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The second life of the Polish art world in the Eighties

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The Eighties in Poland were a time of continuous collapsing of the social order developed by leaders of the Polish United Workers' Party almost forty years earlier. After the imposition of martial law on 13 December 1981 and the mass repression of people involved in the Solidarity movement, the Communist authorities lost their remaining credibility in Polish society, which had somehow fared fairly well during the relatively stable 'Gierek era'. The Eighties were also a time of continuous economic crisis, which led to the emptiness of shelves in shops. The changes in the political sphere that led to the negotiations between the authorities and opposition leaders at the end of the decade are well documented by Polish historians¹. But the research focused on this political history has long eclipsed the social history of this period. Academics from various fields have only recently begun conducting research on various phenomena of the late period of the Polish People's Republic and they often use the framework of civil society to analyse these topics.²

I will also use this framework in my paper. I aim to present a few basic theses concerning visual artists as a particular social and professional milieu. This text exclusively focuses on the creation of visual art as a social activity leading to the creation of particular social interactions. These interactions are based on the creation and distribution of works of art and the spread of information. In Howard S. Becker's classic work, these social groups are called the 'art world'³. My main emphasis is on the organization of art exhibitions, which I find to be the most interesting phenomenon in the framework of civil society studies. I aim to present how such informal activities can be discussed in the frames of wider research on the rise of civil society in Central Europe conducted by academics from diverse disciplines.

In contrast to the 'art worlds' of cinematography or literature, the field of visual art the whole process of creating and circulating visual art could be organized entirely without any support from state-controlled institutions like movie studios, publishing houses, cinemas and bookstores. The analysis of visual art milieus could show how particular groups organized grass-roots initiatives in the social space to cope with their particular situation.⁴

Visual arts in the Bloc are often perceived in academic literature as a sphere of political activity against regimes. Even attempts to make a particular kind of art based on neo-avant-garde Western trends (e.g. happenings, performance art, or even just non-figurative art) are interpreted as outcries against Communist rule, which acknowledged only realistic academic art. In my research I am describing the activity of visual artists in a different way, i.e. as a social milieu in which members were able to develop their informal social structures in order to present their work in the public (in this case semi-public) sphere.

It is not my objective to analyse the artistic meanings of the presented art pieces. Instead I perceive the creation of art as a particular social activity that is not necessarily a professional career for all practitio-

¹ See: Paczkowski Andrzej: *Pół wieku dziejów Polski 1939–1989*, Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2005; Friszke, Andrzej (ed.): *Władza a społeczeństwo w PRL*, Warsaw: Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, 2003; Friszke, Andrzej: *Przystosowanie i opór. Studia z dziejów PRL*, Warsaw: Biblioteka 'Więzi', 2007.

² The most important book concerning this topic is: Wedel, Janine (ed.): *The Unplanned Society. Poland During and after Communism*, New York/NY: Columbia University Press, 1992.

³ Becker, Howard S.: *Art Worlds*, Berkeley/CA: University of California Press, 1982; Becker, Howard S.: *Art as Collective Action*, in: *American Sociological Review*, 1974 (Vol. 39), No. 6, pp. 767–776. In Poland a similar concept was developed by Aleksander Wallis, who used the term 'universe of culture', see: Wallis, Aleksander: *Atlas kultury polskiej 1946–1980*, Międzychód: Eco, 1994, p. 37.

⁴ This article was exclusively written during my research fellowship at the Herder Institut in Marburg, so I was only able to use the materials available there.

ners. American anthropologist Stuart Plattner conducted research concerning the life and self-perception of visual artists.

Some producers make work primarily because their identity and self-respect are defined by their work. These people may want to make money, but their involvement with their work derives from identity rather than money. They may be said to be addicted to their work; economists use the term 'psychic income.'⁵

I am interested in the development of the informal mechanisms used to publicize these artworks. Under Communism, the most basic mechanism was the use of social bonds to organize a particular event (e.g. an exhibition) and spread the word about it. Due to these small but valuable social networks, artists were able to avoid having to promote exhibitions through official channels.

The phenomenon of so-called alternative or unofficial culture in the field of visual arts is discussed almost exclusively by art historians. Sociological and anthropological angles are scarce in these analyses. Commentary on this topic also tends to be based on the simple dichotomy of official vs. unofficial artists⁶. Another problem is that many authors make passing judgments on the topic; the artistic values of the artworks are given centre stage rather than descriptive analysis. The conceptualization of my Ph.D. project is instead based on academic works that focus on other informal social phenomena in Communist Poland and other Bloc countries. Aside from the field of culture production and presentation, these topics are well described by academics from diverse fields.⁷

The theoretical framework of my paper utilizes categories proposed by Jan Kubik and Grzegorz Ekiert in their article *Civil Society from Abroad. The Role of Foreign Assistance in the Democratization of Poland*, which focuses on various aspects of the activities of social groups in Poland in the Eighties.⁸ The aforementioned authors call this period 'state socialism disintegration'⁹ and define civil society as a 'set of organized groups/associations, whose members deliberate to act collectively to accomplish common goals'¹⁰. In the case of Poland in the Eighties, these groups existed under the particular set of conditions created by the authorities.

Under each political regime public space is constituted in a specific way and different types of groups are protected or represented by the state. Under state socialist regimes the space was highly restricted and organized [and] had very little autonomy.¹¹

The activity of visual artists in the Polish People's Republic was put into the frames developed by state institutions, which were slowly falling apart by the Eighties. Kubik and Ekiert describe the social activity of these milieus as 'uninstitutionalized autonomy'. They propose interesting categories that can be successfully used to analyse this particular case:

⁵ Plattner, Stuart: A Most Ingenious Paradox. The Market for Contemporary Fine Art, in: *American Anthropologist*, 1998 (Vol. 100), No. 2, pp. 482–493, here p. 483, <http://www.stuartplattner.com/AA-ART-Paradox.pdf>

⁶ See: Alan, Josef (ed.): *Alternativní kultura. Příběh české společnosti 1945–1989*, Praha: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 2001.

⁷ See: Kenney, Padraic: *A Carnival of Revolution. Central Europe 1989*, Princeton/NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002; Wedel, Janine (ed.): *The Unplanned Society, Poland During and after Communism*, New York/NY: Columbia University Press, 1992.

⁸ Ekiert, Grzegorz / Kubik, Jan: *Civil Society from Abroad. The Role of Foreign Assistance in the Democratization of Poland*, in: WCFIA Working Paper Series, No. 00-01, February 2000, Harvard University, http://www.wcfia.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/91__2000-01%20Ekiertfinal2.pdf

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

Consequently, three forms of associations can be identified under state socialist regimes: (1) pseudo-autonomous (e.g. official trade unions or professional associations); (2) semi-autonomous (e.g. some churches and religious organizations); and (3) illegally autonomous (e.g. dissident groups or black-market networks).¹²

The milieu of Polish visual artists constitute a very interesting example of developing new kinds of partly grass-roots initiatives determined by political, social and economic factors. During the Seventies the state-run artists' union (ZPAP – Association of Polish Visual Artists) was very active, but it was also a time of new initiatives. So-called *authors' galleries* were organized under the sponsorship of the Polish student organization (SZSP – Socialist Association of Polish Students) and were independent from the system of state-owned galleries, which were controlled indirectly by the guidelines of the Ministry of Culture. New social actors arrived on the Polish art scene in the Seventies as well. The most important factor in the growth of these initiatives was the organized system of sponsorship. Various institutions, such as local branches of the student organization and local cultural centres provided space for exhibitions. This support led to the growth of numerous local small-scale galleries. On the other hand, the Seventies also witnessed the creation of the art market. According to approximate statistics, there were 300 galleries in Poland in the Seventies.¹³ At the time, a simple yet strict distinction was made between so-called union artists and artists involved in the authors' galleries. The first group encompassed mostly full-time artists whose insurance was organized by their union, which was also responsible for obtaining different contracts for them. But the artists involved in the authors' galleries weren't earning any money. According to the Plattner text, these artists only reaped psychological gains. The whole system of authors' galleries was developed in the Seventies and somehow managed to struggle through all of the Eighties. It formed the basis for organizing exhibitions, but also for communication with other members of the outside world. This system was established not to avoid censorship, but rather to avoid the agency of the state-controlled and bureaucratic artists' union and the Bureau for Artistic Exhibitions. The problem was not only of an ideological nature but also concerned the fact that employees of these institutions lived in the world of academic, figurative art and they established their own informal client-patron networks. In fact most of the events in the authors' galleries were approved by the censors; the galleries also developed special tactics to gain the censors' permission to put on exhibitions.

In the Eighties this system was enriched by many completely informal galleries in private flats, where everything was organized without any state control; these events were called 'suitcase exhibitions'. At the same time, diverse artistic discourses existed. There were many exhibitions of religious art organized in strict collaboration with the Catholic Church and Solidarity. Legal private galleries were selling functional art, portraits and landscapes. Meanwhile, a few groups of new expressionists arose, but the neo-avant-garde artists also continued their activities and kept in contact with similar circles in the West.

I aim to present a few of the different tactics that members of these informal circles used to publicize their artworks in their grass-roots public sphere. In the Eighties this cultural life was even more important than the one organized by state-owned institutions. I must also mention that most of the artists boycotted these institutions after the imposition of martial law in 1981. The map of Polish visual culture in the Eighties encompasses a lot of small but well-connected islands. People involved in these activities after 1989 developed a new system of cultural life based on state-owned institutions and the commer-

¹² Ibid., p. 8.

¹³ Stokłosa, Bożenna: *Artystyczno-społeczna problematyka zrzeszeń plastyków w Polsce w latach 1946–1976 /grupy twórcze i tzw. galerie niezależne/*, Warsaw, 1981, pp. 82. Unpublished material, Institute of Art, Polish Academy of Sciences.

cial art market as well. This sphere of social activity can be compared with similar phenomena in other circles. As far as I know some academics in Poland are conducting studies on this period, focusing on social movements, informal networks within formal institutions and semi-legal economic activity.

The most important turning point in Polish artistic life was the imposition of martial law on 13 December 1981. In the Eighties such initiatives continued, but the situation in the field of visual art was far more complicated than in the previous decade. In keeping with Kubik and Ekiert's approach, I can identify three essentially different art worlds with respect to their level of autonomy in Communist Poland. The first level was pseudo-autonomous and concerned the state-run artists' union, ZPAP. Because of its support for Solidarity in 1983, ZPAP was suspended and liquidated.

The ZPAP is – with its membership estimated at 11,000 – the numerically strongest creative union in Poland. [...] During the stormy Solidarity days ZPAP unequivocally sided with the free labor movement and was among the first creative unions to join the democratic opposition movement. [...] Following the imposition of martial law in December 1981, ZPAP was suspended, along with all other similar unions and put in official limbo for more than four months. Reactivated on 30 April 1982, it has been exposed to all kinds of ideological, administrative and financial pressure ever since. [...] The community's deliberate refusal to accept the regime's attempts to dictate to it appears all the more heroic as the actual state of artists' working and living conditions has been admittedly deteriorating alarmingly over the last few years.¹⁴

After disbanding ZPAP the authorities created a new union called ZPAMiG, the Association of Polish Painters and Graphic Artists, which was comprised of so-called *party artists* who were actively (or more often passively) supporting the authorities' policy. Some of ZPAP's tasks were taken over by 'Sztuka Polska' (Polish Art), the state-owned art management company, which was responsible among other things for selling art pieces.¹⁵

Starting in the Seventies, there were also private but completely legal galleries in Poland; these would fall into Kubik and Ekiert's semi-autonomous category by virtue of having more distance from the state than the artists' union. Some of them aimed to show new art and were perceived as kinds of authors' galleries, but apart from such places there were also commercial galleries focused mostly on selling art. The most famous private gallery was run by Anna Maria Potocka in Cracow.¹⁶ Her gallery was located in a private flat, but it was legally registered as an exhibition space.

The Department for Art and Culture of the city of Cracow is supporting the request of Anna Maria Potocka concerning using her flat as a private /non-commercial/ art gallery. [...] The existence of private galleries is in accordance with cultural policy. The existence of such places is sanctioned by the guidelines of the Ministry of Culture and Art.¹⁷

The running of such a gallery in Cracow was also portrayed very positively in the local newspaper.¹⁸ Apart from such non-commercial galleries, in the Eighties some galleries were dedicated to selling art. The most unique was probably a gallery in Warsaw that sold religious art.

¹⁴ The Taming of Intellectual Dissent. The Fine Arts, Radio Free Europe report 19 March 1983, Herder Institut, Marburg, sign. P 720; Sokołowski, Grzegorz: Wymuszona decyzja, in: Trybuna Ludu, 23–24 April 1983.

¹⁵ Han, Ewa: Co to jest 'Sztuka Polska'?, in: Słowo Polskie, 28 September 1983.

¹⁶ <http://www.moma.pl/>, accessed 15 June 2009.

¹⁷ Official letter from Director of Department of Culture and Art of the city of Cracow to Director of Krowodrza district 28 February 1980, Potocka Gallery archive.

¹⁸ Grzegorzczuk, Elżbieta: Z prywatnej pasji zjawisko artystyczne, in: Echo Krakowa, 5 February 1974.

On the last day of the Pope's visit to Poland, the first and only salon of religious art was opened. The trade company Veritas [which belongs to the Catholic Church – P. W.] has opened this place because of the growing interest from numerous believers and artists in sacral art.¹⁹

The Eighties also saw the emergence of new actors on the art market.

The crisis of the Polish economy has serious consequences for the lives of visual artists. [...] A new, previously unknown phenomenon is the growth of attractive orders for visual art from private entrepreneurs and Polish companies with foreign capital.²⁰

Polish artists also developed a strategy for participating in the Western art market during their travels to West Berlin.

Artists departing from Poland for their exhibitions abroad [...] were probably selling some of their artwork. These works were mostly sold for relatively low prices – especially in Western Germany and West Berlin – however, these transactions are still profitable for artists because there are no brokers and state companies responsible for foreign trade. Artists can avoid paying taxes and they are exchanging money for black market exchange rates. Another important factor is the situation in our country with respect to the availability of paint, paper, tools and chemicals. Such materials are quite often unavailable in Poland and it is only possible to buy such things abroad.²¹

The third tier of the Polish art world in the Eighties was illegal and autonomous and manifested in the growth of completely informal and illegal exhibitions in private flats, ateliers and churches. This phenomenon was described in a few books and articles mostly written by authors who had participated in these exhibitions.²² The events are described merely as a kind of political activity, i.e. as an act of resistance against the oppressive Communist state.

The various Polish milieus of visual artists in the Eighties are examples of the politically and economically motivated growth of new forms of social life. Similar to other groups of artists but also engaging in a wider array of different social initiatives, the activity of visual artists had previously been programmed by the Communist authorities through the creation of the artists' union (ZPAP), which was developed to provide welfare services but also to exert control over this milieu. Since the end of the Sixties, however, this system had gradually been decreasing its functions, and in the Eighties, it broke down completely. Different strategies used by Polish artists for organizing their professional careers and supporting themselves were determined by the social and economic situation in Poland. Apart from their political activity, their grass-roots initiatives ultimately led to the creation of an art market based on the free market economy, which was created after 1989.

¹⁹ W Warszawie powstała pierwsza galeria sztuki religijnej, in: Dziennik Polski, 7 July 1983.

²⁰ Czejarek, Karol: Plastycy wobec kryzysu, in: Życie Literackie, 25 March 1984.

²¹ Sprawozdanie z wyjazdów służbowych i udziału polskich twórców w międzynarodowych imprezach plastycznych, 1983, Archive of Ministry of Culture, sign. 1511/21.1.

²² The most important book about this activity is: Wojciechowski, Aleksander: Czas smutku, czas nadziei, Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1992.