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**(Don't) let them see us – the censorship of queer culture in Poland**

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What is queer culture, [otherwise called] homoerotic, and in one of its varieties known as 'camp'? (I deliberately chose not to use the common term 'gay culture', as it excludes non-heteronormative women.) LGBTQ motifs present in art are [usually analysed in relation to] the thematic scope of a particular piece, or on the other hand, in relation to the sexual identity of the author. The latter [aspect], not only in my opinion, is highly problematic. [Even though] the artist's personal experiences have an impact on his or her art, it [seems inappropriate, or even] homophobic, to try to establish their sexual identity. Nevertheless, in the case of artists, who are open about their sexuality, it can also be taken into consideration in the textual analysis of their work.

**Polish homoerotic artists and the history of their art**

*Finally, it's time for gay art in Poland. We have been set back in this respect by centuries. Art history – from ancient times, throughout the Renaissance and Enlightenment to Postmodernism – has been marked by the work of homosexual men. Often, [such art set] subversive trends within the mainstream of patriarchal [aesthetics?]. Without gay, as well as female art, modern pluralistic visual and 'love' culture, as we know it, would not have been able to come into existence. The homosexual tradition in Polish art is still yet to be discovered and dug out from underneath the heterosexual 'filter', which suppresses any gender alternatives and sexual imaginations.*

P. Leszkowicz, T. Kitliński, *Miłość i Demokracja. Rozważania o Kwestii Homoseksualnej w Polsce.*

My aim here is to argue that homoerotic art has been present in our country for at least four decades, as well as being shaped by artists who have had a significant impact on Polish culture.

The person considered to be the pioneer of Polish gay art is Krzysztof Jung, a performance artist associated with the *Repassage* gallery in Warsaw. In his 1970s performances, Jung admired and exposed the naked male body. Often, the focus of his art was two men, as if the

artist tried to dwell on the partner dialogue between them. Also in the 1970s, Piotr Majdorowicz and Jan Bujak made independent films, which portrayed young homosexual men, scared and confused by the place and time in which they happened to live, however, at the same time, the films are full of fantasy [imagery]. Also in the same decade another artist, Łukasz Korolkiewicz, painted male lovers.

Finally, in the 1980s the first male nudes appeared. Jacek Sempoliński eroticised Christ's body, whereas Wojciech Ćwiertniewicz 'hides' it away in abstract stylistics. A painting considered to be predominantly gay-themed, is *Die Einsamkeit (Loneliness)* from 1984, by Jarosław Modzelewski and Marek Sobczyk, affiliated with [a Warsaw collective,] GRUPPA.

The cult of beautiful naked male bodies was also the inspiration for Wojciech Misiura's dance performances at the Theatre of Expression, popular in northern Poland in the 1980s and 1990s.

[Importantly,] AIDS is [a recurring theme in art,] which is linked with [the perception of?] homosexuality, as well as with [the artistic outlets throughout which] the LGBTQ liberation movement [seeks to express its demands] (most often this is performance art). In the West, gay art has been significantly marked by AIDS. The first, and perhaps the largest, event discussing AIDS issues in Poland was a 1995 exhibition held at a Warsaw cinema *Stolica*. The exhibition was titled *Ja i AIDS (Me and AIDS)* and the works of artists such as Katarzyna Kozyra, Artur Żmijewski, Grzegorz Kowalski, Andrzej Karaś or Krzysztof Malec were presented.

A central point of that exhibition was a realistic male nude cast in plaster by Krzysztof Malec. This 1994 piece bears a resemblance to Michelangelo's *David*, an [important] icon for gay artists. Male nudes by male artists were also featured at the review of erotic art – an event organised at the National Museum in Warsaw in 1994 (the work of Igor Mitoraj and Ksawery Wolski was shown).

Andrzej Karaś, whose work was part of *Ja i AIDS* exhibition, was probably the first openly gay Polish visual artist. Karaś explores the experience of otherness in his art and his work to a large extent revolves around [the form] of self-portrait. He also collaborates with one of the most renowned contemporary artists, Katarzyna Kozyra. For example, in one of her Polaroid photographic series, Karaś [achieves a provocative as well as comic effect] by posing with a rose placed between his buttocks.

In 1996 Krzysztof Wodiczko, (an artist well-established both in Poland and abroad, the creator of the Polish pavilion at the 2009 Venice Biennale, who is interested in making ‘socially conscious’ art) organised a multimedia event, which, among others, touched upon the issue of the exclusion and discrimination of homosexual people. In his work, Wodiczko uses the unique technique of projecting images onto walls of government buildings. As part of his installation art project, *Słowa i Gesty Wieży Ratuszowej (Words and Gestures of the Town Hall Tower)*, he screened films, which featured images of hands holding different objects. At the same time, anonymous people told their stories to the gathered crowd – stories about domestic violence, a story of an older blind man abandoned by his family, one by the family of a drug addict, and finally, the story of a young gay man. The last speaker talked about his misery, the experience of being beaten up, as well as about being rejected by his loved ones.

On the other hand, not all artists see the dramatic [aspect] of homosexuality. A successful painter, Edward Dwurnik, who is himself heterosexual, not to say [borderline] sexist, produced a painting, titled *Teraz Jestem Gejem (I’m Gay Now)*. A print of that painting was featured in the weekend magazine of a major daily broadsheet, *Rzeczpospolita*, along with the artist’s commentary, where he explained his belief that nowadays being a member of a sexual minority helps in becoming a successful artist. And to some extent Dwurnik is right, as the 2000s were a time of a true explosion of queer and homoerotic-themed art in Poland. Among rising new artists there was Tomek Kawszyna, who made embroidered samplers with mementos [of twisted childhood rhymes] reading ‘*Serce i strzala to znak pedala*’ (‘*A heart with an arrow is what fag stands for*’). There were also Karol Radziszewski, photographer Oiko Petersen, video artist Piotr Żyliński, Tomasz Kitliński, painters Adam Adach (*Westerplatte-Proud*) and Piotr Nathan (*Pedały do gazu – Die Fags*).

When it comes to lesbian art, the situation is slightly worse – which is perhaps symptomatic of the so-called double exclusion of non-heteronormative women. However, in the years 2004-2005, *Darkless*, by Justyna Apolinarzak, the first Polish lesbian comic book [graphic novel?], was published. More interesting art in this area started to appear towards the end of the 2000s. For example, Beata Sosnowska specializes in lesbian drawing, and the first lesbian stand-up comedy group, *Barbie Girls*, has been touring around Poland. Also, since 2007, the Warsaw UFA – a female-queer cultural and social centre – has been operating. It was established by the former members of *Porozumienie Lesbijek (The Lesbian Cooperative)*, as well as some independent women- and queer-rights supporters and feminists.

One person, the curator Paweł Leszkowicz, managed to organise an exhibition which featured the most pieces thematically revolving around homo- and bisexual love. The exhibition, titled *Miłość i Demokracja (Love and Democracy)*, was presented in a private gallery, *Stary Browar*, in Poznań and in *The Centre For Modern Art – Łaźnia*, a public art gallery in Gdańsk.

This is what the curator himself writes about the exhibition in the brochure for the event:

*I asked myself a question: how to organise a modern exhibition of erotic art, which would both address the needs of our times, as well as take a stand in relation to the conflict of [the needs of different groups in society? How to make sexuality and love [meaningful] in the social context and how to link the personal and political spheres? How to find a ‘middle way’, other than easy pornography and the terror of Polish sex-phobia? How to express the relationship between sex, emotions and intellect? How to create an exhibition, which would be at the same time exciting, educational, existential and political? How to make an exhibition of Polish art, like no other before, and [how] to open up a new chapter about presenting love, eroticism and new approaches to thinking about [these issues]?*

*I decided to organise an exhibition about artistic, emotional and sexual freedom and plurality, as opposed to nationalistic homophobia and censorship.*

In 2009 Paweł Leszkowicz curated *Vogue*, another exhibition at the Gdańsk *Łaźnia*.

In the past few years a number of major queer culture festivals have been organised in Poland. To name only a few, there was the *Culture for Tolerance* in Cracow, *Lesbians, Gays and Friends* in Wrocław, *Queer Fest* in Toruń, *Equal Right to Love* in Warsaw, *The Bydgoszcz and Olsztyn Days of Equality*, *Rainbow Mountain* in Zielona Góra or *The Festival of Rainbow Families* in Warsaw. Also, for the past three years, the *Million Different Loves* film festival has been organised in Łódź. [Some of] the above mentioned events – and especially any marches, that were part of the celebrations – have been attacked by nationalists and football hooligans, who were often supported by the [far-]right and conservative circles.

### **Social campaigns**

[Probably] the first homosexual artistic and social campaign in Poland was *Let Them See Us*, a project carried out by Karolina Berguła, a photographer educated in Sweden, and *Campaign Against Homophobia*, an NGO. The campaign, which was supposed to be ‘a mass therapeutic session healing homophobia’, involved photographing thirty same-sex couples, fifteen male

and fifteen female ones. All the pictures were taken outside – people in the photographs could not offend anyone wearing thick winter coats, they were [just] holding hands. [Berguła photographed] ‘regular people’ instead of celebrities. The couples were mainly young and tried hard to smile [for the camera]. [This is how one couple remembers the experience:]

*A frosty afternoon in the heart of Warsaw, winter 2003. We’re holding hands next to the monument to the ‘Unknown Soldier’. We decided to take part in this campaign, but also that we will remain anonymous. In front of us, Karolina Berguła, the photographer, is standing with her camera pointed at us and tells us not to pose, to be natural and to smile. Smiling is difficult: we’re cold and we’re feeling awkward because this is an unusual sight in the Polish public space – two men holding hands, a loving same-sex couple. Passers-by pretend not to notice us, after a while some of them turn around to look. We welcome the end of the photo shoot after a tiring thirty minutes of this ‘pretended normality’. Now we can regress to our safe public ‘heterosexual masks’. [Later,] Karolina told us that we are one of those couples who wouldn’t smile. Despite that, we tried to look good. For a moment we imagined we were models. But models of what?*

Paweł Leszkowicz, Tomasz Kitliński, *Miłość i Demokracja* [...]

Five hundred copies of the posters made out of the photographs were supposed to be printed. They were supposed to be displayed on bus stops in Warsaw, Cracow, Gdańsk and Sosnowiec. Additionally, all thirty photographs – some couples did not give their permission for using their image in public spaces – were supposed to be presented as part of an exhibition in various places in Poland.

However, the project has never seen daylight in its planned form. Two months before the project was due to be launched, the Cracow division of *Liga Polskich Rodzin* [(a nationalist right-wing organisation)] carried out a campaign, which aimed at preventing the project from being publicly displayed. After the mayor of Cracow issued a negative statement on publicly displaying the photographs and threats of vandalism from *Młodzież Wszechpolska*, [an infamous youth branch of *Liga Polskich Rodzin*,] AMS, a company specializing in outdoor advertising, decided to pull out of the deal with *Campaign Against Homophobia*. It has been speculated that one of the reasons behind this decision was a threat from the Cracow city council that all municipal deals would have been cancelled, if [AMS had gone ahead with the project].

However, the campaign, which proved to be controversial for [bureaucrats], who [actually] never saw the photographs, was organised [in spite of difficulties] on a much smaller scale. *Campaign Against Homophobia* signed a contract with another [advertising] company, *CityBoard Media*. Instead of [using] bus stops, five much larger than originally planned billboards were used [to display the posters] three and a half meters above the ground. [Unfortunately,] it did not last very long because the posters were vandalised, probably by some paint-filled plastic bags thrown at them. The decision to remove the posters was made because along with the prints the entire displays got damaged. Also, the exhibition had [a rather short life.] It was banned in conservative Cracow's gallery of the *Association of Polish Visual Artists* and, in consequence, the exhibition's curator lost her job. [Instead,] the exhibition was welcomed by a private art gallery *Burzym & Wolff*. However, this cost them the loss of their tenancy agreement with their landlord.

In other cities the exhibition was presented more or less without any problems – [the other venues were] the gallery of the *Association of Friends of Fine Art* in Warsaw, an alternative club, *Żółta Łódź Podwodna (Yellow Submarine)*, in Wrocław, [whereas] in Gdańsk it was held at a public institution – the *Łaźnia Centre for Modern Art* – alongside a seminar on homophobia led by the exhibition curator, Małgorzata Lisiewicz.

### **Director Nowak's last sausage**

Between 2001 and 2006, LGBTQ [activist circles in Poland] had mixed feelings about Maciej Nowak, a journalist and theatre critic. He was one of the first people to come out publicly in Poland. It happened nine years ago, after the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) had issued a report on the situation of sexual minorities in the then candidate countries for the European Union. In the case of Poland the report was rather unfavourable. In response to that, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, [a liberal national daily newspaper], published a commentary by Nowak, who believed that 'being a homosexual in Poland, one can live a life [full] of dignity and [uninhibited] creativity, as well as enjoy the trust of friends and colleagues, one can love and experience complete safety'.

However, in 2005 Nowak, who was then the director of the successful *Wybrzeże* Theatre in Gdańsk, decided to participate in a photo shoot for *Lifestyle* magazine. As he posed wearing boxer shorts and a belt of sausages [tied around his waist], his career came to an end. In 2006 he was dismissed by the regional governor, Jan Kozłowski, despite the ongoing public debate and the support granted to Nowak by the local art world and a large part of the liberal media.

The official reason behind this decision was Nowak's [alleged] poor management of the theatre and[, subsequently, generating] its [high] debt.

The then director of the Department of Culture at the local governor's office, Arkadiusz Rybicki, revealed the real reasons behind this decision when talking to the press. [On one occasion he said]: 'I believe that Maciej Nowak, crossed a point of no return [...]. He should protect the dignity of a public institution, such as the theatre. Surely he brought upon himself problems and the criticism of the local councillors. This is an environment, which [represents specific values] – Kashubian<sup>1</sup>, middleclass, catholic and conservative, and they do not tolerate such behaviour. We shall see what will be the councillors' response.'

[Of course,] the councillors responded. Mieczysław Meyer representing *Samoobrona*, a populist party, said: 'You judge a man by his achievements. The material published in the *Lifestyle* magazine has shown the [real] face of this man, it has shown what he is capable of and what he is worth. A person in public office, especially one associated with culture, cannot distort it, and above all, should not expose his sexual orientation.'

Fortunately, councillor Meyer's opinion was disregarded by *Polityka*, [a high-profile weekly magazine], which considered Maciej Nowak to be the most influential figure in the Polish theatre in 2008. Nowak has not returned to his Gdańsk job.

### **The sad story of Le Madame**

Another example of political intervention in queer culture was the closing down of a Warsaw club, *Le Madame* (even the name of the club possesses an ambiguously queer quality, achieved by the juxtaposition of the French masculine article 'le' with the feminine word 'Madame') . The venue was established by Krystian Legierski, an LGBTQ activist and Elzbieta Solanowska. It was not only a site for artistic ventures of the most sophisticated kind (i.e. *The Variety Theatre* or Andrzej Wajda's Film Direction School), but also [it welcomed] social initiatives, such as *The 8 March Women's Co-operative*, *The Polish Rationalists' Society* or [the green movement] *Zieloni 2004*. The club was criticised by the right-wing local government, who also owned the property occupied by *Le Madame*. In March 2006 *Le Madame* was evicted, in spite of a protest by the club's regulars and artists lasting several days. The protesters were removed from the premises by force and the club was officially cordoned off. The official reason for closing down the venue was its excessive debt, however,

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<sup>1</sup>The Kashubians are a West Slavic ethnic group indigenous to Northern Poland. They speak a distinctive dialect and form a strong community within the region.

according to the club owners and regulars, the real reasons were ideological [and in line with the ruling party's (Law and Justice<sup>2</sup>) conservative views.]

### **Right-wing politicians on art**

In 2009 Artur Górski, a Law and Justice MP, made a formal complaint to the minister of culture Bogdan Zdrojewski and demanded the director of the Warsaw gallery *Zachęta* to be dismissed. Why? Because, as part of an exhibition, a gay pornographic film was shown. The film was titled *The Phantom Boys* and was part of the *Peeing on the Cake* exhibition, which was curated by a homosexual artist, Karol Radziszewski. The film had not been censored and spectators could see the actors having [gay] anal and oral sex followed by ejaculation. Warning about the [explicit content] had been displayed on [special] boards outside the room [where the film was screened], but this proved to be insufficient for Górski. He said: 'The people who contacted me about the film did not notice any warnings, they walked in there by chance and left feeling outraged and offended.'

According to the Law and Justice MP, homosexuality was being promoted in *Zachęta*, which led to the profanity 'of the place which was a site of important historical events, including the assassination of Poland's first president, Gabriel Narutowicz.'

[In response,] Karol Radziszewski said: 'As an artist, I often touch upon issues concerning homosexuality. It has reached a stage when some people would even like me to paint flowers in that context. This is why I decided to use humour and self-irony [in my art]. Moreover, [the presented film] is not random. This is the first Polish gay porn film, which was made as recently as the year 2000. It tells you a lot about our society. I think the MP's reaction [to the exhibition] was exaggerated.'

However, there are certain circles that acknowledged Radziszewski's [work]. In 2010 he received a prize from the *Polityka* weekly magazine for his achievements in the field of visual art. When Radziszewski received the prize, he said: 'I would like to quote Lady Gaga here and say, that I'd like to thank God and the gays. I would also like to thank my parents and grandmothers, my brother Kamil, my boyfriend Paweł and the management of *Zachęta* gallery for letting me pee on that cake.'

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<sup>2</sup> Law and Justice is a Polish national-conservative political party, which was in power from 2005 to 2007. It is the second largest political party in the country.



Alongside this year's Gay Pride parade, there will probably be held an exhibition at the National Museum. The exhibition, titled *Ars Homo Erotica*, will deal with homoerotic themes in Polish art. The task of choosing appropriate exhibits has been given to Paweł Leszkowicz and the whole venture will be sponsored by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage. However, this idea did not appeal to a Law and Justice MP, Stanisław Pięta. He asked rhetorically: 'Why does the Director of the National Museum want to restrict [his exhibition] just to homosexual art? Why does he want to discriminate against paedophiles, zoophiles or necrophiles? [After all,] homosexuality is a deviation like the others mentioned above.' [Fortunately,] the conservative MP's complaint did not have the desired impact. Bogdan Zdrojewski, the Minister of Culture, replied: 'I do not share your concerns about the quality of this exhibition, I fully trust director Piotrowski's judgement. If we wanted to get rid of all homosexually-themed art, we would have to close down the Vatican Museum. I am sure that even you will enjoy this exhibition.' [This was also the time when] the first homosexual 'revolt' occurred in Poland, and those who took part in it were not just art critics or gallery regulars, but mainly ordinary people. They responded to the appeal launched by the gay.pl portal, which encouraged everyone to send explicit text messages to Pięta [in response to his comments about the exhibition] – a fact which the MP widely discussed in the media.

Pięta's attack on the exhibition and the curator was supported by a conservative journalist from the [Polish issue] of the *Newsweek* magazine, Szymon Hołownia, who had not seen the [proposed portfolio of artwork] for the *Ars Homo Erotica* exhibition. [In a mocking article Hołownia wrote:]

*Doctor Leszkowicz possesses incredible sensitivity, which allows him to see 'a gay man', where others see a tree, a bird or a rock. Here is David and Goliath. A tale of a weaker man who defeats a stronger [opponent] with his wit? Or perhaps a tale of two gays, who got a bit naughty and one of them lost his head? I read Leszkowicz and I keep asking myself: where were my eyes? If Saint Sebastian symbolizes a penetrated male body, why shouldn't I organise an exhibition devoted to fetishists (patron: Saint Lawrence grilled on a hot grate). Saint Francis, who is often portrayed with a skull at his feet would be perfect for a necrophiles' biennale. Saint Blaise? Mmm, shivers of excitement go down my spine. [Traditionally] on his day in churches people's throats are touched with two candles...*

*[...] A serious debate is out of the question, because how, for God's sake, am I supposed to have a serious debate with someone, who is trying to convince me that Titian or Rubens were imagining homosexual orgies whilst painting portraits of saints? And if it wasn't them who saw it, but the curator, why should I follow his posterior visions in a public institution? Why am I not allowed to do it my way – given my blessed naivety and simpleton's analytical means – why can't I simply contemplate the sacrum of art? Why does somebody want to convince me that I am not worthy of being considered fully human until I acknowledge that 'the gay perspective' is also mine?*

### **Censorship equals discrimination**

*Poland is one of the countries, where homophobia in its different forms, from mild to radical, is part of the official politics on a national level and often also cultural politics. It is a peculiarity of this country, which being a member of the European Union, violates human rights. Looking at gay culture in Poland, it is necessary to also take into consideration the local repressive context.*

*Paweł Leszkowicz, 'Erotyka i Polityka sztuki gejowskiej w Polsce' in *Queer Studies, podręcznik kursu*.*

I hope that I managed to show that the censorship of queer culture, or even attempts at censorship, often stem from a lack of expertise in the field of art history, as well as from homophobic rhetoric filled with hatred. This is not just censorship, it is also discrimination.

*Translation: Katarzyna Drązkiewicz*