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**AGNIESZKA KURANT****DISPATCH: ART IN WARSAW**

*Poland is the future: The nationalist, extreme-right-wing Law and Justice Party swept to power there in October 2015, giving the rest of the world a glimpse of what happens when contemporary populism engulfs a nation and takes hold. This shift announced a crack in the postwar liberal European order, and the results have been as swift as they are terrifying: authoritarian efforts to rewrite the constitution, a draconian attempt to curtail reproductive rights, and the radical defunding of the arts. In this way, Poland can be seen as both a case study and a warning—portending the dire conditions of culture in the age of ultranationalism.*

*In the pages that follow, Artforum invited a group of distinguished contributors to reflect on art in Warsaw in this political climate. Joanna Mytkowska, director of the city's Museum of Modern Art, examines the state of the capital's cultural institutions; curator Natalia Siewewicz writes about advertising, propaganda, and spectacle in Warsaw's urban spaces; and critic Anna Kats weighs in on architecture and the built environment under siege. Finally, artists Agnieszka Kurant, Monika Sosnowska, Piotr Uklański, and Artur Żmijewski discuss the ways in which the city's changed circumstances affect their ideas now.*



View of "Bread and Roses: Artists and the Class Divide," 2016, Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw. Photo: Bartosz Stawiarski.

**IN HIS FINAL WRITINGS** before his death this past January, Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman made use of the notion of the *interregnum*. This term, as defined by Antonio Gramsci, describes the period of crisis when an old social order is dying and the new is not yet born. In this disorienting moment, ideological allegiances are fleeting, and hearts and minds are dangerously up for grabs.

It is also an appropriate description of post-Communist Poland, present era. After 1989, a wave of capitalist euphoria led to an ideological power vacuum. Chronic factionalism quickly decimated the Polish left, leaving only a confusing choice between the neoliberal center-right, which ignored the working class, and the Catholic right, which manipulated the poorest and most uneducated citizens with pseudosocialist promises. The latter's vision of nationalist populism appealed to many frustrated citizens. It is misleading, however, to regard this neofascism solely as a misguided protest against neoliberal inequality or globalization, for to do so would be to overlook the latent ghosts of xenophobia that continue to haunt Polish society. Let's not forget that the Communist government blamed the strikes of March 1968 on a Zionist plot and used this claim as a pretext to expel the country's remaining Jews—some twenty-five thousand.

Despite these social divisions, solidarity is still possible. Last October, massive protests by women against the criminalization of abortion gathered some 100,000 participants. And, as curator Kuba Szreder and philosopher Ewa Majewska recently wrote, Polish artists, writers, and theorists have responded by employing the "weak resistance" of "postartistic," expanded, and extra-institutional art. Two such projects—both developed outside galleries and museums—include the self-organized artist-run space Goldex Poldex, in Kraków, and its more recent offspring, Szalona Galeria (Crazy Gallery). The latter, a portable exhibition space installed in a van, traveled to small towns and villages in the summer of 2016 in an effort to present rural populations with an alternative to populist ideology.

These undertakings are distinct from well-known Polish practices of the 1990s, including those of Artur Żmijewski, Paweł Althamer, Joanna Rajkowska, and Zbigniew Libera, with their important analyses of identity, taboos, racism, social bonds, and class divisions. For younger artists, Żmijewski's notion of "applied social arts"—the idea that art itself can be an instrument of social change—is inapt, since art is a polyvalent activity rooted in shifting meanings. Because art influences reality in nonlinear, unpredictable ways, it cannot be instrumentalized as a tool of political activism. New conditions on the ground require the recognition that tools for change must be found elsewhere.

"As You Can See: Polish Art Today," a survey of Polish art organized by the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw in 2014, likewise feels very disengaged from contemporary Poland. That show's premise was that the artistic strategies of "ostalgia" and avant-garde nostalgia have been exhausted, with artists now seeking refuge in the so-called plastic arts: folk art, crafts, academicism, metalwork, ceramics, and

textiles. Others in the exhibition turned toward autonomous microworlds of surrealism, with one critic labeling an entire group of painters “tired with reality.”

Meanwhile, a whole host of important subjects remain largely unaddressed in Polish art. Finance capitalism and the knowledge-based social-factory model of post-Fordism have brought us automation, the precariat, outsourcing, the economic exploitation of users via social media, the general indifference of technology to the redistribution of capital, offshore accounts, artificial intelligence, and the rise of fascist nationalism. There are also the dilemmas of the Anthropocene: In a temporary appeasement of its electorate, the Polish government cynically chose to alleviate unemployment by deregulating carbon dioxide emissions and reopening coal mines.

Two exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw in 2016, “Making Use: Life in Postartistic Times” and “Bread and Roses: Artists and the Class Divide” explored some of these issues, as did a 2010 exhibition at the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, “Workers Leaving the Workplace.” (Significantly, however, all three were only partly composed of Polish artists.) Filmmakers and theater directors, as well as writers and cultural theorists, notably Majewska, Janek Sowa, and Edwin Bendyk, have been far quicker to take up these themes. Another relevant show was “Unusually Rare Events: Distribution of the Neo-Avant-Garde,” held in 2009 at Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art in Warsaw and organized by a group of artists, scientists, architects, and writers. The exhibition addressed the collective intelligence of complex systems and the effects of outliers and “black swans.”

Janek Simon and Oskar Dawicki, two of the artists who helped organize “Unusually Rare Events,” are among the most interesting figures in the current Polish art scene. Simon’s practice addresses postcolonialism, shadow economies, and the consequences of globalization, while Dawicki’s deadpan art addresses failure and weakness. Today’s most important artists critique neoliberalism, but they do so recognizing that this condition precludes any possibility of true emancipation.

*Agnieszka Kurant is an artist based in New York.*

*This is a complimentary article from the May issue of Artforum. [Subscribe](#) to access the rest of the issue and our online archives.*

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