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From self-defence to counterattack, how the populists in Poland reclaimed the language of contemporary art

Piotr Piotrowski, who the most important researcher writing about art in Central Europe after the fall of communism, saw the source of Poland's unease with the republican principle of the separation of church and state in the problematic nature of the sources of its legitimacy. Like Claude Lefort, he believed that democracy should be an ideologically impartial system. It is the rule of an "empty space"; neither God nor History nor anything else can be an ideological "justification" for a democratic system. Meanwhile, post-communist democracy, at least in Poland, has an ideological foundation, both in terms of theory (its constitution[s]) and in the practical exercise of power. This foundation is the Christian tradition.

At present, two worlds of the imagination – secular-republican and religious-conservative – are in strong competition with one another in Poland. At the heart of the dispute are attitudes to tradition, religion and individual autonomy. The site of this struggle is visual culture in its broadest sense, as in today's media-saturated societies; images seem to be the quickest and most effective weapon in political disputes. Łukasz Zaremba writes that images have usually not played a major role in Polish social life: "The [current] conflicts over images, especially public disputes [...] is one of the rare moments when they [images] have become visible. Images are now playing a role as sources of conflict, as pretexts for disputes, as catalysts for differences, but also as victims of attacks."

The visual arts are not only a realm in which both sides in this conflict push at boundaries and engage in semantic appropriations. It is clearly also an area in which the culture wars tend to get heated, in which fistfights, police actions, arrests and court trials all have a place. The contemporary visual arts have been treated with a great deal of suspicion and distrust from the outset of the political transformations after 1989.

In my paper I would like to present the evolution of strategy that took place in the populists circles in Poland that adopted the elements of language of avant-garde art such as collage, happening, performance, installation to promote conservative and antidemocratic counterrevolution in Polish society. I would like to explore the change that took place, from iconoclastic terrorism that was a typical reaction towards contemporary visual culture to political art that borrows the language of avant-garde to promote anti avant-garde values. In this perspective it is also interesting to examine the reaction of art criticism towards this new situation.

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