

# CAPITAL OFFENSES ■ Claire Bishop in Warsaw



View of “Kissing Doesn’t Kill: Ania Nowak and Guests,” 2023, Muzeum Sztuki Nowoczesnej, Warsaw. Photo: Daniel Chrobak.

ANYONE SEEKING CULTURAL WHIPLASH could do worse than visit the Polish capital, which offers a grim glimpse of what lies ahead. On a two-day trip this past August, I saw a heteropatriarchal, nationalist, religious right staked against a younger, international, college-educated, gender-fluid center-left. It’s a familiar opposition, but this particular encounter left me uneasy. By the end of my stay, I was left asking whether culture should speak only to its preferred constituencies or whether we should secretly still harbor a belief in art’s power to communicate to a broader public.

A microdose of background: In 2015, Poland’s Law and Justice party was elected, and it has been clinging to power ever since—banning abortion, opposing gay rights, objecting to immigration, and imposing a pro-family, nationalist, and Catholic agenda. Unusual for the global authoritarian right, Law and Justice is anti-Putin (fifteen and a half million Ukrainians have crossed the border into Poland since March 2022). In the past three years, the

government has set its sights on culture. Directors have been ousted and replaced at the country’s leading art institutions, including Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź (as chronicled in the summer 2022 issue of *Artforum*) and two in Warsaw: the Zachęta National Gallery of Art, and the Center for Contemporary Art, Ujazdowski Castle, a much-loved experimental venue. Only Warsaw’s Museum of Modern Art (Muzeum Sztuki Nowoczesnej, hereafter MSN) has managed to keep its progressive leadership, a feat it accomplished by cannily switching from national to city funding earlier this year. Visiting the three venues is akin to being in an ideological pinball machine that bounces you from old-school conservative to transgressive alt-right to the liberal-left miscellany that opposes them.

Zachęta is the easiest venue to critique, the most obviously reactionary and risible. The exhibition on view during my visit, “Latin Figure Rationalities,” presented three older male artists, all of whom are art instructors and allies of the museum’s ministry-of-

culture-appointed director, Janusz Janowski (himself a painter). The first room—a glorious nineteenth-century gallery with skylights—was filled with biblical paintings by Antoni Cygan, including a fourteen-panel crucifixion. It was hard to believe they were crafted in this century and not in 1892. In the adjacent galleries, Tadeusz Boruta’s paintings—equal parts Christian, existentialist, and homoerotic—showed naked men in empty settings. It was so bad that I couldn’t get enough. How about a naked self-portrait with a pot of tea and a magazine tossed on the floor showing Putin on the cover (*Five O’Clock*, 2015)—or a rainbow-hued cosmic-eye motif framing a naked man experiencing a vision of Christ outside the city, complete with the actual canvas peeling off the frame (*Parousia*, 2023)?

A room of works by Piotr Naliwajko contained no fewer than seven paintings of fathers and sons, all titled *Abraham and Isaac*. Amid all this hairy patriarchal testosterone, there was only one painting featuring women: Cygan’s two hot maidens with prominent décolletage. The title? *Virgins*, 2011. Appropriately, the only other visitors to this enormous space were two young women, also laughing at the art and taking photographs.

Right on cue, I emerged from Zachęta into W Hour—the annual celebration of the 1944 Warsaw Uprising. W Hour is a relatively recent invention, a holiday introduced by President Lech Kaczyński in 2009 as another opportunity for nationalist sentiment, now with an anti-Russian flavor. It celebrates the moment when the Polish rose up against Germany; but the Soviets didn’t exactly rush in to help. At 5 PM, a siren blared and everyone stood stock-still in the street, brandishing national flags to remember the heroes of the resistance.

All those flags were on my mind as I entered the Museum on the Vistula, MSN’s temporary venue, housed in a building previously used as the temporary kunsthalle. Stationed on Berlin’s Schlossplatz from 2008 to 2010, then relocated and rebuilt on the riverbank, it is serving as MSN’s home until the 2024 opening of its grand new building on Plac Defilad. The museum’s freedom from state interference was happily on display in “Kissing Doesn’t Kill: Ania Nowak and Guests,” a show guest-curated by Michał Grzegorzek. Boldly punctuating the space was a ragged rainbow flag hanging from the thirty-five-foot ceiling. Borrowed from the gay-rights association Lambda, the flag was made in 2006 and now evidences ample damage from protests in 2018 and 2019.

“Kissing Doesn’t Kill” brought together an idiosyncratic blend of queer art, queer history, and a queer reading of cultural objects. Nowak describes the show as a performative exhibition about “queer grief.” Striking video works like Luiz Roque’s *Modern*, 2014 (Henry Moore sculptures at Tate Britain interrupted by a Leigh Bowery-type figure in black latex), were set alongside

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live performances (e.g., a dancer activating a curved glass object by Pakui Hardware). Sculptures and drawings by a younger generation were juxtaposed with older works: Tee A. Corinne's printed negatives of bare-breasted couples kissing (one featuring a woman using crutches, another showing one in a wheelchair) from the 1970s were hung next to an 1899 painting by Wojciech Weiss, *Kiss on the Grass*, now speculatively interpreted as depicting a same-sex couple. The clothes of Warsaw's most famous drag queen, Kim Lee, who died in 2020, were arranged by fashion designer Maldoror into a campy equestrian monument (*Kim Lee Strikes Back*, 2023)—a more recent intergenerational dialogue.

The presence of objects attesting to a longer cultural history created interesting friction. "Stones of disgrace" and "masks of shame," sixteenth-century objects used as devices of torture and humiliation for women, were loaned by a local history museum. These were now shown as sculpture alongside rocks thrown through the Warsaw headquarters of Lambda. Another highlight was an appealing wood carving by Turkish artist Rüzgâr Buşki (*How I realised that the agony and the bliss both belong to the universe as I was transitioning interspecies to save myself from the misery of the humankind*, 2019); this also functioned as a bench for viewers and as a platform for performances. The overall installation looked terrific, although the curator's captions were enigmatic at best, and I would not have guessed queer grief was the throughline.

There's much more to say about the show. But let's first drop by CCA at Ujazdowski Castle, where the curatorial policy of new director Piotr Bernatowicz seems to be "artists canceled in their own countries." He has managed to find a British ceramicist, Claudia Clare, who's anti-trans, anti-Muslim, and anti-sex worker. The promotional text for "Feminist Satire. No Safe Spaces" gives a taste of CCA's combative curatorial rhetoric:

Who does Claudia Clare think she is? A ceramicist entering her sixth decade, she really ought to have learned to shut up by now. She has no business sharing her critique of the sex industry, for she is not a "sex worker" herself. Neither is she a Muslim, and yet she persists in criticising Islamism without even having the decency to be brown. Worse still, as a lesbian she refuses to embrace her transgender sisters and laughs at their "lady penises."

In other words, it was a show that could unify the Zachęta and MSN audiences in shared horror, albeit from opposing sides of the political fence. Formally at least, Clare's ceramics don't look particularly incendiary. In another context, they might even get exhibited as radical craft. *The Butch Pot*, 2020, for example, celebrates butch lesbians. As far as I could tell, it was the accompanying curatorial text that really spun the exhibition into a rant against transitioning. Yet the Clare show began a pattern that continued throughout the institution: A language of transgression and nonconformity,

which used to be synonymous with the liberation-seeking left, is now mobilized by curators toward a right-wing political agenda. So too is the visual and verbal language of international contemporary art (as opposed to the oil-on-canvas conservatism of Zachęta).

This could be seen on the second floor of CCA in the work of exiled Chinese cartoonist Badiucao, who uses painting, installation art, light boxes, participatory campaigns, and research projects. His painting *PuXi*, 2022, for example, combines Russian and Chinese leaders into one horrible socialist-realist painting, displayed alongside a scatter installation of soy-sauce bottles turned Molotov cocktails. Badiucao's art centers on a critique of China: its human-rights violations, severe censorship during the pandemic, treatment of ethnic Uighurs, repression of Hong Kong protesters, and diplomatic ties to Russia during the ongoing war in Ukraine. In other words, there's a lot of stuff to get behind here. The wall text championed Badiucao as a daring individual who has "a duty to stand up and speak out against any form of injustice." Sure thing . . . except you're visiting an institution that has, in the past, exhibited a blackface performance parody of George Floyd's murder. In this context, the heroic freedom-of-speech rhetoric acquires a different flavor.

CCA was completely exhausting. Figuring out the artists' position versus the curatorial position versus your own position dominated the experience. This is what happens when art gets flagrantly instrumentalized; it was like being in a washing machine on the spin cycle. (In an interview on Polish television, Badiucao didn't seem to realize what kind of an institution CCA has become; what matters most to him is getting his own message out.) All of which is a warning to the left as well as the right. After CCA, the partiality of the curatorial agenda at "Kissing Doesn't Kill" made me queasy. Neither show contained interpretational texts that hoped to speak to a general audience.

Writing up my experience with some distance, I'm led to conclusions not so much about the irreconcilably polarized nature of "political art today" (after all, there is no equivalence between an increasingly violent and openly authoritarian right and the so-called woke left). Rather, it made me ponder the responsibilities that come with curating in the public sphere. The internet and social media have made us insular enough, with micro-bubbles, echo chambers, and dog whistles. In this context, how is mediation possible? The art and diplomacy of curating face new challenges. Rhetoric, framing, and interpretation matter, for all audiences. Historically situating works of art without clumsily skewing them to political agendas is a start. This isn't a call to end radical curating, but to think about our historical moment and what might be needed if we are to avoid piling civil war on top of climate apocalypse. It seems crucial that institutions manage to speak to the forsaken middle rather than just to their own fringes—otherwise, paradoxically, we abandon all hope for an agonistic public sphere. □

CLAIRE BISHOP IS A CONTRIBUTING EDITOR OF ARTFORUM.



Left: Tadeusz Boruta, *Five O'Clock*, 2015, oil on canvas, 51 1/8 x 43 3/4". From "Latin Figure Rationalities: Tadeusz Boruta, Antoni Cygan and Piotr Naliwajka," 2023, Zachęta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw. Below: Claudia Clare, *The Butch Pot*, 2020, glazed ceramic, 19 3/4 x 11 3/4 x 11 3/4". From "Claudia Clare: Feminist Satire. No Safe Spaces," 2023, Ujazdowski Castle Center for Contemporary Art, Warsaw.



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Cover: Sam Gilliam, *Foggy* (detail), 2021, acrylic, aluminum granules, copper chop, sawdust, flocking, encaustic, and paper collage on canvas, 96 × 96 × 4". (See page 122.)

From top: Reginald Hudlin, *Boomerang*, 1992, 35 mm, color, sound, 117 minutes. *Strangé* (Grace Jones). Yuko Mohri, *Moré Moré (Leaky): Variations* (detail), 2022, water, hose, PET bottle, bucket, sponge, pump, bottle, umbrella, imitation flower, plastic sheet, flower base, plastic bowl, plastic chain, LED light, cymbal, pot, iron screen, pinch, sewing box, candle stand, bell, funnel, nylon wire. From the series "Moré Moré (Leaky)," 2015–. Installation view, Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea, Milan. Photo: Lorenzo Palmer. Genesis Báez, *Parting (Braid)* (detail), 2021, ink-jet print, 30 × 42". Cecily Brown, *Lobsters, Oysters, Cherries and Pearls* (detail), 2020, oil on canvas, 59 × 67".