

Issues raised by the “Labor Relations” exhibition at the Wrocław Contemporary Museum

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21 June 2016



Labor Relations; an exhibition at the Wrocław Contemporary Museum (MWW), through March 27, 2017

Labor Relations at the Wrocław Contemporary Museum (Lower Silesia, Poland), drawn from the museum’s international contemporary art collection, might well be “the city’s most important art exhibition of the year,” according to the liberal *Gazeta Wyborcza*.

But the first international show at Poland’s major center of avant-garde art cannot be analyzed without placing it in a definite context.

First, there is the reality of the ultra-right Polish government of Beata Szydło and the Law and Justice Party (PiS), which has demonstrated its bitter hostility to democratic rights, socialism and artistic freedom. Any ostensibly “leftist” art exhibition inevitably becomes under the present conditions a political issue and the possible arena for conflict and censorship.

Second, however, one cannot seriously discuss the current exhibition in Wrocław without calling attention to the deleterious impact of postmodernism and identity politics on the character and quality of contemporary art.

The exhibition occupies two floors of the World War II air-raid shelter that houses the museum. Divided into three parts: *Industry, Primitive Accumulation of Capital* and *Subordination and Desire*, the exhibition features works of several dozen international artists interested in the impact of industrialization on contemporary social relations, post-colonial reality and the general state of social relations.

The first work we see upon entering the exhibition, part of the *Industry* section, is *Fragments of Images of Contingence* (1994) by Austrian artist VALIE EXPORT. The glowing light bulbs submerged in liquids “fundamental to our existence,” such as water, milk and motor oil, “creates a situation,” according to the curators, “of potential tension between the substances symbolising today’s capitalism and conflict (oil) as well as those referring to motherhood (milk) and ensuring survival (water).”

Anna Molska’s video *The Weavers* (2009) features three unemployed Silesian miners who complain about their fate using dialogue from the drama of the same title, written in 1892, by German playwright Gerhart Hauptmann, about the weavers’ uprising of 1844. Scenes depicting workers in a present-day coal mine are accompanied by *The Weavers’ Song*, a revolutionary anthem. The author seems to be suggesting that the rhetoric of the 19th century workers’ struggles no longer fits a modern reality.

The cotton weavers’ uprising was a major event that sent ripples across Europe. *The Weavers’ Song* by Heinrich Heine was published on July 10, 1844, in Karl Marx’s *Vorwärts!* [*Forward!*] newspaper, which proclaimed the weavers’ revolt as the harbinger of a coming revolution. The Royal Prussian Supreme Court banned the song because of “its rebellious tone.”

Little or nothing of that spirit finds expression in Molska’s work. The jobless and impoverished miners in her video fret about their lot without conviction or passion as if they were amateur artists hired to act out an outdated drama.



Run Free (2011) is a film by Piotr Wysocki and Dominik Jakułowicz portraying a group of “difficult” working class youth, from an impoverished housing estate in Radom in east-central Poland, who are taking part in a social experiment. The young boys confront the local riot police, perennially hostile to them, for a joint exercise in parkour (a discipline derived from military obstacle course training that includes running, climbing, swinging, vaulting, jumping, rolling, often in an urban environment).

The workout is held in the old Łuczak factory, the site of the brutal suppression of workers protests against rising food prices in 1976 by the Stalinist police and militia. The interviews with the teens who describe their negative experiences with the police are fresh and genuine. Nonetheless, the overall approach of the filmmakers is summed up by the museum’s catalogue: “The joint exercise of the teenagers and the police is an attempt to overcome the mutual lack of trust and aggression.” Why in the world should the youth give up their hostility to the police?

Ewa Axelrad’s *Riot* (2014) features a sculpture forming a barricade of the police shields used in the riots that spread across England in the summer of 2011. However, the police murder of 29-year-old Mark Duggan in Tottenham along with poverty and social inequality are not presented here as major factors in the eruption of the violent protests. The plastic grips of the shields resemble dildos as if to suggest that the male hormones on both sides were responsible for the social disturbances.

Jeremy Deller’s banner *Hello, today you have day off* (2013) refers to a text message commonly sent to all “zero hours,” part-time workers in Great Britain. Tens of millions of people worldwide work on such junk contracts that don’t guarantee a minimum wage or social benefits. Despite its “good news” formulation, the automatically generated message spells disaster as it announces that no paid work is available to an individual awaiting a last-minute assignment.

The *Primitive Accumulation of Capital* section of the exhibit deals with the question of post-colonialism and its ramifications in today’s world. Videos portraying modern victims of post-colonialist policies in Africa and South America dominate the display. Prominence is given to racial discrimination. The word “imperialism” is not mentioned.

Worth noticing here is Ed Atkins’s video *The Trick Brain*, which uses footage originally filmed by Fabrice Maze of the private art collection belonging to the founder of the surrealist movement, André Breton, sold at the shameful auction of his works in 2003. Breton, as the museum catalogue notes, “was a vigorous opponent of the French colonial politics and capitalism.”

First They Ignore You, Then They Laugh at You, Then They Fight You, Then You Win by Gregor Róžański (2015) centers on the logo of the first McDonald’s restaurant opened in Warsaw in 1992 after the reinstatement of capitalism in Poland. Situated next to the latter piece—and obviously contrasted with it—is Allan Sekula’s *Farmer Threshing Grass at Abandoned Airport Used by CIA for Transport of Clandestine “High Value” Terrorism Suspects, Szymany, Poland, July 2009*, pointing to the dark side of the Polish-American military and political alliance embodied in the establishment of torture prisons on the country’s territory.

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In the third part of the exhibit, identity politics plays the first fiddle. *Subordination and Desire* is full of works obsessing about race, sex and gender. *Blackendream* (2015), a 45-minute video by American artist Shikeith, is fixated on the moment when black men became aware of their color.

The only reference to any representative of socialism, Rosa Luxemburg, occurs in Joanna Rajkowska’s *Born in Berlin—A Letter to Rosa* (2011/2012). Having little to do with the revolutionary thinker murdered in Berlin in 1919, Rajkowska’s work, in a series of trivial and often vulgar collages, tells the viewer why the artist has chosen Berlin, a city that used to be “the source of destruction,” for the birthplace of her daughter (named Rosa).

There are reasons why, despite its promising title and subject matter, *Labor Relations* fails to impress. Artists in eastern Europe continue to work under difficult conditions. On the one hand, Stalinism did vast damage to the consciousness of the working class, discrediting socialism in the eyes of millions. The reintroduction of capitalism has been a disaster for the overwhelming majority, and the nationalistic-fascistic tendencies of the crisis-ridden Polish bourgeoisie are making themselves increasingly obvious. Nonetheless, very few eastern European artists and intellectuals have yet worked through the big questions of the 20th century, including, above all, the betrayal of the Russian Revolution at the hands of the Stalinist bureaucracy.

Furthermore, insofar as the artists identify “left” trends in art work, and this if of course a global problem, they turn toward “radical,” “conceptual,” “postmodern” art that concerns itself for the most part with gender, race and sexuality, the stock in trade of the affluent middle class pseudo-intelligentsia. This variety of “left” art tends to be chilly, self-absorbed and indifferent to the conditions of wide layers of the population.

The decisive figure for the Polish artists, although of course they do not see this themselves, is Leon Trotsky. The content and course of Trotsky’s struggle and thought, including his profound writings on art and society, demonstrate that socialist-internationalist resistance to Stalinist counter-revolution existed and forms the basis of political and intellectual opposition to the status quo in our day.

The Wrocław Contemporary exhibition reveals that adaptation to the postmodernist narrative fails to offer a deep and meaningful picture of the most important issues facing humanity. The artistic potential of exploring such an important topic as labor and the productive forces has largely been wasted.

Unhappily, the art presented in Wrocław often lacks depth and beauty, is generally uncreative, depressing and unfulfilling. Agitated by present conditions but seeing no way out (and not struggling terribly hard to find one), the artists on display tend to offer desperation without rage, problems without solution, pleasure without satisfaction.

The exhibition’s curator, Sylwia Serafinowicz, in an interview with *Gazeta Wrocławska*, admitted that “leftist” terminology has a pejorative connotation in Poland. She acknowledged that such language is generally avoided for fear of the consequences: ostracism and government punishment through financial cuts. The funding for a planned exhibition on the migration crisis was recently rejected by the authorities. The Wrocław Museum is still awaiting the approval of basic funding to purchase art.

Attacks on freedom of expression have intensified since PiS took power last October, but they cannot be attributed to the clerical nationalist regime alone. Increasingly, ruling elites all over the world have no interest in art unless it serves their immediate political and social interests. The previous Polish government and local governments especially have for years played a very damaging role by cutting art funding.

The ferocious attack on performing arts and museums has only been temporarily delayed. The new minister of culture, Piotr Gliński, who entered the political scene by unsuccessfully attempting to ban Wrocław’s Polish Theater production of *Death and the Maiden* in November last year, is currently preoccupied with transforming public media (television, radio and film), considered to be a priority, into “missionary” tools of the Polish nation-state. Soon, however, art institutions such as the Wrocław Contemporary Museum, which seek to offer some sort of artistic alternative, may face the threat of being financially and politically strangled by the extreme nationalistic PiS regime.

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