

OCTOBER

182

George Baker

*The Underneath of Painting,
Redux*

Bradley Bailey

*Dada Meets Dixieland: Marcel
Duchamp Explains Fountain*

Tacita Dean, Thomas
Hirschhorn, Julia Robinson,
Joshua Shannon

Four Texts on Claes Oldenburg

Hal Foster

*“The Object Comes Alive”: A
Conversation with Claes Oldenburg*

Art Communities at Risk

grupa o.k.

*Facing Poland’s “New Historical
Politics”: A Conversation with
Jarosław Suchan*

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*Władysław Strzemiński. Neoplastic Room. 1948–50.
Courtesy of Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.*

Facing Poland's "New Historical Politics": A Conversation with Jarosław Suchan

GRUPA O.K.

To focus attention on the amplified hostility around the world to the figure of the artist and artistic expression, as well as to attend to the conditions of specific instances of repression and specific tactics of resistance, we have commissioned an occasional series consisting of short contributions by and about artists, critics, and cultural professions at risk around the world, including Slovenia, Cuba, Russia, Ukraine, Hong Kong, Bolivia, and now Poland.

In the spring of 2022, Jarosław Suchan, the longtime director of Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, Poland, was informed that his contract to lead the innovative museum would not be renewed. His was not an individual case but part of a campaign of recent dismissals at Polish institutions pursued by the populist Law and Justice party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, or PiS), which in recent years has enacted changes in state-run media and educational curricula, reframed historical narratives at memorial museums, and put its stamp on national theaters.¹ For a time it seemed as if modern- and contemporary-art museums might escape the scrutiny of deputy prime minister Piotr Gliński, who had audaciously assumed the additional role of minister of Culture and National Heritage. But now PiS has begun to expel museum leaders that it sees as ideological enemies.² As a result, major institutions of contemporary art in Warsaw, Gdańsk, Kraków, and elsewhere are now led by PiS appointees.

In the landscape of Polish art institutions, Muzeum Sztuki stands out. It is one of the oldest institutions in the world devoted to modernist art. The core of the museum's collection was gathered by Jan Brzękowski, Katarzyna Kobro, Julian Przyboś, Henryk Stażewski, and Władysław Strzemiński, members of the avant-gardist a.r. group—contemporaries of De Stijl and the Surrealists—as a gesture of

1. Examples include the patrolling of language at the World War II Museum and the firing of Paweł Potoroczyn, the director of the Adam Mickiewicz Institute. Hili Perlson, "Artists React to Poland's Revisionist Cultural Policies," *Artnet News*, April 12, 2017, <https://news.artnet.com/market/cultural-workers-react-polish-cultural-policies-775244>.

2. Magdalena Moskalewicz, "The Crisis in Poland's Museums," *Art in America*, December 17, 2021, <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/columns/issues-and-commentary-zacheta-janusz-janowski-1234613869/>.

international solidarity among the progressive art movements of their time.³ Almost by chance yet somehow appropriately, they built their collection in Łódź, the industrial hub known as the city of four cultures (Polish, Jewish, German, and Russian)—a pluralism annihilated during years of Nazi occupation, mass extermination, forced labor, and the reapportionment of ethnic and national populations in the war's aftermath.

Looted by Nazi occupiers and damned as “degenerate,” the modernist collection survived the war only in fragments.⁴ In the late 1940s, the artists hoped to reintegrate their work into a damaged history by expanding the diminished collection and constructing Strzemiński's Neoplastic Room, a modernist environment designed to house artworks gathered before the war.⁵ But the moment was fleeting. In 1949, Polish authorities under Soviet domination declared that only art that was “realistic in form” would be permitted, and in January 1950, the room was destroyed and the works placed in storage.⁶ It was only in the 1960s, after the deaths of Kobro and Strzemiński, that their project was revived in a lasting way by a younger generation of Polish intellectuals sympathetic to the a.r. group's ideals. In 1960, one of Strzemiński's students rebuilt the Neoplastic Room according to Strzemiński's plans. And Ryzsard Stanisławski, who saw the museum as a “critical

3. The history of the museum and its collection is narrated in *The International Collection of Modern Art of the “a.r.” Group*, ed. Anna Saciuk-Gąsowska and Paulina Kurc-Maj (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki, 2019). Our moniker, “grupa o.k.,” is a tribute to the group that amassed the museum's founding collection.

4. The art historian Nawojka Cieślińska-Lobkowicz examines this history in “Kunstmuseum zu Litzmannstadt i wystawa ‘sztuki zwyrodnialej’ w okupowanej Łodzi” [“Kunstmuseum zu Litzmannstadt and the Exhibition of ‘Degenerate Art’ in Occupied Łódź”], *Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi: Monografia, Tom I*, ed. Aleksandra Jach, Katarzyna Słoboda, Joanna Sokołowska, and Magdalena Ziółkowska (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki, 2015), pp. 202–31. The essay describes the organization of a traveling exhibition that drew upon the a.r. group collection under the rubric of “Degenerate and Jewish Art” and notes that the works' presence in this show ironically “may have protected them from the threat of destruction, allowing a significant portion to survive the period of Nazi occupation such that these works would eventually comprise the foundation of Muzeum Sztuki and an expression of the continuation with pre-war history and the city's culture” (231).

5. Przyboś relocated to Lviv in 1939 and was arrested by the Gestapo in 1941; after release he kept a low profile until the Red Army liberated Poland. Kobro and Strzemiński survived mostly in Łódź, where they were vulnerable to Nazi persecution. Both had spoken against the Nazis before the war, and their art was included among works deemed (and exhibited as) “degenerate.” Strzemiński was also disabled from injuries sustained in World War I and therefore doubly vulnerable when the Nazis began to exterminate anyone residing in Łódź not considered able-bodied. Luiza Nader describes their precarity and Strzemiński's wartime production in “Strzemiński's War” in *A Reader in East-Central-European Modernism 1918–1956*, ed. Béata Hock, Klara Kemp-Welch, and Jonathan Owen (London: Courtauld Books Online, 2019), pp. 343–57. See also Nika Strzemińska's reflection on her mother's life and the fate of her sculptural works in “Katarzyna Kobro: Woman and Artist,” trans. Joanna Holzman, in *Katarzyna Kobro: 1898–1951*, ed. Elżbieta Fuchs and Alina Kwiatkowska (Leeds: Henry Moore Institute, 1999), pp. 13–16.

6. “The Neoplastic Room. An Open Composition” (gallery guide), ed. Leszek Karczewski, Aleksandra Jach, and Daniel Muzyczuk (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki, 2019). Available online: https://msl.org.pl/file.php?i=przegladarka-plikow/msl_sala_neoplastyczna_internet-EN.pdf.



The "a.r." group—Documents: The Fortieth Anniversary of the International Collection of Modern Art in Łódź, *Muzeum Sztuki*, 1971.
Courtesy of Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.

instrument," directed the museum from 1966 to 1991, tracking contemporary developments in Conceptual art, film, performance art, and Pop art, and acquiring collections of Czech artists at the end of the Prague Spring.⁷

Suchan's sixteen-year directorship may be regarded as a third transformative moment in the museum's history. Appointed after Poland became a member nation of the European Union, Suchan navigated the EU's paradoxical demand of cultural institutions: to be (or become) internationalist yet also express a local particularism that might serve as community identification and tourist enticement. Suchan answered this riddle by building a program rooted in

7. Ryszard Stanisławski, "Muzeum jako instrument krytyczny" ["The Museum as a Critical Instrument"], typewritten document, c. 1992. Reprinted in *Monografia, Tom I*, pp. 482–91. In 1973, Stanisławski organized the exhibition *Constructivism in Poland 1923–1936: BLOK, Praesens, a.r.* for Museum Folkwang, Essen, Germany, and Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo, The Netherlands.

the museum's history while also recognizing affinities with art worlds exterior to it. Under his direction, Muzeum Sztuki pursued research projects around Polish figures like Leopold Buczkowski, Debora Vogel, and Teresa Żarnower, and mounted exhibitions centered on local countercultural initiatives including the collective Łódź Kaliska, Józef Robakowski and Małgorzata Potocka's Exchange Gallery, and the legendary 1981 exhibition *Construction in Process*. His program also explored transnational links, as with the 2009 exhibition *Katarzyna Kobro/Lygia Clark* and the 2010 collection display *The Neoplastic Room: An Open Composition*, which juxtaposed Strzemiński's modernist icon with contemporary works by Nairy Baghramian, Daniel Buren, Celine Condorelli, Monika Sosnowska, and Julita Wójcik.

Through programs like these, Suchan built a cohesive curatorial project oriented by the museum's collection and history without being beholden to it. In doing so he made the unlikely industrial city of Łódź an international art destination and substantially shifted how the history of modernism can be told. Perhaps most significantly, he staked out a position in which an art-museum director might still function as a public intellectual. All of this, it seems, is now ending.

Suchan spoke with grupa o.k. about his case, the state of art museums in Poland, what PiS wants from culture, and where things may go from here.

—grupa o.k. (Julian Myers and Joanna Szupinska)

grupa o.k.: PiS has been a strong force in Polish politics for two decades. But it was only after winning a parliamentary majority in 2015 that the party began to reshape the institutions of civil society to suit its brand of populist nationalism—including, now, Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, the museum that you directed from 2006 until 2022. During that time we have been attentive members of your audience, researchers in the museum's archives, and contributors to a couple of publications. We care deeply about this institution. Before talking about your dismissal, tell us about the museum and your approach to directing it.

Jarostaw Suchan: For anyone interested in the twentieth-century avant-garde, Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź is *the* museum. Its cornerstone, established in 1929, is the International Collection of Modern Art, which was assembled over the course of the 1930s by grupa a.r. (*artyści rewolucyjni*, or group of revolutionary artists), one of the most important associations of avant-garde artists in Poland. It was one of the first museum collections of avant-garde art in the world, and the only one still in existence that was founded by artists. The museum went through many difficulties over the decades, traversing German occupation during World War II and suppression during the early years of Soviet influence. Yet it survived, and between the 1960s and '90s it was the most important modern- and contemporary-art institu-

tion in Poland, showing Polish audiences what was important and valuable in twentieth-century art and teaching international audiences about the most important phenomena in Polish art.

When I assumed the directorship, though, the institution was in bad shape. Owing to the transformation of the Polish art scene in the 1990s and a deficit in leadership, Muzeum Sztuki had lost its central role. It lacked international connections, there was no clear understanding of its mission, and it wasn't very active. Everything about the museum had to be redefined, remodeled, including the staff and the physical infrastructure. So when I got the job, there were many immediate, practical concerns. Over the last sixteen years, this situation has changed meaningfully. The museum got a new space, ms². The existing spaces were modernized. And a team of creative people with great expertise and experience was built. Muzeum Sztuki is again visible on the international art scene and is well connected locally and internationally. The education program and research aspects are strong. The public audience is bigger and more diverse. The collection is still growing—at least I hope it is.

But what is most important, and everything I am describing here is subordinate to this, is that there is a clear understanding of the public role of this institution, which is derived from a reinterpretation of its avant-garde roots. This dedication to the legacy of the avant-garde makes our institution special; this is what distinguishes it from institutions elsewhere in Poland. That doesn't mean we only work with the historical avant-garde, but everything we do with contemporary art and contemporary issues, we tie back to the historical avant-garde.

grupa o.k.: How did you think about this legacy when you started? Did you see it as an inspiration? Was there any way it seemed like a burden?

Suchan: When I first arrived to make my presentation for the directorship, I had not visited the museum in many years. Walking around the galleries, I saw all of those legendary works from the a.r. group collection, the fantastic works of the European avant-garde of the 1920s and '30s. But I had the sense that they were exhibited like dead animals in a natural-history museum. They were devoid of life. These works, which were supposed to spark a revolution—not only an artistic but a social revolution—were presented like fossils from a dead past. I emphatically disagreed with this way of thinking about and showing the work of the avant-garde. I wanted these works to be a source of ideas, questions, and intuitions that were relevant to the present.

This experience was clarifying and led to the realization that it was critical to activate the institution's avant-garde legacy to make it relevant to a contemporary public: to make it socially useful again. I am, of course, conscious of the limitations of the historical avant-garde project: its Eurocentrism, its political naivete and mistakes, its corruption by the market. And we have addressed these shortcomings in many of our undertakings. Nevertheless, I believe that the emancipatory and utopian impulse in the avant-garde is



Elżbieta Jabłońska, I Repeat Them to Reach Them, 2009, as seen installed in Władysław Strzemiński's Neoplastic Room, 1948/1960 (reconstructed by Bolesław Utkin, 1960), ms1, 2009. Photo by Marcin Stępień. Courtesy of Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.

worth saving and might also pose an answer to the current political situation. That is what I, with my colleagues and team, tried to achieve with our exhibitions, research programs, and educational endeavors.

grupa o.k.: These commitments are connected to your general orientation as someone trained in art history. But it strikes us too that the episodes of your career so far have followed some of the major developments in Poland's recent history. You began working as a curator in the 1990s in Kraków, after the collapse of communism, drawing on those energies.

Suchan: Yes, the early 1990s in Poland were an exciting moment of chaos, not only in art and culture but generally in social life. It was an amazing and formative time.

grupa o.k.: You were the director of Bunkier Sztuki in Kraków, a municipal gallery with the profile of a *Kunsthalle*, at the turn of the century—only departing after some controversy.

Suchan: There were multiple reasons, but the one that tipped the scale was a panel discussion on the topic of *Irreligion*, a widely debated exhibition in Brussels that featured Polish artists using Christian iconography in unorthodox ways.

A conservative youth association organized a protest in front of Bunkier, and a right-wing paper appealed to the mayor to fire me.⁸

grupa o.k.: So you are no stranger to public scrutiny. Next you took the position of deputy director and chief curator at Ujazdowski Castle, Center for Contemporary Art in Warsaw.

Suchan: Another very special place: interdisciplinary, open to new forms of culture, and willing to show phenomena that were risky or up for debate. Some of our efforts at Ujazdowski, like Nan Goldin's exhibition *Devil's Playground*, also ended in controversy.⁹

grupa o.k.: You became the director of Muzeum Sztuki in 2006, shortly after Poland joined the EU in 2004. But the latest transformation, PiS's consolidation of power in 2015, had a slower effect. You negotiated these changing political forces for several years.

Suchan: There are a few reasons for this. First is Muzeum Sztuki's position in Łódź, rather than Warsaw. Since the early 2000s, power on many levels of social life has been consolidated in the capital city. Following a political centralization, mass-media stations and large company headquarters moved there. The biggest contemporary-art institutions, too, are in Warsaw: Ujazdowski, Zachęta National Gallery of Art, and Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. Muzeum Sztuki is simply farther from the Ministry of Culture than those institutions.

But more importantly, contemporary-art institutions were not the focus of the governing party's attention. The party's cultural agenda is subordinate to what journalists and scholars have called "new historical politics."¹⁰ Its main objective is a historical revisionism that aims to create an idealized picture of Polish history, to remove all controversial moments, and to present Poles as righteous and Poland as a nation that has always stood on the right side of history. They want to replace what they call *pedagogika wstydu*, the "pedagogy of shame," meaning anyone researching or exposing any dark sides of our national history.¹¹ And from this perspective, contemporary-art

8. The exhibition *Irreligion: The Morphology of the Non-Sacred in Polish Art* was on view at the private gallery Atelier 340 Muzeum, Brussels, in 2001–02. Marek Wasilewski, "Appropriation and Confrontation: Art and Religion in Poland," *blok*, February 12, 2020, <https://blokmagazine.com/appropriation-and-confrontation-art-and-religion-in-poland/>. Marcin Pańtak provides further details in "20 lat po dyskusji wokół wystawy *Irreligia*" ("20 Years After the Discussion about the Exhibition *Irreligion*"), Bunkier Sztuki, <https://bunkier.art.pl/?wydarzenia=20-lat-po-dyskusji-wokol-wystawy-irreligia>, accessed August 14, 2022.

9. *Nan Goldin: Devil's Playground* debuted at the Centre Georges Pompidou in 2001 and traveled to venues throughout Europe. It concluded its tour at Ujazdowski Castle in Poland in 2003.

10. The idea of "new historical politics" is linked to the emergence of the Law and Justice party in the early 2000s, and to its passionate rejection of liberal elites as Poland was granted membership in the European Union in 2004. These emergent tensions are described in Wiktor Osiatyński, "Focus on Poland," *Dublin Review of Books*, May 2007, <https://drb.ie/articles/focus-on-poland/>.

11. Political scientist Rūta Kazlauskaitė and philosopher Mikko Salmela discuss the role of shame in PiS's "strategy of emotional regulation" in "Mediated Emotions: Shame and Pride in Polish Right-Wing Media Coverage of the 2019 European Parliament Elections," *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research* 35:1 (2022), pp. 130–49.

institutions are less important than national or historical museums. The governing party took over the latter first.

grupa o.k.: And theater?

Suchan: Yes, and theater. The Polish intelligentsia has traditionally placed more importance on literature and related arts like theater and cinema. That is why theaters were under attack. At first, government policy was largely based on ignoring visual-art institutions.

Also, directors of public institutions are well protected by Polish law. There needed to be a strong case to fire a director before his or her term of office expired. Otherwise the courts may invalidate the decision and force the government to pay a fine. The first few attempts, like the early dismissal of the director of the Adam Mickiewicz Institute in 2016, ended in court. So the governing party changed its strategy. Rather than allow these cases to go to court, they have replaced the directors of contemporary-art institutions when their terms of office end. The Ministry of Culture waits until their term expires and replaces them with directors invested in the governing party's ideological agenda. That is what happened at Ujazdowski Castle, at Zachęta Gallery, and, now, at Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź.

grupa o.k.: This brings us to your own dismissal. What happened?

Suchan: My term expired in November 2021. After that, I was employed as acting director, and there were intimations that maybe my term of office would be renewed—that some at the Ministry of Culture thought it would be worth working with me further. I was invited to Warsaw for a meeting that was supposed to be about the future of the museum. Instead, on arrival, I was told that I was dismissed, effective immediately, and to clear out my office. It was like a hammer to my head. I was so shocked that I forgot to ask who would replace me, or even to ask about the conditions of the dismissal. I simply walked out of the office.

To make matters worse, on leaving the office I ran into someone who has slandered the leading figures of the Polish art world for years, and who declared that he was my replacement. The next day he had the boldness to ask me if I would serve as his consultant.

grupa o.k.: Unbelievable.

Suchan: It was absurd. Because I was the acting director, they could have told me at any time, "Okay, we are not going to continue collaborating with you. We have another person for the position. So prepare the institution for this transition, say, in one month." There was an excess of hostility, of humiliation. It was difficult to understand.

grupa o.k.: Did you receive any explanation?

Suchan: No. In a press interview after my dismissal, the minister of Culture said that the newly appointed director presents a "sovereign intellectual attitude," one independent of the influence of international cultural circles and institutions. He said that Polish art institutions are under pressure by Western,

liberal ideas that they copy in an immature way. I guess they came to see Muzeum Sztuki as one such institution, and therefore I had to be replaced.

I think my situation was worsened by the fact that in late 2021, our museum hosted the annual conference of the International Committee for Museums and Collections of Modern Art, or CIMAM. This was an international event that gathered museum curators of modern and contemporary art from all over the world. The conference theme was "Under Pressure: Museums in Times of Xenophobia and Climate Emergency."¹² At the time, there was a refugee crisis on the border of Poland and Belarus. Polish authorities were being criticized for their hostile policy toward refugees, who were being pushed back; Poland was building a wall. The minister of Culture understood the conference as a criticism of this policy.

grupa o.k.: It wasn't?

Suchan: Honestly, it was just a matter of chance. The topic of the conference had been decided by CIMAM almost two years earlier as a response to the global situation. I was summoned to the Ministry of Culture prior to the conference because someone must have seen the title and panicked. The minister tried to persuade me to change the title. Of course it was impossible, and I did not see any reason to do it. But this created a situation in which the Ministry of Culture was not happy and, I think, weakened my position.

That said, I'll admit it was not a case of mistaken identity. For instance, two months earlier I had participated in a CIMAM webinar entitled "Museums in Eastern Europe Under Pressure?," during which I criticized cultural policy in Poland—and not for the first time.

grupa o.k.: Muzeum Sztuki's internationalism must have been another factor.

Suchan: Our commitment to internationalism is an orientation drawn from the history of the museum. The foundation of Muzeum Sztuki's collection was assembled as a gesture of international solidarity among avant-garde communities of the 1920s and '30s. Internationalism was central to their agenda. They thought of themselves as a transnational and universalist movement. They were critical of local and national traditions, though this was not a zero-sum situation: Some elements of local traditions were adapted and reused. But generally speaking, the avant-garde was totally against the idea of national culture as something separate from the cultures of others. It was simply against their universalist spirit.

We tried to keep this internationalism in our activity while acknowledging that today internationalism means something different than it did a century ago. At that time it was Eurocentric; even if there were universalistic ideas, they were composed from the perspective of European culture. We tried to problematize this in our activity and our acquisitions for the collection.

12. CIMAM describes the 2021 conference, participants, and the program of discussions at "Under Pressure: Museums in Times of Xenophobia and Climate Emergency," [cimam.org](https://cimam.org/cimam-annual-conference/annual-conference-2021-poland/under-pressure-museums-in-times-of-xenophobia-and-climate-emergency), <https://cimam.org/cimam-annual-conference/annual-conference-2021-poland/under-pressure-museums-in-times-of-xenophobia-and-climate-emergency>, accessed August 13, 2022.



Prototypes 03—Carolina Caycedo & Zofia Rydet: Care Report, *ms1*, 2019–20. Courtesy of Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź, and Zofia Rydet Foundation, Kraków. Photograph by Piotr Tomczyk.

Nevertheless, it is important to underline internationalism, especially when nationalism is part of the ideological agenda of the populists, who mobilize their electorate by telling them they must defend their culture against the influence of others who want to destroy it. That is an ideology we definitely opposed.

grupa o.k.: You also took up the idea of heritage, at first glance a conservative shibboleth.¹³

Suchan: You are referring to the project 100 Years of the Polish Avant-Garde that we initiated in 2017 as a reaction to the newly created cultural policy.¹⁴ Polish heritage was a key idea for them: a source of principles on which our national identity should be built. We decided to take up the gauntlet and raised the question: What *actually* constitutes our national heritage?

13. Tony Judt lambastes European heritage industries after the founding of the European Union in his magisterial *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), pp. 770–74.

14. The museum describes the initiative and offers a list of participating museums at “100 Years of the Avant-garde in Poland,” Muzeum Sztuki, <https://msl.org.pl/100-years-of-the-avant-garde-in-poland/>, accessed August 29, 2022.

The governing party understands national heritage in a way that is conservative, traditionalist, and ethnocentric. Our project, initiated to celebrate the centennial of the Polish avant-garde, aimed to promote awareness that the avant-garde is part of our heritage. And that means that our heritage is built on the ideas of emancipation, social revolution, internationalism, and openness to new forms of culture and life.

The first objective of this project was to undermine an understanding of heritage that would allow it to be used as a tool for conservative social pedagogy. And there was also the project of providing historical legitimation to radical manifestations of contemporary art that have sometimes been seen as foreign elements that want to destroy Polish culture.¹⁵

grupa o.k.: "You want heritage? Okay! It contains everything you say is foreign to it."

Suchan: The objectives were ambitious, as you can see, and of course the project failed.

grupa o.k.: In what sense?

Suchan: I didn't expect that we would be able to change the cultural policy of the government but hoped we would change ways of thinking among the less radical right-wing intelligentsia: the people who create think tanks, advise the government, or write for conservative media.

grupa o.k.: How do you measure that failure? On what criteria?

Suchan: I try to look at it realistically. More than a hundred institutions were involved in this project—which was great.¹⁶ But there were also strong institutions that could have influenced opinion that instead distanced themselves from this project. From that perspective, yes, it failed. On the other hand, what our museum did under the umbrella of this project was, I think, successful.¹⁷ We proposed new interpretations of the avant-garde in Poland,

15. This bias is not because the avant-garde artists were themselves foreign to Poland; most were ethnic Poles, whether or not they were born within the borders established in 1918. Rather, foreignness was attributed to the perceived origin of their artistic ideas and aesthetics: Germans, Russians, and so-called rootless cosmopolitans, an epithet often directed at Jewish intellectuals.

16. This involvement encompassed exhibitions, concerts, performances, publications, lectures, and conferences at a range of institutions including art museums, history museums, theaters, and music academies. Alongside surveys and thematic exhibitions were monographs devoted to Oskar Hansen, Tadeusz Kantor, Natalia LL, Debora Vogel, and others, and exhibitions exploring international connections—for example, between Polish artists and Hans Arp or Dziga Vertov, and a show at Ujazdowski Castle co-organized with the Indonesian art center JaF (Jatiwangi art Factory).

17. At Muzeum Sztuki the project took multiple forms, including a series of ten exhibitions and ten monographic publications, crowned by the project The Avant-Garde Museum, which consisted of an international conference, "Museum of the Avant-Garde or the Avant-Garde Museum: Collecting the Radical," held December 2–3, 2017; an ambitious exhibition, *The Avant-Garde Museum*, curated by Suchan and Agnieszka Pindera and held from October 15, 2021, to May 1, 2022; a massive publication collecting new research and source documents, *The Avant-Garde Museum*, ed. Agnieszka Pindera and Jarosław Suchan (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki and Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther und Franz König, 2020); and an online exhibition co-presented with e-flux (<https://theavantgardemuseum.e-flux.com/avantgardemuseum/>).

bringing this phenomenon into the present. And there were observable results: Among young thinkers and researchers in Poland, the avant-garde is becoming more and more important.

grupa o.k.: This project assumes that people might still be convinced through reasoned argumentation. But everything right now is stacked against that kind of persuasion. The horizon of such a project may not necessarily be in the present, but in the future. It builds a groundwork for future actions—in that sense it is something like the avant-garde itself.

Suchan: You mean it will succeed through *Nachträglichkeit*, deferred action?¹⁸ Hopefully.

grupa o.k.: Let's turn to the present and future. We have seen the recent shows organized under the new directorship at Ujazdowski Castle and wondered: Who are these exhibitions for? What does PiS want from contemporary art? Is their project restorative, speaking to some old guard? Or do they picture a new, right-wing audience that will embrace contemporary art?

Suchan: One thing we should be careful about is not to look at the governing milieu as a monolith. There are different interests and different groups behind these changes. There is not only the elaborate cultural policy created by the spin doctors of the populist party, but also groups of artists who have felt excluded and marginalized for the last thirty years.

There are at least three distinct positions within the larger milieu. First is the governing party itself. What does PiS want? They want calm and peace of mind, undisturbed by controversies and critical debates. They want museums to provide easy, comfortable experiences. They want a sort of educational entertainment that doesn't force audiences to confront difficult questions related to our history or current social situation. They want museums to present only heroic and glorious moments from our past, proving that as a nation we have always been on the right side, and to promote widely accepted, "safe" achievements of today's culture.

From this perspective, the contemporary art we were showing at Muzeum Sztuki is problematic because it tries to revise such a picture of history and society. It takes the public out of its moral comfort and forces it to face its prejudices, discriminatory practices, and a difficult past. Hence the negative attitude of the ruling party toward contemporary art. But they

18. The link between the psychoanalytic concept of deferred action and the historical avant-garde is explored by Hal Foster in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), in particular the chapter "Who's Afraid of the Neo-Avant-Garde?," pp. 1–32. Influential in Central and Eastern European countries after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Foster's parsing of the concept offered a model for histories of art interrupted by war, totalitarianism, and political repression, and for thinking about the complex legacy of unfulfilled aspirations from the history of the avant-garde. The curator and museum director Zdenka Badovinac argues this case directly in "The Museum of Contemporary Art," in *Comradeship: Curating, Art, and Politics in Post-Socialist Europe*, ed. Julian Myers (New York: Independent Curators International, 2019), pp. 103–20.

eagerly support art that provides purely aesthetic pleasure, that appeals to so-called eternal values, that manifests mastery, that cultivates the classic triad of truth, goodness, and beauty. The current cultural policy does not support artists and institutions that try to participate in public debates.

That is the general direction. A second strain consists of those in the ruling party's milieu who believe it is necessary to openly oppose what they perceive as a liberal-leftist offensive against Polish culture in recent decades. So instead of ideological neutrality, they want to confront liberal-leftist values and stand on the side of conservative, traditional, and nationalist values. They see this as a restoration of cultural pluralism that has been denied by liberal hegemony. The truth is that such pluralism existed in Poland: various museums showing various manifestations of artistic production, artists representing different political views. Whereas now almost all major art institutions are run by people associated with one political perspective.

Ujazdowski's program is emblematic of this second position. It is not about winning conservatives to contemporary art, but rather about undermining an alleged liberal-leftist hegemony. It is a provocation addressed to intellectuals, not to the masses. Notably, the current director of Ujazdowski was a student of Piotr Piotrowski, one of the most respected Polish academics and museum directors, who practiced socially committed, critical art history. In my opinion, Ujazdowski's director is following his mentor's model of political commitment and criticality, but has paradoxically reversed his ideological vector from Left to Right.¹⁹

grupa o.k.: And what about the other major institutions?

Suchan: The new appointments at Zachęta and Muzeum Sztuki characterize a third faction. They are seizing the opportunity created by the ruling party to "regain" these museums. They are not necessarily adherents of the ruling party's ideology but are people who felt excluded from leading art institutions and from today's art world in general. They are part of artists' unions and circles of, so to speak, contemporary academicism. They represent different aesthetics and visual languages but share biases against contemporary art, claiming it is too ideological and politicized and that it neglects intrinsic artistic values. They have long criticized museums and galleries for promoting only this kind of art and marginalizing other kinds.

19. Piotr Piotrowski (1952–2015) was one of the most important historians of Central and Eastern European art in recent decades. He was a model of the engaged public intellectual, and among his transformative contributions was the essay "How to Write a History of Central-East European Art" (*Third Text*, vol. 23, no. 1 [January 2009], pp. 5–14) and *In the Shadow of Yalta: The Avant-garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989* (London: Reaktion Books, 2009), works that rethink the place of Central and Eastern European art within the global turn in art history and that advocate more broadly for a "horizontal art history" that better accounts for art worlds previously excluded from Western narratives. In this they have presented vital resources for postcolonial thinking across the field.

grupa o.k.: These distinctions are useful for understanding what is happening, but also where fault lines exist. This eases our sense of impasse in the long term. But what are the more immediate consequences of this wave of dismissals?

Suchan: Art institutions have become places of debate and reflection on the critical problems faced by contemporary society. I am afraid they will no longer serve this function. Artists, activists, and thinkers who take up these issues will lose institutional support and the opportunity to make their production public. Public space, already diminished, will shrink even more. Moreover, I am afraid that the enormous effort put into building the international position of Polish art institutions in recent decades will have been wasted. Polish culture will certainly be less present in the world. Our audiences will suffer as a result, as they will have fewer opportunities to confront international artistic and intellectual production. Polish artists will also suffer, because it will be more difficult to promote their art to the world.

grupa o.k.: When your dismissal was announced, Mami Kataoka, director of CIMAM, published a letter to the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage condemning the action, and there was the usual outcry on social media.²⁰ Yet we had the sinking feeling as we read (and posted) that not only would these protests be ineffective but that we were merely playing into the dynamics that the dismissals were meant to unravel: internationalists who “know better” chiding Poland for its backwardness and telling it what to do. The populists were better at being in the minority: adept at creating scandals, riling up their base, and making things so unpleasant for museum directors that they would quit before their contract was finished.²¹

Suchan: Right now the opposition is weak. This is a result not of a natural but a typical process. The liberal parties were in power in Poland for a dozen years. Their ideas wore out and became unattractive. This is not something special to Polish or Eastern European societies. But there is a specificity to our case. After 1989, Polish society faced very harsh, brutal neoliberal policies that marginalized huge sections of society.²² Those excluded felt harmed, victimized by the

20. Kataoka's letters to Piotr Gliński and Grzegorz Schreiber, marshal of the Łódź Voivodeship, are available at “CIMAM expresses its concern over the dismissal of Jarosław Suchan as director of Museum Sztuki in Łódź,” *cimam.org*, April 29, 2022, <https://cimam.org/museum-watch/museum-watch-actions/about-jaroslaw-suchans-dismissal/>.

21. For example, Anda Rottenberg, then director of Zachęta, was publicly pressured to resign from the museum in 2001 over the display of an artwork by Maurizio Cattelan. “Poland, Belarus & Ukraine Report,” *RadioFreeEurope*, vol. 3, no. 9 (March 13, 2001), <https://www.rferl.org/a/1344116.html>.

22. The Balcerowicz Plan was a series of reforms that navigated the transition from a socialist to a capitalist economy in Poland after 1989, guided by deputy prime minister and finance minister Leszek Balcerowicz and based on the thinking of neoliberal American economist Jeffrey Sachs. Sometimes called “shock therapy,” the plan instituted rapid privatization across the Polish economy. The plan has been attacked for its negative fallout in Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Picador, 2007), and systematically condemned by the Polish political economist Tadeusz Kowalik in *From Solidarity to Sellout: The Restoration of Capitalism in Poland*, trans. Eliza Lewandowska (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2011).

system. This led them to vote for a party that promised to care for all: the less educated, the poor, the small towns and villages that felt forgotten. The pendulum shifted from liberalism to populism.²³

This shift coincided with a deficit of new ideas and political projects from the liberal side. PiS wins because it has nobody against whom it could lose. There is a lack of vision that could engage people, could persuade them to vote for liberals or leftists. The populists are in a better position because they offer a simpler, and therefore more appealing, narrative. They are also good at picking out scapegoats for the problems people face and keeping the electorate mobilized against them—against all those “others” who want to destroy “our” way of life.

I believe cultural institutions still have a role to play in contemporary politics. They stimulate critical imagination and the ability to think and act independently of the interpretations and visions of the world imposed by “big others” like politicians and the church. This is a way to produce a mature citizenry. Our program at Muzeum Sztuki was driven by this mission, and it did not change when the populists came to power. Quite the opposite. We strengthened those aspects of our program. It wasn't easy. But I think that this is one way we can oppose the march of populism, not only in Poland but in other countries.

23. Piotr Piotrowski tracks the emergence of populism as a political force in post-socialist Poland in his essay “Visual Art Policy in Poland: Democracy, Populism and Censorship,” *The Populism Reader*, ed. Lars Bang Larsen, Cristina Ricupero, and Nicolaus Schafhausen (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2005), pp. 187–93.