CURATING THE ARTISTIC PRACTICES OF RESISTANCE (ACTIVIST EXHIBITIONS IN POLAND, 2017–2022)

Izabela Kowalczyk

Pregledni rad /
Review article
UDK 7.038.5(438)"2017/2022"
7:304]"20"

Abstract

In this text, I propose to reflect on the curatorial strategy that involves political engagement and the artistic practices of resistance. I define this approach as engaged (or activist) curating. This strategy manifests itself in the presentation of artistic and activist visual works in art galleries and museums, and in doing it with engagement. What is particularly important in such a curatorial strategy is combining artworks with visual artifacts from protests, such as banners, leaflets, and zines. Such curatorial practices can also function as a strategy of resistance, especially in cases of restrictions on civil rights. The exhibitions selected for discussion are: *Polish Women, Patriots, Rebels* in the Arsenal Gallery in Poznań (2017); *We Are People* in the Labyrinth Gallery in Lublin (2020), *You'll Never Walk Alone* in the Labyrinth Gallery (2020/2021), and *Who Will Write the History of Tears: Artists on Women's Rights* in the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw (2021/2022). I analyze these examples by tracing the connections between art and politics. I also raise the question of the significance of exhibitions that incorporate activism into the field of art.

Keywords: contemporary art, Poland, activist exhibitions, curatorial practice, curating as resistance, civil rights

In this text, I propose to reflect on the curatorial strategy that involves political engagement and the artistic practices of resistance. I define this approach as engaged (or activist) curating. This strategy manifests itself in the presentation of artistic and activist visual works in art galleries and museums, and in doing it with engagement. What is particularly important in such a curatorial strategy is combining artworks with visual artifacts from protests, such as banners, leaflets, and zines. Such curatorial practices can also function as a strategy of resistance, especially in cases of restrictions on civil rights. I will refer to several exhibitions that were created in reference to the introduction of strict anti-abortion law in Poland and fight for women's and LGBTQIA+'s rights. I will analyze these examples by tracing the connections between art and politics. I also want to raise the question of the significance of exhibitions that incorporate activism into the field of art. Does this strategy allow us to look at artistic activity in a way that is different than traditional? And what does it say about the relationship between art and activism?

Art and Activism

The concept of curatorial activism was proposed in 2018 by Maura Reilly in her book *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating.*[1] She used this term to "designate the practice of organizing art exhibitions with the principal aim of ensuring that certain constituencies of artists are no longer ghettoized or excluded from the master narratives of art. It is a practice that commits itself to counter-hegemonic initiatives that give voice to those who have been historically silenced or omitted altogether—and, as such, focuses almost exclusively on work produced by women, artists of color, non-Euro-Americans, and/or queer artists."[2] Reilly calls for change in the art world consisting in rejecting white privilege and Western centrism, and challenging hetero-centrism and lesbo-homophobia. However, the author is not concerned with incorporating activism into art itself, but rather with incorporating an anti-hegemonic position into institutional practices.

As Juan Albarrán Diego notes, Maura Reilly's proposal, supported by a precise diagnosis of the persisting inequalities in contemporary art, is doubtlessly relevant. However, "[h]er research, [...] presented as a sort of 'manifesto for change in the art world,' reinforces the central role of the curator in the art system, ignoring collaborative curatorial processes and projects developed in non-conventional formats, in spaces far removed from hegemonic circuits and centres."[3] Albarrán Diego draws attention to the spread of the concept of artivism (art + activism) at the beginning of the 21st century in connection with the aesthetics of anti-globalization protests—their performative, playful and creative aspects. These include actions taking place mainly on the streets, directly in urban areas, which have become a new field for creative protest.

The author also refers to Peter Weibel's editorial and curatorial project *global aCtIVISm*,[4] which explores the same area. The exhibition opened on December 13, 2013, at ZKM (Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe) brought together a wide array of material: videos, installations, objects, photographs, documentation of direct actions in the streets, and interventions on social media—produced by collectives, NGOs,

1 Maura Reilly, *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating* (Thames & Hudson, 2018).

2 Maura Reilly, "What is Curatorial Activism?" www.academia.edu/38083139/What_Is_Curatorial_Activism (accessed on February 25, 2026).

3 Juan Albarrán Diego, "Curating Activism: Art, Politics and Exhibitions (In, Around, and Beyond Institutions)," trans. Phoebe Clarke, *Critique d'art*. *Actualité internationale de la littérature critique sur l'art contemporain* 51 (2019), journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/36575 (accessed on February 23, 2026).

4 Peter Weibel (ed.), *Global Activism: Art and Conflict in the 21st Century* (MIT – ZKM, 2014).

activists, filmmakers, intellectuals and artists from around the world. Weibel describes these activities as performative democracy and links them with a neo-avant-garde tradition: "Performative interventions by artivists coupled with mass media online distribution have shown how citizens can—and want to—play a tangible part in overcoming crisis situations: practices of artistic performance and those of audience participation, which have existed in art since the 1960s, are now descending into the world of politics, as it were."[5]

Albarrán Diego, analyzing various publications and approaches to strategies combining activism and curatorial practices, concludes and asks:

"The political work identified as activism continues to encourage us to reflect on the way to integrate this activity—labile, energetic, and always guided by the desire to intervene politically in reality—into the space of contemporary art. How can we integrate its transforming force to the work dynamic of agents implicated in the field? How can we bring it to the present time—how can it be exhibited—without betraying its aims, so we can understand its meanings and experiment at least a fraction of its intensity in the very field of art?"[6]

These questions are also relevant for my text, in which I discuss the combination of curatorial practices and activism in a very narrow time frame and geographical area, using the example of exhibitions that took place in Poland from 2017 to 2022.

I would argue that exhibitions incorporating activist strategies can lead to a transformation of the visual order and, consequently, a change of power relations. An exhibition can function as a form of political intervention and may become a public forum where important political issues are addressed and discussed. It can also examine the institution of democracy, removing the borders of identities that are strictly defined by the social order and changing the field of visibility from a monolithic structure to a diverse one. According to the French philosopher Jacques Rancière,[7] artistic activity can become political only through the transformation of the visual order and its perception. Rancière focuses on politics within the imagery because, as he says, aesthetics has its own politics. Politics within aesthetics determines the visibility or invisibility of certain phenomena, presupposes a certain hierarchy of themes, and democratizes the aesthetic order. In the light of these considerations, art has political power when it sows ferment, destroys a given order of

5 Peter Weibel, "People, Politics, and Power," *Global Activism* 58, after: Albarrán Diego, "Curating Activism."

6 Albarrán Diego, "Curating Activism."

7 Jacques Ranciere, *Estetyka jako polityka* [Aesthetics as politics], trans. J. Kutyła and P. Mościcki, introduction A. Żmijewski, afterword S. Žižek (Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2007). Cf. Jacques Rancière and Peter Engelmann, *Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. W. Hoban (Polity Press, 2019).



The opening of the exhibition Polki, patriotki, rebeliantki [Polish women, patriots, rebels], Arsenal Gallery in Poznań, 8.09.2017, photo by Ewelina Muraszkiewicz

representation, and undermines the conventions of imagery. In the case of art exhibitions, the point would be to present topics from the margins, but also those that may cause controversy and achieve the aforementioned effect. This could be, for example, showing gender hierarchies, usually obvious in the art world, pointing to political conflicts, or revealing hidden power relations. What is of major interest here is what happens at the junction of art and reality, and I think that pointing to this area can lead to a reconfiguration of the visual order, which contemporary art often strives for. On the other hand, an exhibition that incorporates activist practices highlights them, reinforces their message, and makes them more present in the audience's consciousness.

The postulate of transforming the world, also through artistic actions, is still actual and even more urgent than ever. I am referring to issues as Russian aggression against Ukraine, threats of new wars, the refugee and climate crises. This is a moment that calls for action, also in the field of art and curatorial activity. I will quote art historian Piotr Piotrowski's assumptions about links between art and democracy, where he wrote: "It is up to intellectuals and artists, who cherish freedom as an ideal, who fill the discomfort of unfulfilled expectations, the discomfort of unfulfilled democracy, to argue and agitate for democracy."[8] He warned against neglecting the construction of an open society, against discontinuing a debate on democracy and freedom, and against a lack of respect for differences, which ultimately lead to the atrophy of democracy.

Piotrowski defined art as a political act, observing as follows: "Art as public activity is, by its very nature, a political activity in the broad sense of the word, as this space is defined by politics, i.e. a conflict between authority and citizens, between various camps of broadly understood power, and also between different groups of citizens differing in gen-

8 Piotr Piotrowski, *Art and Democracy in Post-communist Europe* (Reaktion Books, 2012), 288.

Mateusz Budzisz, Czarny protest [Black Protest], Poznań, 3.10.2016



der, social origin, economic interests, as well as professed ideological systems; it is a conflict between emancipation tendencies and those conserving the social, moral and political order."[9] In these processes, as he noted, art is not their expression or illustration, but an active agent. Art exhibitions can also become active agents in this regard, especially when they refer to civil rights and relate to activism.

Political Context in Poland

In Poland, we are still witnessing cultural wars and the radicalization of political conflict, but it was especially obvious during the Right and Justice Party (abbreviated to PiS) government, 2015–2023.[10] Polish democracy was at a dangerous juncture, because the foundations of democracy, such as the Constitutional Tribunal, the Constitution itself, or the independent judiciary, were devalued and changed by means of acts of law, while the ruling government tried to take complete control over the media, science, education, and culture. This process was coupled with the political domination of the PiS and its parliamentary victories (on October 25, 2015, and October 19, 2019). The party's dominance ended with the parliamentary elections in 2023, but it still won 35.38% of the vote, and the 2024 presidential election was won by Karol Nawrocki, the PiS candidate. Right and Justice Party is a right-wing, national-conservative, Christian, populist party founded by brothers Lech and Jarosław Kaczyński in 2001. Its politics, curtailing some democratic rules, trig-

9 Piotr Piotrowski, *Sztuka według polityki. Od Melancholii do Pasji* [Art after politics: From melancholy to passion] (Universitas, 2007), 8.

10 Cf. Bartek Pytlas, "From Mainstream to Power: The Law and Justice Party in Poland," in *Aufstand der Außenseiter. Die Herausforderung der europäischen Politik durch den neuen Populismus*, ed. F. Decker, B. Henningsen, M. Lewandowsky, P. Adorf (Nomos 2022), 401–414.



Ewa Partum, *Feminist Quotes* ["You deprive us a freedom of choice, we will deprive you of power"], 2017



Chór Czarownic [Witches' Choir], still from the video, photo by BTW. Photographers Maziarz/ Rajter

gered a wave of civil protests in defense of free courts and media, and women's rights, among others. As Piotrowski wrote about such kind of governing: "It seems that the style of modern or rather a postmodern democracy, based on the majority respecting the rights of minorities, is alien to the style of governing represented by the successive governments; what is preferred is a peculiar type of classical principle of the 'rule of the people': a domination of the majority."[11]

The PiS's policy during its rule in 2015–2023 included restrictions regarding women's rights, including withdrawal from subsiding prenatal physical examinations, limitation of access to contraceptives, attempts

11 Piotr Piotrowski, "Sztuka według polityki" [Art after Politics], in *Negocjatorzy sztuki wobec rzeczywistości* [Negotiators of art in the face of democracy], ed. Bożena Czubak, exhibition catalogue (CSW Łaźnia, 2000), 31.

Fragment of the exhibition *Polki, patriotki, rebeliantki* [Polish women, patriots, rebels], Arsenal Gallery in Poznań, 8.09.2017 – 8.10.2017, photo by Izabela Kowalczyk



to denounce the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (the Istanbul Convention), and tightening the already restrictive anti-abortion law. A draft of the new anti-abortion law was submitted to the Polish parliament in 2016 by the Ordo Iuris organization and supported by the Roman Catholic Church.[12] The said organization is ultra-Catholic and as Klementyna Suchanow has demonstrated in her book *To jest wojna. Kobiety, fundamentaliści i nowe średniowiecze* [This is a war: Women, fundamentalists, and the new Middle Ages] (2020), it is financed by the Kreml in order to destroy the very basics of the EU such as human rights.[13] The first attempt to restrict women's rights in 2016 caused an unprecedented wave of women's protests (*W naszej sprawie* [In our case] [April 9, 2016]), the Black Protest, and the National Women's Strike (October 3, 2016). Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk have described this movement as part of a "broader struggle against right-wing populism—a stage of this struggle in which feminism strives to take the initiative."[14] They have also highlighted the Polish movement's transnational connections and mobilization success, "its effective employment of powerful cultural symbols."[15]

12 Elżbieta Korolczuk, "Explaining Mass Protests against Abortion Ban in Poland: The Power of Connective Action," www.academia.edu/31658768/Explaining_mass_protests_against_abortion_ban_in_Poland_the_power_of_connective_action?sm=b&rhid=38035818382 (accessed on February 20, 2026).

13 Klementyna Suchanow, *To jest wojna. Kobiety, fundamentaliści i nowe średniowiecze* [It is a war: Women, fundamentalists, and the new Middle Ages] (Wydawnictwo Agora, 2020).

14 Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk, *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment* (Routledge, 2021), 139.

15 Ibid., 137.



Fragment of the exhibition *Jesteśmy ludźmi* [We are people], Labyrinth Gallery in Lublin, 24.06.2020 – 30.09.2020, photo by Wojciech Pacewicz

***Polish Women, Patriots, Rebels*, 2017**

In 2017, in relation to the aforementioned protests, I organized an exhibition titled *Polki, patriotki, rebeliantki* [Polish women, patriots, rebels] in the Arsenal Gallery in Poznań.[16] The main aim was to reflect on the situation and problems faced by Polish women—as citizens, participators in public life, patriots, and protestors. The exhibition was not intended as rendering the atmosphere of the Polish street Anno Domini 2016/2017, but rather as an artistic commentary on the surrounding reality and the situation of Polish women at that time.

The protests, which gathered thousands of participants, voiced anger and outrage, and their vast number across Poland showed the government that a single spark was enough to turn the masses against them. Activism intertwined with creative activities, and the art of women artists involved in the Black Protest movement became a commentary on it and a way to reinforce the message. I name these activities artistic practices of resistance. To my mind, the strength of these protests, their vocal symbolism, and their diversity deserved a comment in the form of an exhibition.

Women's protests developed their own symbolism. Slogans such as "Save the Women," "Freedom of Choice," "I Think, I Feel, I Decide," "You Are Not Alone," "If I Am Dead, I Will Not Give Birth to a Child," "I Am Here Because I Am Furious" were supplemented by visual symbols. Wire coat hangers and black umbrellas became such symbols (though the latter became so accidentally, due to the torrential rain that accompanied the October 10 protests in 2016 but failed to discourage women from taking part). Also symbolic was the wearing of black, associated with the pe-

16 Cf. Izabela Kowalczyk (ed.), *Polki, patriotki, rebeliantki* [Polish women, patriots, rebels] (Galeria Miejska Arsenał, 2018).

Fragment of the exhibition *Nigdy nie będziesz szła sama* [You'll never walk alone], Labyrinth Gallery in Lublin, 13.12.2020 – 30.04.2021, photo by Wojciech Pacewicz





riod of national mourning from 1861 to 1866. At that time, wearing black was a manifestation of dissent against the policies of the partitioning powers and the bloody suppression of the Polish fight for independence. Nowadays it has become a symbol of opposition to the efforts aimed at depriving women of their right to control their own bodies. The strength of these protests stemmed largely from a collectivism that transcended divisions, best represented by the images of a "sea of people" with umbrellas over their heads. These images can be read as a symbol of rejecting one's individuality and uniting for a common cause—a symbol of collective rebellion against the unjust decisions of the regime. This results in what Rosi Braidotti describes as "hybrid" social identities, indicating that these identities, as well as "the new modes of multiple belonging they enact may constitute the starting point for mutual respective accountability, and pave the way an ethical re-grounding of so-



Fragment of the exhibition *Kto napisze historię łez. Artystki o prawach kobiet* [Who will write the history of tears: Artists on women's rights], Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, 26.11.2021 – 23.03.2022, photo by Izabela Kowalczyk

cial participation and community building."[17] This points to the need for intersectional feminism, which addresses exclusion not only on the basis of gender. It is therefore characteristic that those who took part in the Black Protest also participated in other protests—in defense of the Constitutional Tribunal, education, in support of people with disabilities.[18]

The language of the street was devoid of martyrdom, but it conveyed anger and disbelief that this was really happening, as well as reflected the absurd reality in which we found ourselves living. However, the posters also contained a lot of irony and humor (e.g. "Liberté, Égalité, Wypierdalać [Fuck off]"), because without it, it would have been difficult to get through it all. It is artistic activity, as well as music and cooperation, which can be termed "feminist artivism", that the new feminism of power[19] is built upon. As Graff and Korolczuk state, "the movement owed its success to its ability to mobilize powerful emotions. (...) Personal accounts, media interviews with activists and stories circulated in social media – all of these materials testify to a powerful emotional experience lived by individuals and immediately shared with the newly established activist community."[20] Graff and Korolczuk describe these activities as "populist feminism" in relation to "left populism" theorized by Chantal Mouffe (2018), focusing in particular on the participants' self-definition as "ordinary women," the mobilization of emotions, and the use of embodied knowledge.[21] However, taking into account the inclusion of art in this discourse, emphasizing agency and empowerment, it seems to me that the term "feminism of power," or perhaps rather "intersectional feminism of power," may be more useful in emphasizing the strength of community, solidarity, and mutual care.

At the exhibition, Ewa Partum, who represented the older generation

17 Rosi Braidotti, "Bio-power and Necro-politics," *Springerin* 2 (2007), 18–23, www.springerin.at/en/2007/2/biomacht-und-nekro-politik/ (accessed on January 15, 2026).
18 Graff, Korolczuk, 139.
19 Cf. Naomi Wolf, *Fire with Fire: New Female Power and How It Will Change the Twenty-First Century* (Random House, 2013).
20 Graff, Korolczuk, 158, 159.
21 Ibid., 139.

Fragment of the exhibition *Kto napisze historię łez. Artystki o prawach kobiet* [Who will write the history of tears: Artists on women's rights], Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, 26.11.2021 – 23.03.2022, photo by Izabela Kowalczyk



of feminist artists in Poland, showed her *Feminist Quotes*. She depicted black umbrellas and the slogan: "You deprive us of the freedom of choice, we will deprive you of power," transcribed literally from a one of the Black Protest banners. This work, placed at the start of the exhibition presenting mainly the younger generation of artists, was also a symbolic combination of different generations of feminist artists in Poland.

Some participants displayed artworks referring directly to the Black Protest, such as recordings of the Chór Czarownic [Witches Choir] (their song *Twoja władza* [Your power] was an anthem of the protests in Poznan); a transparent made by Kolektyw Złote Rączki [Golden Hands Collective] for the Black Protest in Krakow, a series of memes by Marta Frej affirming women's activism (*Wzięłam udział w Czarnym Proteście ponieważ*...[I took part in the Black Protest because...]); and Iwona Demko's *408,223 podniesień spódnicy, czyli Mój sen o Czarnym Proteście* [408,223 skirt lifts, or My dream of the Black Protest], referring to the ritual of *ana-suromai* (showing the vagina to scare away the enemy). Other artworks were subversive to the patriotic symbolism, such as Agata Zbylut's *Kawiorowa Patriotka* [Cavior patriot], a dress made from football scarfs, or Lilianna Piskorska's photo showing her sleeping with a "genuine Pole" in bedding decorated with national emblems (*Autoportret z pożyczonym Polakiem, aka Jestem Polakiem więc mam obowiązki polskie* [Self-portrait with a borrowed man, a.k.a. I'm Polish so I have Polish duties], 2016). Karolina Mełnicka, in her video *Polska Burka* [Polish burqa], showed a woman wearing a white-and-red burqa and sitting alone in a stadium, while aggressive shouting of football fans is heard. Ewa Świdzińska also demonstrated the fact that the female body had become a national symbol; in her work *Emblemat* [Emblem], we can see her crotch in red underwear with an embroidered white butterfly reminiscent of the Polish eagle. There were also works referring to forgotten women's heritage, including an installation by Jadwiga Sawicka *Raz na jakiś czas* [Once in a while]; to cooperatives and collective activities (Witches Choir, *Kolaborantki* [Collaborators], Kolektyw Złote Rączki [Golden Hands Collective]). The exhibition was supplemented by leaflets, posters, and information about the possibilities of legal abortion.

The political battle of that time over Poland's future was largely tak-

ing place on the streets and revealed how both identity and community are understood (as closed and strictly defined on one hand, or as fluid and open to minority identities on the other). The public sphere became an arena for manifesting democratic values and opposition to those in power, a site of struggle over symbols, but also a space of repression and exclusion, eloquent and tragic demonstrations of the acts of violence against immigrants that followed a wave of anti-immigrant phobia. This issue was addressed in Dawid Marszewski's touching video-installation titled *Ściana* [The wall] revealing racist prejudices in Polish society. On the other hand, photos from Irena Kalicka's series *Autoportret* [Self-portrait], showing hybrids of herself and animal heads, aimed to draw attention to relationships between humans and non-humans, and the need for taking care of the more-than-human others. This last work can be interpreted according to Rosi Braidotti's postulate from her book *The Posthuman*, "that we need to learn to think differently about ourselves."[22] The author encourages us to build a new, post-humanistic project, that is, to create a vision in which there is a place for hybridity, move away from humanism and individualism, and include the previously excluded and marginalized forms of subjectivity. That is why we need, as Braidotti points out, a recomposition of both subjectivity and community.[23]

As Agata Araszkiewicz and Agata Czarnacka stated in relation to this exhibition: "It seems that art (created by women) has played a vital role in recording the conservative social revolution, which has been strengthened by the rule of the PiS. It has devoted a lot of attention to the endangering of personal freedom and the idea that nowadays, Polish women who are patriots must be rebels."[24]

New Regulations in the Anti-Abortion Law

In 2020, the Polish government started to work on new regulations in the anti-abortion law in relation to a proposal reported by Kaja Godek. As the parliament started to work on these new regulations, the protests flared up again. Those in April 2020 were organized as car blockades and queues "to freedom" in front of supermarkets or pharmacies because of pandemic restrictions. A new symbol of the protests was red light, frequently placed on hygiene masks. Many young visual artists focusing on these attempts to restrict women's rights were using this symbol.

The ruling of the Constitutional Tribunal on October 22 caused Poland to become one of the countries with the most restrictive abortion laws in the world. As a consequence, huge protests were organized

22 Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman* (Polity Press, 2013), 12.
23 Ibid., 83.
24 Agata Araszkiewicz, Agata Czarnacka, "Poland's Rebel Women," *Eurozine* (March 8, 2018), www.eurozine.com/polands-rebel-women/ (accessed on January 15, 2026).

across Poland, in large and small cities and towns, gathering thousands of people. The language of the street was also very meaningful. Banners expressed anger, as well as strength and irony. These protests were met with a strong reaction from the police.

Labyrinth Gallery in Lublin

Artists were still related to the protests and undertook activist actions. Exhibitions were organized in response to these events, such as *Nigdy nie będziesz szła sama* [You'll never walk alone] in the Labyrinth Gallery in Lublin at the end of 2020.

The Labyrinth Gallery in Lublin had been directed by Waldemar Tatarczuk since 2010. He started cooperated with the LGBTQIA+ community in Lublin in 2011, when the exhibition *Love is Love. Art as activism LGBTQ: from Britain to Belarus* was organized and curated by Tomek Kitliński and Pawel Leszkowicz.

Tatarczuk, together with artist Filip Kijowski, established the Azyl [Asylum] library and organized a club for the community related to the Equality Parade in Lublin. It is important to add that the city is located in eastern Poland and is rather conservative and homophobic. In 2020, Tatarczuk started to organize exhibitions as a kind of political interventions. The first exhibition, titled *Jesteśmy ludźmi* [We are people], was opened on June 23, 2020, and was organized by Tatarczuk and Filip Kijowski in response to the former president Andrzej Duda's words spoken during his reelection campaign, when he stated: "They are trying to persuade us that the LGBT are people, but it's an ideology."

Tatarczuk wrote: "I felt it was our obligation to respond. The show came together in days. I knew it couldn't be an exhibition revolving around an abstract curatorial concept. I thought of it as a cry for freedom and equality. As we kept adding work and the show grew denser, it began to look more and more like a demonstration."[25] In his curatorial text, he recalled the words of the Holocaust survivor Marian Turski: "Auschwitz did not fall suddenly from the sky," and underlined that we should be very sensitive to any kind of discrimination, also in the field of language.[26]

The exhibition was supported by more than 100 artists with their works related to the LGBTQIA+ rights, among others by Eva & Adele, Karol Radziszewski, Paweł Matyszewski, Edna Baud, Nikita Kadan, Jerzy Kosał-

25 Joanna Kozłowska, "Where Art Meets Resistance: The Galleries Pushing back against Poland's Illiberal Politics," *Calvert Journal* (July 30, 2021), culturalfoundation.eu/stories/where-art-meets-resistance-the-galleries-pushing-back-against-polands-illiberal-politics/ (accessed on January 14, 2026).
26 Waldemar Tatarczuk, "Jesteśmy ludźmi" [We are people] – about the exhibition (June 24 – October 11, 2020), Galeria Labirynt, Lublin, labirynt.com/2020/11/02/we-are-people/?lang=en (accessed on January 15, 2026).

ka, Izabela Maciejewska, Bart Staszewski, and Paweł Żukowski. Curators were still adding works after the opening, so the exhibition kept changing.

As Sylwia Hejno stated: "Away from the academic definitions of what is queer and what is not, from debates about whether it includes or divides, identity-based resistance and the queer strategy of exposing what culture and society do with identity create a space of freedom and become a tool for fighting oppression."[27]

The author of a review highlighted the relationships between art and politics that the exhibition revealed: "One can take to the streets and shout, or one can use camp and glamour as a weapon, as Krzysztof Marchlak does in the series 'Dreamers', deconstruct stereotypes like removing makeup (Filip Tułak 'Your Mom's Makeup Removal'), or turn oneself into a living, queer artwork, as Eva & Adele do. The exhibition 'We Are People' showed not only the diversity of possible strategies but also the complexity of identity processes, which make identification not always straightforward. Finally, the exhibition itself is an example of a spontaneous outburst carried out in the name of defending civil liberties. After all, without freedom, we don't even have the means to dream of freedom in art."[28]

The next exhibition, titled *Nigdy nie będziesz szła sama* [You'll never walk alone], was opened on December 13, 2020, on the anniversary of imposing martial law in Poland (1981), as a reaction to the aforementioned sentence by the Constitutional Tribunal on October 22 and the new wave of protests. It was curated by Nadia Wójcik and Waldemar Tatarczuk, and the aim was to express solidarity with people who protested in marches and blockades, as well as with those who stayed at home because the apparatus of repression and contempt had destroyed their mental health and filled them with fear. The curators invited authors of banners, slogans, cardboards, stickers, graphics, strike posters, photographic and video documentation of the protests, as well as artists supporting the protesters, to create works that showed solidarity with the All-Poland Women's Strike. They gathered in the largest room of the gallery. A single large multimedia installation was created, surrounding the viewer. One wall was covered with photographs from the protests, along with a number of posters and cardboard signs with striking slogans.

These statements were again accompanied on the one hand by rage, and on the other by humor. As Paweł Leszkowicz pointed out, "they create a language of rebellion that breaks the boundaries of silence and absurdity, caused by the true horror of what the PiS government wants to do to us, and what it wants to force women to endure."[29] The banners

27 Sylwia Hejno, "'Jesteśmy ludźmi', czyli pora na sztukę sprzeciwu" ['We are people', it is time for the art of resistance], *Kalejdoskop Kultury* (June 21, 2021), kalejdoskopkultury.pl/jestesmy-ludzmi-labirynt/ (accessed on February 22, 2026).

28 Ibidem.

29 Paweł Leszkowicz, "Nigdy nie będziesz szła sama. Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet jako Działo Sztuki w Galerii Labirynt" [You'll never walk alone: The nationwide women's strike as a work of art at the Labyrinth Gallery], *Oko.press* (February 28, 2021), oko.press/ogolnopolski-strajk-kobiet-jako-dzialo-sztuki-w-galerii-labirynt (accessed on January 15, 2026).

30 Ibidem.

31 Aleksandra Dunajska-Minkiewicz, "Fundacja Kai Godek chce odebrać finansowanie m.in. Galerii Labirynt. Bo 'promuje aborcję i ideologię LGBT'" [The Kaja Godek's Foundation wants to withdraw funding from, among others, the Labyrinth Gallery. Because it 'promotes abortion and LGBT ideology'," *Kurier Lubelski* (February 22, 2021), kurierlubelski.pl/fundacja-kai-godek-chce-odebrac-finansowanie-min-galerii-labirynt-bo-promuje-aborcje-i-ideologie-lgbt/ar/c1-15456388 (accessed on February 25, 2026).

included, among others, the following inscriptions: "Laughter to the Enemies of the Fatherland," "my uterus is not a chapel," "fear to fuck," "only anal left," "piss off," "faggots with women," "I don't want to be a coffin," and "enough blows below the belt."

The curators were fascinated with the language and imagery of the street, which is why artistic and non-artistic materials were exhibited as equally important. The aim was to show that this great, nationwide grassroots movement occurred in hundreds of cities and towns across the country. In this way, they created a vibrant exhibition showing the whole spectrum of resistance practices.

Leszkowicz wrote about the two exhibitions: "*You'll never walk alone* and *We Are People* present a new model of curating in Poland, proposed by Waldemar Tatarczuk. It is no longer just about socially and politically engaged art, but rather about interventionist art. It is interventionist curating, a kind of direct action through the institution of art. It is also oppositional curating, showing solidarity with the protesters and the discriminated, with the victims and opponents of the PiS regime."[30]

As a consequence, Waldemar Tatarczuk and the Labyrinth Gallery were labeled as "activist" by some Polish right-wing politicians, such as Kaja Godek from the aforementioned Ordo Iuris organization. She and her allies called on the city council to cancel the Labyrinth's funding, arguing that taxpayers' money should not be used to finance "divisive and controversial content."[31]

In 2021, after attacks on the exhibition *You'll never walk alone*, Piotr Gliński, minister of culture, refused to approve Tatarczuk's automatic re-appointment as the gallery's director, and during the next year, he served as an interim director. Lublin's city council organized a new tender, in which Tatarczuk lost his position, and he ceased to be the director of the Labyrinth Gallery on February 28, 2022. However, after the change of government, he was restored to the post and served as a director from 2023 to 2025. The case of the Labyrinth Gallery shows how the official policy interferes in cultural life, aiming to suppress acts of resistance.

Who Will Write the History of Tears

There was another important exhibition related to women's rights in the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw: *Kto napisze historię łez. Artystki o prawach kobiet* [Who will write the history of tears: Artists on women's rights] (curators: Magda Lipska, Sebastian Cichocki, and Łukasz Ronduda, November 26, 2021 – March 23, 2022). The title was inspired by Barbara Kruger's work, and it was international exhibition relating different experiences of women and fights for reproductive rights in Argentina, Ireland, Poland, Portugal, Spain, and the United States. There were exhibited works by collectives and artists including Archiwum Protestów Publicznych [Archive of Public Protests], Artists' Campaign to Repeal the Eighth Amendment, Anne Maree Barry, Cecily Brennan, Rachel Fallon, Viola Głowacka, Guerrilla Girls, Ewa Kuryluk, Alice Maher, Ana Mendieta, Luiza Prado de O. Martins, Elena Tejada-Herrera, and Teresa Tyszkiewicz. The architecture of the exhibition, designed by the German architect Johanna Meyer-Grohbrügge, related to the historic exhibition *Womanhouse* in 1972, created by students of Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro.

The exhibition showed that women's reproductive rights had been at the center of feminist art from its very beginnings, to mention only Barbara Kruger's work *Your Body is a Battleground*, presented at the exhibition in both versions, English (1989) and Polish (1991). The collected material also demonstrated that in all countries where the fight for abortion rights was taking place, artistic activities intertwined with activism. Moreover, it gave hope for changes in anti-abortion law in Poland by presenting examples from countries where the struggle had resulted in the liberalization of such laws, such as Spain, Portugal, Ireland, and Argentina.

One of the central rooms juxtaposed experiences of women fighting for reproductive rights in Ireland and Poland, and these works were the most touching for Polish viewers. Curators wrote about the presentation: "The works presented in the exhibition strive to break through the impasse that has prevailed in the debate over abortion, to transcend the crisis of verbal and visual language. The aim is to wrest the topic of abortion from the control of political clichés. The artists draw on real stories and include in their works the entire spectrum of visual and poetic allusions, images and symbols, conveying the complexity of the experience of pregnancy and abortion."[32]

32 "Who will write the history of tears: Artists on Women's Rights," website of the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, historielez.artmuseum.pl/en/wprowadzenie (accessed on January 15, 2026).



Irena Kalicka, *Selfportrait*, 2009-2010, the fragment of the exhibition *Polki, patriotki, rebeliantki* [Polish Women, Patriots, Rebels], the Arsenal Gallery in Poznań, 8.09.2017 – 8.10.2017, photo by Mateusz Budzisz

Conclusions

In exhibitions such as those presented above, I believe that art, through its symbolic power, is able to convey ideas of freedom, democracy, and human rights, thus strengthening the social message and the feminist and queer agenda. Furthermore, their inclusion of non-artistic materials, such as posters, banners, and zines, allows them to be seen as a form of activist art. The gallery space then replaces the site of protests, allowing the messages from the street to resonate. Curating the practices of resistance reinforces messages from the street, bringing materials from outside the realm of art into it, which leads to the transformation of the visual order and the traditional thinking on art. In turn, engaged art amplifies the message of activist actions, introducing visual messages related to values such as solidarity, support, and care.

Regarding the actions discussed above, I want to emphasize the importance of combining art and activism. According to Rebecca Solnit, it is precisely these that allow us to hope for the future.[33] Also Donna Haraway, in her book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, points out that in order to deal with the problems of the modern world, in addition to changing scientific language and activism, we need social and artistic actions and stories.[34] It is therefore important to emphasize the significance of art that incorporates activism, as well as engaged curatorial practices. They are crucial in defending civil rights and investing efforts into a better future.

33 Rebeca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities* (Canongate Books, 2016).

34 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016).

Bibliography

— Albarrán Diego, Juan. "Curating Activism: Art, Politics and Exhibitions (In, Around, and Beyond Institutions)," trans. Phoebe Clarke, *Critique d'art*. *Actualité internationale de la littérature critique sur l'art contemporain* 51 (2019), journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/36575.
— Araszkiewicz, Agata, Czarnacka, Agata. "Poland's Rebel Women," *Eurozine* (March 8, 2018), www.eurozine.com/polands-rebel-women/.
— Braidotti, Rosi. "Bio-power and necro-politics," *Springerin* 2 (2007), 18–23, www.springerin.at/en/2007/2/biomacht-und-nekro-politik/.
— Braidotti, Rosi. *The Posthuman*. Polity Press, 2013.
— Dunajska-Minkiewicz, Aleksandra. "Fundacja Kai Godek chce odebrać finansowanie m.in. Galerii Labirynt. Bo 'promuje aborcję i ideologię LGBT'" [The Kaja Godek's Foundation wants to withdraw funding from, among others, the Labyrinth Gallery. Because it 'promotes abortion and LGBT ideology'," *Kurier Lubelski* (February 22, 2021), kurierlubelski.pl/fundacja-kai-godek-chce-odebrac-finansowanie-min-galerii-labirynt-bo-promuje-aborcje-i-ideologie-lgbt/ar/c1-15456388.
— Graff, Agnieszka, Korolczuk, Elżbieta. *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment*. Routledge, 2021.
— Haraway, Donna. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press, 2016.
— Hejno, Sylwia. "'Jesteśmy ludźmi', czyli pora na sztukę sprzeciwu" ['We Are People', it's time for the art of resistance], *Kalejdoskop Kultury* (June 21, 2021), kalejdoskopkultury.pl/jestesmy-ludzmi-labirynt/.
— Kozłowska, Joanna. "Where Art Meets Resistance: The Galleries Pushing back against Poland's Illiberal Politics," *Calvert Journal* (July 30, 2021), culturalfoundation.eu/stories/where-art-meets-resistance-the-galleries-pushing-back-against-polands-illiberal-politics/.
— Korolczuk, Elżbieta. "Explaining Mass Protests against Abortion Ban in Poland: The Power of Connective Action," Academia.edu, www.academia.edu/31658768/Explaining_mass_protests_against_abortion_ban_in_Poland_the_power_of_connective_action?sm=b&rhid=38035818382.
— Kowalczyk, Izabela (ed.). *Polki, patriotki, rebeliantki* [Polish women, patriots, rebels]. Galeria Miejska Arsenał, 2018.
— Kowalczyk, Izabela. *Wraz z Innymi. Artystyczne praktyki troski* [With the Others. Artistic practices of care]. Universitas, 2026.
— Leszkowicz, Paweł. "Nigdy nie będziesz szła sama. Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet jako Działo Sztuki w Galerii Labirynt" [You'll never walk alone. The nationwide women's strike as a work of art at the Labyrinth Gallery], *Oko.press* (February 28, 2021), oko.press/ogolnopolski-strajk-kobiet-jako-dzialo-sztuki-w-galerii-labirynt.
— Piotrowski, Piotr. *Art and Democracy in Post-communist Europe*. Reaktion Books, 2012.
— Piotrowski, Piotr. "Sztuka według polityki" [Art after politics]. In: *Negocjatorzy sztuki wobec rzeczywistości* [Negotiators of art. in the face of democracy], ed. Bożena Czubak, 20–34. Exhibition catalogue. CSW Łaźnia, 2000.
— Piotrowski, Piotr. *Sztuka według polityki. Od Melancholii do Pasji* [Art after politics: From melancholy to passion]. Universitas, 2007.
— Pytlas, Bartek. "From Mainstream to Power: The Law and Justice Party in Poland". In: *Aufstand der Außenseiter. Die Herausforderung der europäischen Politik durch den neuen Populismus*, ed. F. Decker, B. Henningsen, M. Lewandowsky, and P. Adorf, 401–414. Nomos 2022.
— Ranciere, Jacques. *Estetyka jako polityka* [Aesthetics as politics], trans. J. Kutyła and P. Mościcki. Introduction A. Żmijewski, afterword S. Žižek. Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2007.
— Rancière, Jacques, Engelmann, Peter. *Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. W. Hoban. Polity Press, 2019.
— Reilly, Maura. *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating*. Thames & Hudson, 2018.
— Reilly, Maura. "What is Curatorial Activism?" Academia.edu, www.academia.edu/38083139/What_Is_Curatorial_Activism.
— Solnit, Rebeca. *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*. Canongate Books, 2016.
— Suchanow, Klementyna. *To jest wojna. Kobiety, fundamentaliści i nowe średniowiecze* [It is a war: Women, fundamentalists, and the new Middle Ages]. Wydawnictwo Agora, 2020.
— Tatarczuk, Waldemar. "Jesteśmy ludźmi" [We are people] – about the exhibition (June 24 – October 11, 2020). Lublin: Galeria Labirynt, labirynt.com/2020/11/02/we-are-people/?lang=en.
— Weibel, Peter (ed.). *Global Activism: Art and Conflict in the 21st Century*. MIT – ZKM, 2014.
— "Who will write the history of tears: Artists on Women's Rights," website of the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, historielez.artmuseum.pl/en/wprowadzenie.
— Wolf, Naomi. *Fire with Fire: New Female Power and How It Will Change the Twenty-First Century*. Random House, 2013.

Izabela Kowalczyk, PhD, is an art and cultural historian, art critic, and curator. She is an Associate Professor at the University of Arts in Poznań. She is the author of publications on critical art, feminist art, and interpretations of recent history. Her books include *Ciało i władza. Polska sztuka krytyczna lat 90.* (*Body and Power in Polish Critical Art in the 1990s*, 2002), *Podróż do przeszłości. Interpretacje najnowszej historii w polskiej sztuce krytycznej* (*A Travel to the Past. Interpretations of Recent History in Polish Critical Art*, 2010), and *Wraz z Innymi. Artystyczne praktyki troski* (*Together with Others. Artistic Practices of Care*, 2026). She has published approximately 250 articles. She participated in the research and preparation of the exhibition *Gender Check: Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe* (Vienna, Warsaw, 2008–2009). She has curated several exhibitions of Polish contemporary art.