

## Struggle for Freedom. Art for Tolerance in Poland

**Key words:** contemporary art in Poland, democracy, tolerance, censorship, art for tolerance.

I wish to examine the connection between art and democracy by focusing on the contemporary situation in Poland, and to write about the need for Art for Tolerance. Poland opened itself up to the West and turned to the capitalist system in 1989. The year is hailed as the regaining of freedom after the communist period. New threats to freedom have, however, appeared after 1989. One such threat is connected to the power of the conservatives and the Catholic Church. Poland is predominantly a Roman Catholic country: according to statistics, approximately 90% of the Polish population has been baptised. The

Church plays a great role in public and political life. Polish rightwing politicians are responsible for, among other things, the ban on abortion introduced by law in 1993, inadequate public education on sexuality, and discrimination (including in the form of large-scale homophobia) in different fields of social life. There is also pressure by people and groups related to rightwing parties and to the radical wing of the Catholic Church (e.g., *Radio Maryja*) not to display controversial art. As a result, many exhibitions have been closed or repealed.

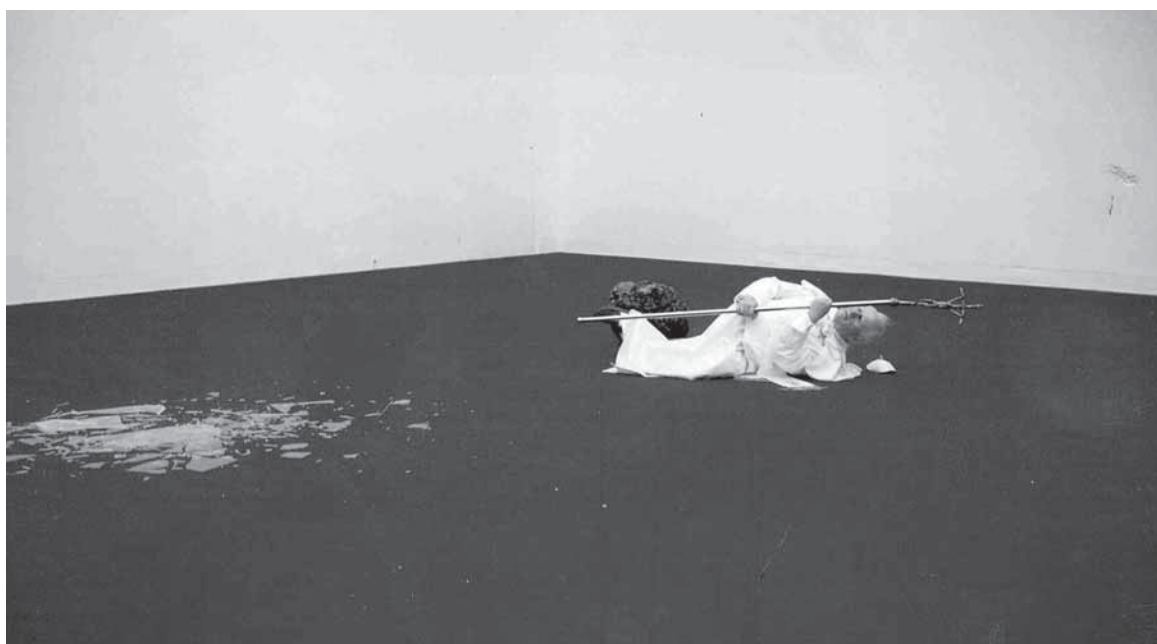


Fig. 1. Maurizio Cattelan, *La Nona Ora*, 1999. After demolishing by the deputy of the Polish Parliament Witold Tomczak, Zachęta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw, 2000. Courtesy: Zachęta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw. Photo by Anna Pietrzak-Bartos

In Poland, contemporary art is commonly perceived as something scandalous, excessive, or at best, the individual statement of a blasé artist. Viewers have in no way been taught or prepared to perceive modern works, and consequently approach art in a non-reflective way. The only information in this field comes from the media, and it presents art almost exclusively in the context of a scandal. As a society we are therefore vulnerable to the manipulations of rightwing politicians who “track down” all such scandals – essentially in order to be acknowledged as defenders of “national and Christian values”.

The lack of proper art education and the marginalisation of art make it an easy target for pseudo and auto-censorship. This has led to the discontinuation of certain exhibitions, e.g., *Ja i AIDS (Me and AIDS)* at the Stolica Cinema in Warsaw in 1996, and *Dogs in Polish Art* at the Arsenał Gallery in Białystok. And it has brought about the exclusion of individual works, e.g., Andres Serrano’s *Piss Christ* from his monographic exhibition at the Centre for Contemporary Art in 1994; Zbigniew Libera’s *LEGO- Concentration Camp*, intended for the Venice Biennale 1997, and withdrawn by the curator of the Polish Pavilion; Rafal Jakubowicz’s *Arbeitsdisciplin* (2002), not exhibited at the last minute at the Arsenał Gallery in Poznań; David Černý’s *Shark*, removed from the *Shadows of Humour* exhibition at Gallery BWA in Bielsko-Biała in 2006. Further examples of art censorship include Katarzyna Kozyra’s *Bonds of Blood*, which was chosen by Gallery AMS in 1999 for presentation on billboards that were then covered for fear of negative reactions. Destroyed artworks include Robert Rumaś’ *Hot Water Bottles* in Gdańsk in 1994; Maurizio Cattelan’s *La Nona Ora* (1999) – by rightwing Parliament member Witold Tomczak at the Zachęta Gallery in Warsaw in 2000 [fig.1]; and Piotr Ukański’s *Nazis* – by the actor Daniel Olbrychski, also at the Zachęta Gallery in 2000.

The most absurd example is that of a court case against Dorota Nieznalska, who was accused of offending religious feelings in her work *Passion*, and brought to trial in 2002. In her work the artist analyses the construction of masculinity and its meanings in contemporary Poland, which is a Catholic country with a consumer culture. *Passion* (2001)

incorporated a movie showing a man exercising at a gym, and a cross-shaped object with a photo of male genitalia as a kind of symbol, pars pro toto, of masculinity. This work depicted a contradictory idea of masculinity: by training one’s body one produces a new kind of masculinity – with “passion”. The reference to Christ’s passion offended some of the Catholics who, instead of asking her about the meaning of her work, accused Nieznalska of offending their religious feelings. Following a year of legal battles, in 2003 the court in Gdańsk sentenced the artist to six months of community services for offending said feelings. The Court of Appeal overruled this sentence – and a new trial, which continues to this day, commenced in 2005.

Several art institutions have also been closed down. Galeria Wyspa in Gdańsk was shut after presenting Nieznalska’s *Passion* in 2002. A generally unfavourable attitude regarding art has led to a number of instances when private galleries have lost their leased premises. This happened in Kraków after an exhibition of posters by KPH (the Campaign against Homophobia), and in Ostrów Wielkopolski, before the opening of Nieznalska’s exhibition in 2003. These are not individual cases, but rather a part of



Fig. 2. Ania & Ilona from *Niech Nas Zobaczą* (Let Us See), 2003. Courtesy: KPH. Photo by Karolina Breguła



Fig. 3. Tomek & Sylwek from *Niech Nas Zobaczą* (Let Us See), 2003. Courtesy: KPH. Photo by Karolina Breguła

the general “witch-hunt” against contemporary art – particularly art which relates to social critique, feminism, and gay and lesbian activism. It is becoming more and more difficult to display works that oppose mainstream thinking, and that are related to complex social issues. Nevertheless, it must be clearly stated that those artists who do not deal with these issues today cannot be certain that their work will not also be subject to attack at some point in the future.

As a result of such restrictive measures, the managers of formal galleries often prefer to present works that are neutral or formalistic in their outlook, sometimes even of low artistic value, simply to avoid the unpleasant consequences of displaying works by “unpopular” artists. Pressured by the so-called “defenders of morality”, who create an illusion of speaking on behalf of all of society, the art curators and organisers of artistic life end up subjecting their work to auto-censorship. By demanding that exhibitions be closed down, and by stopping funding for specific galleries, the adversaries of contemporary art seek to limit broad public access to works of art, and to deny people the right of individual judg-

ment; their own implied judgments usually suggest that contemporary art is immoral and pathological. In this context, it is interesting to note that the opponents of art have succeeded in “conditioning” the world of art – that their requirements and bans have been absorbed by gallery managers and directors, who, more than anything else, fear accusations of having insulted somebody’s religious feelings. Those who subject themselves to auto-censorship do so in order to defend the institutions they represent from possible attacks and accusations that the art they exhibit does not conform to the tastes of the public at large.

The art adversaries’ most commonly exploited argument is that art offends religious feelings. Any art that initiates a discussion on Polish Catholicism, and the impact of the Church on people’s consciousness, is considered dangerous – as is art that relates to sensitive issues like intolerance and social exclusion. The opponents assume that art should comply with the views of the majority, and that artists have no right to areas they consider inviolable. Krzysztof Pomian says the following about art and democracy in Poland:

“The accusations of blasphemy which are so often heard in our country today are an obvious abuse. Nobody is forced to visit galleries which display works that apparently offend their religious feelings. Everybody has the right to call for a boycott of these works, or even to organise protests. But hiding behind the defence of religious feelings, and involving state institutions in the process, is not the same as defending one’s own feelings. It is an attempt to use police methods in order to prohibit others from expressing their own feelings. And even if these feelings oppose religion, or are ironic towards it, they have as much right to exist in a democratic country as do religious feelings”.<sup>1</sup>

It is worth remembering that both artistic freedom and freedom of speech are guaranteed by the Polish Constitution. However, there is a problem in Polish society regarding its democracy, and the understanding of what democracy is.

The approach to art that I have described is a symptom of limiting democratic civil rights, of a process that does not permit the full development of a civic society with a mature political awareness – one that can make its own choices and judgments, and that does not avoid sensitive and controversial issues. This restrictive approach to art is inscribed in the broader political context. The “witch-hunt” that is happening in Poland does not apply only to art. It is also keen to ridicule sexual minorities, and feminists who demand changes in the anti-abortion law. Rightwing and Catholic circles do not limit themselves to an attack on art. In their opinion, religious feelings can be insulted in various ways: in films (Martin Scorsese’s *The Last Temptation of Christ*, 1998; Pedro Almodóvar’s *Bad Education*, 2004); on billboards and magazines covers; in demonstrations for tolerance and equality. The threat against democracy was demonstrated during the so-called “Poznań events” of November 19, 2005 – when authorities prohibited an Equality March, and when the police brutally “pacified” a peaceful rally in its support. The event demonstrated that Poland is a place where constitutional law is not always fully



Fig. 4. Izabela Jaruga-Nowacka, former vice prime minister in a t-shirt I am Arab from the Tiszert for Freedom (T-shirt for Freedom), 2004. Courtesy: Fundacja dla Wolności. Photo by Konrad Pustola

respected. Public insults against sexual minorities go unchecked, and all discussions concerning equal rights and tolerance are silenced and blocked.

This situation forces one to reflect on the role of art within the context of democracy. According to Pomian: “Contemporary art, but not only art, stimulates our awareness of the fact that democracy requires diversity in relation to groups, politics, ideas, religions, and so on, and that democracy requires disputes”.<sup>2</sup>

Given this situation, there is an urgent need for Art for Tolerance as a means of evoking public discussion. Art for Tolerance aims to draw public attention to the marginalisation of different minorities, and to the need to counteract such discrimination. Various social and art actions have already taken place in Poland, and there does exist a form of critical art that takes into account the issues of Otherness, tolerance, and so on. Strategies used during various actions include the following:

#### 1. EXPLORING THE ISSUE OF OTHERNESS

*Me and AIDS* (1996) – an exhibition aimed at confronting artists’ attitudes regarding AIDS and people with this illness. The mid-1990s was still a time of panic regarding AIDS. Artists were asked to relate their fears and prejudices, their understanding of changes in social relations within the context of this illness. The exhibited works did not give a voice to people with AIDS, or try to show their perception of reality. It was the artists who wanted to show their own attitudes and social fears. One of the most interesting exhibits was by Katarzyna Kozyra. In her work entitled *Krzysztof Czerwiński* (1996), she showed a beaten homeless man with AIDS in a pose reminiscent of Christ on the crucifix, against a background of the Polish national flag. In this way, the artist showed the clash between Christian values and the attitudes of a society that fears people with AIDS, doesn’t allow the construction of treatment centres for them, and even chases them away with stones. The Other was shown as a Stranger, a victim of society. The exhibition was closed down after three days, for moral reasons.



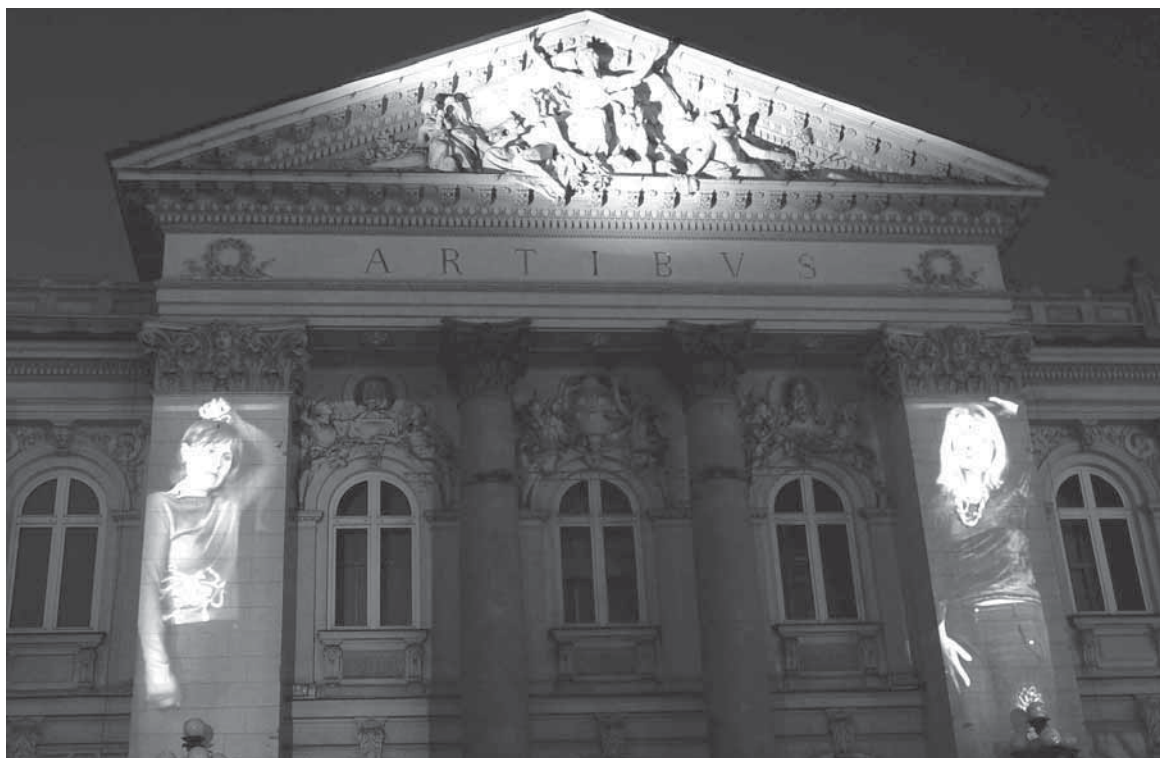


Fig. 5. Krzysztof Wodiczko, *Monument Therapy*, 2005, projection on the facade of the Zachęta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw. Courtesy: Zachęta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw. Photo by Sebastian Madejski

## 2. BECOMING FAMILIAR WITH OTHERNESS

*Let us see* – an event to promote acceptance of gays and lesbians, organised in 2003 by the Campaign Against Homophobia (KPH). It featured posters and billboards in Polish cities, and was inspired by the photographer Karolina Breguła [fig. 2, 3]. Posters of couples – ordinary young people – holding hands were meant to be displayed on billboards in Poland's largest cities. The idea became impossible because of the controversial topic, and the posters were shown only in a few galleries. Gay rights activists did claim, however, that the campaign was a success because it sparked a debate about gay rights. As Robert Biedroń, leader of the Campaign Against Homophobia, said: "For the first time, homosexuals were shown as ordinary people, not as paedophiles at a railway station, or as freaks in a gay parade"<sup>3</sup> The positive side of the action was that it showed people who are excluded from the field of visibility, and at the same time are excluded from the public sphere.

However, another effect of this action was a confirmation of the discourse of "normality". The photographs showed that gays are as normal as other

people. But "normality" is a kind of "trap", for it is always connected with some form of exclusion (for example, elderly people in this case). A discourse of normality always produces its Otherness.

## 3. EMPATHY WITH THE OTHER

Here I am referring to the Polish projections by Krzysztof Wodiczko, an artist who is "most known for staging projections onto the facades of public monuments and buildings, using structures at the heart of the city's identity to tell the stories of citizens often overlooked by society"<sup>4</sup> He has made two projections in Poland. One was a public projection on the Old Town Hall tower in Kraków, in 1996, in which he gave voice to various excluded people: a man with AIDS, a homosexual, a homeless person, and a woman beaten by her husband. Viewers could only see the people's hands, and hear their voices. The other projection, during his exhibition entitled *Monument Therapy*, at the Zachęta National Gallery of Art in Warsaw in 2005-2006, concerned the problems of female victims of violence in contemporary Poland [fig. 5]. In it he projected pictures of women

posed as caryatids. The women spoke about being beaten by their husbands, about rape and other kinds of violence, including violence by law, i.e. the restrictive anti-abortion law.

The most important aspect of these actions is that they give a voice to people who are marginalised in the public sphere, who normally have no possibility to speak out. The confessions of the so-called Others are also very touching, and evoke a feeling of empathy in the viewer. It is a strategy whereby we can feel the emotions of the Others, and thus identify with them. The Other stops being an anonymous person and a stranger, and starts to be someone we do not regard with indifference.

#### 4. DESTRUCTION OF IDENTITY

In 2004, the Foundation for Freedom prepared a campaign called *Tiszert for Freedom* (*T-shirt for Freedom*).<sup>5</sup> It consisted of covering t-shirts – so

called “individual billboards” – with slogans signalling the existence of certain taboo topics and discriminated social groups in Poland. The action was invented by a young sociologist, Antek Adamowicz. The campaign gained the support of many Polish celebrities, who agreed to be photographed wearing the t-shirts [fig. 4]. In the first edition, slogans included: I’m a Jew, I’m an Arab, I’m black, I don’t listen to the Pope, I don’t go to church, I’m a gay, I’m a lesbian, I have my period, I use a spiral, I’m from the countryside, I have AIDS, I’m unemployed, I had an abortion, and so on.

In 2005, an exhibition of all the photos of celebrities supporting the campaign began to travel around Poland. It was presented in Warsaw and in Kraków (at the central railway stations), and in Poznań (at the School of Humanities and Journalism). The exhibition was accompanied by discussions and conferences at which social activists and politicians discussed the issue of tolerance. A presentation of



Fig. 6. Aleksandra Polisieicz, *Reanimacja demokracji – Marsz Równości idzie dalej* (*The Re-animation of Democracy – The March of Equality Moves On*), 2005, video. Courtesy: the artist

the exhibition which was intended for a festival on human rights, *Human Rights in Films*, organised by Amnesty International and the Helsinki Fund at *Chatka Żaka*, part of the Marie Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin, was prohibited by the dean of the University under pressure by the local bishop. Given these circumstances, the organisers cancelled the entire festival, and in doing so evoked a debate on freedom of speech, and relations between the Catholic Church and public institutions.<sup>6</sup>

I have called this strategy “destruction of identity” because each person wearing the “T-shirt for Freedom” can demonstrate his/her own individual problem and exclusion, or s/he can identify with the Other – can be the Other for a moment, metaphorically wear the skin of the Other. In this way, the campaign shows that we are Others among Others. It also reveals that our identity is not something that is of the essence, but is socially constructed.

## 5. BUILDING A NEW ORDER

An exhibition entitled *Love and Democracy* was organised by Paweł Leszkowicz for the private Grażyna Kulczyk Gallery in Poznań in 2005. A larger version of it was shown at the Centre for Contemporary Art in Gdańsk in 2006. The curator gathered together various works related to the title. These included individual voices on different kinds of sexuality, love, and desire (e.g., Katarzyna Korzeniecka). Some of the artworks presented a play and change of identity (Maciej Osika). Others, more related to social and political problems, included the aforementioned photos in the *Let us see* exhibition, and Aleksandra Polisieicz's film *The Re-animation of Democracy – The March of Equality Moves On*, 2005 [fig. 6], which documents a rally in Warsaw supporting the banned Equality March that was brutally suppressed on November 19, 2005 in Poznań. Thus the exhibition also collected some of the earlier strategies, i.e. exploring the issue of Otherness, becoming familiar with Otherness, and destruction of identity. Within the context of this exhibition, the Other stops being an Other, and starts to be one of many of us.

The exhibition showed a pluralistic vision of different existing sexualities and identities. Paweł Leszkowicz described it as “plural love stories, multiple sex-

ual narratives, various images of femininity and masculinity”.<sup>7</sup> In this way, the exhibition presented a new kind of social order, with a place for Others and for different kinds of desire. According to this point of view, democracy is applied as it should be: “to guarantee the peace and security of all citizens in a multi-sexual society, and to control aggression and violence”.<sup>8</sup> This project wasn't, however, shown in a public space. It appeared in the fairly safe space of the Gallery, and proposed a kind of “impossible Paradise” – a Utopian vision within the context of Polish reality. Again, the earlier strategies – to examine democracy, to move the borders of identities which strictly define our social order, to change the field of visibility from a monolithic to a diverse one – are important.

Art for Tolerance is important in the context of a weak Polish democracy. According to Pomian, in a social order, the elimination of differences leads to an atrophy of public life, and is one of the most serious threats facing democracy.<sup>9</sup> It is also a great threat for the arts.

In his *Dekada (The Decade)*, Piotr Piotrowski recalled a statement by Josif Brodsky: “The non-reading of poetry leads a society to an appalling level of speech skills that makes it easy prey for demagogues and tyrants”.<sup>9</sup> If applied to contemporary art in Poland – to the existing attempts to block it, to the covert censorship of Art for Tolerance – these words take on a disturbing new meaning.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Krzysztof Pomian, ‘Sztuka nowoczesna i demokracja’ (‘Contemporary Art and Democracy’), in: *Kultura współczesna*, no. 2 (40), 2004, pp. 35-43.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> See: ‘Demolishes Gay Awareness Campaign’, 27 May 2003. [http://niechnaszobacza.queers.pl/strony/prasa/27.05.03\\_en.htm](http://niechnaszobacza.queers.pl/strony/prasa/27.05.03_en.htm)

<sup>4</sup> “If you see something...” – Krzysztof Wodiczko, 2005 [http://www.culture.pl/en/culture/artykuly/wy\\_in\\_wy\\_wodiczko\\_lelong\\_nowy\\_jork](http://www.culture.pl/en/culture/artykuly/wy_in_wy_wodiczko_lelong_nowy_jork)

<sup>5</sup> *Tiszert for Freedom*, <http://www.tiszert.com/tiszertdla-wolnoscil/english.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Paweł Leszkowicz, ‘Love and Democracy. Art – New Images of Love and Eroticism’, in: Paweł Leszkowicz (ed.), *Miłość i demokracja (Love and Democracy)*, ex. cat.,

Gdańsk: Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej 'Łaźnia', 2006, pp. 139-191.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>9</sup> Pomian, 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Piotr Piotrowski, *Dekada. O syndromie lat*

*siedemdziesiątych, kulturze artystycznej, krytyce, sztuce – wybiórczo i subiektywnie (The Decade. Selective and Subjective Remarks about the 1970's Syndrome, Artistic Culture and Critique)*, Poznań: Wydawnictwo Obserwator, 1991, p. 80.

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## Kova už laisvę. Menas už toleranciją Lenkijoje

**Reikšminiai žodžiai:** tolerancija, marginalizacija, šiuolaikinis menas, homofobija, demokratija.

### Santrauka

*Menas už toleranciją* siekia atkreipti visuomenės dėmesį į įvairių mažumų marginalizaciją ir į poreikį priešintis šiai diskriminacijai. Lenkijoje yra vykę įvairių socialinių ir meninių akcijų, tokių kaip *Kampanijos prieš homofobiją* organizuota akcija *Let us see (Leiskite pamatyti)* ir *Laisvės fondo* projektas *Tiszert for Freedom (Marškinėliai už laisvę)*; esama kritinio meno, kuris atkreipia dėmesį į kito tolerancijos ir panašias problemas. Tokių akcijų ir tokio meno suvokimas ir eksponavimas yra problemiškas – jis net susiduria su tam tikra neinstitucine cenzūra. Žmonės ir grupės, susijusios su dešiniuosiomis partijomis ir radikaliuoju katalikų bažnyčios sparnu (pavyzdžiui, *Radio Maryja*), siekia uždrausti rodyti tokį meną, todėl daug parodų buvo uždaryta ar atšaukta.

Šiuolaikinis menas dažnai suvokiamas kaip skandalingas ir „laužantis“ nacionalines ir krikščioniškas vertybes. Vis dar tebevyksta Dorotos Nieznalskos procesas – ji apkaltinta tuo, kad savo kūrinio *Aistra* (2001) įžeidė religinius jausmus. Tokia situacija grėsminga ir menininkams, ir žiūrovams. Ji skatina apmąstyti Lenkijos demokratijos situaciją. Anot Krzysztofo Pomiano, šiuolaikinis menas ir, beje, ne tik menas, ragina mus suvokti faktą, kad demokratija reikalauja grupių, politikos, idėjų, religijų ir kt. įvairovės, ir kad demokratijai reikia diskusijų.

*Gauta: 2007 03 06*

*Parengta spaudai: 2007 10 08*