

On the Citizen Forum for Contemporary Arts

Joanna Figiel

Two-thousand-and-twelve saw a certain large-scale, spectacular sporting event take place in Poland, leading to a number of discussions concerning the use of Ministry of Culture funds. A large portion [of these funds] was allocated for big scale, one-off events such as the Euro 2012 football championship or the 2012 Polish Culture Congress, drawing attention to the generally poor, day-to-day financial situation of Polish artists and cultural workers. Following these debates, the various artists, curators, critics and writers forming the Citizen Forum for Contemporary Arts (Obywatelskie Forum Sztuki Współczesnej - OFSW¹), staged a one-day art strike – a day without arts and culture. The aim of the strike was to influence the public discussion of cultural matters, including the symbolic and political, but also economical place of artists and cultural producers within the public sphere and social hierarchies. Around the same time, a proposed change to tax law meaning a reduction or elimination of a flat-rate allowance to reclaim up to fifty percent of costs from revenue on contracts was announced. Such a change would further harm the majority of artists and cultural producers who are often reliant on commission contracts and need to then recoup the costs of their production, materials, etc. This provided further impetus for the OFSW action.

'The day without art', the first to ever take place in Poland, followed a well established, if sporadically enacted and relatively little-known tradition of artists' refusal of work. The protest followed examples beginning in the 1960s with the Art Workers Coalition (AWC), who focussed mainly on institutional critique and that continued through Gustav Metzger's "years without art" (1977-1980), when the artist went on strike, producing no work whatsoever, thus drawing attention to his position as part of the art world and his relationships to galleries and institutions. In the early 1990s art strike strategies were taken up again, this time by Stewart Home and various adherents of the Neoist movement, whilst in recent years Redas Dirzys and Temporary Art Strike Committee have been calling for an art strike in Lithuania. Such actions attempted to disrupt the role and position of artists themselves,

or to address issues in the cultural economy and creative industries in more general terms. Most recently, in 2012, the London-based Precarious Workers Brigade, a group organizing for several years around the issue of precarity within cultural and creative work, called for a Cultural Workers Walkout², in solidarity with other casual and public sector workers taking part in a national strike the same day.

The Polish art strike was, by all accounts, quite a small and seemingly insignificant event, relatively speaking. A number of galleries and institutions³ did however express solidarity, and some did indeed close their doors for the day, in addition to a handful of protesting OFSW members, some bystanders, and one banner. In terms of media coverage or turnout it certainly did not stand out amongst demonstrations and strike actions staged that year by workers in other sectors. However, the strike did kick-start a non-going debate about cultural and artistic production in Poland. It brought, once and for all, the often-invisible working conditions in the arts and culture into the public domain. Most importantly, it cemented the credentials of the autonomous, horizontally organised OFSW as an effective and credible model for (some, see below) artists and cultural producers to represent themselves and each other in a field that is unstable, mostly reliant on decreasing amounts of public funding, and characterised by increasing levels of competition and individualism.



Zbigniew Libera, "I'm an artist, but this doesn't mean I work for free"

Photo by OFSW



Julita Wójcik, "I'm in a union - I don't work for free", Photo by OFSW

Crucially, this first public action of OFSW not only brought the economic conditions of artistic and cultural work into open discussion, but also into the streets of Warsaw, where contemporaneous protests, be it by nurses or taxi drivers, were taking place. Thus, not only were their often obscured working conditions and labour made visible, but also the ideological distance between the labour of artists and cultural producers, and that of workers in general, was dramatically reduced. Artists and cultural producers on contingent, casual and temporary contracts, without health insurance or pensions, increasingly without the ability to own a home or afford the mortgage and burdened with debt, are, in terms of employment law and economic survival, often leading the way for workers in other sectors. Therefore, when some twisted joke on the original mission of the art avant-garde casts artists as new models of employment in an increasingly deregulated, neoliberal job market, an erasure of the ideological gap between art and labour, and the dismantling of the myth of artistic genius could be an important political strategy.

Almost two years on from the art strike, OFSW is continuing to shape the struggle for changes to economic and social aspects of the Polish art scene. Its programme includes:

- Efforts to ensure artists receive payment from art institutions.
- Artists' remuneration to be included in the rules of the Ministry of Culture grant programs.
- Inclusion of artists' labour rights in Polish employment legislation.
- Pension and health insurance provision for artists.
- Publishing a 'Black Book for Artists in Poland', with an aim of defining the status of artists and cultural production in Poland.

The forum was also actively involved in the on-going conflict around the Centre for Contemporary Arts Zamek Ujazdowski⁴ and the dispute concerning the directorial competition at Poznan's Arsenal Gallery.

More recently OFSW has joined forces with the trade union movement, or rather, one of the new unions, the recently formed Inicjatywa Pracownicza⁵ (IP, Workers' Initiative), which began in 2001 as a continuation of various self-organised grassroots and anarcho-syndicalist groups active mainly in and around Poznan. In 2004 it became an officially recognised union. IP was formed as a reaction to the crisis of Poland's official union movement—its bureaucracy, passivity and links with the anti-social and anti-worker governments – but also as a union that recognises new forms of employment and contracts not recognised by traditional unions, also paying attention to specific issues concerning female and migrant labour. IP allows for the formation of autonomous collegial commissions that can then support workers on casual contracts, or those who are self-employed.

One such collegial commission affiliated to IP is the recently formed Komisja Środowiskowa ‘PracownicySztuki’⁶, founded in October 2013. The forming of the group was in part a reaction to the ongoing CSW Zamek conflict⁷. Here, despite two trade unions in operation, most staff concerned with the issues at stake (developments around the tenure of director Fabio Cavalucci, the non-payment of artists fees⁸ or the *British British, Polish Polish* exhibition, various other budgetary concerns, the treatment of the Winter Camp exhibition/events season and so on) were unable to participate in the dispute due to their employment status, i.e. being on casual contracts. Other reasons for affiliation were to receive formal support from a nationally and legally recognised union in negotiations around the guaranteed minimum artist’s fee payment and issues concerning social security and pension contributions. In addition, it allowed representation for freelancers, project-based workers and the self-employed who, for the lack of a physical and fixed workplace, are often unable to even recognise who their colleagues are, let alone to struggle alongside them or cooperate with arts and cultural employees on permanent contracts.



24.05.2012. - Art Strike rally in front of Warsaw’s Zachęta – National Gallery of Art Photo by OFSW



Banner reads “Strike! - We call for the government to start negotiating with artists” Photo by OFSW

The commission, currently consisting of over 100 members – including artists, cultural producers, writers, curators and critics, academics and teachers, poets, musicians recently held its first annual conference. During the two-day event, attended by ca. 50 new members, four objectives were declared:

- The struggle for workers’ rights and social protection (especially health insurance and pension) for artists.
- Striving to settle the issue of remuneration for artistic work.
- The struggle to incorporate the voice of artists in decision-making processes in the arts and cultural sector
- Solidarity and cooperation with other industries where there are on-going struggles for workers’ rights, as well as social movements for freedom and democracy (e.g. the anti-eviction movement).

Working groups on issues such solidarity/interventions, legal/contracts, social insurance/pensions were formed and since the commission’s inception a meeting addressing the work and payments for writers, including non-fiction writers and poets, has taken place.

To date, the biggest success of the commission/OFSW has been with regards to the issue of guaranteed minimum fees for artists. On 17th February 2014 four institutions—Art Museum, Łódź, Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, Zachęta National Art Gallery, Warsaw and Arsenał Gallery, Poznań—signed an official agreement

regarding such fees. The minimum payments were set at 800PLN for taking part in a group exhibition, 1200PLN for taking part in a small group exhibition or so-called 'project room', and 3700PLN for a solo show (respectively c. 200, 300, 900Euro). A further five institutions have pledged to sign the agreement as well.

While this leaves artists in Poland far off the relative security of other countries' models, for instance the German system of social insurance for artists⁹, or organisational models, such as the Scottish Artist Union¹⁰, the commission is definitely a first step towards some more concrete solutions. The formation of such a group, in a sector so heavily reliant on competition and individualism as the art world, and where even a few years ago it would have seemed scarcely achievable, can be counted as a great success in itself.

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Endnotes

1 <http://forumsztukiwspolczesnej.blogspot.co.uk/>

2 <http://precariousworkersbrigade.tumblr.com/post/7027907945/culturalworkers>

3 Around 90 in total, including, beyond Warsaw, in Poznan, Krakow, Wroclaw, and Trojmiasto; as well as in smaller towns like Bytom, Slupsk, Torun.

4 <http://csw.art.pl/index.php?lang=eng>

5 <http://ozzip.pl/inicjatywa-pracownicza/item/10-about-inicjatywa-pracownicza-workers-initiative>

6 <http://www.obieg.pl/obiegTV/31185>

7 <http://art-leaks.org/2013/10/26/centre-for-contemporary-art-ujazdowski-castle-workers-protest-letters-contd-warsaw-poland/>

8 <http://www.krytykapolityczna.pl/artykuly/kultura/20140217/stokfiszewski-koniec-z-nieplaceniem-artystom>

9 <http://www.kuenstlersozialkasse.de/>

10 <http://www.sau.org.uk/>