

The TRAF0 Boycott: Standing Up to the Privatization and Corporatization of Art and Cultural Institutions in Poland

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If the '90s in Eastern Europe saw a hasty implementation of neoliberal politics, then in case of Poland this period was also characterized by a shameless expression of admiration towards Margaret Thatcher. The paradigm of decentralization as the fundamental rule for organizing the public sector administration introduced in that period was, and still is, particularly damaging to the arts and cultural institutions. Continuing this logic of neoliberal politics, formerly state-run art centers and galleries are being passed over under the management of local governments, and simultaneously pushed into a never-ending conflict with the latter. These conflicts – concerning, for example, the rules specifying criteria for directorial competitions – have been intensifying since about three years ago when a new amendment was introduced to the law on cultural institutions allowing local governments to out-source management of cultural institutions to private companies selected via an open tender process – a procedure identical to that used when contracting a supplier of, say, concrete or tarmac.¹

Since this new legislation, the relationship between underfunded galleries and arts centers, the arts community and local governments has been steadily deteriorating. Local councilors are now armed with a new tool for disciplining the expensive and unnecessary – in their view – art and cultural institutions. Worryingly, some of them are able to exploit the new laws to the full advantage of personal/political

agendas. The issue is further complicated by the steady stream of structural EU funding, part of which reaches the cultural sector in the form of one-off infrastructural investments.

This EU funding, the so-called 'Polish Thatcherism' insisting on privatization of every part of the public sector in the name of neoliberal ideology,² the decentralization of management of cultural institutions, and a lack of coherent legal culture all create – in the long view – a lethally destructive combination. This neoliberal approach is – first and foremost – affecting democratic procedures, fairness and transparency when it comes to management and appointments, as well as labor relations in the cultural sector, with working conditions increasingly deteriorating over the past decade.³

The best example of the devastating effects of the new regulation is the case of the TRAFOf Trafostacja Sztuki, Center for Contemporary Art in Szczecin.⁴ Under circumstances that are to this day unclear, the Center has been passed over under the management of Baltic Contemporary – not to be mistaken with the Gateshead/Newcastle upon Tyne complex – which, to date, has had no engagement whatsoever in the arts nor in the cultural sector. In fact, the company has been created just before the tender took place. Those running it were only given weeks to prepare offers; the only offer presented against that of Baltic Contemporary has been disqualified over a formal technicality. A private company whose owner, Mikolaj Sekutowicz, has never been involved in the arts nor culture, resides in Berlin, not in Szczecin. His partner Constanze Kleiner is, however, a curator and subsequently prepared the first show under his management, and is now in charge of what has been, to date, one of the most important spaces in Szczecin.⁵

The two artists that publicly described and criticized the tender process⁶ and the merits of the winning offer, Agata Zbylut i Kamil Kuskowski – both academics with links to the Fine Arts Academy in Szczecin – ended up entangled in legal proceedings that lasted a year and a half. Zbylut, from the Zachęta Sztuki Współczesnej, an arts organisation that initially came up with the idea of opening an arts centre in the current TRAFOf location, and Kuskowski, a director at the Fine Arts Academy in Szczecin, have merely written about the facts and questions concerning the tender process, yet they were accused by Baltic Contemporary's lawyers of 'black PR' against the company. The pair was initially found guilty under fair competition laws and sentenced to a fine before having their conviction overturned in a court of higher instance.⁷

In mid-2014, the Citizens Forum for Contemporary Arts⁸ called artists and curators to boycott the gallery in solidarity with the accused pair and to defend freedom of speech in the context of privatization of cultural institutions, of which, sadly, TRAFOf has become a symbol of. Around 200 have joined the call, and since then, practically no Polish artists allowed their work to be shown there. While this display of solidarity can, and should, of course be seen as a success, a situation in which a major city like Szczecin remains without a serious – and adequately run – cultural space showing local artists is hardly ideal.

Even more worryingly, the mayor of Poznan has recently cited the TRAF0 tender as a positive example of managing such – de facto – outsourcing processes. The mayor, instead of ensuring a well-executed competition for a new director of the Arsenal Municipal Arts Centre in Poznan decided instead to dismantle the Centre, only to outsource its management, via a tendering process, to a private entity.

The Szczecin and Poznan events are just two examples of the worrying effects of the unacceptable state of affairs brought on by neoliberal politics and particularly this new amendment to the law allowing the emergence of the open tender public managers of cultural institutions. The authors of this regulation, presumably in their excitement at the possibilities the free market supposedly entails, did not anticipate the scale of possible conflicts of interest and demonstrated a cardinal misunderstanding of the meaning of public institutions. The ‘successful’ running of the latter cannot – and should not – ever be reduced to quantifiable ‘outputs’ nor mere ‘business efficiency’, which are unfortunately imperatives of destructive neoliberal politics developing over the last decades in Poland and most other European countries.

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Endnotes

1 More about the new legislation on public tenders and cultural institutions is here <http://www.przetargipubliczne.pl/archiwum/art,4997,instytucja-kultury-jako-zamawiajacy.html> and here <http://www.zamowienia-publiczne.lex.pl/czytaj/-/artykul/instytucje-kulturalne-moga-nie-stosowac-przetargow>

2 Or, as Mikołaj Iwański terms it in his commentary on the recently aborted directorship competition at Poznań's Arsenal, 'Slavic Thatcherism' – see: Mikołaj Iwanski, "Słowiański thatcheryzm". Komentarz do unieważnienia konkursu na dyrektora Arsenalu," available at: <http://obieg.home.pl/test/teksty/29351>

3 Such outsourcing of public services, or the so called "secondary primitive accumulation" in neoliberalism is described at length, mainly in relation to the UK situation, by Ursula Huws in her text: "Crisis as Capitalist Opportunity: New accumulation through public service commodification", [http://vuh-la-risprt.herts.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/crisis-as-capitalist-opportunity\(-4184b6a5-6d9c-44e9-944a-9430142c5bdd\).html](http://vuh-la-risprt.herts.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/crisis-as-capitalist-opportunity(-4184b6a5-6d9c-44e9-944a-9430142c5bdd).html), as well as in her book, *Labor in the Global Digital Economy: The Cybertariat Comes of Age*.

4 For more about the center, see: <http://www.trafo.org/index/trafo>

5 There is a profile of Mikołaj Sekutowicz and his partner, Constanze Kleiner – formerly of Berliner Kunsthalle – in the local edition of one of the bigger Polish daily newspapers, Gazeta Wyborcza Szczecin edition here: http://szczecin.gazeta.pl/szczecin/1,34959,12782714,Kto_przejal_szczecin-ska_Trafostacje_Sztuki_Poznajcie.html. For more on Kleiner's dismissal from the role at Kunsthalle see for example here: <http://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/dieter-rosenkranz-den-eintritt-zahle-ich/1542472.html> and here:

6 Here, the pair give an interview about the process:

7 More on the case and it being eventually dismissed here: Mikołaj Iwański, "Uchylony wyrok przeciw Agacie Zbylut i Kamilowi Kuskowskiemu!," available at: <http://obieg.home.pl/test/felieton/34389>

More reactions to the outcome of the tender and the handling of the tender process here: Ewa Podgajna, Trafostacja Sztuki połowy miasta. "Moja noga tam nigdy nie postanie", available at: http://szczecin.gazeta.pl/szczecin/1,34939,14525734,Trafostacja_Sztuki_polowy_miasta_Moja_noga_tam_nigdy.html

8 The Citizens' Forum of Contemporary Art is an open association of various communities, organisations and private individuals from all over Poland, that have one thing in common – their desire to accelerate the changes needed in the cultural arena, especially in relation to contemporary art. For more information on the group and its actions see my article in the previous ArtLeaks Gazette here: https://artsleaks.files.wordpress.com/2012/09/joanna_figiel_artleaks_gazette_2.pdf