

Unveiling the Heaviness: Contemporary Polish Art Confronting the Iron Curtain

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April 5, 2011

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Portland cement, sand, and water: these are three basic ingredients required for mixing concrete. To use them to raise a firm structure--such as a wall--you need some extra components: steel stakes and, more important, knowledge about how to combine them. This is pure physics and chemistry. How about establishing concrete walls that have a significant meaning, that are more than just a spatial barrier? The very substance of some walls is ideas and policies. Those structures result in divisions that last for decades, even if the physical objects no longer exist. Let's focus on a certain wall that follows this pattern--the Berlin Wall, usually identified as the most spectacular symbol and the tangible symptom of the Iron Curtain. Constructed by the German Democratic Republic in 1961, it separated Eastern Europe from the rest of the world. Just a quick look at the images from the 1980s reveals how meaningful this structure was. Whereas the Western part of the wall was decorated with graffiti, the Eastern part, guarded by the militia, was grey and horrifying. This doubleness of the Teutonic world was captured by the lyrics of a Sex Pistols song of that time: "I am looking over the wall and they are looking at me."

The Berlin Wall practically shaped two different realities, and so did the more general concept, which used to lie behind it, the mythical Iron Curtain, a semi-political, semi-ideological boundary that divided Europe in two parts from 1945 to 1989. It was established with documents and declarations, such as the so-called Warsaw Pact, which stated that all of the countries from the central-European region were in a military alliance (informally controlled by the Soviet Union) and, on the other side, the policy of NATO. This famous Iron Wall, resulting in a two-speed world, remains a strong point of reference for contemporary Eastern European art production even after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989. For decades it was one of the most important identity factors for Czechs, Poles, and Russians. Surprisingly, it still works as a kind of common cultural basis. Moreover, contemporary art inspired by the Iron Curtain is not only about anti-communist rebellion. As much as the concept and historical fact of the Iron Curtain are criticized by artists, there is a strong tendency towards preserving or commenting on modern art as an aesthetic code of the Communist era.

The artistic outcome of the 1970s and 1980s becomes a strong positive stimulus for the youngest art generation. Young artists have discovered modernist fonts, Polish design from the 1960s, and connections with the Russian avant-garde. The unveiling of the past works in these two directions.



Figure 1: Zbigniew Libera, *Drilling Machines*, 1997.

If we want to discuss the bipolar dynamics towards the Iron Curtain on the contemporary Polish art scene, we have to start from the so-called “critical art.” Critical of what? Of what was left even after the collapse of the Iron Curtain, the idea of a human being and whole society shaped to be obedient, silent, depersonalized. Let’s take Zbigniew Libera and his project *Drilling Machines* (1997). (Figure 1) We see drawings depicting standard hand drills with small modifications. Parts have been enlarged so that they look like guns. The same artistic procedure has been implemented on real 3-D drills, which work like *objet trouvé* sculptures. Libera chose a small piece of the material reality that surrounded him--innocent and meaningless--and filled it with a strong reference to the politics and power games of the Communist legacy. Critical art is regarded as a voice about the Communist era because of its methodology; it doesn't confront phenomena directly. You couldn't stand up and fight under the regime, but it gives you a spark and explosive material. You have to combine them and use them to understand that it has the power of rebellion.



Figure 2: Zofia Kulik, *The Gorgeousness of Self*, photographic collage, 1997.

Of course, Libera wasn't the only one to follow this critical art approach. We have also the example of Zofia Kulik and her photographic collages, which, in terms of structure, should be considered sculptures. They are based on modules, have strong decorative character, and are a bit similar to Oriental carpets. Let's have a closer look at one of the pieces, *The Gorgeousness of the Self* (1997). (Figure 2) We see a cucumber and a cut tomato instead of the symbols of reign, a crown formed from cabbage leaves, a patterned dress. If we take a closer look we see that this pattern is made of the silhouette of a naked person. This is not without reason. Kulik's collages comment on the idea of being a uniformed, collective

organism and of losing identity. They also have strong gender sensitivity; they may be perceived as a comment on the woman's role in society: influential and meaningful but still dependent on men. We can analyze them as art that is critical of the heritage of the Iron Curtain because of the structure. Kulik uses common objects, such as vegetables, the human body, and her own portrait, and by putting them in a new context or slightly manipulating them, she invents new meaning for them. A simple tomato is not a tomato anymore; it becomes an object that leads us to think about identity shift, the language of propaganda, and authority. The fact that this work is referring directly to the Communist era becomes clear if we notice what is on the left of the image. There is a sickle, like the one on the Soviet flag, but instead of a hammer we see a cross. Critical art uses a wide spectrum of subjects and Kulik doesn't give simple solutions.



Figure 3: Anna Molska, video still from *Tangram*, video art, 2006.

These are several examples of contemporary Polish art projects strongly opposing communism. Yet, there are as many works of art which openly cherish the contemporary connection with the Communist-era heritage, usually made by the youngest art generation. Let's focus on the video art *Tangram* (2006) by Anna Molska. (Figure 3) A tangram is an ancient Chinese puzzle. In this case it has been extended to an enormous scale and made 3-dimensional. The soundtrack is the Alexandrow

Ensemble, one of the most renowned musical choirs in Russia, performing classical Russian songs. Two young men move the pieces of the jigsaw and speak Russian. It is a reference to Kasimir Malevich's *Black Square*. Painted in 1915, *Black Square* is not only a revolutionary picture, but a symbol of the Russian avant-garde. The simplest composition, it is abstraction reduced to a geometrical shape: nothing extra, nothing appealing, just a pure object, pure thought. This is why it has become a famous symbol. In Molska's video the two men are seeking this revolutionary quality of art. We may read the video as an expression of regret that contemporary art has lost this ability to form straight statements. Instead, it has become weak, focused on aesthetics, too appealing. Notice that Molska is referring to the early phase of the socialist era, to the avant-garde, to the utopia of collectiveness; she is presenting, in a way, the cultural movement of the Soviet Union as a Promised Land of art. She skips all the political and real historical inclinations, which, for Libera and Kulik, were negative and resulted in a unified and pacified society. So, for Molska, the crucial thing about the Communist era is this direct connection to a great tradition of creativity, free and independent thinking, and philosophy.

Let's get back to where we started--to the concrete recipe. This material used to build the Berlin Wall evokes a spectrum of stereotypes about communism. The communist residential architecture, made of concrete, is often said to be boring, grey, and grim. This stereotype and this material have been a topic for Katarzyna Przewanska, whose works engage space interventions and use bright colors. Among her most renowned works are the interventions made in Park Bródnowski, a typical leisure area in a residential zone in Warsaw, Poland. (Figure 4) Przewanska painted parts of the park's infrastructure in bright, fluorescent colors to underscore what people usually want to hide: holes in the pavements, cracked pieces of concrete, the places of devastation. Her goal was to focus attention on aspects that are usually considered faulty, defective, and unattractive. We can read her artistic practice as a general metaphor of how to deal with the burden of the Iron Curtain heritage. You can try to hide it--which will never work--or simply put it in the spotlight and try to spice it up with your own point of view, your own discourse. This policy, developed and implemented by Przewanska and others, makes contemporary Polish art full of tension and ready to react. There is one recipe for concrete, but plenty of them for good art.



Figure 4: Katarzyna Przewaska, public installation art, Warsaw, 2009.