

## Introduction

Piotr Piotrowski (1952–2015) has become one of the major figures in the discourse of East-Central European art history and also global art history, being among those who understood that the world’s new geopolitical situation requires a revision of the ways that art-historical discourse is formulated. His concept of “horizontal art history”, developed during the process of writing the history of post-war art created in East-Central Europe, proved to be of worldwide importance.<sup>1</sup> Yet the significance of Piotrowski’s writings and activities goes beyond that, and in this book we concentrate on a different aspect, lesser-known to the international audience – namely his interest in the political engagement of art, artists and art historians.

Born in Stalinist Poland, educated in a post-totalitarian society, and developing his academic career in post-communist Europe, Piotrowski always put the issue of democracy at the core of his art-historical writings and his activities as a critic, curator, museum director and citizen. His politically engaged writings bear witness to Poland’s turbulent transformation from a post-totalitarian socialist country to a post-communist democracy, and of the role art played in that transformation. All the forms of Piotrowski’s activities – his research, university teaching and political activism – were distinguishable as being imbued with his appealing personality, and this – one may say – was structured by a dialectical relationship of openness and radicalism. The first feature allowed him to create a substantial network of people working on the subjects that interested him most; the second contributed to the fact that he often had great impact on their theoretical approach. He bluntly and bravely addressed controversial problems, and remained open to similar responses. His affection for people, and his strong commitment to the practices of “radical democracy” – as introduced by Chantal Mouffe – and Rancièrian “dissensus” resulted in many long-standing friendships enlivened by fervent disputes.

---

<sup>1</sup> A book on horizontal art history is being prepared by the Piotr Piotrowski Center for Research on East-Central European Art (Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, [www.piotrpiotrowski-center.amu.edu.pl](http://www.piotrpiotrowski-center.amu.edu.pl)).

\* \* \*

Piotrowski studied at the Institute of Art History at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań from 1971–1976; the institution remained his “home” for his entire life. During his studies he met two important teachers with whom he developed lifelong friendships: Andrzej Turowski – a scholar with a strong Marxist background, working on Russian and Polish constructivism, who, as Piotrowski said, “with his leftist inclinations opened up the possibility of exercising a subversive art history”<sup>2</sup>; and Jarosław Kozłowski – a conceptual artist – who at the time was developing his mail art initiative, “NET”, which would put Piotrowski into contact with a whole network of artists around the globe and equip him with direct knowledge of art in East-Central Europe.

The time of the Solidarity upheaval brought Piotrowski to politics – he was a member and co-founder of the Solidarity Trade Union at the university, and after the imposition of martial law by state authorities in December 1981 he became involved in the underground opposition movement. This had a strong influence on both his practice of friendship, rooted in collectivity, and on his notion of democracy, later framed by him with post-Marxist thought rather than a neoliberal context. He perceived Solidarity as a labour union of civil resistance, and strongly criticised its later role in rightist politics.

The first half of the 1990s was the period of Piotrowski’s intense scholarly and professional development. Owing to several research grants he had received, he spent a fairly long time in the USA, where he “discovered” texts and publications by authors affiliated with *October* magazine, and in which he saw connections to his own ideas on art and power, thereby allowing him a different perspective on his Marxist background.<sup>3</sup> Hal Foster’s concept of critical art, and Michel Foucault’s concept of

<sup>2</sup> “Miłość do emancypacji. O warsztacie i zaangażowaniu badacza humanisty rozmawiają Luiza Nader, Katarzyna Bojarska i Adam Mazur” [Love for Emancipation: On the Know-How and Engagement of a Researcher-Humanist. In Conversation with Luiza Nader, Katarzyna Bojarska and Adam Mazur], *Widok. Teorie i praktyki kultury wizualnej* no. 3 (2013), <http://pismowidok.org/index.php/one/article/view/87/115> (accessed 06 August 2018).

<sup>3</sup> One of the crucial texts written by Piotr Piotrowski – on horizontal art history – begins with an expression of his disappointment with the authors of *Art since 1900*, American art historians associated with *October* magazine, belonging to a group of art historians that has done much to revise the paradigm of art-historical studies, but have proved to support rather than

power (not read directly but mediated by “French Theory”) proved to be especially influential. Combined with his experience in the opposition movement, they became his tools for the criticism of post-transitional mechanisms of power that silenced the collective spirit of revolution and strengthened dependence on centralised and Church-related authority. Freedom of artistic expression and the issue of censorship were present in Piotrowski’s writing since the 1990s; engagement with both feminist and sexual minorities’ issues were to become extremely important in his historical writing and civic participation.

In the 1990s Piotrowski concentrated on rewriting post-war Polish art history, and simultaneously developed his interest in East-Central Europe. In *Znaczenia modernizmu: w stronę historii sztuki polskiej po 1945 roku* [*Meanings of Modernism: Towards a History of Polish Art after 1945*] (1999) he tried to outline the most important processes taking place in Polish art history after World War II. He invalidated seemingly antithetical notions established in Polish art history, such as official and unofficial art, and replaced them with a different distinction between “autonomous” and politically engaged approaches.

In 1994 in Poznań, the international congress *Culture of the Time of Transformation* was organised, where Piotrowski was responsible for the part dedicated to the visual arts.<sup>4</sup> At the time Piotrowski became a member of an international community of scholars dealing with East-Central European art, gradually playing an increasingly important role in it.<sup>5</sup> His engaged and innovative writing, along with his winning personality, resulted in a central position in the field.

---

challenge its Western-centrism; see: Piotr Piotrowski, “Towards a Horizontal History of the European Avant-Garde”, in: *Europa! Europa? The Avant-Garde, Modernism and the Fate of a Continent*, eds. Sascha Bru, Jan Baetens, Benedikt Hjartarson, Peter Nicholls, Tania Orum and Hubert van den Berg (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 49.

<sup>4</sup> Two editions of the international congress *Culture of the Time of Transformation* were organised in Poznań in the 1990s, dedicated to the culture of Central and Eastern Europe. The first took place from 02–05 February 1994, the second from 11–14 March 1998. Both were organised by the Poznań Society of Friends of Arts and Sciences.

<sup>5</sup> In 2010 he was honoured with the Igor Zabel Award for Culture and Theory. The jury emphasised that he was an outstanding art historian of the East-Central European region, “active in setting up a network, as well as disseminating the specific art practices and ideas that originate in the region, outside of the centres. By doing so, Piotr Piotrowski acts as a sort of cultural ambassador.” <http://www.igorzabel.org/en/award/award-2010> (accessed 25 August 2018).



The Igor Zabel award ceremony, 10 December 2010 at MACBA, Barcelona. Photo: David Campos. Courtesy of the Erste Foundation and the Igor Zabel Association.

Piotr Piotrowski was the recipient of the Igor Zabel Award for Culture and Theory 2010. Three working grants were awarded by the jury: Maja and Reuben Fowkes, the Romanian curator Raluca Voinea, and the interdisciplinary Peace Institute from Ljubljana, Slovenia. The fourth was appointed by Piotrowski himself, as laureate, and went to the Bratislava-based art historian Daniel Grúň. The jury in 2010 consisted of the following members: Edit András, Chus Martínez and Tadej Pogačar.

Piotrowski was convinced that it is essential to rethink how to write the history of the region in such a way that it will challenge the Western paradigm of art-historical discourse. He often emphasised the necessity of the re-evaluation of the seemingly neutral, omnipotent discourse of Western art history and its canon. He emphasised the need for a paradigm change, whereas in East-Central Europe many scholars relished the Western canon, trying to read East-Central European works in its context and fit them into it. Piotrowski's objective was not to extend the canon, but to differentiate it by introducing the perspective of critical geography, which challenges the relationship

between the centre and the margins. The critical geography of art (created initially in a dialogue with Irit Rogoff's critical cartography) was understood by him primarily as "a discourse on the relationship between different places". This relationship interested him as it revealed power relations, and because its analysis always aimed at questioning the centre's power. As Piotrowski claimed, the question of the relationship between different European places, particularly between West and East or Central Europe, is first of all the question of the centre, where power resides, and the margins, which are the object of power strategies.<sup>6</sup>

The existing discourse of art history was recognised and described by Piotrowski as "the hierarchical, vertical discourse ordering the artistic geography in terms of centres and peripheries".<sup>7</sup> He was not convinced by Hans Belting's "two voices of the history of European art" – the first, Western art history, and the second, Eastern European, as an alternative: "the task is not to provide the 'other voice of art history'" – he claimed – "but to establish another paradigm of writing art history".<sup>8</sup> That paradigm was named "horizontal art history". It is very likely that Piotrowski perceived this as parallel to the concept of "radical democracy" introduced by Chantal Mouffe – namely, he coined a notion that made possible the inner polemics he believed were inherent to both art history and democracy (and that he kept under peculiar protection), and maintained it as a critical battlefield. His role in discussions problematising the relationship of the centre vs the periphery/ies mirrors his resistance towards the socio-political (but also the discursive and visual) exclusion of various minorities.

In his book *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989*, which can be considered one of the most influential books on East-Central European art history, extensively quoted and translated into a number of languages, Piotrowski actively practiced the notion of horizontal art history. He introduced a critical, geopolitical, comparative narrative, which, rooted in the complexity of modernism, challenged the established discourse on East-Central European art by describing the conflictual contexts of particular regional narratives. He argued that, "depending on

<sup>6</sup> See: Piotr Piotrowski, "Between Place and Time: A Critical Geography of 'New' Central Europe", in: *Time and Place: The Geohistory of Art*, eds. Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann and Elizabeth Pilliod (Hants: Ashgate, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> Piotrowski, "Towards a Horizontal History of the European Avant-Garde", 51.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

the location and political context, the same type of art could have radically different meaning and significance in different countries of the region”<sup>9</sup> His intention was to create the critical “map of the region and [the outline] of its historic and geographic dynamics”<sup>10</sup> He strongly objected to what he considered to be an effect of the oppressiveness of the Western, hegemony-unified vision of East-Central European art, and elaborated on the nuanced differences between countries based on differing historico-political contexts.

Piotrowski recognised democracy as one of the crucial determinants of context; even prior to publishing his book *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe* it silently framed his arguments. *Art and Democracy* brought the essential shift in Piotrowski’s methodological approach. He problematised the notion of post-communist Europe, recalling the theories introduced by Susan Buck-Morss and Boris Groys, and included in his research countries of the former Soviet Union. He elaborated on the juxtaposition of post-communist and postcolonial studies, perceiving it as *problematic from a historical point of view*. Instead, ascribing the notion of “agoraphobia”, borrowed from Rosalyn Deutsche, to the communist period, Piotrowski employed the term “agoraphilia”, which according to him, in its political nature, “signifies the drive to enter the public space, the desire to participate in that space, to shape public life, to perform critical and design functions for the sake of and within the social space”, and “provides the key to the description” of the art of the region after 1989.<sup>11</sup> It is clearly visible how discussions led by Piotrowski with friends such as Bojana Pejić, Edit Andrés, Krzysztof Wodiczko, Jarosław Kozłowski and Tamás Szentjóby influenced his writings – their concepts appear in his argument as a result of conference and private debates, and even conflicts, which – similar to how Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau defined democracy – were perceived by Piotrowski as being essential to friendship.

From 2009 to 2010 Piotrowski worked as the director of the National Museum in Warsaw. His radical position led to his resignation from the position, caused by the

<sup>9</sup> Piotr Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989*, trans. Anna Brzyski (London: Reaktion Books, 2009), 10. First published in Polish as *Awangarda w cieniu Jałty. Awangarda w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej w latach 1945–1989* (Poznań: REBIS, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Piotr Piotrowski, *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), 7. First published in Polish as *Agorafilia. Sztuka i demokracja w postkomunistycznej Europie* (Poznań: REBIS, 2010).

rejection of his programme by the museum's Board of Trustees. The gesture, however, appears as a consequence of, and not a resignation from, the concept of the "critical museum", as conceptualised in his book *Muzeum krytyczne* [*The Critical Museum*] (2011).<sup>12</sup> The critical museum appears as a concept parallel in structure to both "radical democracy" and "horizontal art history" – demonstrating that inner criticism conditions the maintenance of those notions. The book reflects Piotrowski's dialectical (both theoretical and practical) stance as applied to the critical museum. Describing the general assumptions of the new museology, Piotrowski deliberated on the possibility of introducing such a critical approach to East-Central Europe, and simultaneously presented examples of exhibitions that were a realisation of the idea, among them *Ars Homo Erotica* curated by Paweł Leszkowicz.

Piotrowski's answer to the question that became clearly heard in the new millennium – of how to write global art history – came from the consistent development of his horizontal approach. While many claimed that the globalised condition of today's art production challenges art history, Piotrowski saw that the need to rethink art history comes from a different direction – namely politics. In his last, unfinished project – *The Global Viewpoint of Eastern European Art* – he proposed a horizontal comparison of art created at particular historical moments, such as 1947, 1956, 1968 and 1989, in parts of the world where major changes occurred at those times ("the horizontal historical plane").<sup>13</sup> As regards 1989, his crucial observation was that the fall of communism in Europe coincided with the collapse of the apartheid regime in South Africa, and also with earlier events that culminated in the rejection of totalitarian regimes by various South American countries; he emphasised the return of democracy in those parts of the world. Although the relationship between the centre and the peripheries was always important for him, an equally crucial position was occupied by the problem of the relationship between art and politics in particular countries. Thus, when he compared East-Central Europe, South Africa and South America, he preferred to talk about similar situations in regions designated as post-communist, post-apartheid and post-authoritarian, but not postcolonial. He argued that there is a crucial discrepancy between the global character of the economy and local models of democracy, established and dictated by individual countries, which contributes to the

---

<sup>12</sup> Piotr Piotrowski, *Muzeum krytyczne* (Poznań: REBIS, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> The unfinished book was published in Polish after Piotrowski's death as *Globalne ujęcie sztuki Europy Wschodniej* [*The Global Viewpoint of Eastern European Art*] (Poznań: REBIS, 2018), 39.

crisis of democracy.<sup>14</sup> Therefore he stated the need for what he called “global politeia” and “global agoraphilia”. He defined democracy as an “agonistic agora, rather than [a] shopping mall or perfectly organised factory”,<sup>15</sup> emphasising the crucial role of global art in building global democratic foundations.<sup>16</sup> Piotrowski gave up on the postmodern paradigm, which he identified with deconstruction, and claimed that the globally engaged artist must work towards democracy. He argued for transnational democratic structures, claiming that “local political structures are not able to protect citizens from being exploited by global corporations”.<sup>17</sup>

Piotr Piotrowski is one of few researchers in East-Central Europe who created their own research school. Firstly, in the strict sense of the word, with his graduate students, such as – to name but a few – Agata Jakubowska, Izabela Kowalczyk and Paweł Leszkowicz, who specialise in variously embedded discourses related to feminism and LGBTQ rights; Jakub Dąbrowski, focused on the legal aspects of censorship in art; and Magdalena Radomska, developing research on the art of communist and post-communist Europe from a Marxist perspective. Secondly, in a broader sense, the concept of a school refers to a wide group of international researchers engaged in research on the art of East-Central Europe and in practices that challenge the hegemonic discourse of Western art history, and who identified themselves with the methodological position Piotrowski developed.

Compiled after Piotrowski’s untimely death, this book includes contributions by Polish and international scholars who either had an impact on Piotrowski’s intellectual development, identify themselves as belonging to his school of thought, or acknowledge his influence on their critical and historical writing – his teachers, students and colleagues, with whom he collaborated throughout his life. They offer an insight into different periods in Piotrowski’s academic work, presenting not only the development of his intellectual biography, but also of art history written in East-Central Europe about the region’s art. In addition to discussing his work, a number of contributors, having deep knowledge of Piotrowski’s Polish background, offer an overview of Polish culture before and after 1989. The included texts benefit from the close collaboration of their authors with Piotrowski, or at least from numerous discussions with him, which is

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 149.

what makes this volume unique in its combination of rigorous scholarly discourse and subtle private overtones. Some authors decided to refer to Piotr Piotrowski by his first name, others by his family name. As editors, we decided to leave the choice to them. Similarly, although we agreed upon the use of the notion of East-Central Europe (from among many possibilities) as most suitable for Piotrowski's legacy, we decided not to interfere with the choices of our authors, in order to accentuate differences rather than trying to establish a unified system.

The book is divided into three parts that concentrate on crucial notions – friendship and democracy – through which we propose to look at Piotr Piotrowski's legacy. The first part – *Practicing Art History and Friendship* – begins with an interview with Jarosław Kozłowski conducted by Adam Mazur, which is devoted to the lifelong cooperation and discussion between this prominent Polish conceptual artist and Piotrowski. The conversation touches on issues such as the activities of the Akumulatory Gallery – a seminal alternative gallery space operating during the 1970s in communist Poland, created by Kozłowski and his students, including Piotrowski; the NET project, based on the mutual relationships between artists from Central Europe and the peripheral areas, such as South America, that Piotrowski later investigated; and Piotrowski and Kozłowski's discussions concerning the autonomy of art and art's role in political resistance.

The subsequent text, by Andrzej Turowski – Piotrowski's senior colleague at the Institute of Art History at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, a practitioner of Marxist discourse and a prominent scholar of the Russian avant-garde, who inspired Piotrowski's early work – offers an image of their deep scholarly friendship. Turowski reconstructs their regular discussions – in person and above all in their writings – on themes such as the role of socio-artistic utopias, or the relationship between political power and revolutionary art. We also gain an insight into the specificity of the Poznań art history that strongly influenced Piotrowski's intellectual interests.

The next two contributions present Piotrowski as a member of an international milieu of artists and scholars, among whom common interests intersected with mutual affection. An interview with Steven Mansbach, author of *Modern Art in Eastern Europe: From the Baltic to the Balkans, ca. 1890–1939* (1999), conducted by Agata Jakubowska, concentrates on the advancement of research on East-Central European avant-gardes (historical and contemporary) during the 1990s, which is examined here both in political, personal and social contexts. Mansbach pays attention to Piotrowski's friendly

relationships and winning personality as factors that were important in developing research and the distribution of its results. The text by Bojana Pejić, who curated crucial exhibitions connected to the identity of the art of East-Central Europe, such as *After the Wall* (1999) and *Gender Check* (2009/2010), reflects on friendship and communality as crucial elements of East-Central European art history creation in the 1990s, as well as on how discussions with Piotrowski played an important role in Pejić's theoretical approach to curatorial practice and its conceptualisation.

The second part of the book – *Meanings of Democracy* – consists of texts written by a younger generation of scholars, Piotrowski's former students, who shared his interest in the relationship between art and politics, and his devotion to issues of freedom of expression and women's and sexual minorities' rights. The author of this section's first text, Izabela Kowalczyk, analyses the political involvement of Piotrowski's writing on art and culture, presenting it against the changing political situation in Poland and East-Central Europe. She begins with his engagement in the underground Solidarity movement of the 1980s, and concludes with Piotrowski's participation in the initiative for democracy called the "Open Academy". The text by Jakub Dąbrowski concentrates on the notion of freedom, an essential issue in the East-Central European art made both during communism and after its fall, and one that is constantly present in Piotrowski's writings. Dąbrowski analyses Piotrowski's texts and activities related to freedom of expression and its suppression by censorship, demonstrating how discussions about censorship in Poland and East-Central Europe have changed over time. He outlines the tension between democracy and censorship, inscribing the writings of Piotrowski into pre-existing methodological frameworks on the subject. The essay by Paweł Leszkowicz analyses aspects of Piotrowski's writings and museological practice that dealt with the artistic and political expression of the sexual revolution in East-Central European art, presenting Piotrowski's ground-breaking critical studies of body art and masculinity in the art of the region, as well as his understanding of the subversive and democratic potential of LGBTQ visual culture. The last text in this section, written by Magdalena Radomska, elaborates the notion of democracy in Piotrowski's texts from two conflicting methodological approaches he practiced – his inclination towards post-modernism and his Marxist background. It serves as a reconstruction of Piotrowski's methodological approach, demonstrating its inconsistencies and their consequences.

The book concludes with one of the last texts written by Piotr Piotrowski, *Krzysztof Wodiczko and the Global Politeia* – originally published for a monographic Wodiczko



Piotr Piotrowski's studio, June 2015. Photo: Ryszard Rau. The Institute of Art History, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań Archive.

exhibition organised at the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź in 2015. The exhibition's curator, Bożena Czubak, offers a short introduction to the essay, in which Piotrowski emphasises the crucial role of art in building global democratic foundations, and presents Wodiczko as a globally engaged artist who contributes to the development of global agoraphilia. Piotrowski died without seeing either the catalogue or the exhibition. The inclusion of the text in this volume is an indication of our will to continue a discussion *with* Piotrowski, and not to replace it with a discussion *about* him.

AGATA JAKUBOWSKA, MAGDALENA RADOMSKA