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On the Need for an Involved Theory – in Reference to Piotr Piotrowski’s Texts

Although in an invitation to this seminar, Marta Smolińska emphasized the interfaces of art and philosophy, when ending her text she wrote as follows: “Ask more about what IS THE PULSE OF THE PRESENT (#now) and about what IS COMING.” Therefore, I decided to go against the assumptions of this seminar and put aside the issues of philosophical inspiration, but at the same time to ask what is the pulse of the present. I want to reflect on how much we need today both theory and an engaged art. For this purpose, I will examine in depth texts written by Piotr Piotrowski, who died more than two years ago (on 3 May 2015). I am convinced that today it is worth considering the timeliness of his observations, as well as the need for involved writing about contemporary art in the context of the current questions of everyday reality. Certainly, his departure deprived Polish art history or, more broadly, the humanities, of expressive, courageous and even radical views that would allow us to look again at both art and at what is happening around us. There is moreover a lack of demand for freedom, emancipation and democracy, which accompanied most of Piotrowski’s texts. And at the same time, questions need to be posed about the ethical duty of scholars, about the attitude they should take in the changing reality, especially in a reality when the foundations of a democratic state of law are at stake. In his texts, Piotr Piotrowski warned against neglecting the construction of an open society, against discontinuing a debate on democracy and freedom, and against a lack of respect for differences, which ultimately lead to the atrophy of democracy. I want to ask in this text to what extent the scholar’s message contained in his texts is still valid as well as what is missing from these writings. Should not we also, like Piotrowski, being scholars, be primarily referring to the “here and now”, instead of locking ourselves in proverbial ivory towers of our

often hermetic research? Therefore, at stake is also a reflection on what our research should serve.

Today we have found ourselves in an extremely dangerous moment, because the foundations of democracy, such as the Constitutional Tribunal, the Constitution itself or the independent judiciary, are devalued and changed by means of acts of law, while the ruling party tries to take complete control over the media, science, education, and culture. “In line of institutions of the democratic state that are still to be dismantled, the media is next (all the public media have already been destroyed), local governments and universities¹. Anti-immigrant sentiments are on the rise, while nationalistic views, marginal only a few years ago, are now openly expressed and are gaining strength, especially in the context of yearly Independence Parades. As Józef Pinior said in 2016 in an interview with Cezary Michalski: “We are really in the most critical and at the same time the most dangerous historical moment. During the Spring of Nations, Polish nationalism was shaped around the idea of a political nation that was multi-ethnic and multi-confessional. Mickiewicz was a politically radical Roman Catholic who died in Istanbul, the political center of the Islamic world, organizing Polish legions out of the Jewish population of the Ottoman Empire. [...] Now, however, we see the Law and Justice party shift to the position of ethnic nationalism combined with a single religion, which is an implementation of the nationalist concept formed in Poland after the defeat of the January Uprising and the industrial revolution. For the first time in history, this party takes over the Polish state very deeply and wants to equally deeply format Polish society. If they succeed, we will become a museum of antiquities within Europe, which is an emanation of political nations rather than ethnic and denominational ones”².

Why did this happen? To answer this question, it is worth rethinking what happened after the political breakthrough of 1989, when Poland entered a stage of an accelerated development of capitalism. Though many former oppositionists no longer bothered about the question of freedom in the belief that everything had already been done in this matter, Piotrowski believed that this question remains crucial in both the political and artistic context, also in the new political situation. He expressed that view in the 1992 in the text entitled “In search of an alternative; answering Beuys”,

» 1 Adam Leszczyński, “PiS. Zwyczajna polska dyktatura”, “Krytyka Polityczna”, 18.07.2018, <http://krytykapolityczna.pl/kraj/pis-zwyczajna-polska-dyktatura/>

» 2 “Pinior: O co toczy się spór z Kaczyńskim?”, An interview with Józef Pinior conducted by Cezary Michalski, “Krytyka polityczna”, 28/01/2016, <http://krytykapolityczna.pl/kraj/pinior-o-co-toczy-sie-spor-z-kaczynskim/2016/>

published by Obieg³. This was a truly breakthrough text, setting the direction of reflection about contemporary art in the new liberal reality.

In this article, Piotrowski was asking the key question about the situation in which we found ourselves as Eastern European societies after the turn of 1989. The text can also be considered as the author's coming to terms with his own opposition activity. It evokes the hopes awakened by the 'explosion' of Solidarity in 1980 - "the hope for the victory of human solidarity over class, national and political particularisms" and the hope of following the "third way" (beyond communism and capitalism) and building an "integral society", according to the concept of Joseph Beuys⁴. He writes with disappointment: "A careful observer of those days saw the inklings of later nationalist rhetoric and particular ideology. [...] The then (underground) galleries and magazines were brimming with martyrdom and national-Christian journalism"⁵. He points out that the Polish messianism was once again revived; some saw the religious-national iconosphere as a manifestation of the profound identity of Polish art, and following martial law, Christian rhetoric appeared in Polish Parliament⁶. At the same time, Piotrowski pointed to the dangers connected with the domination of the Catholic Church in Polish public life. Due to the fact that the Church in Poland contributed to a certain extent to breaking with the yoke of communism (a special role is attributed, inter alia, to the pilgrimages of Pope John Paul II to Poland), after 1989 the Church found itself in a privileged position. One of the first moves of the democratically elected government of Tadeusz Mazowiecki (the first prime minister elected in democratic elections) was the introduction of Religious Education to schools in 1990; in 1993 a statutory ban on abortion was introduced in Poland. In principle, all subsequent governments in Poland (be them right-wing or left-wing) have made concessions to the Catholic Church, taking into account in their decisions the opinions of the Church hierarchy⁷.

The art historian pointed out that "It would be naive to say that the societies of Eastern Europe are free after the demolition of the wall. They are free, but only from Soviet domination. With the disappearance of the Leninist-Stalinist state, another paradox, the old demons of nationalism, xenophobia and intolerance are revived, in a way that threatens our freedom more than the presence of soldiers with five-pointed red stars on their caps"⁸.

» 3 Piotr Piotrowski, "W poszukiwaniu alternatywy; odpowiadając Beuysowi", "Obieg", 04/05, 1992, p. 9-14.

» 4 *Ibidem*, p. 10.

» 5 *Ibidem*.

» 6 *Ibidem*.

» 7 Cf. Katarzyna Chmielewska, Tomasz Żukowski, "Aborcyjny kompromis?", *Tygodnik Przegląd*, November 19, 2006, <https://www.tygodnikprzeglad.pl/aborcyjny-kompromis>

» 8 Piotrowski, "W poszukiwaniu alternatywy...", p. 14.

Thus, already back then Piotrowski noticed the gravest threats for young democracy: intolerance, nationalism and xenophobia, i.e. the attitudes which in the next years will begin to gain momentum in Central Europe. The problem was also, according to the art historian, that the anti-communist opposition did not aim at the freedom of the individual, but rather at the freedom of the nation, its independence, and thus lacked the opportunity to go beyond national particularism and to universalize individual experience⁹. It can be said that these words, written in the early 1990s, sound like a warning against all that has happened and is happening in Central Europe now; today this primarily concerns the situation of Hungary and Poland. Years later, Piotrowski will define this situation as an unfulfilled democracy¹⁰. At the beginning of the 1990s, he believed that only utopia and rebellion could protect against enslavement. He recalled Albert Camus's famous maxim from *The Rebel* (1958): "I rebel, therefore we are". He drew attention to the grammatical side of this sentence, i.e. the singular subject and the plural object. "For Camus, rebellion is an expression of solidarity with others, a condition sine qua non of the process of liberating mankind, the path from slavery to freedom. It is, therefore, the constitution of humanism"¹¹. Rebellious values, as Piotrowski predicted, will also be increasingly present in artistic strategies. Utopia would give an image of a new vision of the future, in the third way postulated in the text after Beuys. Utopia "stimulates the imagination and makes us take the effort to rebuild the paradigm. It is necessary for each of us to 'transgress ourselves' in order to create a new reality"¹².

It is also in this text that Piotrowski clearly defined the priorities in the attitude of both the researcher and the artist. He wanted to create an attitude of rebellion; he called for disagreement and believed that the duty of both the contemporary art historian and the contemporary artist is the commitment to the "here and now", to the problems of the reality that surrounds us. He also wrote: "Art is born in contact with reality, also this concrete one (although of course not primarily with this one). However, it is more than a reaction to reality. It is, broadly speaking, a reformulation of the contextual, local factor, understood in various ways (political, social, but also formal or psychological) into the universal"¹³.

In his subsequent texts Piotrowski reveals an increasing interest in political entanglements of art; he follows them in reference to the Po-

» 9 *Ibidem*.

» 10 Piotr Piotrowski, *Art and Democracy in Post-communist Europe*, Reaktion Books Ltd., London 2012. p.

» 11 Albert Camus, *Człowiek zbuntowany*, [The Rebel], Oficyna Literacka, Kraków 1984 (orig. Paris: 1958), after: Piotrowski, "W poszukiwaniu alternatywy", p. 11.

» 12 Piotrowski, "W poszukiwaniu alternatywy", p. 14.

» 13 *Ibidem*.

lish art of the 1990s, which uses as the main medium of the message the human body, and thus creativity, which will later be called critical art¹⁴. In the text “Poza starą i nową wiarą” [“Beyond the Old and New Faith”] published in the art magazine *Magazyn Sztuki* in 1996, he analyses the work of, among others, Robert Rumaś, Grzegorz Kłaman, and Zofia Kulik, seeing it as embodiment of the critical attitude characterized by Hal Foster¹⁵. Here again the concept of power appears as the key issue. Piotrowski writes: “The attitude by which the artist-subject realizes him- or herself fully ‘in the mirror of history’ [...] is a critical attitude; to be critical of history is to heal the internal rupture of the artist and to build a bridge between alienation and identification. The task of critical art, as Hal Foster observes, is to name and remove the charm of political operations with the help of the means of a ‘terrorist provocation’, or more precisely to publicize methods of power such as supervision and control of information”¹⁶. This article is interesting especially thanks to its description of the art of Zofia Kulik, who combined political criticism with a feminist perspective, pointing out, inter alia, to the problem of women in Polish society¹⁷. The author calls here by name the repressive attitude of the then authorities to women’s issues, related to the eruption of right-wing rhetoric, which is a reaction to the apparent emancipation of the previous era of communism. In this text he emphasizes especially economic issues: he indicates an increase in unemployment, which in the 1990s severely affected women; their pay was 30% lower for the same work, the vast majority of women were employed in professions that did not require any qualifications and few held managerial positions. According to the feminist statements that at that time began to be published in Poland, including in the feminist magazine *Pełnym głosem*, Piotrowski says: “A ‘male’ political establishment (actually right-wing) defends jobs for men, while legitimizing unemployment among women with ideological reasons”¹⁸. Social aspects related to the lack of equal opportunities for women and men, involvement in both feminist and sexual minorities issues will be extremely important both for Piotrowski’s research on contemporary art and for his museum practice (including the 2010 exhibition *Ars Homo Erotica* in the National Museum in Warsaw, of which Piotrowski was at that time director, while the curator was Paweł Leszkowicz, his former student). The scholar combines the reluctance to accept otherness, to women’s rights and the rights

» 14 Izabela Kowalczyk, *Ciało i władza. Polska sztuka krytyczna lat 90.*, Wydawnictwo Sic!, Warszawa 2002.

» 15 Hal Foster, *A Concept of the Political in Contemporary Art*, Seattle, Washington 1985, p. 153.

» 16 Piotr Piotrowski, “Poza starą i nową wiarą”, *Magazyn Sztuki*, no. 10 (2) 1996, p. 154.

» 17 *Ibidem*, p. 156.

» 18 *Ibidem*, p. 157.

of sexual minorities with the strong position of the Catholic Church and Catholic fundamentalism, manifested not only by the ecclesiastical hierarchy but also by political parties seeking the support and protection of the Church¹⁹.

In his 1998 interview for *Znak* magazine²⁰, framing the Polish art of the 1990s, the art historian pointed to the direct context of this art, namely the mythologised art of the 1980s, which according to some critics was a manifestation of a “spirituality” that “drew on grand national narratives”. This spirituality was supposedly a remedy for the trials and tribulations of martial law and gave a sense of safety and security yet created a grand mythology over reality. According to Piotrowski, attachment to this mythology was instrumental for the critique of the new art of the 1990s. Yet, as the art historian says, admonishing this art for a departure from spirituality was an ordinary political instrumentalism used by those who felt ill at ease in the new, liberal reality. However, the main problem for artists should be their attitude to reality rather than myth. The artist’s identity is measured by the power of his or her confrontation with today’s reality of a global media culture. Piotrowski observed that the art of Polish critical artist dislodges us from automatic vision and thinking²¹.

Unfortunately, Piotrowski’s analyses, though extremely penetrating and insightful, pointing to the shortcomings of late capitalism, do not differ, however, in their fundamental message from neoliberal thinking, which dominated Polish politics in the 1990s. No questions were asked about who and why feels ill at ease in the new liberal reality and what caused this sensation. Piotrowski focused primarily on ideological matters and attached less importance to economic questions, an exception being the above-mentioned paragraph stressing the bad situation of women in the labour market. However, social disparities gained momentum since the early 1990s. The scholar said about his optics in 2007: “I see the disadvantages of neoliberalism and I regret that the national income is growing while the misery around is increasing. But this is not my main thought – my critique is ideological rather than economic, because I do not really know much about the latter”²². Here, however, we can identify an error of judgement here, because the losers of the transformation, those who felt bad in the new reality, as well as those excluded from culture and language, both in Poland and in other countries of post-communist Eu-

» 19 P. Piotrowski, *Znaczenia modernizmu. W stronę historii sztuki polskiej po 1945 roku*, Dom Wydawniczy REBIS, Poznań 1999, p. 238.

» 20 “Wytrącić z automatyzmu myślenia”, an interview with professor Piotr Piotrowski by Maciej Mazurek, *Znak*, December (12) 1998, p. 60-68.

» 21 *Ibidem*.

» 22 J. Janiak, “Artyści ponoszą odpowiedzialność”. An interview with Piotr Piotrowski, Poznań, February 2007, unpublished manuscript made available by the author.

rope, began to increasingly demand their rights by voting for populist, anti-democratic and nationalizing political parties. But it's not just about those excluded from financial prosperity, but also (or perhaps above all?) from a new symbolic order based on tolerance, ideas of freedom, interpersonal and inter-state solidarity. Paradoxically, these noble ideas departed partly from the post-transformation reality and lacked real social solidarity towards those who lost in the transformation of the system. Therefore, liberal democracy is defeated and the losers demand retaliation. It is no coincidence that the hatred of the right-wing "indignant" focused on the European Union, based precisely on the values of liberty and equality.

Recently, humanists have indicated that we are dealing with a new cultural war²³. However, it must be remembered that it has a clear political and economic basis. All previous governments were silent about the victims of the transformation, disregarding the increasing social stratification and the consequences it can have. While some lived better and faster and climbed up career ladders, others became more and more excluded (not only in financial terms, but also in terms of connectivity – mainly small locations cut off from centres where industrial plants were being closed down since the early 1990s), and the existence of the latter was condemned to invisibility. Another issue was the rising unemployment of the 1990s as well as deteriorating working conditions: exploited employees of corporate chains; widespread outsourcing practices that even reached public institutions such as universities, without guaranteeing a fixed salary or even payment (which was the case of the cleaning women working at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań in 2014). These are also the problems faced by single mothers who were awarded alimony by valid and final court rulings and who did not receive their money because of the fathers' evasion of the alimony obligation. There is also a dramatic problem of evicted tenants of tenement houses who, sometimes literally, were thrown onto the pavement. There is finally an impression of growing insecurity related to work and a lack of hope for a stable future. This feeling affects more and more young people, which is why it should come as no surprise that this group included the biggest number of supporters of the Law and Justice party during the last election.

It is the young who see their future as the most uncertain; they have lost faith in the prospects of a well-paid job and do not believe that any-

» 23 See W.J. Burszta, *Kotwice pewności. Wojny kulturowe z popnacionalizmem w tle*, Iskry, Warszawa 2013. See also The Founding Manifesto of the Open Academy, 2 July 2014: <http://e.czaskultury.pl/otwarta-akademia/manifest/1679-manifest-otwartej-akademii> and an earlier Statement of the founders of the Open Academy "Against the Confessional State" (authors: Prof. Przemysław Czaplinski, Prof. Izabela Kowalczyk, Prof. Roman Kubicki, Prof. Piotr Piotrowski, Prof. Krzysztof Podemski, Dr Błażej Warkocki, Prof. Marek Wasilewski), 23/05/2014, <http://e.czaskultury.pl/otwarta-akademia/oswiadczenia/1683-przeciwko-panstwu-wyznaniowemu>, [access: 20.02.2016].

thing depends on them, really. Moreover, they do not have, with few exceptions, a sense of social solidarity, a need to participate in the civil society and even do not fully understand the meaning of the term democracy. Unfortunately, after the transformation, civic education failed. The educational policy of the free Poland focused on the issue of education reforms, on the question of parameterization of science, on the attempt to help young people to enter the labour market, which in essence means raising docile corporations workforce. The science of critical thinking and civic education was completely forgotten; in return, primary and high school students were offered two lessons of Religious Education per week.

Those who form the ranks of the dissatisfied, regardless of their age, both young without prospects and losers of the transformation period, and even those who succeeded in it but for some reason feel excluded from the symbolic system, are used by right-wing political forces, which manage their sense of social and economic exclusion. Pointing out the class divisions in contemporary Poland, David Ost emphasised the problem of people who in the new political conditions were doomed to being losers: “They were picked up by the political right. They were the voice of the excluded as of 1992. And at the same time it furnished absurd recipes saying that everything goes wrong because Poland is in the hands of strangers: post-communists, liberals and atheists. We therefore must unite around the nation”²⁴. Ost, unlike Piotrowski, sees in this pattern the reasons for the expansion of right-wing ideologies and the political development of populism. With regard to Ost’s considerations, Jan Sowa argues that “populism would be eliminated if the anger of the injured should not be directed towards the artificially constructed Evil Other (a communist security service officer, a commie, a kike or a gay), but towards the actual source of problems, i.e. economics”²⁵. Unfortunately, Piotrowski did not want to combine these issues in his analyses. He focused primarily on the ideological aspect of the conflict.

At the turn of the 21st century, economic and ideological divisions were becoming more and more intense in Poland, especially in the context of Poland’s accession to the European Union. The division between supporters of democracy, openness, the European community and liberal values on the one hand and the defenders of national tradition, Polish identity and Catholic religion on the other is getting more and more distinct. The latter see critical art as the target of their attacks, demanding that exhibitions be cancelled or suing in court artists who, in their opin-

» 24 A. Leszczyński, “David Ost o ćwierćwieczu wolnej Polski: Nie byliście głupi”, an interview, *Gazeta Wyborcza. Magazyn Świąteczny*, 27/04/2014, http://wyborcza.pl/magazyn/1,139186,16233248,David_Ost_o_cwiercwieczu_wolnej_Polski__Nie_byliscie.html.

» 25 J. Sowa, *Ciesz się, późny wnuku! Kolonializm, globalizacja, demokracja radykalna*, Korporacja ha!art, Kraków 2008, p. 444.

ion, offended religious feelings. Hardly anyone was at that time able to perceive the economic basis of this conflict, which appears as a struggle between supporters of freedom and the “forces of darkness” (a debate between these groups has probably never been taken up; we could actually ask if such a debate was at all possible?). Due to the fact that supporters of freedom, democracy, civil rights, and free art remained in the minority, even constitutional freedoms were violated (e.g. the right to freedom of assembly was violated by prohibitions of: the Equality Parade in Warsaw in 2005 and the Equality March in Poznań, also in 2005), the only thing that remained was sounding alarm to defend democracy. Piotrowski, who at that time begins to criticize liberal democracy as based on consensus and conviction about the common good, which in practice contributes to the exclusion of minority groups²⁶, states, however: “While it is difficult to critique liberal democracy in Poland, since even the country’s constitution does not fully commit itself to it [he meant the issue of separation of church and state], its proponents must defend themselves and its principles against the ideological force of the consensus”²⁷. He wondered, therefore, how to discuss radical democracy in Poland, since its opposite model of liberal democracy was not fully realized, and what is more, it was being attacked by conservative-rightist circles²⁸.

Piotrowski’s texts are increasingly aimed at analyzing art in a political context. He begins to define art as a political act. In his 2007 book he observes as follows: “Art as public activity is, by its very nature, a political activity in the broad sense of the word, as this space is defined by politics, i.e. a conflict between authority and citizen, between various camps of broadly understood power, and also between different groups of citizens differing in gender, social origin, economic interests, as well as professed ideological systems; it is a conflict between emancipation tendencies and those conserving the social, moral and political order”²⁹. In these processes, as the historian notes, art is not their expression or illustration, but an active actor.

The title of the book and of an earlier article published in the catalogue of the exhibition *Art Negotiators* (curator Bożena Czubak) speaks volumes: “Art according to politics”³⁰. In the text under this title, Pi-

» 26 P. Piotrowski, “Pazurami i dziobem w obronie demokracji”, *Artmix*, no. 15, 2008, <http://archiwum-obięg.u-jazdowski.pl/artmix/1729>

» 27 P. Piotrowski, *Art and Democracy*, p. 264.

» 28 *Ibidem*.

» 29 P. Piotrowski, *Sztuka według polityki. Od Melancholii do Pasji*, Universitas, Kraków 2007, p. 8.

» 30 P. Piotrowski, “Sztuka według polityki”, *Negocjatorzy sztuki wobec rzeczywistości*. Exhibition catalogue, ed. Bożena Czubak, Łaźnia Center for Contemporary Art, Gdańsk 2000, p. 20-34; P. Piotrowski, *Sztuka według polityki. Od Melancholii do Pasji*, Universitas, Kraków 2007, p. 8.

otrowski points to two artistic traditions of art's attitude to politics, present in the Eastern bloc countries – on the one hand thinking about the autonomy of art, which in this way defended itself against appropriation by totalitarian authorities (this thought was taken over by Piotrowski from Jarosław Kozłowski, with whom he had been friends and collaborated since the 1970s) and, on the other hand, an alternative culture that was opposed to official institutions. This simple division changes with the introduction of democracy in the countries of our part of Europe. This forces a revision of modernist mythology, which is universalism. Therefore, the politics of art will be understood differently. “Modernism did not differentiate art according to sex, race, origin. There was one art. Therefore, it did not require individual negotiations, individual reconciliation of one's own position due to gender, race or origin. Now [in the 1990s – note I.K.] it is not possible anymore. The collapse of the totalitarian point of reference entailed the pluralisation of the subject and the awareness of its individualisation”³¹, says Piotrowski. This should enforce awareness of social differentiation due to worldview, economic position, gender, sexual orientation, education or origin. This new situation is also associated with the disclosure of various political interests of particular social groups. However, the Polish authorities, as Piotrowski writes in reference to the 1990s, regardless of whether declaring himself as left-wing or right-wing, tried to hide this diversity. Especially the right-wing governments work to limit the fledgling open or liberal society, deprecating such values as freedom of speech and of art. From these words one can draw a very important point, namely that post-communist societies hardly accepted their own diversity; Polish society was in particular supposed to be - in the opinion of the ruling party - a kind of monolith. This lack of recognition of differences seems to be a serious threat to democracy, and that's what Piotrowski was warning against in this and other texts. “Soon every ‘Other’ and his language will become ‘a stranger’” – wrote the historian of art in a very prophetic way, indicating that this may lead to a new authoritarianism, i.e. the domination of one group over others³².

The scholar moreover paid attention to such topics in the art of the 1990s which, by attacking or criticizing the system of power, reveal the double morality of Polish society and complexes of Poles (or rather those Poles who feel ill at ease in the new liberal reality). He pointed to the interest of the artists in the political discourse of the body, its aesthetization in mass culture, the power of corporations, and repressive models of education. He noted that the art of Polish artists of the 1990s concentrates on the body, pointing to the repression of the corporeal by the mechanisms of

» 31 P. Piotrowski, “Sztuka według polityki”, p. 23.

» 32 *Ibidem*, p. 24.

power. He was very hard at extracting issues related to limiting women's rights to decide about their bodies. For example, regarding the work of Alicja Żebrowska titled *Original Sin*, in which she presents her own vagina, he wrote: "The carnality of women, transvestites, sexual minorities, all those who break away from the patriarchal order, or the places this order designates them, is particularly exposed to oppression. It does not take much effort to find the function of such a system in the so-called new Poland, i.e. after 1989. Generally speaking, the reactionary anti-women policy, which includes not only the binding, very radical law prohibiting abortion, a kind of discourse condemning contraceptives, but also what appears an unhealthy obsession of right-wing politicians – attempts to restrict prenatal tests, so-called family patterns of gender functioning, which have the effect of disadvantaging women in the labour market, make Żebrowska's art a political art par excellence"³³.

Interestingly, with respect to women's rights, Poland in the 1990s had less and less freedom rather than the other way around. An incompletely formed democracy brought about new restrictions. As has already been said, the 1993 statutory ban on abortion disregarded the civic proposal for a referendum, with 1.7 million signatures³⁴. At the same time, subsidies for contraceptives were limited and sexual education lessons were suspended. An attempt to liberalize anti-abortion laws in 1996 encountered resistance from judges of the Constitutional Tribunal. The Tribunal stated the incompatibility of the liberalization law with the small constitution, and thus the act expired³⁵. A draft liberalization of the law of March 2004, submitted to the then Speaker of the lower chamber of Polish Parliament, Józef Oleksy, was not even opened for debate by him. Until today, there is a belief in feminist circles that this was the result of a tacit government agreement (then leftist!) with the Church – the latter would not oppose Poland's accession to the European Union, as long as the government took no steps to liberalize the current law. Thus, the legal status which has been hypocritically called a "successful compromise" was retained.

The current policy of the Law and Justice party introduces new restrictions on women's issues, including the withdrawal of subsidies for prenatal examinations, a battle against contraceptives (including restrictions related to the sale of the "day after" pill), the announcement of the termination of the anti-violence convention, and even attempts to restrict the already restrictive anti-abortion law, which in 2016 triggered a wave

» 33 *Ibidem*, p. 28.

» 34 K. Chmielewska, T. Żukowski, "Aborcyjny kompromis?", "Tygodnik Przegląd", November 19, 2006, <https://www.tygodnikprzeglad.pl/aborcyjny-kompromis/>

» 35 *Ibidem*.

of protests by women on an unprecedented scale in Poland³⁶. Fitting to what is happening in Poland today are Piotrowski's words from the above article, pointing to the lack of respect for open society rules in which the principles of gender balance, respect for minorities, freedom of expression of different beliefs, respect for "strangers", religious neutrality of the state were important. "It seems that the principle of modern or postmodern democracy, based on the majority respecting minority rights, is alien to the style of subsequent governments; rather, we prefer a kind of classic 'the rule of the people': the dominance of the majority"³⁷.

Therefore, the scholar, although criticizing liberal democracy, being on the side of radical democracy, often postulated in his texts the defence of democracy as such. For example, during a lecture entitled "Tooth and Nail defence of democracy", delivered on January 31, 2007 to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the founding of the Poznań Society of Friends of Sciences, in which he referred inter alia to the trial of Dorota Nieznalska, he said: "We, the corporate people [Poznań Society of Friends of Science – I.K.], should be especially sensitive to social and political processes. We should analyse them and talk about it. We should defend such values as democracy and freedom, defend them with 'tooth and nail', just as our ancestors using 'tooth and nail'. I want today's lecture, delivered in this respectable forum, to be received as a voice for the need to conduct a public debate on freedom and democracy, a debate that has recently died in Poland, giving way to further sensations of Polish political life, secret files, agents, tapes, sex-scammers, etc."³⁸.

It seems that it was this lack of discussion on the subject of freedom and democracy, which Piotrowski spoke about, that has led Polish society to the current situation in which the foundations of democracy are at stake. The art historian constantly tried to warn against this situation, but the debate he was calling for has never taken place. He also wrote:

"It is up to intellectuals and artists, who cherish freedom as an ideal, who feel the discomfort of unfulfilled expectations, the discomfort of unfulfilled democracy, to argue and agitate for democracy. Intellectuals and artists who see their place in the agora, in the midst of public debate, are guided in their behaviour by agorophilia"³⁹.

At the end of his life, in connection with the escalation of political conflicts, Piotrowski felt deep concern and the need to act for the freedom of education, culture, scientific research, and open debates. Therefore,

» 36 It is about a draft bill submitted by the organization of Ordo Iuris to the Polish Sejm in 2016, which triggered such protests as: In our Cause, 9/04/2016, Black Protest and the National Strike of Women, 3/10/2016.

» 37 P. Piotrowski, "Sztuka według polityki", p. 31.

» 38 *Ibidem*.

» 39 P. Piotrowski, *Art and Democracy*, p. 288.

he initiated the creation in 2014 of the initiative of the Open Academy (whose other founders included Monika Bobako, Przemysław Czapliński, Andrzej W. Nowak, Roman Kubicki, Krzysztof Podemski, Błażej Warkocki, Marek Wasilewski and the author of this text, with over 500 people from all over Poland expressing the desire to be part of it). The foundation of the initiative was connected with the need we felt to react to the pressure of imposing the right-wing worldview by the circles striving to curb civic freedoms, increasingly felt in Poland at the time. This initiative responded to, among other things, what was happening in 2013 and 2014 in Poznań. This concerned the cancellation of the performance of *Golgotha Picnic* during the Malta Festival in Poznań, but also about earlier attacks on Gender Studies. The establishment of this initiative was associated with the belief that Poznań was becoming a place of ever more embarrassing events, such as “the cancellation of the university debate [War on gender. University. Democration, which was to take place at Adam Mickiewicz University – note I.K.] under the pressure of right-wing circles, as well as the issue of the police abuse of power (never fully accounted for) against people protesting against the anti-gender speech of Father Paweł Bortkiewicz, which took place at the University of Economics on December 5, 2013”⁴⁰. In 2014, during the Malta International Theatre Festival, the play titled *Golgotha Picnic* by Rodrigo García was called off due to the pressure exerted by right-wing parties, representatives of the Church (including the Archbishop of Poznań), as well as Poznań scholars from the Lech Kaczyński Academic Civic Club. The initiative was aimed at revealing the conflict that existed in Poznań, in the academic environment, but which became more and more visible across Poland between supporters of democracy and those who believe that public life should prioritise Catholic and national values.

In the founding text of the Open Academy, which Piotrowski wrote by himself mainly, he emphasized as follows: “Cancelling the performance of *Golgotha Picnic* is a huge step forward in building a religious state, reactivating censorship and restricting civil liberties and human rights, as freedom of expression is part of these rights”⁴¹. The manifesto also included the words: “Tension as well as verbal and, in extreme cases, physical aggression increases in our country and can be found not only in streets but also in university halls. Not only science but also values such as openness, sensitivity and rational thinking are subject to ideological and populist attacks. Not infrequently, these campaigns are full of offensive

» 40 “Przeciwko państwu wyznaniowemu” [Against a religious state] – a statement of a founder of the Open Academy, 23 June 2014, eCzasKultury.pl, <http://e.czasokultury.pl/otwarta-akademia/oswiadczenia/1683-przeciwko-panstwu-wyznaniowemu> [access: 1.03.2015].

» 41 *Ibidem*.

language for which no one takes responsibility. They are often spoken by representatives of public institutions, traditionally endowed with significant social trust”⁴².

Piotr Piotrowski believed that the duty of scholars is to care for society. It can also be associated with his conviction that both science and art should teach critical thinking, openness and responsibility for others. Freedom should be put in the centre because “there can be no democracy without freedom” and “Freedom of expression should not be instrumentalised; it should be absolute and not relative”⁴³. It seems that it is particularly worth remembering these words today, reflecting on our duty we have towards society as scholars.

Although, unfortunately, the Open Academy died together with Piotrowski, its main assumption related to care for democracy and the open society seems to be still valid. This forces us to ask questions about our own scientific and teaching activities: “Are we as scientists able to join the debate on the shape of democracy in Poland with our texts and books? If so, how?” “How should we teach our students, sensitizing them to matters raised by current art, but also to the issue of the freedom of art, without the risk or allegations of politicizing the teaching process itself?” “How to talk about artistic works from the borderline of art and social activism (even those that refer to the debate on women’s rights), avoiding allegations of ideologization?” “How can you not censor yourself by constructing, for example, your own research topics, avoiding problems that may currently be considered controversial (e.g. feminist art, refugee art or the work of sexual minorities)?”

“How to be honest to yourself?” Piotr Piotrowski repeatedly emphasized the need for a rebellion against authorities. He spoke bluntly about the motives of joining the opposition in the 1980s in an unpublished interview conducted by Joanna Janiak: “By embarking on underground activity, I did not even expect communism to be reformed. I just wanted to be honest [...] to do something against those who give us a thrashing [...] in order to be able to look in the mirror”⁴⁴. Although he was close friends with Jarosław Kozłowski, he quickly broke with the idea of the autonomy of art, as Kozłowski himself points out: “Piotr believed that striving for autonomy in art, abstracting from the political or social context and not making a clear ideological declaration, means legitimizing the system”⁴⁵. My text, in turn, is a call for reflecting to what extent our research,

» 42 *Ibidem*.

» 43 P. Piotrowski, *Art and Democracy*, p. 272

» 44 J. Janiak, op. cit.

» 45 A. Mazur, “Kryterium postawy. Rozmowa z Jarosławem Kozłowskim”, “Magazyn Szum”, 29.08.2015, <http://magazynszum.pl/rozmowy/kryterium-postawy-rozmowa-z-jaroslawem-kozlowskim/>.

especially when we refer to the current art in Poland, should focus on the question of democracy as the core of these considerations. In a sense, running away from this problem today can also legitimize the system. •