

Agata Pietrasik

Free University of Berlin

Art in Crisis - Artistic practice from Poland in the decade of 1939-1949

The subject of my dissertation is the artistic practice of artists from Poland between 1939 and 1949. The chosen period is explicitly framed by the beginning of the Second World War and the introduction of socialist realism in Poland after the war. This period allows me to consider the experience of World War II not only as a distinct moment in history but to register its ongoing consequences for artistic and cultural life in Poland. The thesis will carefully delineate and investigate the range of artistic practice undertaken at this time, including art produced in concentration camps by artists such as Józef Szajna (a prisoner at Auschwitz and Buchenwald), Marian Bogusz and Zbigniew Dłubak (both prisoners in Mathausen-Gusen), and artists confined to ghettos such as Gela Seksztajn and Jonasz Stern. It will also include the practices of senior artists such as Władysław Strzemiński, Xawery Dunikowski and Felicjan Szczęsny Kowarski, whose practices were already well established when the War broke out, and analyse the shifts brought about by war.

Using this material and drawing on theoretical investigations regarding art and ethics I will pose questions concerning the function and status of art during wartime, and in turn examine the ways in which it grounded artistic discourse in the immediate postwar context. For the purpose of the latter I will focus on the polemics concerning the relationship of art to the world which dominated the artistic discourse of Poland in the first four years after the war, and which were expressed in writing as well as in the mediums of drawing and painting by the key artists and critics of that time. As the importance of negotiating art's position within the world, its society and its politics, was a key issue at this time, it was also addressed publicly within the spaces of galleries and museums. I will therefore reflect on this process by making a case study of the iconic exhibition, *Warszawa oskarża* [Warsaw Accuses] 1945, which famously presented art works destroyed during the War, radically breaking with museum convention to display them in ruin-like formations,

bringing the destruction of the outside world inside the symbolic museal space, and boldly confronting the issue arts meaning at that moment

The aim of my research project is to present the art history of the wartime period and its immediate aftermath not as a break in modern artistic historiography but as its constitutive part; remaining tied to certain aspects of the prewar avant-garde and in turn founding the artistic discourse of the post-war period, while nonetheless being of its time, singular as it was. The central thesis of my dissertation is that artistic praxis during the war provided, to use Giorgio Agamben's phrase, "the essential measure of men's dwelling on earth." It was through artistic practice that people in the most extreme, hostile and dehumanizing circumstances, could still recognize themselves as human beings. It was this intensity of engagement in art and art's fundamental role in defining a human status in the world that was retained and struggled over both politically and aesthetically in the period immediately after the war. It will therefore also be necessary to bring the complexity of the relationship between ethics and aesthetics to bear on my research. Most of the works of art I will discuss have been recognized as testimony but lack recognition as works of art as such. Therefore my thesis will raise the question of art history's ability to deal with ethical issues. Following Walter Benjamin's famous dictum that "there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism," my project will attempt to delineate the moments when formal concerns become ethical questions. It will thus also propose that elements of this history traverse the particularity of their national and even geopolitical context, and are meaningful on the most fundamental level of lived experience, remaining accessible as such in the material culture in which they are expressed.