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Artistic and curatorial emancipatory practices concerning HIV/AIDS during the 1990s transformation period in Poland

The subject of my dissertation covers, the so far unexamined, artistic and curatorial practices related to HIV/AIDS, undertaken in Poland in the 1990s. My research focuses specifically on the topic of the “Ja i AIDS” [“Me and AIDS”] exhibition, organised in 1996, with three subsequent, but initially unintentional, editions. Its co-curators were Katarzyna Kozyra and Artur Żmijewski who studied at "Kowalnia" – an academy studio run by professor Grzegorz Kowalski who was listed in the brochure related to the exhibition as the main curator – at the Faculty of Sculpture at the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts. The exhibition featured artists such as: Paweł Althamer, Edyta Daczka, Katarzyna Górna, Andrzej Karaś, Ryszard Lech, Krzysztof Malec, Małgorzata Minchberg, Jacek Markiewicz, Jędrzej Niestrój, Monika Osiecka-Leczew, and also aforementioned Kowalski, Kozyra and Żmijewski. In my thesis I am analysing the activities preceding the exhibition, the accompanying socio-political contexts, visual culture and public discourse related to HIV/AIDS. I am also researching the critical reception of this exhibition and the influence of artistic and curatorial ventures on the debate on socially and politically engaged art in Poland.

Following Michel de Certeau, I understand the category of practices as a set of activities undertaken by the users of the dominant system, in order to suit the users' rules and interests. In such perspective, they are the ways of acting that undermine the normative models of identity. I consider such practices, both artistic and curatorial, as emancipatory. It is worth emphasizing, that I use this concept not in relation to the process in the teleological perspective, not as an organized movement with an established program of conduct, but as micro-actions. Additionally, I analyse exhibitions as forms of utterance. Such methodology, focused on communication and acknowledging the different voices, seems particularly important in the context of the emancipatory and identity issues of art exhibitions on HIV/AIDS. It is equally important to underline, that my research is focused both on curators and artists who were interested in the HIV/AIDS issue, cared for it, visually represented the disease, responded to it, and on people living with HIV/AIDS, ones socially stigmatised,

existing beyond the logic of capital accumulation and performance requirements, who were represented at the exhibition.

I associate these practices with political contexts, especially with the category of transformation, the fall of the Eastern bloc and the emergence of various particularisms. It should be emphasized that I perceive transformation as a process spread over time. I do not recognize 1989 as a limit date, because such a perspective does not take into account earlier events that have built the ground for change, and at the same time it assumes the existence of a clearly defined beginning and end. In addition, such a point of view unifies the processes taking place in different countries of the region, not taking into account their specificity. Speaking of transformation, I mean the process taking place on many levels, covering not only the political system and the economy, but also society in its various dimensions, including cultural and that of identity. The system of Western values and capitalist market rules do not only translate into a specific political and economic system, but also shape social ideas of normality and identity. The latter are formed by such paradigmatic determinants as capital accumulation, production, work, reproduction, inheritance or long periods of stability, ensuring and maintaining a sense of continuity, decency and respect, planning and control. In my opinion, exhibitions concerning the HIV/AIDS epidemic questioned the transformational logic of development and the discourse of success by addressing issues such as risk, disease, infection and death.

My main questions are: How did the exhibition represent people living with HIV/AIDS, operating outside the logic of capitalism developing in Poland during the transformation process? What was the role and status of the institutions in which the exhibitions were organized? What were the interests of curators and artists as well as people living with HIV/AIDS, in what areas and in what ways were they represented? To what extent did the representation process reflect the needs and problems of the represented subjects? To what extent were these activities emancipatory?