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Angry Posters. Decoding the Political Aesthetics of Visual Pro-Choice Protest in Poland

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ABSTRACT: *Stigmatization, illegality, and a gradual removal from public health services in Poland since the late 1980s indicate that abortion is a seismograph for changes in politics, public debate on ethics and religion, and the country's prevailing »traditional« nature. This article—drawing on theoretical approaches to visual culture and the politics of aesthetics, movement framing and protest mobilization, and emotions as cultural practice—examines the evolving role of political aesthetics, its associated turmoil, and its symbolic intensity in Polish pro-choice discourse. It investigates how protesters produce, circulate, and shape pro-choice protest through visual signs and slogans, as well as the role and impact of protest images within the Polish »war on abortion.« Three »angry posters« involving, respectively, symbolic appropriation, (anti-)national subversion, and the citation of popular culture are presented: Barbara Kruger's Your Body Is a Battleground (1991/2020), Jarek Kubicki's FUCK OFF! / This Is War (2020), and Ola Szmida's Fighting Polish Woman (2016). The article addresses the highly expressive takeover of imageries, symbols, and aesthetic codes by women's rights and pro-choice activists as a political collective fighting against the religiously inflected »traditionalism« propagated by church and state. Finally, some implications of visual images for feminist practice are considered in aiming at a critical discussion of feminist imageries and their political power (or also lack thereof) regarding either withstanding or bringing about transformative social change in a time of rising populism, anti-genderism, and religious fundamentalism in Europe.*

KEYWORDS: *Poland, feminism, pro-choice activism, visual culture, protest poster*

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> The political slogan, the poster, the sign or symbol of a movement or group [...] speak the voice of an individual but capture the voice of the many and on occasion even the voice of a generation. These images matter, they are the signs of the unrest in our souls, they tell us of our will to freedom and of our unwillingness to conform. (Kapoor 2019, 9)

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Introduction: Pictorial Politics against Poland's Anti-Abortion Law

Warsaw, 2020. Almost 30 years after it was first plastered on walls around Poland as women's rights were being eroded in the Eastern European country following the fall of communism, a poster with the message *Twoje ciało to pole walki* (»Your body is a battleground«) reappeared in the Polish capital and caught the eye of passersby. The seminal black and white, famed text-based artwork is the Polish version of the silkscreen portrait made by the United States feminist artist Barbara Kruger to support the Women's March 1989 in Washington, DC. The iconic pro-choice poster returned to Poland as visual protest against the tightening of the abortion law and curtailing of reproductive rights there. To a country where differing visions of society and the state, the role of religion, and the limits of individual freedom clash.

Political struggles over conception, contraception, and abortion are long-standing in Poland (Mishtal 2015; Suchanow 2020; Wężyk 2021). With the rise of right-wing parties and fundamentalist religious movements across Europe in the last three decades, their agendas have come to dominate the public debate in Poland too, centering around the Catholic Church, the protection of »traditional values,« and »restoration of the natural order«—therewith pushing a populist cocktail of anti-feminist, anti-progressive, and anti-abortion rhetoric (Kuhar/Paternotte 2017; Graff/Korolczuk 2022). *Contemporary Women's Hell* (2005): under this title the leading Polish feminist organization *Federacja na Rzecz Kobiet i Planowania Rodziny* (Federation for Women and Family Planning, FEDERA) published already midway through the first decade of the new millennium its eye-opening report on the lack of safe abortion services in Poland. The victory of the right-wing populist and national-conservative Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS) party in the 2015 parliamentary elections was the starting point for a massive »cultural backlash« amid the ongoing efforts of the Catholic Church and fundamentalist »pro-life« organizations to ban all abortions. Despite the biggest protests nationwide of the post-communist era—the so-called Black Protests and Women's Strikes starting in 2016 and continuing in the years that followed—a new draconian law making the majority of abortions in Poland illegal still came into force in 2021. The country has now one of the most restrictive abortion laws in Europe after the constitutional tribunal banned abortion for severe and irreversible fetal defects on the grounds that it would violate Article 38 of the Constitution, which ensures the »legal protection of the life of every human being.«[1] The tightening of the law reignited the debate over abortion access in the country, proving that the right to legal abortion represents one of the most contentious and polarizing issues in Polish politics.

The present article, based on a methodological triangulation of visual discourse analysis and participant observation, grows out of the investigation of pro-choice demonstrations and cultural pro-choice events during several field stays in Warsaw in 2019/20 and 2022. These were complemented by digital ethnographic observation of the online presences and social media channels of select feminist organizations and their supporters. These include the aforementioned FEDERA[2] as well as Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet (All-Polish Women's Strike, OSK). The latter is a bottom-up women's right movement established in 2016, responsible for the organization of the Black Monday on October 3 of that year, the first mass demonstrations in the series of the Black Protests across the country. OSK was also behind the subsequent protests on October 22, 2020, as thousands of people took to the streets once again to oppose the constitutional court's decision to ban nearly all abortions.[3] Since 2016, graphic designers and artists from all over the country have supported the protesters

with their striking visual graphics and posters. In the last five years, over 100 visual artists have designed more than 200 pro-choice protest posters and made them available to protesters free of charge as part of online projects such as *Plakaty na Strajk* (Posters for the Strike) and *Pogotowie Graficzne* (Graphic Emergency Service).[4] To challenge existing forms of political and legal legitimacy, the protest community has downloaded, shared, printed, and displayed the posters in a wide variety of forms and formats in the country's public space and on social media as an expression of anger, solidarity, and will to a collective voice against the religiously inflected ethnonationalist and anti-progressive campaigning ongoing in Poland.

The outlined developments, actors, and actions serve here as the backdrop to the exploration of the overlapping boundaries between pictorial politics, political aesthetics, and pro-choice activism when abortion becomes aesthetically and emotionally (de)coded. This analysis at the intersection of gender, protest, affect, and visual studies focuses on the emotive-aesthetic dimension of protest posters as communication media providing a powerful vehicle for dramatizing injustice and urging change. It suggests an interesting ambivalence of Polish (female) activists toward their understanding of nation(ality) and belonging to a political collective. Furthermore it indicates militarization, interweaved by the topos of a persistent resurgence of »good« versus »evil,« as one of the dominant narratives and leitmotifs in the public debate on gender and reproductive rights in Poland. Herein, the war metaphor dominates the public rhetoric and imagery circling around emotionally charged buzzwords such as »war,« »fight,« or »battlefield« (cf. Suchanow 2020). (Anti-)abortion images or protest posters become »war pictures« then, and the emphasis on visualization in the political struggle over abortion a form of surveillance and »attack« (cf. Halfman/Young 2010).

The selected »angry posters«[5]—with signal slogans »Your Body Is a Battleground,« »PIS OFF / This Is War,« and »Fighting Polish Woman,« created by politically conscious artists with a sharp edge—are puissant visual images documenting the tense relationship between art, politics, and social activism. On the one hand, the posters are echoes of earlier protest struggles, for example of the 1980s anti-communist *Solidarność* (Solidarity) movement or of the feminist activism seen in the early 1990s. On the other, they are a new chapter in Polish feminism's struggle with national symbols or utilize innovative political aesthetics, whose material, visual, and symbolic manifestations become means of mobilizing and contesting in an age of global social networking and intervisuality. This article is an attempt to investigate how protesters document and produce this pro-choice sentiment through visual aesthetics, as well as the cultural meanings, emotional strategies, and social impacts of such protest posters within the Polish »war on abortion.«

Abortion in Poland: Volatile Political Struggles, Progressions, and Regressions

Poland is a prime example of how the issues of abortion and legal restriction can repeatedly resurface even after years of, to some degree, liberal and socially accepted legislation. During the communist period, abortion was widely practiced in public hospitals and private clinics. After the end of communist rule in 1989, access to abortion turned out to be more difficult. In the early 1990s, related legislation became the subject of controversy, thrusting abortion to the top of the political agenda. The fall of communism resulted in an increase in the political power of the Catholic Church: religion as a subject of school education was introduced in 1990; church officials now entered mainstream public life, becoming visible

and influential therein; and, the Church assumed the proportions of being the main driving force behind the criminalization of abortion, as guided and supported by the »Polish Pope« John Paul II. With the election of a noncommunist government, increasingly stringent requirements (medical as well as psychological certificates and fees) were put into place for women trying to obtain an abortion.

A major change came in 1993 when a new bill, »Act on Family Planning, Human Embryo Protection and Conditions of Permissibility of Abortion,« was passed. It removed entirely »difficult living conditions« as accepted grounds for the termination of pregnancy and, in real terms, criminalized abortions carried out based on social considerations (Nowicka 2007, 170f). Furthermore, therapeutic abortion and abortion for reasons of facing criminal charges, which had been legal in practice, became almost completely inaccessible. The »abortion compromise«—shorthand for the new legislation—pushed the procedure into expensive and often dubious »underground« facilities,[6] planting the seed for eternal divisions within Polish society over reproductive rights. Three years later, socioeconomic considerations were reintroduced by a left-leaning government as the legal basis for abortion, with restrictions on gestational duration to 12 weeks and requirements for women to receive counseling before going through with the procedure.

Since the 2010s, claims for limiting or banning access to legal abortion have initiated a new, more radical chapter in the Polish »war on abortion.« Between 2011 and 2018 several bills were introduced to the Sejm, the lower house of the Polish parliament, seeking to impose such changes and fueling anti-abortion rhetoric in the public debate. The bills were drafted by »anti-choice« organizations, primarily by the ultraradical Catholic legal organization *Ordo Iuris*,[7] in being supported by the Catholic Church and right-wing politicians in the Sejm—especially by the PiS. In April 2016, the *Stop Aborcji* (Stop Abortion) initiative, headed by the ultraconservative foundation *Pro — Prawo do Życia* (Pro — Right to Life),[8] began collecting signatures to support a bill proposing a complete ban on legal abortions. At the same time, the *Ratujmy Kobiety* (Save the Women) pro-choice initiative for the liberalization of related laws also started to collect signatures in support of their own proposal.[9] Both bills reached the Sejm in summer 2016, but only the former one was passed to the upper house after a vote (Król/Pustułka 2018, 373). The outcome of the latter sparked the aforementioned Black Monday mass demonstrations across the country, which took place simultaneously in almost 150 Polish cities, towns, and villages, bringing together an estimated 100,000 participants (Korolczuk 2016, 98). This moment marked the birth of a wider social movement fighting for reproductive and women's rights in Poland, under the umbrella term »Black Protests.«

The Polish »war on abortion« reached its next stage four years later. On October 22, 2020, the constitutional tribunal, which lacks legal validity and independence due to the influence of the incumbent PiS over it, ruled that the existing legislation allowing an abortion on the grounds of fetal abnormalities was unconstitutional. Enraged, Polish citizens launched again mass demonstrations. Despite the protests, the much-disputed law—leading, as noted, to some of the most draconian restrictions across Europe in this domain—came into force on January 27, 2021, after the constitutional court published the law in the government's official journal. The ruling was condemned by international human rights organizations such as Amnesty International, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, and by opposition MPs, who staged a protest wielding placards with the hashtag *#ToJestWojna* (#ThisIsWar) in parliament.[10]

The new law recognizes abortion as legal only in cases of rape, incest, or if the mother's health is at risk, making up some 2 percent of all abortions in Poland. Even before the ruling, the number of legal pregnancy terminations was low countrywide—at around 1,000 per year, 98 percent of them due to serious fetal impairment.[11] In practice, however, it is almost impossible for those eligible for a legal abortion to obtain one, leading to a boom in »abortion tourism.« Every year thousands of women leave Poland to access abortion care in other European countries or import medical-abortion pills, with total estimates lying between 100,000 and 150,000 cases hereof.[12] Since 2016, the feminist collective *Aborcyjny Dream Team* (Abortion Dream Team) has opposed the ban by organizing demonstrations and workshops teaching women how to obtain and self-manage a medical abortion.[13] In 2021 alone, the collective—a founding member of *Aborcja Bez Granic* (Abortion Without Borders), an initiative of several organizations across multiple European countries working together to help people access abortions either at home with pills or in clinics[14]—has spent PLN 1.5 million to help 32,000 persons from Poland to obtain the procedure abroad.[15]

Yet, the constitutional court's decision had an immediate chilling effect: Polish women express fear of getting pregnant amid concerns they will not be able to abort in case of complications that could endanger their lives; doctors and hospitals are scared of being prosecuted, and now tend to be overzealous in their respecting of the law.[16] Moreover, the new draconian legislation took its first toll on human life: since its implementation, six women have officially died because they were refused abortions even though their own health was in peril. Izabela, a 30-year-old woman in the 22nd week of pregnancy who died in late 2021 of septic shock after doctors waited for the fetus' heart to stop beating, was the first victim of the new ruling.[17] Her death sparked massive protests under the hashtag *#AniJednejWięcej* (#NotASingleOneMore) and reignited the debate over abortion access in Poland, a country that has confirmed its status as one of Europe's most restrictive on the issue.

Approaching Protest Images: On Aesthetics, Spaces, Materialities, and Emotions

Visual culture and protest images have existed throughout history, but in recent decades the »pictorial turn« (Mitchell 1995) has gained momentum, with graphics and placards now made to accompany all manner of marches and movements (McQuiston 2019; Rippon 2019; McGarry et al. 2020). Protest image and image-making are central to the politics of aesthetics (Rancière 2004), understood in the sense of *aesthesis*—as referring to humans' capacity to perceive the world with their senses and to interpret it accordingly. As an inalienable part of political aesthetics, protest imageries have the potential to become real weapons in struggles over narratives, presence, and visibility—or even to unleash »image wars« that place the medium »at the heart of political struggle, which has become an endless process of images battling, reversing, erasing and replacing other images« (Khatib 2013, 1). With respect to protest, visual imagery—posters, photographs, drawings, banners, and symbols—provides a powerful means of mobilizing and contesting, often becoming a first step toward self-determination and dignity for those involved.

These very processes of mobilizing and contesting take place in traditional media, in the streets, and on the Internet. They create a specific »mental climate« (Debord 1995, 18) of a social movement, city, and urban space, where demonstrations and collective actions occur; they also reveal those ruptures where protest should begin and seek to initiate sociopolitical change. To get the latter underway, social movements transform the public space—and

especially the streetscape—into a venue of ritualized forms of public protest culture. As a result, the street and the urban sphere become the interface of local, virtual, and media spaces. Also the production, dissemination, and circulation of protest imagery take place in a hybrid communication realm that connects three protest topographies: the street, traditional media, and the communication space of the Internet. The overwhelming majority of activists and their supporters connect and exchange within like-minded »virtual communities« (Rheingold 1993), but their »ar/ctivism« (Hamm 2004)—a collaboration between artists and activists—plays out in both physical and virtual space.

This hybrid activism, including the production and dissemination of protest images, is accompanied by strong emotions. Taking our cue from James Jasper's (1998) work on the role of emotions in social movements and Monique Scheer's (2016) Bourdieuan »doing emotion« approach that understands emotions as cultural practices, such powerful sentiment does not render the protestors irrational. Instead, as reactions to respective events, emotions frame protest activism and provide motivations, goals, and affective bonds or loyalties. As Barbara Rosenwein (2020) indicates, anger can be a leading emotion of activism and it can emerge before individuals join protest groups—both in public space and virtually. It can also be formed or reinforced in collective actions as the example of the later analyzed pro-choice imageries. Furthermore, conceptualizing such emotions as a practice produced by the habitus (Bourdieu 1977) allows a fundamental connection to be established between discourse and physicality. The common denominator of these two factors, to refer again to Scheer, could be described as materiality: »[F]eelings [...] can be experienced sensually through material anchors and therefore strengthened and consolidated« (2016, 28).

Posters, banners, or other protest objects take, then, this function of material anchors. It is, therefore, important to stress the emotive and symbolic dimensions of material objects, as Karl-Sigismund Kramer (1962) emphasizes by drawing on the revealing concept of »thing significance.« This approach refers to the affective and emotionally charged meanings of everyday objects, which go beyond their material properties, and to the instrumental and functional use of things such as posters as protest requisites. It allows considering the feminist pro-choice protests and their visual framing as »emotional communities«: that is, »groups that share the same [...] norms and values about emotional behavior and even about feelings themselves« (Rosenwein 2006, 3).

Whether on advertising pillars, house walls, or billboards, the political poster has one goal: to attract attention and convey a message. While the heyday of advertising posters for theatre, cabaret, or film began at the end of the nineteenth century, the political poster as a mass and protest medium was first established in the course of the French Revolution of 1789. Since then, the poster has become an integral part of sociopolitical struggle. It still dominates the urban streetscape and seeks to »crawl into the minds of the masses« (Böhm et al. 2009, 238). To attract the viewer's attention, the design should be conspicuous, catchy, and effective. Using a large format, distinctive font and graphic elements, concise color scheme, and diverse visual forms (among others, depictions of people/objects, personifications, symbols, or allegories) can all be helpful in ensuring the desired effect. These aesthetic means of advancing posters as »war pictures« may express political standpoints, strengthen collective identities, and convey (counter)narratives or leitmotifs in political struggles—here, over abortion.

Your Body Is a Battleground: The Recurring Universality of Visual Pro-Choice Imagery

Kruger's aforementioned *Untitled (Your Body is a Battleground)* print is a prime example of visually coded and politically substantial »war pictures« being used in the abortion debate. Known for her confrontational silkscreens from the 1980s, she combines easily understandable graphics with critical texts set in the characteristic Futura Bold font. Her work is dominated by the colors black, white, and red, and draws on Soviet avant-garde and US advertising of the 1950s. Kruger's critical prints focus, among other things, on issues of gender, inequality, and women's emancipation. *Your Body Is a Battleground* is a powerful site of resistance to the objectification of women, becoming the slogan of the international pro-choice movement.

Kruger created this iconic piece in 1989, in response to the numerous anti-abortion laws that were seeking to undermine Roe versus Wade.[18] The poster shows a woman's face that vividly intersects with one half black and the other white, staring directly at the beholder. The image is overlaid with an inscription, printed in white sans-serif font on red background stripes: »Your body is a battleground.« Using the determiner »Your,« Kruger connects the viewer to the image and focuses their attention on the divisive topic of reproductive rights. Initially, the piece appears to split the reproductive-health discussion into two camps: those against a woman's right to choose and those who support the latter, shown by the simultaneous negative and positive renditions in the image. By making it so, the artist is able to depict the ambivalences of the abortion debate: pro-choice versus »pro-life«; women versus patriarchal society; medicine versus religion; »good« versus »evil.« However, the caption »Your body is a battleground« denotes just how the fight for reproductive autonomy has an entirely different nature to political battles: when it comes to abortion, the emotional struggle for freedom of choice transpires outside a woman's body and turns it into a »combat zone« that she both struggles over and in. Kruger's work draws much of its impact from the tension between image and text: the printed words are an ironic commentary on the image, which loses its original function and gains a political veneer instead. By means of juxtaposition and decontextualization, this art piece thus questions the status quo. As the artist herself would say about this work: »I try to be affective, to suggest change, and to bid defiance to what I perceive on some level as the tyranny of social life.«[19]

In the early 1990s, Kruger expressed her support for the Polish pro-choice movement for the first time. On the occasion of her exhibition at Ujazdowski Castle Center for Contemporary Art in Warsaw, the artist presented the Polish version of her emblematic feminist artwork with three additional slogans: *Broń praw kobiet. Walcz o prawo do aborcji. Żądaj edukacji seksualnej* (Defend women's rights. Fight for the right to abortion. Demand sex education). As a political statement within the heated debate on reproductive rights that led the way for the 1993 »abortion compromise,« the Ujazdowski Center plastered in autumn 1991 and spring 1992 hundreds of copies of Kruger's poster across the Polish capital. The emergence of this expressive poster in Warsaw's public space sparked a vivid discussion about reproductive rights and sex education. As the exhibition's curator Milada Ślizińska recalls, the posters were quickly »torn off the walls as spoils [of war].«[20] They were put up again with the help of feminist activists, this time high on poles and walls to ensure their more enduring presence and impact in the streets of Warsaw.

Kruger's iconic artwork returned to Poland's public space a quarter century later, in 2020, after the aforementioned constitutional court ruling imposing a near-total ban on abortion. The struggle over body autonomy had clearly lost none of its virulence in the

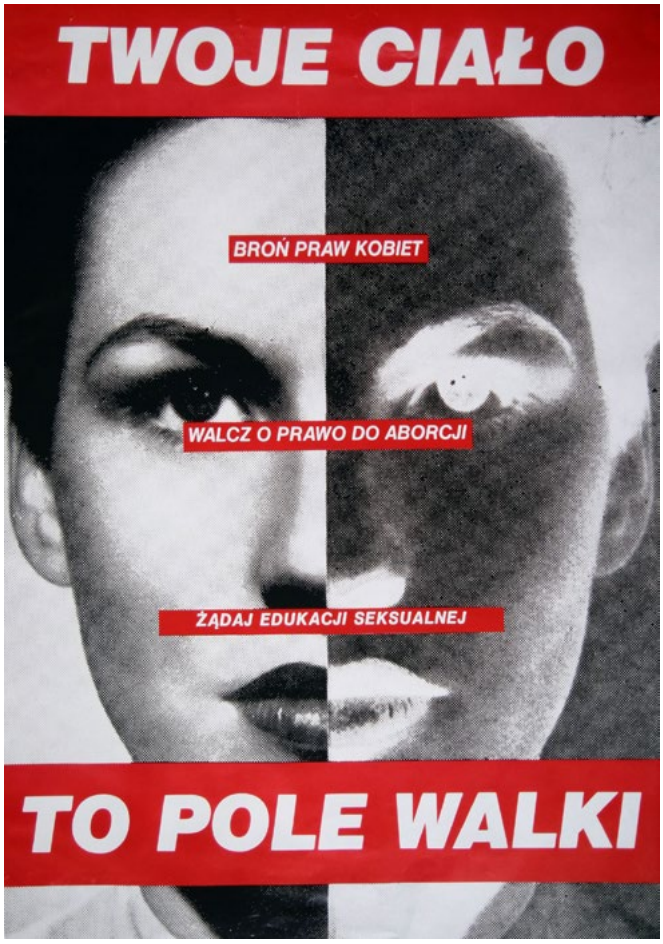

Figure 1. Barbara Kruger: Untitled (Your Body Is a Battleground) / Twoje ciało to pole walki), 1991/2020

country. Shortly thereafter, TRAFO Center for Contemporary Art in Szczecin, the capital city of West Pomerania, received the Polish reproduction of Kruger's print courtesy of the artist and her agency, Sprüth Magers Berlin. As a form of materialized protest that goes hand in hand with recent demonstrations in and around the country, TRAFO organized an installation of Kruger's Polish version of the poster and placed it on the Center's facade as well as around Szczecin. This offered to passersby strolling through the city's streets a meaningful and emotional visual statement against the violation of women's rights. »With politicians trying to objectify the female body, Kruger's work remains extremely relevant and ›ready to use‹«[21] comments TRAFO director Stanisław Ruksza on the spatial use, political context, and aesthetic universality of this emblematic poster.

The topicality of Kruger's print—in right-wing discourse critically presented as »the frontline in the culture war«[22] between the pro-choice and »pro-life« movements—has been acknowledged also by Magdalena Lipska, Sebastian Cichocki, and Łukasz Ronduda, the curators of the 2021/2022 *Kto napisze historię łez* (Who Will Write the History of Tears) exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. This exhibition explores the tensions and relations between the female body, repressive laws, and women's ongoing battle for their reproductive rights. Its curators turned back to the political aesthetics of Kruger's artwork and placed the prominent *Your Body Is a Battleground* poster next to another black and white print by the same artist showing a screaming female face overlaid with the eponymous question: Who will write the history of tears?

In answer, the curators focused on the key narratives, threads, and leitmotifs that different artists have stressed when addressing pregnancy and abortion: the brutal reproductive realities of the post—Second World War period; changes in perspective within the broader process of sociopolitical transformation; contemporary tensions and mass protests in Argentina, Ireland, Poland, Portugal, or the US; the use of traditional herbal remedies, modern pharmacology, or surgery in the »abortion underground.« Finally, there have been the personal voices of female artists who themselves experienced a pregnancy termination and examine abortion through emotions that help manifest its existential and individual dimensions. As Lipska explains, the aim of the exhibition was to »wrest the topic of abortion from the control of political clichés,«[23] to destigmatize it, and to place the focus on female artists who draw on real stories by encompassing a whole spectrum of politically aesthetic allusions, images, and codes—therewith conveying the complexities of pregnancy and abortion.

PIS OFF / This Is War: National and Pop-Cultural Symbols in Favor of Women's Rights

The 2020 mass demonstrations after the draconian constitutional court ruling vested the verbal and visual language of the heated public debate on abortion with a new quality and political intensity. What becomes here undeniably visible is another chapter in »Polish feminism's dialogue and struggle with national symbolism« (Graff 2019, 472), via contestation of the dominant understanding of nationhood, national belonging, and the appropriation of national imaginaries by right-wing, masculinized political forces and the Catholic Church. A paragon of this protest for women's equality and body autonomy, in the form of aesthetic acts of resistance to nationalist and Catholic rhetoric, is Jarek Kubicki's both brilliantly witty and vulgar design *WYPIERDALAĆ!* (Fuck Off!). The forerunner to this »angry poster« is M's (an anonymous artist) black-and-white print *PIS OFF!*, created for the aforementioned 2016 OSK Black Monday mass rally and employed nationwide at pro-choice protests in public space.[24] The white slogan »PIS OFF« being featured on a black background, symbolizing anger and grievance, is a multilayered stroke of creativity, linguistically mixing the English swearword »piss off« and the Polish acronym PiS standing for the ruling party's name. The author added the final touch to the critical poster through the chosen design of the vowel »O,« which assumes the shape of a vagina as an allegory for women's right to body autonomy (see Figure 2 below). The aesthetically formulated demand »Keep your morality out of our vaginas« is an emotional manifestation of collective anger, addressed to the Catholic Church, the PiS, and their allies.

The vulgar imperative »Fuck off!« was repeatedly chorused by pro-choice demonstrators, sung in protest songs, or appeared on posters and handmade banners from the first Black Protests of 2016 onward. Kubicki combines it with an important Polish national symbol of resistance: the logo of the *Solidarność* trade union that was crucial in Poland's peaceful revolutionary fight against communist rule in the 1980s. The designer adapted Tomasz Sarnecki's famous *Solidarność* campaign poster from 1989, when Poland held its first semi-free elections. The latter artwork shows the movement's logo placed behind an image of Gary Cooper, appearing as a fearless cowboy and upright sheriff in Fred Zinnemann's famous 1952 Hollywood Western *High Noon*. Sarnecki replaced Cooper's pistol with a ballot paper and added the Solidarity movement's logo above his sheriff's badge to equip him for a »high noon« moment: June 4, 1989.

Figure 2. M for Graphic Emergency Service: PIS OFF!, 2016

On this historic election day, the once-outlawed Solidarity party swept to success—with Tadeusz Mazowiecki becoming Poland's first noncommunist prime minister. One year later, Lech Wałęsa—the leader of the Solidarity movement and later Nobel Peace Prize laureate—won the country's presidential elections and became the first freely elected noncommunist head of state in 45 years. As Sarnecki explains, the design of the poster was supposed to depict »the only righteous man, who, thanks to his magnificent, noble, seamless image, would have been able to lift a weight beyond the strength of a single person« (Balcerzak 2020, 347).

Iconic about the poster is not only its layout and symbolism but also the characteristic all-caps, red *Solidarność* sign. Conceived by the graphic designer Jerzy Janiszewski, the logotype known as *solidaryca* is a joined-up font with the Polish flag waving from the letter »N« in *Solidarność* to embody a unified country. Kubicki adapts this font, which carries strong symbolism and is highly recognizable. He further reworks the original poster by adding the slogan »Wypierdalać!« instead of the union's logo and by replacing Cooper's sheriff with female action heroes from well-known Hollywood movies. Kubicki would explain the idea behind the design thus: »[W]omen we know from cinema roles in which, when they say ›Fuck off,‹ you are going on the run, even if you are a beefy bad ass. Or a priest. Or a right-wing politician. Or another jerk who dreams of restricting the rights of others.«[25]

He created several versions of the poster that immediately went viral and became a recognizable symbol of the 2020 pro-choice and anti-government protests. We see, among others, Ellen Ripley from Ridley Scott's 1979 *Alien*, the Bride from Quentin Tarantino's

Figure 3. Jarek Kubicki for All-Polish Women's Strike: WYPIERDALAĆ!/FUCK OFF! To jest wojna/This Is War, 2020

Kill Bill neo-Western martial arts film, or Imperator Furiosa from George Miller's 2015 post-apocalyptic action movie *Mad Max: Fury Road*. Ripley for instance, a fictional war captain and strong heroine played by the American actress Sigourney Weaver, is one of the first and most significant female action protagonists in cinematic history and a prominent figure in popular culture. Kubicki presents her wearing military fatigues, armed with a weapon hanging over her shoulder, strong-willed and ready to fight. An additional text in the upper-left corner of the poster reads *To jest wojna* (This is war), accompanied in its lower part by the contact details for Abortion Without Borders and the characteristic OSK logo—a black silhouette portrait of a woman with a red lightning bolt in the middle.

Kubicki transformed these tough female Hollywood protagonists into steadfast warriors for Polish women's reproductive rights, echoing the former's qualities in the process. The visually catchy graphics seemed to perfectly capture protestors' emotions after the tightening of the abortion law, immediately spreading on the Internet. Many Polish women, including left-wing MPs, created similar images with themselves in the foreground.[26] This »(en)gendering of patriotic symbols as a feminist strategy of choice« (Graff 2019, 481) can be interpreted as both an aesthetic expression of »patriotic« feminism on the one hand and as »anti-patriotic« provocation or even as a criminal offence on the other. In so doing, progressive feminist activists, organizations, and informal networks forge a political collective that challenges the masculinized ethnonationalist, anti-liberal, and religiously homogeneous understanding of state and national belonging propagated by the Catholic Church, the ruling party, and the far right in Poland (cf. Balcerzak 2020, 143ff).

The political staging of Sanja Iveković's 2009 artwork *Invisible Women of Solidarity* during the first Black Protests is another example here. The Croatian artist's remake of the iconic poster, designed on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the *Solidarność* revolution, reads »High Noon: 1989 – 2009« and features a black and faceless cowgirl figure expressing a harsh critique of the invisibility and exclusion of women inherent in the masculinized ethnonational tradition. Black Protests participants demonstrated with fliers, stickers, and banners carrying Iveković's design, and some provided the female silhouette with an umbrella as another iconic symbol of these events. They had to face legal consequences in the aftermath: Solidarity, which has been closely affiliated with the PiS and the Catholic Church for years now, accused the feminist protesters of the »unlawful« use of their legendary logo—understood as a national symbol. The lawsuit was eventually resolved in favor of the protesters. Still, the case led to an emotionally charged debate on the right to use, interpret, and reframe culturally significant symbols and visual aesthetics (cf. ibid., 349).

Fighting Polish Woman: (Re)framing Powerful Allegories of »Connective Activism«

The last politically engaged poster analyzed here provides another vivid example of discord regarding uses and abuses of national symbols that challenge the right-wing monopoly on »patriotism.« At the same time, it also indicates the emergence of a new modus operandi regarding feminist interventions, civic activism, and protest framing. The new wave of pro-choice feminism arising in Poland, as initiated by the 2016 Black Monday mass demonstrations, is a political collective and »networked social movement« (Urzędowska/Suchomska 2020, 9) hybrid in nature. This is because it oscillates between taking the form of multichannel online activism and that of visually stunning mass rallies in the public space. Elżbieta Korolczuk explains the phenomenon by adducing the »connective activism« occurring in the course of both online and offline encounters, »[as] based on the use of flexible, easily personalized action frames, which were also well-embedded in cultural narratives referencing the fight for Poland's independence and resisting the oppressive state« (2016, 108).

The protests erupting against the abortion ban have demonstrated that there is an organizationally strong network of women's nongovernmental organizations and civic initiatives able, as a political collective, to coordinate national actions, provide social technology, and produce a body of knowledge disseminated in hybrid protest spaces. Mobilization occurs first online, with hashtags trending on social media and visually ingenious protest images playing a key role here. The enormous differences between participants, the lack of top-down coordination, and the huge scale and largely improvised nature of these protests have made it impossible to maintain control over the cultural meanings of the polyvalent symbols that are used in them. Paradoxically, however, these symbols and images—ones carrying important aesthetic and emotional functions—have served as »recruitment tools in a structureless context« (Graff 2019, 489), shaping the country's protest spaces and acting as a key resource for mobilization.

One of the most prominent and iconic symbols of these aesthetic »recruitment tools« is the red lightning bolt, as integrated by Kubicki into his posters. In addition to the coat hanger (the best-known symbol of the dangers of illegal backstreet abortions), the lightning bolt has been one of the most striking and enduring symbols of the pro-choice protests. It was created in 2016 by Ola Jasionowska as the official OSK emblem. »It says: Watch out, beware. We will not accept to deprive women of their basic rights« its creator would explain.[27] This

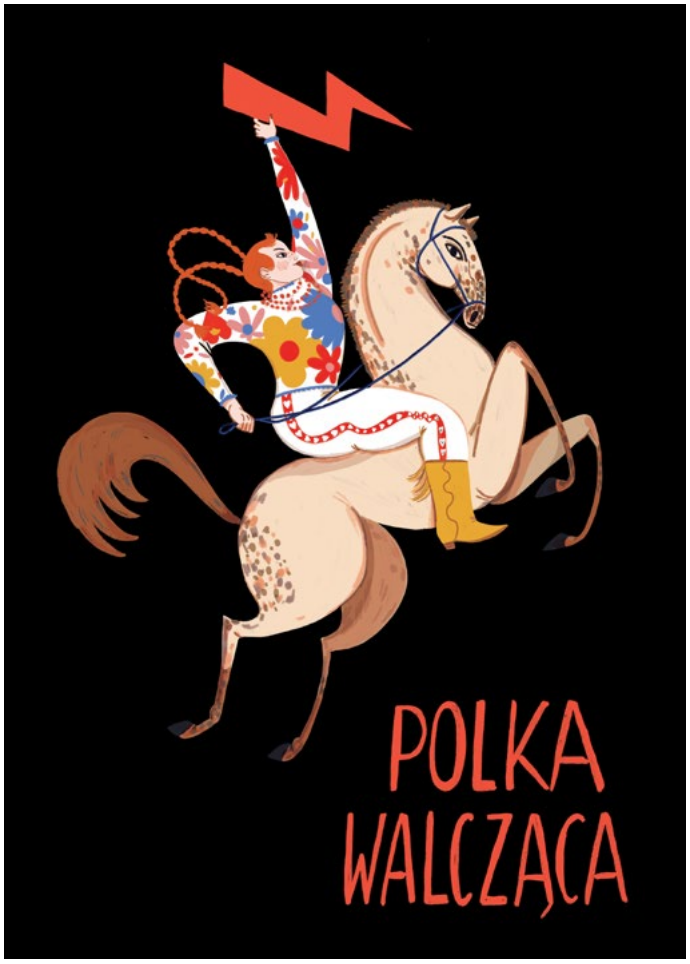

Figure 4. Ola Szmida for Posters for the Strike: Polka Walcząca / Figthing Polish Woman, 2020

globally known symbol—which has since been displayed on posters and banners, painted on the body, or sprayed onto walls—serves, then, as a warning. Such code has been seized on by right-wing critics, who have repeatedly referred to pro-choice protesters as »left-wing fascists« and drawn links between the lightning bolt and totalitarian symbols such as the insignia used by the SS, as one of the major paramilitary organizations propping up Nazi Germany.[28] With this absurd distortion of facts and the attempt to reframe the symbol as negative, and thus worthy of condemnation, its critics have overlooked the fact that the OSK logo is different in color, shape, and style to the SS insignia, and that lightning bolts are a globally common symbol for an array of different groups and objects—as just one of many examples, for high-voltage areas.

In 2020, in the course of the massive protests against the constitutional court's ruling, the young female illustrator Ola Szmida designed the »angry poster« *Polka Walcząca* (Fighting Polish Woman) with two significant codes: the lightning bolt and the figure of a female warrior. The poster, of black background representing the protesters' grief and anger, shows a strong woman on a horse with a red lightning bolt in her hand that she is about to throw. The horse is standing on its hind legs, a silhouette to symbolize battle readiness. Szmida drew her inspiration from the canon of Polish folklore art and Greek mythology. She depicted the young Polish woman as an Amazon—a female warrior and hunter known for her extraordinary physical agility and strength—dressed in a top with a floral pattern and wearing a red bead necklace, as characteristic accessories of Polish folk costumes.

By calling the figure Polka Walcząca, Szmida circles back to the *kotwica* (anchor)—another fiercely contested national symbol and important Polish historical sign associated with the Home Army and the 1944 Warsaw Uprising. It was created in 1942 by Anna Smoleńska, a member of the underground resistance, and henceforth used as a symbol of the struggle against Nazi occupation. The *kotwica* has a shape showing the letters »PW,« which stand for *Polska Walcząca* (Fighting Poland) and visually resemble an anchor. The 2016 Black Protests opened up a new chapter in the history of the feminist appropriation of this powerful symbol, as taking place in dialogue with national tradition and the previous monopolization of it by right-wing/far-right forces.

In 2013 the illustrator Maja Rozbicka designed for the oldest and largest Polish feminist demonstration, Manifa, the poster *O Polkę Niepodległą* (For Independent Polish Woman). The print inscribed the anchor into a woman's displayed body and transformed the patriotic phrase *O Polskę Niepodległą* (For an Independent Poland) in order to claim independence for women as individuals (instead of Poland as the nation-state). In 2016, a new, simpler, and catchier design of the *Polka* sign, with two dots turning the arms of the anchor into breasts and a braid attached at the top to resemble a women's body, flooded the country's protest spaces (cf. Balcerzak 2020, 319). This aesthetic and symbolic political activity offered female Black Protests participants a sense of unity and solidarity, allowing them to identify themselves as »female warriors« and to set their struggle for reproductive rights in dialogue with Poland's exclusionary national tradition.

Eventually, the designs of Szmida and others reinterpreting and reframing the »Fighting Poland« sign shared a similar fate to the feminist remaking of the *Solidarność* poster: namely much public debate and a number of court cases. As a national symbol and common good, the sign is protected by law, which is why the ironic *Polka* remake has been viewed as offensive by both right-wing radicals and some protest participants themselves. While Solidarity's copyright claim was adjudicated to be invalid, in the »Fighting Poland« case this symbolic appropriation was ruled to be a breach of »patriotic« decorum.[29] Regardless of the legal consequences, such as financial penalties,[30] the appropriation of the *kotwica* fulfilled the role of being a connective aesthetic intervention and at least temporal emotional unifier that favored the cause of the pro-choice protests—helping mask the enormous differences between participants in terms of age, social background, and political outlook. Finally, the case vividly testifies that image-making is central to political aesthetics and to social movements seeking to dislodge or change a political system and »traditional« order. Thus, politics is not produced exclusively by the vocalized claims or demands of protestors but above all by their actions. Herewith the aesthetics of protest reveal how democracy is shaped through »a complex interplay of performance, images, acoustics and all the various technologies engaged in those productions« (Butler 2015, 20).

Conclusion: Contested Imageries, or Who Has the Right to Visual Aesthetics and How Powerful Is It?

Abortion has emerged as one of the most divisive issues in Poland, particularly since the right-wing PiS took power in 2015 promising a return to the »traditional« model of society. Abortion reflects the tenor of discourses on equality and women's autonomy, the mother role and family, the secularization of public life, and on national »traditions.« By analyzing three protest posters, this article investigated how activists document and produce their pro-choice stance through visual aesthetics. It also considered the predominant cultural

codings, emotional strategies, and social impacts of contested visualities within the Polish »war on abortion.«

The presented case studies certify that political aesthetics, understood as cultural signs and slogans, are harnessed by sociopolitical actors—pro-choice activists, graphic designers, and protesters—through actions vesting them with the power to challenge existing structures, ideas, and national orthodoxies. These aesthetics are constantly and dynamically politicized images, words, objects, and spaces of importance to the (inter)national imaginaries that comprise material and performative culture—ones with a high potential to be replicated digitally and shared across social media, ideological terrains, state borders, and linguistic frontiers. Protest-related visual framing and image-making help to communicate emotions such as anger or solidarity, to raise awareness and visibility, and, finally, to act as connective recruitment tools for further mobilization.

The aim of the article was to capture the aesthetics of the Polish pro-choice protests, their visual, material, and virtual dimensions, as well as their vocalizations and rhythms against the backdrop of the related activism spanning from the 2016 Black Protests through the mass rallies after the 2020 near-total ban on abortion. The chosen examples show the dynamic relationship between feminism, universal pro-choice demands, and national symbolisms, indicating how visual images and (inter)national codings have become a means of contestation within Poland's highly polarized society. This strategy—which includes the appropriation, reinterpretation, and subversion of historically potent symbols and slogans such as the Solidarity poster, the anchor, or the lightning bolt—makes clear that political aesthetics are not only powerful but also a multivocal site of »war« over meanings, forms of belonging, and modes of use. The protesters have taken shape as active and increasingly self-reflective political collectives in this »war of symbols« based on their related activities, which include reframing and reconfiguration, humor and vulgarity, as well as citing popular culture. They have produced and distributed in both online and offline encounters posters with competing interpretations, evoking a sense of unease, grievance, and anger. Reinforced by Poland's militarized verbal and visual call to battle, the posters formulate demands and defend against the alliance of fundamentalist right-wing forces, the Catholic Church, and the ruling PiS. Barbara Kruger's *Your Body Is a Battleground* stands for this fight as no other. It speaks to feminism, universal women's rights, and communicates a powerful message for the viewer to ponder—even if for only a split second.

These aesthetically reinterpreted and reframed designs—like Jarek Kubicki's *FUCK OFF!* print echoing and transforming the legacy of the Solidarity movement or Ola Szmida's *Fighting Polish Woman* displaying the red lightning bolt, materialized as poster, pin, or sticker—have become a popular protest accessory that certifies how Polish feminism is an artistic, literary, and intellectual movement. Furthermore, the symbolic takeover of the anchor has challenged the right-wing monopoly on national symbols and the Polish emancipatory discourse. »[The] imaginary rivalry between *Polska* and *Polka*« (Graff 2019, 479) challenged the intense and durable Polish trend of attributing to women the role of both biological and cultural reproducers of the nation rather than considering them equal agents of history and as subjects of rights. This ongoing marginalization of women's rights and claims—ingrained in the intimate symbiosis in Poland of the Catholic tradition and »patriotism,« with their ideological exclusiveness—has filled the national imaginary with powerful allegorical representations of woman- and motherhood such as Matka Polka (Polish Mother), Matka Boska (Virgin Mary) as queen of Poland, or Polonia (Poland) as a suffering woman. This cultural repertoire—dominated by the topos of heroic, divine, and self-sacrificing patriotic women and mothers, always called on to remain passive, charming, and eternally

grateful—emphasizes the urgency and drama of the national cause, with it prevailing over the rights and demands of Polish women themselves regarding the state, politics, and social change.

Finally, the presented highly expressive, rich-in-metaphor, and full-of-wit protest graphics speak about the female body—deconstructed, sliced up, and appropriated as a field of ideological and political struggle. But Poland serves here as merely a testing ground for reactionary ideas on the broader European level, especially in the Eastern Europe context. As images spread worldwide of the 2020 strike by Polish women following the constitutional court ruling against almost all abortions and, one year later, international media informed people about 30-year-old Izabela being the first victim of this new draconian law, this was actually, in fact, only a new chapter in the long history of European struggles over feminism, anti-genderism, and liberal democracy.

The argument in Croatia over the Istanbul Convention concerning violence against women, the Estonian referendum on LGBT rights, or the heated Lithuanian public debate on abortion are only a few examples of this deep-rooted European conflict. In these contexts, too, the question of the exact function, circulation, and impact of visual images arises. What will the competing narratives be? Who will achieve success here, and on the basis of which toolsets, cultural effects, and affective strategies? Will pictorial politics be powerful enough to either withstand or bring about sociopolitical change? The answers to these myriad uncertainties are yet to emerge, drawing attention to the existence of the multivocal narratives and multiple meanings challenging existing forms of political collectiveness and legitimacy.

Notes

1 Cited from Article 38 of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland adopted on October 2, 1997: https://www.trybunal.gov.pl/en/about-the-tribunal/legal-basis/the-constitution-of-the-republic-of-poland (last accessed February 10, 2022).

2 https://www.federa.org.pl (last accessed February 12, 2022).

3 All-Poland Women's Strike, which currently counts over 500,000 followers on Facebook, was created as one of the feminist pro-choice groups responsible for the organization of the 2016 Black Monday mass demonstrations. The latter were inspired by 1974's Black Thursday in Iceland, when 90 percent of women there decided to rally for equal rights by refusing to work, cook, or perform childcare. See: https://www.facebook.com/ogolnopolskistrajkkobiet (last accessed December 12, 2022).

4 See the online presences of *Plakaty na Strajk* (https://www.plakatnastrajk.pl) and *Pogotowie Graficzne* (https://pogotowie.tumblr.com/post/633034533139251200/to-jest-wojna) (both last accessed December 18, 2021).

5 I use the term »angry posters« in reference to the publication *Angry Graphics. Protest Posters of the Reagan/Bush Era* (Jacobs/Heller 1992).

6 Once abortion left the public sphere, it entered the gray zone of private arrangements. With somewhere around 150,000 abortions per year, a rough estimate of USD 95 million is being generated annually for doctors who are earning both unregistered and tax-free (Chełstowska 2011, 98).

7 https://www.ordoiuris.pl (last accessed February 15, 2022). The organization is part of a global ultraconservative network that was founded in Brazil in the 1960s. It was Ordo Iuris that drafted the 2016 anti-abortion bill in Poland: https://www.ordoiuris.pl/stop-aborcji (last accessed February 15, 2022). For further information, see: Wielka Koalicja za Równością i Wyborem (2020).

8 See its campaign »Stop Abortion«: https://stronazycia.pl/stop-aborcji (last accessed February 15, 2022).

9 The draft bill »Save the Women«: https://archiwumosiatynskiego.pl/alfabet-buntu/ratujmy-kobiety (last accessed February 16, 2022), collected almost 500,000 signatures. In 2018, the Sejm rejected it. The goal of the bill was the liberalization of abortion regulations, reliable sexual education in schools, and free access to contraception.

10 See the statements of Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights Dunja Mijatović (https://twitter.com/Dunja_Mijatovic/status/1320781834112933888) and of Amnesty International (https://amnes-

ty.org/en/latest/news/2020/10/polands-constitutional-tribunal-rolls-back-reproductive-rights) (both accessed February 15, 2022).

11 In 2020, 1,074 legal abortions—26 less than in 2019—were performed in Polish hospitals according to data obtained by FEDERA from the Ministry of Health in July 2021: https://federa.org.pl/dane-mz-aborcje-2020 (last accessed February 16, 2022).

12 These estimated figures are based on information provided by FEDERA's director Krystyna Kacpura in 2019: https://federa.org.pl/terminacja-ciazy-2019 (last accessed February 18, 2022).

13 See the website of Abortion Dream Team: https://www.aborcyjnydreamteam.pl (last accessed February 16, 2022).

14 Except for Abortion Dream Team, the network consists also of organizations from Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom: Women Help Women, Ciocia Basia, Abortion Network Amsterdam, Abortion Support Network. It also encompasses support organizations in, for instance, Austria or the Czech Republic: https://www.abortion.eu (last accessed February 16, 2022).

15 According to the data provided on January 27, 2022, by Abortion Dream Team on Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/aborcyjnydreamteam/posts/3868231153401236 (last accessed February 16, 2022).

16 See the Euronews report from January 27, 2022: https://www.euronews.com/2022/01/27/polish-women-scared-to-be-pregnant-a-year-after-near-total-abortion-ban-came-into-force (last accessed February 20, 2022).

17 Ibid.

18 Roe versus Wade was the 1973 landmark ruling to protect a pregnant woman's right to have an abortion. The US Supreme Court overturned Roe versus Wade in 2022, holding that there is no longer a federal constitutional right to an abortion in the country.

19 As cited in the online art marketplace Fineartmultiple: https://fineartmultiple.de/barbara-kruger (last accessed February 10, 2022).

20 As cited in *Magazyn Szum:* https://magazynszum.pl/plakaty-barbary-kruger-zrywano-ze-scian-niczym-zdobycze-rozmowa-z-milada-slizinska (last accessed February 10, 2022).

21 As cited on TRAFO's official website: https://trafo.art/en/barbara-krugertwoje-cialo-to-pole-walki (last accessed February 10, 2022).

22 As stated by Piotr Bernatowicz on March 4, 2021, in the online art magazine *Obieg*: https://obieg.pl/en/209—barbara-kruger-s-poster-and-the-frontline-in-the-culture-war (last accessed February 10, 2022), on the occasion of the »Who Will Write the History of Tears« exhibition. Since 2020, the right-wing and PiS-friendly art historian has been the director of the Ujazdowski Castle Center that accommodates the original 1991 Polish version of Kruger's *Your Body Is a Battleground*.

23 As cited in the exhibition's description on the website of the Museum of Modern Art: https://artmuseum.pl/pl/wystawy/kto-napisze-historie-lez (last accessed February 10, 2022).

24 For instance as big protest transparences prepared by three young Polish women for the 2016 Black Protest in Poznań, as depicted in Stepan Rudyk's photograph for *Polityka:* https://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/kraj/1678804,1,czy-czarny-protest-zmieni-polityczne-uklady.read (last accessed February 12, 2022).

25 As cited on October 25, 2020, in the biggest liberal Polish daily newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza*: https://trojmiasto.wyborcza.pl/trojmiasto/7,35611,26433558,ellen-ripley-i-wypier-pochodzacy-z-trojmiasta-grafik.html (last accessed February 12, 2022).

26 One of them was, for instance, Magdalena Biejat, Warsaw sociologist, feminist, and member of the progressive party *Razem* (Together), as her Facebook post on October 30, 2020, proves: https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=391635995543589&id=104180510955807 (last accessed February 12, 2022).

27 As cited on October 29, 2020, on *Polki.pl*: https://polki.pl/magazyn/o-tym-sie-mowi,-co-naprawde-oznacza-czerwona-blyskawica-symbol-strajku-kobiet,3466,wideo.html (last accessed February 12, 2022).

28 Compare, for instance, with the argumentation of right-wing historian Tomasz Panfil in an interview with the fundamentalist, far-right online portal *Polonia Christiana PCh.pl* on October 28, 2020: https://www.pch24.pl/runa-sieg---od-nazizmu-do-feminizmu,79427,i.html (last accessed February 14, 2022).

29 See other cases of the appropriation of the »Fighting Poland« sign and the legal consequences thereof: https://www.prawo.pl/prawo/znak-polski-walczacej-zniewazenie-zasady-uzywania,453057.html (last accessed February 14, 2022).

30 In 2017, a court in Kielce found one of the co-organizers of the Black Monday protests guilty of publicly insulting »Fighting Poland« and sentenced her to pay a PLN 2,000 fine. See the report in *Dziennik Gazeta Prawna* on May 12, 2017: https://www.gazetaprawna.pl/wiadomosci/artykuly/1042338,zniewazenie-symbolu-polski-walczacej-podczas-czarnego-protestu.html (last accessed February 15, 2022).

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