Global Definition of National Identity: Dilemmas of the National Art Gallery Exhibiting Contemporary Art

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Global Definition of National Identity: Dilemmas of the National Art Gallery Exhibiting Contemporary Art

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Abstract

The paper attempts at describing changes in ways of practicing national identity in spaces exhibiting art that took place in Poland in new political circumstances of the nineties. Based on the case study of the exhibition at the national art institution in Poland devoted to the evolution of the concept of national identity and the exhibition of Polish culture shown at the major American museum I am proposing a new perspective on the practice of national identity, more and more devoid of content and essence, and consequently, having a purely indexical nature which meaning and function is to point to the position of the country within the international network.

Résumé

Cet article décrit les changements dans les lieux d’exposition de l’art polonais du nouveau contexte politique des années 1990. En m’appuyant sur le cas d’une exposition à l’Institut national de Pologne, consacrée à l’évolution du concept d’identité nationale et sur une exposition de culture polonaise dans un musée américain majeur, je propose un nouvel angle d’approche des pratiques de l’identité nationale. Celles-ci sont de plus en plus dépourvues de contenu et d’essence, et par conséquent de nature purement indexicale, dont la signification et la fonction consistent à souligner la position du pays dans le réseau international.

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In common perception, globalization is perceived as a structural force that more and more dissociates the individual from collective bodies and situates the experience of the human being in abstract systems created by new forms of communication, a new quality of the technical environment, and new modes of mobility.\(^1\) In his book *Consequences of Modernity*, Anthony Giddens describes how advanced technologies cause a transformation of the most intimate spheres of individual experience.\(^2\) If so, communal experiences inevitably happen to undergo significant changes too. Academic thought of the last decades, exemplified among others by Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, provides an explanation and implicitly a justification for the disintegration of some traditional collective bodies such as nation by pointing to its constructed nature and fictional foundations.\(^3\) Globalization is thus given both a “spontaneous” (stimulated by technology and other factors) but also a “conscious” (resulting from the implementation of the learned thought) dimension, which has led to the pronouncement of the end of the era of nations for the sake of the development of the global village where nations are “replaced” by states that are more and more transformed into providers of administrative bodies.\(^4\)

Without denying the strong diffusive tendencies in the contemporary world, one observes at the same time the reappearance of the attachment to nationalistic forms of collective experience. The spectacular manifestation of nationalistic sentiments can be observed in the field of sport competition on a global scale institutionalized in the form of World Olympic Games. The impact of these kinds of events relies predominantly on eliciting nationalistic sentiments where a greater value is attributed not so much to an individual achievement itself as to its framing by national identity.

The world of culture appears to assume, at least in its most manifested declarations, the anti-nationalist ideology following the ideas that compromised fictive constructions. In reality, the issue of national distinctions in art and culture is more complex, which can be seen for example in the still fashionable events such as the Venice Biennial quite immune to the definitive dissolution of national divisions.\(^5\) However, the vitality of the concept of national identity does not necessarily derive from the persistence of its traditional forms, which are nowadays particularly strongly cultivated by the so called rightist factions of various societies. Individual experience could not remain resistant to globalizing factors, so collective subjectivity such as national identification must have evolved as well.

The selected case study of the recent history of the national gallery in Warsaw named “Zacheta”\(^6\) attempts to trace the evolution of the concept of national identity from its traditional understanding into the one shaped in and by the contemporary global world.\(^7\)

In 1993 Andy Rottenberg, an internationally well-known Polish curator of contemporary art, was appointed director of this institution. This gallery has been an important symbol in the general Polish consciousness due to its role as the first programmatically national art institution founded back in the 19th century when Poland was under partitions. Owing to the just passed decades of the communist system and dependence on Russia, the turn of the eighties and nineties of the 20th century triggered a general revival of the

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1. One needs here to make a distinction between global processes and international character of cooperation characteristic of earlier history. Globalism is immune to the sense of national belonging and the national self which were important in the modernist period of internationalization (and which still takes place aside from globalization). The differentiation between both terms is based here on a thesis that internationalism is interpreted as a “project” term in economic and cultural exchange, whereas globalism describes a situation resulting from economic, social and cultural mingling. The former is the ethical situation being an effect of economic processes that tend to ignore national affiliations.


4. See for example how Zygmunt Bauman describes the developing relations among the member countries in the European Community, Ponowoczesność jako źródło cierpieli (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Ścieł, 2000).

5. See for example, Charlotte Bydler, *The Global Art World* (Stockholm; Elanders Gotab, 2004).\(^8\)

6. Trans. as ‘encouragement’.

politics of nationalist sentiments for which institutions such as Zacheta were of established importance. Taking into account the curator’s strong involvement in the promotion of contemporary art and her interest in the values of the western world of art (and by that I mean social, cultural and political matters which were high on the leftist agenda) which by the 1980s and 1990s had been promoted in full bloom, the appointment of Anda Rottenberg brought about a big question about the future profile of the institution. The logical conclusion of the ideological changes and movements taking place in the West, which struggled for more and more equality and freedom for various social groups in various terms implied the anti-nationalistic politics of multiculturalism, cultural nomadism and international fluid exchange. In this concept of the world no significance was to be attached to nationalistic divisions, or they were perceived even as a historical construct itself to be deconstructed and eventually ignored.\(^\text{139}\)

Given that for decades Poland was to a large extent kept apart from the intense march of globalization and that because of it the global world became for Polish society an object of desire, the regained sovereignty was a moment of uncritical affirmation of the globalist politics rather than a subject of critique. Some aspects of the contemporary capitalism such as thorough commercialization, unrestrained consumption, and the homogenization of society were noticed, yet in a total count, the processes of globalization with their powerful prospect of possibilities were welcomed rather than questioned. The positive appearance of globalization was in a way underlined by the unification of Europe, which seemed to replicate the global logic on a continental scale. In such particular political and historical circumstances the confrontation of the old national ideology with the processes of globalization seemed to offer nothing but a split in the consciousness of Polish society and in fact it did produce a chasm, sometimes a quite violent clash between the leftist or liberally minded and the conservative factions which saw in the globalizing world a threat for Polish national identity.\(^\text{140}\)

Therefore, while studying the history of exhibition at the Zacheta National Gallery of Art in the decade of the nineties, one could be perplexed by the very fact of appointing Anda Rottenberg as its director, even if this fact can be interpreted as a sign of a conscious governmental policy aiming at the internationalization of the Polish art scene. What appears to build a paradox was Rottenberg’s explicit declaration and openly demonstrated endeavors to reclaim for Zacheta its national status and mission,\(^\text{141}\) which in the case of this institution were largely dissolved during the communist period.\(^\text{142}\)

The elucidation of this seemingly paradoxical combination of nationalist ideology, which gives priority to national interests, and leftist criticism, which questions the conservative order, of which thinking in nationalist terms is an integral part, can provide a new perspective on the meaning of the concept of national identity in a global world.

The elucidation of a paradox was to some extent provided by Anda Rottenberg herself, who in one of her interviews shortly after her appointment stated that “the presentation of Polish art doesn’t aim at the articulation of some kind of national features.” “National identity doesn’t refer to the art that is shown here but to situating of the

\(^{139}\) Globalist relations secure a far greater anonymization of their participants when compared to international exchange. See also Anthony Giddens, \textit{Europe in epoce globalnej}, trans. Magdalena Kłosowicz, Miłosz Habura (Warszawa: PWN, 2009), 141-144, where the author writes about the difference between national identity and cultural/ethnic identity.

\(^{140}\) I am referring here among others to the incidents that took place in Zacheta in connection with the exhibitions raising controversial social and national issues that caused violent physical interventions of rightist politicians such as for example the lifting the figure of John Paul II from the floor in Maurizio Cattelan’s “Non Ora,” an installation intended as a form of protest against the debaseing horizontal position of the Pope, who is considered a Polish religious and national icon.

\(^{141}\) Rottenberg could have well opted for the “state” name and status of Zacheta. Her endeavors to reclaim the national dimension of the institution reflect in fact more general tendencies to refit the meaning of national identity in the contemporary world.

\(^{142}\) Even if the communist ideology and politics exploited the nationalist rhetoric, at the same time and because of it, they contributed to the devaluation of thinking in nationalist terms. The exhibitions at Zacheta such as for example “Folk Culture – National Culture” in 1968, “Army in the Fatherland’s Life” from the same year or “Colors of Polish Armies,” despite the quite epidemic use of the adjective “Polish” in the titling shows, contributed to a rather to a grotesque image of celebrations of national values in the communist practice.
institution. [...] 'National means no more than 'of
the highest rank' [...]'.

Tellingly, the first show Rottenberg curated at this institution was “Richard Serra. Props,” which was accompanied by a catalogue containing an introductory text written by a noted art historian, Rosalind Krauss. The exhibition was announced as the first one in East Central Europe of this kind. The nations entering the European Community as new members. The admission itself to the EU of the countries of Central Europe didn’t change the sense as “members of the highest rank.”

As Anthony Giddens writes about the phenomenon of a relative deprivation of an individual whose life’s evaluation depends on the others, with whom she or he compares. Giddens, *Europa w epoce globalnej* no. 11, 1994. 


144 As Anthony Giddens writes about the phenomenon of a relative deprivation of an individual whose life’s evaluation depends on the others, with whom she or he compares. Giddens, *Europa w epoce globalnej*, 63. Similar mechanisms are at play in the case of national relations in a global system. The example is provided here by the self-evaluation of the nations entering the European Community as new members. The admission itself to the EU of the countries of Central Europe didn’t change instantaneously in the radical manner the sense of their national self. Anthony Giddens writes about these countries’ self-sense as “members of the second category,” ibid., 67.

One can suggest here an analogy to the theory of Jean Baudrillard, see for example *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972).

Thus the nation is no no more than a “stock exchange” kind rather than serving the specificity of the culture it represents. According to such logic, the task of the gallery is not to reflect upon the meaning of the term “Polish” but to ask where the Polish nation with its culture stands – or by means of its culture may stand - on the international arena. The role of the gallery is understood, one may say, as that of a broker of the national assets, which in the case of Anda Rottenberg’s museum program happened to be contemporary art. One of the exponents of such thinking was in the case of Rottenberg her rather steady cooperation with a selected group of Polish artists: few but well known, and what’s important also known abroad. Abakanowicz, Bałka, Tarasewicz, Wodiczko and four or five others constituted a pretty constant core of most of the exhibitions Rottenberg as the director of Zacheta curated for foreign venues. These artists were Rottenberg’s “national” stock on the global museum market. Their established position minimized the risk of loss of the national prestige and secured the ground for creating occasionally some new propositions. The importance of art in the global competition gets reduced to its more and more instrumental value.

Another consequence of the processes mentioned is such that the valuing of art doesn’t take place in any neutral space – since there is no such – but basically it is interlaced with the position of the country of origin on the global scale. And I don’t mean that the higher level on this scale most likely equals to respective economic wealth which guarantees a much more comfortable and easier access to extensive education but that the national origin carries with it a certain credit of quality as it were, a brand value so to speak, which does its own workings on the final worth of the artistic product.
One could say that by focusing only on the international standing of the institution Rottenberg thus managed to free the notion of “nationality” from the old power structures which put national identity in the service of the paternalistic, conservative order. While stating that national identity practiced at Zacheta is not about the articulation of some kind of national features but about situating the institution, Rottenberg probably meant its position to be some kind of international appreciation and honor. Looking at her other exhibitions reveals however, that the removal of national specificity from the denotative content of national identity and a move towards the politics of international recognition as such bears further implications. No appreciation takes place in a vacuum or remains just an abstract feeling. Leaving one order means entering another. The change of masters became explicit in the very exhibition practice of Rottenberg which declined some paternalistic authority in order to follow the regime of capital. In 2000, in order to mark the 100th anniversary of Zacheta’s architecture, Rottenberg programmed and curated a set of shows among which were “Polonia Polonia,” dedicated to the history of representation of Poland in art, and another – a rather minor show – “Euro art. Art of the 20th century from bank collections.” The difference of position of the organizer towards the thematic content was telling in that while the first show was in its premise a subject of critical investigation, the second one had a distinctly celebratory character. “Polonia Polonia” assumed a critical position towards the traditional notion of Polish identity, whereas the poetics of “Euro art” was based on the eulogy of what was shown. In this latter case, the art presented was described in terms of “artistic revelations.” No thematic due organized the installation which focused on the overall aesthetic effect that underlined the masterly character of art works shown. The exhibition was received as “beautifully composed”; the role of banking in culture for example – which should have been here a rather expected critical take - was presented as that of an invisible benefactor and nothing else.

A closer insight into the display and narrative of “Polonia Polonia” revealed also other aspects of the “global” politics of national identity practiced in the Polish national gallery besides the critical stance if not hostility towards old notions of nationality and patriotism. There was, for example, a distinct difference in the interpretative treatment of older art and contemporary production. The art of the past was contextualized by means of the exhibition design composed of stylized old furniture (Fig. 1) which developed its own epic about the landed gentry and middle class nature of Polish patriotism but importantly added to it the patina of the bygone times with an aura of obsolescence.

![Fig.1](image)

Part I elaborated by Anna Jerzy Sabra.
Courtesy of Zachęta National Gallery

Contemporary works, on the other hand, were lacking in any specific historical characterization and were presented in the aesthetic frame provided by a white cube (Fig. 2). The domestic environment of earlier times was replaced by an alleged neutrality of white walls. The museum as if stopped defining itself as a mediating agent and displayed contemporary works as autonomous, self-sufficient entities that produce a message free...
from contextual determinants. The selection of older works, quite strictly limited to a kind of old fashioned iconography of Poland, appeared populist and demagogic and as such asked for critical distance. The contemporary works, on the other hand, were chosen with a much bigger thematic breadth, appearing as liberators of the older restrictive tradition, the more so because they themselves communicated doubt, irony or disappointment about Polish identity. They were endowed with the status of messengers of truth, speaking subjects in themselves. What thus happened here was the silent mythologization of contemporary art and artists which turned them into “neutral,” “authentic,” and “true” and as such made them into an effective currency on the market of cultural exchange, allegedly free from “national” dependence. The engine which speeded up the efficacy of this transformation was the white cube translucent for an inattentive observer. As a result, two seemingly disparate goals were achieved at the same time: leftist criticism and capitalist transaction – interestingly, one derivative of another; while the Capital is the invisible but operating keystone that lets “nationality” fuse with global politics.

Globalism is generally associated with progressing homogenization, yet one may claim, its intertwining with nationalistic politics is exactly what produces also particularities in the global world. And by that I don’t mean mingling of local cultural specifics with the sameness produced by the global market but that the “stock exchange” system described above produces very concrete diverging realities depending on the nation’s position on the global scale. The lower we get on the ladder, what counts more and more, is not how we deal with the developing situation but how we are dealt with, and thus for example, whether I exhibit my culture or I am exhibited even if my impression is that of self-standing. The terms “good” and “bad,” standards of “right” and “wrong,” “correct” or “incorrect” are imposed by that part of the global map which occupies economically a more dominant position. Those on the lower end of the global scale accommodate their concepts, notions, systems of working to those on the other end of that scale. In consequence, local divergences and particularities which do not fit into those framings are turned into a symptom of cultural anachronism, cultural folklore, which is perhaps entertaining but not standing up to the global competition. The more of the “cultural left-over” the more “contaminated,” sense of self, the deeper experience of one’s own particularity and locality (even if cultural “contaminations” are more and more subject to gradual erasure and dissolution). Another effect is such that the higher the nation’s position the greater individualization of its cultural achievements pointing to its richness and diversity; those on the other end function as elements of a pretty homogenous whole easy to contain within a simple naming and qualification (e.g. the title “art from Poland” does not sound that awkward as “art from the United States”). Yet, paradoxically to some extent, glocalisms are produced more intensely in cultures further from the globalizing center. The further you are from the higher position, the more “ethnic,” “exotic,” “different” (whatever it means) nation so to speak.

Fig. 2
Photograph by Anna Pietrzak-Bartos, courtesy of Zachęta National Gallery of Art.
you become.\textsuperscript{146} Yet, this doesn’t here concern the unspoken outer perspective only but also self-perception. The lower standing the more pervasive sense of self-as-”other.” “Self-sameness,” “being at home with oneself” is an experience to a large extent reserved for the best situated on the global arena. “Polonia Polonia” for example, exposed in a particularly visible manner the problem the Polish people have with their identity.\textsuperscript{147} The clarification needs to be made here that the issue of national identity and national character has been in this argument in a way artificially extracted from the matrix of concerns and factors conditioning the political economy of the individual self (e.g. gender). An intention here is to define tendencies concerning the development of the politics of communal identity.

As a way of looking at the problem from another side, namely from the point of the effects of nationalistic global politics when it comes to the international cultural cooperation, one can make an insight into the exhibition of Polish culture entitled “Land of the Winged Horseman” shown in 1999 in the Art Institute of Chicago. The show presented cultural and historical artifacts of the period of Poland’s greatest power and wealth, namely the Baroque era, in one of the biggest U.S. institutions. In the way the exhibition was displayed, one could see a homogenizing approach of the hosting institution toward culture for the presentation of which it devoted a few of its galleries. There was, for example, no mention of the authors’ names in the press release of Polish academics who prepared the show, while at the same time the name of the patrons of the space was stressed distinctly at the very beginning (Fig.3). The importance of the exhibition, by means of constructing the press release text, was implicitly defined in terms of the vastness of the geographical area that was traversed in the course of gathering objects for the show, of the quantity of artifacts brought to the exhibition and their material value.

\textbf{Fig.3: Exhibition press release}

The rhetoric of the description almost evoked the image of a conquered country. This picture constructed by the press release contrasted with an experience of the actual display that offered a rather scarce number of objects functioning in the context of the show’s description more as trophies (Fig.4). Given the stress put by the authors of the announcement on the cultural scope of the exhibition that dealt with the Polish religion, army, monarchy and nobility, the few small rooms presenting singular items as representative of each thematic scope gave an appearance of the surrogate of what was supposed to be presented.

\textsuperscript{146} This is among others a reference to Zizek, who claims that behind global multiculturalism and supposed equality of all partners there is an unspoken privileging of the Western subject. Hence, by implication, the West in an unspoken way establishes the standards what is the “right” form of “Westernness,” see Zizek’s description of the phenomenon of “the paradox of colonization” in Slavoy Zizek, The Ticklish Subject. The Abstract Center of Political Ontology (London, New York: Verso, 1999), 215-223.

\textsuperscript{147} The sculpture Victoria-Victoria mała [“small”] by Krzysztof Bednarski representing cut fingers in “V” shape speaks of the disillusionment with the Solidarity heritage and values implemented in the contemporary Polish reality.
Simply put, no decorum was retained between the content of the exhibition and the language in which the show was described what resulted from the accommodation of the show’s reception to the habits and supposed expectations of middle class American audience and not from the organizer’s engaged approach to the subject of the presentation. If we add to it that the show took place in distant galleries of no prominence and that it was run in opposition to other events, the admission was not ticketed but free, the overall impression was of a product on a bargain sale, which perhaps truly but sadly reflects the position of Poland in the politics of the United States on the international arena.

Since no signifier is not without repercussions for the signified, one can risk a claim that the tentative comparison of “Polonia-Polonia” and “Land of the Winged Horseman” exhibitions demonstrated also that not only culture reception but the very culture formation too of a given nation in the global world takes place according to not what is to be shown or what is to be said but what one can achieve by means of art in the global competition.

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148 By accommodation to middle-class habits and expectations one may mean not only a presentation in a form easy to apprehend and eventually consume by the public. As it has been argued elsewhere, the exhibition had assumed a poetics characteristic for western or history-epic movies in a sense that some objects and images such as the “winged horseman” (hussar) for example evoked on the imaginary level the reminiscence of Indians or other ‘opposite side of a battle’ framing the scene in a cinematic perspective.