

Polonus Populus: War or Peace?

Dagmara Wyskiel is a recognised Polish artist and author of modern art projects that use diverse visual strategies. She has been a citizen of Antofagasta for 10 years and is known for commonly integrating local artists. In May 2012, she presented her project "Polonus Populus" in the Museum of Contemporary Art Subsidiary Parque Forestal. It is an object performance, located in the hall of the building, which tries to depict – and interrogate – Polish history from 966 to 2012. It is an exercise in memory and identity that invites the spectator to participate corporally and reflect from his position.

The operation is structurally simple: it is a plastic transparent band 37cm high and 300m long that has each year of the history painted on it, with years of war in red and years of peace in white. The transparent line is designed in the body scale. Hanging at the height of the spectator, it forms a labyrinth of curves and passages that move around freely. The sound is the author's whisper, thinking aloud in Polish; audio that corresponds to the video "Qué hago con tanta memoria" ("What am I doing with so much memory?"; 2009).

Inaugurating the performance on the 3rd of May parallels the celebration of the May 3rd Constitution Day in Poland. It was the first constitution in Europe and the second in the world, "with an absolutely transgressor view of democracy and innovation", says the artist. The performance's title quotes the way John Paul II addressed the Polish nation in his apostolic letters: "Ad perpetuam rei memoriam – Polonus Populus." The last phrase means "Polish People" and refers to the nation that created "Rzeczypospolita." Which in direct translation means "common thing," or better, 'commonwealth' with the concept of an inclusive, modern country that evokes certain years of glory.

In order to reconsider the original length from thousands of kilometres in distance, the author decided to concentrate on the events that seemed to determine Poland's character; and are definitive of the nation's historic balance between war and peace. While discussing the relationship between Poland and, its former neighbour, the Soviet Union, the author claims: "It is neither orient, occident nor centre. With a dreadful geopolitical location between the German order and the Russian volume that have always confronted themselves halfway. Poland - the most catholic country in the world and the most conservative in European Union. Resistant at any price."

The exercise implied a definition of periods lived in each state. However, how to obtain it dealing with a place "of constant social conflicts, sovereignty problems and imposed governments, with no need to shed blood"?

The issue needs interpretation, synthesis and representation of the historical, social and religious background. It needs to hide and reemerge through a subjective symbolism which does not allow any half-tones. However, there were complex years that the author discussed with other Poles. Searching for definitions that have not always been found. Hence a pictorial play of fleck and glaze, and years remaining as an intermediate state – red with a white layer.

The intervention invites you to immerse yourself in and gaze at Polish history as a disrupted space. Walking through it is to assume the comparative game between periods of catastrophe and calm; is to imagine the history. The intervention is also an experience of time convoluted. In the apparent linearity there is a chronology fraught with kinks, contradictions and parallel spans. "The backbone of Polish history is long and

broken at several points. With plaster fragments and poor recovery, with hernias in embarrassing places, memory fractures, religious prosthesis, mystic patches and holy placebo in the form of hope," says Wyskiel. By moving through the room, it operates "a story that is returned, repeated, cross, cleared and intertwined."

"Polonus Populus" invites us to submerge ourselves into the painting, in the style of Zen calligraphy, gestural and repetitive shaped by the intercepting numbers — numbers that lead and disorientate us. A labyrinth where despite the intensity of the events, each year is translated to be just a second. Rereading the story of one's nation involves constructing a drive where the weapon is not necessarily a history but a text to decipher, a scriptural map or territory suspended.

The exercise of memory is then a question of identity. An identity that is blurred by distance and the edges of the country and its history. Deterritorialized identity seeking a body through the pictorial gesture.

A "picture" overwhelmed in an infinite journey /It becomes neither the country nor its history or painting. But it is a repetitive and meditative experience that invites us to interpret the proper processes of war and peace from our standpoint.

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The film displays the 1055 years of Polish history emphasizing the relationship between times of peace and war, reassessing the meaning of this, and highlighting the relationship between the two. Questioning the victories and defeats we learn in school and reflecting on the concept of national heroism in a European context points out conflicting times of "superficial peace" (1793 – 1918, 1946 – 1989 among others), under which the struggle for true sovereignty boiled and years of government taxes added up to centuries. How much blood has to run in an uprising to define it as a year of war? What to do with the years that were erased from history? Can a country that does not exist be in a war?

Finally, if we add the periods when we could live peacefully in a free country, we reach 487 years, equivalent to 46% of our existence as a state.

The backbone of Polish history is long and broken at several points. With plaster fragments and poor recovery, with hernias in embarrassing places, broken memories, prosthetic religion, mystical patches and holy placebo in the form of hope. Neither East nor West, but not centered. With terrible geopolitical location between the command of Germany and the volume of Russian, which is always facing the middle. The most Catholic people of the world and the most conservative in the European Union. Tough, at all costs.