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*FLIGHT*

artist: Roman Stańczak

curators: Łukasz Mojsak, Łukasz Ronduda

representative of the Zachęta: Ewa Mielczarek

commissioner of the Polish Pavilion: Hanna Wróblewska

organiser: Zachęta — National Gallery of Art



**Please feel invited to explore the texts accompanying the exhibition at the Polish Pavilion: curatorial statement by Łukasz Mojsak and Łukasz Ronduda, excerpt from text by Andrzej Szczerski concerning the *Flight* project, text by Dorota Michalska devoted to the artistic practice of Roman Stańczak, and essay by Adam Szymczyk devoted to the idea of the Biennale and national pavilions.**

## Two Aircrafts

Imagining the outcome of the process, initiated by Roman Stańczak, of turning an aircraft inside out posed considerable difficulties. Based on a seemingly straightforward transformation algorithm, the artist's concept was challenging, if not downright impossible, to visualise. Stańczak himself declared that for him the final result was shrouded in mystery. Thus, from the very beginning, *Flight* has borne characteristics of an artwork that seeks to convey an unimaginable situation — one that needs to be experienced in order to make any attempts at understanding possible at all. Stańczak's inside-out aircraft is a piece devoted to unimaginable reversals, extremely rare and often inexplicable events, paradoxes and shocks that shape history and determine the modern-day condition of Europe and the world. It is a monument to the obverses and reverses of reality, which — however difficult it is to imagine — penetrate each other or unexpectedly swap places.

Such a reversal of reality was experienced by Eastern European societies at the turn of the 1990s, when the collapse of communism ushered in the capitalist transformation. Having abandoned a regime whose end seemed difficult to imagine, those societies adopted a new one, which is also said to last forever. "It's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism"<sup>1</sup> — wrote Mark Fisher, seeking to prove that there was more to capitalism than a mere economic system. It is the foundation of the all-embracing condition of "capitalist realism", which penetrates and determines all spheres of reality. It draws on the conviction that capitalism is the only possible socio-economic regime, to which there is no alternative, or at least alternatives are impossible to imagine; a system that subdues and absorbs all previous history; a hidden dark potentiality inherent in all previous systems.<sup>2</sup>

Poland witnessed the advent of capitalist realism at the turn of the 1990s as a result of the transformation "shock therapy",<sup>3</sup> which led to the economic and social exclusion of entire segments of the population and peripheral regions abandoned to degradation, or even compelled to return to pre-modern reality of life and methods of securing necessary resources.<sup>4</sup> A reflection of the radicality of that change, the image of the condition of its victims and the degradation of their material world has been discerned in Roman Stańczak's early practice from the beginning of the 1990s.<sup>5</sup> The artist conveyed it via the very figure of reversal — turning objects of everyday use [e.g. kettle, women's tights, bathtub] inside out, or through their methodic devastation, depriving them of their outer layer. He therefore concentrated on the realm of extreme destitution.

In the world of capitalist realism, the opposite end of the spectrum to the poorest masses — people like those to whom Stańczak referred to in his early pieces — is occupied by a narrow group in possession of resources that exceed many times over the wealth and income of the other social classes.

1 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism. Is There No Alternative?* (London: Zero Books, 2009), 2.

2 Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 5.

3 Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine. The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 177.

4 Tomasz Rakowski, *Hunters, Gatherers, and Practitioners of Powerlessness. An Ethnography of the Degraded in Postsocialist Poland*, trans. Søren Gauger (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2016).

5 See e.g. Dorota Michalska, "Rzeźby zdegradowane. Twórczość Romana Stańczaka wobec transformacji ustrojowej po 1989 roku," *Miejsce*, no. 4, 2018.

Today, this so-called 1% — the global financial elite — is already in control of half of the world's wealth.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, more and more people in the countries with the highest economic inequalities suffer from destitution, while efforts towards reducing poverty levels have failed to deliver intended results.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, as Richard H. Tawney wrote at the beginning of the 20th century, “what thoughtful rich people call the problem of poverty, thoughtful poor people call with equal justice a problem of riches”.<sup>8</sup> The situation of those at the top of the income and wealth ladder influences the situation of those on its lowest echelons, while increased poverty levels usually go hand in hand with higher financial status and earnings of the wealthiest.<sup>9</sup> Albeit different in every conceivable way, the narrow circle of the richest and the masses of the poorest are not detached from each other, they do not function autonomously in the economy and society. They are the two sides of the same coin that affect each other.

Stańczak's sculpture — an inside-out private aircraft, a means of transport of the 1% — stands as an expression of this very obverse and reverse of the social and economic world troubled by dramatic inequalities. It does so not only via the mere gesture of reversal, but also through the meanings that this gesture came to acquire in the early period of the artist's practice — during Poland's capitalist transformation, with his work based on the deconstruction of objects of everyday use recognised as a reflection of the condition of the destitute. Of note are also the methods and tools, derived from that very period, employed by the artist, who operates without the support of specialists, advanced technologies and sophisticated machinery.

Besides the flourishing of financial markets, which largely catapulted representatives of the 1% to their current position, the main factors behind the growth of inequalities also include globalisation and development of technology.<sup>10</sup> All these elements of the late capitalist landscape are symbolised by the luxury private aircraft which Stańczak turned inside out. In this light, the artist's very work on the sculpture acquired a performative character as it became a confrontation — based on simple, “poor”, pre-modern methods — with a technological symbol of the lifestyle of the world's narrow financial elite and its international mobility.

In Poland, wealth and income inequalities are not [yet] perceived as an urgency. Although they have not reached such levels as, for instance, in the United States, a recent study conducted by the World Inequality Lab at the Paris School of Economics has shown that income inequality is greater than previously estimated.<sup>11</sup> Jakub Majmurek argues that, in the longer run, this issue might expose the Polish society to a greater division than the current ideological conflict provoked, among other factors, by the 2010 presidential airplane crash in Smolensk, Russia.<sup>12</sup> The fact that Majmurek draws a line between these two issues is telling. Inequalities are not devoid of impact on social cohesion and form strong relations with political conditions and social polarisation caused by ideological

6 Rupert Neate, “Richest 1% own half the world's wealth, study finds,” *The Guardian*, November 14, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/inequality/2017/nov/14/worlds-richest-wealth-credit-suisse>, accessed April 20, 2019.

7 Anthony B. Atkinson, *Inequality. What Can Be Done?* (Cambridge, MA, London, UK: Harvard University Press, 2015), 23–24.

8 Richard H Tawney, “Poverty as an Industrial Problem,” in *Memoranda on the Problems of Poverty* (London: William Morris Press, 1913), quoted in Atkinson, *Inequality*, 25.

9 Atkinson, *Inequality*, *ibid.*

10 Atkinson, *Inequality*, 82.

11 “Income Inequality, Poland, 1980–2016”, World Inequality Database, <https://wid.world/country/poland/>, accessed April 20, 2019.

12 Jakub Majmurek, “Nierówności podziela nas bardziej niż wrak Tupolewa,” *WP Opinie*, April 5, 2019, <https://opinie.wp.pl/majmurek-nierownosci-podziela-nas-bardziej-niz-wrak-tupolewa-opinia-6367051682219649a>, accessed April 20, 2019.

issues. In the United States, this phenomenon has been defined as “the dance of ideology and unequal riches”.<sup>13</sup>

In today’s Poland, it is still the political and ideological divisions around such questions as the Smolensk tragedy that make themselves more clearly felt. Smolensk actually seemed to be the first connotation triggered by the idea to exhibit in the Polish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale a sculpture that resulted from the process of turning a real aircraft inside out. It also appeared to loom from underneath all other motifs and contexts in which Stańczak’s sculpture sits. We may even go so far as to say that the atmosphere around the project in Poland was marked by a Smolensk “ideosis” — to refer to the term used in 1984 by Andrzej Turowski<sup>14</sup> in the context of Polish post-war art that functioned in “an ideologically saturated space that limits unconstrained manifestation of thoughts due to a top-down omnipresent perspective”, which “does not allow the artwork to preserve its innocence”.<sup>15</sup>

Yet, the conflict around the Smolensk tragedy is yet another iteration of a more fundamental social rift,<sup>16</sup> otherwise manifested by the antagonisms and inequalities provoked by the capitalist transformation, among other factors. The shock of the transformation opened up the possibility to deploy drastic neoliberal methods, while the presidential airplane crash in 2010 changed the rules of the country’s political game and aggravated social polarisation. The transformation in the 1990s introduced capitalist realism in Poland, whereas the Smolensk tragedy gave rise to a faith that unites all those for whom there was more to that event than a mere aviation catastrophe; for whom its meaning connects with the sphere of the sacred — it bears a spiritual dimension as an expression of the suffering of the nation treated cruelly by history.

Yet, are the foundations on which capitalist realism rests are indeed so-far removed from faith? Perhaps they are closer to the very realm of faith than to rationality? Although, as Fisher wrote, “capitalism brings with it a massive desacralization of culture”,<sup>17</sup> a closer look may blur the seeming opposition between these two spheres. As Joseph Vogl states, “Political economy has always had an affinity with spectrology, pointing to invisible hands and other such ghostly presences to explain the course of economic events. This may well be because there is something uncanny about how, in economic processes, circulating objects and signs take on a spectral willfulness”.<sup>18</sup> A perfect illustration can be found in financial markets, allegedly „the purest distillation of market activity in general”,<sup>19</sup> to which, as we have already remarked, today’s global financial elite largely owes its current position. Vogl argues that the mechanism and functioning of these markets seems to be founded on faith rather than rationality, as can be seen, for instance, in the fact that economics — “this dogma of our time” — is hard-pressed

13 Nolan McCarty, Keith Poole, Howard Rosenthal, *Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches* [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006], quoted in: Aktinson, *Inequality*, 12; see also: Joseph E. Stiglitz, *The Price of Inequality: How Today’s Divided Society Endangers Our Future* [New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012].

14 Andrzej Turowski, “Polska ideoza,” in *Sztuka polska po 1945 roku. Materiały sesji Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki, Warszawa, listopad 1984* [Warsaw: PWN, 1987], 31.

15 Ibid.

16 As stated by Michał Łuczewski, among other figures, in „Łączą nas różne paniki, nie tylko dziecięce. Także antyuchodźcze, antysemitki, homofobiczne czy antyklerykalne”, Michał Bilewicz and Michał Łuczewski interviewed by Grzegorz Wysocki, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, April 13, 2019, <http://wyborcza.pl/magazyn/7,124059,24647085,lacza-nas-rozne-paniki-nie-tylko-dzieciece-takze.html>, accessed April 20, 2019.

17 Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 6.

18 Joseph Vogl, *The Specter of Capital*, trans. Joachim Redner, Robert Savage [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015], 1.

19 Vogl, *The Specter of Capital*, 11.

to clarify the inexplicable crashes and crises that occur therein, and which have actually accompanied capitalism since the 17th century, for example in the form of bursting speculation bubbles.<sup>20</sup> For that matter, the author of *The Specter of Capital* writes even about an “oikodicy”, a theodicy of the world of the liberal capitalist economic doctrine, which “views contradictions, adverse effects, and breakdowns in the system as eminently compatible with its sound institutional arrangement”.<sup>21</sup>

In this context, the aircraft that symbolises the 1%, which Stańczak deconstructs, may be perceived as a figure of faith in the free market, not so far-removed from religious faith. From the very start, Stańczak’s work has been characterised by a high dose of spirituality: for the artist, the act of penetrating an object, turning it inside out, serves to reach the spiritual foundations of reality. Such gestures also bear a strong relation with the exploration of the moment of passage to the other side — death and preparation for it. Stańczak declares: “My sculptures speak of living not among objects but among ghosts”. As for *Flight*, one of such ghosts is surely the Smolensk tragedy and its myth, which, although it seems to have been exhausted and lost its essence, still remains unburied and continues to haunt the Polish community and polarise it. But another such ghost is the “capitalist spirit”.<sup>22</sup>

Financial markets with their derivative instruments were designed not only as a stable system, but also a step towards a world in which risk has been essentially eliminated — where “indeterminate future can be assimilated into the present since it is offset by determinable expectations about the future”. A world that “moves gently and continuously from moment to moment, knowing neither crashes nor sudden leaps and bounds”.<sup>23</sup> Yet, that vision has been challenged by crises that troubled financial markets, such as that in 2008.

Also in the case of the shock therapy that served to implement capitalism in Poland everything was supposed to go well, as assured by the apostle of laissez faire Jeffrey Sachs, who played a major role in designing the process in question. It was supposed to bring about nothing but “momentary dislocations” caused by prices skyrocketing overnight, “But then they’ll stabilize — people will know where they stand”<sup>24</sup> — Sachs argued.

One of the inherent characteristics of capitalist realism discussed by Fisher is the expansion of bureaucracy and its essentially simulated control function: “Inevitably, a short-circuiting occurs, and work becomes geared towards the generation and massaging of representations rather than to the official goals of the work itself”.<sup>25</sup> Bureaucracy therefore becomes akin to a performance of control pursued for its own sake, to sustain an illusion, which removes its object from the field of vision. What is more, as the circumstances of the recent Boeing aircraft crashes have demonstrated, neoliberal capitalism can also effectively undermine state control systems,<sup>26</sup> conjuring up a parallel reality, whose phantom-like character is laid bare only at the moment of a catastrophe.

20 Vogl, *The Specter of Capital*, 10–11 .

21 Vogl, *The Specter of Capital*, 16.

22 Vogl, *The Specter of Capital*, 3.

23 Vogl, *The Specter of Capital*, 78.

24 Quoted in Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*, 179.

25 Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 46.

26 Will Hutton, “The Boeing Scandal Is an Indictment of Trump’s Corporate America,” *The Guardian*, April 7, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/apr/07/boeing-737-max-regulation-corporate-america>, accessed April 20, 2019.

As shown by the Final Report of the Committee for the Investigation of National Aviation Accidents concerning the crash of the presidential Tu-154 aircraft in 2010, the causes of that catastrophe can also be seen through the prism of a similar performance of control that remains blind to deficiencies.<sup>27</sup> In this case, it was only the unimaginable tragedy that revealed the shortcomings of the supervision of preparations to the flight and the journey itself.

In nearly all of those cases, an immense role in laying bare the shortcomings of seemingly stable and rational systems and the illusionary character of efforts towards minimising risk was played by the so-called “black swans” — extremely rare and inexplicable events that nevertheless exert an extreme impact on reality; shifts “that interrupt the linear sequence of events, leaving behind an island of turbulent activity that are scarcely credible, and excess of randomness”.<sup>28</sup> Touches of the Real. Moments when reality says “check”.

Such events, albeit often tragic, not only mark the end of a certain chapter by turning reality inside out, but also open up a new one, compelling us to draw conclusions. Perhaps this is how we should look at *Flight* — as an image of an inexplicable, improbable catastrophe that had no right to happen. Created through destruction, Stańczak’s sculpture contains a creative force in the sense that it encourages us to reflect on our condition, open up a new chapter and prepare ourselves for the possibility that reality may suddenly witness a complete reversal. Perhaps this is what the artist has in mind when he declares that turning things inside out is about hope<sup>29</sup>

The catastrophe that struck Stańczak’s aircraft is a collision of the forces of the market, capitalism, technological advancement globalisation and modernity with the world of poverty, faith and spirituality. These two spheres are the obverse and reverse, while their conflict indicates the axis of conflict that divides the Polish and global community, in which a response to unfulfilled promises of capitalism and modernity comes in the form of populism, resentment and antagonism.

Suspended between Polish “ideosis” and capitalist realism, Stańczak’s sculpture is a monument to the world where unimaginable things happen, capitalism reveals its irrationality and ideologies dance with unequal riches. The artwork not only demonstrates the conflictual nexuses of ideology, politics and economy that form the modern-day global condition, but also compels us to confront those conflicts and work them through. By showing that seemingly polar opposites are actually not so far-removed — that the obverses and reverses of reality mutually permeate each other — *Flight* invites us to rethink the essentiality of the divisions that separate us. It does not call to thoughtlessly abandon them altogether, but encourages us to check whether their foundation is perhaps a mere play of the inside and the outside devoid of substance.

27 Committee for the Investigation of National Aviation Accidents, “Final Report from the examination of the aviation accident no 192/2010/11 involving the Tu-154M airplane, tail number 1010, which occurred on April 10, 2010 in the area of the Smolensk North airfield,” [https://doc.rmf.pl/rmf\\_fm/store/rkm\\_en.pdf](https://doc.rmf.pl/rmf_fm/store/rkm_en.pdf), accessed April 20, 2019.

28 Vogl, *The Specter of Capital*, 9. See: Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable* (New York: Random House, 2007), xvii–xviii.

29 Jakub Banasiak, „Tworzenie przez niszczenie. Rozmowa z Łukaszem Mojsakiem, Łukaszem Rondudą i Romanem Stańczakiem,” *Szum*, January 11, 2019, <https://magazynszum.pl/tworzenie-przez-niszczenie-rozmowa-z-lukaszem-mojsakiem-lukaszem-ronduda-i-romanem-stanczakiem/>, accessed April 20, 2019.

Andrzej Szczerski

## To Turn Flight Inside Out [excerpt]

The plethora of connotations that surround the airplane transform it into something much more than a mere means of transport available to us today. Since it was invented, the aircraft has stood as a symbol of human genius and the use of technology for the sake of transcending the limits of human existence. It has come to be associated with freedom of travel, potential of establishing contacts between people on an unprecedented scale, democracy and efforts towards worldwide peace. Yet, it is also viewed as a figure of power and a tool with which to subdue others. That the object which allows people to soar above the ground has always had something both irrational and sublime to it makes itself manifest in the cargo cult, described by anthropologists, represented by the indigenous peoples of the Melanesian islands during World War II. They worshipped and discerned divinity in the aircrafts that served to deliver food and other goods to Japanese and American soldiers temporarily stationed on that territory. Entering into contact with those soldiers and profiting in part from the goods delivered by air, the Melanesians came to associate aircrafts with divine creatures bringing generous offerings. They therefore celebrated them by building wooden structures reminiscent of airstrips or by imitating the shape of fuselages and wings in order to invite supernatural beings to visit and embrace them with care. In today's highly developed countries, those temples find their counterpart with aviation museums that collect aircrafts from the past in order to register the history of modernity and worship infinite progress.

7 Given the specific status enjoyed by the aircraft, each aviation catastrophe becomes an absolute tragedy that wrecks the self-confidence of modern-day humans and demonstrates the transience of their dream of flying as well as the limits of their reign over nature. According to many, the 21st century, with its conflicts and the sense of crisis of the Western civilisation, began on 11 September 2001, when airplanes became a tool that served to perpetrate the attack on World Trade Centre in New York City. In the recent years, the whole world followed with emotions the case of the Malaysian airplanes that disappeared somewhere above the South China Sea, as well as the death of the passengers on board the flight from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur, shot down by pro-Russian separatists in Eastern Ukraine. Every such catastrophe leaves nothing but distress and a sense of helplessness, when humans realise that they have failed to completely master their own creation. In Krzysztof Kieślowski's *Blind Chance* [1981], an aviation catastrophe serves to confirm the power of the merciless fate. The film depicts three versions of a storyline from the life of a young man, which depend on whether he manages to catch a train — this, in turn, determines whom he meets on his way. Yet, in the final scenes of each storyline, the man inevitably boards an airplane that explodes immediately after take-off.

An aviation catastrophe transforms an aircraft into thousands of elements that nobody needs and that can never be used to build something new again. Yet, a catastrophe lived through in a proper way also carries a promise of a *catharsis*. Although the lost reality cannot ever be brought back to life, engagement with memory and rites of passage may usher in a revival. The path towards it does not lead through a mere simple repetition, but through appreciation of what the destroyed thing was made of and what has left its traces even after annihilation. The most significant aspect that determines the meaning of the sculpture *Flight* is the very act of turning inside out the individual elements of the

fuselage and wings, followed by merging them together into a single whole, with care taken to preserve every single detail. An aircraft, a symbol of modernity, is thus transformed into its opposite. It is now nothing but defenceless matter, which the sculptor forms anew by putting the broken and torn pieces together. The sculpture appears to recapitulate the experience of the 20th century and stands as a figure of the modern-day interesting times, which the Chinese proverb wishes upon us with perverse irony — the times we are witnessing and yet still fail to comprehend. An answer may come with the very gesture of turning the object inside out, which is essentially an act of reconstruction of what already exists on the foundations of *materia prima*, matter that cannot be disputed.

The catastrophe of the Polish governmental aircraft in Smolensk [Russia] on April 10, 2010, which took the lives of 96 official state delegation members, including the Polish President Lech Kaczyński and his wife Maria, is an experience of absolute evil, akin to every aviation catastrophe. It may bring about further misfortunes, but it may also come as a liminal moment that marks the beginning of a search for everything that resists evil and lends immense power to a revival. Memories from 2010 are obscured by death, collapse, destruction, profaned memory, antagonisms, but also bear testimony to solidarity, compassion, respect and honour. As time goes by, the presidential airplane crash in Smolensk is changing into a universal image of destruction, but it also offers hope that this image may change into its opposite. If we are to survive the interesting times, we need to see the world once again from its unknown inside-outside, just as Roman Stańczak's sculpture shows it. We need to reverse the outer layer; only then can we transcend the superficial and find the *arche*, which allows us to build the world anew. For years, the artist has been searching in his practice for a mythical state of grace, which the work of art may bring upon us. The materiality of his piece, which is not subjected to manipulation and does not hide behind superficial stylisation, allows us to approach that state of grace provided that we negate the sense of seeming safety that modern-day civilisation promises and recognise that physical matter contains a grain of spirituality. This can actualise a transformation and awareness of extreme states that we confront, able to choose good over evil. Such transformation is far from easy, it necessitates sacrifice and suffering, but it is the most significant reason why art exists at all. What makes a genuine flight possible is not an ordinary aircraft, but its inside-out form.



## Roman Stańczak: The Underworld of Capitalism

Roman Stańczak's artistic practice can be seen to express the multi-layered degradation processes experienced in some Polish regions with the advent of capitalism and the country's entry into the global market at the turn of the 1990s. The neoliberal reforms in Poland — as compared to other Eastern European states — brought about particularly dramatic consequences leading to an exponential increase in income inequality, unemployment rate and the share of population living below the minimum subsistence level.<sup>1</sup> On the rise throughout the 1990s and reaching its peak in the 2000s, the degradation suffered by some social groups adopted a complex character: both material and psychological, social and class-related. Stańczak's performances and sculptures, with their depictions of ruined bodies and objects, closely correspond to that reality, which for a long time remained outside the scope of interest of Poland's neoliberal governments and the young generation of artists debuting in the early 1990s.<sup>2</sup>

9 What is more, not only does the artist's work convey the specific post-communist condition, but it may also be considered in a broader perspective as an illustration of the degradation of the human subject that occurred on the global peripheries, which suffered the crisis of the 1980s and entered the global neoliberal circulation in the 1990s. In this context, the time spent by Stańczak in Mexico City in 1993 becomes highly significant as it opens up the possibility to draw meaningful parallels between his artistic practice and the realm of *gore capitalism* — the capitalist management of death that characterises late capitalism in the countries of the broadly understood Global South.<sup>3</sup> This aspect makes itself manifest in Stańczak's work, which challenges the binary divisions between life and death, animate and inanimate matter, performance and sculpture. Contrary to previously formulated interpretations, undermining these categories does not result solely from the individual artistic strategy with its roots in the artist's biographical experience, but it may also be viewed as an effect of the capitalist machine at work, whose dynamics, among its other manifestations, blurs the above enumerated dichotomies.<sup>4</sup>

The prism through which I discuss the relation between Stańczak's works and the capitalist reality is the category of Surrealism, although it may at first seem far-removed from the social and class perspective adopted in this text. Historically, Surrealism was one of the main targets of post-war leftist criticism both in the West and in Poland under communism [in texts by theatre critic Jan Kott, among other figures] as a manifestation of "bourgeois" aesthetics, focussed on individual experience. Yet, my intention is to follow a different understanding of that avant-garde tendency as proposed by Michael Löwy in his book *Morning Star: Surrealism, Marxism, Anarchism* [2010]. The French-Brazilian philosopher and sociologist situates Surrealism in a transnational and transhistorical perspective that transcends

1 That transformation was initiated with a series of market reforms between 1985 and 1988, and sealed after 1989 with the implementation of a neoliberal reform package; see: Jan Sowa, *Ciesz się, późny wnuku! Kolonializm, globalizacja i demokracja radykalna* [Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2008], 414–418.

2 See: *Wyparte dyskursy. Sztuka wobec transformacji i deindustrializacji lat 90.*, ed. Mikołaj Iwański [Szczecin: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Akademii Sztuki w Szczecinie, 2016], e-book: <https://issuu.com/mikolajiwanski/docs/wyparte>, accessed April 20, 2019.

3 Sayak Valencia, *Gore Capitalism* [South Pasadena: Semiotexte; Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2018].

4 James Tyner, *Dead Labor. Toward a Political Economy of Premature Death* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018], vii–xvi.

hitherto delineated geographic, temporal and gender-related frames.<sup>5</sup> For Löwy, whose interests concentrate primarily on the history of Marxism in Latin America, Surrealism was, on the one hand, a result of a shrewd analysis of the capitalist reality, while on the other hand — a tool of resistance against that reality. The author outlines the dynamics that develops between the acknowledgement of one's position as a victim of the neo-colonial economic system and an attempt to formulate a critical stance. I believe that the perspective proposed by Löwy offers the possibility to meaningfully situate Stańczak's work against the backdrop of the global transformations that occurred in the 1990s, both in Poland and in other peripheral countries of the neoliberal system.

## I.

Among the works created by Stańczak during the first half of the 1990s, I distinguish a group of pieces that may be defined as “degraded sculptures”. They originate from the period of the artist's studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw [1989–1994] and the following two years of intensive creative and exhibition activity [1994–1996]. This group comprises such pieces as *Cabinet* [1990–1991], *Chair* [1992–1994], *Couch* [1995] and *Shelving Unit* [1996]. They all share the artistic strategy that consists in removing the outer layer of objects. Stańczak used his chisel as a sort of scalpel with which he tore off the surface to reveal the inner structure. The remnants of that process — shavings, sawdust, springs, scraps of fabric — are usually scattered around the works. The hitherto formulated interpretations most often concentrated on the metaphysical aspect of that sculptural gesture, which offered an insight into the essence of things and the possibility to discover their inner workings.<sup>6</sup> Stańczak himself declares that his works can be perceived as an “exercise in dying”, which consists in uncovering and exploring the negative side of reality. When asked about what turning things inside out means, the artist responds: “It's a preparation for death; it's waiting for the death of certain people. ... I'm waiting for the death of my mother, the death of my father, my siblings, I'm waiting for the death of the Pope. ... By reversing everyday situations, I can show people the world from another angle.”<sup>7</sup> This statement clearly orients potential interpretations towards an idiomatic existential experience. Yet, the above enumerated works can also be situated in the context of the 1990s. Such perspective lends a historical dimension to Stańczak's artistic practice and allows us to shed light on the relation between his works and the socio-political realm.

Against the expectations of politicians and the society, the initial years of the new political regime in Poland brought about a rapid economic collapse and a profound social crisis, whose origins date back to the second half of the 1980s.<sup>8</sup> The most significant phenomenon of the early 1990s was a marked rise in unemployment rates ushered in by the mass closure of state enterprises, the deindustrialisation of entire regions and the dissolution of the network of State Agricultural Farms [PGR].<sup>9</sup> Those processes

5 Michael Löwy, *Morning Star: Surrealism, Marxism, Anarchism, Situationism, Utopia* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009).

6 Roman Stańczak, *Life and Works* (Rome: Nero Press, 2016), 70–78.

7 “Burdened with a Howl from the Heavens. Roman Stańczak in Conversation with Łukasz Gorczyca and Artur Żmijewski,” in Artur Żmijewski, *Trembling Bodies. Conversations with Artists*, trans. Søren Gauger, Maciej Głogoczowski (Bytom, Berlin: CSW Kronika, Berliner Künstlerprogramm/ DAAD), 314–315.

8 Tomasz Rakowski, *Hunters, Gatherers, and Practitioners of Powerlessness. An Ethnography of the Degraded in Post-Socialist Poland*, trans. Søren Gauger (Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books, 2016).

9 See: Katarzyna Duda, *Kiedyś tu było życie, teraz jest tylko bieda. O ofiarach polskiej transformacji* (Warsaw: Książka i Prasa, 2019).

caused a traumatic shock that left a profound mark on a segment of the society. They grew more and more intense throughout the 1990s in order to reach their peak at the beginning of the 21st century.<sup>10</sup> The tension was partly eased only after Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004, which made mass economic migration possible. That multi-aspectual socio-economic crisis, which led to a genuine collapse in some of the country's regions, was described by anthropologist Tomasz Rakowski in his book *Hunters, Gatherers, and Practitioners of Powerlessness. An Ethnography of the Degraded in Post-Socialist Poland*. Rakowski describes a reality "after a catastrophe", which experienced a sudden regression to a pre-modern social, economic and infrastructural realm. Instead of participation in the modernisation process, those regions suffered a civilizational collapse, which forced their inhabitants to seek alternative sources of income, such as gathering and hunting. The world depicted in the book brings to mind a post-apocalyptic reality, where mankind struggles to survive on the ruins of the old world.

The notion of "degradation" aptly describes Stańczak's sculptural strategy deployed in such works as *Cabinet, Chair, and Shelving Unit*.<sup>11</sup> By removing their outer layer, the artist deprived them of their function, while their material disintegration undermined their identity and place in a given category of objects. The sculptures provide an example of a "negative transformation", which manifests itself as an experience of loss and painful rupture. Thus, they resonate strongly with the material and infrastructural situation of some Polish regions — a world of devastated industrial plants, houses, buildings and public spaces, initially abandoned, and later destroyed and plundered. That act of destruction bears connotations that pertained both to social class [as a testimony to extreme poverty] and to history [as an embodiment of the rapid transformation process].

11

The artist's works portray transformation as a time when things lose their former meanings. They cease to docilely satisfy people's expectations. They become unruly, unclear, fleeting. Such a vision of the everyday object closely corresponds to the message conveyed by André Breton's text *Crisis of the Object*, which accompanied the exhibition of Surrealist objects at the Charles Ratton Gallery in May 1936. Breton writes: "Our primary objective must be to oppose by all means the invasion of the world of the senses by things which mankind makes use of more from habit than necessity. Here, as elsewhere, the mad beast of *convention* must be hunted down. ... With this new focus, on the contrary, the same object, however complete it may seem, reverts to an infinite series of *latent possibilities* which are not peculiar to it and therefore entail its transformation".<sup>12</sup> Breton's essay reveals similarities to Stańczak's artistic approach. Both artists pursue the goal of extracting the object from its natural circulation and subjecting it to transformation processes that reveal its different meanings.

Stańczak's sculptures depict a dark face of the capitalist transformation, which adopted the form of "ruining modernisation" in some regions of the country. In order to shed more light on this aspect, it is worth turning to the experience of the inter-war Surrealist avant-garde. In his groundbreaking book *Compulsive Beauty*, Hal Foster argues that the Surrealist artists and writers were the first to capture

10 According to Statistics Poland: <https://stat.gov.pl/obszary-tematyczne/rynek-pracy/bezrobocie-rejestrowane/stopa-bezrobocia-rejestrowanego-w-latach-1990-2019,4,1.html>, accessed April, 20, 2019.

11 I discuss this aspect of Stańczak's practice in more detail in the article "Rzeźby zdegradowane. Twórczość Romana Stańczaka wobec transformacji ustrojowej po 1989 roku," *Miejsce*, no. 4, 2018, 88–107.

12 André Breton, *Crisis of the Object*, in *Surrealism and Painting* (London: McDonald and Company, 1972), 279.

the dialectical nature of history, which frequently manifests itself as “regressive progress”.<sup>13</sup> The inter-war period witnessed a moment of a rapid industrial, technological and infrastructural acceleration: the 19th century — with its culture and architecture — was falling into oblivion in a flash. Surrealists observed up-close that historical dynamics, which made itself manifest through the double image of a “progressive ruin”. Their turn towards the ruined reality formed part of their complex strategy of seeking to undermine the seeming obviousness and naturalness of the capitalist order. Therefore, their interest in the bygone historical eras was motivated by their willingness to harness them for the sake of resisting the storm of “now”. This perspective allows us to grasp the temporal dimension of Stańczak’s work: his sculptures exist beyond the linear vision of historical progress; they rather belong to the world in which “one ruin forces out another ruin before it ultimately destroys it”.<sup>14</sup> This aspect gains particular relevance in the context of the 1990s, an era dominated by the belief in the one and only possible direction of development: towards neoliberal democracy.<sup>15</sup>

## II.

The above discussed processes were not experienced solely by post-communist countries, but belonged to a broader global tendency of an increasing economic polarisation within the capitalist system.<sup>16</sup> In 1993, Stańczak — still a student of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw — left for Mexico for six months, during which he travelled extensively and earned a living mainly from private artistic commissions. When asked if he was active as an artist at that time, he responds: “I was more absorbing. Although I was meeting some artists. I was invited to lead a studio at the UNAM [National Autonomous University of Mexico]”.<sup>17</sup> That episode from Stańczak’s biography is particularly significant as it situates the artist’s work beyond the post-communist realm, as an element of global art history, which enables a comparison between the experiences of Eastern Europe and Latin America. This postulate is in line with the concept put forward in the last book of the recently departed art historian Piotr Piotrowski in which he formulated the scholarly, artistic and political appeal: “The peripheries of all parts of the world — unite!”<sup>18</sup>

For that matter, it is worth highlighting the considerable economic and social similarities between Mexico and Poland at the beginning of the 1990s. The turn of the decade in Mexico witnessed a rampant socio-political crisis. In order to overcome the financial collapse aggravated by an escalating debt, at the beginning of the 1990s President Carlos Salinas de Gortari introduced a range of neoliberal reforms aimed primarily at privatisation and opening the country to international investors.<sup>19</sup> Those reforms met with violent resistance of a vast part of the society, which culminated with the rebellion of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation.<sup>20</sup>

13 Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* [Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993], 165.

14 Benjamin Péret, “Ruines: ruine des ruines,” *Minotaure*, no. 12/13, 1939, 58.

15 Boris Buden, “When History Was Gone,” in *The Long 1980s. Constellations of Art, Politics and Identities* [Amsterdam: Valiz Press, 2018], 314–322.

16 Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes [1914–1991]* [London: Abacus Press, 1995], 570–575.

17 Stańczak, *Life and Works*, 5.

18 Piotr Piotrowski, *Globalne ujęcie sztuki Europy Wschodniej* [Poznań: Rebis, 2018].

19 See: *Mexico in Transition: Neoliberal Globalism, the State and Civil Society*, ed. Gerardo Otero [London: Zed Books, 2013].

20 Neil Harvey, *The Chiapas Rebellion: The Struggle for Land and Democracy* [Durham–London: Duke University Press, 1998]. The Zapatista Army of National Liberation postulated: granting autonomy to the indigenous population, resignation from neoliberal reforms, acceleration of agricultural reforms, and introduction of direct democracy.

The same period in Mexico saw the emergence of a new generation of artists who directly addressed the extreme class and gender-related violence haunting the streets of the country.<sup>21</sup> At the beginning of the 1990s, Teresa Margolles, then member of the SEMEFO collective (acronym of the coroner's office in Mexico) created a series of sculptural and photographic works devoted to the bodies of brutally murdered residents of Mexico City: mainly women, homeless persons, children. Her practice responded to an exponential increase in violence levels in the country at the beginning of the 1990s, caused by growing inequalities, political conflict and the expansion of the drug cartel network.<sup>22</sup> Spanish activist and researcher Sayak Valencia defined the Mexican reality of the 1990s and 2000s as "gore capitalism", a new economic and cultural formation based on the laws of necropolitics — management of death and deriving profit from it. Valencia sees that phenomenon as a response to the neoliberal reality of late capitalism, in which the body becomes the ultimate commodity.<sup>23</sup> The scholar emphasises the "turn towards death" that occurred at the beginning of the 1990s in Margolles' work.

The notion of *gore capitalism* may also be evoked in the context of Stańczak's degraded sculptures that bear traces of violence. The juxtaposition of his works and those by Margolles (and Santiago Sierra, among other artists) demonstrates that all of them form part of a certain global condition of peripheral countries which entered the free-market economic system in the 1990s. Although the process obviously adopted a much more dramatic course in Mexico than in Poland, the common denominator between the two countries was the phenomenon of the degradation of the human subject, its class-related and bodily ruination.

13 Stańczak's time spent in Mexico acquires additional meanings in the light of a reference to Surrealism. Latin American countries — particularly Mexico, which André Breton considered "the surrealist country par excellence" — were an object of avid interest and a frequent travel destination of Surrealist artists.<sup>24</sup> The neo-colonial aspect of those journeys, which made itself manifest through the exoticisation of the local reality, the imposition of Western interpretations, and proclivity for perception of the local art and culture in the categories of primitivism and orientalism, is currently subject to critical analysis.<sup>25</sup> All these reservations notwithstanding, it is worth highlighting the truly international character of that movement, which — in line with Löwy's observations — made one of the first attempts to establish a global artistic map that went beyond Western Europe and North America, founded on a staunchly anti-colonialist political stance. It was Surrealists who challenged the traditional division between the centre and the peripheries: apart from Paris, key locations on the map of Surrealism also included Prague, Buenos Aires and Cairo.<sup>26</sup> With hindsight, this internationalist aspect of the inter-war avant-garde emerges as one of the most important achievements of the movement — as a point of reference for the formulation of modern-day research methodologies with regard to art and its history.

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21 Coco Fusco, "The Unbearable Weightiness of Beings: Art in Mexico after NAFTA," in *The Bodies That Were Not Ours. And Other Writings* (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, Routledge, 2001).

22 See: Amy Sara Carroll, *REMEX. Toward an Art History of the NAFTA Era* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017).

23 Valencia, *Gore Capitalism*.

24 The artists who visited Mexico included Antonin Artaud, André Breton, Luis Buñuel, Leonora Carrington, Benjamin Péret, and Wolfgang Paalen, among other figures. See: Melanie Nicholson, "Surrealism's 'Found Object': The Enigmatic Mexico of Artaud and Breton," *Journal of European Studies*, vol. 43, no. 1, 2013, 27–43.

25 Louise Tythacott, *Surrealism and the Exotic* (London–New York: Routledge, 2003).

26 See: Sam Bardaouil, *Surrealism in Egypt. Modernism and the Art and Liberty Group* (London–New York: I.B. Tauris, 2017); Derek Sayer, *Prague, Capital of the Twentieth Century. A Surrealist History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

### III.

In 1994, Stańczak returned to Warsaw and completed his studies at the Academy of Fine Arts. The same year, the a.r.t. Gallery in Płock hosted an exhibition of diploma works by the Academy graduates. Stańczak presented his earlier pieces and staged a new performance *Untitled* (1994). This work opens up yet another perspective on the links between his artistic practice and the new (both Polish and global) reality of the turn of the decade. The preserved footage that documents the action shows the artist lying in a bathtub facing the bottom. He then begins to alternately immerse himself and emerge out of water; we can clearly hear him breathing as he tries to inhale as much as air as possible before the next immersion. The artist's movements remove more and more water from the bathtub. Towards the end of the performance, Stańczak leaves the bathtub having put on a red perizoma.

*Untitled* can certainly be seen as an expression of the artist's idiomatic experience with a religious and emotional underpinning. Such interpretation is founded on Stańczak's statements, in which he frequently emphasised the spiritual aspect of his artistic practice and the fundamental role played by Catholicism in his life as a teenager.<sup>27</sup> Beyond doubt, the performance from 1994 is deeply rooted in Christian iconography through the references to baptism and the red perizoma — the draped loincloth of crucified Christ. Yet, such understanding does not exhaust the potential meanings of the piece, which can also be situated in a broader historical and social context. Such perspective opens up the possibility to outline a profoundly materialist aspect of his practice, which has so far been overlooked by art historians.

In order to shed more light on the materialist context of Stańczak's performance, we need to refer once again to Surrealism and the phenomenon of reification: blurring the borders between life and death. Hal Foster remarks that a key experience for Surrealists consisted in undermining the borders that separated animate from inanimate matter.<sup>28</sup> That traumatic experience of uncertainty — am I dead or alive? — lay at the foundation of their practice, in which they also frequently questioned the dichotomic differentiation between the subject and the object. That phenomenon, Foster argues, had double historical roots. On the one hand, it came as a direct response to the trauma of World War I, while on the other hand — to the expansion and consolidation of global capitalism. That latter experience, based on the close relation between Surrealism and the dynamics of the capitalist system, becomes particularly relevant in the context of Stańczak's work. In Western Europe and North America, the inter-war economic crisis brought into sharp relief the paradoxical and profoundly unsettled nature of the global free-market economy.<sup>29</sup> The accompanying slump in production and the marked increase in poverty and unemployment levels fully demonstrated the social exploitation behind the processes of capital accumulation. According to Foster, Surrealists' work became a direct response to the phenomenon of the reification of the human subject, as a result of which "The act (or result of the act) of transforming human properties, relations and actions into properties, relations and actions of man produced things which have become independent (and which are imagined as originally independent) of man and govern his life. Also transformation of

27 Stańczak, *Life and Works*, 13.

28 Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, 1-19.

29 Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes*, 85-109.

human beings into thing-like beings which do not behave in a human way but according to the laws of the thing world".<sup>30</sup>

According to Marx, such transformation process — in which the subject becomes the object — results from the vampiric power of capitalism, which “sucks” living labour out of people in order to transform it into accumulated capital. Thus, production cycle exerts a profound influence on the very division between the living and the dead. Marx writes: “Capital is dead labour, that vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks. The time during which the labourer works is the time during which the capitalist consumes the labour-power he has purchased of him”.<sup>31</sup> The circulation of capital relies on absorbing living human labour and harnessing it for the purpose of the ongoing stimulation of capital, which betrays an essentially parasitic nature. That is why critics wrote about a peculiar kind of necromancy inherent in the writings of the German thinker, who framed the activity of developed capital as a process of putting the subject to death in order to bring the commodity to life.

This context sheds a different light on Stańczak’s performance at the a.r.t. Gallery in Płock in 1994. During the action, the artist constantly moved in the space between breath/life and suffocation/death. Although Stańczak’s statements suggest that the performance addressed spiritual experiences, it is worth noting its potential materialist and historical connotations. The border which Stańczak’s body crosses does not belong exclusively to the religious or existential sphere, but it may also result from the changing economic field at the turn of the 1990s, which undermined the hitherto ontology of the body. Those transformations gave rise to a new vision of the subject as “animated corpse”, whose vital energy is constantly sucked by the structure of the capitalist economy. That is why the motif of death in Stańczak’s work can be perceived not only through the prism of existentialism, but also as an embodiment of a specific moment in history. The binary division between life and death, animate and inanimate matter, was also challenged at the level of the artistic medium: after the performance, the artist transformed the bathtub into a sculptural object. It was heated with an industrial furnace and later turned inside out with a hammer. What occurred was a “disintegration” of the performance into other artistic media and a transformation of the artist’s subject into a sculptural object.

#### IV.

Let us now make a temporal leap forward. In October 2016 — just before the Day of the Dead in Poland — Stańczak carried out his performance *29.10.2016.* at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. The action began inside the museum: the artist changed his black t-shirt and jeans for a red perizoma. He then went outside and lay down in a previously dug pit, assuming a foetal position. His assistants began to fill the pit with the extracted soil, covering entirely the figure lying on the bottom. They levelled the soil with a shovel and scattered apples on the grave. Only after a longer while did the soil begin to move and Stańczak slowly emerged to the surface. Having left the pit, he first started to play noughts and crosses on the museum window and later smashed a bottle of vodka hanging under the ceiling.

The “resurrection” performance acquired a special meaning in the context of the artist’s biography. In 1996, after his major show *Sixty-Three Kilos* at the Ujazdowski Castle and the smaller-scale

30 Gajo Petrović, “Reification,” in *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983], 411–413.

31 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* [New York: Dover Publications, 2011], 257.

exhibition *Objects* in 1997 at the Biała Gallery in Lublin, Stańczak vanished from the art scene. The artist explains in interviews that his disappearance was caused by a range of factors: burnout, alcohol addiction, pursuit of a different kind of experience.<sup>32</sup> Throughout the next 17 years, until 2013, Stańczak remained outside the art world and took up different jobs, such as sculpture renovation, carpentry or stonemasonry. Meanwhile, his colleagues from the studies at the Academy of Fine Arts, such as Paweł Althamer, Artur Żmijewski and Katarzyna Kozyra, established themselves as artists and gained international recognition. Leading to Stańczak's comeback to the Polish art scene in 2013 was, on the one hand, the re-discovery of his artistic practice from the 1990s, and on the other hand — the creation of his new piece *Guardian Angel* at the Sculpture Park in the Warsaw district of Bródno and his exhibition at the Stereo Gallery in Warsaw.

Let us now compare the performance *29.10.2016* with the action at the a.r.t. Gallery in Płock 22 years before. The two pieces share manifold similarities and may even be recognised as each other's mirror reflection. Both revolve around the motif of resurrection: immersion in water, burial in the ground, followed by a return to the surface; both even feature a red perizoma. They may be seen as two chapters that, respectively, open and close a certain stage in Polish history. The year 2014 witnessed the celebrations of the 25th anniversary of the collapse of communism and the advent of neoliberal democracy. Yet, they were tainted by the awareness of an escalating social, economic and political conflict in the country, which led to the parliamentary election victory in 2015 of the right-wing Law and Justice party, which questioned in many respects the hitherto adopted direction of the country's economic development.<sup>33</sup> The key political question of that period concerned the assessment of the transformation process, whose evaluation changed fundamentally during those 25 years: the initial enthusiasm shared by many social groups at the turn of the 1990s yielded to bitter disappointment over — and, in some cases, even rejection of — neoliberal democracy.<sup>34</sup> Stańczak's figure emerging from the grave incarnates not only his individual biography and inner struggle, but also refers to the moment of crystallisation of a specific historical experience; the figure stands as a metaphor for the last 25 years in Poland, bearing the traces of both individual and structural violence, returning from the underworld of the "shock therapy" of the 1990s.

Seen from such perspective, Stańczak's figure appears as "remnants" of a wounded and marked body, which bring us into direct contact with history. What occurs is a temporal glitch: the past meets the present, what was supposed to be dead and forgotten comes back to life. Stańczak's biography acquires a special meaning in the context of the Polish transformation and the influence of that historical stage on the lives and work of artists. In the 1990s, many artists of the young generation managed to both establish their careers and achieve financial success, thus living out the dream of the possibilities offered by the neoliberal system. Others, in turn — such as Stańczak — did not come to terms with the new reality and were relegated to its margins.<sup>35</sup> That is why the artist's return in 2016 can be seen as settling accounts with the past and a realisation of the damage done in the 1990s. Not only does Stańczak's figure embody his own — at times dramatic — biography, but also a broader image of the Polish historical experience that is fundamental for the understanding of the current situation.

32 Stańczak, *Life and Works*, 16–17.

33 See: Michał Sutowski, *Rok dobrej zmiany* [Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2017].

34 Duda, *Kiedyś tu było życie*.

35 See: *Wyparte dyskursy. Sztuka wobec transformacji i deindustrializacji lat 90*.



## V.

In many ways, Stańczak's inside-out aircraft at the Polish Pavilion in Venice marks a continuation of the previous themes and strategies present in the artist's practice. The very idea of tearing the aircraft apart, turning it inside out and putting together again was mentioned by Stańczak already in the 1990s. Yet, the scale of the sculptural object makes it stand out from among his earlier project. Since the studies at the Academy of Fine Arts, the artist's practice concentrated primarily on objects of everyday use that form part of human daily life. Such intimate character of his works resulted, on the one hand, from the biographical dimension of Stańczak's practice, while on the other hand — from the specificity of the historical period: the transformation process ushered in a radical change in both the micro- and macro-structures of social and everyday life. The artist managed to capture that situation by depicting the changes experienced by ordinary objects such as a bathtub, a kettle or a cabinet. Now, however, such modest household equipment was replaced with a massive aircraft exhibited at the Polish Pavilion. How can we understand this artistic gesture?

Above all, we need to highlight the symbolic dimension of the inside-out aircraft. A ship, an airplane, a spacecraft — they all represent hope for the future, ambition to go beyond the familiar horizon, to challenge the laws of gravity. Since the era of geographic discoveries, these machines have embodied the faith in progress and the positive role of technology. That is why the images of their catastrophes often stand as a metaphor for broader processes: the end of historical epochs, disappointed hopes, profound crises or the internal rupture and defragmentation of the self.<sup>36</sup> Seen in this light, Stańczak's inside-out aircraft pursues further the profoundly anti-utopian dimension of his sculptural practice, which first came to light in the pieces from the early 1990s. Yet, the project at the Polish Pavilion in Venice not only marks a continuation of that theme, but also shows the expansion of the modern-day degradation process that embraces even broader spheres on a hitherto unimaginable scale. Thus, Stańczak's sculpture acquires a "total" dimension, which may refer to the devastation of even greater segments of reality. The piece does not give this diagnosis in a straightforward way; it rather results from a peculiar nexus of Stańczak's artistic practice and a specific historical reality. It is only this connection that reveals the full potential of meanings inherent in the artist's works — meanings hitherto overlooked due to the dominant position of interpretations that highlighted the existential character of his practice. I discuss this complex relation between the individual and the social dimension of Stańczak's work through the prism of Surrealism, which allows me to grasp the tension between the irrational dimension of his practice, with its roots in the sphere of dreams and spirituality, and the historical-materialist context of his sculptures and performances. This category also sheds light on the piece exhibited at the Polish Pavilion — a "found object" turned by the artist into a deformed sculpture devoid of its functionality. The object deprived of its original meanings embodies the fears of the escalating degradation, both of the human subject and the entire reality. Stańczak's inside-out aircraft formulates a correct diagnosis of the contemporary times at many levels of human experience: in its material, psychological, class-related and social dimension.

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36 See: Hans Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator. Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence* [Cambridge, Mass., and London: MIT Press, 1997].

Adam Szymczyk  
**Common Garden**

¿LE GUSTA ESTE JARDÍN?

¿QUE ES SUYO?

¡EVITE QUE SUS HIJOS LO DESTRUYAN!

These three lines of Spanish, fenced by question and exclamation marks, close Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano* (1947). Read by Consul, the novel's protagonist, from a sign placed before the entrance to a garden [or public park] in a Mexican town named Quauhnahuac, they literally mean: "Do you like this garden that is yours? Prevent your children from destroying it!" Yet, Consul — half drunk, half in fear — half bitterly interprets the sign as a possible threat, a call for dispossessing and evicting strangers. He reads — only to admit seconds later that his bad Spanish, or perhaps his bad intentions, might have made his translation only half faithful: "You like this garden? Why is it yours? We evict those who destroy!"

Gardens and parks are inviting retreats, but not for everyone. Fences that separate them from the city delimit their space, opening hours limit their time. Undesirable behavior [cruising, taking and selling drugs, loitering, littering, camping] is criminalized. Guards patrol parks. Strangers are not welcome. Pedion tou Areos, Athens's Champ de Mars, can be seen as an exception to the rule. This large park designed in 1934 was constructed during the dictatorship of Ioannis Metaxas, which lasted until the Nazi invasion of Greece. Conceived as an open-air pantheon for the national heroes of the 1821 Greek Revolution, the park is dotted with monuments, including the towering equestrian monument of King Constantine created in 1938 by Italian sculptor Francesco Parisi, and the statue of militant Athena Promachos [Athena Who Fights in the Foremost Ranks] by Vassos Falireas erected in 1952, which together with the monument on which it stands is dedicated to the British, Australian, and New Zealand soldiers who lost their lives in Greece during World War II. In recent years, Pedion tou Areos has become the unofficial, temporary home of refugees who made it to Athens after crossing the Mediterranean Sea and have nowhere to go. They shelter under trees, in tents and in the park's artificial grottos. They were evicted and they have returned. It is the stranger, then, who uses and transforms the park, which was once planned as a stage of ideological representation of the nation: an immutable image and spectacle of history and nature, as well as monument to unity achieved through physical and moral strength, built at the time when Greece, like most European countries before World War II, fell into the hands of right-wing nationalist dictatorship. Some years ago, the park underwent a "revitalization project," realized by the Region of Attica with support of European funds, which proved to be a Pyrrhic victory of the forces of order as the illegitimate users soon took over again — the temporary shelters transform the park from static monument to living document.

The present estate of Venice's Giardini is likewise fraught by paradoxes and discontinuities. The decisions and chance events that have shaped both parks mirror the history of the long twentieth century: An age of nationalisms, totalitarianisms, and mass migration, marked by the two World Wars as well as the Cold War; it has also been an era of democracy and its progress, revolutionary anti-colonial

movements around the globe, and projects of social empowerment of which many have found their voice in avant-garde art and architecture; all of which bear a significant influence on our lives. Today, with the nationalist backlash and the still poorly understood crisis of democracy, the struggle is far from over — yet must be continued, however bleak the outlook may be. Here, some historical parallels might provide useful examples toward making a break in history repeating itself.

In July of 1932, three months after the official opening of the Polish Pavilion in Venice, Poland signed the Non-Aggression Pact with the USSR. In 1934, another Non-Aggression Pact was signed in Berlin between Poland and Germany. The same year saw the development of what came to be known as the “isolation site” of Bereza Kartuska. Established by the executive order of Poland’s President Ignacy Mościcki, this detention camp in the east of the country was intended for political prisoners: Polish communists, socialists, ultranationalists, as well as Ukrainian separatists and other individuals “whose activity or conduct,” as stated, “gives reason to believe that they pose a threat to public security, peace, or order.” At the same time, in Warsaw, the construction of the National Museum was underway. Designed by Tadeusz Tołwiński, the museum opened in 1938, shortly before the Nazi and Soviet invasion of Poland. At this time national rhetoric and its slogans translated into the founding principles of society; they were intended as an antidote to all imaginable dangers and challenges faced by the young state as well as a weapon against enemies, including those within. Needless to say, the faith in this rhetoric and the dreams of power that followed proved utterly illusory, in Poland, Greece, and elsewhere. Yet, the specters of nationalism keep haunting us to this day, unrepelled.

19 Following the Treaty of Versailles that ended World War I, new nation-states entered the stage of the Giardini and gradually assumed their presence in the garden’s microcosm. Some were housed in the complex designed by the Italian architect Brenno Del Giudice in 1932–38 on the Island of Sant’Elena, which is separated from the main Giardini by a canal. The central section of the building is home to Padiglione Venezia [Pavilion of Venice], which originally accommodated presentations of the decorative arts, and much later, during the final phase of the Cold War, hosted exhibitions of artists from the German Democratic Republic, from 1982 until the country ceased to exist in 1990. The Polish Pavilion is located in the right wing of the ensemble. A part of the building’s left wing that initially housed the Swiss Pavilion was handed over to Egypt after the Swiss relocated to a new structure by the entrance to the Giardini in 1952 — part of the continuously changing configuration of denominations and positions. In 1938, Del Giudice’s complex was expanded. The new spaces eventually became home to the Yugoslavian [now Serbian] Pavilion [adjoining the Swiss, now the Egyptian Pavilion], and the Pavilion of Romania [adjoining the Polish]. The decade also witnessed the construction of two independent structures on the Island of Sant’Elena: the Austrian Pavilion, completed in 1934 [just four years prior to the country’s Anschluss], and, in the same year, the Pavilion of Greece, built by George Papandreou and Del Giudice when the end of the Second Hellenic Republic was near and Greece was soon to fall back into monarchical governance after a rigged referendum, and then became a dictatorship one year later. In 1964, the modernist Brazilian Pavilion emerged on the axis of the Pavilion of Venice, partially obstructing the view, as the second and, so far, the last non-European guest on the island — for the time being. The countries that stage their presentations on the island have formed a remarkably heterogeneous new subcontinent, where the distance from Egypt to Brazil as well as to Austria is shorter than to Israel [located in Giardini

proper], while Poland — as it did in 1939 — borders Romania, neighboring Greece. All these countries on the forsaken island were thrown together by chance, or rather got arranged this way because none were a global superpower able to establish themselves on Giardini's continent proper.

This appearance of the national pavilions *extra muros*, on the island beyond the Giardini, all took place after 1930 when the Biennale became, by royal decree, an "autonomous entity" (*ente autonomo*) subject to the fascist state administration instead of the city council of Venice. The ensemble of pavilions is, however, only part of the Island of Sant'Elena. A historical residential area lies just behind the wall. Visitors of the Biennale usually arrive by sea or reach the grounds on foot from San Marco, avoiding any local inhabitants, while for the residents of the island the Biennale appears as an ultimate *limes*, a uniform blank wall devoid of any national characteristics, or any characteristics at all. From inside the Giardini, the pavilions convey the divergent aspirations of the nation-states that own them, either in the architectural features of the buildings [such as the neo-Byzantine modernism of the Pavilion of Greece] or the named monumental doors that punctuate Del Giudice's edifice. Essentially, his building is a design of the facade, a theatrical backdrop shaped by the rhythm of alternating niches and exedras of a simplified neoclassical character, typical of the official Italian fascist architecture of the mid-1930s, clearly deployed as a form of public address — most fully performed by the roofless circular portico with geometric pillars bearing an architrave that initially preceded the central entrance to Padiglione Venezia, but was later dismantled. This facade, which [if only it led somewhere] resembles an elaborate gate, like the Porta del Popolo in Rome, prompts one to think of other kinds of "pavilions," those that may take shape as freestanding garden follies or exotic mock-ups quoting various functional and cultural contexts, such as Chinese temples, orangeries, hermit's huts, or picturesque ruins. For pavilions, historically and *de nomine* are "architectural butterflies": from the Latin *papilio*, denoting a butterfly or a form of tent offering cheap attractions [elsewhere called "art for the people"]. According to another classical definition, the pavilion is an independent yet structurally connected and functional part of a larger whole. Such architectural notions are of little use in attempting to describe the specific character of the buildings that now house, amongst others, the Polish and Greek Pavilions, their function announced by little more than the inscription *POLONIA* above the entrance to the Polish Pavilion or the historicizing brickwork and templelike arches of the Pavilion of Greece. Yet, every word and form mean much more than what was intended. The use of the Latin name of the country, *Polonia*, for example, connotes Poland clad in a romanticist, heroic, and tragic costume: an allegorical figure of martyrdom. *Polonia* is the female personification of national suffering and struggle. She embodies the history of an oppressed Poland and appears as the mother of a diasporic community awaiting reconstitution. Such *Polonia rediviva* or "Poland reborn" conveys a vision of idealized "Polishness" that was perfectly in line with the official state policy [including cultural policy] pursued by the nation from the moment of the restitution of independence in 1918 and which extended well into the 1930s. Currently, similar political delusions of making the nation-state "great again" are commonplace in Poland, as already seen in a growing number of countries globally.

It is undeniable that the pavilions stand as embodied signs of power. Their obsolete architectural messages and visions are not that of openness to others; they appear unbothered by the contemporary status and pressures of Europe. Their existence is predicated on the concept of defending rather

than dissolving borders, a concept too closely related to xenophobic patriotism and quite out of step with today's much-needed common endeavor for the coexistence of differences, where people are not discriminated on the basis of skin color, creed, gender, or any other criteria. In the framework of the *Giardini* [the gardens that imitate the lost notion of nature as a living whole that knows no divisions], the pavilions sing out of tune and too loudly with the supremacy of nations, forgetting the inevitable changeability of states, of all their terms and forms. It seems that the only conceivable use of a national pavilion in the *Giardini* would be to fill it with polemic content [artistic, related to history, current politics, or otherwise] capable of revising and rectifying its outworn architectural forms employed to play part in the political rituals that subject a community of individuals to the rigid categories of nation and ethnicity. The only subject worth discussing here perforce is that of the striking anachronism of the pavilions' isolation, their strategic siting, and the diverse typology and symbolism of their architecture, designed to articulate differences and emphasize competition between the states — rather than imagine a common space.

Yet, such common spaces open up not least thanks to projects proposed — realized or not — by architects, activists, educators, and artists at different times and places. A collective dream about claiming the right to public space is a recurring experience. Imagined transhistorical and transnational spaces of conviviality open up below and within the designs of nation-states. One such unfinished project, on the margins of the *Pedion tou Areos* grand plan, known from drawings made in 1931 by Greek architect Nikolaos Mitsakis, was an open-air school [Υπαίθριον σχολεῖον]. The school was meant to be built next to *Pedion tou Areos* at *Parko Dikastirion* [Courthouse park]. Artist Zafos Xagoraris — who presently participates in the exhibition *Mr. Stigl* in the Pavilion of Greece at the 58th International Art Exhibition, *La Biennale di Venezia*, together with Panos Charalambous and Eva Stefani — took up this idea and proposed an outdoor work *Downhill Classroom* as part of an open-air educational project at *Pedion tou Areos*, organized by the experimental education group *Skasiarxeio* [Truancy] and the teacher-activist Babis Baltas. Xagoraris's classroom in the park was realized and used by several visiting schools in October 2015, and later documented in the publication *The Niche* [2017] which he presented as part of his contribution to *documenta 14* in Athens.

In 2003, Polish artist Paweł Althamer suggested transforming the Polish Pavilion into a dormitory or hostel open to all for the duration of the Venice Biennale Arte. The proposal, addressing the need for affordable and conveniently located accommodation for a considerable number of visitors of moderate means, included furnishing the pavilion with basic beds and sanitation and transforming a conventional daytime space for the contemplation of art into a space for night activities — rest, sleep, and possibly, collective dreaming. Furthermore, the repurposed pavilion was to be made accessible to visitors from both sides of the wall: the *Giardini* as well as the Island of Sant'Elena. Althamer's pavilion was conceived as a gate to the outside world, a hatch enabling unrestrained circulation between the garden and the city. The project, however, went unrealized, and the official reasons for its dismissal included technical and fire safety issues: the use of the emergency exit at the rear of the pavilion as a new entranceway would have allegedly interfered with existing regulations. In addition, "opening up" the pavilion on to the area outside of the *Giardini* would have run the risk of "unwanted individuals" penetrating the gardens of the Biennale, and, thus, the organizers losing control over its "audience." Last but not least, the vision

of Polishness conveyed by such a pavilion [a multinational lodging operating under the auspices of the Polish Ministry of Culture] was certainly too daring, even for a jury of contemporary art professionals. Althamer's project revisited ideas of reclaiming public space that were materialized by a wave of demonstrations and sit-in protests which swept through public institutions in 1968, including universities and the Biennale itself. It also anticipated the rise of the Occupy movement, whose tents sprung up in the vicinity of dOCUMENTA [13] in Kassel in 2012, and the activities of several social movements in the main exhibition space of the 7th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art, curated by Artur Żmijewski, the artist who exhibited his work in the Polish Pavilion at the 51st Venice Biennale in 2005. Both Althamer and Żmijewski were students of the "open studio" of Grzegorz Kowalski at the sculpture department of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw in the early 1990s. Among the graduates of this class was Roman Stańczak, the artist "representing" Poland at the current, 58th Venice Biennale.

The function of a pavilion to belong to one nation is never definite, as states come and go [as seen in the Pavilion of Yugoslavia giving way to Serbia, or Switzerland to Egypt], though the national pavilions in the Giardini unfortunately, in most cases, remain bound to the role they were first assigned: to represent the respective nation-state to which they belong. Nonetheless, it is timely to imagine an alternative scenario where the division of the Giardini territory, based on the economic and military strength of nations [and the corresponding exclusion of others], would give way to a community of thinking and responsible action, a hospitable community of equals that finds its origins in a common field of reflection and sharing — for "there's one humanity or there isn't," as the Nigerian writer and Nobel Prize laureate Wole Soyinka said in a recent conversation with Henry Louis Gates Jr. Let's use imagination to see such community come into existence in the shadow of the Giardini's trees, a community who contemplates the ruins of national pavilions slowly devoured by nature, in one, two hundred years, tomorrow, now.

This text is a rewritten and expanded version of a previously published text in *Common Pavilions*, a project and book by Diener & Diener Architekten, commissioned for the 13th Venice Architecture Biennale titled *Common Ground*, curated by David Chipperfield in 2012. It is published in the exhibition catalogues of both the Polish and Greek Pavilions at the 58th Venice Biennale.