

**POLISH
PAVILION
IN VENICE**

Dead Class. Daniel Rycharski

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for the curatorial project for the exhibition
in the Polish Pavilion at the
59th International Art Exhibition in Venice in 2022

Concept of the Exhibition at Polish Pavilion at Venice Biennale 2022

Dead Class

The project presents a selection of new works by Daniel Rycharski, that address the tensions arising out of the dramatically altered relationship between humans and land, seen from the perspective of rural Poland. These changes, resulting from intensified industrial food production, subjected to the logic of maximum profit, bring about far-reaching cultural transformations, which may be seen as the latest chapter in the demise of peasant culture.

The exhibition chooses to focus on social and cultural consequences and personal stories, leaving the economic transitions as such aside. It asks: How does the fall of family farms impact the status of individuals and their autonomy? How does it relate to climate change? How do the current transformations call for an update of beliefs concerning rural culture (religiosity, the position of women, the relationship with land and animals)?

In his artistic practice, Daniel Rycharski has consistently addressed matters related to the countryside, queer culture and faith. The set of six new works prepared for the Polish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale showcases a number of relationships, desires and conflicts within a rural community in the face of global transformations and an identity crisis.

The key work of the exhibition, which also acts as its open-ended conclusion, is the *Letter from Heaven* – a video work inspired by the activity of Piotr Ściegienny, a 19th-century Catholic priest and popular leader. Ściegienny urged peasants to overthrow serfdom using a *Letter of Pope Gregory to Farmers and Craftsmen* that he himself fabricated. In it, he called for self-education, solidarity, tolerance and brotherhood. We aim to carry out the project in collaboration with Artur Żmijewski, an actor known for his role as Father Matthew from a popular TV series of the same title. Impersonating the much-loved priest, Żmijewski would go from village to village, reading an updated version of the letter to fans of the series. This new form of solidarity and cooperation (also with the natural world) would look for an answer to the crisis, rather than just describe it.

Oriented towards this work are other realisations, sculptural objects exploring the subjects of changes and emotional conflicts that accompany them.

Pigsty Art, *Yoke* and *Yin and Yang* are installations made out of personal objects and farming tools used to raise animals and grow crops. These works follow an artistic strategy important for Rycharski: processing found materials, their stories and the emotions they evoke. The sculptures point to the changes occurring within the material aspects of the countryside, such as the shift from DIY to standardised, state-of-the-art farming equipment; they refer to the changing relationship between humans and animals as well as the status of animals in industrial farming. They also talk about personal stories, transience and the remnants of a culture that is not here to stay.

The Golden Calf addresses changing religiosity. The sculpture – a life-size cast of one of the animals kept by a local farmer – will be made out of found figurines and metal devotional items. The object touches upon the clash between the religiously motivated attitude of “fill the earth and subdue it” and being aware of the threat to our planet posed by climate change. It records the futile search for balance and the resulting conflicts.

The experience of shame is one of the basic emotions explored by the artist. Shame, used to discipline and subdue, is related to imposed behaviour patterns and expressions of one’s corporality. The work *Shame*, which directly addresses these issues, is a sculpture cut out of school textbooks – works that set out standard patterns of thinking about the countryside. The resulting composition, which reproduces fragments of the artist’s body, touches upon the subject of the body as an archive that remembers and internalises this emotion.

The set of Rycharski’s works presented at the Polish Pavilion may contribute to creating new symbols to talk about the complex relationships between our native countryside and the world changing alongside it. A return to the country proves important not just in order to understand the dynamics of social life in contemporary Poland, but also to adopt this perspective when analysing the ongoing debates on culture wars, people’s histories or the climate crisis.

Exhibition Script – Summary

The exhibition *Dead Class* will present a new series of works by Daniel Rycharski, an artist active at the intersection of various social worlds: the rural countryside, queer culture and the faith-based community. These six works – five sculptures and a video installation – address cultural transformations taking place in rural Poland, changes in the relationship between humans and land, and existential dilemmas in the face of the inevitable need to reinvent our way of life. This is a coherent and multi-layered statement, which employs powerful, evocative abbreviations and symbols. The main materials used to produce the works are found elements, everyday objects associated with farming and animal husbandry, painstakingly processed by the artist.

The Polish Pavilion with its additional architecture, adapted to the presentation, will provide a discreet backdrop for the works, whose striking visuality and materiality work best in spaces with as few extra elements as possible. As part of the preparations, some of the pavilion's skylights will be covered to enable direct spotlight on the works. The objects, arranged within the space, may be seen in any given order, and viewers are left to identify the network of connections and relationships between them.

The presentation will be accompanied by a small catalogue with three in-depth texts outlining the context of the works and placing them within a network of international references.