

# Art and Theory in an Anti-fascist Year

An Interview with Kuba Szreder

Angela Dimitrakaki

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The **Anti-fascist Year** is an umbrella name for a wide array of anti-war and anti-fascist cultural and social events being held in many places all over Poland between 1 September 2019 (the 80th anniversary of the outbreak of World War II) and 8 May 2020 (the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II in Europe). The programme is organised by an independent, countrywide grassroots coalition of Polish cultural institutions, NGOs, social movements, art collectives, individual artists and activists. <https://rokantyfaszystowski.org/>

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'Demonstration of paintings', an artistic bloc organised by the Consortium for Post-artistic Practices (CPP) in March 2019, to contribute to the anti-fascist and anti-racist demonstration in Warsaw, photo by Kuba Szreder

**Angela Dimitrakaki:** There is no agreement today in the Left about whether it makes sense to use the term ‘fascism’ to refer to a range of political developments and narratives that are associated with social hatred, often violent practices of exclusion, an embracing of national and/or racial purity against ‘internal’ and ‘external’ enemies, and generally the values of the far right. Enzo Traverso, for instance, refers to ‘post-fascism’.<sup>1</sup> What is your view on this? And what is the position of the Polish Left?

**Kuba Szreder:** This debate about ‘what is fascism’ has been running as long as fascism itself. The text written by George Orwell in 1944, under that exact title, is a very interesting read. Ironically, Orwell depicted the confusion surrounding fascism but was driven by a clear conviction that, alas, one cannot define fascism, one has to struggle against it.

Orwell was not isolated in his analysis. When a group of militant art historians in Poland associated with the Anti-fascist Year (Kuba Depczyński, Bogna Stefańska, Aleksy Wójtowicz) researched the history of artistic anti-fascism, the most surprising thing about this genealogy was how consistently this bewilderment regarding the nature of fascism recurred throughout the history. When artists were mounting exhibitions against fascism in the 1930s, they decried militarism, capitalist violence and imperialism, as all those ‘positions’ overlapped and fascism could not have been easily extracted from this murderous mess. Possibly, confusion is the only sensible response of a logical brain to the protean nature of fascism as such. I personally agree with the philosopher Michał Kozłowski, also affiliated with the Anti-fascist Year, that fascism is the most dangerous ideology invented by humankind, not in spite of but because of its own inconsistencies and self-contradictions, and an utter disrespect for the procedures of truth and logic.<sup>2</sup> As he argues, fascism was, and is, both modernist and anti-modernist; it promises eternal peace by waging perpetual war, and its internal and external enemies are at the same time painted as the weakest of the weak, and omnipresent and powerful. Fascists pretend to speak for the little people while venerating strict hierarchies, promise to get rid of the old elites by establishing new ones. It is characterised, as Kozłowski says, by a hateful surplus, a death drive expressed in vehement racism, misogyny and a cult of violence, the political project aiming to erode the very basis of social emancipation.

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<sup>1</sup> Nicolas Allen and Martín Cortés, ‘Fascisms Old and New: An Interview with Enzo Traverso’, *Jacobin*, 4 February 2019, <https://jacobinmag.com/2019/02/enzo-traverso-post-fascism-ideology-conservatism>,

<sup>2</sup> Michał Kozłowski, ‘Czym jest faszyzm’, available at the Anti-fascist Year website <https://rokantifaxyzystowski.org/dlaczego-antyfaszyzm/>, accessed 12 April 2019

All of what I say here is indebted to the examination of fascism conducted in the collective of cultural workers who have been organising the Anti-fascist Year in Poland. We have invested quite a bit of energy into philosophical and historical research about fascism. This research is driven equally by intellectual curiosity and political necessity, as one has to understand the enemy in order to fight it. In Poland, for example, the fascist sympathisers cannot present themselves as such, because fascism is still a social anathema (some people still remember the atrocities of World War II) and is actually forbidden by law. So even if somebody speaks like a fascist, looks like a fascist and thinks like a fascist, he or she will not call himself or herself a fascist. It is unsurprising that there aren't as many 'neo-fascists' – to use Traverso's taxonomy. Fascists, in order to establish fascism, need to present themselves as everything but fascists. They do not flash swastikas in public, but rather go around with new, revamped symbols, which are swastikas in all but name and design. And this confusion works to their advantage, it makes them legitimate, gives them leverage as patriots, anti-communists, harbingers of peace and order – is it that much different to the 1920s or 1930s? Fascism harnesses support at the highest echelons of government and police. And make no mistake, even if there are only a few governments openly displaying a fascist mentality, many are inclined in this direction.

Let me tell you an anecdote from the annual demonstration against racism and fascism in Poland in March 2019, in which we participated with an art workers' bloc. Our friend was stopped and identified by a policeman because he carried a banner with an anti-fascist poster from the 1940s, which featured a swastika crushed under the high heel of elegant pumps. At the same time, real fascists, who carried their banners during the nationalist march in November 2018 are being cleared of charges by public prosecutors, who accept the culprits' explanation that they were only expressing their rightful patriotism and anti-communist ire. Out of 300,000 people who marched, only ten were charged, and there were hundreds of fascist symbols around.

By the way, the fascist sympathisers often defend their hateful presence in the public realm as the constitutional freedom of speech, while obviously they dismantle this right as soon as they grab power. Whatever does the job, right? In such a context I find the ponderings about neo- or post-fascism a bit misled by the consciously developed strategies supporting the current wave of fascism. Most of the anti-fascist organisations in Poland usually adopted a different stance: they have emphasised the fascist nature and historical roots of the phenomenon at hand. For example, the association Never Again, established in the 1990s to document fascist and racist incidents, deliberately refers to the recurrence of fascism. The

coalition Anti-fascist Warsaw is not called Anti-post-fascist Warsaw, and neither does the Student Anti-fascist Committee working at the University of Warsaw call itself the Student Anti-post-fascist Committee. I therefore agree with a slogan coined by a group of anti-Brexit art activists in the UK: 'keep it complex, make it clear'.<sup>3</sup> We should not obfuscate the truth by complexity in fear of oversimplification. 'Clear' does not mean 'simplified' or 'silly', and one needs to face the lies spread by fascists with a clarity of vision in order to rip apart their veil of lies. It might be a far-flung analogy, but just think about the Brexit campaign. Artists can be good at clarifying stuff without losing complexity. If more people listened to a bunch of artists humorously reminding the public that 'potatoes are migrants too' (another of their brilliant jibes), maybe this dreadful mess would have been avoided.

**AD:** For many years now, and as a result of specific political developments and the phenomenal anti-communist propaganda of the post-World War II period, opposition to fascism and Nazism appeared under the banner of anti-totalitarianism. In your view, is this still the majority liberal position in the Polish artworld and society, and in the post-socialist countries more broadly? If so, what is the impact of this position on shaping anti-fascism in art and beyond?

**KS:** A clarification is needed. The 'anti-totalitarian' historical revisionism is a way to let fascists off the hook by equalising fascism with communism, painting both as different iterations of a totalitarian impulse. It is actually a late expression of Cold War politics, which in itself emerged as a result of rifts within the grand coalition against fascism that won World War II. Still, the only things that the two sides of the Iron Curtain could agree upon was that fascism and Nazism were much worse than what happened afterwards, although obviously during the Cold War fascism was used as a derogative for any type of militarist and imperialist strategy (so, for example, Nixon could be called a 'fascist'). But this consensus faded, paradoxically, after 1989. Especially in eastern Europe and in countries such as Poland, a new historiography emerged that relativised the historical victory over fascism as a Pyrrhic victory that resulted in the period of new Soviet, totalitarian enslavement. So, both communism and fascism were defined under the shared name of 'totalitarian regimes', and currently in Poland both a swastika and a hammer and sickle are forbidden as totalitarian symbols.

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<sup>3</sup> The campaign 'Keep it Complex, Make it Clear' (<https://makeitclear.eu/>) evolved out of the anti-Brexit campaign organised by a collective of UK-based artists (<http://eu-uk.info/>).

Actually, both ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’ Polish MEPs [members of the European parliament] pushed to include this rather more vague, and historically misleading, definition into the European directives. Anti-communism became a cornerstone of the Polish elites after 1989, and it is explicitly used to venerate right-wing radicalism as anti-communism, a stepping stone in the process of whitewashing Poland’s own, pre-war, nativist fascism with its inherent anti-Semitism and authoritarianism. This historical revisionism ran amok after the electoral victory of right-wingers in 2015. The neo-authoritarians used the anti-communist rhetoric to trump their liberal opponents as post-communists, painting them as corrupted elites, while the liberals started to call out neo-authoritarians as fascists-in-all-but-name, identifying the totalitarian logic of their anti-democratic operations. But this is rather a new development, as previously the neo-authoritarians were debunked as *homo sovieticus* (keen on reviving the principles of one-party rule). Obviously, it is all rather absurd, sometimes even ironic, and at least partially context-specific.

More generally speaking, the anti-fascist Left worldwide faces the newly converted anti-fascists with more liberal inclinations, who have been at least partially responsible for the rise of fascism and the marginalisation of anti-fascism (and the Left) in the first instance. I am talking about the pundits, the commentariat, politicians, and the experts of a varied ilk who have consciously erased the leftist messages and values from the mainstream to build their own ideological hegemony. Not to mention the neoliberal policy makers that decimated any forms of social organisation that could oppose the accumulation of capital – like trade unionism, social movements, or other modes of community organising. And the absence of leftist politics created a vacuum now used by fascists to build their political project. So obviously, there are a lot of people to blame for this state of affairs, but I do not think that we should turn it into a blame game. The situation is so grim that it calls for the revival of a popular front, despite its weaknesses and divisions, as eventually it was the grand coalition of communists, socialists, liberals and anti-fascist conservatives who managed to defeat fascism. The political necessity makes for even stranger bedfellows. In order to become a political force, anti-fascism has to enter into the mainstream and become popular, convince the unconvinced, strengthen sympathisers and alienate fascists.

**AD:** In February 2019, the Anti-fascist Year was launched in Gdansk, Poland. Who initiated it? What prompted this initiative politically? And what are the broader and more specific aims of the Anti-fascist Year?

**KS:** The idea to organise the Anti-fascist Year in 2019 emerged a year earlier, in February 2018, before an annual carnival ball of the Consortium for Post-artistic Practices (CPP). The CPP is a very loose alliance of artists, post-artists and not-not-artists, who linked with each other in response to the authoritarian turn in politics after 2015 and recent developments in artistic theory and practice (more on that later). The Anti-fascist Year is an umbrella operation for a coalition of institutions, collectives and individual artists who will devote their projects and programmes to the popularisation of anti-fascism, and more generally, anti-racist, pro-feminist and progressive social causes. The programme will be accessible on the web platform, and it will officially commence on 1 September 2019, and conclude on 8 May 2020. Some of the projects proposed are quite high-profile, like exhibitions about the history of anti-fascist art organised by major Polish art institutions; others are more low-key, like an idea to organise a travelling info-kiosk with anti-fascist materials.

The platform is self-organised; it is a coalition of the willing, there is no official host institution, and no budget, but has a lot of supporters, allies and affiliates. The response was very positive, as many people are genuinely anxious about the evolution of politics in Poland and abroad. There are around 150 entries by now. The programme was shaped conceptually during a series of summits, organised in Poznań, Warsaw and Gdańsk, hosted by various art institutions (Arsenał Gallery in Poznań, CCA Łaźnia in Gdańsk and the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw). The summits are self-organised but very well attended, as dozens of people join the discussions and come up with ideas – all this without a budget, simply by repurposing an existing infrastructure. The next summit, ‘Unlearning Fascism’, will be held at the Sculpture Centre in Orońsko in April 2019. Although the platform emerged in the artistic and intellectual fields, it affiliates itself with the more general field of anti-fascist politics, but the platform itself is more like a broad church as it attracts people of different political denominations but with shared anti-fascist convictions. Yet, it is not ‘just’ art. Art workers partake actively in demonstrations, movements, and various other struggles built on leftist legacies and progressive politics. For example, Zuzanna Hertzberg, a visual artist from Warsaw, is active in reviving the history of a Polish delegation that participated in the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s, a fact actively erased by historical revisionists (ie the names of the streets are changed, monuments decommissioned, exhibitions changed – it is a serious operation). Some of the institutions that are participating in the Anti-fascist Year, such as Teatr Powszechny in Warsaw, provide an infrastructure for anti-fascist congresses, like ‘There is no fascism in Poland’ that was organised by a coalition of initiatives in January 2019. The aim of this platform is to mainstream anti-fascism and use art’s clout to broaden its rightful

presence in the public sphere, while reviving the – often dismissed – legacies and histories of past anti-fascisms in the arts and beyond.



'Demonstration of paintings', an artistic bloc organised by the Consortium for Post-artistic Practices (CPP) in March 2019, to contribute to the anti-fascist and anti-racist demonstration in Warsaw, photo by Kuba Szreder

**AD:** What preceded the Anti-fascist Year initiative? What I mean is: was there a trajectory of events in Poland or elsewhere that eventually indicated the usefulness of this sort of coordinated, large-scale intervention?

**KS:** The idea to organise an anti-fascist artistic project originated in Kraków, where in late 2017 a group of artists and curators proposed to mount an anti-fascist exhibition in the National Museum, in response to its conservative makeover. The idea was neither rejected nor accepted, but this call was carried over by the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, who decided to put on a major exhibition devoted to this topic in September 2019, to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the beginning of World War II, which in turn inspired the Consortium for Postartistic Practices that eventually became a core team of the Anti-fascist Year. As you see, ideas travel – just as Rasheed Araeen said once:

The ideas can be and are turned into institutionally manageable objects, thus contained in their temporalities, but *ideas as knowledge* can never be trapped as the property of an individual or the institution. They can always salvage themselves, give themselves a new

context and move forward within the dynamic of new time and space. They can indeed perform a radically new transformative function in dealing with today's situation. But for this art must go beyond what prevails as art and integrate itself with the collective struggle of life today to recover its true social function and become a radical force of the twenty-first century. ... It is in fact *artistic imagination*, not art objects, which once freed from the self-destructive narcissist ego, can enter this life and offer it not only salvation but put it on the path to a better future.<sup>4</sup>

I really love this quote, as Araeen manages to dialectically turn the critique of the political economy of the art market (and the bourgeois art institutions) into an affirmation of the power of art, currently contained by the apparatuses being criticised.

Anyway, the Anti-fascist Year refers to the much longer legacy of anti-fascism and the continuing grassroots work, located within the broad spectrum of the Left. From my personal experience, I gather that quite a few people are worried about the political situation worldwide, and they respond to this urgency by more direct participation in politics, especially when their way of life feels threatened; and the danger is not abstract, but more direct, graspable, it has a nasty face. Also, for many people who fashion themselves as liberal centrists, the electoral victories of the right-wing transpired as a wake-up call, when the authoritarian mobilisation – previously disregarded as leftist scaremongering – came to fruition. In Poland, one should definitely account for the series of mass mobilisations related not only to the pro-democratic demonstrations of 2017, but especially to the more recent wave of women's struggles (pro-choice), ecological struggles, and the most recent workers' struggles.

In the field of art, the politicisation was a result of several tendencies. The field of art has a long history of struggles against political censorship, as the right-wingers waged their culture wars back in the 1990s, but the rifts between leftist progressives and nativists of various ilk date back even to the 1920s, or much earlier to the struggles between modernisers and apologists of the old ways in the nineteenth century. But coming back to a more recent history: after 2016, in response to the looming threat of authoritarian cultural policies, a series of high-profile congresses and assemblies were organised, prior to the Anti-fascist Year. The first assembly was called by Galeria Labirynt in Lublin back in 2016.

However, the current developments cannot be understood solely by reference to the context of artistic autonomy. On the contrary, this politicisation is an element of a subjectivity of artists-citizens or artists-activists who emerged from the artistic participation in social

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<sup>4</sup> Rasheed Araeen, *Art beyond Art, Ecoaesthetics: A Manifesto for the 21st Century*, London, Third Text Publications, 2010, p 158



movements – feminist, ecological, urban activist, anti-capitalist – and also, significantly, from the emergent unionisation of art workers who established progressive unions in many Polish art institutions and amongst individual artists alike. It is not a coincidence that the institutions that are progressively unionised are also the ones most active in promoting other progressive causes, anti-fascism included. It is not a law of nature, but a prominent tendency.

**AD:** Overall, in the art field there seems to be more grassroots action relating to or identified as anti-fascism and less theoretical analysis addressing anti-fascism as a political struggle in its relationship to art (by ‘art’ I don’t mean just artworks but the totality of practices making up the field of art). Do you agree that this is the case? Or does this not apply to Poland?

**KS:** I have a different opinion. For me, it seems more like a cycle of struggles, as the previous waves of mobilisations (feminist, queer, alter-globalist, etc) mutate and resurface in artistic anti-fascism. That was my impression when I read reports gathered in the excellent survey ‘Art and the Neo-authoritarian Turn’ edited by Greg Sholette and published in *Field* 12/13 (Winter/Spring 2019).<sup>5</sup>

Also, anti-fascist art has a prominent legacy – in my opinion, forcefully suppressed by the globalised art market, not even in terms of content but definitely in terms of its social form, as on the market, art (not only as artwork but as what you so pointedly call a ‘totality of practices’) has to be commodified, while in a social reality it has many other meanings and uses. In terms of artistic theory and practice, artistic anti-fascism is firmly embedded not only in its own specific tradition, but more broadly in the legacy of artistic avant-gardes, artistic activism, politically contextualised artistic autonomy, militant conceptualism (think about the conceptualists of the southern hemisphere, for example in South America in the 1960s and 1970s), art workers mobilisations (the Art Workers Coalition’s involvement in anti-Vietnam protests, for example, is widely known).

For me personally, the current developments in theory and practice are closely affiliated with the historical works of Jerzy Ludwiński, who already in the 1970s theorised art in post-artistic times, and the more recent theories of usership by Stephen Wright, mobilised in response to fascism.<sup>6</sup> Although Ludwiński shunned direct political references in his texts, his theories of impossible art, which transpires beyond what is institutionally recognised as art,

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<sup>5</sup> See the special issue ‘Art, Anti-Globalism, and the Neo-Authoritarian Turn’ of *Field*, 12/13, Winter/Spring 2019, edited by Greg Sholette <http://field-journal.com/>

<sup>6</sup> Jerzy Ludwiński, *Notes from the Future of Art: Selected Writings of Jerzy Ludwiński*, Van Abbemuseum and Veenman Publishers, Eindhoven and Rotterdam, 2007; Stephen Wright, *Toward a Lexicon of Usership*, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 2013

chime very well with the recent developments in artistic theory and practice, possibly even more so than theories of activism, fixated on the fetishised notion of political efficiency. When we organise a demonstration of paintings, I think about Wright's notion of the reciprocal readymade gleaned from Duchamp's jibe about using Rembrandt as an ironing board. The situation calls for more active utilisation of artistic competences, in and beyond what is currently deemed as art. It should not be surprising that the protean nature of fascism provokes equally diverse responses. As anti-feminism, homophobia, racism and nativism are at the core of the fascist project, obviously feminist, anti-racist and queer art are also weaponised in the struggle against it. In the current wave of mobilisations, I see not the legacy of Berlin Dada, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Martha Rosler, Lucy Lippard, Joseph Beuys and Rasheed Araeen, and many others. For me, it seems that most people active in anti-fascist art are more or less aware of this legacy, but one can never know, especially when the theatre of war changes so rapidly, and the threat mutates.

**AD:** What should anti-fascist art theory and curatorial work be addressing as a collectively undertaken, transnational project? And in relation to this, is there scope for such a transnational project or are the conditions addressed by anti-fascists in art particular and specific to their national contexts?

**KS:** I have recently revisited the 'Author as Producer' by Walter Benjamin. You know, it is the 85th anniversary of its original delivery, as the lecture was given by Benjamin in Paris on 27 April 1934 at the Institute of Studies on Fascism, where he escaped after Hitler's electoral victory in Germany. This text might be worth revisiting in the context of our current predicaments, as Benjamin defends the artistic avant-garde, working on two fronts – against Socialist Realism and against the bourgeoisie's appropriation of art. Benjamin advocates what he calls a 'technique' that entails the revolutionary transformation of the apparatuses of artistic production and artistic forms alike. It is a very interesting and still vibrant thought, as he sketches premises for the dialectic and materialist understanding of artistic forms and of art institutions.

Responding to your question more directly, one could ponder about the global circulation of contemporary art, which fancies itself to be very liberally oriented and cosmopolitan, while having failed so tremendously at the task of promoting global democracy, climate justice, economic, gender and racial equality. What it has done instead is to have entrenched already existing privilege, or art-washed the power of global elites, indirectly contributing to the rise

of fascism. The untransformed circulation, especially its segments most closely integrated with the global art market, is part of the problem and not a solution.

But a response to this situation should not devolve into the nativist backlash against artistic internationalism. Obviously, some of the existing artistic forms and institutions might be international, but in a wrong way, subservient in reproducing gendered, racial and economic hierarchies that enable fascism and are reinforced by it. Following Benjamin, one could approach them dialectically, and contribute to their transformation into the progressive, socially useful and artistically potent institutions of the global commons. Responding even more concretely, together with the Anti-fascist Year, the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw and the international coalition of museums, L'internationale, we are planning to organise a summit devoted to the new, international popular front in art and beyond. We are working on it together with Jesus Carrillo from Madrid, and imagine it as a hybrid gathering, with both discursive and organisational purpose, a conference and an open call for action. We will keep you posted.

**March/April 2019**

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**Postscript:** The questions and issues signalled in this interview will be developed during the conference 'Internationalism after the End of Globalisation', co-organised by the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw and the L'internationale coalition of European museums and taking place in Warsaw on 25–26 of October 2019; more information can be found here: <https://artmuseum.pl/en/wydarzenia/internacjonalizm-po-koncu-globalizacji>

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