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**abstract:**

The article is the first study of Przemysław Kwiek's work from the period of postcommunist transformation. Based on a method of symptomatic reading of ideology (Slavoj Žižek), the author analyzes Kwiek's work as a repressed symptom of the transformation, a blind spot of its ideology. To do so, he uses two metaphors: kynicism and cynicism (Peter Sloterdijk), treating Kwiek as an exponent of a kynical attitude. The main thesis of the article is as follows: Kwiek's work is not a part of the canon of the Polish art of the 1990s because, as radically critical of the neoliberal shock therapy, it could not fit into the ideological framework of the epoch. Significantly, this was also true of art history, dominated by gender or identity issues typical for the transformation. The article proposes to look at Kwiek's attitude as a potentiality to complement these themes with a critique of the economic (including class) basics of transformation. The article extensively examines Kwiek's work, placing it within such a critical project.

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## **Diogenes from Łomianki-Dąbrowa:** **Przemysław Kwiek and the Ideology of the** **Transformation**

"The newspapers write that we have to get ready to struggle for survival again, to tighten our belts, to lower our sights, and the ecologists say the same thing. Privileged society, to hell with it!"<sup>1</sup>

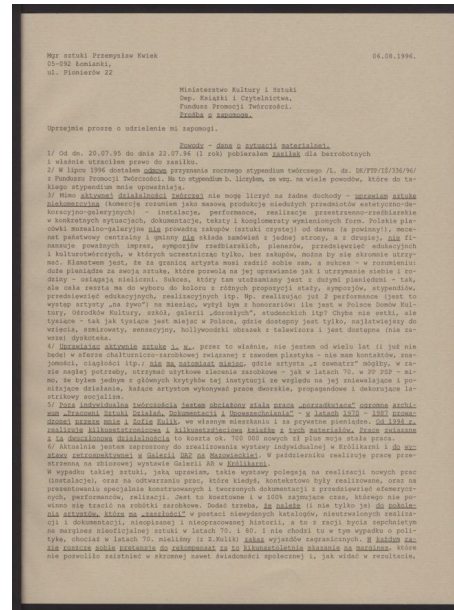
Peter Sloterdijk, 1983

"I have no computer, no decent camera, I have no car, nor a thousand other things. But you've got to live. But you've got to live... Of course, I don't have to take part in this twisted game, I could just wait in peace, pretending to be a serious artist."<sup>2</sup>

Przemysław Kwiek, 1993

On August 6, 1996, Przemysław Kwiek (b. 1945) submitted a financial assistance request to the Ministry of Culture and Art (MKiS). This was one big "J'Accuse...!" against the cultural policies implemented after 1989. I believe it is a document of exceptional historical significance. As such, I would like to quote it extensively:

- 1/ From 20.07.95 to 22.07.96 (1 year) I collected unemployment aid and have just lost my rights to these benefits.
- 2/ In July 1996 I was refused a year's creative scholarship [...] from the Creativity Promotion Fund. I was truly counting on this scholarship [...].
- 3/ Despite my active creative work I cannot rely on any income – I make non-commercial art (I understand "commercialism" as the mass production of small aesthetic-decorative-gallery objects) – installations, performances, spatial and sculptural projects in particular situations, documentation, texts, and conglomerates of these forms. Polish museum-gallery institutions have not made purchases (of fine art) for some time (though they should!); on the one hand the central and regional state patronage does not offer commissions, and on the other it does not finance serious events, sculpture symposiums, plein-air, education and culture-building undertakings in which one might earn a modest living without making sales. It is false to state that artists abroad have to fend for themselves, and



Przemysław Kwiek, financial assistance request to the Ministry of Culture and Art, dated August 6, 1996. Published as part of the series *The Art of the Ministry of Culture and Art II* in the catalogue *The Avant-garde Is Selling Lilacs*, published by Związek Polskich Artystów Plastyków Okręg Warszawski, Warszawa 1998. Courtesy of Contemporary Art Centre Zamek Ujazdowski/archival materials from the Mediateka.

that success, in the sense of big money for your art, allowing you to continue making it and to support yourself and your family, is achieved by only a few. This is true for success associated with big money, but all the rest have a wide range of internships, symposiums, scholarships, educational and implementation projects, commissions etc. [...]

7/ Also during the 05.07.91–05.01.92 and 14.04.93–13.04.94 periods I collected unemployment benefits. Altogether, since 1991, I was two years and five months “unemployed”! Does the Regional Labor Board serve as a patron of the arts and does its program and duties include supporting or replacing the tasks of boards created for this purpose? One such board is the Ministry of Culture! [...]

9/ Summing up: though being among the top ten (if not the top five) Polish neo-avant-garde, post-conceptual, processual artists and performers (some would say: artists in general), being historically of note, I am on the verge of destitution. Owing to the persistence of this situation, like a medieval plague, I have found myself in what might be called a state of “structural poverty,” making it impossible to function in any way (to be in town, travel by public transport, buy household items, clothes, take pictures, send letters, receive guests, buy a magazine, a book, a cool drink on a hot day, a ticket to a museum or the Centre for Contemporary Art, make a telephone call etc.). The large sum (of money) that I and, to a large extent, the State invested in my 30 years of work is being wasted.

[...]

I speak openly to our curators, critics, art historians, sponsors, patrons – to those distributing state funding for the arts (not all culture is art), and therefore to the workers of the Ministry of Culture, the provincial and regional culture institutions: sticking their heads in the sand, “not seeing,” downplaying, disregarding etc. [non-commercial art] is in no way justified, all that can be “justified” is ignorance. [...] And everyone who is “in the business” should know all this, for when the artist

includes a “complaint” in their work (not on a piece of paper to a board or government), this complaint of ignorance is immortalized, through the artist and the work, in the national culture. Or it dies (this is happening<sup>3</sup> now), which essentially means aborting unborn audiences.

Kwiek received no aid. He did, however, use his Ministry of Culture application in his work. In 1998, he published it in a brochure accompanying an exhibition at the DAP Gallery in Warsaw, thus including it in a series of interventional works titled *Art of the Ministry of Culture and Art II*. In this way, though his “complaint of ignorance” (the complaint of the artist and the ignorance of the bureaucrats) “died” in an institutional and financial sense, it gained public visibility. The stakes of the present text are similar: to save Kwiek’s work and stance in the transformation era from oblivion.<sup>4</sup> It is also an attempt to sketch out a “potential history” of the Polish art of the 1990s. Namely, it is a vision in which art’s ethical task is not solely tied to critiquing representation or discourse in order to hasten social modernization – as was the case with critical art – but also to undermine the economic basis of that modernization.

## Kwiek as a symptom

Przemysław Kwiek is not an unknown commodity. On the contrary, he is widely considered a classic figure of the neo-avant-garde. From 1970–1987 he and Zofia Kulik comprised the KwieKulik duo, today part of the global contemporary art canon. The same might be said of the solo work of Zofia Kulik (after 1987). Meanwhile, Kwiek’s solo work remains basically neglected.<sup>5</sup> This is despite his “active creative work,” as he (literally) underlined in the above document. This was no exaggeration. When the duo fell apart, Kwiek was a mature artist with an established position in the arts scene, with a developed creative method, active in many fields. In 1988, he initiated the creation of

the Association of Artists of Other Disciplines, a platform to integrate and promote neo-avant-garde art in its broad definition. He then made regular appearances at performance festivals, took part in collective exhibitions, and also had a few solo exhibitions.

In spite of all this, Kwiek's work is completely absent from the canon of Polish art at the time of the transformation. This holds true for academia (books, articles, teaching programs),<sup>6</sup> institutions (collections, exhibitions),<sup>7</sup> the market (auctions, galleries, corporate collections),<sup>8</sup> the media (awards, recognition), and finally the state (scholarships, decorations, representing the country at international events).

Therefore, we are dealing with an absence so deeply rooted, even absurdly total, that in order to interpret it, it seems appropriate to use psychoanalytical categories. Literally.

I intend to show that the reason for Kwiek's absence in the canon, when we consider the quality and accessibility of his work, can only be ideological. To this end, I will look at his work and approach in the spirit of "symptomatic reading." This is a model of interpretation that is situated, as Krzysztof Świrek once put it, at the intersection of Marxism and psychoanalysis.<sup>9</sup> Plainly speaking: I will treat Kwiek as a repressed symptom of the violence of the transformation era in art. He never accepted the changes that began in the late 1980s. His interventional installations, happenings, and performances (collectively known as "Appearances") and *Art of the Ministry of Culture and Art II* (complaints, applications, protests) expressed his opposition to the elimination of state patronage, artists' drastic living conditions, the conservatism of exhibiting institutions, the commodification of art, and the ignorance of the elite. His pieces make up a unique body of work – perhaps the only case of such a conscious, methodical, and uncompromising critique of the transformation era in Polish art. And herein lies the source of the

repression.

A social symptom, Slavoj Žižek says, is a “pathological,” redundant element of any socio-ideological field – an excess that signals its falsehood, undermines its universality, disrupts its coherence. In other words, a symptom is a flash of the traumatic “truth” of an ideology, its Real. This is why it must be repressed – that is, removed from the collective symbolic order.<sup>10</sup> The repressed truth of the transformation in the sphere of culture, as in other regions, was inequality, exclusion, and “structural poverty.”

According to Žižek, the true significance of the symptom can only be recognized *post factum*, through interpretation, i.e. retroactive analysis of what has been repressed. At the moment of its appearance, a symptom is not yet “the” symptom – it is merely an error, as incomprehensible as a momentary disturbance in the smooth surface of an ideology. Kwiek’s work has been perceived analogously, as incompatible with transformation-era logic, an oddity, an unfathomable and unbearable excess. Žižek writes that a symptom is an “imaginary fixation.”<sup>11</sup> Kwiek was indeed seen as fixated: a vulgar, bitter miser, always grumbling instead of adapting to the new rules of the game. This reception was encouraged by his *emploi*. Kwiek did not dress in black, did not look like the model “contemporary artist”; he looked more like a vagrant, a vagabond, a hippie. Nor did he share the enthusiasm of the new artistic elite; on the contrary, he was weary, irritable, always discontent. It was clear he was struggling against something, but the nature of this struggle remained vague, or indeed repressed. “Symptoms,” Žižek writes, “are meaningless traces, their meaning is not discovered, excavated from the hidden depth of the past, but constructed retroactively – the analysis produces the truth; that is, the signifying frame which gives the symptoms their symbolic place and meaning.”<sup>12</sup> As Žižek points out, this is the essence of writing history – inserting repressed events from the

past into new symbolic structures.

The retroactive gesture of symbolization that I intend to make here, the gesture of rewriting history, involves treating Przemysław Kwiek as a kynic, a stubborn moralist, a rude clown, a thinker philosophizing with shit and obscenities, an existential materialist and a shameless man – a Diogenes from Łomianki-Dąbrowa.<sup>13</sup>

## A kynic against cynicism and the collapse of principles

Jan Sowa seconds Bruce Fink's opinion that the aim of the analyst is to "bombard the Real with metaphors."<sup>14</sup> For the interpretation proposed here, the metaphors are cynicism and kynicism. It is with them that I will bombard Kwiek's work, which until now has functioned as nonsensical and ultimately as an ignored excess. In this I draw from Peter Sloterdijk, whose *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1983) is a brilliant analysis of the two standpoints. According to Sloterdijk, ever since antiquity, philosophy has run on two tracks. The personifications of these paths are Plato and Diogenes of Sinope, the "dog-man" and the founder of kynicism. The former broke the thread connecting theory and matter, summoning idealism to life. In this way, ideas became abstractions, and truth could be established through theoretical speculation. Meanwhile, for Diogenes, truth is the conjunction of theory and practice. Diogenes is a materialist who tests ideas with actions. According to Sloterdijk, in a critical sense, the philosopher's task is not "to get people to chase after unattainable ideals," but "much more: to say what they live."<sup>15</sup>

Sloterdijk says that all idealism inevitably turns into cynicism. This happens when ideas are no longer the motors of social change, but instruments of control. The essence of cynicism, in turn, is consent to a systemic *status quo*. The fundamental consequence of this state of affairs is the loss of faith in the

meaning of individual sacrifice. The cynical mind is defeatist, disillusioned, bitter, focused on the here and now. But then kynicism also appears, which, like a “secret diagonal,” cuts through Western thought since Diogenes.<sup>16</sup> In this sense, cynicism and kynicism are “constants in our history, typical forms of a polemical consciousness ‘from below’ and ‘from above’.”<sup>17</sup>

This is the quarrel between the master and the servant. Kynicism, in one form or another, flourishes in eras of community breakdown, systemic change, and modernizing pains. Idealism has always undervalued the social foundation of theory, appreciating the abstract: reason, virtue, genius, metaphysics. Materialism hoisted the flag of labor. Kynics of all eras are people on the social margins, excluded, maladjusted, desperate, degraded. The cynical idealism of the masters has authority, morality, gravity, money, discourse, argument, ambition, good taste – in a word, it has power. The kynic is left “pissing against the idealistic wind.”<sup>18</sup> Kynicism appreciates laughter (not analysis), life (not text), earthiness (not sublimity), corporeality (not spirituality), malice (not mawkishness), contempt (not magnanimity), the grotesque (not reason), impertinence (not convention), weakness (not strength), shamelessness (not shame), vulgarity (not pathos), deeds (not dialogue), practice (not theory), and courage (not tactics).

*Critique of Cynical Reason* was aimed at the Western postmodernity of the “end of history.” In this sense, the cynicism of the transformation-era ideology was typical in its essence: from a position of power, it tried to convince people that it would be better if reality conformed to higher ideals. But before the free market fixed everything, they’d have to tighten their belts.

Kynics always confront abstract slogans with the prose of mundane life – poverty, exclusion, violence – thus exposing their fictions. “To embody a doctrine means to make oneself into its medium,”<sup>19</sup> writes Sloterdijk. Przemysław Kwiek did just this: “I (try to) take ‘life’ on an equal footing with art, which means

I regard 'artistic activities' as part of 'life' – a piece of it made public. Yet life should not be confused with art."<sup>20</sup> In other words: the point is not an avant-garde abolition of art as such, its dissolution into life, and therefore – ultimately – resignation from it. It is rather to conceive a model of creativity in which art is a medium of life.

An expression of this approach – the "embodiment of theory" – was the Appearance, an art genre created by Kwiek. He presented the term and its accompanying theory for the first time at the Visual Arts Association plein-air in Olsztyn in September 1987, at a point when the cynicism of the declining Polish People's Republic had turned into the cynicism of the transformation. An Appearance is a moment when the audience gains insight into the artist's life. What does this mean? With his characteristic kynical humor, Kwiek explained that an Appearance might be compared to slicing brawn. Brawn is a creation both complex and covert. It is made of mixed bits of fat, chunks of meat, and skin, yet it is all hidden in an opaque intestine. An Appearance is the point when the artist's life "reveals itself" in a specific, individual moment. If we were to cut the brawn in a different place, the effect would be different, yet somehow similar. At the same time, the revealed structure always belongs to the invisible rest that precedes it – this is where it began, and without it, it ceases to exist. We cannot fully understand a given Appearance without considering the previous ones.

An Appearance, Kwiek tells us, is "practicing a process."<sup>21</sup> This term might prompt associations with processual art, yet an Appearance can take any form – a painting, installation, performance, text, etc. In this sense, Kwiek is post-artistic:<sup>22</sup> if art can be anything, the form is not at stake. What counts is the purpose for which it is used.

Kwiek calls the Appearance a "philosophy." We will follow suit,

with the reservation that this is a cynical philosophy: the method is the foundation here, and the foundation the method. This helps us see the Appearance as a shield against cynicism. "Ability," Sloterdijk writes of cynical art, "is only an embellishment of genuineness. It is not the lasting works that count, but the moment of their intensive realization."<sup>23</sup> We would say: the moment of their "revealing."

## Kynicism, the strength of the act: digression 1

Here, we need to make a digression. For if we are to consider Kwiek a cynic, then were all those who participated in the transformation-era arts system – that is, the great majority – behaving cynically? Not necessarily, or at least: not entirely.

To see this clearly, we must nuance the concept of ideology. For Sloterdijk, ideology is merely a function of power. A famous metaphor from *Critique of Cynical Reason* states that postmodern cynicism is "enlightened false consciousness." This is, of course, a paraphrasing of Marx. The difference is that while Marx treated ideology as an inextricable part of social relations, Sloterdijk thought that contemporary societies understand the fictitious nature of ideology all too well. The postmodern subject therefore perceives the gap between the falsehood of ideology and the "true" nature of social relations, but still opts for the falsehood. Why? For the lack of alternatives. "[Cynics] know what they are doing," Sloterdijk writes, "but they do it because, in the short run, the force of circumstances and the instinct for self-preservation are speaking the same language, and they are telling them that it has to be so."<sup>24</sup> Slavoj Žižek complicates this approach. In his opinion, Sloterdijk recognized the specificity of the era, yet failed to notice that cynicism is itself a form of ideology. This oversight comes from the fact that Sloterdijk treats ideological illusion as external to social reality. Meanwhile, says Žižek, the illusion does not come from knowledge: reality itself has a fictional structure.

In this sense, Sloterdijk himself succumbed to an ideological illusion, treating cynicism as an essential “truth” of the era of the end of ideology, not an expression of an ideology of the end of ideology. This does not make his tropes of kynicism and cynicism worthless; on the contrary, only now do we see their deeper significance. Given that human behavior is governed by an unconscious (!) illusion, it would be difficult to consider cynical or ironic distance intentionally unethical. Only conscious cynicism – the instrumental use of ideals – is a tool of power. It is also for this reason, as Žižek notes:

The classical kynical procedure is to confront the pathetic phrases of the ruling official ideology – its solemn, grave tonality – with everyday banality and to hold them up to ridicule, thus exposing behind the sublime *noblesse* of the ideological phrases the egotistical interests, the violence, the brutal claims to power. This procedure, then, is more pragmatic than argumentative: it subverts the official proposition by confronting it with the situation of its enunciation.<sup>26</sup>

The kynic is dangerous to the cynical authorities, serving as a reminder of what they have experienced first-hand – that the repressed truth of ideology is social antagonism. In a sense, the kynic is a critic of ideology *per se*, because the kynical procedure of bearing witness to the truth presupposes the coherence of theory and practice – there is no room for (cynical) distance. Only now do we come to the connection fundamental to this article: since the illusion of ideology does not rest in knowledge, but in reality itself, then it can only be dispelled by an act. From this perspective, those social actions that disrupt the ideological illusion *in practice* can be considered kynical. When it comes to the transformation era, these would include, for instance, stopping evictions, peasant protests, or bootleg mining. All these

activities, these social symptoms of the economic violence of the transformation era, have been repressed – we do not find them in the hegemonic narratives of the transformation (unless as an aspect of “resentment”). It is in this sense that cynicism is essentially “symptomatic.” I see Kwiek’s actions from an analogous perspective.

## Zofia Kulik’s career as an expression of the ideology of the transformation: digression 2

Let us consider this issue in terms of Zofia Kulik’s career. This is worthwhile because, after KwieKulik parted ways, the fact of Kulik’s recognition is just as symptomatic as that of Kwiek’s omission. The point is not, of course, to show that one’s art is “better” than the other’s. Our only aim is to reconstruct how ideology works, as precisely as possible.

The solo work of Zofia Kulik implemented the central premises of the transformation era’s cultural project almost faultlessly. Naturally, I do not mean an intentional “propaganda” relationship, but rather the mechanism described above.

The stakes of the post-communist transformation were “catching up” with the West, not only in economic and political terms, but in cultural ones as well.<sup>27</sup> In the 1990s and 2000s, Polish art was culturally dominated by the values of Western liberalism: tolerance toward the Other, secularization, a critical relationship to history, etc. In terms of form, the aim was also to fall in line with Western idioms.<sup>28</sup> Here, too, we are dealing with a blind spot of ideology, one that cannot be articulated in its logic. This is, of course, the antagonism of the transformation itself, or the economic and cultural violence behind it. From a broader perspective, it was the epistemological violence of the neoliberal West, whose sphere of influence embraced post-communist Europe, including its arts infrastructure. As such, the lack of works and historical-artistic narratives dealing

with transformation-era violence is highly symptomatic.<sup>29</sup>

Two artists of the transformation era perhaps most fully expressed the idea of art on the West's new peripheries: Mirosław Bałka and Zofia Kulik. The former spoke of the Holocaust from a Central European perspective, using post-minimalist means of expression. Analogously, Kulik raised such topics as totalitarian captivity (*Idioms of the Soc-Ages*), feminism (*The Marvel of Myself*), or media and political propaganda (*From Siberia to Cyberia*). Kulik's new formal idiom became the black-and-white photomontage, cohering with local tradition, but also alluding to Constructivism or Dadaism, and thus quite legible in the West. This was a conscious shift in her artistic language. "It turns out," she said in 1992, "that I had the temperament of a traditional artist, the same passion to build aesthetic wholes and the desire to conceal the grind of the creative process from the viewer. [...] Today I have to say that making traditional art objects is easier."<sup>30</sup> In other words: Kulik no longer wanted to validate art through life.

Zofia Kulik's career is the flipside of Przemysław Kwiek's lack thereof: her work is now part of the inner canon of Central-Eastern European art. For our purposes, however, it is more interesting that Kulik watched Kwiek's career fail from close up. Literally: after Kwiek's dissolution and the couple's private break-up, Kwiek continued living on the grounds of Kulik's property in Łomianki-Dąbrowa. To be precise: Zofia Kulik lived in a villa she bought in the 1980s with money she earned from selling her Warsaw apartment, and in 1992, Kwiek moved into a small shed adapted for living purposes (where he remains to this day).<sup>31</sup> Since 2016, the Kulik-KwieKulik Foundation headquarters has been at Zofia Kulik's house, managing the work of Zofia Kulik and the KwiekKulik duo.

And so Kwiek was right there, yet it was as if he were not there at all. When Hans Ulrich Obrist, then one of the most prominent figures in the global art world, came to Poland in 1999, he visited

Łomianki-Dąbrowa to speak with Zofia Kulik. A late result of this meeting was the title of a monograph on Kulik: *Methodology, My Love* (2019). The phrase emerged during a conversation with Obrist. No one spoke with Przemysław Kwiek. Nor does there exist a Kwiek-KwieKulik Foundation. No one has written a book about his solo art. If such a book were to be written, it might bear the title of one of his works: *Shit in the Regional Labor Office* (we will return to this title).

This tension – essentially between idealism and cynicism – is so pronounced that it is impossible not to approach it with materialistic literalism. Kwiek, his “structural poverty,” his artistic stance, the fact of his living side by side on Kulik’s property, would all be symptoms of the Real in the art of the transformation era. Kulik and her international recognition, meanwhile, would symbolize the power of the phantasm. Almost every day, Kulik saw new symptoms of the Real, the material conditions of existing in the transformation-era arts system, and still participated in it. She wasn’t cynical. This was ideology at work.

### **“Because I want to sell!”: “excessive orthodoxy” as cynicism**

In his pioneering study of KwieKulik, Łukasz Ronduda insightfully tied the disintegration of the duo with the collapse of Kwiek and Kulik’s relationship, as well as with the fall of the system. In this way, three structures in which the common good was to outweigh particularism – whether artistic, romantic, or sociopolitical – gave way to the power of individualism. Self-interest became the new paradigm. “KwieKulik privatized as well,” Ronduda writes, “ultimately parting ways in 1987.”<sup>32</sup>

Ronduda added one more change to the above: KwieKulik’s artistic idiom. With the disintegration of their common unit came the end of art conceived, above all, as a testimony to life, and

secondly, as involvement in the transformation of a flawed world. This was replaced by a model essentially separating art and life: even if the work of KwieKulik still had a critical or polemical dimension (and it did), after about 1984 this polemic was contained in a performative-visual metaphor about the nature of the autonomous work.

Ronduda, understandably, concludes his overview in 1987, yet his narrative arc might give us the impression that KwieKulik's change in artistic idiom applied to the solo careers of both Kwiek and Kulik. The narrative proceeds in a linear or even teleological fashion: from Ronduda's standpoint, the radical nature of KwieKulik's work gradually disappears from the mid-1970s onward, until it finally fades out altogether – just as socialism fades away. 1987 therefore corresponds to 1989: a definitive end and a "new beginning."<sup>33</sup> Yet while in the case of Kulik there was a transition to autonomous art, in Kwiek's case we ought to speak of continuity. It is owing to Kwiek, as Kulik herself admits, that in KwieKulik what counted was "unrealized ideas, ephemeral actions, improvisation, documentation, integration, dissent – in a word, everything that was opposed to a traditional concept of the work of art."<sup>34</sup>

This did not change after 1987, as the term "Appearance" was meant to indicate. Above all, however, Kwiek's stance, which we are calling kynical, stayed the same. This is why we should recall that KwieKulik's work also involved a rejection of cynicism. As Maciej Gdula writes in his *KwieKulik – przeciw cynizmowi, przeciw antypolityce* [*KwieKulik – Against Cynicism, Against Anti-Politics*], in the 1970s "the basic means of socialization became cynicism."<sup>35</sup>

Here, too, the point is the operation of ideology. Artists participated in the state art system of the Polish People's Republic, and yet ironically railed against it in private. Žižek points out that it was precisely this gap, this distance from the official doctrine while accepting its symbolic universe, which allowed for the ideological phantasm to function undisturbed.

This is why the most dangerous thing for ideology is when someone takes ideological principles seriously, collapsing the distance between thought and act. Žižek calls this phenomenon “over-orthodoxy.”<sup>36</sup> This is what KwieKulik did: their *Art of the New Red* was to be one instrument for reforming the system to fit the official doctrine of the Gierek state. In KwieKulik’s vision, the (actually) socialist art system would incorporate neo-avant-garde works into its logic, helping propaganda become truly progressive. Łukasz Ronduda believed this was to be a way of bringing the public and private spheres closer together.<sup>37</sup> We would counter that the cynical stance – uniting theory and practice – was intended to replace cynicism.

Przemysław Kwiek remained “over-orthodox” even after the system change. In March 1988, after the couple broke up and the duo parted ways, a previously planned KwieKulik exhibition was held at the Grodzka BWA Gallery in Lublin. This was also a moment when the art system, like other state sectors, was already undergoing extensive privatization.

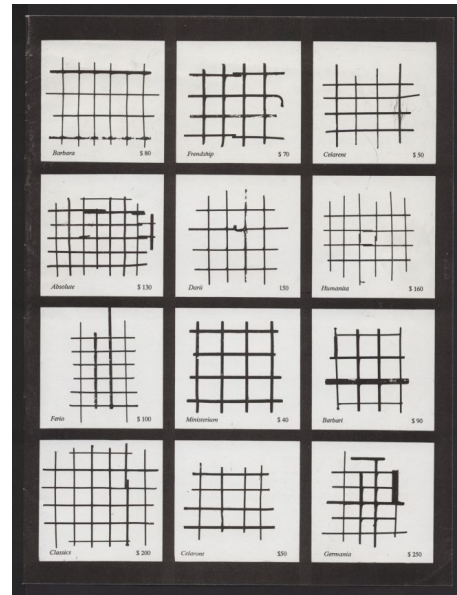
Kwiek calls this *Appearance 0*. One element of the exhibition was bars welded from metal rods.<sup>38</sup> These were displayed like pictures: they hung on walls with titles, and also prices, given in dollars. During the opening, Kwiek explained:

Hanging behind us are metal bars, objects of sorts. They’re fairly nice pieces. I’d encourage you to buy them! They are reasonably priced. Considering our status at this moment and how it will probably, perhaps, increase, whoever buys bars is sure not to lose money, but rather will gain more and more over time – pure profit! I think bars like this should be in every citizen’s home. And what it does for an interior! [...] So I heartily urge you... I urge you to advertise it to your friends.<sup>39</sup>

Kwiek was appealing to the logic of the new, free-market system in which, as Ronduda wrote, “art now only fights as a barren replica.”<sup>40</sup> Kwiek treated the free-market fantasy literally: he turned art into a commodity, promoted it, gave it a good price. He soon repeated the tactic at the *Bars* exhibition at the Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art (1990). Its catalog is essentially a folder of products: with reproductions, titles, and, again, prices (from \$40 to \$450, the *America* model being the most expensive).

It soon became clear that “over-orthodoxy” did not pay off in capitalism either. In 1991, Kwiek found himself unemployed. He then began painting “barred” landscapes. Literally: he fastened bars onto the stretcher frame. The series kickstarted a year of paintings, ten pictures for every season. The bars were clearly a symbol of captivity, once associated with the repertoire of the anti-communist opposition. Combined with the conventional landscapes and the fact that Kwiek was unemployed, they acquired a surprising context: the new, free-market reality was oppressive.

After finishing the series, Kwiek welded barbed wire onto every picture, onto the bars, then painted them in colors corresponding to the tones of the landscape. The wires wound like strange vines, like extensions of the landscapes. Kwiek thus created his stylistic “stamp,” his trademark, through which the “barren replica” could start. In February 1992, he took part in a television program called *The Hypermultimedia Band of Marcin K.*



Page from the catalogue of Przemysław Kwiek's exhibition at the Courtesy of Contemporary Art Centre Zamek Ujazdowski in Warsaw, 1990. Photographs of works with titles and prices. Courtesy of Contemporary Art Centre Zamek Ujazdowski/archival materials from the Mediateka.

(i.e. Krzyżanowski). In the TVP2 studio he lauded the barred pictures as worth buying. He screamed, while explaining why he was screaming: "Because I want to sell!" Then, in April, all the "barred" landscapes were shown at the BWA Lublin Gallery as one painted installation: *Appearance 20*.

Kwiek did not sell; the transformation-era art market paid no attention to him, though the quality of his work and position in the art scene were undeniable. This was because participating in the ideological game requires distance, and excessive identification with the phantasm reveals its illusory nature. This is the power of ideological fiction: we know it is only an illusion, but we still legitimize it through social practice. "The fantasy has to remain 'implicit'," Žižek writes, "it has to maintain a distance towards the explicit symbolic texture sustained by it."<sup>41</sup> From this standpoint, Kwiek should have shouted: "I don't want to sell!" And under no circumstance should he have put price tags on his work. In other words, Kwiek took a dialectic approach: he negated the negation.



Przemysław Kwiek painting one of his paintings behind bars, 1991-1992. From Przemysław Kwiek's archive.

## **"To Hell with it!": "getting dirty with reality" as kynical irony**

In the *Bars* exhibition catalog, Kwiek declared that "sometimes he earns money to buy his work from himself."<sup>42</sup> How exactly does the kynical artist make a living? KwieKulik did "work on the side" – that is, state commissions: commemorative plaques, exhibition arrangements, grandstand designs, etc. At the same time, these always tried to move past the cynicism of the art system of the Polish People's Republic. The *Moonlighting* and *Earning and Creating* series revealed in various ways that the

source of the duo's income was public procurement. Thus, they showed art was never fully autonomous, that there was always a material basis behind it. Zofia Kulik spoke in this context of "getting dirty with reality."<sup>43</sup>

In 1993, the neoliberalization of the state was concluding, in culture as elsewhere.<sup>44</sup> Kwiek, like many other artists, found himself in a dire financial situation. At the same time, he did not want to break the cynical link between art and life. He had to "get dirty with reality" once more. He did this by painting flowers. The first work with this motif – *Appearance 29* – came about at *Domes, Towers, Attics – Passages of Urban Citizens*. This festival, organized by Ewa Mikina and Andrzej Paruzel, offers a great opportunity to construct a potential history of the Polish art of the transformation era. The project was openly critical of the ongoing changes. The idea was simple: to display contemporary art in the windows of tenement houses on Piotrkowska Street in Łódź. The artistic statement was defined here as a "critical commentary and intervention," addressing, in part, "the new visual persuasion of the city with its 'young capitalist' poetic of shop windows, advertisements, signboards etc." By the same token, Mikina and Paruzel stressed that behind the "ground-floor facade of the 'consumer paradise'" were people "desperately confronting the new situation, in both an existential and a political sense." Putting their work in the windows, the artists were supposed to be highlighting this fact. It was just as important to call attention to the artists' financial situations, to capture a less-than-evident "dialectic of the art space and street." To this end, Mikina and Paruzel decided upon a radical gesture: the second part of the exhibition took place in the attics of the tenement buildings and was closed to the public. This was a conscious evocation of the socially isolated bohemian – the curators wrote of the myth of the tower and the attic in modern art.<sup>45</sup>



View of Przemysław Kwiek's exhibition *Appearance (20)*. Galeria Grodzka in Lublin, 1992. Courtesy of Contemporary Art Centre Zamek Ujazdowski/archival materials from the Mediateka.

Przemysław Kwiek, *Appearance 29*, 1993

Kwiek displayed pictures with bars and barbed wire in his shop window. To advertise it further, he placed this ad in the *Gazeta Wyborcza* newspaper:

"Even Kwiek... has begun to be forced to paint lilacs." Take a Saturday or Sunday stroll down Piotrkowska Street (from Wolności Square to the Grand Hotel) to see 10 pictures by Przemysław Kwiek from his legendary series of 40 oil landscapes with steel bars attached to them, sprouting barbed wire. The pictures have been placed in shop windows. Why not become the owner of a picture? The name and status of the artist guarantee every work will turn a profit. There have never been paintings like this. The prices are adjusted to suit budgets in this region of Europe.

Cards with prices in dollars were attached to the bars. But why the lilacs in the first sentence? These, the public could not have been seen – Kwiek painted them in the attic. He painted them while cursing with all his might: "In the fucking cunt, damn it, whore..." The film of Kwiek swearing as he painted was an inextricable part of *Appearance 29*.

One of the most important artists of the neo-avant-garde painting lilacs in an attic is a flash of the Real, transformation-era art world: something hidden, unspoken, yet fundamental to a social order. This something was the material degradation of

artists. Could Kwiek have become a postmodern cynic who ironically commented on the system, yet proceeded according to its logic? "Of course, I could have opted out of that subversive game, waited patiently, pretended to be a *serious* artist,"<sup>46</sup> he said after *Appearance 29*. Yet, once again, he chose cynical irony. This, in turn, Sloterdijk shows, does not legitimize passivity, but is geared toward struggle, through which the cynic "makes [his] hands as dirty as the circumstances are."<sup>47</sup>

Idealism seeks truth in abstract arguments; cynicism formulated another way of validating the truth, one that is realist and materialist – that is, one in which it is "a dialogue of flesh and blood."<sup>48</sup> "I began painting out of fear," Kwiek declared in a rare interview. This was not hyperbole. "My iron-clad daily budget with expenses," he said, "is ten zloty." At the same time, he stressed, as if for clarity, that it was not yet "African poverty," just "chronic, pathological deficiency." The interview was titled "I Can't Afford to Use the Internet (Norwid Wouldn't Have Either)."<sup>49</sup>

The *Appearance* in the Łódź attic was the germ of a series called *The Avant-Garde Is Painting Lilacs*, which Kwiek continued for many years. Altogether, he painted flowers on several dozen canvases, bearing witness to his misery in art.<sup>50</sup> In 1999, he inaugurated *The Avant-Garde Is Selling Lilacs*. In the market in Łomianki, on a street in Piotrków Trybunalski, or the parking lot of the Kampinoski National Park, he set up his booth with canvases. The prices ranged from 600 to 1,300 zloty, which was deliberately too high (similar "kitschy" pictures cost from 60 to 160 zloty at the market). Sometimes he placed a picture next to the booth that read: "I do not accept contributions below 1,000 zloty." Of course, this was a radical way of cutting his chances to earn. And indeed, he did not sell a single canvas with flowers. Why did he inflate the prices? As he put it, he did not yet have to "eat grass," so he could still treat the flower pictures not as a cynical "side hustle" that he was really out to sell, but as cynical

irony. Kynicism is a “low theory,” Sloterdijk writes, which seals “a pact with poverty and satire.”<sup>51</sup>

## Institutional critique as cynicism

At the core of Sloterdijk’s argument is an analysis of modernity, up to its late phase at the end of the twentieth century, as an era in which the idealism of the Enlightenment gradually fossilized into cynicism. This is why he calls cynicism the “Enlightenment in antiquity.”<sup>52</sup>

Analogously, Voltaire and Diderot saw themselves as new kynics.<sup>53</sup>

We should note this broad horizon.

It is the tension between the ideals of the Enlightenment and the virtues of postmodernity that shows the essence of Kwiek’s incompatibility with the transformation-era *milieu*.

This relationship will unfold on several more occasions. Now let us consider it in terms of Kwiek, who might retroactively be seen as an exemplar of an institutional critique that was apparently absent in the 1990s.<sup>54</sup>

In his introduction to the seminal anthology *Institutional Critique* (2009), Alexander Alberro points out that the institutional structure invented in the eighteenth century (libraries, archives, universities, museums) was based on a fundamental rule: institutions produce knowledge not for themselves, but to make it public, to disseminate it as a common good. This is why, Alberro argues, contemporary institutions might be perceived as updating the “radical promise” of the Enlightenment.<sup>55</sup> Since about 1993, after the (financial)



1) Przemysław Kwiek, Appearance 66, from the series *The Avant-garde Is Selling Lilacs* (third outing to the market), 1999. Market, Łomianki. From Przemysław Kwiek’s archive.

2) Przemysław Kwiek, Appearance 74, *The Avant-garde Is Selling Lilacs in Łomianki*, 2000. Piotrków Trybunalski. From Przemysław Kwiek’s archive.

3) Przemysław Kwiek painting *I Will Not Accept Donations Below 1000 złotych*, later used in the Appearances *The Avant-garde Is Selling Lilacs*, 1999. Courtesy of Contemporary Art Centre Zamek Ujazdowski/archival materials from the Mediateka.

fiasco of *Bars* and the first experience of “chronic deficiency,” Kwiek’s work can be seen in similar terms: as expressing a conviction that only restoring a way of thinking about institutions in the logic of public service can stop the neoliberal dismantling of state patronage. As we see from the document quoted at the beginning, Kwiek perfectly realized the falsehood of the transformation-era critique of state interventionism. In true cynical fashion, he calls the fetish of free-market voluntarism what it is: a lie. And he points out that in the idealized “West” it is the patronage of the state that guarantees the harmonious development of artistic life. He was also conscious of owing his arts education to the state. That is why, in a conversation recorded after *Appearance 29*, he suggested the state should continue to employ artists, which would help give visual expression to the coming epoch.

The transformation-era ideology discarded this model *a priori*, considering the market to be a sufficient regulator of social relations. Kwiek’s response to this state of things was fundamentally critical. Here, too, we are dealing with a continuation. *Art of the Ministry of Culture and Art II* is the next phase in KwieKulik’s work, though once more, as Gdula writes, it was Kwiek who “showered the offices with letters, demanding change, interventions, explanations of administrative decisions.”<sup>56</sup> In the new reality, the aim was the same: to say plainly what he thought of the actions of leading institutions, both political and artistic (like Zachęta or the Centre for Contemporary Art, which Kwiek called the “Cemetery of Contemporary Art”). Kwiek scolded, admonished, and even tried to convince decision-makers to buy his works (without success). He wrote to bureaucrats of all stripes: directors of institutions, department managers, even ministers. Kwiek saw the letters he wrote as works – he documented them, exhibited them, and priced them.

"A letter by Kwiek is worth more than a picture by [Roman] Opałka!"<sup>57</sup> he declared with kynical confidence.

A novelty here was the request for assistance, which had been unnecessary in the art system of the Polish People's Republic. This shows a basic difference between the neoliberal and socialist art systems. In the latter, although the Party rejected KwieKulik's ideas, branding them "revisionists," surveilling them and forbidding them from leaving the country (1975–1979), they could still benefit from state patronage. This was, of course, a "cynical" relationship (though KwieKulik, as we have seen, tried to unmask this dependency), and the patronage was sometimes unreliable, yet the state still ensured artists a minimum of material stability.

"The moral foundation of enlightenment," Sloterdijk writes, "is decomposing because the modern state simultaneously demoralizes the enlightened and makes public servants of them."<sup>58</sup>

This statement is fundamentally Marxist. In *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Marx notes that, from the bureaucrat's point of view, the private goal (e.g. a promotion) swiftly begins to take precedence over the state's goal. The tension between the state (the common good) and bureaucracy (individual egoism), their incompatibility, is in essence the tension between idealism and cynicism. Here, too, Marx posits a dialectic: "The abolition [*Aufhebung*] of the bureaucracy can consist only in the universal interest becoming really – and not, as with Hegel, becoming purely in thought, in abstraction – particular interest; and this is possible only through the particular interest really becoming universal."<sup>59</sup> In *Art of the Ministry of Culture and Art II*, the institutional critique is thus radical in the sense that it touches the roots (*radix*): it concerns not so much the art institutions themselves, but the epistemologies behind them. "In [his] cheekiness lies a method worthy of discovery,"<sup>60</sup> Sloterdijk writes of Diogenes. Kwiek's impertinence also served to reveal the

incompatibility between idealistic abstractions and the cynical reality of the neoliberal state.

## “I needed to take a shit”: toward crude enlightenment

If the cynicism of the masters exploits the sublimity of idealism, then the cynicism of the subjects is left with what is low, arrogant, and unworthy. This is why Sloterdijk says that cynicism is a “crude enlightenment.” The cynic’s weapon is the curse, mockery, impertinence, their stage the *agora*, market, fairground (even in Łomianki). The cynic, writes Sloterdijk, “has to challenge the public sphere because it is the only space in which the overcoming of idealist arrogance can be meaningfully demonstrated.”<sup>61</sup>

Kynicism is a physiognomic and physiological critique: Diogenes pulls faces, masturbates, and defecates in public. Meanwhile, Sloterdijk writes, for the cynic, “everything is shit; his overdisappointed superego does not see the good in the shit.” Shit is a symbol of all the matter that cynics loathe. “The relation that is drummed into people with regard to their own excretions provides the model for their behavior with all sorts of refuse in their lives.”<sup>62</sup> The cynic, on the other hand, notes even the lowest form of matter: “The excluded lower element goes to the marketplace and demonstratively challenges the higher element.”<sup>63</sup>

And so we have shit in the *agora*. In October 1994, Kwiek carried out *Appearance 44*, calling it *Shit in the Regional Labor Office*. This time, the *Appearance* took the form of an installation. In its center stood a toilet. Somewhat higher was a picture frame, to which four Statue of Liberty figurines were attached, one on each side – this was the throne and frame of transformation-era modernity. The background was a screen made of bars, flanked by white-and-red flags. At the top: a sash bearing the title.

Apart from that, a famous slide from KwieKulik's *Actions with Dobromierz*, with Kulik and Kwiek's son sitting on the toilet. And photos from the action, in which Kwiek threw lumps of clay – like shit – at a stone marked for sculpting at the Center of Polish Sculpture in Orońsko (*Appearance 36*).

*Shit in the Regional Labor Office* is a cynical voice addressing the misery of artists and the lack of state patronage, and undoubtedly a rude one. An integral part of the composition was the text which explained the origin of the title and the central motif of the toilet seat:



Przemysław Kwiek, *Shit in the Regional Labor Office*, 1994. Installation. Galeria XXI, 2004. Warsaw. From Przemysław Kwiek's archive.

On 14.12.1993 I went to the Regional Labor Office on E. Ciołka Street in Warsaw to pick up my dole payments (1,222,000 zloty). I needed to take a shit. After searching and running up and down the stairs I found one open washroom on the second floor, with two working stalls. And everywhere human waste and godawful mess. One stall was occupied. I peeked in the other, but the bowl was filled to the brim with shit. I flew up and down the stairs again (I was desperate!) hoping I had missed an open one. No such luck. I went back. I found newspaper in a bucket (for toilet paper) and finally, first letting a woman go in front of me, I used the stall, which was so tight it was hard to remove my jacket. Moreover, the water flushed so hard and suddenly that it fouled the white plastic toilet seat with the scraps it swept up. Another woman went in after me!<sup>64</sup>

After the exhibition at DAP (1998), where *Shit in the Regional Labor Office* was shown, a *Gazeta Wyborcza* journalist asked if it was an allusion to Duchamp's *Fountain*. "This is no Duchamp, it's life," Kwiek cynically replied.<sup>65</sup> We would add, in the spirit of a symptomatic reading, that *Shit in the Regional Labor Office* is excess, material remains, which, in the transformation-era

ideology, would not be made a symbol. Small wonder that this work by Kwiek, a symptom of the Real, was also repressed.

Another example of Kwiek's rudeness is *Appearance 46, Let's Hope It Goes Till Retirement* (1995). Krzysztof Żwirblis euphemistically commented that this was an "uncultured response to the world."<sup>66</sup> The installation was made for the niche AR Gallery at Cinema Tęcza, and consisted of two parts. The first was a frieze made up of black-and-white reproductions of ancient sculptures (*Winged Victory of Samothrace*, etc.) with a "potpourri" of the most vicious curses cut out of them: "Oh you whore, you two-timing cunt, you're fucked in the head..." Through the cut-out letters peeked a yellowed document of KwieKulik's actions. There was also another part: some tawdry railing posts, as if taken from Gargamel's hovel, on which, on two metal sheets – leftovers from some side projects – Kwiek scattered piles of crushed marble. The effect is cynically plain: the subject behind the abuse is the transformation-era state, and the target of the abuse is culture itself; the state curses at culture, seeing it as worthless. And the pile of rubble? By neoliberal logic, all that remains of public policies is a "pile of rocks."<sup>67</sup>

Kwiek, like Diogenes, knew how to be rude toward the representatives of power. In June 1998, when the ministry again ignored his requests for support, he decided to return his MA diploma. He sent one of the two official copies of the document to the Minister of Culture and Art, Joanna Wnuk-Nazarowa. His letter was part of *Appearance 60* and was titled *I Suggest the Minister Eat My Diploma*. It need not be the whole thing, Kwiek specified – it could also be "a part of it, the rest can be given to



Przemysław Kwiek, *Let's Hope It Goes Till Retirement*, 1995. Installation. Galeria AR, 1995. Warsaw. From Przemysław Kwiek's archive.

bureaucrats from the relevant departments and art centers to taste, to Zachęta and the museums.”<sup>68</sup> This time, his kynical impudence paid off. Wnuk-Nazarowa even awarded Kwiek a three-month stipend, the lowest available. However, she did not return his diploma. Perhaps she really did eat it?

Kwiek’s vulgarity sometimes used invectives as well. As Sloterdijk recalls, in the Enlightenment, the critique of ideology reserved the right to “*argumentum ad personam*,” believing in the power of “holy nonseriousness.”<sup>69</sup> Kwiek, however, declared: “true ‘critical art’ should ‘name names’.”<sup>70</sup> In *Appearance 49, Judgment Day* (1995), the artist asked the audience to name public figures, and then to “judge” them with a thumbs up or down. Those who received the thumbs down included Aleksander Kwaśniewski, Lech Wałęsa, and Karol Wojtyła; according to Kwiek, they were all guilty of ruining culture, making it trivial and commercialized.

Kwiek attacked the artistic elite even more viciously, also “naming names.” He accused them not only of legitimizing an unjust or even inhumane economic system, but also wasting an opportunity to educate the masses in a progressive way. In the interview mentioned above, Kwiek said those guilty of social ignorance of the neo-avant-garde would not “get away”; these were “[Wojciech] Krukowski, [Anda] Rottenberg, [Maria] Poprzęcka, [Dorota] Jarecka, [Monika] Małkowska, Łódź, Wrocław, Warsaw (i.e. their museums and the directors thereof) and the Ministry of Culture.”<sup>71</sup> Kwiek repeated such tirades whenever he could. We might say: he was shameless.

### “How shameful!”: kynicism as shamelessness

The critical potential of kynicism culminates in the notion of shamelessness. Kynical shamelessness, however, is more than vulgarity. In it, we should see not so much a method (though it is this as well) as a standpoint. The history of philosophy alternately speaks of Diogenes as “shameless” and a “political

animal” – a dog who bites his master instead of heeling. This is not an Aristotelian *zoon politikon*, but a position that allows one to maintain autonomy from a system of imposed values. One of its keystones is shame.<sup>72</sup>

What was the value system of the transformation? To answer this, we must take into account the bond between shame and modernity. In his essay “War of Shame,” Przemysław Czapliński notes that “modernity gave shame a special role, making it an instrument of progress. There is no way to appeal for a holistic change in the world without stigmatizing attitudes to be eliminated.”<sup>73</sup> Shame first became an instrument of social (rather than individual) exclusion in the eighteenth century. During the Enlightenment, the blade of shame was pointed at opponents of egalitarianism and emancipation. In the neoliberal transformation era – or more broadly: postmodernity – there was an inversion of modern values, including what was shameful. Individuality, or even egoism, has become a virtue, and Enlightenment values – solidarity, care, equality – have become vices. Postmodernity, Czapliński writes, is progress without solidarity and equality. This is why, in the transformation era, the most important lesson of shame was: if you find yourself in a drastic living situation, you are to blame. Shame on you!<sup>74</sup>

In this way, all the “losers” of the transformation era began to be subjected to shaming procedures. The mechanism was simple: the lack of economic advancement also had an ethical dimension. For shame! Kwiek showed this connection in *Appearance 96*, “unveiled” at Bytom’s Kronika Gallery in 2004. The idea was to make unemployed diggers from a local bootleg mine and jobless artists hand out Kwiek’s poems from the *Super, Hyper, Extra the Best...* series. This was a cynical alliance of the degraded and demeaned. We should pause for a moment to consider Kwiek’s analogy. For this, let us turn to Tomasz Rakowski’s celebrated work of ethnography, *Hunters, Gatherers, and Practitioners of Powerlessness*. Here, the author compellingly showed the agency

of residents of towns and villages ravaged by the transformation. One of its symptoms was people digging their own mines. The wonderful paradox of the metaphor of “practicing powerlessness” is that it removes shame from those harmed by the transformation. Unlike the cynical ideology of the transformation, here weakness is not guilt to be ashamed of, but a source of agency. Rakowski points out that the “degraded” experience shame when they are unable to meet the norms imposed from above. This is in fact the experience of a gap between an increasingly isolated “self” and society. It is why they decide to externalize their shame. Individual shame, Rakowski writes, then means “constantly revealing the fabric of shamelessness.”<sup>75</sup> The miners communicated their shame in the form of “complaints,” “grumbling,” inappropriate behavior, and sometimes aggression. This gave them momentary control over entropy. It is in this energetic surplus that the source of agency lies. In this sense, the practice of powerlessness is a manifestation of dignity.<sup>76</sup>

An analogous relationship occurs in most of Kwiek’s works. Kwiek, an artist on benefits, willingly exposed his discouragement, disappointment, or fatigue – he externalized his shame. He did this, however, as a practice of powerlessness: he used his solitary “I” as a shield against the unethical ethics of the transformation era. For the same reason, he could be rude. Seen from this perspective, Kwiek’s work no longer expresses helplessness – it is not a “complaint” or “grumbling,” but a show of agency. An Appearance – a sign of life – becomes here the revealing of shame. “Such shame – *The Avant-Garde Is Selling Lilacs* – in the marketplace!”<sup>77</sup>

Przemysław Czapliński points out that the transformation era “overinvested in shame, making it the chief source of developmental energy. Meanwhile, the affective economy tells us that people strive to minimize shame.”<sup>78</sup> This is why the shamed “backwater” did not modernize itself in a liberal fashion, but – to

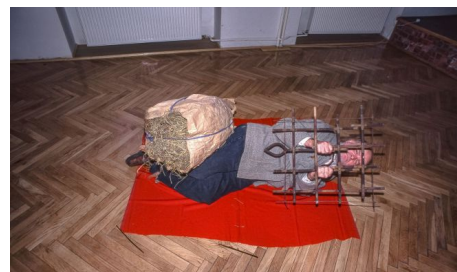
stick with the economic metaphor – invested in the politics of resentment.<sup>79</sup>

This is brilliantly shown by the “cold war between art and society,” as the social debate over critical art was called, using the title of Zbigniew Libera’s famous work.<sup>80</sup> One front in the battle concerned a sculpture by Maurizio Cattelan, *La nona ora* (1999). Kwiek parodied it during *Appearance 77*, performed during the *At the End of the Century* concert at the Municipal Cultural Center gallery in Piotrków Trybunalski (2000). *La nona ora* is a veristic figure of John Paul II. The Pope is lying on the ground, crushed by a meteorite. Kwiek also lay on the floor, in a similar pose, yet he was crushed not by a rock from sky, but by a sack of hay. He had a pained expression, he was worn out, in his hand he held bars he called *Polonia*, priced at \$300. He explained that this was how much he needed to buy a good television. Cattelan’s sculpture expressed the dilemma of an idealist: the meteorite is a metaphor for the weight of faith. Kwiek was pressed to the ground by poverty.

But what exactly was the object of Kwiek’s satire? The context here is all-important. Let us recall: Cattelan’s sculpture was exhibited at Zachęta, in the noble Matejkowska Hall, during the jubilee exhibition, *Watch out, Leaving Your Own Dreams You May Find Yourself in Others’*

(2000). The media was interested in Cattelan’s piece even before the opening, and a series of rumors had called it “scandalous.” The effects were not long in coming: a few days after the opening, Witold Tomczak, an MP for the League of Polish Families, rammed through the barriers and “freed” the Pope from the meteorite, thus damaging the sculpture.<sup>81</sup>

Taking the meteorite from the Pope’s back, Tomczak was



Przemysław Kwiek, *Appearance 77*, MOK, Piotrków Trybunalski, 2000.  
From Przemysław Kwiek's archive.

essentially lifting the cultural shame from the shoulders of the losers of the transformation. Despite appearances, this was not a cynical gesture: on the contrary, it fell in line with a hegemonic (i.e. conservative) narrative of the transformation. This does not change the fact that, owing to performances of this sort, the powers of the culture war effectively veiled the view of what was down below: matter, the belly, the earthy side of things.<sup>82</sup>

If, as Žižek would have it, a symptom is “news from the future,” then the message of *Appearance 77* would be this: perhaps the transformation-era morality would be different if in the Matejkowska Hall – that *pars pro toto* of national culture – there was room for a critique of economic voluntarism. In this sense, the parody of *La nona ora*, the externalized shame of a wretch, was not aimed at Cattelan or a society that was “lagging behind,” but at the transformation-era elite.

### The cynic: a (committed) intellectual *déclassé*

We have reached the point where the above threads can converge. This point is cynicism conceived as class anger. The economic changes of the 1990s were connected to a radical change in the social class structure. The cultural norms of the middle class prevailed. This went hand in hand with the symbolic degradation and pauperization of the classes forming the social structure of the Polish People’s Republic: the peasantry, working class, and intelligentsia.

The cynic, writes Sloterdijk, represents a “declassed or plebeian intelligence,” a “lone owl,” and finally a “provocative, stubborn moralist.” He is also an urban type. The cynic turns his back on the city and despises its falsehoods, yet only the metropolis can give him sympathy and recognize him as an outstanding individual.<sup>83</sup> The cynic is also a person of the city, but the difference in status is plain: this is “an average social character in the upper echelons of the elevated superstructure,”<sup>84</sup> an ordinary bourgeois. One’s place in the social structure

translates into a readiness to be involved. The kynic proves the theory with action, while the cynic limits themselves to “public chatting”: they contribute to collections, take part in elections, go to demonstrations, but never, ever risk their social standing.

Kwiek comes from a multi-child family; his parents were doctors. The Kwieks lived in Warsaw’s Praga district, in the “bad,” blue-collar part of town. The artist’s mother and grandmother were committed communists – they belonged to and were active in the Party. As Maryla Sitkowska writes, it was Kwiek’s mother who nurtured “an ethos of the progressive Warsaw intelligentsia going back to the nineteenth century, traditionally leftist and anticlerical.”<sup>85</sup> Kwiek never abandoned this – it was expressed through an idealistic [sic!] involvement in socialism, and after the system change, opposition to the neoliberal transformation. In this light, Kwiek’s work is a struggle to be true to his own class interests. These interests were threatened by the increasingly free-market state.

The kynic, the “plebeian intellectual,” always feels closer to the folk than to the upper classes, because it is with them that he shares common interests. Kwiek, it seems, realized this, or certainly sensed it, unlike most intellectuals. In his works, motifs from the plebeian imagination return time and again: sacks of hay, wildflowers, degraded suburban areas. There is no mockery or irony here, only a sign of solidarity; undeniably, he was sensitive in his use of these symbols. The same applied to clothing. Kwiek often joined visual symbols of the working class and the intelligentsia: sometimes he would appear in a worn sweater, another time in a quilted jacket. In short, he presented himself as a scruffy slacker, a “lone owl.” Always with a beard – a symbol of the political intellectual, but also an attribute of the philosopher, still uncontroversial in the times of alliance between the people and intellectuals in the first wave of Solidarity.<sup>86</sup>

On the other hand, he never dressed in black, as the transformation-era art-world dress code demanded.<sup>87</sup>

Essentially, the whole visual side of Kwiek's work, including his own appearance, can be seen as opposing the aesthetic preferences of the middle class. It was also, inevitably, a blow to their economic privilege. In fact, by lauding everything that the new standards of taste defined as tasteless, Kwiek revealed a class division that was fundamental to the transformation era.<sup>88</sup>

Kwiek's place in the new social hierarchy is well illustrated by the two-part *Appearance 79*, performed in Piotrków Trybunalski in 2001. In the first part, Kwiek sat in a horse-drawn wagon and pretended to be painting a picture; children ran behind the colorful procession, as if during a harvest festival. The pre-prepared painting depicted flowers, as usual, yet the inscription was equally important: *Coca-Cola Must Be a Bad Drink If They Need So Many Ads for People to Drink It. And Pepsi Too*. Here, critiques of the new economic order and new artistic order mingle: the latter is an expression of the former, which is why both appreciate the mechanisms of marketing and promotion. The artist who breaks free from this logic is a "yokel," a crude relic of a bygone era.

In the second part, Kwiek alluded to the transformation-era businessman. He sat in a bathtub on the sidewalk in front of the BWA Gallery. Submerged in water, he sculpted a clay portrait of "the new man of success, who earns 50,000 zloty (\$12,000) a month." Then he dissolved the clay head in the water and bathed in the resulting "healing" mud. In this way, an aesthetic and an economic critique came together. The conclusion here would be: for non-commercial artists, a private patron (commissioning



Przemysław Kwiek, *Appearance 79*, Piotrków Trybunalski, 2001. Phot. Raster

a portrait) is as tangible as clay vanishing in warm water.

As Magda Szcześniak has noted, in the transformation era, the only social class defined according to Marxist criteria – by their relationship to means of production – was the bourgeoisie. At the same time, to describe the classes situated lower and higher, “they used substitute figures, making reference rather to cultural capital (of the elite) or an approach to reality (*homo sovieticus*), and not to a place in the social hierarchy.”<sup>89</sup>

Where did the intelligentsia rank in this hierarchy? The ideology of the transformation was unambiguous here: the intelligentsia, as a strata with an ethos, had already fulfilled its mission. This is why it had to turn into the middle class or disappear from the stage of history in some other, unspecified way. This is a fine example of a “substitute figure.” While the elite of the intelligentsia did indeed become the middle class (or even its upper crust), capitalizing on the cultural capital they had accumulated, the intellectual “masses” did not disappear. They did, however, experience a drop in finance and status. These were primarily low- and mid-rung educated workers employed in the public sector, and those pursuing liberal professions: teachers, academics, bureaucrats, artists. All of these groups felt the effects of the state falling apart – its infrastructure, resources, and social functions. As such, they had to begin privatizing their own bodies and time – the only means of production they had.<sup>90</sup>

Among the artists in a particularly dire situation were those practicing the “fine arts,” or, as Kwiek preferred to say, bringing in a neo-avant-garde concept, the “non-commercial arts.” This was where the liquidation of the state art system hit hardest: the right to a pension, a studio, commissions.

All in all, Teresa Kostyrko wrote, after 1989, the visual arts community got a “shock lesson in independence.”<sup>91</sup>

Classes aspiring to power always portray their interests in terms of eternal, natural ideas.<sup>92</sup> The transformation-era ideology elevated the standards of the middle class, and, as a result, its value system – the same one opposed by cynical shamelessness – was presented as universal. In this sense, Kwiek’s self-identification as a “plebeian intellectual” struck at the very heart of the transformation-era ideology. This required him not only to recognize his own class position, but also to identify with the fate of the degraded and excluded.

Kwiek’s family background undoubtedly came into play here: the virtues of the political intelligentsia were the opposite of those of the transformation. One such virtue was treating work as a social service rather than a path to individual success. In a rare interview (the same one where he mentioned his “chronic, pathological deficiency”), Kwiek noted that his wretchedness was a chance to educate society “through the ‘artist’s service’.” At the same time, he interpreted this task in a cynical fashion: he meant “pantomimically and grotesquely,” a rude exultation of both the bourgeois masses and the elite. Let society learn, he said, that the “suit or uniform” of the serious artist (we would say: the idealist artist)<sup>93</sup> “looks to me like a jester’s hat.”

Another proponent of a left-wing ethos, Andrzej Walicki, has written of the liberal intelligentsia “betraying their calling



Przemysław Kwiek, Appearance 79, Piotrków Trybunalski, 2001.  
From Przemysław Kwiek's archive

after the system change.” He thought liberals could be accused of “all too quickly forgetting their ‘social’ genesis; all too quickly repressing their traditional duty to support the weak, and not the strong; all too quickly accepting a political discourse in which liberal freedom mainly (if not exclusively) meant freedom of the market, in which ‘defender of the people’ was an ironic expression, and the fight for minimal living standards was associated with a *homo sovieticus* mentality [...]”<sup>94</sup> Walicki’s statement is a valuable testimony of ethical principle. Yet we ought to nuance it as we did the figure of cynical reason. Undoubtedly, the liberal elite understood little of what Peter Sloterdijk quite aptly calls the psychosocial context. However, the intelligentsia did not so much betray its ethos (“betrayal” presupposes a planned operation) as it came under the influence of ideology. For the same reason, it could not become a Marxist “class for itself”: the ideology of the transformation era, like any other, obscured the class antagonism from which it had sprung. Kwiek’s work stubbornly reminded us of it. That is why it had to be repressed.

Kwiek was unemployed, with intervals, from July 1991 to December 2009. He had the right to benefits for two years and six months, and had no rights to them for six years and nine and a half months. He regularly showed up at the Regional Labor Office in Łomianki, where he submitted a statement of his earnings. He recorded these visits. Since 2010, Kwiek has been living and making art on a pension amounting to 1,150 zloty a month, or thirty-eight zloty a day. Had there not been pensions for artists in the Polish People’s Republic, he would not have access to even this amount.



rather, they have a bitter knowledge that the world is how it is, and it is bad.”<sup>98</sup> Sloterdijk characterized the contemporary cynic in a nearly identical fashion: “A certain chic bitterness provides an undertone to its activity. For cynics are not dumb, and every now and then they certainly see the nothingness to which everything leads.”<sup>99</sup>

The above quote from Piotrowski pertains to a cynical project by Krzysztof Wodiczko, *Vehicle for the Homeless*. We should take a closer look at this interpretation. For Piotrowski, Wodiczko’s vehicle is as much the work of an artist-engineer – an example of functional art, or at least art with a social function (changing the situation of people in the New York homelessness crisis) – as it is (perhaps above all) an ironic “absurd take on the avant-garde tradition, particularly that part of it which built technological utopias, designed objects, buildings, urban complexes for a future, harmonious and happy society.”<sup>100</sup> Postmodern irony is reserved for faith in a “naive” capacity to change the world, and so it is here. Piotrowski is a postmodern idealist, presupposing that a relationship between “true” and “false” – between theory and substance – is infinitely fluid. Wodiczko consulted his project with people in the homelessness crisis and social organizations assisting an excluded community. The stakes for the *Vehicle for the Homeless* were real change in the fates of real people. Yet, according to Piotrowski, “artists’ declarations matter little. In the context of the ‘death of the author,’ what they have to say loses significance [...]. Does Wodiczko truly believe his vehicles will turn attention to the problems of New York’s homeless community [...]? These things are of secondary importance here.”<sup>101</sup> In this approach, the titular vehicle is not merely tin, rubber, and tarpaulin combined to meet certain goals, but a “a game of facts and meanings that cannot be untangled.”<sup>102</sup>

The conclusion of this reasoning can only be cynical: “The cognitive, critical significance of these actions cannot be overestimated – we see a terrifying reality, sharply and

profoundly. We see its awful meaning precisely because we *know* that, even if we were to introduce a thousand vehicles to the streets of New York we would not make a dent in the system.”<sup>103</sup> We know this mechanism: if the subject perceives that reality is incompatible with idealistic assumptions, it supposes that “things must be this way.”

According to Sloterdijk, at the heart of a cynical consciousness is the conviction that “knowledge is power and power is knowledge.”<sup>104</sup> This was essentially the only lesson of the Polish art history of the transformation era: knowledge is power. Post-structuralism became the theoretical expression of this standpoint. Its political significance was concisely worded by Jan Sowa: if postmodernism is the cultural logic of late capitalism, post-structuralism is the philosophical logic of postmodernism. Both postmodernism and post-structuralism assume the lack of something outside the text and the representation, both express a lack of anything beyond capitalism itself.<sup>105</sup> In an instructive sketch from *In the Shadow of Duchamp*, Piotrowski pointed out: “A remedy for contemporary indoctrination cannot speak ‘alongside’ capitalist structures, as such spaces simply do not exist, nor could they in a counterculture, as it could not defend itself from the rapacity of mass culture [...]”<sup>106</sup>

The remedy, then, was to track down the knowledge-power inscribed in discourse and visual culture. What was at stake was no longer “rebuilding the world,” as in the political art tradition, but, conforming to the logic of idealism, “formulating a critical language to describe contemporary culture.”<sup>107</sup> Political involvement understood in a cynical way – as confirming an idea with one’s life – was deprecated as naive.

Why was transformation-era art history so attuned to the suffering of the Other, yet so blind to economic violence against the weak? Why did it turn so swiftly into yet another serious faction in theory and debate? As Sowa notes, “the post-

structuralists' mistake was that when there was something they could not perceive, as it was caught in a blind spot of their discourse, they decided it did not exist."<sup>108</sup> All the same, art history – like other transformation-era “factions” – repressed the symptoms of social antagonism, which was the condition for its functioning. In other words: it did not recognize its own self as knowledge–power, although it surely was.<sup>109</sup> That is why it didn't recognize those who, to return to Kwiek's litany at the beginning of this essay, had no money “to be in town, travel by public transport, buy household items, clothes, take pictures, send letters, receive guests, buy a magazine, a book, a cool drink on a hot day, a ticket to a museum or the Centre for Contemporary Art, make a telephone call etc.”

Kynicism, collapsing the division between theory and act, made it possible to bring theory down to earth and perceive “flesh-and-bone” arguments. If we formulate the aim of writing history in this way, perhaps we can create an outline for a history of a potential Polish art of the transformation era – that is, one in which the impulse of tolerance toward the Other is complemented by a critique of neoliberal violence. For although these streams never crossed, they did run side by side. In 1990, Kwiek declared: “I'm a dialectician, that's my bread and butter.”<sup>110</sup> It would be worthwhile if art history tried to move in a similar – materialist – direction.

1 Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis–London: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 99.

2 Przemysław Kwiek, *Appearance 29*, 1993, <https://artmuseum.pl/pl/filmoteka/praca/kwiek-przemyslaw-appearance-29> (accessed September 4, 2023).

3 Przemysław Kwiek, request for aid submitted to the Ministry of Culture and Art, August 6, 1996, in: idem, *Awangarda bzy maluje* (Warsaw: Związek Polskich Artystów Plastyków Okręg Warszawski, 1998), unpaginated.

4 Here, I am assuming that the rifts of the transformation are not sharp; I am also

- supposing that economic, political, and epistemological transformation began even before 1989. I consider the symbolic end of the transformation, or certainly its first phase, to be Poland's accession to the European Union. On this subject, see: Wojciech Musiał, *Modernizacja Polski. Polityki rządowe w latach 1918–2004* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UMK, 2013), for the transformation as a modernization project; Magda Szcześniak, *Normy widzialności. Tożsamość w czasach transformacji* (Warsaw: Fundacja Bęc Zmiana, Instytut Kultury Polskiej UW, 2016), for the transformation in the realm of visual culture; Jakub Banasiak, *Proteuszowe czasy. Rozpad państwowego systemu sztuki 1982–1993. Stan wojenny, druga odwilż, transformacja ustrojowa* (Warsaw: Akademia Sztuk Pięknych w Warszawie, Muzeum Sztuki Nowoczesnej, 2020), for the transformation of the arts system.
- 5 In *Forgotten Heritage*, the most important digital repository of Central European art, there is not a single work by Kwiek, and he is mentioned only in the context of KwieKulik. The biographies of the artist on *Wikipedia* and the popular *Culture.pl* website end abruptly in 1987.
  - 6 The only [sic!] academic work on Kwiek to date is Tomasz Załuski's "W pogoni za możliwością. Szkic o Przemysławie Kwieku," in: *Pr. Kwiek*, eds. Paulina Kempista and Przemysław Kwiek (Lublin: Galeria Labirynt, 2012), 36–49. Symptomatically, Załuski focuses on sketching the continuity between Kwiek's method and KwieKulik, practically failing to problematize Kwiek's stance and work after the duo fell apart. This, however, was attempted by Sebastian Cichocki in 2004, in: "Kontrofensywa błędnych rycerzy" [The Counteroffensive of Errant Knights]. This article was published on the Bunkier Sztuki's webpage, and is no longer accessible. The same applies for presentations of various actions by Kwiek on the Raster Gallery's website. The only other exception is a book by Jerzy Truszkowski, *Sztuka krytyczna w Polsce. Część 1. Kwiek. Kulik. KwieKulik. 1967–1998* (Poznań: Galeria Miejska Arsenal w Poznaniu, 1999). This, however, has no theoretical or even factographic backbone; it more idiosyncratically lauds the titular protagonists, and is mainly of value for the documents it reproduces. All in all, the most important publications are four modest catalogs (resembling brochures or booklets) of Kwiek's solo exhibitions in 1990 (Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art), 1998 (DAP Gallery), 2004 (Kronika Gallery), and 2012 (Labirynt Gallery).
  - 7 Kwiek occasionally had – and still has – exhibitions in small, local galleries. Still, he is absent from the large consecratory institutions: the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, Ujazdowski Castle, Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, MOCAK, Wrocław Contemporary Museum, or the national museums. Kwiek has not had solo exhibitions in these institutions, nor even smaller exhibitions of more recent works. There was a modest solo presentation at Ujazdowski in 1990, capping off his work with

Zofia Kulik, whose *Inter-National Gothic* was shown at the same time. I will return to this exhibition. His institutional absence also includes from collections. One of Kwiek's works is held by the Lublin Society for the Encouragement of the Visual Arts (*Fall – Unemployment*, 2000), one by the Foundation for Silesia (*Coca-Cola Must Be a Bad Drink If They Need So Many Ads for People to Drink It. And Pepsi Too*, 1998–1999), and two at the Bielsko BWA Gallery, through these are only photographs of paintings (*Long Live Free Time and Those Who Know What to Do with It – The Artists*, 2005; *We Demand Peace Between the Arabs and the Jews!*, 2005). When it comes to the leading institutions, the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź holds a fragment [sic!] of one work: only the photographic part was purchased of the photography-painting installation *The Avant-Garde Paints Lilacs* (ed. 2004). This in itself is symptomatic. This sort of decision seldom occurs, and is certainly tied to a lack of recognition: if Kwiek's work was seen as of primary significance, it would not have been "carved up" in this way.

- 8 Kwiek is not represented by any gallery; his works, apart from occasional exceptions, are not auctioned. A dozen or so years ago, Kwiek became involved with the now defunct Art NEW Media gallery, but this did not alter his market position. Kwiek's work is not included in corporate collections either.
- 9 Krzysztof Świrek, *Teorie ideologii na przecięciu marksizmu I psychoanalizy* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN SA, 2018). The psychoanalytical terms are being used on the same basis as: Jan Sowa, *Fantomowe ciało króla. Peryferyjne zmagania z nowoczesną formą* (Kraków: Universitas, 2012). This book was what first inspired me to treat Kwiek as a symptom.
- 10 This is why Žižek writes that a symptom "is a species subverting its own genus." Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London–New York: Verso, 1989), 35. I reconstruct the concept of the symptom based on the same book. This is, of course, a highly complex issue, and the literature on the topic is endless. It has recently been the subject of an in-depth analysis by Krzysztof Świrek, *Teorie ideologii*, passim. See also: Sowa, *Fantomowe ciało króla*, 259.
- 11 Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 55.
- 12 Ibid., 55–56.
- 13 In 2013, Jakub Majmurek wrote that "Poland needs a Diogenes, it needs a lesson in shamelessness," evoking the latter in the context of the transformation. The present article might be seen as an attempt to develop this postulate. See: Jakub Majmurek, "III RP, czyli dwie cele wstydu," <https://krytykapolityczna.pl/kraj/majmurek-iii-rp-czyli-dwie-cele-wstydu/> (accessed September 4, 2023). Kynicism is also mentioned by

- Marcin Kościelniak in his analysis of *Kultura Zrzuty* and, in fact, of Łódź Kaliska railway station. See: Marcin Kościelniak, *Egoiści. Trzecia droga w kulturze polskiej lat 80.* (Warsaw: Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, 2018).
- 14 Sowa, *Fantomowe ciało króla*, 364.
- 15 Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 101–102.
- 16 Ibid., 535. According to Sloterdijk, cynical philosophers have included Marx, Heine, Nietzsche, and Freud.
- 17 Ibid., 218.
- 18 Ibid., 103.
- 19 Ibid., 102.
- 20 “Żeby artysta tworzył na gorący temat... Z Przemysławem Kwiekiem rozmawia Paulina Kempisty,” in: *Pr. Kwiek*, op. cit., 62.
- 21 Kwiek, *Appearance* 29.
- 22 I use the term “post-artistic” in the sense applied by Jerzy Ludwiński in: “Sztuka w epoce postartystycznej,” [https://janchwalczyk.pl/en/portfolio\\_page/sztuka-w-epoce-postartystycznej-maszynopis-2/](https://janchwalczyk.pl/en/portfolio_page/sztuka-w-epoce-postartystycznej-maszynopis-2/) (accessed September 4, 2023). We should note that Kwiek takes his “Appearances” to be extensions of KwieKulik’s creative methods, especially of *Mail-outs*, *Wholes*, *Activities*, and *Art of the Ministry of Culture and Art*. A description of these categories can be found in: *KwieKulik. Zofia Kulik & Przemysław Kwiek*, eds. Łukasz Ronduda and Georg Schöllhammer (Warsaw–Wrocław–Vienna: Muzeum Sztuki Nowoczesnej w Warszawie, BWA Wrocław – Galerie Sztuki Współczesnej, Kontakt. Kolekcja Sztuki Grupy Erste and ERSTE Fundacji, KwieKulik Archive, 2012), 465–469.
- 23 Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 396.
- 24 Ibid., 5. I am neglecting a whole range of nuances arising from a Marxist understanding of ideology, exhaustively summarized in: Świrek, *Teorie ideologii*, particularly the sub-chapter “Problematyka reprezentacji: reprodukcja,” 71–94.
- 25 Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 55.
- 26 Ibid., 29.
- 27 On this topic, apart from the aforementioned book by Magda Szcześniak, see: Boris Buden, *Strefa przejścia. O końcu postkomunizmu* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki

- Politycznej, 2012).
- 28 The issue of the transformation-era “catching up” with the West in Polish art has been outlined in detail by Dorota Monkiewicz, “Dyskurs polskiej krytyki artystycznej w okresie transformacji,” in: Zbigniew Libera, *Art of Liberation: Studium prasoznawcze 1988–2018*, vol. 1: 1988–97 (Warsaw: Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej Zamek Ujazdowski, 2019), XI–XXXI.
- 29 On this topic, see: Octavian Eșanu, *The Postsocialist Contemporary: The Institutionalization of Artistic Practice in Eastern Europe after 1989* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021).
- 30 Ryszard Ziarkiewicz, “Bądź tylko posłusznym psychofizycznym instrumentem” [a conversation with Zofia Kulik], *Magazyn Sztuki* no. 1 (1993), 15.
- 31 Kulik’s mother had previously lived on the ground floor of this building, and before her, Zbigniew Libera.
- 32 Łukasz Ronduda, “Od odmian czerwieni do odmian szarości. Sztuka i polityka w działalności KwieKulik w latach 1971–1987,” in: *KwieKulik. Forma jest faktem społecznym* (Wrocław: BWA Wrocław – Galerie Sztuki Współczesnej, 2009), 20.
- 33 It is worth emphasizing that this itself expressed the ideology of the transformation era. On this subject, see: Buden, *Strefa przejścia*.
- 34 Ziarkiewicz, “Bądź tylko posłusznym psychofizycznym instrumentem,” 15.
- 35 Maciej Gdula, “KwieKulik – przeciw cynizmowi, przeciw antypolityce,” in: *KwieKulik. Zofia Kulik & Przemysław Kwiek*, op. cit., 513. Of course, this approach to cynicism requires more nuance (gender, class, regional, etc.), which exceeds the scope of this article.
- 36 On this topic, see: Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 2008), 32–43. This interpretation was first proposed by Ronduda, though he drew from one of Žižek’s lesser-known terms: “subversion-through-identification.” See: Ronduda, “Od odmian czerwieni do odmian szarości,” 10–13.
- 37 Ronduda, “Od odmian czerwieni do odmian szarości,” 15.
- 38 Bars had appeared in KwieKulik’s work in 1985. They were made by Kwiek, and served as a backdrop for the *Festival of Intelligence* in Dziekanka in April 1985. See: *KwieKulik. Zofia Kulik & Przemysław Kwiek*, op. cit., 376.

- 39 I cite Kwiek's comment from the invitation to the 2nd Polish Appearance Festival in June 2001, Mediateka CSW Ujazdowski Castle in Warsaw, *Kwiek Przemysław* file, flyer.
- 40 Ronduda, "Od odmian czerwieni do odmian szarości," 18
- 41 Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, 32. On this topic, see: Świrek, *Teorie ideologii*, 120–125; Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 34–35, 42–48.
- 42 *Przemysław Kwiek* (Warsaw: CSW Zamek Ujazdowski, 1990), text printed on the back cover.
- 43 "Anatomia KwieKulik. Z Zofią Kulik i Przemysławem Kwiekiem rozmawia Tomasz Załuski," in: *KwieKulik. Zofia Kulik & Przemysław Kwiek*, op. cit., 540.
- 44 I write about this in detail in *Proteuszowe czasy*.
- 45 It is possible that this is also an allusion to the festival's recent relocation to Łódź: an attic is as artistically radical as it is socially isolated. Ewa Mikina and Andrzej Paruzel, flyer for the *Domes, Towers, Attics – Passages of Urban Citizens* exhibition, reprinted in: Ewa Mikina, *Słów brak. Te pasáže obywateli miejskich ksty z lat 1991–2012*, eds. Jakub Gawkowski and Marysia Lewandowska (Poznań–Łódź: Galeria Miejska Arsenal, Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, 2023), 62.
- 46 Kwiek, *Appearance 29*, emphasis mine.
- 47 Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 441.
- 48 Ibid., 121.
- 49 "Nie mam środków na korzystanie z Internetu (Norwid też by nie miał), czyli autoryzowana wymiana e-mail pomiędzy Przemysławem Kwiekiem i Sebastianem Cichockim," loose print in the catalog-envelope of a Przemysław Kwiek exhibition, *Radykalne poetyki rewizjonizmu*, 2004, 8.
- 50 He received the stretchers from Zachęta as payment for arranging part of the *Sigma, Galeria, Repassage, Repassage 2, Rerepassage* exhibition (1993).
- 51 Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 102.
- 52 Ibid., 162.
- 53 This is outlined by: Maciej Parkitny, "Filozofia antyczna jako figura nowoczesności w dyskursie Ignacego Krasickiego," in: *Antyk oświeconych. Studia i rozprawy o miejscu starożytności w kulturze polskiej XVIII wieku*, ed. Tomasz Chachulski (Warsaw: Instytut

- Badań Literackich PAN, 2013), 126–127.
- 54 If examples of this sort of criticism are indicated, it is always with the reservation that it was mild and did little to undermine the ideological entanglements of the institution's work, political and personal relations, etc. On this point, see: Patrycja Sikora, *Krytyka instytucjonalna w Polsce w latach 2000–2010* (Wrocław: BWA Wrocław – Galerie Sztuki Współczesnej, 2015), especially 57–65.
- 55 Alexander Alberro, "Institutions, Critique, and Institutional Critique," in: *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings*, eds. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, MA, London: MIT Press, 2009), 3. I do, of course, realize that the Enlightenment was a bourgeois revolution, and the emancipation of the middle classes was tied to the end of the old world of the masses, peasantry, and all those who failed to "adapt." Yet cynicism, too, is a purely bourgeois figure – we will have more to say on this subject. On the effects of the Enlightenment for the lower classes, see: Łukasz Moll and Michał Pospiszyl, "Stawanie się motłochem. Wielogatunkowe dobra wspólne poza nowoczesnością," *Praktyka Teoretyczna* vol. 37, no. 3 (2020), 17–43. Sloterdijk, in turn, suggests that the Enlightenment was a gradual move from (eighteenth-century) idealism to (late-nineteenth-century) cynicism. He believes this movement was tied to abandoning action in favor of thought.
- 56 Gdula, "KwieKulik – przeciw cynizmowi, przeciw antypolityce," 514.
- 57 "Nie mam środków na korzystanie z Internetu," 6.
- 58 Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 88–89.
- 59 Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's "Philosophy of Right"*, trans. Annette Jolin and Joseph O'Malley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 48.
- 60 Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 101.
- 61 *Ibid.*, 105.
- 62 *Ibid.*, 151, with footnote.
- 63 *Ibid.*, 104.
- 64 Truszkowski, *Sztuka krytyczna w Polsce*, 125.
- 65 Monika Kuc, "Awangarda bzy maluje," *Gazeta Stołeczna*, February 11, 1998, unpaginated (*Przemysław Kwiek* file, Zachęta – National Gallery of Art archive).
- 66 Krzysztof Żwirblis, untitled text in: *Galeria Przyjaciół Akademii Ruchu. Lata 1992–1996*

- (Warsaw: Muzeum im. Xawerego Dunikowskiego w Królikarni, 1996), 89.
- 67 The reference is to Bartłomiej Sienkiewicz's statement on the program of Polish Developmental Investments: "Shit, cocks, and a pile of rocks. There is none." Sienkiewicz's statement was recorded during the "tape affair." See: Wojciech Czuchnowski and Renata Grochal, "Rząd na podsłuchu," <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75398,16161164,rzad-na-podsluchu-o-czym-rozmawiali-politycy.html> (accessed February 16, 2024).
- 68 Truskowski, *Sztuka krytyczna w Polsce*, 133..
- 69 Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 18.
- 70 "Nie mam środków na korzystanie z Internetu," 6.
- 71 Ibid., 5.
- 72 See: *ibid.*, 185–188.
- 73 Przemysław Czapliński, "Wojna wstydu," *Teksty Drugie* no. 4 (2016), 21.
- 74 Ibid., 21–28. Significantly, Czapliński, like Sloterdijk, uses the metaphor of binders (20).
- 75 Tomasz Rakowski, *Hunters, Gatherers, and Practitioners of Powerlessness*, trans. Soren Gauger (New York–Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2016), 106.
- 76 Ibid.
- 77 "Nie mam środków na korzystanie z Internetu," 8.
- 78 Czapliński, "Wojna wstydu," 42.
- 79 Ibid., 38–42.
- 80 As Magda Szcześniak has noted, critical art was not at all the subject here, only an instrument for the liberal elite to shame the "unenlightened populace." See: Magda Szcześniak, "Sztuka bez klasy? Uwagi o badaniu polskiej sztuki czasu transformacji," in: *Założenia przedwstępne w badaniach nad polskiej sztuki najnowszej. I Seminarium Dłużewskie. 6–8 lutego 2014*, 137. It is symptomatic that when Czapliński writes of the "critical art" that reflected deeply on the mechanisms described here, he is not thinking of visual art at all, only literature and theater (he studies the former professionally).
- 81 Jakub Dąbrowski discusses this in detail in: *Cenzura w sztuce polskiej po 1989 roku. Artyści, sztuka i polityka*, vol. 2 (Warsaw: Fundacja Kultura Miejsca, 2014), 287–296.
- 82 On politicians' use of visual culture in the transformation era, see: Łukasz Zaremba, *Obrazy wychodzą na ulice. Spory w polskiej kulturze wizualnej*

- (Warsaw: Fundacja Bęc Zmiana, Instytut Kultury Polskiej UW, 2018), 148–179, 206–207.
- 83 Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 3–4.
- 84 Ibid., 4.
- 85 Maryla Sitkowska, "Zanim powstał duet KwieKulik," in: *KwieKulik. Zofia Kulik & Przemysław Kwiek*, op. cit., 530. Kwiek's mother brought about an unprecedented drop in infant mortality in Katowice; she only traveled to Warsaw on weekends.
- 86 Szczęśniak, "Sztuka bez klasy?," 45
- 87 In 1997, Ewa Kępa and Stach Szablowski wrote in *Raster* magazine about a new Polish art-world fashion: "Artists do not dress in black. [...] Asked about the black issue, they seem confused, *their reluctant grimaces reveal a kind of embarrassment*, as if they were caught doing something nasty. A thought: [...] perhaps artists dress in black because they want to hide something so terrible from us that only black is sufficiently opaque and allows them to escape with that something from the viewer's persistent, prying gaze?" [emphasis mine]. Of course, this article had the tongue-in-cheek tone customary for *Raster*, yet perhaps we ought to treat it with a psychoanalytic dose of suspicion. Ewa Kępa and Stach Szablowski, "Dlaczego artyści ubierają się na czarno? (Chrystus i lodziarze)," *Raster* no. 5 (1997), 30.
- 88 Szczęśniak, "Sztuka bez klasy?," 119.
- 89 Ibid., 101.
- 90 On the status of the intelligentsia in the transformation era, see the work of Tomasz Zarycki, e.g. "Hegemonia inteligencka: kapitał kulturowy we współczesnym polskim polu władzy – perspektywa 'długiego trwania'," *Kultura i Społeczeństwo* no. 4 (2014), 27–49.
- 91 Teresa Kostyrko, "Sztuki plastyczne i ich odbiorcy," in: *Kultura polska w dekadzie przemian*, eds. Teresa Kostyrko and Marcin Czerwiński (Warsaw: Instytut Kultury, 1999), 39. In the case of the decorative arts, the liquidation of state-owned businesses in the visual arts market and social patronage often meant a change for the better.
- 92 Świrek, *Teorie ideologii*, 85.
- 93 "Nie mam środków na korzystanie z Internetu," 8. "Pantomimically and grotesquely" is a phrase from: Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 102.

- 94 Andrzej Walicki, "Czym nie powinna być inteligencja liberalna," in: idem, *O inteligencji, liberalizmach i o Rosji* (Kraków: Universitas, 2007), 123–124.
- 95 Of course, I have in mind the art history that deals with contemporary art, although the mechanisms described here could also be applied to post-war art.
- 96 Rafał Jakubowicz wrote extensively on this subject in: "Robotniczym. Sztuka w ujęciu radykalnym," <https://www.praktykateoretyczna.pl/artykuly/rafa-jakubowicz-robotniczym-sztuka-w-ujeciu-radykalnym/> (accessed September 4, 2023). Here, we might make an important digression. Jakubowicz's article (from 2016) wrote itself into a larger tendency: a critique of the transformation by a new generation (born more or less in the mid-1970s) of artists, curators, and activists (though not art historians!). We should note, however, that this perspective – although it sometimes hoisted the flag of materialism – was unable to break through the logic of idealism: a reconfiguration of power was meant to transpire through a reconfiguration of knowledge. The same applied to the perception of the work of ideology, situated in a Marxist manner, on the side of knowledge, not reality. It is in this sense that its victims were also taken to be the adherents of critical art. This is why the stakes came to be telling another, critical story of the transformation. As it was put by Stanisław Ruksza, the curator of the popular exhibition *The Face of the Day* (2014), its aim was to "expand the Polish imagination by restoring these issues to their images" (Stanisław Ruksza, "Oblicze dnia. Koszty społeczne w Polsce po 1989 roku," <https://archiwum-obieg.u-jazdowski.pl/obiegTV/32574> [accessed September 4, 2023]). So this was a proposal in the spirit of critical art, albeit *à rebours*.
- 97 Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 361.
- 98 Piotr Piotrowski, *W cieniu Duchampa. Notatki nowojorskie* (Poznań: Obserwator, 1996), 88.
- 99 Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 5.
- 100 Piotrowski, *W cieniu Duchampa*, 87.
- 101 Ibid.
- 102 Ibid., 84.
- 103 Ibid., 88, emphasis in the original. On this same principle – Piotrowski writes – Barbara Kruger does not support her placards with a value system, only "cynically," "signaling that everything is commodified, including the revolt against consumption," etc.

- 104 Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, xxix.
- 105 Jan Sowa, "Okruchy Realnego. Polityka po postmodernizmie," *Teksty Drugie* no. 5 (2022), 60. On this topic, see: Świrek, *Teorie ideologii*, 228–229.
- 106 Piotrowski, *W cieniu Duchampa*, 75.
- 107 Ibid., 47. Piotrowski reconstructed here the differences between the historical avant-garde and the postmodernism of resistance, while, it seems, finding inspiration for his famous distinction between supposedly autonomous and apolitical "modernism" and the political "avant-garde."
- 108 Jan Sowa, "Humanistyka płaskiego świata," *Teksty Drugie* no. 1 (2014), 202.
- 109 More or less in the early 2010s, art history, along with other disciplines, verified the methodological potential of post-structuralism of the knowledge–power variety. Yet what was at stake for this movement was updating the potential of the discipline, not revising its own ideological entanglements of the 1990s. See: Piotr Piotrowski, "'Francuskie teorie', amerykańska mediacja, polska redakcja. Pro domo sua i/lub humanistyka po dekonstrukcji," in: *French Theory w Polsce*, eds. Ewa Domańska and Mirosław Loba (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2010). Interestingly, art history has never addressed the dependency of the Polish humanities of the 1990s on the imperialist policies of the USA, as Domańska points out in the same volume ("Co zrobił z nami Foucault?," 62–79). This is surely a subject to be taken up in further research on the history of art history in the transformation era.
- 110 This declaration was made in Paweł Kwiek's film *A Conversation with My Brother* of 1990. The film is available at: [https://mediateka.u-jazdowski.pl/zasoby/pawel-kwiek-rozmowa-z-bratem,751650110,M\\_VM\\_1990\\_0001\\_0004%2Cmp4](https://mediateka.u-jazdowski.pl/zasoby/pawel-kwiek-rozmowa-z-bratem,751650110,M_VM_1990_0001_0004%2Cmp4) (accessed September 4, 2023).

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