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# "Someday things will be different – that is, normal" Male Homoeroticism in Polish Art-Historical Narratives During the Transformation

Author

Zuzanna Andruszko

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Abstract

At the turn of the 21st century, art history and art criticism in Poland approached the body – its appearance, expressive potential, eroticism, gender, and sexuality – as both a symbol and a site for observing moral and political transformations. A particular focus was placed on the male body, masculinity, and, consequently, male homosexuality. This article examines the secondary production of Polish "gay art," exploring how its presence was instrumental in affirming the democratization of the public sphere. This thesis argues that, the more liberal strand of critical-artistic discourse, homosexuality and homoeroticism before 1989 functioned as both anti-communist expressions and as liberal formations "avant la lettre". The primary reference point for this discussion is the curatorial work and writings of Paweł Leszkowicz in 1990s and 2000s. At the same time, I aim to analyze the normative queer subject that emerged within this discourse and consider the representations to which the Polish art scene opened itself in order to align with the dominant Western European narrative.

There was no political freedom, so there was no full male nudity,"<sup>1</sup> writes Paweł Leszkowicz in the introduction to his *Nagi mężczyzna. Akt męski w sztuce polskiej po 1945 roku* [The Naked Man. The Male Nude in Polish Art after 1945] (2012), the most comprehensive study to date on the subject. The Poznań-based art historian aims to demonstrate the relationship between the aesthetics and eroticism of the male body and the broader narratives of democratization and the liberalization of the public sphere. In this context, male (homo)eroticism emerges as both a marker of civil liberties and a symbol of resistance against oppressive political and religious systems.

In this article, I examine the discourse surrounding masculinity and male homoeroticism in Polish art during the transformation period. In particular, my focus is on the ways in which art created before the political transformation was framed as a harbinger of systemic change – a necessary component in the transition from a totalitarian system to a liberal democracy. As my primary research material, I analyze the texts and curatorial projects of Paweł Leszkowicz, who, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, played a crucial role in shaping knowledge production in the field of gay art and male homoeroticism in Poland. His articles, published in the leading art magazines of the period – including *Magazyn Sztuki*, *Obieg*, *Artmix*, and *InteRalia* – helped establish interpretative frameworks and analytical tools for examining male sexuality in Polish art within the context of political change.<sup>2</sup>

An important aspect of constructing the image of Polish culture as liberal and democratic was the inclusion of a specific type of representation within art production. As I will demonstrate later in the text, these were primarily depictions of male homosexuality. While the visual manifestations of economic change were evident in stores and on the streets, the integration of homoerotic representations into the narrative of transformation was

part of a more complex process – one that involved shaping a new kind of political subject. In the case that interests me, this is the queer liberal subject<sup>3</sup> – a subject that can be assimilated into the dominant social framework without fundamentally disrupting its structure.

## Transformation vs. Emancipation

In *De-Centering Western Sexualities*, editors Joanna Mizielińska and Robert Kulpa describe the early 1990s as a “queer time”<sup>4</sup> – a period marked by the emergence of diverse minority policies and an influx of Western theories. However, as I will argue, this era is better characterized as a time of normalization – one in which the queer subject was adjusted to the new class, consumer, and social norms that had been developing since the late 1970s as a result of Poland’s progressive social and economic liberalization. These adjustments, as Magda Szczesniak has observed,<sup>5</sup> had a very important visual dimension. For this reason, the scope of this article includes artistic works and texts produced from the 1970s through the early 2000s.

My starting point is the assumption that 1989 was by no means a moment of radical openness to queer sensibilities.<sup>6</sup> Rather, it marked a smooth transition between two systems. In *Transnational Homosexuals in Communist Poland: Cross-Border Flows in Gay and Lesbian Magazines*, Łukasz Szulc provides an in-depth analysis of the circulation of information and knowledge transfer between non-heterosexual groups on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Since the early 1980s, Poland and other Eastern Bloc countries had been “monitored” by Western activist organizations, such as the International Gay Association (IGA; later ILGA), which commissioned the *Eastern European Information Pool* project from the Homosexual Initiative Vienna (HOSI). The project’s goal was to “collect information about homosexuality-related issues in the Eastern Bloc, make contacts with local homosexuals, and ‘encourage the forming of informal interest groups.’”<sup>7</sup> From 1983 to 1989, HOSI produced annual reports on the situation of homosexuals in the Soviet Union and its satellite states. These reports document the ongoing exchange of information between activists on both sides of the Iron Curtain, shedding light on the perspectives and attitudes of Western activists toward their counterparts in the East.

Szulc emphasizes that many of the prevailing myths about the lives and organizing of non-heteronormative people in the Eastern Bloc arise from the assumption that these regions were isolated from Western knowledge circulations. “Central and Eastern Europe and the West are not only homogenized but also habitually essentialized; that is, as relatively uniform geopolitical units, each of them is thought to possess a unique essence regarding LGBT issues,” the researcher observes.<sup>8</sup> This perspective contributes to the heavy mythologization of 1989, which is cast as a symbol of transition from one grand narrative to another, implicitly a better one. As a result, there is a pronounced disavowal of the legacy of the People’s Republic of Poland and a tendency to frame all aspects of social life during that era, including artistic production, as uniformly negative. While such representations rely on simplifications and omissions, they have nonetheless been instrumental in shaping the image of the new regime and integrating the emancipation of marginalized groups into the teleology of transformation.

## Male Transformation

The new political landscape served as a catalyst for an “evaluation” of gender and sexual dynamics. As they turned their gaze to the West and its democratic values, researchers sought to identify markers of alignment with the new dominant narrative in contemporary art. In his 1999 essay “Sztuka a płeć. Szkic o współczesnej sztuce polskiej” [Art and Gender: Sketch on Contemporary Polish Art], published in *Magazyn Sztuki + Obieg* magazine, Leszkowicz responds to Ewa Lajer-Burcharth’s article<sup>9</sup> by analyzing the state of recent Polish art

within its socio-political framework. He posits that the "problem of gender-sexual identity" stands at the core of "discussions about the human condition and the meaning of freedom within a developing democratic system."<sup>10</sup>

According to Leszkowicz, the 1990s in Poland were defined by three key characteristics: (1) the strong authority of the Church and the accompanying moral conservatism of society; (2) the absence of the "difference factor"<sup>11</sup> – the cultural, ethnic, and sexual diversity that typified Western societies; and (3) the emergence of new forms of mass media and consumption modeled on the West. He further described the political system of the time as a "post-totalitarian pseudo-democracy"<sup>12</sup> – a regime that was no longer totalitarian but not yet fully democratic. The prefix *pseudo* implied a kind of forgery or pretense. Polish society, he argued, found itself suspended between entrenched habits of the past and the values of the Western market economy and liberal democracy.

Leszkowicz also highlights that, unlike in Western European countries where it occurred in the 1960s, movements bearing the hallmarks of a sexual revolution emerged in Poland only in the 1990s. Contrary to Lajer-Burcharth – who argued that gender had yet to emerge as a subject in Polish artistic discourse – Leszkowicz identifies it as one of the central themes in the creative practices of the decade. Overall, he asserts, these artistic explorations mark a paradigm shift in the discourse on the body and sexuality.

While Leszkowicz primarily focuses on so-called critical art, he also observes certain conservative tendencies within it that hindered broader social progress. This was particularly evident in the works of artists such as Alicja Żebrowska, Katarzyna Kozyra, and Jerzy Truszkowski. He notes that while their art frequently engages with corporeality, the mere presence of a literally framed body does not necessarily signify a shift in attitudes toward gender stereotypes. As he writes:

The artistic practice [of these artists] largely illustrated prevailing norms or unconsciously reinforced them, even when positioned as defiant. In essence, it enacted the official gender discourse rather than offering a genuine alternative. Its subversiveness lay primarily in the heightened expression of corporeality, challenging established notions of "taste" and aestheticizing artistic politics.<sup>13</sup>

What, then, was the alternative?

While the demand for change applies to all gender norms, Leszkowicz emphasizes that female expression enjoys greater freedom, whereas masculinity remains a site of "constant reconstructions of totalitarianism."<sup>14</sup> The political transformation, he argues, should therefore have had a more profound impact on shifting perceptions of masculinity and, consequently, male sexuality. "Homophobia is [...] an essential element of the pedagogy of proper masculinity,"<sup>15</sup> he writes, identifying works that engage with homoerotic desire – such as those by Krzysztof Malec<sup>16</sup> and Tomasz Kitliński – as key examples of art that reevaluates representations of masculinity. At the same time, these works signal the emergence of the very "factors of difference" that characterize democratic societies.

### **(Male) Body as a Battlefield**

In art history and criticism, the body – its appearance, capacity for expression, eroticism, gender, and sexuality – has been positioned as both a symbol and a site of transformation. Within this discourse, particular emphasis has been placed on the analysis of the male body, masculinity, and, by extension, male homosexuality. Homosexuality and homoeroticism from before 1989 – at least within the liberal sphere of critical-artistic discourse – functioned as both anti-communist formations and, in a sense, a liberal *avant la lettre*. In 2003,

Leszkowicz wrote: "Artists take the struggle for freedom and independence of the country literally on their bodies and express it in performance or self-portraits."<sup>17</sup> Thus, the male body was conceptualized as a battlefield – a reference to the title of Barbara Kruger's widely recognized work from the 1990s – where dominant regimes and social demands collide. As it turned out, the political crisis became a crisis of masculinity.<sup>18</sup>

In 2003, an issue of the online magazine *Artmix* was published, entirely dedicated to masculinity. It featured texts by Izabela Kowalczyk, Dominika Dzido, and Leszkowicz, among others, all of whom examined the evolving representations of men in art and popular culture at the dawn of the new millennium. The political transformation had not only been linked to shifts in social and class dynamics but also to changes in gender relations. The roles of men and women – both within the family and in the public sphere – had to be redefined to align with the new political and economic framework. Drawing on Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity, which was then at the height of its influence in Polish academia, Kowalczyk wrote:

The ideal of masculinity is transforming before our eyes, as societal expectations and roles for men continue to evolve. On one hand, the consumer-driven lifestyle, the promoted model of partnership-based families, and the increasing visibility of the male body in the media reshape perceptions of masculinity. On the other, traditional gender roles remain deeply entrenched in Poland, with men still expected to be primary providers, often facing the pressures of demanding work, unemployment, or the rigid masculinity reinforced by institutions such as the military. These tensions compel us to take a closer look at men's experiences and situation.<sup>19</sup>

The researcher positions the ideal of masculinity in Poland at the intersection of two dominant forces: the dogmas of Catholicism and the capitalist imperatives of productivity and success. This ideal is both unattainable and yet persistently demanded.<sup>20</sup>

Against this backdrop of transformation, discussions surrounding male sexuality – framed through aesthetics in art – gain new relevance. "Artistic statements on homosexuality," writes Leszkowicz, "are symptoms of democracy in culture, emerging from the post-totalitarian breakthrough and entering the capitalist order of the market."<sup>21</sup> Artists active during the communist era are thus retrospectively cast as precursors of "gay art,"<sup>22</sup> their sexuality driving them into radical opposition to the system. Male nudes in the People's Republic of Poland – and indeed, much of the era's art – are described as distorted, gray, and devoid of eroticism. The exception lies in works with homoerotic undertones, such as the plastic theater performances and drawings of Krzysztof Jung or the intimate depictions of sexual minorities' social life in the paintings of Łukasz Korolkiewicz.

Krzysztof Niemczyk's exhibitionist street actions supposedly "introduced into the public space a different aspect of male sexuality and carnality – one that was non-heroic, infused with humor, and seemingly in defiance of both avant-garde complacency and the prudish, gray atmosphere of communist streets."<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Jung's performances at the Repassage Gallery were interpreted as both anti-communist and countercultural. This was not only due to his use of motifs such as entanglement in webs or threads but also because of his representation of the male body as attractive, erotic, and aesthetically compelling.

## Good Because Beautiful

In *Normy widzialności*, Magda Szczęśniak examines how appearance played a crucial role in the transformation process. Appropriate clothing functioned as part of a visual code signaling class affiliation, lifestyle, and social belonging. Alongside the rise of middle-class norms, the homosexual community also

underwent a process of “rebranding.” For the liberal faction within this group, the aspiration was a future in which “someday things will be different – that is, normal.”<sup>24</sup> Normality, as defined by Western values – neoliberal democracy and a free-market economy<sup>25</sup> – became the primary reference point. As Szczesniak notes, discussions about sexual minorities largely took place within their own circles, in what she describes as the counter-public sphere.<sup>26</sup> This context explains the emphasis on the “prissiness” and normalization of Polish homosexual identity, aligning their emancipation with the broader process of integration into democratic Western Europe.

Lisa Duggan describes this type of advocacy for sexual minorities as homonormativity – “it is a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption.”<sup>27</sup> Rather than seeking to dismantle the existing system, the focus shifts toward inclusion within it.

If the transformation of sexual and gender norms was to serve as a marker of a new socio-political system – and if the presence of the “difference factor” is an inherent feature of democracy – then, in the context of art, one must ask: What forms of representation and visuality qualify as democratic? Whose bodies, when displayed in galleries and exhibitions, are meant to signify the democratization of artistic production?

In his 1999 article in *Magazyn Sztuki + Obieg*, Leszkowicz contrasts what he considers the “macho” works of Jerzy Truszkowski and Grzegorz Klamman with the idealized, naked male bodies in Konrad Kuzyszyn’s objects and the expression of homoerotic desire in the works of Tomasz Kitliński and Krzysztof Malec.<sup>28</sup> Notably, in a later version of the text, the subsection titles were changed to *Nowe figuracje męskości* [New Figurations of Masculinity] and *Awangarda homoseksualna* [The Homosexual Avant-Garde],<sup>29</sup> emphasizing the pioneering status ascribed to these artists by Leszkowicz.

Despite the clear distinction between these works – the absence of overt homosexual desire in Kuzyszyn’s art versus its explicit presence in the works of Kitliński and Malec<sup>30</sup> – Leszkowicz identifies several commonalities. First, all are figurative, centered on representations of the male body. Second, these figures are uniformly beautiful, young, and seemingly healthy. The term “aesthetic” is frequently used in reference to these works, reinforcing the idea that the emblem of moral transformation has become the image of the attractive, naked male body. Consequently, the visibility of such bodies in art functions as a barometer for the democratization of not only the artistic sphere but also the broader public space.

A symbolic moment in the merging of artistic and activist discourse surrounding the emancipation of homosexual people was the 2003 *Let Us Be Seen* campaign. The project featured photographs of 30 homosexual couples (cisgender gays and lesbians) displayed on billboards and posters. The images, captured by Karolina Breguła, included a portrait of Leszkowicz and Kitliński among the featured couples. However, the campaign proved to be “too brave and too utopian for the Polish streets at the time”<sup>31</sup> and was removed from public spaces after just two weeks, relegated thereafter to gallery exhibitions. Yet, as Leszkowicz and Kitliński later observed, this “failure” carried significant meaning, as it positioned art galleries as “utopian queer spaces”<sup>32</sup> that function independently of the homophobic realities of society. In a 2005 article, Leszkowicz even describes *Let Us Be Seen* as a “Polish Stonewall,” with the crucial difference that it did not unfold on the streets but within gallery spaces.<sup>33</sup> He and Kitliński reinforce this interpretation in their text *The Utopia of Europe’s LGBTQ Visibility Campaigns in the Politics of Everyday Life: The Utopic of Social Hope in the Images of Queer Spaces*. As they write:

Subjectively, our subjectivity has become agency; objectively, intersubjectivities represented in the images have turned into polities of futurity. In miniature, our life is before *Let Us Be Seen* and after it; with us or without, the history of Poland's lesbian and gay rights is before and after the campaign; this is Eastern Europe's Stonewall.<sup>34</sup>

The researchers thus reproduce precisely the division that Heather Love discusses in *Feeling Backward* regarding the narratives of emancipation movements. According to Love, the prominence of Stonewall created a false dichotomy between "pre-Stonewall" (bad) and "post-Stonewall" (good).<sup>35</sup> Similarly, in Poland, 1989 – or the *Let Us Be Seen* campaign – became an artificial caesura in the narrative of LGBTQ+ emancipation.<sup>36</sup>

However, the Stonewall metaphor is strikingly disconnected from reality – even if understood as a rhetorical device linking Polish emancipation movements to their American counterparts. After all, who was truly affected by this so-called breakthrough when it took place within the confines of an art gallery? Who actually became visible as a result? The 1969 riots against police violence involved individuals from diverse social classes, predominantly marginalized groups – many of whom were homeless youth, non-heterosexual, non-cisgender, and largely Black, Hispanic, or from other racialized communities. By contrast, Poland's supposed equivalent showcased only homonormative, non-disruptive, and predominantly middle-class individuals. The campaign repeatedly emphasized the importance of visually appealing, aesthetically pleasing, and non-erotic representations – "friendly and non-confrontational for the general public."<sup>37</sup> It was modeled after a similar Italian campaign, which the researchers describe as "exuding an aura of sensuality, comfort, and luxury,"<sup>38</sup> featuring people who "resemble models – young, attractive, sexually normative [sic! – author], and engaged in a passionate kiss."<sup>39</sup> This aesthetic aligns more closely with a perfume advertisement than a social campaign. In fact, the researchers themselves acknowledge this comparison, defending the campaign's form as "subvertisement" – a subversive use of advertising strategies.<sup>40</sup>

The absence of individuals other than cisgender gays and lesbians from these campaigns was explained by organizers as a matter of gradual progress: the idea, as officially stated by Kampania Przeciw Homofobii (Campaign Against Homophobia, KPH), was that society would slowly become accustomed to seeing more diverse couples holding hands.<sup>41</sup> However, as Rafał Majka, drawing on Lisa Duggan, observes, this assumption reflects the fragmentation and individualization of social movements under neoliberalism. These movements tend to specialize in narrowly defined "sectors of exclusion," with limited cross-group cooperation and little intersectional activism. The efforts of neoliberal activist groups typically center on a single axis of oppression – sexuality – while factors such as class, race, or gender are sidelined.<sup>42</sup> Within this framework, equality is understood not as systemic change but as assimilation – the ability to be like everyone else.

In *The Utopia of Europe's LGBTQ Visibility Campaigns...*, Leszkowicz and Kitliński analyze images of the Italian homosexual couples seated at tables laden with regional delicacies, identifying these depictions as homonationalist – "grounded in local languages, customs, cultures, and codes of behavior and communication [...]; produced to communicate with the national public in a particular country, and sometimes even region, or city."<sup>43</sup> The values embedded in these representations, positioned in opposition to problematic nationalist imagery, are intended to facilitate cultural change within specific national and social contexts through a distinct visual code. Their aim is to integrate homosexuality into the traditional national *imaginarium*.

However, the authors appear to overlook the ways in which the status of the "proper" citizen is inextricable from factors such as class, race, and gender. As Jasbir Puar observes, "Nation, and its associations with modernity and racial and class hierarchies, becomes the defining factor in disaggregating between upright,

domesticatable queernesses that mimic and recenter liberal subjecthood, and out-of-control, untetherable queernesses.<sup>44</sup> While Puar's analysis is rooted in international politics – particularly conflicts within the Arabian Peninsula and the United States –her insights remain relevant to what Leszkowicz and Kitliński discuss in their text. This is especially pertinent given recent imagery from Gaza, where a rainbow flag, carried by Israeli occupiers, now flies over the rubble of destroyed Palestinian cities. The widely circulated photograph is accompanied by the caption: "The IDF is the only army in the Middle East that defends democratic values. It is the only army that allows gay people the freedom to be who we are" (though, of course, Leszkowicz and Kitliński's text does not address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict).

Puar clearly stresses how the construction of a normative group of homosexual men and women serves to uphold the nation-state, reinforcing values of family and male homosocial bonds (brotherhood) while simultaneously supporting the expansion of the neoliberal capitalist market.<sup>45</sup> Within this framework, the emerging model of the monogamous homosexual relationship generates the ideal consumer demographic: a group with dual incomes, fewer children, and increased leisure time – resources that can be redirected toward consumption and tourism. At the same time, the (ostensible) openness and acceptance of non-normative sexualities function as evidence of the United States' supposed moral-political exceptionalism, a narrative that legitimizes its "peace missions" in allegedly less developed nations while reaffirming its global dominance as an expert in democracy, emancipation, and free-market economics.<sup>46</sup> The promotion of democracy, as well as its professed concern for women's rights and sexual minorities, often serves as a pretext for military interventions, occupations, and political interference. Framing the U.S. or the West more broadly as the model of modern civilization thus becomes little more than a reaffirmation of its hegemonic status – an ideological justification for cultural colonization.<sup>47</sup> During the transformation period, these themes remained entirely absent; from the perspective of equality, the West was viewed in an unequivocally positive light.

### **Ars Homo Erotica**

In 2010, Warsaw became the first city in Central and Eastern Europe to host EuroPride – the international equality parade. According to the European Pride Organisers Association – an organization coordinating the annual EuroPride – the honor of hosting the 2010 event was awarded to Warsaw following a legal victory by Tomasz Bączkowski and the Równość [Equality] Foundation against Poland at the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg.<sup>48</sup> The case stemmed from the 2005 ban on the Equality Parade imposed by then-mayor of Warsaw, Lech Kaczyński. In 2007, the Court ruled that the ban violated provisions of the European Convention on Human Rights, thereby establishing a precedent that the right to organize and participate in such events constitutes a fundamental human right.

It is worth noting that while banning the Equality Parade in 2005, the mayor of Warsaw simultaneously permitted several other gatherings under slogans such as: "Against any work on the draft law on civil unions," "Against the promotion of civil unions," "Education based on Christian values as a guarantee of a socially and morally healthy society," "Christians who respect God's laws, or the laws of nature, are first-class citizens," and "Against the tendency to allow homosexual couples to adopt children."<sup>49</sup> As a result, the rights of sexual minorities became a significant point of contention in the political landscape of the early 2000s, particularly in the context of Poland's accession to the European Union.

Public attitudes toward non-heteronormative individuals function as an indicator of a country's level of Europeanization/westernization, reinforcing global divisions between so-called leading and backward nations – not only in economic terms but also in relation to adherence to "human rights" norms.<sup>50</sup> This is why, in the

years immediately before and after Poland's EU accession, it was crucial for activists to present themselves as European citizens; this was the catalyst for increased efforts to enhance the visibility of homosexual masculinity.

As part of the EuroPride program in 2010, the National Museum in Warsaw hosted a large-scale exhibition *Ars Homo Erotica* dedicated to homoerotic art, curated by Paweł Leszkowicz at the invitation of then-museum director Piotr Piotrowski. In the introduction to the exhibition catalog, Piotrowski emphasized that the event "embraces the idea of a museum as a critical institution, contributing to the debate on key issues of contemporary public life."<sup>51</sup> The exhibition was thus conceived not only as a contribution to the European discourse on the rights of non-heteronormative individuals but also as an intervention into art history, highlighting the exclusion of works addressing LGBTQ+ themes. Piotrowski explicitly linked the exhibition's opening to the EuroPride celebrations, noting that such an event was taking place "for the first time in **former Eastern Europe**."<sup>52</sup> In doing so, he framed the exhibition as a symbolic departure from the region's communist past and an assertion of alignment with the modern Western European narrative.

What images were chosen to represent this new chapter of history? The exhibition was structured into eight thematic sections: *Classical Tradition*, *Male Nude*, *Iconography of Mythical Male Couples*, *Saint Sebastian*, *Lesbian Imaginarium*, *Transgender/Androgyny*, *Fighting Time*, and *Archive*. Together, these sections offered a survey of more than two thousand years of art history through the lens of homoeroticism. Leszkowicz approached homoerotic expression as a universal, transhistorical phenomenon – an intrinsic element of the cultural history of Western civilization.<sup>53</sup> However, such a broad perspective inevitably invited generalizations and omissions.

The exhibition was largely dominated by representations of men. Depictions of other forms of sexual non-normativity were largely confined – by necessity – to the *Lesbian Imaginarium* and *Transgender/Androgyny* sections. As with the aforementioned social campaigns, the diversity of sexual non-normativity was distilled into its most socially assimilable form: cis-male homosexuality. The image of sexual minorities that emerged from the exhibition was primarily that of idealized, eroticized male bodies. Moreover, a significant portion of the objects on display, particularly those from the National Museum's collection – such as antique sculptures and 19<sup>th</sup>-century paintings and drawings – were not explicitly homoerotic (in the sense of directly expressing homosexual desire). Rather, they were male nudes that the curator interpreted through a homoerotic lens.

It is difficult to disagree with Bogusław Deptuła's observation that "The protagonist of the exhibition according to Leszkowicz is... democracy,"<sup>54</sup> rather than non-heterosexual individuals. According to the author of *Nagi mężczyzna* [The Naked Man], the male body serves as a battleground for conflicting ideological perspectives. In his catalog essay, Leszkowicz references Winckelmann, who presented "the Greek ideal of political and individual freedom combined with sensuous eroticism of images of the masculine ideal."<sup>55</sup> Thus, the exhibition sought to integrate the history of homosexuals into the broader narrative of European democracy. Its context was the participation of Polish homosexual men in a society still undergoing transformation – both toward democracy and within the framework of capitalism.

Nonetheless, it is undeniable that Leszkowicz achieved a degree of success in advancing the policies he championed. In 2010, when minority discourse remained far from mainstream in Poland's social realities, he managed to bring it from the margins of activist and academic circles into a major public cultural institution – one of national significance. I would not go so far as to call this event the realization of a queer utopia.<sup>56</sup> However, if we consider utopia in the sense articulated by Leszkowicz – specifically, a utopia of representation



– then it may indeed have been realized to some extent. At least for some homosexual men. At least for a while.

### Will It Be Normal?

As Jasbir Puar observes, the production of a model queer citizen inevitably generates its opposite.<sup>57</sup> Neoliberal policies “have been implemented in and through culture and politics, reinforcing or contesting relations of class, race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, or nationality.”<sup>58</sup> It is therefore impossible to separate cultural issues from the economic structures in which they unfold.

During the period of political transformation, the body and its visual representations became key sites for observing shifts in cultural paradigms driven by changes in the political and economic landscape. From the perspective of liberal art criticism, the affirmative representation of non-normative sexuality in Polish art was seen as a necessary condition for its integration into Western cultural circulation. However, this representation was built on numerous exclusions. Rather than effecting a genuine transformation of the social structure, it ultimately established a new normative framework – one that primarily accommodated homosexual cisgender men.

As a result, artistic works became instrumentalized by scholars as tools for constructing a revised historical narrative – one that sought to sever ties with the communist past. Frequently stripped of their original meanings and contexts, these objects were absorbed into a theoretical apparatus that sought to position Polish culture within a Western European discourse.

*Translated by Karol Waniek*

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1. Paweł Leszkowicz, *Nagi mężczyzna. Akt męski w sztuce polskiej po 1945 roku* [The Naked Man: The Male Nude in Polish Art after 1945] (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2012), 27. ↵
2. Leszkowicz belongs to the generation of art critics who began their careers during the height of so-called critical art – a trend that dominated the artistic discourse in the early 2000s. He was among the most active theorists of that period. He published articles and exhibition texts for artists such as Alicja Żebrowska, Katarzyna Kozyra, Dorota Nieznalska, and Zbigniew Libera. At the same time, his main research area was the male nude and homoerotic art. He was the first person to engage with this subject matter and gain such significant visibility. ↵
3. Francesca Romana Ammaturo, "The 'Pink Agenda': Questioning and Challenging European Homonationalist Sexual Citizenship," *Sociology* 48, no. 6 (2015), 1152. ↵
4. Joanna Mizielińska and Robert Kulpa, eds. *De-Centering Western Sexualities* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2011), 16. ↵
5. See Magdalena Szcześniak, *Normy widzialności. Tożsamość w czasach transformacji* [Norms of Visibility: Identity in Times of Transformation] (Warsaw: Fundacja Bęc Zmiana, Instytut Kultury Polskiej UW, 2016). ↵
6. As examples of initiatives demonstrating the secondary nature of the 1989 caesura, one can mention the journal *Biuletyn*, which Andrzej Selerowicz began publishing as early as 1983, the Gdańsk magazine *Filo*, appearing since 1986, or the founding of the Warsaw Homosexual Movement in 1987. ↵
7. Łukasz Szulc, *Transnational Homosexuals in Communist Poland. Cross-border Flows in Gay and Lesbian Magazines* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 61. ↵
8. *Ibid.*, p. 5. ↵
9. See Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, "Warsaw Diary," *Art in America* 82 (1994), 85–93. The article also appeared in Polish translation in 1995 in *Magazyn Sztuki* 5, 1. ↵
10. Paweł Leszkowicz, „Sztuka a płeć. Szkic o współczesnej sztuce polskiej” [Art and Gender: An Outline of Contemporary Polish Art], *Magazyn Sztuki + Obieg* 22 (1999), no. 22, accessed September 8, 2024, [https://web.archive.org/web/20040609121111/http://www.magazynsztuki.pl/archiw\\_set/archiwumFrameset-5.htm](https://web.archive.org/web/20040609121111/http://www.magazynsztuki.pl/archiw_set/archiwumFrameset-5.htm). ↵
11. *Ibid.* ↵
12. *Ibid.* ↵
13. *Ibid.* ↵
14. *Ibid.* ↵
15. *Ibid.* ↵
16. Leszkowicz frequently positions Krzysztof Malec’s artistic practices “on the boundary between homoerotic-coded art and openly homosexual identity.” The realistic, aesthetic, and (according to the researcher) erotic, even “lascivious” *Akt* [Nude], exhibited in 1995 at *Ja i AIDS* [Me and AIDS], is considered one of the first representations of gay pride in Poland (Leszkowicz, *Nagi mężczyzna*, 269–321). *Akt* was created as part of academic coursework with students, serving as a model study. Malec’s teaching method involved sculpting the same object alongside students to directly demonstrate appropriate techniques and solutions. Thus, the homoerotic expression within the sculpture is Leszkowicz’s interpretation rather than a conscious artistic intention. ↵
17. Leszkowicz, *Nagi mężczyzna*, 28. ↵
18. A similar phenomenon can be observed today – in the face of climate catastrophe, increasing political tensions, and the ongoing emancipation of women and gender-nonconforming individuals, as well as the crisis of the traditional family model, growing attention is devoted to so-called new masculinity. ↵

19. Izabela Kowalczyk, "Odczarowanie 'męskości' w sztuce krytycznej" [Disenchanted "Masculinity" in Critical Art], *Artmix* 5 (2003), accessed May 31, 2024, <https://web.archive.org/web/20030415221445/http://free.art.pl/artmix/0303ik.html>. ↵
20. Ibid. ↵
21. Leszkowicz, *W stronę demokratycznej sfery publicznej*, 115. ↵
22. Gay art, as interpreted by Leszkowicz, is defined by „the dominance of the male nude, an erotic gaze at the male body and intimate relationships between men, the narcissistic self-portrait, and social issues related to repression.” (Leszkowicz, *Nagi mężczyzna*, 269). ↵
23. Leszkowicz, *W stronę demokratycznej sfery publicznej*, 303. ↵
24. Paweł Leszkowicz, "W stronę demokratycznej sfery publicznej. Motywy homoseksualne we współczesnej sztuce polskiej" [Towards a Democratic Public Sphere: Homosexual Motifs in Contemporary Polish Art], in *Sztuka dzisiaj. Materiały Sesji Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki* [Art Today: Proceedings of the Art Historians' Association Conference], ed. Maria Poprzęcka (Warsaw: Stowarzyszenie Historyków Sztuki, 2002), 132. ↵
25. Szczepiński, *Normy widzialności*, 28. ↵
26. Ibid., p. 32. ↵
27. Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Beacon Press, 2003), 50. ↵
28. Leszkowicz, *Sztuka a płęć*. ↵
29. Paweł Leszkowicz, *Płęć we współczesnej sztuce polskiej. Eksplozja i regresja lat 90. XX wieku* [Gender in Contemporary Polish Art: Explosion and Regression of the 1990s], manuscript (1996–2007). ↵
30. It is worth stressing that the homosexual connotations of the works is determined by the author of the article, making it a matter of interpretation. Similarly, the selection of works for the *Ars Homo Erotica* exhibition at the National Museum in 2010 followed the same approach. See Paweł Leszkowicz, *Ars Homo Erotica*, exhibition catalog (Warsaw: CePed, 2010). ↵
31. Tomasz Kitliński and Paweł Leszkowicz, "The Utopia of Europe's LGBTQ Visibility Campaigns in the Politics of Everyday Life: The Utopic of Social Hope in the Images of Queer Spaces," in *A Critical Inquiry in Queer Utopias*, ed. Angela Jones (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 185. ↵
32. Ibid. ↵
33. Paweł Leszkowicz, "Sztuka a seksualna przebudowa polskiej przestrzeni publicznej. Igor Mitoraj i 'Niech nas zobaczą'" [Art and the Sexual Reconstruction of Polish Public Space: Igor Mitoraj and "Let Us Be Seen"], accessed May 25, 2024, <https://archiwum-obieg.u-jazdowski.pl/teksty/5771>. ↵
34. Leszkowicz, Kitliński, *The Utopia of LGBTQ*, 196. ↵
35. See Heather Love, *Feeling Backward. Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Harvard University Press, 2007). ↵
36. It seems that in the context of the emancipation of non-heteronormative communities in Poland, initiatives such as the magazines *Filo* or *Furia Pierwsza*, which brought together activists and created a platform for exchanging experiences and forming alliances, had a greater impact on community formation than visibility campaigns. The role of lesbian and gay magazines in international knowledge exchange was discussed, among others, by Szulc in *Transnational Homosexuals*. ↵
37. Leszkowicz, Kitliński, *The Utopia of LGBTQ*, 188. ↵
38. Ibid., p. 180. ↵
39. Ibid. ↵
40. Ibid., p. 179. ↵

41. According to the description of the campaign on the *Niech nas zobaczą* [Let Them See Us] website, accessed May 25, 2024, <https://web.archive.org/web/20120508044635/http://niechnaszobacza.queers.pl/>. ↵
42. Rafał Majka, "W ślepych zaułku. Homonormatywność i neoliberalizacja życia społecznego" [In a Blind Alley: Homonormativity and the Neoliberalization of Social Life], *Nowe Studia Kulturowe* [New Cultural Studies], ed. Jacek Kochanowski, Tomasz Wrzosek (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2014), 171–188. ↵
43. Leszkowicz, Kitliński, *Utopia*, 181. ↵
44. Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages. Homonationalism in Queer Times* (London: Duke University Press, 2007), 88. ↵
45. Ibid., p. 91. ↵
46. Ibid., p. 92. ↵
47. Maciej Duda wrote about self-colonization in relation to the activism of non-heteronormative groups in Poland: "Historia lokalna versus samokolonizacja i (neo)liberalizm polityk emancypacyjnych" [Local History versus Self-Colonization and (Neo)Liberalism in Emancipation Policies], *Czas Kultury* 34 (2018), 13–19. ↵
48. Steve Taylor, *Europride: Thirty Years of Progress*. Accessed June 1, 2024, <https://epoa.eu/europride/30-years/>. ↵
49. Adam Bodnar, *Trybunał w Strasburgu o zakazie Parady Równości w 2005 roku* [The Strasbourg Tribunal on the Ban of the Equality Parade in 2005]. Accessed June 1, 2024, <https://publicystyka.ngo.pl/trybunal-w-strasburgu-o-zakazie-parady-rownosci-2005>. ↵
50. I use quotation marks in this case to emphasize the superficiality and ambiguity of this concept, as it selectively applies to individuals depending on their racialization, gendering, and class positioning, as well as their legal status (refugees, freedom fighters, etc.). ↵
51. Piotr Piotrowski, "Ars Homo Erotica w Muzeum Narodowym w Warszawie" [Ars Homo Erotica at the National Museum in Warsaw], in Paweł Leszkowicz, *Ars Homo Erotica* (Warsaw: CePed, 2010), 4. ↵
52. Ibid., emphasis mine. ↵
53. Leszkowicz, *Ars Homo Erotica*, 14. ↵
54. Bogusław Deptuła, *Ars Homo Erotica*. Accessed on June 1, 2024, <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artukul/1324-ars-homo-erotica.html>. ↵
55. Leszkowicz, *Ars Homo Erotica*, 10. ↵
56. Leszkowicz, Kitliński, *Utopia...*, 177. ↵
57. Jasbir K. Puar, "Queer Times, Queer Assemblages," *Social Text* 23, no. 3–4 (84–85) (2005), 122. ↵
58. Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality*, 3. ↵

### Zuzanna Andruszko

(b. 2001) is a curator and researcher, who earned her MA at the Faculty of Artistic Research and Curatorial Studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. Her research and curatorial practice center on feminist and queer perspectives, fostering solidarity among minority groups, and collaborative knowledge production. In 2023, under the supervision of Jakub Banasiak, she defended her bachelor's

thesis, *Pożegnanie z Utopią. Praktyki artystyczne Krzysztofa Junga i Krzysztofa Malca jako praca wobec niedogodności* [Farewell to Utopia. The Artistic Practices of Krzysztof Jung and Krzysztof Malec as Work in the Face of Inconvenience]. She is a member of the *zwykła dziewczyna* collective. She curated the exhibition *Horyzont* [Horizon] at Galeria -1, Czapski Palace (2022) and co-curated *Wyrzucone z gniazda* [Thrown Out of the Nest] at Prześwit – Collective Cultural Institution (2024) and *Nie miałyśmy szczęśliwej gwiazdy zapaliłyśmy własną. Herstorie warszawskie* [We Didn't Have a Happy Star, We Lit Our Own. Warsaw Herstories] at Muzeum Warszawy (2022). She also collaborated on *Niepokój przychodzi o zmierzchu* [Anxiety Comes at Dusk] (2022) and *Drugiej wiosny nie będzie...* [There Will Be No Second Spring...] (2023) at Zachęta – National Gallery of Art.

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