

# Conservative Traditions in Polish Art History

The Challenges of Overcoming Entrenched Paradigms

**Karolina Łabowicz-Dymanus**

[doi.org/10.23955/tht.148813](https://doi.org/10.23955/tht.148813)



This article investigates the persistence of adherence to traditional approaches in Polish art history and the challenges faced in attempting to challenge it. The analysis reveals how art historians in Poland have adhered to notions of 'objective' and apolitical science, perpetuating earlier methodologies based on a factographic-object approach. This prevailing mindset inhibits the acceptance of newer, critical frameworks. The paper explores significant historical figures, institutional structures, and movements that have contributed to these conservative trends, while advocating for a more self-reflective approach in line with global methodological developments. By confronting resistance to change, the discipline can broaden its academic and cultural relevance.

**Keywords:** *Polish art history, conservatism, methodology, academic trends, critical frameworks*

This article seeks to dissect the historical, cultural, and political vectors shaping the narrative of Polish art history in recent decades. It queries the dominant hermeneutical approach and the marginalization of critical schools within this field. What socio-political dynamics have obstructed the evolution of critical methodologies in Polish art historiography? What historical conditions have impeded the development of critical methodologies in Polish art history? From what perspective has this narrative traditionally been – and continues to be – crafted?

The drive to explore the limited enthusiasm for critical methodologies in Polish art history sprang from my investigation into Marxist theories within our national art historiography, which currently resides at the margins of Polish art literature. This initiative was further shaped by my academic experiences during a period marked by significant politicization of the broader social, political, and artistic discourse in Poland, particularly following the last decade's shift in political power.

Additionally, the concept for this text was conceived during a period when the main political narrative, including historical and art historical discourse in Poland, was subjected to an extensive politicization of the broadly understood social, political, and artistic discourse in Poland over the last decade. These developments were, in part, the result of the populist Law and Justice Party assuming power, which led to the polarization of social and political discourse. The authoritarian inclinations of the populists have also affected crucial arts and culture sectors, where leadership positions were filled based on political allegiance rather than scholarly merit, transforming these entities into extensions of

political propaganda.<sup>1</sup> This shift was mirrored in academia where the politicization has profoundly impacted art studies. Notably, the Ministry of Education and Science has favored Catholic universities, which often promote a narrowly defined worldview, thereby excluding academic pluralism. Furthermore, it directed research agendas by setting priorities within its scholarship and grant programs, actively discouraging critical methodologies, especially those concerning women's rights and minorities, gender identity, historical or cultural materialism. Additionally, topics perceived as potentially "offensive to religious sentiments" or accused of promoting "Marxism" – interpreted not as Marxist doctrine, but as a general disdain for communism – were also marginalized.

Certainly, innovative research projects and publications that pioneer new perspectives of inquiry are also emerging. These, however, are not part of the mainstream art history discourse and are developed outside the conventional

1 See, e.g. Vivienne Chow, "Self-Censorship Among Artists and Museum Workers Is on the Rise in Poland, a New Report Finds," *Artnet News*, October 11, 2022, read 09.03.2024, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world-archives/poland-art-censorship-report-2189730>; Anca Ulea, "Polish Artists Were Muzzled by the Populist Government: An NGO Wants Donald Tusk to Reverse It," *Euronews*, December 15, 2023, read 09.03.2024, <https://www.euronews.com/culture/2023/12/15/polish-artists-were-muzzled-by-the-populist-government-an-ngo-wants-donald-tusk-to-reverse>; "Poland's Right-Wing Party Censors Artists and Actively Suppresses Creative Expression, New Report Finds," *ArtDependence Magazine*, October 11, 2022, <https://artdependence.com/articles/poland-s-right-wing-party-censors-artists-and-actively-suppresses-creative-expression-new-report-finds/>; Alex Marshall, "Poland's Art World Awaits a Culture War Counteroffensive," *New York Times*, November 6, 2023, read 09.03.2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/06/arts/design/poland-culture-election.html>; Adam Mazur, "How Did Poland's Art World Swing Right?" *Frieze*, March 1, 2022, read 09.03.2024, <https://www.frieze.com/article/how-did-poland-art-world-swing-right-wing>; Kuba Szreder, "The Authoritarian Turn: On the Crisis of the Polish Institutions of Contemporary Art," *Ci-MAM*, March 6, 2023, read 09.03.2024, <https://cimam.org/news-archive/the-authoritarian-turn-on-the-crisis-of-the-polish-institutions-of-contemporary-art/>.

institutes of art history. During this period, numerous significant research projects emerged, particularly in the field of social art history. These were primarily focused around the Museum Center at the Museum of Art in Łódź until the museum's leadership was overtaken by a politically appointed director in 2022. One might expect the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw to engage in a more critical discourse; however, it neither conducts research activities nor publishes scholarly works. Furthermore, until 2023, it was administered by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, which undoubtedly contributed to funding constraints. Researchers such as Agnieszka Chmielewska and Tomasz Załuski led some of these noteworthy studies. Others, including myself and the community of researchers centered around the Institute of Literary Research at the Polish Academy of Sciences, the seminar at the Center for Cultural and Literary Studies, as well as many scholars from the Polish Academy of Sciences, have resisted the dominant narratives by choosing to publish their research abroad.

Looking forward, it is essential to explore the structural and institutional obstacles that have historically hindered the proliferation of critical discourse within Polish art history. Analyzing how political climates have shaped academic and cultural institutions offers a window into understanding the broader implications of these influences on art historiography. These insights not only enrich our understanding of the field's current state but also suggest how integrating these sidelined perspectives could rejuvenate the discourse in Polish art history.

## Exploring Critical Challenges in Polish Art Historiography

Following the contextual groundwork laid in the introduction, it is crucial to explore four specific areas where the resistance to critical methodologies in Polish art history is most evident. These areas not only reflect the broader

socio-political dynamics but also highlight the internal academic struggles and the external influences shaping the discourse:

1. **Contrasting Schools of Thought in Art History:** The tradition of Polish art history, rooted in the 1930s, has bifurcated into two main schools: one that views art history as an 'objective science' primarily concerned with cataloging monuments and compiling dictionaries using iconology and, more recently hermeneutics, and another that embraces critical studies and methodologies.
2. **Historical and Intellectual Stances:** Since the early 1960s, there has been a persistent belief within Polish political dialogue that intellectual circles should maintain an oppositional and anti-communist, or at times apolitical, stance. This belief system has led to the rejection of critical attitudes like socialist feminism,<sup>2</sup> criticism of apartheid, and anti-colonialism, which held an important place in socialist discourse during that era. Today, this translates into a reluctance to engage with these critical perspectives, often perceived as aligning too closely with past regime ideologies.
3. **Anti-Communist Traditions and the Role of the Catholic Church:** The anti-communist sentiments that have been strengthening since the 1960s view the church as a 'sphere' or 'oasis' of freedom, a perception that continues to influence Polish cultural and academic narratives profoundly.
4. **Intensified Politicization of Social Conversations:** In recent years, the rise of the radical right has notably intensified the politicization of social and academic discussions, influencing the thematic and methodologi-

2 Agata Jakubowska, "Feminist art and art history in state socialist Poland, as seen through all-women exhibitions," *MODOS: Revista De História Da Arte* 7, nro. 2 (2023): 94–119.

cal orientations of art historical studies. The history of Polish art largely still adheres to its belief in 'objective' and apolitical scholarship, which only reinforces the traditionalist tendencies developed earlier.

These points will be examined in detail to understand how they contribute to the current state of art historiography in Poland and what they imply for the future of critical methodologies within the field.

## 1. Contrasting Schools of Thought in Art History

From its inception, Polish art history functioned primarily as a chronicle of events rather than as an independent academic discipline. In 2000, Elżbieta Gieysztor-Miłobędzka published an insightful article entitled "Polish Art History: Its Conservatism and Attempts to Overcome It" in *Kultura Współczesna* [Contemporary Culture], one of the few scholarly periodicals comprehensively addressing cultural issues through theoretical, analytical-interpretive, diagnostic, and practical lenses. The researcher characterized the Polish discipline as "resistant to impulses brought by the current major cultural transformation," describing it as a discipline that "permanently merges the positivist fossil with deeply rooted ideas of romantic lineage."<sup>3</sup> She attributed this state of affairs to historical conditions that shaped the national and cultural heritage following the partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth at the end of the eighteenth century.

As Poland vanished from the political maps for 150 years, the Polish field of art was shaped under the influence of political demands and

national expectations associated with the struggle for the survival of the nation and its culture. This shaping continued and solidified with the restoration of statehood in 1918, establishing and safeguarding it as the moral and material basis for the existence of Polish identity. During this period, the primary task of artists was to support the Polish national movement, while art historians were tasked with securing the national symbolic capital. Art history and its components, such as museums, were utilized for nation-state building, and cultural heritage, including artifacts, was reduced to the status of national heritage that needed to be cataloged and, predominantly, described by highlighting its Polish national characteristics.<sup>4</sup>

In the nineteenth-century awakening of national consciousness and the continuous struggle for independence, Gieysztor-Miłobędzka sees the establishment of Polish art history as historiography. She argues that it was at this time that Polish art historians developed a sense of duty to work towards a political and social goal, intertwining romantic nationalism with the contemporary standards of knowledge, namely historicism and positivism. The researcher emphatically wrote, "national concern [then] displaced deeper philosophical culture, favored anti-reflectiveness – and today [also] it is painfully evident."<sup>5</sup> Under the banner of showcasing Polishness and securing national culture, inventory programs were initiated, factual knowledge was expanded, and monographs on objects and artists were developed. These efforts, admirable in their dedication, continued after the restoration of statehood in 1918 and again after 1945. Each time, alongside the rebuilding of the Polish nation, there was also a need to assess

3 Elżbieta Gieysztor-Miłobędzka, "Polska Historia Sztuki – jej konserwatyzm oraz próby jego przezwyciężenia [Polish Art History – Its Conservatism and Attempts to Overcome It]," *Kultura Współczesna* 4, no. 26 (2000): 58.

4 Agnieszka Chmielewska, *Wyobrażenia polskości: Sztuki plastyczne II Rzeczypospolitej w perspektywie społecznej historii sztuki* [Polishness Imagined: Visual Arts of the Second Polish Republic from the Socio-Cultural History Perspective] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego 2019), 43–45.

5 Gieysztor-Miłobędzka, "Polska Historia Sztuki," 59.

war damages and to inventory objects within ever-changing geopolitical boundaries.

Secondly, the researcher identifies the factographic-object approach to art as rooted in nationalistic care, serving as the foundation for the establishment of the Art History Commission in Polish lands within the Austrian partition at the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow in 1873. This was the year when the First Congress in Vienna recognized art history as an independent academic discipline. The commission's statutory goal was to publish materials and archival sources, dictionaries, and catalogs of monuments—foundations that are still considered basic to the discipline today. In her text, Gieysztor-Miłobędzka provides a sharp diagnosis of Polish art history, which remains relevant today: the inventory and documentation practices showing a startling congruence with the nineteenth-century program and the ongoing factographic-object approach. Warsaw's art history continues this tradition to this day. It began in the capital by librarian and archivist Zygmunt Batowski, who was entrusted with the newly established chair of the Institute of Art History at the University of Warsaw in 1917. Batowski perceived the goal of Polish art history in its documentary activities. This positivist model of Warsaw's art history was continued by Batowski's students and remains the basis of teaching at the Institute to this day.<sup>6</sup>

However, in the 1930s, a new generation of art historians, such as Michał Walicki and Juliusz Starzyński, emerged, who laid the methodological foundations of the discipline and its developmental trajectories. They brought high intellectual standards and excellent contacts

to Polish art history. Because neither of them worked at a university, they had no opportunity to introduce their thinking into the academic mainstream at the time. From the 1930s, Juliusz Starzyński was interested in social art history and theories inspired by Marxism. He emphasized that an art historian should see the contemporary art around them as an integral element of artistic life. From 1935, he managed the Institute of Art Propaganda, then the largest institution in the country dealing with contemporary art, which established contacts with modernist and avant-garde artists from all over Europe.<sup>7</sup> Together with Walicki, he was ambitious to introduce Polish art into the canon of Western art, introducing the first account of Polish art history as a chapter titled *History of Polish Art*, in the Polish translation of Hamann's *History of Art*.<sup>8</sup> Even then, he was interested in Marxist theories and the social conditioning of art. His approach was close to contemporary social art history.

It was not until 1949 that Juliusz Starzyński had the opportunity to establish his own scientific institution, the State Institute of Art, which in 1959 became part of the Polish Academy of Sciences as the Institute of Art. Until his death in 1974, Starzyński managed the Institute, gathering around him a community of outstanding researchers, theorists, and art critics, who were engaged in the research and development of theories and methodologies not only for studies on earlier art but also contemporary art. Starzyński promoted modern interdisciplinarity and cared about maintaining contacts with scientists,

6 Joanna Sosnowska, "Polska historia sztuki w latach 1945–1989: Zagadnienia metodologii" [Polish History of Art, 1945–1989: Methodological Questions], in *Humanistyka polska w latach 1945–1990* [Polish Humanities Research, 1945–1990], edited by Urszula Jakubowska & Jerzy Myśliński (Warszawa: Fundacja Akademia Humanistyczna, Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 2006), 225–226.

7 Marta Leśniakowska, "Władza Spojrzenia – władza języka. Juliusza Starzyńskiego obraz sztuki i jej historii" [The Power of the Gaze – The Power of the Language: Juliusz Starzyński's Vision of Art and Its History], *Modus: Art History Journal* XII–XIII (2013): 31.

8 Michał Walicki & Juliusz Starzyński, "Historja sztuki [History of Art]," in *Dzieje sztuki od epoki starożytności do czasów obecnych* [History of Art from the Early Christian Era to the Present], ed. Richard Hamann, Michał Walicki & Juliusz Starzyński, translated by Mieczysław Wallis (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo M. Arcta, 1934), vol. I, 9–619; vol. II, 627–905.

but also leading centers worldwide. He cared about scientific exchange with France, Italy, Switzerland, England, Germany, and the United States.<sup>9</sup>

The politicization of art history, particularly in the early 1950s in Poland, and the top-down imposition of socialist realism and Marxism-Leninism also facilitated the development of Polish thought about art based not on Marxism-Leninism, but on neo-Marxism, which was developed in Poland by the philosopher and writer Stanisław Brzozowski. Starzyński supported research into the social and economic conditions influencing artists' work, hence, for instance, the regular conducting of surveys and interviews with artists about living conditions, artistic education, and the need for studios, whose results were published in scholarly journals such as those issued by the Institute, *Przegląd Artystyczny* [Artistic Review], and *Materiały do Studiów i Dyskusji z Zakresu Teorii i Historii Sztuki, Krytyki Artystycznej oraz Metodologii Badań nad Sztuką* [Materials for Studies and Discussions in Art Theory and History, Art Criticism and Art Research Methodology]. Materials were collected by employees at the Studio of Documentation of Visual Arts of the 20th and 21st Century at the Art Institute, Aleksander Wallis, an art historian and sociologist. His work, *Visual Artists: Occupation and Environment*, published in 1964, was the first of its kind in Poland.<sup>10</sup> Wallis examined and analyzed social and institutional conditions, how the conditions for creation were organized, and why representatives of certain social groups could easily become artists in the professional

9 Karolina Łabowicz-Dymanus, "Normative Practice and 'Tradition Management' in the Polish Art and History of Art of the 1950s," in *A Socialist Realist History? Writing Art History in the Post-War Decades*, ed. Krista Kodres, Kristina Jõekalda & Michaela Marek (Wien: Böhlau Verlag, 2019), 81–99.

10 Aleksander Wallis, *Artyści-plastycy: zawód i środowisko* [Visual Artists: Occupation and Environment] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1964).

sense of the word, while representatives of other groups never did.

Juliusz Starzyński was a visionary and a pioneer, but he also navigated the corridors of power with finesse. During the post-war years, Starzyński continued his vision of providing an organizational framework for research on visual and performing arts, a vision that, combined with Marxist dogma, lent itself well to being seamlessly inscribed into the political-propagandistic view of art history as a "master narrative" in a Socialist culture. Throughout the 1950s, Starzyński operated within a domain where he was the dominant authority, in which he controlled the Lyotardian knowledge/power nexus, giving him the ability to define the cultural canons of the time. He not only enjoyed the position of director of the State Institute of Art but also presided over the Committee on Art Studies at the Academy of Sciences. He was also commissioner of the Polish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 1954, 1956, and 1958. In 1950, Starzyński founded the Department of Aesthetics at the Institute of Education of Scientific Staff under the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party. In 1956, he founded the Polish branch of AICA.<sup>11</sup>

It was precisely the strong association of Juliusz Starzyński with communist power, as well as his interest in theories rooted in Marxism, that led to his being erased from Polish art history in later years, with his achievements forgotten. As Gieysztor-Miłobędzka observed, all subsequent directors of the Institute did everything they could to transform Juliusz Starzyński's scientific institute into a documentation institute.<sup>12</sup> It is significant that the majority of texts on art treat art history as a subsidiary science to historical studies, focusing primarily on writing

11 Juliusz Starzyński, *Dokumentacja Osobowa Instytutu Sztuki Polskiej Akademii Nauk* [Documentation of Employee Management of the Institute of Art], Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw, file: A-112, 1949–1974.

12 Gieysztor-Miłobędzka, "Polska Historia Sztuki," 60.

monographs of artworks and artists, as well as on catalogs of monuments and dictionary compilations. Notably, an unusual multi-volume publication, *Polskie życie artystyczne w latach 1944–1960* [Polish Artistic Life in 1944–1960], appears as a monumental diary of artistic events that took place in Poland during those years.

Among Polish art research centers, the so-called Poznań school distinctly stands out, from which Piotr Piotrowski, the author of the book *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe* (2011) and probably the most renowned Polish researcher of Central and Eastern European art in the world today, emerged. The development of the Poznań school was significantly influenced by its contacts, due to geographical proximity, with the Munich and Berlin academic communities. Among these contacts was Richard Hamann, a student of Heinrich Wölfflin, who took up a professorship in what was then German Poznań in 1911. From the beginning, the Poznań school undertook research from a broad humanistic perspective, employing interdisciplinarity and methodological and theoretical awareness. Since the 1970s, it has been closely linked with the Institute of Cultural Studies at the Adam Mickiewicz University and the circle associated with the philosopher and theorist Jerzy Kmita. This period saw the emergence of the so-called “Poznań methodological school,” which placed a strong emphasis on methodological issues, including primarily Marxist revisionism, albeit in a rather subtle version of superstructure. Among Kmita’s followers was the aforementioned Piotrowski, who, along with his group of students and collaborators such as Agata Jakubowska, Izabela Kowalczyk, Mariusz Bryll, and Piotr Juskiewicz, introduced Western methodologies and postmodernist reflection on art into Polish art history, including by publishing translations of key texts in the journal they

edited, *Artium Quaestiones*.<sup>13</sup> After Piotrowski’s departure in 2009, the emphasis on methodological development significantly weakened, and the community became dispersed. However, it is worth noting the research conducted by Agata Jakubowska, who is among the world-renowned specialists and theorists in feminist art and theories related to care and maintenance in women’s artistic practice.<sup>14</sup>

## 2. Historical and Intellectual Stances

The above examples of the activities of individuals or even institutional entities, although spectacular, should be considered exceptional, not typical or characteristic of the majority of works in art history. Today, hermeneutics and biographics, along with the restoration of memory about forgotten women artists, dominate art research. Discussions among art historians regarding art literature are rare and conducted on a small scale. In recent years, perhaps the most interesting exchange occurred in the pages of the academic journal of art history, *Artium Quaestiones*, published by Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań.

In 2019, three recognized researchers in Polish art thought, Anna Markowska, Wojciech Włodarczyk, and Andrzej Turowski, contributed

13 Mariusz Bryll, Piotr Juskiewicz, Piotr Piotrowski, & Wojciech Suchocki, eds., *Perspektywy współczesnej historii sztuki. Antologia przekładów* [Perspectives of Contemporary Art History: An Anthology of Translations] (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu im. A. Mickiewicza, 2009).

14 See for example: Agata Jakubowska & Katy Deepwell, eds., *All-Women Art Spaces in Europe in the Long 1970s* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018).

their texts.<sup>15</sup> Their writings are maintained in a dialogue format, primarily concerning the changes that have occurred in the paradigm of Polish modern art and the understanding of “modernity” in the twentieth century. Włodarczyk analyzed the transformations in the meaning that the term “modernism” has undergone. The researcher noted that in Polish art history, “modernism” has become an established theory, where the researcher begins with an analysis of paintings and their “thick description,” then finds confirmation in the analysis of the language of criticism and the conservative historical-artistic tradition of painting, with its categories of luminism or intensivism.<sup>16</sup>

Researchers agree that a paradigm of art was developed in Poland, which categorized art according to the degree of radicalism and political engagement in the following ranking: 1) critical art; 2) avant-garde; 3) modernism, where modernism is understood as autonomous art that sustains the political status quo.<sup>17</sup> This division was also associated with the valuation of art and positioned modernism and avant-garde as opposites. It maintained a vertical division in which the most highly valued paradigm was that of criticality, innovation (progress), and resistance.<sup>18</sup>

Markowska also highlights the binary construction of Polish history and art history after

1945, pointing out that it divides into anti-communist victims and communist persecutors. This division allowed for a cynical treatment of modernist art, particularly in its most popular form in Poland, known as “colorism,” which was a local adaptation of the École de Paris art – seen as a victorious phase in Poland’s path to artistic independence. In this process, Soviet influences on colorism, which Markowska identifies in the attitudes of the Peredvizhniki, were obscured and denied, whereas I would see them more in the concurrent development of Soviet modernism. The researcher pointedly states that the Polish art historian conceals an ideological backdrop behind nobly sounding slogans, believing in an enlightened, universalistic concept of their academic discipline. She rightly sees in this attitude the origins of an “obsession with formal analysis.”<sup>19</sup>

It was precisely the social engagement, too strongly associated in Poland with socialist realism and the stigma of Marxism-Leninism, that discouraged the local academic community from engaging with critical methodologies. This was compounded by strong anti-communist sentiments, leading to a post-thaw period shift towards reflecting on aesthetic or stylistic categories. During the period when the doctrine of socialist realism prevailed, these categories were deemed antagonistic to realism, labeled as “formalism.”<sup>20</sup> However, from the mid-1950s, art history turned back to its positivist tradition, considered to be an objective, anti-communist, anti-Soviet, anti-Russian, and pro-Polish stance. This period also addressed the mandate for a “Polish road to socialism” and “modernization”

15 Anna Markowska, “Around 1948: The ‘Gentle Revolution’ and Art History,” *Artium Quaestiones* 30 (2019): 137–160, <https://pressto.amu.edu.pl/index.php/aaq/article/view/21878/20952>; Wojciech Włodarczyk, “1989: On the Concept of Modernism,” *Artium Quaestiones* 30 (2019): 257–270, <https://pressto.amu.edu.pl/index.php/aaq/article/view/21892/20968>; Andrzej Turowski, “Remarks on the Margin of Wojciech Włodarczyk’s Article ‘1989: On the Concept of Modernism,’” *Artium Quaestiones* 30 (2019): 271–273, <https://pressto.amu.edu.pl/index.php/aaq/article/view/21893/20969>.

16 Włodarczyk, “1989,” 258.

17 Piotr Piotrowski, *Znaczenia modernizmu: W stronę historii sztuki polskiej po 1945 roku* [Meanings of Modernism: Towards a History of Polish Art after 1945] (Poznań: Dom Wydawniczy Rebis, 1999), 119–121.

18 Włodarczyk, “1989,” 261.

19 Markowska, “Around 1948,” 140–142.

20 “Sprawozdanie Komitetu Centralnego na II Zjeździe PZPR. Referat wygłoszony przez Przewodniczącego KC PZPR Bolesława Bieruta [Report of the Central Committee at the 2nd Congress of the Polish United Workers’ Party. Speech Delivered by the Chairman of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers’ Party, Bolesław Bierut],” *Życie Warszawy* 1954, no. 60: 3–4.



under the first secretary Władysław Gomułka, who came to power in 1956. Socialist realist art was replaced, on the one hand, by so-called colorists from the circle of painter Jan Cybis, and on the other, by abstract art and later neo-avant-garde. In the latter two cases, these trends should be understood differently than their Western counterparts. They were meant primarily to express the modernity of Polish culture but were also perceived as apolitical, and autonomous from the regime.

Wojciech Włodarczyk has noted that the articulation of modernity following Clement Greenberg's concept of modernism and the foregrounding of the autonomy of art issue in Poland constituted a political qualification.<sup>21</sup> Hence, for example, the common political assessment in Poland of abstract art as autonomous, and thereby acceptable to the authorities of the People's Republic of Poland (PRL). Subsequently, in the 1990s, there was a negative judgment of artists involved in abstract art, branded as not anti-communist.

Meanwhile, Piotr Piotrowski's analysis in the exhibition catalog *A Decade* presents a critical perspective on the neo-avant-garde milieu of the 1970s. He critiques its professed apoliticism and artistic radicalism, highlighting how it seemingly satisfied the dual needs of the authorities and society during that era. The era's rhetoric of constructing a "second [parallel] Poland" – portrayed as prosperous, civilized, and tolerant – allowed for the de-ideologization of the state and tolerance for intellectual independence. However, this notion of modernization was largely illusory, as artistic freedom remained tightly circumscribed and curtailed by censorship. Piotrowski suggests that this period represents a form of historical mystification that reinforces prevalent stereotypes, stating, "We had avant-garde, but the values formulated by

it were often superficial. [- -] What counted was activity, glossiness, noise."<sup>22</sup>

This marked the first such forceful attempt to confront the Polish art history of the 1970s and its seemingly conformist, pseudo-apolitical stance. Piotrowski's critique was directed less at the artists themselves and more at the critics and theorists supporting them. Despite the plethora of books on Polish neo-avant-garde, Piotrowski's work remains to this day one of the rare critical studies that debunk the myth of dissent, highlighting the symbiotic relationship between the neo-avant-garde community and the ruling authorities. Since the early 1960s, neo-avant-garde art enabled artists to conceal their intentions behind progressive forms while eschewing any "leftist/socialist" or political inclinations, even as they moved in the milieu of Parisian leftist artists and critics. Artists and critics associated with Galeria Foksal always crafted an apolitical image.<sup>23</sup> This did not prevent them from closely collaborating with artist Daniel Buren, as well as art critics Michel Claura and René Denizot, who regularly published in the journal *Les Lettres françaises* issued by the Communist Party of France. The environment, which effectively created its own myth of a politically non-committed stance, did not hesitate to represent Poland on the international stage during the martial law in 1982. The independence proclaimed by the avant-garde community bore little resemblance to the politics of dissent. Instead, it fulfilled the authorities' demand for promoted artistic

22 Piotr Piotrowski, *Dekada: O syndromie lat siedemdziesiątych, kulturze artystycznej, krytyce, sztuce—wybiórczo i subiektywnie* [A Decade: On the Syndrome of the Seventies, Artistic Culture, Criticism, and Art - Selectively and Subjectively] (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Obserwator, 1991), 11.

23 Anka Ptaszkowska, "W cieniu dobroczyńcy, Analiza mecenatu socjalistycznego" [In the Shadow of the Benefactor, Analysis of Socialist Patronage], in *Wierzę w wolność, ale nie nazywam się Beethoven* [I Believe in Freedom, but I'm not Called Beethoven], (Gdańsk: Słowo/obraz terytoria, 2010), 96–100. Original title: "A l'ombre du bienfaiteur, l'analyse du mécénat socialiste," Art Press 1983, nr 71 (juin).

21 Włodarczyk, "1989," 260.

freedom and unrestricted cultural expression. The neo-avant-garde community willingly embraced this mystification.<sup>24</sup>

### 3. Anti-Communist Traditions and the Role of the Catholic Church

The environment of artists and art critics reflected broader social changes, particularly noticeable in circles such as art historians. The shift towards a more apolitical stance among the intelligentsia began as early as the mid-1950s. Since the early 1960s, there has been a persistent belief within Polish political dialogue that intellectual circles should maintain either an oppositional, anti-communist stance or adopt an apolitical position. Although there are no comprehensive sociological studies on this topic, examining the biographies of Polish art historians suggests that many came from landed, aristocratic, or intellectual backgrounds. Consequently, Polish art history was often written from the perspective of this social group, reflecting its cultural codes, interests, tastes, and political and social beliefs. This perspective aligns with Pierre Bourdieu's theory that cultural production often mirrors the habitus and cultural capital of dominant social groups.<sup>25</sup> As Markowska noted in the previously cited text, the Polish People's Republic (PRL) maintained class divisions, and the so-called high culture and humanities were dominated by this social group.<sup>26</sup> Interestingly, even Marxist theorists, who dealt with social practices in studies of culture and art, such as the previously mentioned Jerzy Kmita. In the introduction to the volume *Studies in the Theory of Culture and Methodology*

*of Cultural Studies* the researcher wrote that the cultural capital and an enriched worldview system are necessary for the reception of symbolic culture, as are artistic practices.<sup>27</sup> Even Marxist theorists followed this belief system, which might also indicate that they were only interested in the superstructure, not the actual class divisions and social engagement. This has led to the rejection of critical attitudes like feminism, anti-colonialism, social engagement, class consciousness, social advancement, universal education, universal social insurance, and access to free higher education, which were pivotal in the era of socialist realism and undoubtedly a significant civilizational leap for many social groups during the first decades of the PRL. Interest in feminism did come at the beginning of the 1990s, along with the influx of Western methodologies. Interest in other social classes has intensified in Polish humanities in the last decade, thanks in part to publications such as *Sleepwalking the Revolution: An Exercise in Historical Logic* by the philosopher of culture, Andrzej Leder.<sup>28</sup> However, Polish art history remains uninterested in themes that fall outside the spectrum of intelligentsia symbolism and codes.

Additionally, there is the strong influence of ecclesiastical censorship. Since the 1960s, the Catholic Church has positioned itself as an anti-communist sphere, an "oasis" of freedom, depoliticization, and de-economization of discourse. It produced a strong language of values embraced by the Polish right, yet not recognized as a right-wing language, and accepted as the language of the intelligentsia because it was this group that shaped the field of art. This conventional environment of art historians allowed,

24 Karolina Labowicz-Dymanus, "Keeping up Appearances: The Neo-Avant-garde as a Smokescreen during Poland's Martial Law Era," in *The 1982: Cultural Exchange Between Łódź and Los Angeles*, ed. Agnieszka Pindera (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi 2024), 67–77.

25 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1984), 318–371.

26 Markowska, "Around 1948," 153–154.

27 Jerzy Kmita, *Studia z teorii kultury i metodologii badań nad kulturą* [Studies in the Theory of Culture and Methodology of Cultural Studies] (Warszawa-Poznań: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1982), 9–13.

28 Andrzej Leder, *Prześlona rewolucja: Ćwiczenia z logiki historycznej* [Sleepwalking the Revolution. An Exercise in Historical Logic] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2014).

and continues to allow, an escape from political engagement. As a language of science, it was meant to be a higher, better, safe, and politically neutral language. In reality, it turned out to be a detachment from leftist thinking and expression. A particular example of self-censorship, or so-called dispersed censorship, in Poland is the offense of religious feelings, which has been occurring regularly since the 1960s when the Catholic Church became the second most influential player after the Party.<sup>29</sup> The signing of the Concordat between Poland and the Holy See in 1993 made the offense of religious feelings a legal category.<sup>30</sup> There are countless examples of censorship of art or critical texts due to the offense of religious feelings. This phenomenon has undoubtedly also contributed to the strengthening of the factographic-object approach in Polish history.

The hesitation among scholars to tackle these and related issues is, without a doubt, a reflection of the deep politicization of historical discourse, leading to the perception of academic debate as inherently partisan. Precisely for this reason, since the 1970s, Polish art historians gravitated towards a study of formalism and iconology, thereby reinforcing the myth of the intelligentsia's apolitical posture and perpetuating the idea of art history as an objective, detached academic field.

However, an interesting and telling consequence of avoiding discussions on critical methodologies in art and engagement in debates related to

historiosophy and art history's historiography includes: 1) a lack of discussion about the art canon, aside from the painstaking efforts to restore the memory of distinguished artists; 2) the absence of a permanent, museum presentation of Polish art post-1945 that would reevaluate the established canon; 3) the lack of textbook materials dedicated to Polish art comparable, for instance, to publications such as *History of Estonian Art*, which critically approach both the legacy of art created under state patronage during Soviet times and the so-called unofficial art; 4) a lack of interest in the heritage of Polish Marxist thought on art, which developed remarkably well thanks to figures such as Helena Blum, Elżbieta Grabska, Juliusz Starzyński, Mieczysław Wallis, and Aleksander Wallis.

The aforementioned paradigm of Polish art history also imposes a particular approach to research on art from the first half of the 1950s, when the centrally imposed doctrine of socialist realism dominated. Discussions on this topic are rather rare, and if they do occur, they often involve ridiculing realism as a style and the themes tackled by artists and critics. Placing art history within an anti-communist narrative forces a clear critique of the attitudes of artists, art historians, and critics engaged in socialist realism, or places them in the realm of dissent, potentially outside the historical and political context. This leads to a situation where dissenting themes or the escape towards Polish avant-garde are highlighted, while those that actually dominated the discourse of that period are excluded, such as improvements in the lives of workers, rural electrification, the dissemination of knowledge about hygiene, or the fight against illiteracy. Interestingly, despite the growing interest in postcolonial theories, there is no reflection on Poland's strong military involvement in the wars in Korea and Vietnam at that time. A notable example is the series of exhibitions and accompanying events that have taken place in recent years, such as *A New Beginning: Modernism in the Second Polish Republic* at the

29 Marcin Kościelniak, "Kościół-Partia-teatr: Cenzura rozproszona w PRL" [Church-Party-Theater: Diffuse Censorship in the Polish People's Republic], *Pamiętnik teatralny* 72, nr. 4 (2023): 139–163, <https://ruj.uj.edu.pl/server/api/core/bitstreams/020be6cd-a795-40ad-9861-72315b4663e2/content>.

30 Jakub Dąbrowski, "Art as a Feature of the Prohibited Act," in *Censorship in Polish Art After 1989: Art, Law, Politics*, ed. Jakub Dąbrowski & Anna Demenko, trans. Łukasz Mojsak & Aleksandra Sobczak (Oakville, ON: Mosaic Press, 2019), [https://www.google.pl/books/edition/Censorship\\_in\\_Polish\\_Art\\_After\\_1989/GVQEAAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&pg=PT10&printsec=frontcover](https://www.google.pl/books/edition/Censorship_in_Polish_Art_After_1989/GVQEAAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&pg=PT10&printsec=frontcover).

National Museum in Krakow, *Henryk Streng/Marek Włodarski and Jewish-Polish Modernism* at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, and *Cold Revolution: Central and Eastern European Societies in Times of Socialist Realism, 1948–1959* at the National Gallery of Art Zachęta. These exhibitions reinforce the concept of the clash between two universalist doctrines: socialist realism and abstract modernism. Today, this translates into a reluctance to engage with these critical perspectives, often perceived as aligning too closely with past regime ideologies.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the exploration of Polish art historiography reveals a deeply entrenched network of political, cultural, and academic influences that have molded the discipline's development and discourse over the years. This field has been shaped under the substantial weight of a conservative belief system, further compounded by ecclesiastical censorship and a politicized academic environment. Such influences have not only stifled the introduction and acceptance of critical methodologies but have also kept these important perspectives peripheral within the mainstream art historical discourse in Poland.

The reluctance to engage with and integrate critical perspectives – such as feminism, anti-colonialism, and class consciousness – highlights a broader hesitance within the field to challenge and redefine traditional narratives that have long been dominated by a relatively homogeneous intellectual elite. This elite has historically shaped the narrative to reflect its own cultural codes, political beliefs, and social standings, often overlooking or deliberately omitting the diverse and dynamic elements of Polish art history. Moreover, the perception of academic debate as inherently partisan due to the politicization of historical discourse has only served to reinforce these barriers, discouraging open intellectual exploration and the questioning of established orthodoxies.

As we move forward, it is imperative for the future of Polish art historiography to transcend its historical limitations by adopting a more inclusive and critically engaged approach. This shift would involve a significant reevaluation of the contributions of historically marginalized groups and perspectives, thereby enriching the discourse. It also calls for the cultivation of an academic environment that not only tolerates but encourages robust debate, the challenging of long-standing views, and the integration of previously sidelined methodologies.

Expanding the scope of interests and research in Polish art history, for example, provides the opportunity to examine art that has previously been overlooked and to analyze the mechanisms of exclusion and omission of certain themes or artists. This includes undertaking research into the legacy of Marxist thought on art and exploring the institutional, political, and social conditions of the discipline. Additionally, it would enable us to explore the role of institutions in shaping artistic discourse and art history, for example, by employing methods such as the biography of institutions. It is also important to examine and analyze the methodologies used in writing socialist art history, especially in the 1950s, and to investigate the patterns upon which it was based – patterns not necessarily derived from Moscow but often borrowed from Paris and, most importantly, rooted in the works of Polish Marxists and Marxist art historians from the 1930s. Such studies have yet to be undertaken.

Furthermore, this expansion would enable broader studies of art objects that did not fit into the previously described paradigm of modernity, progress, and avant-gardism. For instance, it would allow for new interpretations of exhibitions such as the so-called Art of the Youth from Socialist Countries, which took place in galleries and art museums. This approach also allows us to consider artists who did not align with the modernity paradigm and thus remained in the

margins of art historical interest. At the time, their works were catalogued as ethnographic objects even at exhibitions of contemporary art and were described as ethnographic, and to this day they remain largely unexamined. Incorporating these works would not only expand our understanding of 20th-century art but also include in the discourse the works of artists from Polish ethnic minorities such as the Roma, Armenians, Tatars, and others. Their art is still not recognized within the conventional category of art history and is usually exhibited in ethnographic museums rather than contemporary art venues, remaining outside the interest of the discipline.

By embracing these changes, Polish art history can better capture the rich tapestry of its national cultural heritage. It can transform into a discipline that not only acknowledges its past biases but actively works to rectify them, thus offering a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of both past and present artistic

expressions. This evolution is crucial not only for the academic field but also for the broader cultural landscape of Poland, as it seeks to navigate its complex historical narratives and their implications for contemporary society.

---

**Karolina Łabowicz-Dymanus** is an assistant professor and the Head of the Department of the 20th and 21st Century Visual Arts Documentation at the Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences. Her research interests span the writing of art history, the cultural dimensions of the global Cold War, and the theory and aesthetics of art from the Socialist era to contemporary times. She also focuses on artistic and institutional responses to global modernization in the 1950s and 1990s. Currently, she is leading a research project on artistic exchange between Poland and socialist Asian countries in the 1950s.

## Bibliography

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984.

Bryll, Mariusz, Piotr Juszkiewicz, Piotr Piotrowski & Wojciech Suchocki, eds. *Perspektywy współczesnej historii sztuki. Antologia przekładów*. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu im. A. Mickiewicza, 2009.

Chmielewska, Agnieszka. *Wyobrażenia polskości: Sztuki plastyczne II Rzeczypospolitej w perspektywie społecznej historii sztuki*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2019.

Chow, Vivienne. "Self-Censorship Among Artists and Museum Workers Is on the Rise in Poland, a New Report Finds." *Artnet News*, October 11, 2022. Read 09.03.2024. <https://news.artnet.com/art-world-archives/poland-art-censorship-report-2189730>.

Dąbrowski, Jakub. "Art as a Feature of the Prohibited Act." In *Censorship in Polish Art After 1989: Art, Law, Politics*, edited by Jakub Dąbrowski & Anna Demenko, translated by Łukasz Mojsak and Aleksandra Sobczak. Oakville, ON: Mosaic Press, 2019. [https://www.google.pl/books/edition/Censorship\\_in\\_Polish\\_Art\\_After\\_1989/GVQEAAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&pg=PT10&printsec=frontcover](https://www.google.pl/books/edition/Censorship_in_Polish_Art_After_1989/GVQEAAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&pg=PT10&printsec=frontcover).

Gieysztor-Miłobędzka, Elżbieta. "Polska Historia Sztuki – jej konserwatyzm oraz próby jego przewyżnienia." *Kultura Współczesna* 4, 26 (2000): 58–76.

Jakubowska, Agata. "Feminist Art and Art History in State Socialist Poland, As Seen through All-Women Exhibitions." *MODOS: Revista De História Da Arte* 7, nro. 2 (2023): 94-119. <https://doi.org/10.20396/modos.v7i2.8672671>.

Jakubowska, Agata & Katy Deepwell eds. *All-Women Art Spaces in Europe in the Long 1970s*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018.

Kmita, Jerzy. *Studia z teorii kultury i metodologii badań nad kulturą*. Warszawa-Poznań: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1982.

Kościelniak, Marcin. "Kościół-Partia-teatr: Cenzura rozproszona w PRL." *Pamiętnik teatralny* 72, nro. 4 (2023): 139–163. <https://ruj.uj.edu.pl/server/api/core/bitstreams/020be6cd-a795-40ad-9861-72315b4663e2/content>.

Leder, Andrzej. *Prześlona rewolucja: Ćwiczenia z logiki historycznej*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo "Krytyki Politycznej", 2014.

Leśniakowska, Marta. "Władza Spojrzenia – władza języka: Juliusza Starzyńskiego obraz sztuki i jej historii." *Modus. Prace z historii sztuki / Modus: Art History Journal* 12–13 (2013): 27–52.

Łabowicz-Dymanus, Karolina. "Keeping up Appearances: The Neo-Avant-garde as a Smokescreen during Poland's Martial Law Era." In *The 1982: Cultural Exchange Between Łódź and Los Angeles*, edited by Agnieszka Pindera, 67–77. Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, 2024.

Łabowicz-Dymanus, Karolina. "Normative Practice and 'Tradition Management' in the Polish Art and History of Art of the 1950s." In *A Socialist Realist History? Writing Art History in the Post-War Decades*, edited by Krista Kodres, Kristina Jöekalda & Michaela Marek, 81–99. Wien: Böhlau Verlag, 2019.

Markowska, Anna. "Around 1948: The 'Gentle Revolution' and Art History." *Artium Quaestiones* 30 (2019): 137–160. <https://pressto.amu.edu.pl/index.php/aq/article/view/21878/20952>.

Marshall, Alex. "Poland's Art World Awaits a Culture War Counteroffensive." *New York Times*, November 6, 2023. Read 09.03.2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/06/arts/design/poland-culture-election.html>.

Mazur, Adam. "How Did Poland's Art World Swing Right?" *Frieze*, March 1, 2022. Read 09.03.2024. <https://www.frieze.com/article/how-did-poland-art-world-swing-right-wing>.

Piotrowski, Piotr. *Dekada: O syndromie lat siedemdziesiątych, kulturze artystycznej, krytyce, sztuce – wybiórczo i subiektywnie*. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Obserwator, 1991.

Piotrowski, Piotr. *Znaczenia modernizmu: W stronę historii sztuki polskiej po 1945 roku*. Poznań: Dom Wydawniczy Rebis, 1999.

"Poland's Right-Wing Party Censors Artists and Actively Suppresses Creative Expression, New Report Finds." *ArtDependence Magazine*, October 11, 2022. Read 09.03.2024. <https://artdependence.com/articles/poland-s-right-wing-party-censors-artists-and-actively-suppresses-creative-expression-new-report-finds/>.

Ptaszkowska, Anka. "W cieniu dobroczyńcy, Analiza mecenatu socjalistycznego". In *Wierzę w wolność, ale nie nazywam się Beethoven*, 96–100. Gdańsk: Słowo/obraz terytoria, 2010.

Sosnowska, Joanna. "Polska historia sztuki w latach 1945–1989: Zagadnienia metodologii." In *Humanistyka polska w latach 1945–1990*, edited by Urszula Jakubowska & Jerzy Myśliński, 206–229. Warszawa: Fundacja Akademia Humanistyczna, Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 2006.

"Sprawozdanie Komitetu Centralnego na II Zjeździe PZPR. Referat wygłoszony przez Przewodniczącego KC PZPR Bolesława Bieruta." *Życie Warszawy* nro. 60 (1954): 3–4.

Szreder, Kuba. "The Authoritarian Turn: On the Crisis of the Polish Institutions of Contemporary Art." *CiMAM*, March 6, 2023. Read 09.03.2024. <https://cimam.org/news-archive/the-authoritarian-turn-on-the-crisis-of-the-polish-institutions-of-contemporary-art/>.

Turowski, Andrzej. "Remarks on the Margin of Wojciech Włodarczyk's Article '1989: On the Concept of Modernism'." *Artium Quaestiones* 30 (2019): 271–273. <https://pressto.amu.edu.pl/index.php/aaq/article/view/21893/20969>.

Ulea, Anca. "Polish Artists Were Muzzled by the Populist Government. An NGO Wants Donald Tusk to Reverse It." *Euronews*, December 15, 2023. Read 09.03.2024. <https://www.euronews.com/culture/2023/12/15/polish-artists-were-muzzled-by-the-populist-government-an-ngo-wants-donald-tusk-to-reverse>.

Walicki, Michał, & Juliusz Starzyński. "Historja sztuki." In *Dzieje sztuki od epoki starożytności do czasów obecnych*, edited by Richard Hamann, Michał Walicki & Juliusz Starzyński, translated by Mieczysław Wallis. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo M. Arcta, 1934, vol. I, 9–619; vol. II, 627–905.

Wallis, Aleksander. *Artyści-plastycy: zawód i środowisko*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1964.

Włodarczyk, Wojciech. "1989: On the Concept of Modernism." *Artium Quaestiones* 30 (2019): 257–270. <https://pressto.amu.edu.pl/index.php/aaq/article/view/21892/20968>.