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The Dissident Power of Queer Art and Curating in Central Eastern Europe

Abstract

The text aims to explore the political, cultural and artistic implications of LGBTQ+ art and curatorial practices in Central Eastern Europe in the 21st century. Currently, queer exhibitions, are on the rise in post-communist Europe, especially those held in contemporary art centres and museums. They cast light on new queer art and activism and the volatile sexual politics in the region because of the significant increase in the number of artists working with LGBTQ themes and the topical political background of this movement and its impact on cultural debates. Curators are developing innovative perspectives on sexual, social and artistic dimensions of queer exhibitions in this geographic context still seriously affected by homophobic state policy. The objective is to feature three art shows of major queer artists which have been organised in Hungary, Poland and Estonia in the last decade. The exhibitions are: *The Survivor's Shade: The Life and Work of El Kazovsky* at the Museum of Fine Art- Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest in 2015/16; *Daniel Rycharski: Fears* at the Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw in 2019 and *Jaanus Samma. Not Suitable for Work. A Chairman's Tale*, Museum of Occupations and Freedom, Tallinn in 2016. The three artists and their exhibitions have been selected because they were organised by major cultural institutions in the capitals, they have achieved a significant social impact and huge audience and the artists have played an important role in the contemporary art scene in each country. Their work is a current manifestation of the queer artistic and intellectual culture that has been developing slowly in the region since the 1980s and has come to play an increasingly important role in recent years. The exhibitions and art of the three artists are a starting point for a broader outline of the themes and important figures in recent queer art in Central Eastern Europe (CEE). Moreover, in each case, they appear in a complex and difficult political context related to the struggle for LGBTQ+ rights. Hence, I would like to propose a thesis about the dissident power and status of queer art and curating in CEE.

Keywords: queer curating, queer exhibitions, El Kazovsky, Jaanus Samma, Daniel Rycharski

The text aims to explore the political, cultural and artistic implications of LGBTQ+ art and curatorial practices in Central Eastern Europe (CEE) in the 21st century.

Currently, queer exhibitions are on the rise in post-communist Europe, especially those held in contemporary art centres and museums. They cast light on new queer art and activism and the volatile sexual politics in the region because of the significant increase in the number of artists working with LGBTQ themes and the topical political background of this movement and its impact on cultural debates. Curators are developing innovative perspectives on sexual, social and artistic dimensions of queer exhibitions in this geographic context still seriously affected by homophobic state policy. Hence, the mere presence of queer exhibitions and art is a significant pro-democratic development in the cultural sphere; thus, it is a phenomenon that needs to be studied and emphasised but also placed in a global and European comparative context. Simultaneously, the new wave of queer curatorial projects in (CEE) is part of a much broader movement in contemporary art and museological praxis towards inclusiveness and more open expression of diverse identities.

My objective is to point out three art shows of major queer artists which have been organised in Hungary, Poland, and Estonia in the last decade. The exhibitions are: *The Survivor's Shade: The Life and Work of El Kazovsky* at the Museum of Fine Art- Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest in 2015/16; *Daniel Rycharski: Fears* at the Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw in 2019 and Jaanus Samma. *Not Suitable for Work. A Chairman's Tale*, Museum of Occupations and Freedom, Tallinn in 2016. I have selected the three artists and their exhibitions because they have been organised by major cultural institutions in the capitals, they have achieved a significant social impact and huge audience and the artists have played an important role in the contemporary art scene in each country. Their work is a current manifestation of the queer artistic and intellectual culture that has been developing slowly in the region since the 1980s and has come to play an increasingly important role in recent years.¹ The exhibitions and art of these three artists can be a starting point for a broader outline of the themes and important figures in recent queer art in CEE. Moreover, in each case, they appear in a complex and difficult political position related to the struggle for LGBTQ+ rights in the region.

1 On art and visual culture around LGBTQ rights in CEE, see: L. Essing, *Queer in Russia: A Story of Sex, Self and the Other*, Durham, 1999; N. Fejes, A. Balogh, *Queer Visibility in Post-socialist Cultures*, Chicago, 2013; M. Gržinić, *Situated Contemporary Art Practices. Art, Theory and Activism from the East of Europe*, Ljubljana, 2004; T. Kitliński, *Dream? Democracy! A Philosophy of Horror, Hope & Hospitality in Art & Action*, Lublin, 2014; *From Dusk till Dawn. 20 Years of LGBT Freedom in Lithuania*, ed. L. Kreivyte, Vilnius, 2013; *De-Centring Western Sexualities Central and Eastern European Perspectives*, eds. R. Kulpa, J. Mizelińska, London, 2011; *Beyond the Pink Curtain. Everyday Life of LGBT People in Eastern Europe*, eds. R. Kuhar, J. Takacs, Ljubljana, 2007; P. Piotrowski, *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe*, London 2012; J. B. Baer, *Other Russias: Homosexuality and the Crisis of Post-Soviet Identity*, London, New York, 2009; P. Leszkowicz, *Art Pride. Gay Art from Poland*, Warszawa, 2010, P. Leszkowicz, T. Kitliński, *Miłość i demokracja. Rozważania o kwestii homoseksualnej w Polsce*, Kraków, 2005.

El Kazovsky and the reflection on gender and sexuality

Russian-Hungarian El Kazovsky (1948–2008) was one of the most influential and well known contemporary artist in Hungary. In current terms, he was also openly transgender but he called himself “transsexual”. He was born in Russia and was assigned female at birth in Leningrad but as an adult considered himself a homosexual man. His own self-identification was stated like this: “My case is quite special, and in many respects the life I was born with is built around the fact that I am transsexual. ... Transsexuals who feel that they are women are perfectly visible, striking even, because in our culture ‘womanhood’ always makes a display of itself. ... My situation is different because I am a man living in what for me is a peculiar female body, and to complicate matters even further, I am a homosexual man who is attracted to very girlish-looking young men, whom I in fact see as women, and whom I love as women.”² This acknowledgment exemplifies that the artist was never oppressed in Hungarian culture and openly expressed his transness while being celebrated with many major art prizes. Despite this strong trans statement which drove his life and art, the artist never transitioned medically.³

The exhibition and the catalogue *The Survivor's Shade* of the Hungarian National Gallery, curated by András Rényi, Krisztina Jerger and László Százados, openly stated the artist's transgender identity and its impact on his art. On the first page in the footnote is explained that El Kazovsky was a transgender person born into a female body, but self-identifying as a man, that is why the English texts in the exhibition use the masculine pronouns -he, him, his.⁴ In discussing the Russian origin of the artist, who migrated to Budapest with his mother at the age of sixteen, the curator points out that the artist stylised his masculine dominant performance on the basis of his beloved 19th-century novels by Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy. Imaginatively he wanted to be an aristocratic army officer.⁵

The second major inspiration that influenced the artist's persona was the counterculture of the 1970s and 1980s in music and fashion, particularly the rebellious punk movement and the androgynous, oversexed and explosive characters of David Bowie and Sid Vicious. In fact, the latter slim and fragile body influenced the episcene figuration of Kazovsky's paintings and performances.⁶ The artist's queer art was also inspired by the films of his friend – Derek Jarman.⁷

The posthumous massive monographic exhibition with 400 works, attempted to present the artist's rich oeuvre through a variety of crossing perspectives: the anthro-

2 A. Rényi, *The Survivor's Shadow. The Life and Works of El Kazovsky*, Budapest, 2015, p. 10.

3 S. Stryker, “Surviving in the Shadow of the Un/Seen: On the Paradoxical In/Visibility of El Kazovsky”, *Journal of Visual Culture*, vol. 19.2, p. 278.

4 Rényi, op. cit., p. 1.

5 Ibid., p. 29.

6 Ibid., p. 26.

7 J. Jankó, “The Labyrinth of El Kazovsky in the National Gallery Conversation with the Awardees”, <http://muzeumcafe.hu/en/labyrinth-el-kazovsky-national-gallery/>, [accessed 20/11/2021].

pology of fetishisation and theatricality, the Hungarian avant-garde and subcultural background, the historical genesis in the Russian origin and foremost through the socio-political aspect of sex and gender and the aesthetic of camp.⁸

The complicated intersection of gender identification and sexuality makes El Kazovsky a paragon of queer subjectivity which he moreover expressed in his multimedia art. Kazovsky created pictures, sculptures, installations, performances and stage designs which dealt with the theme of ambiguous eroticism and desire. Especially his metaphorical paintings reflect the artist's colourful and expressionistic style and interest in ancient Greek subjects, unattainable beauty ideals and the androgynous male body. The semi-abstract landscapes of emptiness, loneliness and shadows are also inhabited by many sharply painted dogs/wolves – symbols of desire in this universe. The figures are presented as isolated faceless androgynous torsos or ballet dancers. He created a self-referential and constantly repeated iconography based on a very private mythology, not related to the surrounding social or political world. Hence Kazovsky's art was not explicitly socially engaged in LGBTQ+ rights, yet his openness about the defiance of gender roles, self-constructed identity, and the expression of one's own queer desire, made his well-known persona influential on the initially open politics of sexuality in Hungarian culture at the turn of 21st century.

One of the highlights of the exhibition was a room with a display of the monumental stage, fashion costumes and documentation from the *Dzhan*⁹ *Panopticon*,¹⁰ or *Game about Objectification* (fig. 1) a long series of Dionysian performances with many actors, central for El Kazovsky's output. Éva Forgács called them "a love letter in the genre of performance art" as the cyclical performances were ceremonial celebrations commemorating the short but joyful love affair that the artist had with a young delicate Turkish man. Around this event, Kazovsky created an entire fetishist and symbolic theatre of performances based on the story of Pygmalion and Galatea from Ovid, where the artist plays the role of Pygmalion who attempts to give a soul to the feminine male body. Hence the beautiful youthful male body/idols are always admired in this art. The curators in a special space displayed the documents of these relationships that initiated a personal mythology, including a video recording of the Turkish man – Can Togay, recalling their love today.¹¹ Thus, in the curatorial emphasis individual queer desire was placed at the centre of the story of El Kazovsky's art and life narrated by the monographic exhibition.

It was a big progressive advancement that such a major retrospective of openly transgender artists was possible in the Hungarian National Gallery. Yet it was not the first example of a major art show dealing with queer sexuality presented in Budapest. *Trans-Sexual Express* was shown at Kunsthalle in 2002 and *The Naked Man*

8 Ibid., p. 24.

9 "Dzhan" is an ancient Persian word for soul, in modern Turkish it is a name for both boys and girls.

10 In the interpretations of the performances, I have not noticed a reference to Michel Foucault's concept of optical surveillance based on the architecture of the panopticon by Jeremy Bentham.

11 Rényi, op. cit., pp. 2–5.



Fig. 1. El Kavovsky, *Dzsán Panopticon XXXI, or the Dream of Arcesilaus XI*, February 26 1991, Feszek Klub, © El Kazovsky Foundation.

at Ludwig Museum in 2013,¹² yet both these thematic exhibitions were touring projects organised in Western Europe which only came to Budapest. *The Survivor's Shadow* dealt with local queer artists and the Hungarian cultural background which enabled his success and recognition. Yet the official Hungarian sexual politics tells another story.

Susan Stryker, a prominent transgender scholar, activist and filmmaker, in her reading of the exhibition at the Hungarian National Gallery in 2015/16, emphasised that paradoxically it was organised in Victor Orbán's homophobic and particularly transphobic Hungary! His right-wing populist government in power since 2010, consequently attacks the concept of gender and queer as a Western and Jewish conspiracy to undermine traditional Hungarian society. As a consequence, Central European University which taught gender studies was forced to move to Vienna.¹³ Moreover, there has been a line of anti-LGBTQ+ laws introduced in Hungary,

12 G. Muskovics, "Against Interpretation. On the Performance Art of El Kazovsky and Tamás Király", <https://artportal.hu/magazin/against-interpretation-on-the-performance-art-of-el-kazovsky-and-tamas-kiraly/>, p. 20, [accessed 20/11/2021].

13 Stryker, op. cit., pp. 277–278.

despite the EU's anti-discriminatory fundamental human rights obligations. In 2020 and 2021 Fidesz's government prohibited legal recognition of transgender people and LGBTQ+ content and displays for minors. The ban on "homosexual and transexual propaganda" is a reminder of the Russian law introduced in 2013.

How was it then possible that El Kazovsky was presented as a national cultural icon in such a transphobic country? Stryker argues that due to the gender-neutral grammar of the Hungarian language and the deeply personal even hermetic iconography of his art, his transness was in the shadow, unintelligible, readable only for those from his cultural world but invisible and unseen for broader society. Especially that he was a transgender man, and only transgender femininity offers more distinct visual difference. But on the other hand, Stryker uses Cricket Keating's concept of "homoprotectionism",¹⁴ a strategy of homophobic governments, which sometimes occasionally act as protectors of LGBTQ+ people, to mask the upcoming discriminatory policy.¹⁵

Stryker's analysis presents particularly disturbing consequences for cultural sphere globally, as official homoprotectionist deceit can instrumentally use the diversity of culture, to hide legal injustices. I do not reject this theory, yet I would like to question her diagnosis about El Kazovsky's in/visibility and his un/seen difference. The fact is that he was the most important and prominent trans artist not only in Hungary but also in the entire post-communist CEE, active since the 1970s, before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall. His late erotic *Dzhan Panopticons* were widely televised. The catalogue of *The Survivor's Shadow* includes numerous quotes from the artist who spoke about his gender identification and queer desire at many moments in his long career. The curators emphasise that to cover it would be a hypocrisy. I would rather agree as Stryker confirms, that he was unknown in the West, but it does not mean that his invisibility for Western art history and curatorial praxis, is equivalent to his general unseen status, particularly in Hungary or in the region. The thesis of El Kazovsky's in/visibility just marginalises the artist. Moreover, Hungarian or Polish far-right regimes have never pretended that they protect queers, they rather unashamedly and consequently discriminate, ignoring the EU criticism.

In 2010 El Kazovsky's painting *The Good Shepherd's Hours* (1998) (fig. 2) was included in the transgender section (!) of the pioneering exhibition *Ars Homo Erotica* at the National Gallery in Warsaw, curated by Paweł Leszkowicz. It was one of the first queer-themed group exhibitions organised in the national museums globally. *Ars Homo Erotica* presented over 200 artworks from antiquity to the 21st century and proposed a queer perspective on the entire collection of the National Museum in Warsaw, and the contemporary art of CEE more broadly. Works from the National Museum's collection, along with the works of specially invited contemporary

14 C. Keating, "Conclusion: On the Interplay of State Homophobia and Homoprotectionism", *Global Homophobia: States, Movements and the Politics of Oppression*, eds. M. L. Weiss, M. J. Bosia, Urbana, 2013, pp. 246–253.

15 Stryker, op. cit., p. 282.

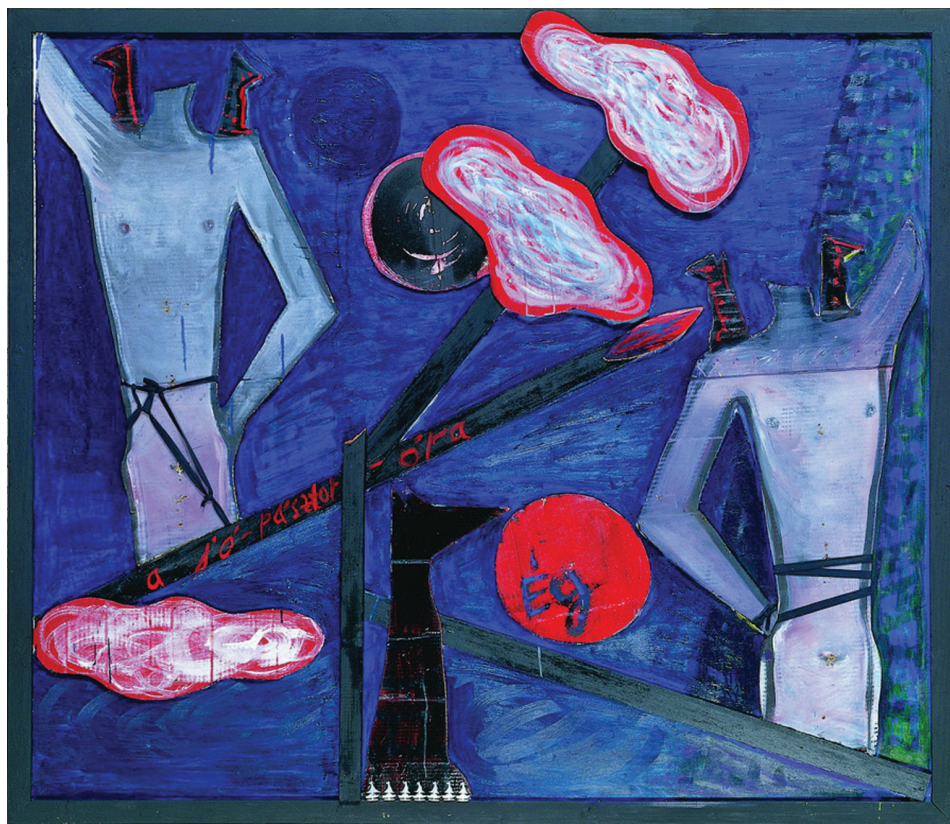


Fig. 2. El Kazovsky, *The Good Shepherd's Hours* (1998), oil painting, © Róbert Alföldi.

artists, surveyed cultural history and political contemporaneity from LGBTQ+ points of view. The invited artists came from such Eastern European countries as Romania, Bulgaria, Lithuania, the Czech Republic, Croatia, Hungary, Slovakia, Ukraine, Poland, Belarus and Russia, where amorous and sexual diversity sparks cultural tensions, political discrimination and acts of censorship.¹⁶ The purpose of the exhibition was to challenge the heteronormative visual canon in the present and in the past.¹⁷ El Kazovsky was celebrated as a forerunner of transgender art in the region!

The Survivor's Shade: The Life and Work of El Kazovsky at the Museum of Fine Art- Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest in 2015/16 and *Ars Homo Erotica* at the National Gallery in Warsaw in 2010, testify to the occasional mainstreaming of queer art and exhibitions in CEE. Especially that these exhibitions were organised

¹⁶ See the catalogue: P. Leszkowicz, *Ars Homo Erotica*, Warsaw, 2010.

¹⁷ M. Reilly, *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating*, London, Vilnius, 2018, p. 198.

by national museums which hold the highest cultural status in both homophobic countries, run in 2021 by openly anti-LGBTQ+ governments. One way to look at the paradox is to use the Western concept of “homoprotectionism” and to think about the right-wing manipulations with culture, the other way which I chose, is to apply the Eastern European praxis of dissidence crucial for the abolishment of communism. The spirit of dissidence lives and continues in CEE art and its institutions, particularly in queer art! The power of queer art and curating in the region lies in its dissident force against new political authoritarianisms connected with nationalism and/or religious fundamentalism, which Hungarian and Polish governments are the main representatives. Queer artists and curators envision LGBTQ+ futurity which has not yet arrived, the politics lags far, far behind. The utopian futurity might never come politically but it is already here in dissident queer culture. Thus, it is real.

The two exhibitions at the national museums in Budapest and Poland did not appear out of nothing but are part of a whole movement of queer curating that has been growing in the region since the 1990s, often supported by feminist curating. Thus, one has to mention that the most important international museum project to have dealt with gender and sexuality in twentieth-century CEE art was the exhibition *Gender Check. Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe* curated by Bojana Pejić, with many national collaborators.¹⁸ The project was sponsored by the Austrian Erste Foundation and organised by The Museum of Modern Art Foundation Ludwig in Vienna in 2009. In 2010 the show traveled to Poland’s Zachęta National Gallery in Warsaw. *Gender Check*, with its predominantly feminist focus, has written Eastern European women artists and feminism back into international art history; the queer component was much smaller but still present in the exhibition and in the monumental catalogue.

However more important are smaller thematic group shows devoted to LGBTQ+ art organised by various public institutions and curators across CEE. I would like to selectively list such projects as: *Me and Aids* at the Czereja Gallery/Stolica Cinema, Warsaw 1996, curated by Artur Żmijewski, Katarzyna Kozyra and Grzegorz Kowalski; *Love and Democracy* at the Bathhouse Center for Contemporary Art, Gdańsk 2006, curated by Paweł Leszkowicz; *Pomada Queer Festival* annually organised in Warsaw since 2010 curated by various authors; *Untold Stories* at Kunstihoone, Tallin 2011, curated by Rebeka Põldsam, Airi Triisberg and Anders Härm; *Pulse, Within the Veil* at Tranzit House, Cluj-Napoca 2011, curated by Georgiana But; *Love is Love. Art as LGBTQ Activism from Britain to Belarus* at the Labyrinth Gallery, Lublin 2011, curated by Tomasz Kitliński and Paweł Leszkowicz; *What a Material! Queer Art from Central Europe*, a touring exhibition organised by Ceske Centrum, Prague 2012, curated by Ladislav Zikmund-Lender; *From Dusk to Dawn. 20 Years of LGBT Freedom in Lithuania* at the Contemporary Art Centre, Vilnius 2013, curated by Laima Kreivyte; *Transgender Me* at the Gallery of the National Library of Tech-

¹⁸ Two groundbreaking publications, a catalogue and a reader, accompanied the exhibition, see: B. Pejić, *Gender Check: A Reader: Art and Theory in Eastern Europe*, Cologne, 2010; *Gender Check. Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe: A Catalogue*, ed. B. Pejić, Cologne, 2009.

nology, Prague 2013, curated by Lukáš Houdek and Michelle Šiml; *Prague Pride: East Side Story* at Karlin Studios, Prague 2014, curated by Michal Novotný; *Queer Stories* at Tranzit.sk, Bratislava 2018, curated by Christiane Erharter; *Creative Sick States: AIDS, Cancer, Hiv* at Arsenál City Gallery, Poznań 2020, curated by Luiza Kempnińska, Paweł Leszkowicz, Zofia Nierodzińska, Jacek Zwierzyński; *We Are People* at the Labyrinth Gallery, Lublin 2020, curated by Waldemar Tatarczuk.

Remembering El Kazovsky's origin, I would like to mention that exhibitions with a strong queer content have been even staged in Putin's homophobic Russia, restricted by the federal law against "gay propaganda" introduced in 2013. At the high of the political discussion around the legislations such major exhibitions were organised as: *The New Academy St. Petersburg* at Ekaterina Cultural Foundation, Moscow 2012, curated by Arkady Ippolitov, Alexandra Khartonova and *The Manifesta 10* at The State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg 2014, curated by Kasper König, which included plenty of LGBTQ+ artists and images, in direct opposition against the new homophobic legislation. To avoid censorship, these projects did not state openly their strong queer component, mixed strategically with other issues, yet the art spoke for itself.

The multiplicity and diversity of LGBTQ+ projects prove that queer curating is flourishing in CEE, demonstrating often the oppositional power of queer art, while the level of dissidence always depends on a local context. It is in this framework of curatorial plenitude that the retrospective *The Survivor's Shade: The Life and Work of El Kazovsky* allowed for a wide presentation of an artist who openly expressed intimate non-heteronormative and non-binary gender and sexuality so frightening for the Hungarian government.

Daniel Rycharski and the reflection on homophobia

Polish artist Daniel Rycharski explores in his art the relationship between homosexuality and religion, contesting his country's dominant governmental ideology of fundamentalist Catholicism. In 2019, the artist exhibited the installation *Fears* at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw as a part of his monographic exhibition of the same title (fig. 3). *Fears* were curated by Szymon Maliborski and it was the first big queer project of this major museum, yet incredibly significant, impactful and brave in Law and Justice's Poland.¹⁹ The reflection on Rycharski's retrospective would allow me to demonstrate how homophobia is one of the dominant themes of CEE queer art and curating.

The *Fears* series consists of twenty-two wooden crosses of many Christian denominations, on which are overlaid colored clothing or shoes of individuals who experienced discrimination on the basis of non-heteronormative sexual orientation

¹⁹ See the catalogue of the exhibition, see: Daniel Rycharski. *Strachy. Wybrane działania 2008–2019*, ed. S. Maliborski, Warszawa, 2019.



Fig. 3. Daniel Rycharski, *Fears*, 2019, the Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw, © MSN.

or gender identity. The clothes themselves are hybrids, cut and sewn, additionally, they are stretched and attached to the wood by barbed wire.

Daniel Rycharski's work belongs to the international theme of art devoted to the reflection on violence and discrimination against LGBTQ+ people, combined with an emotional take on Christianity. Homophobia is an important theme in recent global visual culture. Several outstanding works on this subject have been created in post-communist Europe, where creeping homophobia is a historical heritage and contemporary politics. To its venom contributes the legacy of communism, religious fundamentalism and nationalism, the three authoritarian systems that determine Eastern European toxicology. In such a hostile yet activist background, queer art has struggled to thrive in CEE where it has a very strong political impact and visibility.

Rycharski's scarecrows/fears are associated with strange figures set up in rural fields to scare away animals in order to protect the crops. Moreover, when made, they were first placed in the fields in Kurówko, the village where the artist works, which inspires him and where he comes from. The sculptures, through the association with crosses, stakes, and even gallows and the presence of barbed wire and cuts of clothing, become a metaphor for suffering, pain and torture. They are not pleasant. And yet they are attractive as works of art. Observed from a distance as a whole, the "crosses" are multicolored and energetic, evoking a rainbow. The domi-

nant colors are blue, red and yellow. That is, the three primary colors; even here the work operates on an archetypal level.

Thanks to their vivid colors, symbolically suggestive forms, and tactile materials: wood, human clothes, and barbed wire, the sculptures have a strong visual and material presence. They tease the eye and provoke touch, and at the same time evoke many emotions, most often negative, connected with something repulsive, pathetic and primitive – like a scarecrow. The title *Fears* refers as well as to the whole politics and psychology of fear around sexual and gender non-normativity. It is a fear that determines the governmental politics of sexuality in Poland in particular, but not exclusively. The ongoing culture wars over LGBTQ+ rights are happening in many countries globally. But it is above all fear and victimhood – the suffering of people experiencing violence and discrimination. These are their clothes, as real as they can be. No wonder, then, that Rycharski calls a work of such powerful expression his manifesto.²⁰

I consider the sculptures *Fears*, as well as the entire monographic exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, to be an important institutional masterwork, rooted in the ghastly Polish locality and temporality, and at the same time, timeless and transnational, whose topicality and power will work in many cultural and national framework. The local and global dimensions perfectly intertwine, giving it a timeless character. If we look at the history and scope of the entire Christian civilisation from its inception to the 21st century, we can see that the stigmatisation of sexuality, especially erotic and amorous otherness and freedom has consistently been the phobic centre of many religious orders and ideologies. The history of this civilisation is thus one of millions of human victims of persecution, exclusion, fear and destroyed lives.²¹ Wherever there have been crosses, of the various branches of Christianity, these “crucifixions” may have taken place. Therefore, in order to show the multiplicity of oppression in relation to Christianity, its transhistorical and transnational reach, the artist used different types: the Latin, Papal, Lorraine, Forked, Greek, Orthodox, Saint Anthony and Saint Andrew cross. Among these crosses, the Orthodox one deserves special attention, as the Orthodox Church has so far been one of the most violently homophobic Christian denominations, actively supporting Putin’s policy of queer discrimination in Russia. Its path has recently been adopted by the Polish Catholic Church under the Law and Justice government.

Thus, Rycharski’s works must be addressed in relation to art about homophobia and art that reinterprets the Christian faith and its images. In diagnosing homophobia, so far, the most prominent installations to date in CEE have been based on documentary materials that have explored the language and gestures of homophobic violence from the inside, immersing the viewers in a hateful imagination. The most famous artwork is Croatian artist Igor Grubic’s *East Side Story* (2006/08), exhibited and awarded at the Istanbul Biennale in 2009 and often shown around the post-com-

20 <http://rycharski.artmuseum.pl/pl/serie/0/strachy>, [accessed 29/11/2021].

21 *The Dictionary of Homophobia. A Global History of Gay and Lesbian Experience*, ed. L. G. Tin, Vancouver, 2008, pp. 461–463.

munist region. It is a two-channel video installation that shows on one screen the documentary footage of bashed Pride parades in the Serbian city of Belgrade in 2001 and the Croatian city of Zagreb in 2002. Participants in these parades were brutally attacked and beaten by opponents, usually male neo-Nazi youth militias but also random hostile passers-by. These film documents of homophobic violence were juxtaposed by the artist with a projection on a second screen, where instead of screams and beatings, music and dance appear. In the same streets, arranged by the artists, four dancers, individually and as a group, recreate the dramatic movements of the attackers and the attacked, transforming them into contemporary dance and poetic performance.

The critic Shamita Sharmacharja writes that through contemporary art and dance, Grubic has documented homophobic aggression, but more importantly, he has transformed it into a kind of healing catharsis, so the work becomes a form of group therapy and demonstrates the redemptive power of art.²² Dejan Stretenovic emphasises the context of former Yugoslavia engulfed by ethnic warfare in the 1990s. Just as in the past, the instinct for murder turned against different ethnic or religious groups, so now it seeks a new internal enemy. In nationalistic and homophobic countries with a constant thirst for blood, this role is ideally played by so-called sexual minorities, who concentrate on all kinds of phobias and prejudices.²³ The threat of violence from far-right militias in CEE confirms Zillah Eisenstein's diagnosis that post-communist nationalism and its masculinisation are based on racial and sexual hatred.²⁴

Igor Grubic's video installation concerns the criminal homophobia of hooligan and far right gangs, well known in Eastern Europe, but the systemic homophobia in the region also has another side, namely the ideologies of intolerance and exclusion are propagated by political, religious, media and scientific elites. Therefore, the Croatian artist's diagnosis is aptly complemented by the video installation *Heard Story* (2011) by Estonian artists Liisi Eelmaa and Minna Hint shown in the exhibition *Untold Stories* (2011) at Kunstihoone in Tallin.

Heard Story features a big and comfortable bed where the viewers are invited to lie down. Above the bed, eight TV monitors show prominent Estonian politicians and public intellectuals expressing homophobic opinions. These videos were shot by the artists, who interviewed these famous fighters against homosexuality. For example, we hear the leader of the Estonian National Movement, senior inspector of the Estonian Health Board's Supervision Department, the director of the Tallinn Art Secondary School, and professors of psychology and theology at the University of Tartu. One of their prevailing arguments is that sexuality is something that

22 S. Sharmacharja, "Postcards from Istanbul – Through Crimson Tinted Glasses", www.artvehicle.com/postcard/40, [accessed 8/11/2021].

23 D. Stretenovic quoted in: K. McDonald, *Igor Grubic East Side Story 2006–8*, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/grubic-east-side-story-t13651/text-summary>, [accessed 7/11/2021].

24 Z. Eisenstein, *Hatreds. Racialized and Sexualized Conflicts in the 21st Century*, New York–London, 1996, p. 15.

should belong exclusively to the private sphere and not be imposed on civil rights, as homosexuality is tolerable only as long as it takes place in a private space and does not demand representation in the public sphere.²⁵ The installation suggests that it is homophobia that fully belongs to the public space. Lying on the bed, the viewer can listen to the voices, wearing headphones, while she is placed in the safe and enclosed privacy of a bed. Yet the intimacy of the setting is shattered as the onlookers are subjected to the menacing views of the pundits obsessed with same-sex abjection. Hence, through this mode of perception the artwork questions the conservative opinions that homosexuality should belong only to a private realm, when obviously it is something that is aggressively discussed in society and politics and, as this installation shows, such public voices strongly impact the intimate sphere. So, homophobia is featured here to work against itself, to reverse its message, and to disrupt the illusion of a strict division between the public and the private. Basically, what the artists did was to intensify and multiply the situation that citizens experience in the privacy of their own homes, constantly watching “talking heads” on TV who encourage discrimination.

The works of Igor Grubic, Liisi Eelmaa, and Minna Hintw are ultimately against homophobia, but they are problematic because by overcoming and analysing, they nonetheless repeat and reproduce the language and images of violence. Therapeutically, as part of shock therapy, they allow for their re-expression so that homophobia in the lens of art works against itself, but yet by documenting it the artists also perpetuate it. This is an issue related to documentary strategies in contemporary art, but also to the already historical method of emancipating homosexuality. We deal here with the strategy of a “reverse discourse”, as theorised by Michael Foucault in the *Introduction to The History of Sexuality*.²⁶ It is a part of a modern history in which homosexual subjects restaged the criminal, medical, or perverse status with which they were identified to distance themselves from it and to find new forms of self-expression, visibility and counter-representations. To utilise negative terms and images is not to endorse and accept them, but rather to question, to expose and amplify them. The restaging within a different register of representation, in this case – art, reopens the homophobic imaginings for further inquiry.²⁷ Contemporary art on the subject of homophobia does the same thing; it is often meta-homophobic.

Rycharski’s installation *Fears* has a more global dimension, but it is also a work that is certainly impacted by Eastern European homophobia, especially its religious background. The installation operates on a symbolic level and thus is more universal, not as literally rooted in the locality as the Estonian and Croatian stagings of verbal and physical violence. The absence of audio-visual documentary footage brings the Polish work out of its national frame. The power of the various crosses gives it a planetary dimension, the local is also transnational. Although the clothes

25 *Untold Stories*, eds. R. Pöldsam, A. Triisberg, A. Härm, Tallinn, 2011, p. 5.

26 M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. R. Hurley, New York, 1980.

27 R. Meyer, *Outlaw Representation. Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art*, Oxford, 2002, pp. 11–12.

come from Polish victims of homophobia, they evoke a specific body and person, yet all the other elements of the construction, the crosses, and the barbed wire, are timeless metaphors of suffering but also of death. The sculptural *Fears* in their exploration of violence, are even more radical and tragic than the earlier video installations. Through the association with crucifixion, they enter the sphere of death.

The French philosopher Didier Eribon uses the notion of the “homophobic continuum” to write about different varieties and scales of homophobia.²⁸ Despite their mutual dependence, hate speech and hate crimes are not the same, the levels of homophobic destruction are different; there is a whole scale of manifestations of this prejudice. Grubic shows physical violence, Eelmaa and Hint – the language of homophobic ideology, Rycharski – the potentiality of death, the ultimate sacrifice of the victim. The artist’s crosses are thus on the extremes of the homophobic continuum.

Religious iconography plays a central role in Daniel Rycharski’s art, who, as a believer and a gay man, is personally and artistically searching for his own path in faith. Interviews with the artist demonstrate that he is interested in irreligious, non-institutional Christianity, the religion of solitude, and he is increasingly critical of the Polish Catholic Church, which is according to him moving far away from the idea of mercy.²⁹ The radical work *Ku-Klux-Klan* (2018–2019) presented at the Museum of Modern Art as a part of the retrospective *Fears*, seems to be a brutal farewell to the Church, a step after which there is no turning back.

The collage consists of items of clerical clothing that were acquired from members of the clergy, including those who have left the Church. By readjusting and sewing parts of certain pieces to others, he composes them anew on the basis of the model for robes worn by the Ku-Klux-Klan in the 1920s.³⁰ This strong symbolic white and red costume/composition is dominated by the infamous white hood of the clan covering the face, with dark eye holes, and colorful and floral ornamental elements associated with the Catholic vestments. *Ku-Klux-Klan* is undoubtedly the strongest anti-church work by a “religious” artist, but it is very close to psychological truth. For many queers, especially in countries like Poland now, Catholic priests are what members of the clan were for African-Americans in the United States. This American association is crucial here.

Daniel Rycharski is a Polish artist, rooted in local culture and its revived superstitions and pogroms, and at the same time, he uses very effectively the language of American postmodern art grappling with religious oppressions. This kind of art that Rycharski shows, which references religion and sexuality, can be created anywhere where there is an influence of Christianity, but it is most relevant in Poland and the United States, because the climate of culture wars is very similar in those countries,

28 D. Eribon, “Ce que l’injure me dit. Quelques remarques sur le racisme et la discrimination”, *L’homophobie, comment la définir, comment la combattre*, Paris 1999, p. 14.

29 „Strachy. Szymon Maliborski rozmawia z Danielem Rycharskim”, *Daniel Rycharski...*, op. cit., pp. 25–32.

30 <http://rycharski.artmuseum.pl/en/serie/0/ku-klux-klan>, [accessed 10/11/2021].

and art has been taking a clear voice in this conflict for years. That is why *The New York Times* published an article dedicated to his work and exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, something that happens rarely to artists from outside the US.³¹ His art can be familiar to the American audience; using a term developed by American critics, Daniel Rycharski can be described as a “postmodern heretic” but updated for the global 21st century.

The concept of postmodern heretics was introduced by Eleanor Heartney, in reaction to the unorthodox and subversive use of religious themes in contemporary American art.³² In the 1980s and 1990s, major artists such as Andres Serrano, Kiki Smith, and Robert Mapplethorpe radically transformed iconographic conventions while remaining deeply rooted in Catholic imagery and spirituality. The postmodern heretics saw the conflict between ideas of Christianity and the politics of the Church, which results from an ambiguous and paradoxical attitude to the body, sexuality and womanhood, and from the chasm between official doctrine and the subjective spiritual imagination. The artists are called heretics because of their literal, direct, engaged, and modern interpretation of Catholic doctrine.³³

Ku-Klux-Klan, derives from Polish homophobia of the Church, but also from contemporary art classics – the art of Andreas Serrano and other postmodern heretics. In Rycharski’s case, however, there is also a fundamental difference; he is a much more convincing heretic in art than many of his predecessors. His art stems from declared faith, struggle with it and deeper theological reflection³⁴ and not only from the beauty, eroticism and the power of Catholic images and devotion emphasised by Heartney. Above all, his heretically religious works with the signs of the cross, in the most profound way, raise the issue of LGBTQ+ rights and humanity. The Christian references are explored to make a statement about religiously inspired homophobia, which has a global resonance. The symbolic radicalism of works like *Ku-Klux-Klan*, testifies to the enduring dissident quality of queer art in CEE. The dissident power is even more visible when it comes to queer curating and the courage of public institutions – in this case, the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, to display such potent and contentious works of art which question all the dominant norms aggressively promoted by the state.

The political context is here equally telling and poignant like in the Hungarian case of El Kazovsky’s posthumous retrospective in 2015 which coincided with the beginning of the Fidesz government’s legal attracts on gender and queer equality. In 2019 when Rycharski showed *Fears* in Warsaw a third of Poland legally declared itself a LGBT-free zone, meaning: unwelcoming to any form of queer rights educa-

31 A. Marshall, “Gay Artist Wants to Change Poland, Starting with One Village”, *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/04/arts/design/daniel-rycharski-poland.html>, [accessed 25/11/2021].

32 E. Heartney, *Postmodern Heretics. The Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art*, New York, 2004.

33 Ibid., pp. 1–25.

34 „Strachy. Szymon Maliborski rozmawia z Danielem Rycharskim”, op. cit., p. 26.

tion declared as foreign LGBT ideology. *Fears* perfectly encapsulated and predicted this historical moment.

Jaanus Samma and the reflection on queer history

I would like to finish my text on a more positive note. Many artists and curators in CEE work on the subject of queer memory, recovering LGBTQ+ histories of their countries. Estonia is one of such places where queer art and research thrive supported by local cultural and academic institutions and explored by insightful contemporary artists. Jaanus Samma, in his research-based art, investigates clandestine Estonian gay life and subculture in the Soviet period of criminalisation,³⁵ when his country was known as the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic. In 2015 at the Venice Biennale, he represented Estonia with a multimedia installation *Not Suitable for Work: A Chairman's Tale*, curated by Eugenio Viola. Thus, Estonian cultural authorities decided that as a country they would be represented in Venice by an openly gay artist with artwork on gay subjects. Moreover, in 2016 *NSFW: A Chairman's Tale*, was shown in the privately funded but nationally very important Museum of Occupations in Tallinn (fig. 4). That is why I decided to focus on Jaanus Samma's success, as he received such official and national support and promotion. Similarly like with El Kazovsky and Daniel Rycharski we might consider here the uncanny curatorial mainstreaming of queer art but on a completely different-highest national level. This is a case that we can compare only to Felix Gonzales Torres posthumously representing the US at the Venice Biennale in 2007. Additionally, in 2015/16 when Jaanus Samma was celebrated as an official artist, Estonia, after long and arduous debates, introduced a form of same-sex partnership in the most liberal former Soviet country. Thus, queer culture was like always pioneering, inspiring legal and political transformations.

Not Suitable for Work: A Chairman's Tale is a truly remarkable multimedia work, inspired by the tragic life of Juhan Ojaste³⁶ (1921–1990) who was an Estonian war hero, a devoted family man and Kolkhoz chairman of several collective farms in the 1950s.³⁷ In 1964 he was sentenced to prison on one and a half year of hard labor for homosexual acts, after enduring a degrading trial, losing his social status, career and family. After his imprisonment he moved to Tartu, and as an ex-convict was able to

35 Homosexuality was decriminalised in Russia shortly after the October Revolution of 1917. It started more than a decade of relative tolerance and the promise of personal and cultural freedom in the new state. Then, in 1933, Stalin re-criminalised homosexuality, making it punishable by five years of hard labor. Furthermore, a special section of the KGB was devoted to arresting homosexuals, and until decriminalisation in 1993, around 60,000 men were prosecuted. See: N. Plagne, "Russia", *The Dictionary of Homophobia...*, op. cit., p. 400.

36 It was a real person, whom the artist gave a fictional name Juhan Ojaste, to protect his identity for ethical reasons.

37 See the catalogue *Not Suitable for Work: A Chairman's Tale*, eds. J. Samma, E. Viola, Tallin, 2015 and the artist website: www.jaanussamma.eu, [accessed 25/11/2021].

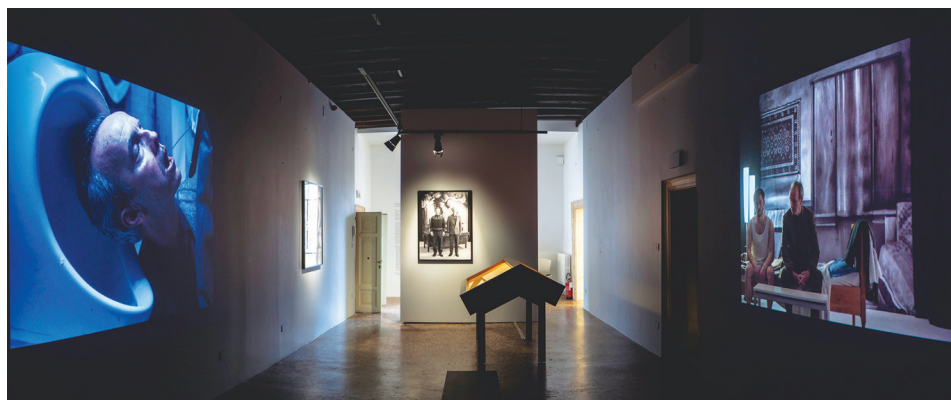


Fig. 4. Jaanus Samma, *Not Suitable for Work: A Chairman's Tale*, installation at the Venice Biennale, 2015, © Jaanus Samma.

get only low-status jobs, yet allegedly he became notorious for his active gay social and sex life. Yet, there is no happy end to his story: the chairman was murdered in 1990 by a Russian marine who was a male prostitute.

Samma discovered this legendary character of the chairman by doing interviews with elderly gay men in Estonia in 2011, for another archival work – an audio collection of *Stories* of gay life in the 1970s and 1980s. Upon discovering this fascinating and emblematic man the artist created a semi-fictitious artistic narrative based on gossip and real archival research.³⁸ He went to the National Archives and found the court files, from which he learned that to make a case and to prove the illegal homosexual acts, the police had to force men to inform each other. A younger lover of the chairman informed him. To create his work the artist read all the provoked testimonies surrounding the trial and published some of them in the accompanying catalogue.

In the project, Jaanus Samma used archival materials and images, a compilation of the criminal files, putting the documents into an elaborate installation of art objects, props, photographs, video films, and a sound piece set in a Baroque opera loge, to create an overall voyeuristic reconstruction of the story. Therefore *NSFW: A Chairman's Tale*, as an exhibition mixes historical documentation and fantasy imaginings to follow the chairman's trajectory but also to evoke the social and political context of homosexuality in the Soviet period.³⁹ The conjured vision of the chairman is a symbolic composite figure that, according to the artist, tells a larger story of a struggle in a system where a person cannot be free, where gay sexuality exists in a dangerous criminalised underground. *NSFW: A Chairman's Tale* is both

38 E. Viola, "The Lessons of History", *Not Suitable for Work...*, op. cit., pp. 18–20.

39 T. Jeppesen, "In the Studio: Jaanus Samma", <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazine/in-the-studio-jaanus-samma/>, [accessed 22/09/ 2021].

an archival and an artistic project, which received distinguished awards and was widely exhibited in Estonia and abroad.

As an artist and researcher, Jaanus Samma conveys the Soviet reality of gay sexuality and existence in a very personal and engagingly cinematic way. Employing a variety of media, the installation puts the viewer in the middle of the story, which is often uncomfortable, sexually explicit, and disturbing to watch, hence the high drama of opera, a queer medium itself, is an appropriate and alluring stylisation applied to this raw and traumatic source. This case exemplifies how one emotionally, visually and erotically powerful work of art recovers and locates silenced historical narratives, placing them at the very centre of the current cultural arena of memory and debate. Because art and exhibitions not only document but also perform queer history, hence this re-enactment has a contemporary resonance.

In 2016 a smaller version of *NSFW: A Chairman's Tale* was shown in the Museum of Occupations and Freedom in Tallinn. This is a museum dedicated to the 1940–1991 period in Estonian history when the country was occupied by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. This placement testifies to the cultural acknowledgment of silenced and traumatic queer history, by allowing homophobic legislation and its consequences to take centre stage in a musicological reconstruction of political repressions experienced by Estonians in the 20th century. Thus, through Samma's multimedia installation, the Soviet criminalisation of homosexuality has been written into the official history of oppressive totalitarianisms determining Estonian and Eastern European history.

As exemplified by the traumatic approach to queer memory in Jaanus Samma's art, even in the dark visions of war, silence and criminalisation there is an optimistic hopeful undertone in archival art. It is the activist aim to turn the past repressions into the liberation of the future, through remembering and visibility, that was denied to the subject in the past. This type of art of memory is often based on past traumas, it has a melancholic quality. However, there is also a tendency to overcome dark visions and to move forward into a more optimistic perspective, to create new constructions of the past and the future, to show the abundance, resilience and joy of underground life. The queer memory is also an activist force directed toward the future, preservation and education for the future. It is visible in some examples of queer artistic projects, which are less melancholic and traumatic than the brilliant but gothic work by Jaanus Samma. To discover the more optimistic tendency in queer archival art one needs to move outside of the fearful geography of Soviet criminalisation of homosexuality, to CEE countries, which were less legally repressive and where queer culture existed even long before the end of communism. Poland, which decriminalised homosexuality very early in 1932 is one of these countries where much more freedom was possible and where in the 1980s gay and lesbian activism and cultural initiatives were already developing.⁴⁰

40 See: T. Kitliński, *Dream & Democracy! A Philosophy of Horror, Hope & Hospitality in Art & Action*, Lublin, 2014, pp. 211–238; J. D. Stanley, "Constructing a Narrative: The History of Homosex-

The activism and pedagogical topicality of queer archiving in the current conservative climate inspired a Polish artist Karol Radziszewski to set up an artistic collaborative project, the *Queer Archives Institute* (2015-ongoing). It is a nonprofit artist-run organisation dedicated to the research, collection, digitalisation, presentation, exhibition, analysis and artistic interpretation of queer archives, with a special focus on CEE.⁴¹ Radziszewski's project unlike Samma's has not been officially supported and is a private initiative by the author. In queer archival projects, the artist's special installations employ strategies of institutional archival, librarian and museum display, comprising not only art but also glass cases and tableaux with documentary materials e.g., newspapers, letters, and leaflets. In Poland it is a subversive initiative not supported by the conservative and homophobic state; it is the major difference between Samma's and Radziszewski's queer archival art.

The special value of Radziszewski's art is the rediscovery of forgotten gay scene from the 1970s and 1980s. The artist recovered, attractively visualised the activities of pioneering gay activist, publisher, photographer and party organiser Ryszard Kisiel from Gdańsk during the period of the Solidarity movement. The project *Kisieland* (2009) titled from the surname of the activist – Kisiel, illuminates several hundred transparencies from the 1980s documenting gay events and parties. These pictures, taken at the time of a state police crackdown on homosexuals, known as Campaign Hyacinth (1985–1987), which purpose was to register gay men, and document the freedom, joy and safe haven found in the private social setting away from a hostile public sphere. This project showcases an alternative, non-martyrological history but also enables the reappearance of a private gay archive, which so far has not found a place in historical discourse.⁴² What is more, *Kisieland* presents a more optimistic model of queer archive and queer past, discovering spaces and figures of joy, pleasure, resistance, cruising and survival, as it documents gay gatherings and drag shows. A lot of work has already been done on trauma and repression, so the focus on private resistance and pleasure seems to be a valued alternative.

Queer memory is not only performed by artists but also by curators and queer exhibitions. They uncover local and regional histories. Karol Radziszewski works also as an art curator. In September 2017 he co-curated with Michał Grzegorek and Wojciech Szymański, a historical pop-up exhibition *Heritage* displayed only for a short time at the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw. The exhibition, part of the *Queer Archives Institute* and *Pomada* projects, highlighted the queer history of Poland with portraits of famous LGBTQ+ Poles from gay kings, aristocrats and politicians to lesbian writers and scientists. The curators worked with reproductions, facsimiles, prints and various ephemeral visuals professionally displayed

uality in Poland", *New Social Movements and Sexuality: Conference Papers from the Sixth Meeting of the Socialism and Sexuality Network*, ed. M. Chateauvert, Sofia, 2006.

41 <http://queerarchivesinstitute.org> and <http://www.karolradziszewski.com/index.php?/projects/qai/>, [accessed 28/10/2021].

42 T. Basiuk, "Kisieland", <http://www.karolradziszewski.com/index.php?/projects/kisieland/>, [accessed 28/10/2021].

and composed. What is more Radziszewski painted portraits of some famous queer Poles, as museum loans would be impossible to secure for such a partisan project.⁴³ The exhibition was successfully crowdfunded (!) and it was a politically oppositional guerrilla show that dealt with the abundance of queer past in Poland where the far-right Law and Justice government's Ministry of Culture and National Heritage would never support it. The artist in interviews emphasised that "they" are not going to stop us and we do not need their money! This is also the reality of queer curating in many CEE countries, where often it is all happening through various alternative and surprising channels, like oppositional art under communism. The situation resembles the culture of dissent where citizens create independently from and against the state system.

The *Heritage of Queer Archives Institute* was like an alternative museological model which traces the currently unwanted and repress history. Queering the national heritage is disruptive for the nationalist ideology which remains heteronormative, queer memory work is opening up the national heritage and history for divergent sexual and gender identities, many of these projects are very successful in their vision of alternative histories. Another example of an important national exhibition of queer art and history is *From Dusk to Dawn. 20 Years of LGBT Freedom in Lithuania* (2013) at the Contemporary Art Centre, Vilnius curated by Laima Kreivyte.⁴⁴ The project included a special room devoted to historical documents on LGBTQ+ movement and history in Lithuania since the decriminalisation in 1993. It accompanied galleries with contemporary Lithuanian queer art. Art was shown next to history. Among the presented artists was a famous Lithuanian photographer Virgilijus Sonta (1952–1992) with his series of black and white neoclassical male nudes from 1991, taken at the end of Communism in the seaside spa – Nida, which was known for a gay beach. As the curator writes the male nudes with the sky and the sea in the background are between freedom and external tension, squeezed in double frames, divided by horizon, overshadowed by dark sky, dramatically lit but still beautiful.⁴⁵ They document the transitory freedom and eroticism of gay/nudist beaches at the time when male homosexuality was still illicit. Thus, archival traces are hidden in many genres of art, especially in portraits and nudes which need to be rediscovered and reinterpreted in a queer way by artists, curators and art historians.

To finish with the archival examples, I would like to return to Estonia and point out a queer feminist approach to history. Anna-Stina Treumund's *Lilli, Reed, Frieda, Sabine, Eha, Malle, Alfred, Rein and Mari* (2017) is an imaginary photographic series of portraiture of queer women who lived in Estonia from the 16th to the 20th century. First the artist researched and discovered the historical characters named in the title, then asked women from the current queer feminist community in Estonia

43 K. Sienkiewicz, "Łaska Dehnela i dwieście guzików", <http://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/7405-laska-dehnela-i-dwieście-guzikow.html>, [accessed 01/10/ 2017].

44 See the catalogue: *From Dusk to Dawn. 20 Years of LGBT Freedom in Lithuania*, ed. L. Kreivyte, Vilnius, 2013.

45 Kreivyte, op. cit., pp. 76–77.

to impersonate them. The contemporary activists embody their historical predecessors thus making the queer archive of special personages alive. Treumund connects archival research into queer femininity in her country with a visual reinvention, using history and phantasy to construct a queer genealogy. To discover the non-normative heroines from the past the artist searched through such mainstream archival materials as: old newspapers, church books, court documents and local folklore and then used her photographic art and performances of friends from her community to create the series of fanciful and legendary portraits.⁴⁶

In general, the artistic involvements with queer archiving and queer memory seem to be a serious alternative to the official institutions which often depend on the changeable political context in a region where cultural and historical organisations rely almost exclusively on the state's financial support. The role of visual arts in queer memory confirms that it is a field which requires a variety of creative strategies and struggles, including difficult research, performative interventions, semi-fiction narratives and pictorial seduction, as in many countries the communication of queer history is still a volatile frontier to be defined and conquered.⁴⁷

The queer archival artistic approaches in CEE are so fascinating because the region is not a homogeneous political and cultural entity when it comes to gender and sexual history and LGBTQ+ rights. Each country has its own complex history with different trajectories of decriminalisation, activism and sexually dissident culture.⁴⁸ Thus, the stories of queer emancipation and expression are equally plural as in so-called former Western Europe, and cannot be categorised under one Soviet construction of sexuality. Yet what all of the CEE countries share in the 20th century is a diverse communist past and its remaining heritage, which queer archival art deals with. This is exactly the main connection which allows to compare all the discussed project under the CEE umbrella.

There is a need for both the queer and the artistic take on the archival and mnemonic order to open it up, disrupt, update and enrich. Uncovered queer resources have an important role to play in the study of the history of both sexuality and intimacy and the underground, subcultural or minorities movements and cultural initiatives. Furthermore, works on queer memory in its variety play an important political and activist role which counters persistent contemporary forms of silencing, repression and taboo. Therefore, Dan Healey in his research on queer past in a socialist period calls it an "insurgent" (rebel) project of queer memory.⁴⁹ This diag-

46 See: A. Triisberg, "Anna-Stina Treumund's Practice in the Context of Lesbian, Queer and Feminist politics", Anna Stina Treumund, ed. R. Artel, Tartu, 2017.

47 K. Quimby, W. L. Williams, "Unmasking the Homophile in 1950s Los Angeles: An Archival Record", *Queer Frontiers. Millennial Geographies, Genders, and Generations*, eds. J. Boone et al., Madison, 2000, p. 167.

48 On the critical approach to treating all the ex-communist countries as one geopolitical and sexual entity with a similar take on LGBT rights see: Ł. Szulc, *Transnational Homosexuals in Communist Poland: Cross-Border Flows in Gay and Lesbian Magazines*, Basingstoke, 2017, pp. 4–12.

49 D. Healey, *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi*, London, 2017, pp. 201–202.

nosis confirms my thesis on the dissident character of queer art and curating in CEE, not only in the past but also in the present.

Artists create art, but without curators it would not be shown and discussed, that is way one needs to emphasise the pioneering, daring and sometimes risky work of curators who in mostly conservative, patriarchal and underfinanced CEE have managed to organise LGBTQ+ exhibitions and publications. Without their initiatives the queer visual culture would be invisible and marginalised thus I consider the curators activists and educators. There is a struggle that needs to be acknowledged and further researched, behind each exhibition mentioned in this text. These projects expand the discourse of modern and contemporary art by showcasing more inclusive selection of artists just by contesting heteronormativity. To use the concept of Maura Reilly, the curators are “curatorial activists”. Defining the term, she writes about people who have dedicated their curatorial praxis to visual culture in, of, and from the margins to artists who are non-white, non-Euro-US, as well as women-, feminist- and queer-identified. These curators are committed to projects that are leveling hierarchies, challenging assumptions, countering erasure, promoting the margins over the centre, the minority over the majority, inspiring intelligent debate, disseminating new knowledge, expanding the canon, encouraging strategies of resistance, and offering hope and affirmation.⁵⁰ Queer curatorial activism in the region has done all of those task but foremost, contributed to the difficult process of building frail democracy in the post-totalitarian world.

The exhibitions and art of the three artists: El Kazovsky, Daniel Rycharski and Jaanus Samma have allowed me to outline the key narrations in queer art and curating in CEE in the 21st century. The issues are: the intimate reflection on queer gender and sexuality; the analysis of homophobic ideologies and their impact on the lives of LGBTQ+ people, and the archiving of queer histories. These are, of course, big themes that also appear in international queer art, but through CEE exhibitions and representations we can explore their regional or national specificity and uniqueness, their local framing. Thanks to LGBTQ+ artists and curators, CEE countries participate in the ongoing global visual reflection on the current contextual conditions of non-heteronormative subjectivity, community and history.

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⁵⁰ Reilly, op. cit., p. 22.

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