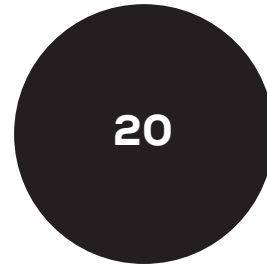




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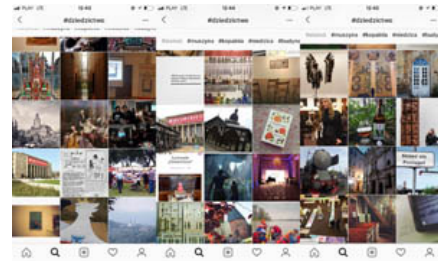
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Meddling with the Past

Translated by Jan Szelaǳewicz

As I write these words, we're still a couple of weeks away from the official November celebrations of the centennial of Polish independence. Regardless of how far away we are, it seems that one can already acknowledge that the repertoire of gestures and images used by state and local authorities in this centennial year will not surprise anyone – a sentiment that also applied to *#dziedzictwo*



"dziedzictwo" ["heritage"] hashtag on Instagram

[*#heritage*], Andrzej Szczerski's 2017 exhibition at the National Museum in Kraków. We cannot break free from the cursed circle of patriotic themes, artifacts, and imagery: red-and-white ribbons, devotional objects, and WW2 reenactor uniforms; exaltation, bravery, and overly romanticized valor; fields of gently swaying wheat, ruined cities, and men marching in lockstep. It's hard to say which is more boring – the repetitive repertoire or repeatedly dissecting it in print. The dominant pictures, content, and forms are all fairly easy to critique.¹ The strategies directing their use are not all that revelatory either – the presumption is that the success of images is determined by their number. It is possible, however, that in this case boredom and ordinariness form the most effective strategy, whereas the potency of patriotic imagery lies in its simplicity. Critiquing national forms has become tiresome, laborious, and ultimately unproductive. We are haunted, however, by a coercive compulsion to repeat it, because refusing to do so may, in the end, be taken for acquiescence or even compliance.

Last year's edition of the POMADA queer culture festival both aptly diagnosed the trap described herein and gracefully sidestepped it. Replying to a patriotic interpellation, the festival's curators decided to dedicate its seventh iteration to examining "heritage" and its attendant issues. Regardless of whether POMADA's Warsaw-based *Dziedzictwo* was a response to the Kraków-based *#dziedzictwo* or rather a reaction to the predominance of patriotic content in the public sphere, it was a tactically brilliant effort aimed at reclaiming and queering heritage itself. Where conservatives intended to appear progressive by exploiting the hashtag as

a symbol of modernity, POMADA instead moved to unpack the concept and prevent anyone from monopolizing it. As Karol Sienkiewicz aptly put it, labeling pictures from POMADA uploaded to social media with the hashtag #dziedzictwo resulted in their incorporation in digital archives operated chiefly by state cultural institutions.² However, efforts to frustrate the homogeneity of interpretations of Polish heritage took place primarily within the confines of the exhibition itself.

Still, an analysis thereof must necessarily be preceded at least by a remark about the unobvious nature of the very gesture of drawing on tradition within the confines of queer thought and praxis. The people behind POMADA were undoubtedly aware of the possibility of being accused of attempts to tap into the mainstream, normative vision of identity built upon a foundation of the past, heritage, historical continuity, etc. Why, then, would they be willing to risk meddling with the past? What role would they have their interventions into history play?

Revealing that the past includes a plethora of diverse sexual identities and practices impinges on the homogeneity and legacy of the commonly adopted vision of Polish identity. It inevitably entails having to strike a dangerous balance, the loss of which may lead to the reinforcement of the mechanisms of normative history, such as putting undue emphasis on distinguished individuals or echoing the argument that the past lends legitimacy to the present. Queer historiography shields itself from these mechanisms by using a variety of means, including the rejection of historical linearity, the domination of single narratives, and belief in the existence of permanent, inherited identities.³ The 2017 POMADA festival, however, ultimately revealed another peculiarity of queer historiographical praxes: the notion that it is not the past but meddling with it that defines the queer present. The bottom-up fabrication of POMADA's legacy is simultaneously heterogeneous and communal. The exhibition openly acknowledges that the reconstruction of history is in fact its manufacture, but one fundamentally devoid of manipulation – a medley, a collection of fragments that do not seek coherence or consistency. The exhibition's premises are not a time machine that explores the past, but a space-time



Dziedzictwo [Heritage] exhibition.
Czesław Miłosz Hall, Palace of Culture
and Science, Pomada Festival 7, 29
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– 1 September 2017. Curators: Michał
Grzegorzek, Karol Radziszewski,
Wojciech Szymański

continuum that allows for processing the past, providing what queer historian Heather Love calls “emotional rescue.”⁴

Karol Radziszewski’s **Queer Archives Institute**, collecting objects from queer counterpublic spheres across Central and Eastern Europe, served as the context for the exhibition and was the source of many of the featured pieces.⁵ Just as *Dziedzictwo*, small enough to be held in a single hall inside the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw, couldn’t hold a candle to the sheer quantitative and qualitative scope of the work exhibited at #dziedzictwo, so the QAI lags far behind archives subsisting on copious state funding. Even the use of the word “institute” seems an exaggeration when applied to an archival and research facility staffed by a single person, regardless of how spirited they are in their efforts. The dignified label is supposed to play a similar function to the “insolent” attempt to reclaim the category of heritage⁶ – by using it, historians of the non-normative demand their field be granted the same rank conferred on traditional historical research.

While historical exhibition designers increasingly often employ means and methods commonly perceived as modern and fresh (they’re fond of screens, usually mobile), the majority of pieces featured in *Dziedzictwo* were presented in anachronistic display cases. One of Radziszewski’s favorite forms of showcasing individual items, this elevates them in order to make them merit the attention of historians. As a matter of fact, in an ironic twist, the display case clearly plays a considerable role in their elevation: it distances itself from them and puts them on display – front and center. The pieces’ transformation into museum exhibits is performative and, to a degree, illusory. Contrary to traditional precepts of exhibition design, the objects arranged next to one another are not uniform: they don’t have to be the same age, serve similar functions, or utilize similar media. The display case, therefore, serves no organizational purpose and does not facilitate the creation of



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a linear narrative – it is more of an editing table, where images and objects are pasted together to concoct new affects. And so the picture of Henryk Tomaszewski dressed as the goddess Kali sits next to an artificial penis used by Katarzyna Kozyra in her installation *Men's Bathhouse*, the documentation for Ryszard Kisiel's housebound performances, and Konrad Swinarski's photograph depicting two half-naked actors, shot during rehearsal for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; documentation of pride parades and anti-fascist demonstrations sit next to a copy of the first printing of Maria Konopnicka's *Rota [Oath]*, featured in a 1908 issue of *Przodownica. Pismo Dla Kobiet Wiejskich [Forewoman: A Magazine for Rural Women]*; a portrait of Warsaw socialite Rysia Czubak, wearing an Independent Students' Union T-shirt featuring the catchphrase "Down with communism," beside a picture of a collapsing Palace of Culture and Science, sits next to a portrait of Henry III of France and the book *Łyżka za cholewą a widelec na stole [Spoon in the Boot and Fork on the Table]* (1974), the cover of which features a drawing of a pink-clad Henry III; pictures of Natalia LL posing with a copy of her *Consumer Art* during the 1977 New York Pride Parade sit next to a series of postcards by Joanna Pawlik, featuring the artist portrayed in areas of San Francisco that the LGBTQ community considers hallowed ground. Reproductions (Maria Dąbrowska's *Portrait of Anna Kowalska*, Da Vinci's *Lady with an Ermine*, Maria Dulebianka's *Portrait of Maria Konopnicka*) sit next to original works (Marcin Maciejowski's [*White Blot*] *Szymanowski*, a Homomilitia LP on cassette) and memorabilia-cum-relics (Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz's ties, Jacek Dehnel's canes) – all of them questioning the validity of our proclivity for fetishizing artwork and suggesting we rethink how we attribute value to pieces exhibited in museums.

As a kind of sensibility, desire, or affect, queer transcends the lines separating different media. Rather than debating which method of frustrating the heteronorm and the heteronormative vision of history is the most effective and the most righteous, the team behind POMADA chose to emphasize the potential inherent in creating and unearthing queer sensibilities in various forms, media, and visual genres. *Dziedzictwo* exploited media that were already recognized in queer communities and traditions – including zines, archival snippets, and performances – and showcased attempts at reclaiming other, less-frequently-queered forms of expression, such as painting



VHS tapes show from the Krzysztof Jung collection, Pomada Festival 7

(superb portraits of Jerzy Andrzejewski and Zofia Sadowska from Karol Radziewski's *Poczet* [*Roster*] series, and Mikołaj Sobczak's *Drag Queens Devouring a Nazi* [Warsaw Uprising 1944]); radio (Radio POMADA, where Rysia Czubak read Michał Witkowski's *Lubiewo* while sitting on a mezzanine in the Czesław Miłosz Auditorium, concealed from both the listeners as well as the visitors); and sculpture. On the one hand, reclaiming media and genres repeatedly reveals their inherent heteronormativity, the manifestations of which include unequivocal gender categorizations in reaction to radio voices. On the other hand, however, the multitude of utilized media is a lesson in "polyvisuality." The recurrent, dominant imagery of national heritage can be countered with a body of work that is abundant, diverse, inconsistent, and indeed uninterested in consistency.

Such a body of work filled the spaces of the festival – which is also what I meant when I wrote about collective meddling with the past. Inside the connection-inspiring space of the exhibition, at festival events, during the screenings of porn tapes from Krzysztof Jung's collection, and at "archive reanimation" sessions, the bodies of performers and artists came into contact with visitors and debate participants. As POMADA went on, one could get the impression that the queer archive – incessantly interpellated by the context of the national community and the binary understanding of gender – has no keepers,⁷ and remains open to our meddling.

The seventh edition of the queer festival Pomada titled "Sex, Lies, and Videotapes", as well as the main festival exhibition titled "Heritage", took place between September 29 and October 1, 2017. The festival was organized by: Michał Grzegorzek, Aleksandra Knychalska, Joanna Manecka, Karol Radziszewski, and Justyna Sobolak. Michał Grzegorzek, Karol Radziszewski and Wojciech Szymański curated the exhibition, which took place in the Czesław Miłosz room of the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw.

Footnotes

1 Paweł Wroński, "Spektakl na pl. Piłsudskiego. Patriotycznie, bohatersko, romansowo" [A Spectacle on Piłsudski Square: Patriotic, Heroic, Romantic], *Gazeta Wyborcza*, Aug. 16, 2018, <http://wyborcza.pl/7,75398,23790972,spektakl-na-pl-pilsudskiego-patriotycznie-bohatersko-romansowo.html> (accessed Sept. 1, 2018).

2 Karol Sienkiewicz, "Laska Dehnela i dwieście guzików" [Dehnel's Cane and 200 Buttons], *Dwutygodnik.com* 9 (2017), <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/arttykul/7405-laska-dehnela-i-dwiescie-guzikow.html> (accessed Sept. 1, 2018). The promotional strategy of the National Museum in Kraków exhibition has been well outlined at <http://mnk.pl/wystawy/dziedzictwo> (accessed Sept. 1, 2018).

3 I wrote more on the subject in Magda Szcześniak, "Queerowanie historii, czyli dlaczego współcześni geje nie są niczyimi dziećmi" [Queering History, or Why Modern Gays Are Nobody's Children], *Teksty Drugie* 5 (2012).

4 Heather Love, "Emotional Rescue: The Demands of Queer History," in *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

5 On queer counterpublic spheres in 1990s and 2000s Poland, I wrote in Magda Szcześniak, *Normy widzialności. Tożsamość w czasach transformacji* [Norms of Visibility. Identity in Times of Transition] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Bęc Zmiana, 2016). On Karol Radziszewski's archival works, see Magda Szcześniak, "Dziwaczne archiwa, queerowe historie. O najnowszych pracach Karola Radziszewskiego" [Strange Archives, Queer Histories: On Karol Radziszewski's Latest Works], *Magazyn Szum* 8 (2015).

6 See a very interesting review of *Dziedzictwo* in Aleksander Kmak, "Zuchwale 'Dziedzictwo'" [Audacious 'Heritage'], *Magazyn Szum*, Oct. 20, 2017, <https://magazynszum.pl/zuchwale-dziedzictwo/> (accessed Sept. 1, 2018).

7 Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995).