

POPREBEL

Strategies of Resistance through Art to Right-Wing Populism in East-Central Europe: Archives and Fake Political Parties

Please do not quote (preliminary results)!

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Addressing a lacuna

- While Western Europe's cultural resistance to populism is often highlighted in both the media and academic studies, resistance to populism through artistic and cultural production is very seldom addressed in the academic studies dedicated to Central and Eastern Europe.
- This does not mean that the cultural producers from the former East do not confront the surge of neo-populism in the region.

Research Questions

1. How do artists understand and figure out alternatives and resist right-wing populist politics and its culture in East-Central Europe?

2. What are their strategies to react against “culturally popular” formats and ethno-religious nationalist culture in an age of generalized anxiety?

Contextualization

The “emotional backlash” (Galston 2018, 5) against elites, immigrants, sexual and ethnic minorities and everyone else who is not part of the “us” is also materialized in culture wars directed against those cultural and artistic productions that undermine and challenge national pride and hegemonic cultural nationalism.

Populism is understood as both an economic-political program and a “cultural mission,” and populist entrepreneurs thus aim to channel all artistic and cultural production towards a form of cultural essentialism and “autochthonism.” Many of these regional populist politicians attempt to convince “the people” that a deliberate revitalization of old cultural practices (neo-traditionalist strategies) are necessary to prevent the conquest of the “colonizers” (the supra-national cultural and political elites).

Correspondingly, one of the most common understandings of this cultural mission refers to cultural practice formats that seek “to constitute the people often around a frontier” of polarization (Palonen, 2018, 237).

The Culturally Popular

In this light, cultural production that is acknowledged as “popular” is usually entertaining, or as Clement Greenberg put it, *kitschy* (Greenberg in *Avant-Garde and Kitsch*, 1939). Thus, kitsch (supposedly omnipresent in popular culture) is easily expressible, easily understandable and triggers “sensationalist effects” in audiences, whereas avant-garde art occasions aesthetic judgements of an allegedly superior (conceptual) nature.

Thus, populist art and culture affect everyone, especially “all those people whom contemporary art has failed to reach or move” (Lippard, 1976, 8). This seems to fuel the populists’ agenda of appealing to “our people” in the name of the “popular” as opposed to the “elitist” and the “outsider.” By the same token, populists comfortably take shelter in embracing neo-traditionalism as the guarantor of ontological security.

Thus, populist entrepreneurs look at the “popular past” and “the traditional” anew, nourishing the people’s “emotional backlash” against “the enemies of national culture.” The biggest enemy of national culture is global culture, or globalization, and the elitist art world along with its commissaries.

Popular Culture and Invented Traditions

Along the same lines, while genetic messianism (an invented autochthonous cultural tradition) appears displayed in various cultural productions side-by-side with Germanophobia and Russophobia in Poland, “invented traditions” are displayed through video games, music videos and other pop cultural media formats in Serbia.

Thus, as Irena Šentevska posits, popular culture can offer valuable insights into the contemporary facets of populist ideologies and its insistence on “reinvented” autochthonous cultural traditions (Šentevska, 2016).

When cultural traditions are not invented for the sake of “the people,” they are engineered in tandem with emergency contexts, such as the COVID-19 crisis in the Czech Republic, which “witnessed a sometimes absurd ‘mask nationalism’, which measured other nations according to their ability to make mask wearing an official policy” (Kucera, 2020)

Unorthodox Archives of Cultural Resistance to Populism

A steady archival praxis, mostly embraced by artists – but also by other cultural producers – that employs popular culture’s strategies to produce unorthodox archives of cultural resistance to the populists’ “patriotic” call to foster national cultural pride.

The still undocumented effort of these cultural/political entrepreneurs goes beyond the traditional conceptualization of the archive (as a mostly state owned entity), and, by using the new social life of digital data and popular digital culture, they foster a networked resistance to right-wing populist culture.

What is also seldom addressed in the studies dedicated to populist culture is the impact of populist artistic production on “the people” (understood as the main recipients of these cultural formats). The discursive construction of “the people” is not necessarily directed against national “elites” but against an enemy that impersonates “the other” of the national culture and ethos.

Case Study 1: Resistance to populism through Art (Daniel Rycharski's piece *The Bed - Without justice there can be no solidarity* (2016)).



Collective Collection, 2018

The main stated purpose of this artists collective was to establish an anti-populist art archive that resists private and institutional models of collecting.

The artists associated with this initiative launched the website of the *Collective Collection* (<http://collectioncollective.art/about>) in Bucharest on 25 October 2018.

Collective Collection (archive)

Alicja Rogalska's video Broniow Song (2012) is one of 42 works in the collection Courtesy of the artist



Today the factories are nailed shut

Self-Imaging as Resistance to Populism and Ethno-Nationalism

Another instance of art-oriented archives against right-wing populism is the online platform of the *Virtual Memorial Foundation*. For 20 years now, artist and curator **Wilfried Agricola de Cologne** gathered an online database with several artistic memorials for humanity.

The memorials include, for example, the Refugees Memorial (Film Collection), the d/i/light Memorial (bringing forward the Shoah Film Collection), the I/terror Memorial (dedicated to the victims of terrorism), the Sonic Memorial (dedicated to migrants), the Hiroshima//Fukushima Memorial, the Never More Memorial (concentrating on Argentina's and Cambodia's troubled pasts) and the Wake Up! Memorial.

The last memorial (**Wake Up! 2015**) reunites art for change from various social contexts and political frameworks, ranging from the Climate Change Memorial and the AIDS **Memorial to self-imaging-artists against Populism & Intolerance**. Within this last cluster (**Populism & Intolerance**), the online archive preserves approximately 100 art pieces produced in various media that render the memorial against populism unique and one of a kind. Virtual Memorial Foundation's art collection can be consulted at: <http://dilight.a-virtual-memorial.org/the-7-memorials-for-humanity/>.

Self-portraits, double self-portraits and multi-self-portraits

What is striking after the familiarization with the art archive against populism and intolerance is that most artists from former-Eastern Europe employ self-portraits, double self-portraits and multi-self-portraits to politically interrogate and challenge right-wing populism and its pitfalls.

By turning the camera on themselves, these artists make social, political and existential statements about the current xenophobic, homophobic and ethno-nationalistic state of affairs.

Case study 1 (self-portraits)

Visual and content analysis of 7 self-portraits from the Wake up memorial archive

Case Study 2: Double Self-Portrait

Visual and content analysis of the works of the Polish artist **Wojciech Gilewicz**

Especially some photographs from the series are entitled *Me and Fazal* or *Me and Milosz*, indicating a certain degree of intimacy by calling “them” by their first name and revealing a permeability between two human entities. In these photographs, Gilewicz covers his body with the other person he collaborates with to produce double self-portraits. He states, “This physical overlapping is nearly ideal, but always a detail or two is giving away the presence of the other person hiding behind me. I often “borrow” from him/her fragments of his/her body.”

Case Study 3: Multi Self-Portrait

In addition to self-portraits and double self-portraits displayed within the Wake-up Memorial, Jasenka Vukelić (Croatia) displays a photograph entitled *In the name of Abraham* (2006). This piece continues the long list of portraits as resistance. This time, the artist employs the self-portrait to make room for a multi-portrait consisting of a gathering of different eyes cut from magazines and pasted on her face.

The Old Testament reference to Abraham as the father of a “multitude of nations” from the title indicates the artist’s feelings of belonging to multinational and multi-religious spaces (Croatia from former Yugoslavia). She states, “I wish that [the] ‘multitude of nations’ see in my self-portrait all people, because we have only ONE father, and He see everything from our eyes.

We have three religions, different countries or different languages, but we are [the] SAME in eyes of God.” (See <http://wake-up.engad.org/jasenka-vukelic/>). The multitude of eyes recalls the erosion of the boundaries between “us” and “them” and guides the viewer to grasp a sublime indistinctiveness of those who cherish being seen.

Fake Political Parties of Artistic Descent

N99 Theatre (Estonia)

Hungarian Two-tailed Dog Party



N99



Hungarian Two-tailed Dog Party

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Hungarian Two-tailed Dog Party



Hungarian Two-Tailed Dog Party's chicken candidate interviewed on state-run media

