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Democracy: Do It Yourself

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We are calling on all theatre people and all Polish citizens to collectively protest against violence in the public sphere, and to defend freedoms of speech, opinion and artistic expression.

GOLGOTA PICNIC – Do It Yourself!

Let us reclaim the censored production and defend our threatened rights.¹

The Event

In preparation for the twenty-fourth edition of the Malta Festival Poznań (9–28 June 2014), which has been an important survey of public and engaged theatre in post-transformation Poland, the Argentinian playwright and director Rodrigo García was selected as one of its curators. The Malta Festival's programme also announced that on 27 and 28 June, two performances of García's play *Golgota Picnic* would take place. However, from as early as the end of May, protests organized by ultra-Catholic organizations were held, opposing the play and its planned performances. In *Golgota Picnic* (2011), García undertakes a critique of Western society, referring to the figure of Jesus Christ, who appears in a contemporary context. At the same time, García enquires about the place of religion and the ethics of Christianity, as well as about the influence of organized religion in the world of today. The artist's use of the crucifixion theme, the nudity of actors 'wallowing in hamburgers', and lines uttered by the character of Jesus, were enough for not only right-wing and radical religious groups but also politicians and Church representatives to identify the show (never before staged in Poland) as obscene and blasphemous. Under the pressure of these attacks, the Malta Festival's founder and director, Michał Merczyński, cancelled the planned performances.

It wasn't the first time that *Golgota Picnic* aroused controversy and met with opposition. The biggest protests had been held in France, where in November and December 2011, first in Toulouse and subsequently in Paris, Catholic organizations demonstrated against performances of García's play. However, the performances weren't cancelled that time,

¹ From the statement published by the Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute on the e-teatr.pl web portal on 23 June 2014.

although 'round table' talks were held between representatives of the protesters and the show's producers.

The cancellation of performances in Poznań, along with the reasons and consequences of that decision, were widely discussed in the immediate context of the event.² The cancellation became the focus of one of many ideological disputes that have animated the debate in Poland in recent years. Consequently, it forms part of a series of conflicts at the interface between the functioning of religion and the state, art and religion, as well as art and democracy. It suffices to recall the Polish dispute over the conscience clause permitting doctors and pharmacists (to refuse services they feel are counter to their beliefs), and also, in a global perspective, the Charlie Hebdo massacre and discussion it sparked about freedom of speech, religion and fundamentalism, and problems of contemporary democracies, which are troubled by cultural, religious, political and social tensions. At the same time, '*Golgota Picnic-gate*' is unique, due to the aftermath it has had in the public sphere. The cancellation of the performances resulted in the grassroots action '*Golgota Picnic – Do It Yourself*', organized by artists, the effect of which entailed over thirty readings of the play as well as screenings of recorded performances that took place in various Polish cities and towns.

When viewed alongside one another, attacks on *Golgota Picnic*, cancellation of its performances and the subsequent organization of public readings expose certain important and multidimensional social tensions. Conclusions drawn from analysis of these tensions go beyond the issue of freedom of expression vs. protection of religious feelings: they touch upon the very essence of Polish democracy, including the character of the systemic relationship between 'the master, the mayor and the pastor' (traditional authority figures dating back to times of noble rule in Poland) – that is, the interrelation between local government, the Church and other bodies such as local cultural institutions. The issue concerns the form of government in the state, not so much in terms of the letter of the law as in the sense of general practice of institutions and officials who are caught up in informal interdependences and undergo pressure on the part of Church hierarchy. The role of that institution is of course linked to the importance of Catholicism in Polish society and is socially anchored in history, including the period of the People's Republic of Poland when the Church was an advocate of the weak and opposed totalitarian rule.

In the process that led to cancellation of the performances in Poznań, institution after institution failed in their duties: primarily the local government and the police. One can go as far as pinpointing the withdrawal of the state from performing its protective function. Also, the Malta Festival failed, with its director taking the decision to suppress the performances. Initially, by categorically responding to criticism from right-wing organizations and from parliament members and city councillors from Poznań, Director Merczyński invoked the constitutional freedom

2 This essay is the Introduction to *Piknik Golgota Polska. Sztuka – Religia – Demokracja*, eds. Agata Adamiecka-Sitek, Iwona Kurz (Warsaw: Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2015), which comprises a comprehensive calendar of events relating to '*Golgota Picnic-gate*', reprints of press commentaries on the subject, and analytical articles concerning various dimensions of the dispute (legal, religious, artistic, social and political).

of artistic expression and the right of access to culture, only to ultimately act against those very rights by deciding to apply preventive censorship. This occurred within a situation of particular pressure on the part of Catholic organizations and the Church, following Archbishop Stanisław Gądecki's public call for nationwide protests and riots and the hope expressed by him that when faced with such threats the police would refuse to support the festival.³ This scenario was in fact realized when in the face of announced protests estimated to involve fifty thousand participants, the Poznań police department pleaded powerlessness, which ran counter to the Police Act. Public safety was to be the argument justifying the act of censorship – the primary alibi invoked in cases of violating democratic freedom in many contemporary ideological disputes.

Censorship and Agency

To understand what manifested itself with unprecedented strength through the suppression of *Golgota Picnic* in Poznań, one must recognize an entire network of implicit relations that in general are not possible to establish as clear evidence, such as the link between Archbishop Gądecki's statement and the police department's declaration of powerlessness. In Poland today, such concatenations pose a real threat to freedoms of expression, artistic creativity and civil liberties. One must recognize what role was played in the situation by Ryszard Grobelny, four-term mayor of Poznań (1998–2014), an adherent of 'Poznań values' that are a perfect example of a union of ideological conservatism and economic neoliberalism. Grobelny refused to support the festival organizers and weakened their position by publicly declaring that he was not planning to attend the Garcia play's performance due to, as he termed it, 'doubts as to the compatibility of the play's contents with values I cherish'.⁴ One must also analyse Director Merczyński's incoherent argumentation, while fending off attacks by right-wing politicians, who invoked constitutional liberties he was obliged to defend as a culture animator and a trustee of public funding while at the same time declaring that 'the performances of *Golgota Picnic* at Malta Festival Poznań were not subsidized by public funds'.⁵ By defending himself in this manner, he both refused basic attributes of public culture such as the willingness to tackle difficult and not necessarily universally accepted topics, and representing a multiplicity of views and rationales, while at the same time legitimizing the power of the 'ordinary taxpayer' in whose name the question was raised: by what right is public money is being spent on a controversial play? The 'ordinary taxpayer' is a construct, after all, called into

3 See Archbishop Gądecki's statement (in Polish): <http://fakty.tvn24.pl/aktualnosci%2C59/sztuka-odwazna-czy-obrazoburcza-protesty-przeciw-golgota-picnic%2C440982.html> [accessed: 19 August 2015].

4 See the statement of Poznań's mayor, Ryszard Grobelny: <http://www.poznan.pl/mim/rzecznicz/news,1180/prezydent-o-przedstawianiu-golgota-picnic,71444.html> [accessed: 19 August 2015].

5 *Golgota Picnic in Poland: Documentation of the Events of May – July 2014*, eds. Paweł Płoski and Dorota Semenowicz (Poznań: Malta Foundation, 2014), pp. 103, 150. This book was published by the foundation organizing the festival. It documents the course of events, focusing on all that led to cancellation of the performances by Director Merczyński. The English version was published at the Culture Action Europe website: <http://cultureactioneurope.org/files/2015/02/GOLGOTA-PICNIC-dokumentacja-ENG-OK-ISSUUE.pdf>.

existence when a politician wishes to undermine the right to publicly fund work that does not comply with the ideology professed by said politician. It is today's most efficient instrument of censorship, in fact, even more effective than the Criminal Code protecting religious feelings in Poland.⁶ These complex relations must be taken into account to perceive that *Golgota Picnic*—gate exposes a distinctive nexus of religious, political and economic conditions as no other instance of censorship intervention has since 1989 – conditions that in an implicit yet extremely powerful way curtail the freedom of expression today and determine the public sphere in Poland. In Ewa Majewska's book *Sztuka jako pozór? Cenzura i inne paradoksy upolitycznienia kultury* [*Art as Appearance? Censorship and Other Paradoxes of the Politicization of Culture*, 2013], the author traces the network of these interrelations, although at the time she did not have such a clear example at her disposal. Attempting to define the new dispersed form of censorship, Majewska writes:

The main form of economic censorship lies, in my view, in almost total invisibility of the nexus of religious and political social standards and their economic effects. Limiting the freedom of art bears no economic, religious or political guise, in any case not in its everyday manifestations. In everyday practice of the art world, it constitutes one regime, one form of distribution of what is visible.⁷

The regime in question was exposed by cancellation of the performances and later by subsequent suppression of screenings of *Golgota Picnic* performance recordings as well as readings of the play announced as part of the civil action 'Golgota Picnic – Do It Yourself'. Through those events, we could see the operations of censorship in Poland in the name of the protection of religious feelings and political capital associated with them, as well as the implicitly related means of public-funding distribution, recognition on the part of local authorities and institutional security. From these factors arises a particular type of not only protective censorship, as it was termed by Majewska, but also paternalistic protective democracy, in which on one hand public safety must be protected while on the other religious feelings of certain individuals must be protected, the result of which being that along with this, all citizens are protected from the slightest controversy.⁸

These factors do not exhaust the essence of the events of June 2014 and their ramifications. Activities undertaken as part of the action 'Golgota Picnic – Do it Yourself' can be termed civic theatre. The point was for citizens to reclaim their agency by establishing a public stage available for their undertakings, an agora in the literal sense that would

6 In accordance with Article 196 of the Code: 'Whoever offends religious feelings of other people, insulting publicly the subject of religious worship or space reserved for public performance of religious rites, shall be liable to a fine, limitation of liberty or imprisonment up to two years'.

7 Ewa Majewska, *Sztuka jako pozór? Cenzura i inne paradoksy upolitycznienia kultury* (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2013), p. 85.

8 The effectiveness of this rhetoric and its cynical foundation was recently argued by Jan Klata, who openly admitted having employed it to end director Oliver Frljic's work on the production of *Non-Divine Comedy: Remains* at the Stary Theatre in Kraków. See 'Nothing Else Matters: Jan Klata in Conversation with Dariusz Kosiński', *Polish Theatre Journal*, 2015.

abolish the hegemony of the mediatized spectacle of power. An agora as an agonistic public sphere, according to Chantal Mouffe, being a space of political mobilization of passion and confrontation allowing for immediate performance by all social actors.⁹ It doesn't necessarily lead to finding a compromise. On the contrary, the value lies in breaking the post-political order and the consensual violence appropriate to it through creating a situation where diverse views and demands can immediately confront one another. The consensus, which in this case was to be the recognition of an allegedly endangered public safety as the highest value, is replaced by an open conflict of groups, which clearly would not lead to any compromise solution.

However, what played out on the streets of Polish cities and towns – involving from a dozen to more usually several hundred protesters – in no way resembled a vision created by media-fuelled blackmail that had predicted a demonstration some fifty-thousand strong including unmanageable violence that certain citizens were allegedly ready to use in order to prevent others from participating in a form of culture that those certain citizens find unacceptable. Instead, organized in a nation-wide grassroots network, the indignant social group responding to '*Golgota Picnic – Do it Yourself*' called the bluff on a spectacle that had been performed over the heads of society: these citizens claimed the stage themselves and exposed a certain truth about the social situation in a particularly conflict-prone area. First of all, however, they opted for participation, which is the condition of democratic politics that is truly threatened, not by the unresolved conflict of attitudes playing out in the public sphere, but by alienation and by a sense of lack of agency.¹⁰

Circumstances of preparing and organizing these events – which were then cancelled under pressure in Lublin, Chorzów, Jaworzno and Szczecin, and carried out under threat of violence in Białystok, Gdańsk, Warsaw and Bydgoszcz, and realized in the form of dialogue between differing parties in Wrocław and ultimately in Poznań – are examples of the public impact of art, and provide diagnostic material on the topic of how democracy functions in Poland. At the same time, opposition against censorship at the Malta Festival bore features of a social laboratory, an example of ideological litigation in public space, and a starting point to pose a more general question about the nature of the society we live in: to what extent are social and political divisions and legal solutions appropriate to contemporary societies still valid in them? "*Golgota Picnic-gate*", therefore, allows both to offer a certain diagnosis, and at the same time to put forward questions regarding the future and concerning political community in Poland.

9 See Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*, trans. by Barbara Szelewa (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2015).

10 The largest protest – around a thousand participants – was held during the screening of a *Golgota Picnic* recording at the Polski Theater in Bydgoszcz on 27 June 2014. It was, however, a peaceful manifestation, with participants were praying, singing and chanting nationalist slogans, such as 'Not Islamic, not secular, but Roman Catholic Poland'.

Religion and Democracy

At first, the entire thing played out on an already well-recognized field in which two factions collide with one another: ‘contemporaries’, that is, supporters of a contemporary state based on separation of government and religion, and ‘traditionalists’ who derive basic community-shaping values from religion, at the same time placing it in a privileged position to other world views. That division has become strongly polarized in Poland, and it was reinforced as a result of institutionalized engagement of political parties, media and the Church on a chosen side. This makes it difficult, not to say impossible, to conduct any substantive debate: we observe on both sides deepening trenches and barbed wire.

A secular state does not mean a secular society, of course, to paraphrase John Rawls’ view; however, the basic function of democracy is to ensure equal expression in the public sphere to adherents of differing views. Charles Taylor was among those to point it out in a direct polemic with Jürgen Habermas – the issue does not concern the relationship between democracy and religion, but rather how democracy can and should allow expression to various voices, including religion.¹¹ The simple division into ‘contemporaries’ and ‘traditionalists’ becomes even more complicated when we view it not only in a local contest but also more broadly, in light of the function that religion fulfils today.¹² As early as the beginning of the 1990s, Gilles Kepel wrote of ‘God’s revenge’, as he termed the return of fundamentalist attitudes in all three major monotheistic religions. Kepel’s diagnosis, reluctantly accepted at the time, became confirmed for many observers after 9/11.¹³ In Kepel’s interpretation, religion, repressed in the ‘modern world’, has returned in full force as a sphere absorbing tensions and conflicts that result from rapid modernization. Religion has provided language that allows description of subsequent crises and ‘apocalypses’ in the Western world, especially when this world is viewed from the margins that perceive Western-style modernization as an export product or even aggression from outside. Religion is also a sphere of expression of dignity for those who feel left out of the modernizing process – particularly, one might add, in its newest, neo-liberal edition, to acknowledge the political and economic dimensions of these processes.

In the case of Poznań events, the first signs of opposition against Głgota Picnic performances had appeared precisely from the side of religious community organizations – like the Rosary Crusade – and were only later taken over by representatives of the institutionalized Church. In the Polish context, the role of the Church as the voice of social anger is crucial, and is used for such purposes as reinforcing the institution’s claims to deciding about the entirety of public life in Poland.

One of the consequences of ‘God’s revenge’ – a rather obvious one, if one adopts Kepel’s reasoning – is also the intrusion of religion into the public sphere. The distinction between what is private and what is public

11 See articles by both authors in Judith Butler, Jürgen Habermas, et al, *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

12 Or ‘lemmings’ and ‘moiré berets’, as these groups are known in Poland, pitting the alleged thoughtlessness of the Civic Platform Party followers against right-wing politics run thanks to old ladies enamoured of the Church and its priesthood.

13 Gilles Kepel, *Revenge of God: The Resurgence of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism in the Modern World*, trans. by Agnieszka Adamczak (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2010).

results directly from the Enlightenment separation of religion (supposed to be an individual matter) and reason (supposed to govern all that is public). According to Judith Butler, the presence of religion in the public sphere is the question of its survival (one could say it's another side of the 'religious Reconquista').¹⁴ In the context of Polish law – with Article 196 of the Criminal Code protecting 'religious feelings' – this results in pre-emptive measures being very easy to take. The logic fails here that suggests that one cannot feel offended by a text of culture one hasn't seen. It can lead to situations in which the mere threat of prosecution prevents citizens, including artists, from executing their constitutional right to freedom of speech.

Art

Social emotions, including anger and indignation at 'demoralizing' art, should not be underestimated, even if they collide with fundamental democratic values, particularly freedom of speech. Whether they are right or wrong, such arguments referring to another instrument of modernity, namely education, prove ineffective in similar situations. At best, those may become a programme for the future, yet are not suitable for solving current problems.

The lack of transparency in 'Golgota Picnic-gate', however, also stems from the fact that this time 'the other side' was incited to anger – and decided to vent it in the public sphere. The protest was initiated by an informal group communicating via Facebook, then acted out in a dispersed manner in various cities and towns. It was held by activists, directors, actors, curators, critics and culture-institute employees. Their first reaction was simple: if we can't get to know a given work of art in its proper context (the suppressed Malta Festival performance), let's transpose it – in full compliance with all current laws – into the public sphere. In this simplest meaning, the 'Golgota Picnic – Do It Yourself' action proved performatively effective.

Two models of theatre or theatre activity worked very well in 'Golgota Picnic – Do It Yourself'. In the majority of places, semi-staged readings were organized, or screenings of a production recording of García's play. The classic mode of a work's reception was therefore preserved, in effect – in the antagonistic context – essentially reinforcing a division into two sides. This was particularly apparent at a semi-staged reading in Warsaw's Defilad Square, where on a separate, raised platform stage, actors read the text aloud and a crowd gathered around them – interested in the reading on one side, on the other opposed to it. An unusual performance was created – particularly in its audio dimension – with the voices of actors, cries, prayers and chants of protesters and reactions of those who came to listen to the reading mingled together.¹⁵ This reproduced, nevertheless, the division in the audience.

The reading organized in Poznań had a different appearance, yet a certain polyphony was also articulated in which prayers, cries and other forms of jamming were superimposed onto the voices of the actors

¹⁴ Butler, Habermas, et al.

¹⁵ See the recording of the Defilad Square reading on 27 June 2014, edited by Michał Libera and Wojtek Zrałka-Kossakowski ('the populist' project): <http://www.krytykapolityczna.pl/artykuly/kultura/20140722/golgota-picnic-odczytanie> [accessed: 17 August 2015].

reading. However, this took place in the space of Wolności Square in Poznań, without any division into stage and audience. Theatre gave way to action, seizing subsequent participants: the play disappeared, giving way to agora and performative agonicity. In that sense, the Poznań reading, literally replacing the censored performance in the time and space it was supposed to have been presented, turned into a metonymy for the entire action.

While evidencing the performative success of the action, one can of course talk about the counter-productiveness of censorship, bearing in mind, however, its other implicit and elaborate effect: self-censorship. The role of art as a laboratory of social change, or at least of discussion on the subject, becomes seriously threatened as a result of cultural-institution directors backing out of difficult or risky situations, which can also sway artists toward self-censorship and limit the critical function of art. The Malta Festival established a bad precedent, unfortunately.¹⁶ All the more so in a situation in which the public sphere is shrinking under the influence of persistent neoliberal colonization and attempts to change it into a sphere of capitalist production and consumption, with the role of public cultural institutions continuing to grow steadily. They are the ones that should create conditions for questioning ideological foundations of consumer society and should enable practices seeking to contest hegemony.

Democracy Once More

Performative effectiveness does not automatically mean political effectiveness, or – to be precise – not in every dimension. One can speculate as to what extent events around *Golgota Picnic* influenced the changes in Poznań's local authorities: as a result of local elections, Jacek Jaśkowiak, a Civic Platform Party candidate for mayor, replaced Ryszard Grobelny (after sixteen years in office). Certainly the right of freedom of expression was confirmed, at least temporarily. The idea of treating the public sphere as a field of civic conflict, to cite Mouffe again, was being practiced live. Mouffe is accused at times of naivety (a simple objection, as it is easier to assume that people devour one another rather than that they argue), but far more frequently is acknowledged for complete familiarization with the economic dimension of contemporary disputes.

The case of *Golgota Picnic* in Poland makes this dimension apparent. Along with the nexus of ideological, political and financial interdependencies described above, its true meaning lies yet elsewhere. The 'God's revenge' articulated by the performance's opponents is the result of derailed modernization, the most extreme manifestation of which is a society not so much contemporary but neo-liberal, ruled not by the 'invisible hand of the market' but by 'invisible capital'. Paradoxically then, those who read *Golgota Picnic* aloud and those who protest against reading it could perhaps meet on the same side – according to this approach, they become situated together on reality's margins and on the margins of the

¹⁶ It is worth noting that the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights issued a guide for people and institutions of culture who find themselves in similar situations. See Dominika Bychawska-Siniarska, Dorota Głowacka, *How to Defend the Freedom of Art? A Practical Guide by the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights*, 2014, <http://www.obserwatorium.org/images/www%20final%20wolnosc%20artystyczna.pdf> [accessed: 17 August 2015].

rule of invisible currents, implicit interdependencies and obscure decision-making. The actual difficulty for the democracy dispute in Poland, however, arises from the fact that in today's society a struggle is perpetrated for contemporaneity, which doesn't yet exist, and for construction of community in a situation in which modernity and its rules don't exist anymore, abolished by the rules of post-political neoliberalism.

Opponents of Golgota Picnic displayed an anger caused by the possibility of a play being performed that could potentially offend their feelings. Its defenders expressed their anger caused by the prohibition and impossibility of seeing a production that could turn out to be inspiring or irritating. *Demos* has a right to have feelings, but in order to become people it must step beyond the subjectivity of its own experience. However, upon what can we build a potential community if not on emotions? Does a value exist upon which modern society can base itself? The question – as well as the task – remains open.

Translated by Karolina Sofulak

Originally published in *Piknik Golgota Polska. Sztuka – religia – demokracja* [*Golgota Picnic Poland: Art – Religion – Democracy*], eds. Agata Adamiecki-Sitek, Iwona Kurz (Warsaw: Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2015), pp. 5-18.

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ABSTRACT

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Democracy: Do It Yourself

The article analyses one of the most important events to have occurred in Poland in connection with censorship in the arts. The cancellation of Rodrigo García's production of his *Golgota Picnic* by the Malta Festival Poznań in 2014 sparked a wave of civil protest across the country supported by dozens of public institutions and NGOs, with many thousands attending the protest events. Throughout Poland, performance recordings of the play were screened, as well as readings of the censored drama. The authors of the article show that this sequence of events, viewed as a whole, reveals fundamental tensions in Polish society. The results of their analysis go beyond issues of freedom of speech and blasphemy laws, and touch upon the very essence of Polish democracy. The case of *Golgota Picnic*, more than any other censorship interference since 1989, reveals a distinctive confluence of religious, political and economic conditions, which in an implicit yet extremely powerful way have hampered freedom of speech and determined the interplay in public space in Poland. After recent parliamentary elections and the passing of power into the right wing's hands, these determinants have become the basis, in turn, of an explicit cultural policy aimed at constraining the public sphere and making culture a tool of ideological indoctrination.