Daniel Rycharski

Gunia Nowik Gallery

Daniel Rycharski

Born in 1986 in Sierpc, Poland. He describes himself as a conceptual and avant-garde artist, and works in various media, with installations at the forefront of his artistic practice. In 2005–2009, Rycharski studied graphic design at the Faculty of Art of the Pedagogical University of Kraków. He then pursued a PhD at the Kraków Academy of Fine Arts. He works with the themes of provinciality, religiosity, Christianity, and LGBTQ+ identity, seeking tensions and new relations between them. In that, Rycharski's art also manifests his personal quest of a realm in which non-heteronormativity and the Catholic faith can coexist. He works closely both with LGBTQ+ activists and religious and agricultural societies to represent their issues and sensibilities, mediating between the consciousness of Polish cities and that of villages. Rycharski often directly engages his local community both in the reception and production of his art, as one of his main concerns is propagating art among rural communities. Besides, the artist lectures at the Academy of Fine Arts in Szczecin. He lives and works in Kurówko and in Szczecin. In 2021, the film *Fears*, based on Rycharski's life, directed by Łukasz Ronduda and Łukasz Gutt, premiered.

Daniel Rycharski

Solo exhibitions:

2026
Wolf's Hole, Gunia Nowik Gallery, Warsaw, Poland

2025
Undressing from sleep (with Władysław Hasior), TRAFO, Szczecin, Poland

2024
I can tell you about me about you (with Władysław Hasior), State Gallery of Art, Sopot, Poland

2023
It's our Christ too, Galeria Zielona 13, Dominican Monastery, Łódź, Poland
We Are a Fairy Tale Inside, Kurówko, Sierpc County, Masovia, Poland

2022
Dead Class, Gunia Nowik Gallery, Warsaw, Poland
Dorothea von Stetten Art Award (with Zuza Golińska and Diana Lelonek), Kunstmuseum Bonn, Bonn, Germany

2021
Valentines / Ash Wednesday, PLATO, Ostrava, Czech Republic
Cages, Kahan Art Space, Vienna, Austria

2020
la goutte creuse la pierre, Villa Arson, Nice, France

2019
Fears, Museum at Open'er Festival, Gdynia, Poland
Fears, Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw, Poland

2013
Rural Street Art, Wozownia Art Gallery, Toruń, Poland

Selected group exhibitions:

2026
Hunting for Painting, Karlowicz Philharmonic, Szczecin, Poland
All the Diamonds, Krupa Art Foundation, Wrocław, Poland

2025
Two Exhibitions – Participatory Art in Prisons, To Be Heard (WE the exhibition), Remand Centre, Warsaw-Białołęka, Palace of Culture and Science, Warsaw, Poland
LGBT+ Zones. Queer Art in the Times of the Good Change, Municipal Gallery Arsenał, Poznań
The Impermanent. Four Takes on the Collection, Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw, Poland
Don't Ask About Poland. From the Collection of Katarzyna Szafrańska and Wojciech Szafrański, Centre of Contemporary Art in Toruń, Poland
Reverses. Meetings at work, Podgląd Gallery, ING Polish Art Foundation, Warsaw, Poland
Quite an Ordinary Village, Curators' LAB Gallery, UAP, Poznań, Poland

2024
Horror Patriae, steirischerherbst, Graz, Austria

2023
If you try to reconcile everyone, you will satisfy no one, Contemporary Art Gallery in Opole, Poland

2022
Kinds of Love, Gunia Nowik Gallery, Warsaw, Poland

2021
In the Beginning Was the Deed!, Galeria Arsenał, Białystok, Poland

2020
Something in Common: 12th Edition of the Warsaw Under Construction Festival, Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw, Poland
We Are People, Galeria Labirynt, Lublin, Poland
Theft and Destruction, Galeria Arsenał, Białystok, Poland

2019
Monumentomania: 11th Edition of the Warsaw Under Construction Festival, Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw, Poland

2018
Exit from the Centre, Galeria Arsenał, Białystok, Poland
Will there be war tomorrow?, Museum of Modern Art, Gdynia, Poland

2017
Late Polishness. Forms of National Identity After 1989, Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art, Warsaw, Poland

2016
Communis: Community Renegotiations, Labirynt Gallery, Lublin, Poland
Bread and Roses: Artists and the Class Divide, Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw, Poland
Making Use, Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw, Poland

2014
Into the Country, SALT Ulus, Ankara, Turkey
As You Can See: Polish Art Today, Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw, Poland

Selected interdisciplinary and public spaces projects:

2024
Installation *Passion*, Festival Łódź of Many Cultures, Park Staromiejski, Łódź, Poland
Performance *It's me, Judas*, Festival Łódź of Many Cultures, Park Staromiejski, Łódź, Poland

2022
Installation/scenography for *Spartakus. Love in Times of Plague* theatre play directed by Jakub Skrzywanek, Contemporary Theatre in Szczecin, Poland

2018–2019
Scarecrows, Kurówko, Poland

2018
Island, Sierpc, Poland

2015–2018
Monument to a Peasant, Poland

2016
Invitation to a Debate, Gorzewo, Poland
Bed (Without justice there can be no solidarity), Kurówko, Poland

2015
Museum of Alternative Social Histories, ART BOOM festival, Krakow, Poland

2014
Gate, Kurówko, Poland

2012
Shrine Gallery, Kurówko, Poland

2011
Multimedia Wild Boar and Bird Repellent, Kurówko, Poland

2009–2011
Village Street Art, Kurówko, Poland

Prizes:

Dorothea von Stetten Art Award, 2022, Bonn, Germany
Paszporty Polityki Award in the Visual Arts category, 2017, Poland
Kulturysta Roku Award by Channel Three of the Polish Radio, 2012, Poland

Selected collections:

Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw; Museum of Art in Łódź; Zachęta of Contemporary Art, Szczecin; The ING Polish Art Foundation

Daniel Rycharski



Daniel Rycharski. Reverses. Meetings at Work 2025, photo by Katarzyna Łukomska-Ładczuk (ŁAD Studio), courtesy of the ING Polish Art Foundation

The New York Times

GIVE THE TIMES Account

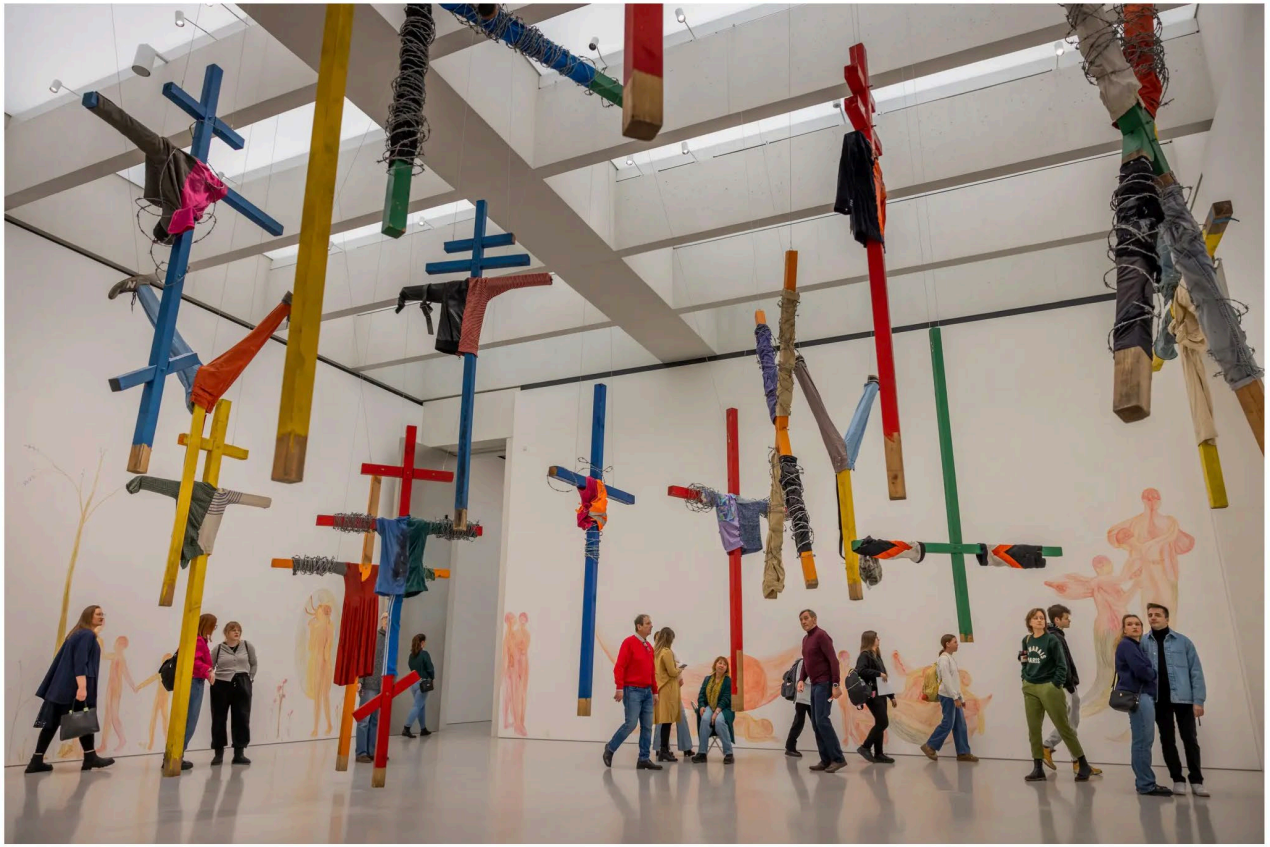
Selected press

Poland's Museums Veered to the Right. A New One Aims for the Middle.

For years, lawmakers tried to turn Polish cultural institutions conservative. Now, the revamped Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw wants to avoid getting drawn into politics.

Listen to this article · 6:07 min Learn more

Share full article



Daniel Rycharski, *Scarecrows*, 2018-19 at the exhibition *The Impermanent. Four Takes on the Collection*, 2025, Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw, Poland

GNG



The New York Times

Gay Artist Wants to Change Poland, Starting With One Village

by Alex Marshall for The New York Times
April 4, 2019

KURÓWKO, Poland — The Polish artist Daniel Rycharski sat in his childhood home recently and considered the idea of fitting in.

In many ways, Poland is a highly polarized country. On one side is the right-wing populist government of the Law and Justice party, with its many rural supporters, which purports to stand for "family values" and the traditions of the Roman Catholic Church; on the other is a more liberal opposition, which finds most of its backers in the country's cosmopolitan cities.

"I'm stuck in the middle," Mr. Rycharski said, sounding resigned. "I don't have a place, really." Nonetheless, his work is the focus of a major exhibition running through April 22 at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. "Maybe the biggest and best art institution

in Poland is making an exhibition of me right now, but I don't feel part of the art community," he said. "And the conservatives, they don't attack me, but ..." He trailed off.

Mr. Rycharski, 33, makes large sculptural installations filled with religious and rural symbolism. His family and a handful of neighbors in Kurowko, in central Poland, take part in creating them, and most are displayed around the village before they are shown anywhere else. *Strachy*, for instance, a large-scale installation, was made with his grandmother and features dozens of colorful crosses with items of clothing sewn around them, then wrapped in barbed wire.

The show at the Warsaw museum, which includes *Strachy*, has been acclaimed by Polish critics. "It's been a long time since such a multifaceted exhibition was shown," Karol Sienkiewicz wrote in Gazeta Wyborcza, a liberal daily. With it, the museum had "hit the bull's-eye," he added. But Mr. Rycharski said that, despite the positive reviews, he felt lonely. His art's focus on religion and the countryside means that he is unfashionable in liberal art circles. The fact that he is gay — and that much of his art is about his sexuality — means he does not sit well with Poland's conservatives either. "Sometimes, I think the only place for me is this village," Mr. Rycharski said. Poland has a long tradition of "conservative avant-garde" artists who take a positive view of the church and of folk life, said Szymon Maliborski, a curator at the Museum of Modern Art. They include performance artists such as Zbigniew Warpechowski, who once stuffed pages of the Bible into condoms to make a statement about society's resistance to church teachings; and Teresa Murak, whose ritual processions in plant-covered clothing reflected an interest in the rhythms of nature. But Mr. Rycharski's art is different, Mr. Maliborski said, noting that it was not simply praising the church or Poland's countryside — it was trying to change them.

Mr. Maliborski cited *Strachy* as an example. It was first installed in fields around Kurowko, the crosses meant to keep birds away, like scarecrows. But the artist collected the clothes sewn on the crosses from lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in Poland, and many of the garments had stories of struggle behind them. *Strachy*, which means *Scares* or *Fears*, could be read as a comment on the church's lack of openness to those groups, Mr. Maliborski said.
"Daniel's more interesting, and braver, than other artists," he said. "It's not so easy to work with such topics in the countryside."

Mr. Rycharski does not hide his sexuality, even though he says it is a factor in his feelings of loneliness. For his interview in Kurowko, he wore a tracksuit modified to have rainbow stripes running down the legs. He grew up surrounded by art, he said. His mother and uncle both painted and made small sculptures "for themselves, for the family." He painted, too, and eventually left Kurowko to study art in the southern city of Krakow. But Mr. Rycharski did not feel at home there. "When I was living in Krakow," he said, "there was too much of everything: too many artists, too many buildings, too many monuments. When I came back here, there was nothing, so I can build everything in my head." His time in Krakow also made him realize the indifference of Poland's art to the countryside. "Everyone thinks people in the village are stupid, dirty, angry and they have no culture," he said. "I knew it was wrong." He wanted to make art that would change perceptions but that would also refresh a sense of community in the village, he said.

One of his most successful pieces was *Monument to a Peasant*, a sculpture dedicated to Poland's small-scale farmers. It featured a trailer, with farming tools attached to it, painted black to represent the dismal mood of agrarian workers facing a host of financial struggles. The mobile artwork has traveled around Poland and struck a chord in many places, particularly in rural areas. The popularity of works like *Monument to a Peasant* gave Mr. Rycharski the confidence to explore his gay identity in art, with crusading works that put the church's rejection of gay Catholics in the spotlight. For one piece, he took a quotation from the catechism that says gay people should be "accepted with respect," and made it into a metal plaque. He asked several liberal churches to display it. When they refused, he stood outside one for 10 hours holding it.

Mr. Rycharski faces a struggle to change attitudes in Poland. The populist agenda of the governing Law and Justice party has made gay rights a central issue before elections later this year. In March, the party's co-founder, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, spoke out harshly against same-sex marriage. Homophobic attitudes tend to be widespread in Poland, though the country's first openly gay politician, Robert Biedron, started a new opposition party in February and has gained some traction and attention. Wojciech Adamski, an amateur artist and firefighter from Sierpc, the nearest town to Kurowko, who has worked with Mr. Rycharski on several projects, said the focus on gay rights was important. "Daniel's activities here can help other people who belong to the L.G.B.T. community, whom we don't know about, find themselves, to feel they are accepted," he said.

Mr. Rycharski said he had no intention of changing his approach, whatever problems it caused him. "If I can change Kurowko, Poland can change," he said.
After the interview, Mr. Rycharski went for a walk along Kurowko's one main road. As dogs barked, and someone burned garbage in a field, he talked about a future project. He wanted to buy a house in the village and make it into a community space for lesbian, gay and transgender Christians, he said. "I'm not sure it's going to happen," he said. "People might not be ready for it yet."

GNG


Courtesy of Daniel Rycharski

The Economist

Daniel Rycharski builds bridges with art
A gay man, he is also a devout Catholic, as his work reflects
June 10, 2021

When two teenagers committed suicide in a quiet corner of north-west Poland in 2015, in part because of opposition to their gay relationship, Daniel Rycharski travelled to the village, took branches from the tree where the pair had killed themselves and made a simple crucifix. He carried his work, *The Cross*, to Warsaw and set it up in front of the presidential palace. Another cross once stood in the same spot to commemorate the traumatic plane crash in Smolensk in 2010 that killed Poland's president and many other senior officials.

A legion of Polish artists are trying to shine a light on the country's swing towards intolerance under the ruling Law and Justice party. But Mr Rycharski's corner of the art scene is a lonely one. He has set up his studio in the village of Kurowko, some 110km from Warsaw. He considers himself a devout Catholic, but as a gay man he is rejected by the Polish church. "For me, to live in Poland is to live in a cage," Mr Rycharski says.

Through his work, the 35-year-old artist-activist is rattling the bars. Mr Rycharski has moulded rosary beads from resin mixed with the blood of a gay friend. He has crafted scarecrows from wooden crosses and clothes donated by persecuted lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. He stitched an ecclesiastical robe from the garments of Polish clergy, called it "Ku-Klux-Klan" and topped it with a distinctive pointed hood.

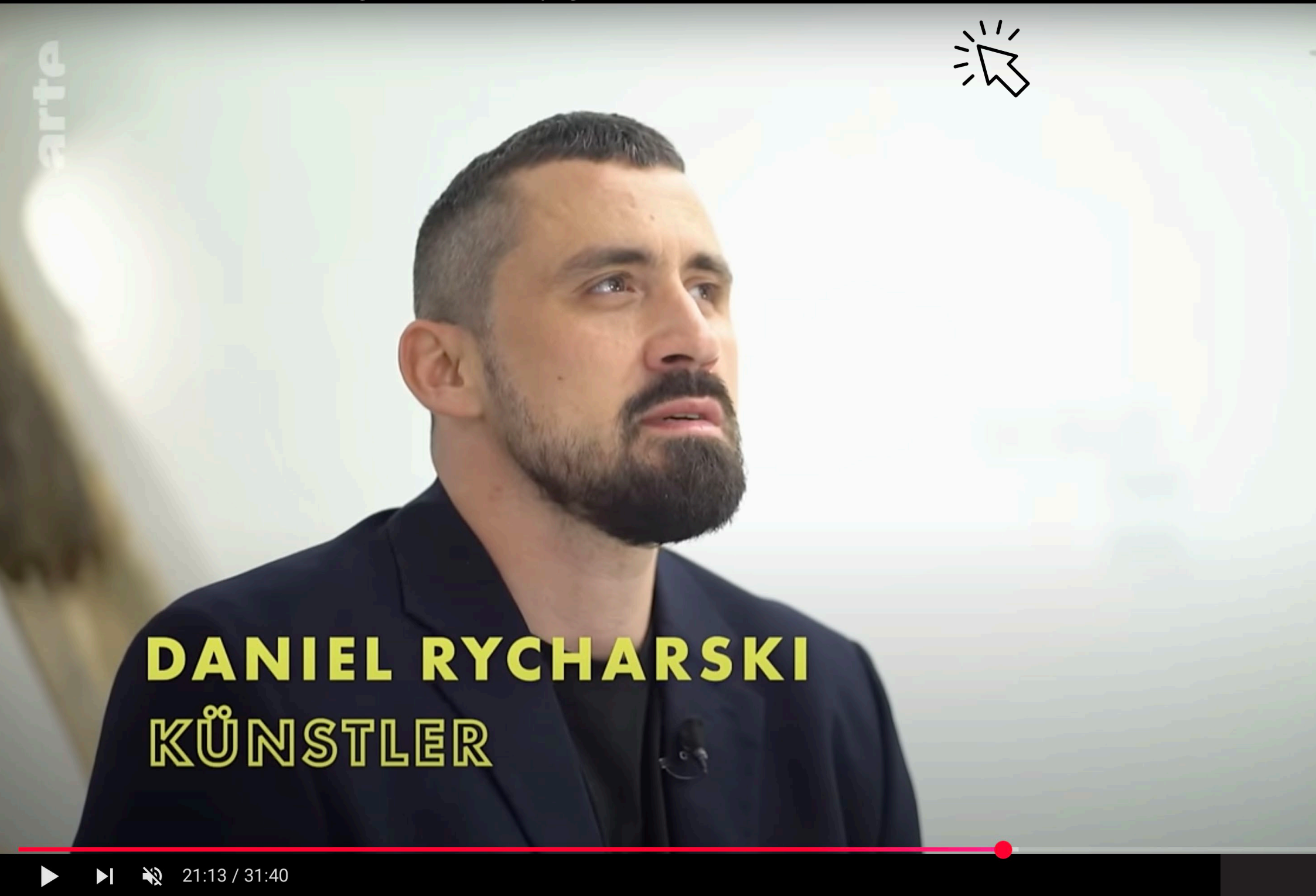
Yet Mr Rycharski is devout. Mateusz Pacewicz, an award-winning Polish screenwriter, points out that though *The Cross* could be considered "creepy", Mr Rycharski's pilgrimage with the crucifix turned the work into "a religious act, a ritual". His faith has helped calm his critics. Government officials wrote to the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw complaining about an exhibition of his work in 2019, but stopped short of shutting it down. Ordinary folk have tried to destroy pieces of his that were displayed in public spaces—but some apologised after the artist explained his meaning. "He doesn't want to lose his connection to the church, he wants to try to create a dialogue," says Kasia Matt-Uszynska, the curator of Mr Rycharski's latest show, at the Kahan Art Space in Vienna.

In fact, Mr Rycharski began to consider his own sexuality in his work only recently. Four years ago he left cosmopolitan Krakow, having decided the city wasn't for him. His goal was to tell the story of Poland's rural communities, often disparaged as backward and philistine. Mr Rycharski won over local villagers with street art, decorating homes, barns and public spaces with images of hybrid animals, part wild and part domesticated. In 2014 he celebrated the 150th anniversary of the abolition of Poland's feudal system by erecting a rainbow-coloured triumphal arch outside a neighbour's home.

It may wind up in galleries across Europe, but his art is almost always displayed on Polish farmland first. His favourite project merged his two worlds. After a string of Polish villages declared themselves lgbtq-free zones, last year Mr Rycharski persuaded five families in rural areas to invite lgbtq visitors to stay for a few days. The most striking exhibit in Vienna is a tapestry depicting one of these hosts, dressed in shorts and a t-shirt, with mechanical farm equipment splayed behind him like the wings of an angel.

Finding willing hosts was hard, Mr Rycharski says. Persuading gay Poles to take part was even tougher. "People trust me, people understand me and people can do things with me they would never do", he says, "with someone from the outside."

Ändert sich etwas bei Abtreibungsverbot und Propaganda-TV in Polen? | Tracks East | ARTE



21:13 / 31:40

CONTEMPORARY
LYNX

We know the laureates of the Dorothea von Stetten Art Award 2022 *Young Art from Poland*
by Kasia Lorenc for Contemporary Lynx
July 25, 2022

This year's edition of the Dorothea von Stetten Art Award at the Kunstmuseum, Bonn – held since 1984 – is dedicated to young Polish contemporary art. After the competition's guidelines had been reorganised some years ago, it has been presenting and promoting art from Germany's neighbouring countries every two years. Among the past winners are artists from Czech Republic (2014), the Netherlands (2016), Denmark (2018), and Switzerland (2020).

First up: this year's modifications. The Polish winning trio adopted a partnership-based approach (and a move away from competition) to the prize and presentation, faithful to the „We are all the winners" motto. „Together, we have decided not to announce a winner and award the prize to one of us, and to resign from competing with one another in the name of cooperation and equal division of the prize, as we have all put an enormous amount of work into creating this exhibition", the winners write in the declaration posted on Facebook. This solidarity also finds its reflection in the exhibition space: each artist occupies exactly one room and the individual presentations are a kind of cabinet exhibitions.

In the introductory text to the exhibition, as well as in the speeches at the opening event, the organisers emphasise the political dimension of the presented



Daniel Rycharski, *Dorothea von Stetten Art Award 2022*, Kunstmuseum Bonn, exhibition views, photos: David Ertl

works: "This year attention turns to the complex, highly self-reflective art scene in Poland which at the moment, however, is also faced with extreme challenges because of the political situation in the country. Nine nominators proposed up-and-coming positions, from which a jury selected the three finalists. Whereas Zuza Golińska examines our role in social systems and public spaces, Daniel Rycharski reflects upon sexual identity in the context of religiosity, tradition and provinciality. At the interface between art and science, Diana Lelonek investigates our treatment of the environment and its resources."

The most diverse presentation by far – combining painting, ready-made and sculpture – are the works of Daniel Rycharski. The artist addresses issues of belonging and identifying, proudly invoking his small-town origin and highlighting his cooperation with the local community. The exhibition showcases works commissioned by Rycharski from a fellow self-taught artist, items saved from disposal or reprocessing, including pig troughs and tombstone figures in truly spectacular new arrangements, as well as a re-adaptation of the relationship between milk and fuel, composed in the pattern of yin and yang.

This year's Dorothea von Stetten Art Award recapitulates the most up-to-date relationship between humankind and the world it has created and continues to create, in reference to natural resources, political shifts, the power of financial markets and social influences. Each room allows one to delve into a new, fresh perspective that doesn't require additional and, above all, competing judgements.

On the occasion of the exhibition, a catalogue will be published by Snoeck-Verlag, Cologne, with essays by Stephan Berg, Sebastian Cichocki, Anda Rottenberg, and Monika Szewczyk. This year's jury included: Adam Budak (Kestner Gesellschaft, Hanover), Fatima Hellberg (Bonner Kunstverein), Ania Kołyszko (independent curator and author), Marie Matusz (participant of the Dorothea von Stetten Art Award 2020), and Aneta Rostkowska (Temporary Gallery, Cologne).



Daniel Rycharski, Dorothea von Stetten Art Award 2022, exhibition view, Kunstmuseum Bonn, photo: David Ertl

ELEMENTY

All THE DEATHS OF THE VILLAGE TO GIVE IT A NEW LIFE

Szymon Maliborski in a conversation with Daniel Rycharski for Elementy
June 2022

This text is a synthetic attempt to collect the threads and sketch a map accompanying us in the preparation of the projects carried out together with Daniel Rycharski. It concerns in particular two exhibitions that will have their première in 2022: *The Dead Class* and *Love Is for Everyone. For Me Too*.[1] These two projects will present new works by Daniel Rycharski that approach the theme of the tensions created by the rapid changes in the relationship between human and land, as seen from the perspective of the Polish countryside. These changes, resulting from the intensification of industrial food production subordinated to the logic of profit, entail profound cultural transformations. They can be seen as the latest chapter in the story of the end of the peasant culture.

Szymon Maliborski: According to Rycharski himself, these exhibitions 'are about the social landscape, not so much focusing on my inner experiences as on the reality in which I am living'. As can be inferred from previous works, he is not so much interested in the economic transformation of the countryside (although he is aware of its importance), but rather in looking at its social and cultural consequences, as well as personal stories. It is the direct experience of observing change, sharpened by literature (by Wiesław Myśliwski rather than the most recent items dedicated to the Polish rural history), that leads the artist back to the 'peasant issue' and to new questions: How does the disappearing of family farms translate into individual status and autonomy and how does it refer to the problem of climate change? In what ways do current transformations demand an updating of ideas related to the rural culture, its religiosity, its relationship to animals and the land?

Daniel Rycharski: If I wanted to locate on the map of my projects the beginning from which these two exhibitions originate, I would have to go back to *Fears*. The exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art was largely devoted to the theme of the emancipation of homosexuals and their complicated relationship with faith. These new exhibitions are very different, as you have mentioned, they are more about the social environment than about me, although they grow out of everyday observation. During the implementation of the *Family Care2* project in 2020, when I went from farm to farm asking if they would be willing to take in LGBT+ people, I realised that there were very few such places left. There are no more farmers. A lot of people replied to me that they would not be able to offer them any work, that they no longer farm, they do not keep animals, they do not even have a field, so there is no chance to experience any connection with nature through agricultural work. There were also responses from industrial-scale farmers that this could not be organised, as procedures do not allow untrained people to enter, for example, a herd of four hundred cows. It was that first moment when I realised that I must have missed something. It was then that I deeply realised the scale of the rapid and unnamed changes, that had transformed the Polish countryside. I return to Kurówek and, indeed, there are only three farmers left there.

This is a very big social change that has taken place in a few years. After all, the life of small farms and their reality were the subject of activities we organised in Kurówek within the *Field Game* in 2014.

Field Game caught the literally last moment to see the remnants of a traditional village with family farms. Jasio Żmijewski [one of the people involved in the project – s.m.] was still alive, some of the farmers had not yet moved out and sold their land. After 2014, most people left and the remaining farms became mostly social farms, maintained by the state, thanks to subsidies from the eu, but no longer living off agricultural production. It was another impetus to return to the theme of the end of peasant culture after projects that focused on faith and engagement in the situation of the lgbt people, and to see how the present can be told from this perspective.

I began to think that the Polish cultural space needed an exhibition about the contemporary countryside. For the past two years, I have been accompanied in this thinking by various books, especially novels and essays by Wiesław Myśliwski, who raised the thesis on the end of peasant culture. I think that this great, thoroughly humanist subject has not been given due consideration in the visual arts.

Recently, however, the village has made itself comfortable in the exhibition world. We have seen significant presentations of this topic from the Venice Biennale of Architecture, where it was presented by the Polonia Pavilion, to the Countryside project by Rem Koolhaas at the Guggenheim Museum. Historical and anthropological publications from the folk history strand have been appearing regularly for the past two years. At the same time, I notice that we still have a breach in telling this experience on a different scale than the macro one, or that we recount the distant past.

These are very valuable exhibitions and publications, from Adam Leszczyński to Jan Wasiewicz. However, this is not something that interests me very much. Leszczyński's *Ludowa historia Polski* (*Poland's Rural History*) focused on the countryside from a distant past, a minimum of one hundred and fifty years ago. This is the time period covered by the open-air museum in Sierpc and I always found it a model reference on how not to talk about and perceive the countryside. Sometimes I feel that the current interest of the 'intelligentsia' in serfdom is similar to the fascination of ethnographers from a hundred years ago pulling out an object to build on its basis the idea on the essence of folk art.

And no one is interested in the profound changes the Polish countryside is undergoing at this precise moment, after joining the European Union in 2004. In a year that, from my perspective, is revolutionary and perhaps even more important than 1989. Also in the field of science, sociology, ethnography too little attention is paid to this turning point. I thought that what happened after our accession to the EU is precisely what we needed to do an exhibition about. In his book *Toast na progu*[3] (*Toast on the Doorstep*) Andrzej Mencwel puts forward the thesis that if we were to find the date of the final death of peasant culture, this death of small farms only feeding the farmers' families, it is precisely the moment of the accession to the eu. The revolutionary moment, when the village gets something, changes for the better along with subsidies and money. And the price for this change is small farms, on the ruins of which industrial holdings are built.

So, we are in the here and now, the story is anchored in the moment, as you like to put it, when the countryside was annexed to Poland, a nodal point

in the recent social memory.

I think it is a good thing that we are doing our homework on the rural history and books such as Radek Rak's *Baśń o wężowym sercu* (*The Tale of the Serpent's Heart*), which won the Nike Literary Award, are appearing. However, I notice a lack of this other pole in theatre, literature or feature films dealing with contemporary times. My impression is that the cinematic image of the modern countryside is getting worse and worse. It is a burden that hinders us, a ballast that must be discarded in order to finally be like the Western world. This is not much different from the early 1990s, when it was also explicitly raised.

We can observe in the Polish visual arts something that can be called a folk turn. There is, for example, Karol Palczak, who paints his village with a certain tenderness, there is Małgorzata Mycek, a non-binary person who shows herself as a transgender person who does not fit in with the conservative province of the Podkarpacie (Subcarpathia) region. There are, of course, other artists as well, although it seems to me that these themes come to them through their fascination with the aforementioned folk history. In my case, it is exactly the opposite. This theme does not come from a fascination with serfdom, with discovering peasant roots. It draws from my here and now. I do not fully trust academics who dig in the archives and try to describe the reality from a few hundred years ago on the basis of source material, when I have people living here and now with whom I can work. I trust them more than these sources.

In this context, how do you perceive the sculpture-monument called *Gate* created for the round anniversary of the abolition of serfdom, which you made in 2014?

Gate made for the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the abolition of serfdom is probably my most often borrowed work. Recently it was to be presented at an exhibition in Katowice.



Daniel Rycharski, *Yin and Yang*, 2022, steel, glass, milk, petrol, paint, Ø 100 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Gunia Nowik Gallery

I just had to create it because in the visual arts, there was no work treating serfdom for almost a decade. However, more than bridging the gap in the local artistic life, I was concerned to see if the subject was remembered by the countryside residents. If I establish my *Gate* for example in Kurówek, will it move the local people? Of course, it turned out that it would not. On a subconscious level, people have repressed this memory. They do not want to remember it; it is like denying the time of poverty and humiliation. The people who would directly remember the times of serfdom are no longer alive, their children's generation is dead as well. In my opinion, it will never be possible to artificially instil such a memory in the countryside, although on some level I understand the idea behind the initiatives aimed at such commemorations.

Is it fair to say, then, that folk history is more needed by the 'intelligentsia' for yet another reworking of the historical narrative than it is a tool for rural emancipation?

I have never seen this kind of story as a tool for rural emancipation. Tomek Rakowski, an anthropologist and ethnographer who has accompanied our projects starting with the *Peasant Monument*, said that 'peasant is a kind of figure for thinking', which means it is used in attempts to reconstruct the past in various ways. It is supposed to fulfil its purpose. And, by the way, when it is used to explain the past in one way or another, it projects interpretations of the current situation. We can quote here the famous words about the way people in corporations are treated like the dark mass. I think it is a misunderstanding to explicate the 'manorial' relations currently prevailing on the Polish labour market by serfdom. This obscures the issue more than it produces a better understanding, and certainly does not lead us to a deeper knowledge of the today's countryside. People generally like the countryside of the past, the safe countryside, as I often say, the kind of countryside that no longer stinks of the peasant.

But let us return to current affairs, to the space of the here and now, to the emotions that pervade the latest realisations. In 2016, you created a work consisting of an empty bed pierced by a gravestone cross, strongly associated with cemetery, for an exhibition we prepared at Galeria Labirynt.[5] Even then, the subject of loneliness, both spiritual (a gay believer) and very physical, was bothering you. Now you add to this setting a coffin, which can be passed through like a gate. It is a work entitled *The Dead Class* and we are looking at it right in Kurówek with its open interior framing the landscape.

This work is in some sense a continuation of the *Bed* and works well combined with other objects. It gets most interesting when there is a man close to it who can be seen through the open lid. It is a traumatising piece of furniture for me, I cannot stay near it for more than five minutes, I have to walk away from it so as not to see it. After a while you start to calculate: 'OK, so it is in a coffin like this that I will spend eternity, that is quite a long time.' This is repeated by virtually everyone who has seen the work. Entering the exhibition through it, one has the impression that the whole exhibition is one installation, a book broken down into individual chapters. From the material perspective, it is a converted plain coffin, lined in white satin with lace, but it opens on both sides and you can squeeze through it. Passing through you can really get the chills.

The Dead Class, on the other hand, is the generation of my grandparents, actually up to the 1950s, the



Daniel Rycharski, *The Dead Class*, 2022, Gunia Nowik Gallery, Warsaw, Poland, exhibition view. Courtesy of the artist and Gunia Nowik Gallery

generation of the last small farmers. It is with them that the centuries-old history of peasant culture ends, at least as described by Wiesław Myśliwski. This community also included doubly excluded members, such as a late dairy farmer from Kurówek, who was both a small farmer and a non-heteronormative person. *The Dead Class* is thus a class understood as a 'social class', and Mr Janek's story, which no one wrote down and listened to, became the inspiration for the project. Following Andrzej Mencwel and his book *Toast on the Doorstep*, I wanted to create just such a doorstep or threshold, a transition from one reality to another. Of course, this is just one death of the countryside from the many others that occurred in the last century, along with the gradual ending of its isolation through reform, war, the experience of communism and the disappearance of landed gentry. However, 2004 brings a qualitative change: this threshold of capitalism crossed by the rural society means that there is no longer any room for such forms of existence. When you talk to anthropologists and sociologists, they say there is no such thing as the end to the countryside, which is probably true from the demographic point of view and around large agglomerations. But if you go much further away from the centres, for example to the vicinity of Sierpc, Kurówek or Smorzewo, you can see how these villages are becoming more and more empty. The people in the village themselves tell me that for them the village is over. Peasant culture was defined by human's closeness to nature. Industrial agriculture does not presuppose such a relationship, nature is not treated as a partner, it is exploited. *The Dead Class* is a threshold, a definitive transition from one social world to another, but of course it also has its metaphysical, existential dimension. What is the death of a village and what will its afterlife be like?

The important context for this ongoing end is that it is taking place unnoticed. In Poland, there is little need to recount it on a regular basis. Meanwhile, it is one of the motivations of your action to show this process in different dimensions.

Well, the ethnographers for sure have not launched any works on 'saving' this rural present day by building open-air museums of the current Polish countryside, as it was the case at the beginning of the last century when folklore was invented. I feel that the countryside's materiality is overlooked, a lot of things go unrecorded. We have to talk about it, make it visible, and at the same time make clear that this phenomenon has not been well recorded. I wonder to what extent my exhibitions illustrate this problem, because they are, after all, strong transformations operating in the realm of symbols and using the language of contemporary art. On the other hand, I sense that some circles may conclude that I am becoming someone who slows down the cultural progress. As long as I was dealing with the emancipation of the countryside and pointed out, for example, its non-heteronormativity, it was fine. However, the moment I start to appreciate the countryside, I stand on the side of its superficial religiosity, then the acceptance ends. Even if faith is superficial, it was at the same time the source of a great many phenomena, for example, strategies for explaining the world, making it bearable for oneself when various tragedies or sufferings happened. At the same time, I do not believe that this kind of faith is a source of homophobia. At some level, rural residents (farmers) have something in common with other excluded people, such as the LGBT+ people. It happens that the level of contempt towards these social groups is similar. If you want to insult someone, you can say 'you faggot' or 'you redneck'; both these terms are highly stigmatising and some people would like to see these two groups disappear. Of course, the countryside is not perfect, it represents the same level of inequality and exploitation or hatred as elsewhere.

Since the topic of the open-air museum and sending specific groups to the past has come up, let us pause with it for a moment to talk about how it is included in the exhibition. It is a space created on the same principle as folk art, by intellectuals wishing to salvage what they found valuable (mainly in an aesthetic sense) from the peasant world. It plays the role of a distorting mirror of the peasant culture. It is also a place, a setting for The Dance of Death, a registration of the paratheatrical action you have in mind, in which you literally send the farmers back to the open-air museum, to the space of what



Daniel Rycharski, *Crying Horse #1*, 2022, oil on canvas, 50 x 60 cm, courtesy of the artist and Gunia Nowik Gallery



Daniel Rycharski, *Crying Horse #2*, 2022, oil on canvas, 50 x 60 cm, courtesy of the artist and Gunia Nowik Gallery

is already past. Please tell us how this intertwining of the open-air museum and folk art as imagery of the countryside works in what you create?

The Dance of Death, one of the works I am planning, takes place right in the Sierpc open-air museum. People have not noticed, because how are they actually supposed to notice, that farmers have become a minority. It is estimated that there are between 330,000 and 550,000 people living on their own farm income in Poland. From a city perspective, I often hear that 'the peasant is power, end of story', that the countryside elects our government, our president. However, in this countryside, where about forty per cent of the population lives, farmers have become a minority, statistically they no longer are at home. Somewhat along the same lines as other minorities, whether national, religious or sexual. In *The Dance of Death*, I want to show that it is time to take the modern countryside to the open-air museum, to unseal our notions of folklore. It is there that the action of this performance takes place, where the assembled minorities collectively perform the dance of death, in the face of which it does not matter who you are, because everyone is equal. The climax features an 'ethnographic uniform', a variation on what a contemporary folk costume might look like. It is also about looking at the mechanisms of the creation of what we consider to be folk, to what extent it can be an inclusive category in the present day.

Are you interested in using the mechanisms of 'folklorisation' to create a situation that does not degrade the countryside, does not deprive it of its contradictions, giving it a chance for social expression?

The peasant did not know what folklore was. It was only the urban intelligentsia at the end of the 19th century who began to indicate him what was folk. This is why I do not like the folklore inspiration, folklorism for sale. Which does not change the economic importance of folk art, when it used to be practised by the poorest and was a source of income for them. What interests me in folk art is not aesthetics, but its social origins and function. Folklore, folk art also emerged at the turn of the previous centuries to unify Polish society, to overcome the division between peasants and nobility. After the regaining of independence, serfdom was still very well remembered. We had to come up with something that would incorporate the villagers into the Polish nation. This is what folk art did, and in this I see an opportunity for activities like mine, or the activities of cultural activists in general. We now need again this unification of the nation, of society, and it seems to me that this can be done through art: the new folk art. This is how I like to think of my activity: as a new version of folk art.

There is a direct reference to this new folk art, to the mechanisms of its creation and circulation in your series of objects Cepelia from the Pigsty, the three sculptures you are about to present in Bonn. On a material level, the work incorporates what was once unworthy of being called a thing worth saving.

Cepelia from the Pigsty originated from my reading of peasant diaries. These books show what peasants went through, especially in the inter-war period, and how many things they had to deny themselves in order to establish these family farms that are disappearing today. The diaries show the price they had to pay, which was enormous. Now it is easy to see that the former farmers have already sold off their equipment. The wooden troughs remain unused. And for me, it is an object that has never been tempting to anyone, neither the intelligentsia in the past or, nowadays, as a utilitarian thing. It was not beautiful from the visual point of view, it could not be monetised, you could not actually do anything with it. The troughs have not found their way into ethnographic museums and have not been recognised as part of the culture. This unwanted object became the basis for my work. I clad the trough with thousands of coins and turn it into a precious thing. There is a bit of a joke in it too, as those allowed close to the trough can gorge themselves, so the pigsty transforms to glamour. For me, however, it is also a story about how agriculture used to be seen not as a branch of the economy but as hard work. In the dead peasant culture, it was sacralised, becoming a branch of metaphysics rather than economics. That made it bearable: this demanding work also met spiritual needs. *Cepelia from the Pigsty* thus touches on social issues, but it also has a spiritual, metaphysical layer.

I think this is the essence of these activities. Narratives on the changing countryside, as we said earlier, can be sometimes found in today's culture, but it is very rare to capture and narrate changes in the spirituality and religiosity, to go beyond a commentary on the banality of religious practice. Metaphysics is also the missing part that is not experienced in traditional folklore. In your work you point out that rejecting metaphysics leads to a loss of balance.

Modern agriculture, and therein lies the problem with modern capitalism, attempts to remove this spiritual sphere, which leads to disunity and to human tragedies. The question of balance is addressed in a key work for the exhibitions we prepare, namely the Yin Yang. This sculpture, which is central to me, came from the fact that I ride around the countryside on my motorbike or bicycle and look for objects, usually thrown out of the barn. This is how I found a wheel from a chaff cutter thrown away by a female farmer who told me her story. She had a farm with her husband that, after 2004, did not adapt to changes, they did not modernise it and things started to deteriorate. He became depressed, alcoholic and so his driving licence was taken away, which made him destroy police cars outside the police station in anger. As a result, he was sent to prison, which did not improve anything and he died shortly after his release. It was the wheel from this farm that I used. In its metal frame, it has inscribed a kind of Yin Yang symbol, which can be read as a symbol of balance. I read in a study by Amanda Krzyworzeka who conducts research in the Podlasie (Podlachia) region, the opinion of a farmer who said that a litre of milk should cost as much as

a litre of petrol, it is one of several recurring dreams. The wheel from the chaff cutter was glazed over and I poured milk and petrol into the created reservoirs. It is a work about the search for an impossible balance. For me, it has a level of agricultural micro-history, a level of general reflection on rural modernity. Much has changed for the better after we joined the UE, but there have been costs. This man was one of many who bore them. It is a bit of a voice of these farmers. There is also a theme of ecology in this work: the impossible balance between nature and its exploitation driving the climate catastrophe. It is the kind of general sense that is easy to read, the search for balance in a world where there is none. It is a central and ambiguous work. Very important to me.

In our conversations, various ideas for further activities often emerged, referring to significant leads from the Polish visual culture. *The Dead Class* is a quotation from Tadeusz Kantor, in the series of paintings *Horses Are Crying*[6] one can sense an allusion to the work *Pyramid of Animals* by Katarzyna Kozyra, and in *Letter from Heaven* a reference to the popular TV series *Ojciec Mateusz* (Father Matthew), but also to the character of the alternative Artur Żmijewski. As if the one connected to the world of critical art should be replaced by the figure of the actor bearing the same name and surname. I find this reworking of the heritage of the classics through a different sensibility incredibly interesting and important. Especially that several texts included reflections on the relationship of your practice with the tradition of critical art of the 1990s.

My art shows well the shifting of the sensibilities in artistic practice. It is critical but also empathetic. It is not about transcending, about believing that the artist can do more and that with a radical gesture – killing animals, forcing a group of people to do something they do not want to do – he or she can show some aspect of reality. We are already in a different place after twenty-five years of critical art, it is a kind of a generational response to this phenomenon. The differences lie in the understanding of the importance of empathy and an awareness of the responsibility when you act among people. I think a very similar thing is happening in young cinema and young theatre. I look at the people who are involved in it and I see that they do not believe uncritically in their professors acting on the limit of ethics.

Apart from ethics, I am interested in what you might call your gesture towards people and working with what they know from their daily life and what they appreciate. This is the source of the strength of your work: creating from elements that are recognisable to people. This is the practical dimension of empathy; it is then easier to feel the main idea behind your realisations.

This has already happened with the *Peasant Monument*. It was simply to be a well-liked and readable monument for the villagers, something that could be understood immediately. The work *Letter from Heaven*, for which I would like to invite Artur Żmijewski, the actor widely known for his role of father Matthew, to come to the village and read out the letter by Piotr Ściegienny, originates in the same approach. It is part of the story of Ściegienny impersonating the Pope and writing a letter to the Polish peasants in the 1840s in which he was telling them to reject serfdom and fight for freedom. Today it could sound like a call for solidarity.

A kind of 'hope in the dark' project when you have to go beyond the 'suffering subject'[7] that has dominated art?

I am currently reading Roch Sulima's latest book, where he talks about, among other things, how he gave lectures in the villages. During one of them, a peasant asked: 'why are there no nails in the commune cooperative stores?' And then Sulima does a half-hour lecture on the subject, after which the peasant says to him: 'No, actually, nails are available in the store, I just wanted to see how you would explain yourself.' And this was supposed to be the project that does not need to be explained, because people know how it is like. If you go to the countryside, everyone knows father Matthew. However, no one has heard of Artur Żmijewski, the artist. It is like creating Żmijewski for one's own purposes, using the same method as he used to, i.e., by somewhat exploiting a man, perhaps against his will. This would be a kind of an activist use of a well-understood cultural code. People know father Matthew, so they will trust you and listen to your letter about the need for social solidarity. Use what they know, what they accept, and someone they would really like to see. I would absolutely like to go back to the people, bring them together and give them something optimistic, something that is empowering, rather than something that may be visually interesting but at the same time has a depressing effect. This is how, one might say, I understand this movement towards the good and beyond suffering.

Since we are talking about good, let us touch further on the subject of love. Young farmer Patryk Ruszkowski, one of the people you work with, talked about the tattoo he has on his arm with a quote from the Rammstein song *Love is for everyone*. For me too. So far, it is just a wish, but simple and pertinent enough that it has stayed with us as the title of the exhibition.

As I pointed out, the death of the countryside and loneliness are themes that tell the story of life in the social stratum. At the same time, they talk about you as an individual, about the fact that everyone can be left alone. This is the biggest problem of the countryside, the desire for love is an aftermath of this. When I go to Kurówek, I remember that a year ago we still had neighbours turning up, but now I do not see them anymore. The kind of people who acted as hubs, to whom you could go to get something done, to talk to, have all moved on or gone away. What is left is the big farm of the Kikolski family, who are constantly working hard with their cows and cannot even go on holiday. But I like what Myśliwski writes: that the individualism

that came after peasant culture (that you can decide for yourself without looking at the group) is perhaps worth its death. We cannot be limited to nostalgia about how it used to be. I have only now begun to seriously study this writer, who has been analysing this topic for many years. What I am now doing could be called 'queering' Myśliwski. He is, for me, the most outstanding Polish prose writer, but I miss something in his work. As usual with him, we have a modernising countryside and various people who are struggling with this reality. He describes a village of philosopher farmers, rather that filthy farmers. His literature is not breaking through to the mainstream now. When I ask my students who are interested in the theme of the countryside, they ignore this name.

Updating this heritage and bringing it back as a source of inspiration could be an interesting move, as it seems so different from current sensibilities.

But, at the same time, is it good at explaining the reality we face?

The aforementioned authors, Mencwel, Sulima or Myśliwski, show me the countryside not from the nostalgic side, as it could be expected. They rather alert me to the pitfalls of such thinking. They also disagree on many issues with one other and want to argue constantly. On average, every ten years this topic is brought up and one of them has to write a text about it.

So there has to be an exhibition on this topic as well. Are we talking about the death of the countryside to give it a new life?

Definitely, yes. And the exhibition can give rise to a theatre play or a film. And that is basically the point.

[1] The exhibitions *The Dead Class* and *Love Is for Everyone. For Me Too* are also a development of the project submitted for the competition for the Polish pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2021, created jointly by Daniel Rycharski, Szymon Maliborski and Agnieszka Żuk.

[2] *The Family Care* project accompanied the 12th Warsaw Under Construction festival, referring to the theme of community. For a week, the group of LGBT+ people who volunteered for the project lived in the Sierpc area, worked during the day and spent time together on family farms, getting to know each other and discussing with the people running them.

[3] A. Mencwel, *Toast na Progu*, Kraków, 2017.

[4] Interior, BWA Katowice, Katowice, 2022, curated by Marta Lisok, http://bwa.katowice.pl/wystawy-i-wydarzenia/interior/

[5] *Communis. Renegotiations of the Community*, Galeria Labirynt, Lublin 2016, curated by Szymon Maliborski, Łukasz Mojsak, http://communis.labirynt.com/.

[6] A series of paintings by Wojciech Witkowski. The fireman-artist has been working with Rycharski since 2018. This time they are creating together a series of paintings depicting horses going to slaughter. It is an attempt to use a classic medium and an amateur style to alter the meanings of often romanticised representations of horses firmly incorporated in the culture.

[7] 'Suffering subject', one of the fundamental themes emerging in anthropology and ethnography after the disappearance of the savages, i.e., the shift of interest from primitive peoples to the subject who suffers and experience injustice. It is also a figure very prevalent in the visual arts, one of the default themes addressed in the field of artistic production. See: J. Robins, *Beyond suffering subject: toward an anthropology of the good*, Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute 19, 2013, pp. 447–462.

ON ART AND AESTHETICS



"Fears", MOMA Warsaw: Daniel Rycharski explores rural Poland, queer culture and faith
Tulika Bahadur for On Art and Aesthetics
February 14, 2019

In his project "Daniel Rycharski: Fears", opening at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, Polish artist Daniel Rycharski combines concerns around religious faith, gay identity and the rural experience. Within the frozen landscape of the artist's hometown Kurówko, one finds multiple crosses erected in rainbow colours (easily signifying LGBT life). The installation is an exercise in self-assertion, a call for freedom. And yet, the artist refuses to sever ties with his roots. Despite the difference and disagreement, he appears to cling loyally and lovingly.

Rycharski has come up with a singular proposal for artistic activity by sparking discussion on issues of identity and the limits of membership within a religious community. Through his works, he manages to convey seemingly contradictory experiences: as an artist and believer, a gay man working within a conservative society to create a new means of emancipation from outdated forms of religion. This cross-section of Rycharski's works is part of the museum's programming initiative to pursue a new lexicon for describing the world around us and draw attention to some of the most interesting and radical artistic attitudes of our time.

Over the course of his studies at the Kraków Academy of Fine Arts, Rycharski began to examine the visual culture and identity of contemporary rural areas. Since then, his works have illustrated a more complex image of the countryside as he began seeking out forms of expression for alternative social experiences and visions. The lessons from Kurówko remain a touchstone for Rycharski in his approach to art and communication with audiences. His personal experience and family situation serve as a point of departure for the artist to take up more universal themes relevant to the perspective of a society experiencing conflicts connected with the return (or endurance) of religion as an instrument of political mobilisation and polarisation. As an artist cooperating with diverse groups, such as agricultural and religious associations, a social club of rural housewives, and LGBT+ activists, he wrestles with numerous social fears and prejudices in his works.

Rycharski's bold approach to faith and Christianity, which has no equivalent in Polish art, is currently the driving force of his artistic practice. The pieces brought together for the purposes of the exhibition tell the story of an artist who has shifted from a desire to organise a grass-roots revolution and achieve equal

rights for LGBT+ individuals within the Church to the determination to practice his faith according to his own rules. Grounded in religion by way of various institutions and family members, he takes a given set of concepts and values and pursues a new version of a liberation project that would embrace outcasts. It is a project he calls 'Christianity without religion'.

The exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw pursues a common nerve running through the actions undertaken by the artist in cooperation with residents of rural areas and the identity projects that have grown out of the fostering of those contacts. Rycharski's endeavours propose an original language for queer art that is mindful of issues of class sensitivity, which the artist uses to try to reorganise our way of thinking about political divisions, to find another path to articulate conflicts. Expressing himself through a range of actions and situations, Rycharski does not abandon the world of objects, but endows them, rather, with a strong charge of emotion and existential experience by placing the materiality of the object and its history in the foreground.

"Daniel Rycharski: Fears" is a report detailing over a decade of work by an artist who does more than meet the demand for an alternative perspective, while drawing richly from codes of popular culture to develop a new interpretation of the art of cooperation bordering on activism, political action and activation.



Daniel Rycharski, *Scarecrows*, 2018-19, used clothing, resin, barbed wire, ropes, nails, painted wood, variable dimensions

poznań art week



The art of helping
Mike Urbaniak in conversation with Daniel Rycharski for Poznań Art Week
July 18, 2020

Mike Urbaniak: Are the fears you're facing today greater than the fears you dealt with in previous years?

Daniel Rycharski: The answer to this question is much more complicated than some would like it to be. And this is precisely why I spend most of the time in the countryside – in the village of Sierpc and Kurowek that are located in the north of the Mazovia region. On the one hand, the attitude of local people towards LGBT issues has changed for the better. To be honest, in here I have experienced homophobic discrimination only once, though, of course, the so-called 'soft homophobia' is still present. Today, I'm under the impression that the more the politicians of Law and Justice party are repressive towards non-heterosexuals, the more gestures of solidarity I personally experience.

Maybe it's because you are a famous artist?

Of course, this fact surely has influence on the way people react to me. Most of my LGBT friends that live here – few ones that still haven't left for Warsaw – are still in the closet and can painfully experience the growing atmosphere of homophobia.

Or maybe, paradoxically, it will bring about a positive change? I am under the impression that even those who used to have a rather ambivalent attitude towards the LGBT community, now feel that the bounds of decency have been pushed.

You're right. Even my father who lives in the countryside and is a mechanic has noticed this hateful media campaign. He has never been a homophobe, but has always been rather lukewarm towards LGBT issues.

So in the long term, will this hate campaign have good results?

In my opinion, yes. I think it's time to show more actively than ever that we are normal people. We are just like everyone else. However, we must not forget about those particularly affected by the current homophobic hate campaign.

And you expect that *The Family Care* will help them?

The Family Care is a project I'm preparing together with farmers and Catholic families from Sierpc and neighbouring villages. I'm looking for farmers who are struggling to maintain their family farms, as well as big-city homosexuals that have found themselves in a different kind of crisis. They are all invited to participate in our project.

Where exactly are they invited to?

To a farmhouse located near Sierpc. They will be spending their nights there. During the day, they will

be working and relaxing on other farms. The whole thing will be financed by the Museum of Modern art in Warsaw as a part of the Warsaw Under Construction Festival.

You were inspired by the book *Futility and Hope. Psychiatric Family Care in an Anthropological Perspective* written by dr Andrzej Perzanowski, a researcher from the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology of the University of Warsaw.

Andrzej Perzanowski described a therapeutic practice that was initiated in the 1930s' in Choroszcza, a town near Białystok where a psychiatric hospital exists until today. This experimental practice involved putting the chronically ill patients into the care of local peasant families. Families received money and the patients could get away from the institutional confinement of a barred psychiatric ward. A family-like bond formed between the patients and the families.

What was happening in Choroszcza is extremely interesting, just like your project in general. However, for me the very fact that the LGBT people appear in the context of psychiatry, one in which they appeared for years, is a red flag. "Rycharski wants to cure homosexuality", I pondered.

Of course it's not about curing homosexuality because it's not an illness. I want to re-activate the practice described by Perzanowski to cure homophobia, a serious illness of our society. Homophobia makes the members of the LGBT community depressed and leads them to addictions. Contempt and lack of acceptance lead to anxiety. It is a perfect time to object to say no to hate and to reach out to people, regardless of what is being publish in the press.

What are the LGBT people expected to get out of this therapeutic practice? Is it supposed to bring them out of the state of 'futility defined as rejection, lack of hope for a better life or a happier existence in the society? Is it supposed to bring them 'hope' that Perzanowski defines as emancipation?

I think that we need to start breaking stereotypes and trying to find 'the cure'. So far, there are four families that are willing to take care of the LGBT people. We are still looking for four more. Together with Tomek Fudala, Natalia Sielewicz and Szymon Maliborski – the curators of the Museum of Modern Art – we are also looking for the participants representing the LGBT community.

Which criteria should the participants meet? Is being a victim of homophobia one of them?

Past experience of physical or verbal abuse is not a requirement. After all, homophobia has many faces and everyone can experience it in a different way.

You expect to find as many LGBT participants as there are families?

Yes, we are looking for eight of them. It is going to be a one-week-long holiday in the Masovian countryside. As I mentioned earlier on, participants will spend their nights in a beautifully located farmhouse, and the days at farms around Sierpc. At the beginning, the farmers will explain and demonstrate to the participants their daily activities. Later, they will engage their guests in their work. There will be no exhausting fieldwork, unless of course somebody agrees on that. The stay at the countryside is expected to be a form of relax. I chose the beginning of August as a starting date on purpose.. After all it's the time for harvesting and participating in harvest festivals. There is much less work to be done, while the weather is still good. I've



Daniel Rycharski, *Fears*, 2019, Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw, exhibition view

also planned some bonfires, canoe trips, and evening meetings with guests – firemen or local artists. We want all participants to have a chance to get to know each other.

An idyllic picture of the Polish countryside.

Maybe it's idyllic? Maybe it's just true? Maybe it's the Polish farmers that will cure our homophobia? The fact that *The Family Care* will be carried out in the countryside is very important to me. Big-city elites have accused people living in the countryside of voting for Law and Justice party in the act of revenge for years of contempt and exclusion, and thus unleashing hell for the whole society. The perversity of this project lies in the fact that support for the LGBT people unexpectedly comes from the countryside, making it a positive setting for this story.

By showing that people living in the countryside are not always backwards and superstitious?

The countryside is a much more complex place than many people think. It's true that many people who live there vote for Law and Justice party. There are people like that in my family. But it's not that they vote for them because they like what that party says about the LGBT community. Many people vote for them out of economic, not homophobic reasons.

The problem is that one can't have one without another. Did you have any problems with finding Catholic families for the project? I can imagine that the local priests can't have liked it.

I can only answer this partly, as I am still in the process of looking for families. The Church plays a rather ambiguous part. I sometimes get to know priests that are supportive to my actions. It happened with my project *The Island*. The participants were students of a Catholic high school. The aim of the project was to commemorate the local Jewish community and to test the attitude of locals towards non-heteronormative persons. I also met some open-minded priests in the group 'Faith and Rainbow' that brings together LGBT christians. However, the contact with them was never official.

They were afraid?

Afraid of their superiors. When it comes to LGBT issues, the views of many priests are less conservative than the views of the bishops. It's partly because many of them are gay themselves.

And yet you left 'Faith and Rainbow'.

I never really left it. I just realized that my artistic-spiritual actions addressed to the Church weren't really effective. They brought no results, no change for the better.

You irritated the church because you didn't attack it from an anti-clerical perspective. You attacked it from the perspective of a catholic individual trying to remind the Church about its own teachings. It was like that with your project *The Board*. You were standing with next to St. Hyacinth's Church in Warsaw. The board featured the Code of Canon law of the Catholic Church that forbids discriminating against LGBT people. You presenting the Canon law of the Church next to a church!

I was chased away by the friars. Actually, I've chased away quite often. It also happened when, together with 'Faith and Rainbow', I wanted to organize the Way of the Cross in the intention of victims of homophobia. I even prepared a special 'cross'. Each station was supposed to be accompanied by a text read out loud by Halina Bortnowska, Jan Turnau...

The so-called 'open-minded catholics'.

The so-called 'open church' is yet another thing I was disappointed with. Very soon it turned out to be not really open. Besides, how can you go to church and allow its officials to treat LGBT people the way they do? Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor whose theology influenced my spirituality, believed that you could not consider yourself Christian and support Hitler at the same time. One contradicts the other. And in Polish church nothing contradicts. You can consider yourself Catholic and still be hateful towards others. This is why I distanced myself from the so-called 'open church'. I haven't become a protestant. I consider myself a non-denominational christian.

And some members of the 'open Church' suspect you have bad intentions.

Yes, I experienced it last year with the exhibition *Fears* held at the Museum of Modern Art. The 'progressive catholic media' had a problem with writing about my art though I've never created anything offensive. I create my art and my social-artistic activities in order to start a dialogue. However, I feel that dialogue is something more and more difficult to hold.

Warsaw-based gays don't really fit in the Polish countryside.

Anything can happen. The willingness of the farmers to participate in the project proves it. They are mostly Catholics living in the countryside, and yet they decided to invite LGBT people. They don't want to pass their judgment, they want to reach out. I want to look for things that unite us, rather than those that divide us. I want to show that dialogue and respect are are possible.

President Duda's words about "LGBT not being people" helped *The Family Care* in any way?

Our project was to be launched a bit later, but the president's statement made us start it sooner. Comments made by the president and other politicians of Law and Justice party made me act faster. I decided to show that there are people in Poland who, despite their conservative views, do not approve of the hate

speech. And here we are – a group of farmers from the most traditional part of Masovia reach out to LGBT people to express their solidarity and readiness to help.

The Family Care is financed by the Museum of Modern Art. The financing includes paying farmers for inviting LGBT people. Can it still be called selfless help then?

It's good you asked about it. Financing is a crucial part of this project. Andrzej Perzanowski also pointed out this aspect. He argued that remuneration (farmers participating in the project will receive 300 zlotys per day) doesn't exclude a genuine need to help and real emotions. Providing care is a job like any other and it should be rewarded according to its value. Thanks to this kind of job, our society can become better. At this point, it's worth to ask why we pay people so little for taking care of others. In his book *Bullshit Jobs*, the American anthropologist David Graeber asks why some professions are well-paid, while others – including being a caregiver – are not. Through *The Family Help* I'd also like to show the real value of professions that include providing care. In our case it will be farmers turned caregivers.

Just like me, you've been involved in LGBT issues for years. You must have become quite thick-skinned by now. Did the dehumanizing statements made by Polish politicians hurt you? Because they surely hurt me.

Of course it hurt me. It all even made me imagine myself standing by the window and jumping out of it. When I had my exhibition in Nice six months ago, the French invited me to stay there. They wanted to rescue me because the whole world is fully aware of what can happen to LGBT people in Poland. They were shocked and worried that something could happen to me. And it all came back after hearing president Duda's words.

And yet you haven't moved to the French Riviera but decided to stay in Kurówko.

You know what, I'm a really family-oriented person. I want to be close to my family, and to places I come from. Not only I'm not moving anywhere, but I even decided that in autumn I will start building a house in here.

Tipping Point. Contemporary Voices. For Europe.



The art of fighting: The Pole Daniel Rycharski protests with the means of art, without ever losing the ability for dialogue.

Alexandra Markl for DATUM Seiten der Zeit
September 4, 2020

Daniel Rycharski is not taking it easy. Neither he nor his work is accommodating, and he is definitely not out to please. The Pole, 34 years old, tense and intense, is channeling all his energy into his fight against the homophobia, the Catholic Church und the eroding democracy in his country. Consequently, his art is not destined to decorate the walls of a home. His art is – true to Picasso's dictum – fight, a tool to attack and to defend. Rycharski is determined: "Poland is right in the middle of a deep crisis. We need to spur on change."

His work reveals a political standpoint and an urgency that is not to be found in Austrian art right now. The curator Katarzyna Uszynska-Matt, artistic director of the Kahan Art Space Vienna enthuses: "In our space, we want to show meaningful political art, and therefore we had to look across the border." She found what she was looking for in Poland, where a restrictive political situation leads to more activism and subsequently to more originality. "How Daniel Rycharski infuses his work with political and peaceful activism feels really special to me."

Alas, everything he does is encumbered by adverse circumstances. Since the PiS – the party for Law and Justice – came into power, these same norms do not seem to apply to Rycharski anymore. He is the target of death threats and mobbing in the Social Media, planned exhibitions are being cancelled, and even his tenure at the College of Education at the University of Cracow is in jeopardy. "The way I create my art is along the intersections of my identity. These are the LGBT issues, my faith and my rural upbringing." Which is how he rips right into the heart of his fellow Poles.

This controversy has made Rycharski quite famous in his homeland. "His exhibition last year at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw – the most important museum of Contemporary Art in Poland – was a huge success, notwithstanding the political hostilities", explains Uszynska-Matt. The artist therefore perfectly embodies the ideological division in Poland; it is through people like him that the gradual political reorganization and erosion of democracy can be described best.

Daniel Rycharski grew up in the countryside, in Kurowko, a village in central Poland. He studied art in Cracow but returned to his community afterwards. "I had the

feeling that if I stayed in the big town, it would be as if I went into the forest with a tree. There are so many artists there, and so much has been already said." And something else bothered him: "Artistic institutions in Poland do not even consider the villages anymore. They are present only in the big towns, and they set up exhibitions for an elite."

His concept was a more revolutionary one: to return to the countryside as a homosexual artist and be inspired by the "problems, fears and dreams" of its community. His open support of the LGBT culture is not only an artistic position in this environment, but also a stark political one.

Regarding the past presidential election in July 2020, Rycharski says: "Whoever is homophobic and against the rights of the LGBT voted for Duda. Whoever is liberal, voted for Trzaskowski." The mayor of Warsaw and presidential challenger Rafal Trzaskowski signed the so-called "LGBT-Charta" in February 2019, in which he conceded more rights to the people concerned. At the other end of the spectrum, President Andrzej Duda drafted the "Family Charta", which aims to impede the possibility of abortions, to dial down the sexual education of children and to cut the rights of LGBT people. This is what he says about them: "They want to convince you that they are humans. But this is an ideology."

This is how one wins votes in Poland today. As a backlash to the "LGBT-Charta", five of 16 voivodeships (government districts) voluntarily installed so called "LGBT-free zones". Those may have no legal effect, but they are highly symbolic as they highlight the tear ripping through the country. The activist Jakub Gawron visually presented the split in his geographic "atlas of hate". It is a blueprint for the results of the latest presidential election: in all these districts, Duda prevailed, with a win of 51,03 percent of the vote in total.

Rycharski cannot help wondering: "Even though the whole state apparatus, the public TV stations, the Polish Post Office and the government backed him, Duda's lead was still minimal." He himself supported Trzaskowski. The latter's party did file a complaint at the Polish High Court against the voting results because of counting irregularities and biased media coverage. However, the Court confirmed the validity of the presidential election back in August 2020.

Since the PiS took power in Poland, the country is frequently at the receiving end of warnings from the European Commission. At the end of July this year, the Commission removed six Polish towns, which had identified themselves as "LGBT-free zones", from its EU-wide twinning program. Coupled with financial relief, its aim is it to reinforce institutions and administrations. The European Council on the other hand criticized Poland's planned withdrawal from the Istanbul treaty, which criminalizes any violence against women. However, the Polish foreign minister has already characterized the pact as a "feminist creation to justify the homosexual ideology". And lately, the European Commission started its fourth treaty violation proceedings against Poland, because a new law there is jeopardizing the independence of the Polish judges.

For all their legal reforms, the PiS party can count on President Duda's support. The new, old President goes by the nickname "dlugopis", a word that is not only a play on the party's name PiS but means "pen" in Polish. Duda's reputation means he is reliably signing off everything that the PiS-controlled parliament is putting in front of him.

Rycharski is frequently reflecting on the divided Polish society: "Many people living in the cities and the elite are trying to cut themselves off from the provinces. After the recent political changes, the differences have become even more pronounced." In his opinion, initiatives are needed to bring people together again. The artist leads by example by having founded a healing and helping project in which he pays farmers to take care of LGBT people. "It is a sort of social service. Working together and living together on the farm becomes a kind of therapy, through which the farmers heal our country from hate and homophobia." It is in moments like these that one feels the deep love Rycharski has for the countryside and his profound belief that the rural community can and should play a crucial part in the cultural development of Poland.

This project is even more astonishing because most farmers are staunch PiS-voters. "But they are able to understand the whole scope of the situation. When I ask farmers if they are ready to help a LGBT person, their curiosity is much stronger than their fear or rejection." The artist's thinking is messianic: „I am searching for a way to make human beings accept one another. I am building a bridge between the LGBT people, the farmers, and the conservatives. This is my very personal answer to the President and his so-called LGBT ideology." Rycharski's eyes are flashing.

Religious zeal is of course in any Poles' blood. The Church plays a crucial role in a country in which 86% of the population are baptized Roman Catholics (according to a 2019 survey from Eurobarometer). "Church is important. During Communism, they were the 'good ones', keeping persecuted people safe and defending democracy," Rycharski explains.

How times have changed. The archbishop of Cracow, Marek Jedraszewski, spoke of the Church having fought the "red plague", but went on to say: "This does not mean that there is not a new plague... not in Red this time, but in the colors of the Rainbow." In a pastoral letter in 2019, he eventually identified the so-called "LGBT ideology" as a threat for the freedom of all Catholics. The reason, according to the archbishop, is the LGBT culture's radical rejection of God.

Rycharski is convinced: "The main problem is the Catholic Church – the conservative Catholic Church, to be exact". The artist is fighting it also through another strong work showing a Ku Klux Klan hat floating on

top of a liturgical habit instead of the traditional Mitra. "To me, the conservative Catholic Church is like the Ku Klux Klan in the USA." The Church has supported Duda during his presidential campaign; in exchange there will be money donations and the advent of new laws pushing very conservative religious values. For instance, there is a law waiting to pass forbidding homosexual couples from adopting children at a constitutional level. Another example is the abortion law, which is expected to be tightened considerably, among much protest in the population.

About his work "Ku Klux Klan", Rycharski says: "Religion is like a costume. Sometimes an incredibly beautiful costume, but only what lies beneath is truly important." In this case, the cloak is veiling the hate of the Catholic Church against anybody not conforming to their values, shrouded in its traditional pomp. Another of Rycharski's sculptures, titled "The drop digs the rock", circles around the same issue. Curator Uszynska-Matt: „The Churches resting on debris... they are small and abandoned, they show us the emptiness of a Church that has forgotten about its content and has lost touch with its people. In short, a Church that has discriminated and excluded Daniel Rycharski and people like him. "However: "I am a Pole, and I cannot repudiate the roots of the Catholic Church", Rycharski emphasizes. So, he first tried to find answers within the Church, to initiate a shift from the inside. "I thought I could change the Catholic Church. For a long time, four or five years, I used to work with a Catholic group, we called ourselves the Rainbow Catholics." But he found his efforts to be fruitless, and now does reject the traditional religious Christendom.

Another aspect of Rycharki's critique of Church and society is their handling of WWII. PiS' nationalistic rhetoric is barring any reevaluation of that time. To that goal, they put a special „censorship law" into effect, which penalizes any insinuation that Poland might share some responsibility for the Crimes of the Third Reich. PiS justified the law by hinting at possible blackmailing to get reparation payments, part of an alleged international conspiracy against the country.

Rycharski's reaction was his project "Island". On a small island near his hometown, he installed Jewish tombstones, in this case requisites from the movie "Poklosie", which is dealing with Polish guilt during WWII. In front of the stones, Rycharski planted flowers in all the colors of the rainbow, their number corresponding to the number of the Jewish inhabitants of the town in 1939. "Through this work, I compared antisemitism to homophobia". These flowers stand for remembrance and against hate: "I believe in a gradualistic policy; in that we have to start a slow change. I do not want any violence."

This attitude is distinguishing todays artists' generation from the one of the 80ies and 90-ies, Uszynska-Matt points out. "The generation today is less political at first sight. There is a lot of irony and skepticism. Daniel Rycharski is trying to live a calm, long term kind of actionism. He protests with the means of art, without ever losing the ability for dialogue".

The artist is asking relevant questions that reach far across Poland's borders. He is speaking to any human being who has lost a spiritual home, cannot live free or is politically oppressed. Rycharski nods: "It might not be easy – but ultimately it is the job of the artist to look behind the curtain and to question what people are believing in."



Daniel Rycharski,
Monument to a Peasant,
2015, mixed media,
dimensions variable



Daniel Rycharski, *Fears*, 2019, Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw, Poland, exhibition view

Daniel Rycharski, *Fears*, 2019, Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw, Poland, exhibition view





Daniel Rycharski, *We Are a Fairy Tale Inside*, 2023, Kurówko, Sierpc County, Masovia, Poland, exhibition view



Daniel Rycharski, *We Are a Fairy Tale Inside*, 2023, Kurówko, Sierpc County, Masovia, Poland, exhibition view

Daniel Rycharski
Double Headed Eagle,
2023, wood, grains of
wheat and barley
124 x 120 x 2 cm



Daniel Rycharski
Golden Calf, 2022,
brass, 60 x 100 x 25 cm



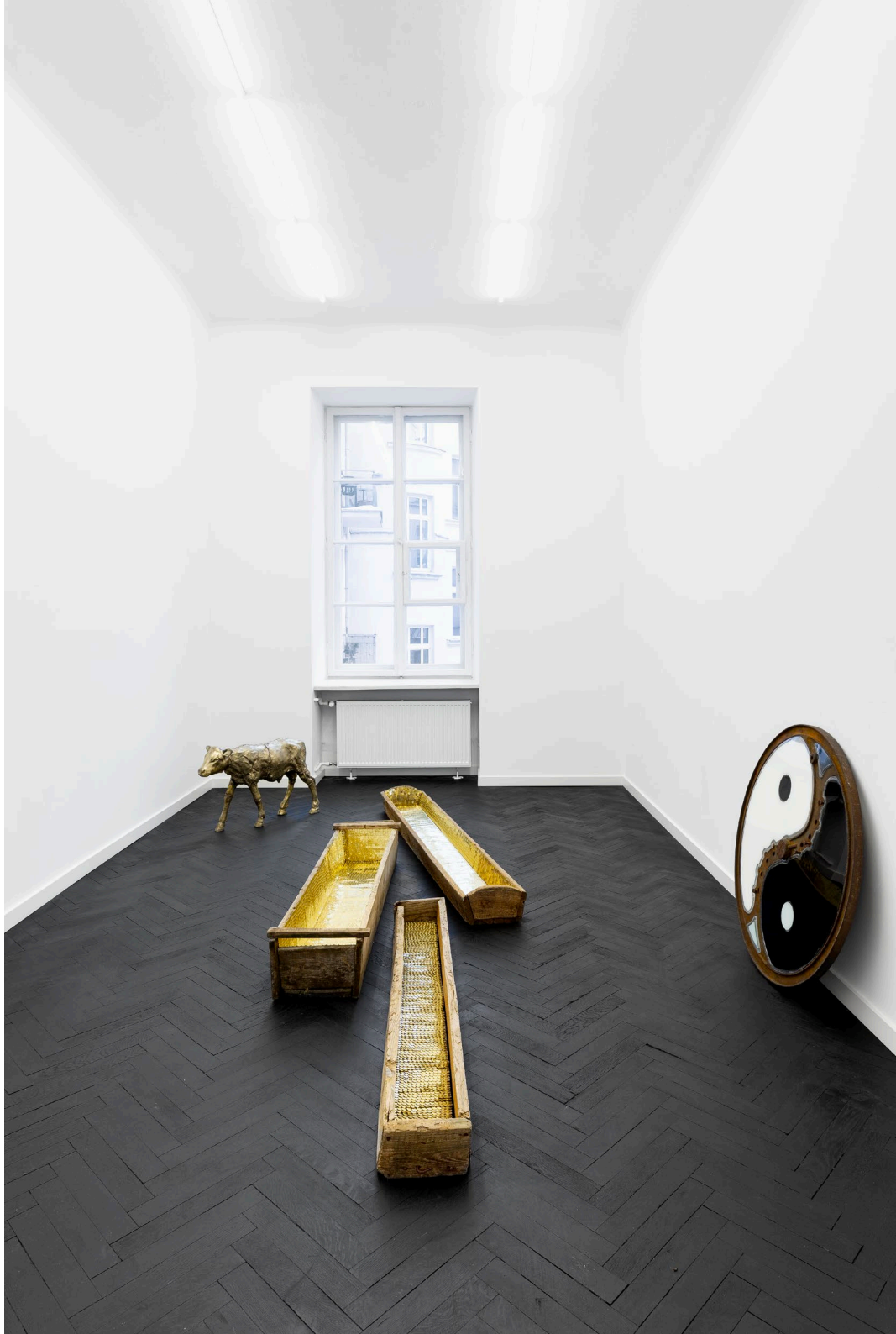


Daniel Rycharski, *Dead Class*, 2022, Gunia Nowik Gallery, Warsaw, Poland, exhibition view



Daniel Rycharski,
Trough #1 (Cepelia out of the pigsty), 2022
wood, pennies,
173 x 35 x 26 cm

Daniel Rycharski, *Dead Class*, 2022, Gunia Nowik Gallery, Warsaw, Poland, exhibition view





Daniel Rycharski, *I can tell you about me about you* (with Władysław Hasior), 2024, State Gallery of Art, Sopot, Poland, exhibition view



Daniel Rycharski, *I can tell you about me about you* (with Władysław Hasior), 2024, State Gallery of Art, Sopot, Poland, exhibition view



Daniel Rycharski, *Passion*, 2024, (metal tools, weather resistant paint, fifteen sculptural groups in a specific order, variable dimensions), Park Staromiejski, Łódź, Poland, exhibition view



Daniel Rycharski, *Passion*, 2024, (metal tools, weather resistant paint, fifteen sculptural groups in a specific order, variable dimensions), Park Staromiejski, Łódź, Poland, exhibition view



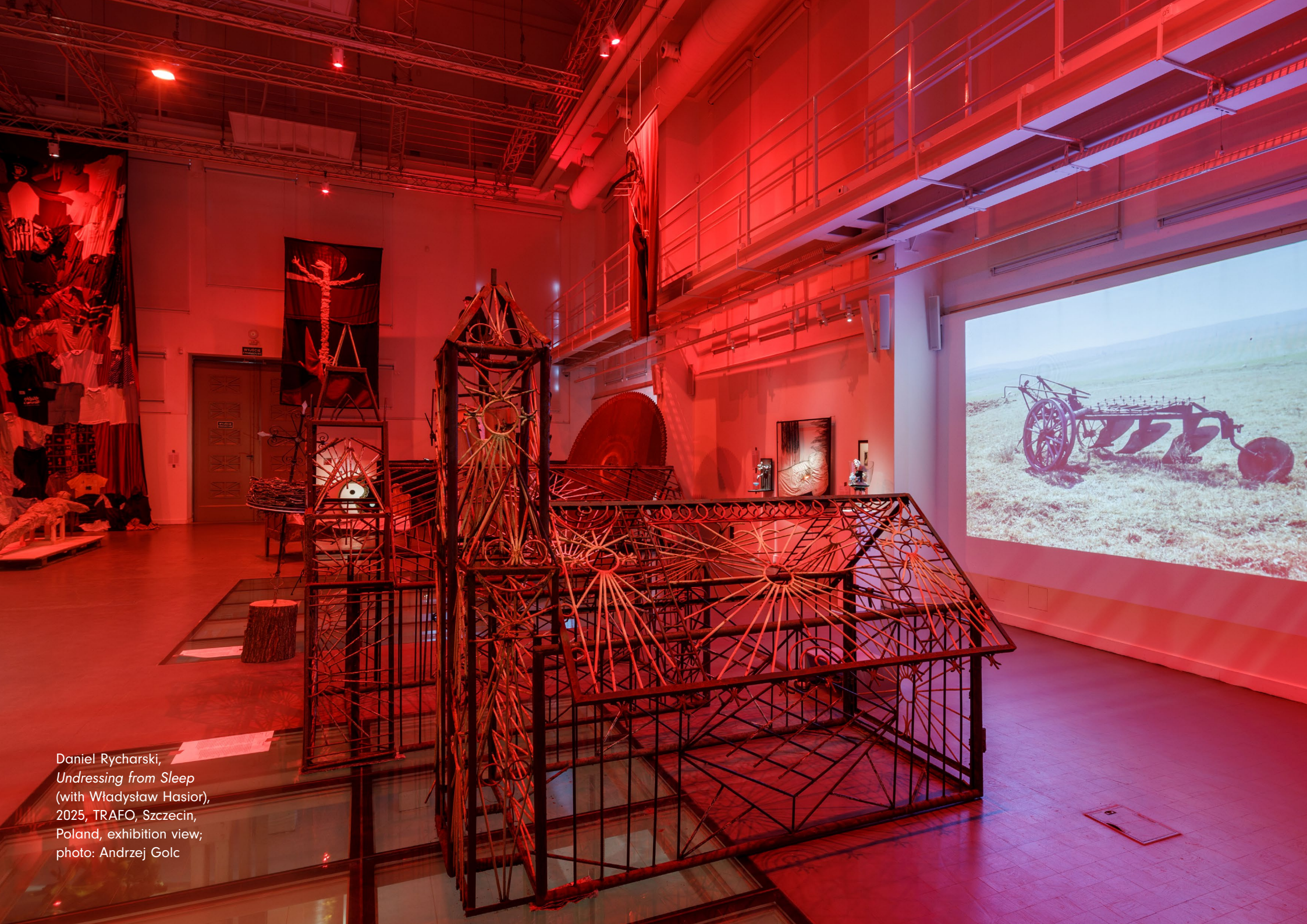
Daniel Rycharski, *Passion*, 2024, (metal tools, weather resistant paint, fifteen sculptural groups in a specific order, variable dimensions), Park Staromiejski, Łódź, Poland, exhibition view

Daniel Rycharski at Basel Social Club, Switzerland, June 2025, exhibition view, photo: Souvenir.Services / Moritz Schermbach. Courtesy the artist and Gunia Nowik Gallery





Daniel Rycharski,
Undressing from Sleep
(with Władysław Hasior),
2025, TRAFO, Szczecin,
Poland, exhibition view;
photo: Andrzej Golc



Daniel Rycharski,
Undressing from Sleep
(with Władysław Hasior),
2025, TRAFO, Szczecin,
Poland, exhibition view;
photo: Andrzej Golc



Daniel Rycharski,
Undressing from Sleep
(with Władysław Hasior),
2025, TRAFO, Szczecin,
Poland, exhibition view;
photo: Andrzej Golc



Daniel Rycharski, *Bread*, 2025, bread, men's underwear, conservation layer, 55 x 55 x 77 cm

The movie *Fears*, 2021, based on the life of Daniel Rycharski, directed by Łukasz Ronduda and Łukasz Gutt

Click here to watch



GNG

Gunia Nowik Gallery

Bracka 20a
Warsaw, Poland
Opening Hours:
Tue–Sat: 12 to 6 pm
+48 516 04 42 72
gunianowikgallery.com
info@gunianowikgallery.com