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LOOPING ARTS, RESEARCH, AND THE STREETS IN RECENT POLISH PROTESTS

Abstract

Using the case study of the 2020/21 Strajk Kobiet [Women's Strike] protests in Poland, this project looks at the relationship between research(ers) and social movements, the blurred line between artist and activist, and the purpose of archiving within a protest wave. What renderings are effective when research needs to exist in a close loop with the streets? Is the role of the artist during a protest wave to disseminate awareness or knowledge, and inspire, or can artistic research be a form of knowledge-development, and therefore a rendering of the research to further political goals and develop political strategies? What is the role of the archive?

Against a backdrop of digitised-mediatised politics and a *fascistisation* of politics globally, this research looks to address an urgent need for dynamic renderings and more structured looping of research, arts, archiving and the streets in the fight for better futures. Posing more questions than offering answers, this exploratory process comes from a personal intersection of academic investigation and activist practice.

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Introduction

This research is a first foray into the question as to whether and how research can be looped back into the streets to strengthen or shift political narratives and strategies, and looks at the role of the artist-activist in real-time research and archiving of social movements. This research comes from a personal intersection of academic investigation and activist practice, as well as a belief in the importance of the queer-feminist movement as a key site of antifascist theory and praxis.

Contemporary global feminism is the most important antifascist struggle, arguing for a major shift in political theory that still separates feminism as some 'other politics' rather than situating it at the core of today's political struggles — as should be the case given the efficiency, internationalism, and numbers of those involved in feminism today. (Majewska, Feminist Antifascism, 6)

When organising protests we — loosely-speaking, activists — would now and then try to find a moment to breathe and to ask ourselves: *Is what we are doing effective? Is this the right strategy? What are we demanding? Where is the movement heading?*

In the eye of the storm, however, there is rarely enough time to sit down, take a step back, and reflect. Acknowledging that this research is happening against a backdrop of digitised-mediatised politics and a fascistisation of politics globally, the urgency of finding dynamic renderings and a looping of research, arts, archiving and the streets becomes critical. As argued by a number of theorists, including Mark Fisher who observed that “protests have formed a kind of carnivalesque background noise to capitalist

realism” (14), rarely do contemporary protests employ tactics that are sufficiently effective to achieve their own demands due to imbalances in power and political agency against the ruling elites. A mass of people — when faced with the concentrated power of a fascistic state, such as that in Poland — is not in and of itself a threat, and very often mass outbursts of energy in the form of street protests dissipate once their futility becomes evident to participants.

So how do we harness the potential of bodies in the street in a way that feels actually threatening to those we are fighting against? Chantal Mouffe has argued for a “left populism”, a construction of “the people” against “the elites” but from the vantage point of leftist demands that aim to foster an alternative to the current system, as opposed to its more commonly discussed right-wing counterpart(s). Such a polarisation of populisms has developed in Poland too, and becomes evident when comparing the right-wing outbursts on Independence Day (11 November) or lately also on the anniversary of the outbreak of the Warsaw Uprising (1 August), with the queer-feminist outbursts on International Women’s Day (8 March), in the form of Pride Marches (throughout the summer), and during particular protest waves, such as the 2016 Black Protests, or the latest 2020/21 Strajk Kobiet [Women’s Strike] demonstrations that this text is focusing on.[1] Paradoxically, the Polish right-wing populism, while employing the anti-establishmentarian tropes of global populist trends, is fully and often also openly supported by the ruling elites, represented by the ruling party PiS (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość [Law and Justice]) and the Catholic Church. This cannot be said for the (queer-)feminist movement, which is often read as threatening to the core idea of ‘Polishness’ as represented by the core family unit and the Church (Graff, Graff and Korolczuk, Majewska). A discussion

of this tension as to whether the movement should fight for space within the concept of 'Polishness' or position itself as outside or against it will be discussed in the below section on reclaiming nationalist symbols.

As this paper comes from personal experiences of organising during the 2020-21 protest wave, an observed core element of this outburst — as well as the entire wave, the start of which is marked in 2016 — is the use of art. The use of art in the Polish feminist movement and the blurring of the artist and activist is mentioned by most scholars writing on the movement's different aspects (it is impossible to ignore), but rarely is there reflection on the agency afforded by the use of art — with the exception of Ewa Majewska who writes on this extensively. Both artists and activists task themselves with an imag(in)ing, referring to the notion of imagination as social practice (McKee 6). Knowledge-making is one necessary step in the process of imag(in)ing a better future, and rendering is another. There is another aspect to the use of art — artistic spaces are often highly academic, artists are reflecting, commenting, and disrupting, backed by a wealth of knowledge and theory. Can this knowledge be looped back into the streets in an impactful way, in a way that does not keep the knowledge only within artistic circles? How can this be done immediately — 'in real-time' — to figure out the most effective tactics, the most achievable demands during a protest wave?

This research, therefore, specifically focuses on this blurry line between the artist and the activist during a protest wave, and looks to artistic interventions and 'art' as forms of rendering research, as well as investigating the role of archiving within this framework. This text will first look at the potential of changing narratives within a protest wave, and then within this context discuss various uses of art: art used as means of (re)

claiming national symbols and (re)claiming public space; commoning artistic practices and dissolving the line between the artist, the activist, and the participant; the affective potential of sound; and the role of the archive.

The questions posed throughout this text, as well as outside it, are: what renderings are effective when research needs to exist in a close loop with the streets? Is the role of the artist and of art during a protest wave to disseminate awareness or knowledge, and inspire, or can artistic research be a form of knowledge development, and therefore a rendering of the research to further political goals and develop political strategies?

And finally: when, as an activist, maybe a new one, should you be finding time to read academic or semi-academic texts? This particular point is important to keep in mind. Since 2016 — and the same happened during the 2020/21 wave — many protesters and organisers, activists, were new. Many scholars have talked of a generational shift, and a 'new way' of doing feminism in Poland, away from its former NGO-ised, formalised, and elitist forms (Ramme and Snochowska-Gonzalez, Graff and Korolczuk). How do you balance new energy and ideas with experience and knowledge of political processes and developments? There cannot be a knowledge exam to enter and engage with spaces of political organising but situating a protest wave or social movement within broader and longer-term political processes is necessary in discussions of next steps and future tactics. Can artists and art — as possible links between the academic and activist worlds — bridge this gap, and complete the loop between research and the streets?

Context

On the day of the announcement of the de facto abortion ban by the Polish Constitutional Tribunal on 22 October 2020, protesters took to the streets in hundreds of cities and towns across the country. The almost daily Strajk Kobiet [Women's Strike] protests lasted over three months. The demonstrations, despite the large numbers and wide resonance in public, media and digital spheres, did not stop the ruling from being published and thus becoming law. They did, however, lead to now an all-time high public support for the liberalisation of abortion law, which according to a recent poll sits at 66%,^[2] and an attempt — albeit an unsuccessful one — to pass a civic bill for the liberalisation of abortion through the Sejm (Polish Parliament) in June 2022. Important to note is that while the protests against restricting access to abortion began in 2016 with the first Black Protests, the entire process began already in 1992, when the Polish Catholic Church successfully bargained for abortion access to be restricted following the end of the so-called communist era (for an outline, see Fuszara, Graff and Korolczuk).

The fascistic desire of the Polish government to control the bodies of those who can bear children is tied to visions of a perfect Polish nation — one that is white, Catholic, and patriarchal. Controlling women's^[3] bodies is a key element in this. The de facto abortion ban not only aimed to 'encourage' more births, but also aimed to paint childbirth as something heroic.

Poland's conservative government is also promoting a valorous vision of Poland's past, emphasising its (rare) military victories and fetishising the (more common) failures, thus imposing on the population a heroic,

martyrological model of citizenship and political agency. Such heroism is also forced on women via limitations on access to contraceptives, abortion and reproductive health strategies. This is also promoted by the image of the (self-sacrificing) Polish mother, who combines a patriotic sense of reproductive obligation with a resignation from career and political ambition. (Majewska, Feminist Antifascism, 14)

A sacrificial act for the nation — men die in combat, women in childbirth. An understanding of reproductive labour as unpaid labour that sustains individualistic and patriarchal neoliberal societies, and the economic subjugation consequently experienced by women, deepens the importance of focusing on feminist movements and their building of common solidarity when fighting for an alternative future (Kurylo). Several scholars have observed the self-definition of protesters as "ordinary women" (Gunnarson Payne, Korolczuk), and this transition towards recognising commonalities among the protesters signals towards the building of "a people", bound by collective experiences and collective emotions, as will be discussed later. Significantly, both Majewska and Federici use the concept of the "commons" as an expression of an alternative world emerging from feminist organising, complemented by Lilja's concept of "constructive resistance"; this idea of the commons will emerge throughout this text, including in the discussion of art as an integral part of this social movement.

Changing narratives

There is a reason we say social *movements* — it is because they do not stay static. While this idea of the commons was present throughout the protests, the diversity of the participants meant that there were shifts occurring in many directions. How narratives can shift is something important to illustrate before trying to look at if and how they can be influenced. To contextualise this particular outburst, the Strajk Kobiet protest wave in winter 2020/21 was much larger in number and more politically radical than in previous years. The prolific use of swear words and words like ‘war’ and ‘hell’ on the one hand, and words like ‘revolution’ and ‘care’, and the usage of ‘strike’ as a synonym of ‘demonstration’ on the other, signalled a shift towards more radical feminist thought (Kurylo) — one that had been arguably emerging in the groups and activists around the radical *Manifa* (International Women’s Day) protests, which started in 2000 (Graff).

The focus on the word ‘strike’[4] had the means to point towards tactics that also have an economic impact and therefore give the protesters greater bargaining power. City blockades were a start in this direction. As observed during the protests, there were split opinions as to how to engage with other social groups joining and supporting them, such as taxi drivers, public transport drivers, and farmers. There were many disagreements that came out of knowing that the other social and groups have their own agendas and there were fears of the focus being shifted away from the ruling banning abortion. Could this have been negotiated to develop a socially broader movement directed at the fascist policies of the PiS government? Could concerted pressure based on an analysis of the ideological threads present among the protesters have led to a more radical

stance of the leadership, and by extension the movement? Could this potential coalition have helped to develop more effective strategies?



Figure 1: A blockade of one of Warsaw’s main streets.
© Archiwum Protestów Publicznych / Rafał Milach

An example of a narrative shift is reflected in the movement’s relationship to the police. In the early days, many people celebrated policemen and -women joining the protests, acting as in more liberal feminist settings. As the weeks went on, the police were deployed to brutally suppress the protests which was widely documented, and the OSK (Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet [All-Poland Women’s Strike]) leadership changed its stance and adopted the anti-fascist slogan ‘Zdejmij mundur, przeproś matkę’ [Take off your uniform, apologise to your mother] — and led to individual participants to act on this too, including a regular appearance from an activist dressed as a tear gas can. As a side note, the performance of this costume afforded the activist (artist?) much coverage in mainstream and social media.



Figure 2: © Archiwum Protestów Publicznych / Rafał Milach

At the same time, as frustrations with the ineffectiveness of the methods and tactics that were being used were shaking up the initially fairly solid intersectional solidarity within the movement, some more liberal voices were starting to use the right-wing propaganda rhetoric to ‘not divide the movement’ by focusing too much on the queer community. There were debates about using the word women, or people with uteruses, or people who can become pregnant, and in response to including points addressing the problems faced by the queer community in OSK’s extended list of demands, some voices argued that the so-called ‘gender ideology’[5] will alienate protesters and supporters. Within a week of the outbreak on 22 October, OSK published their initial list of demands in which they called for a Rada Konsultacyjna [Advisory Council] and began shaping it a few days later. Ewa Majewska discusses some frustrations regarding this process in her contribution in *The Situation of Women in Poland 2020*. Importantly, this

moment showed the problems of the protesters’ diversity – some thought the demands went too far, others that they did not go far enough. A main criticism was not including ‘abortion on demand up to 12 weeks’ on the list, a demand that was arguably central to the entire protest wave, causing a storm on OSK’s Facebook page.[6] Not wishing to delve deep into questions and complexities of hierarchy and leadership of these protests within this text, this is an aspect that nonetheless bears keeping in mind, particularly in the following sketches on the use of and effect of art in the protests.

What the above has illustrated is that simultaneously we were seeing, subjectively when considering a shift towards the left as positive, progressive narrative shifts and regressive narrative shifts. A movement does not have an inevitable path — events and actors within and around it can influence its development.



Figure 3: A scene from one of the protests in Warsaw. © Archiwum Protestów Publicznych / Paweł Starzec

(Re)claiming national(ist) symbols

One of the battlefields of the movement has been the right to public space. Until the recent outbreaks of queer-feminist protests, the right-wing in Poland had been consistently and overwhelmingly claiming public spaces as their own. Anti-abortion billboards depicting fetuses, *plodobusy* (vans, that drive around with gruesome images of aborted fetuses and use their speakers to spread hateful messages), graffiti relating to historical battles and uprisings, and displays of ‘heroism’ by nationalists, such as during the Independence Day marches on 11th November, are all part of the right-wing’s campaign to dominate public space. Particularly on 11th November, over the last few years mainstream and social media has been filled with images of crowds of, largely, men holding red flares and getting into fights. The photos are eerie and become disconcerting when a closer look shows the nationalist, homophobic, racist, and misogynist slogans, and blatant displays of neo-Nazi symbolism.

The reclaiming of public space is part of the feminist fight against the binary of public and private — with ‘women’s issues’ often relegated to the private sphere — and for the visibility and agency of women in public. This was argued by Nancy Fraser in “Rethinking the Public Space”:

In general, critical theory needs to take a harder, more critical look at the terms ‘private’ and ‘public’. These terms, after all, are not simply straightforward designations of societal spheres; they are cultural classifications and rhetorical labels. In political discourse, they are powerful terms that are frequently deployed to delegitimize

some interests, views and topics and to valorise others. (73)

Alongside the reclaiming of public space by the sheer presence of bodies in the streets, in and of itself an act of resistance, there were broader artistic methods used for the same purpose. Some of these included stickers, billboards with the phone number of the grassroots initiative Abortion Dream Team, projections, (often humorous) costumes, and graffiti — all of which can and should be considered as art. The OSK logo, which includes the symbolic red lightning bolt, was also everywhere; the logo is black, white, and red — the white and red deeply entrenched in the Polish consciousness as the national colours, and the black arguably continuing the legacy of the Black Protests. The red flare was (re)claimed by the Strajk Kobiet protesters too, building towards the overarching question raised by the protests: who does Poland belong to?



Figure 4: © Archiwum Protestów Publicznych / Bartek Sadowski

The complicated relationship between feminism and national symbolism has been discussed by Agnieszka Graff:

One the one hand, it is marked by the need to reclaim women’s place within national history (...). It is a question of

belonging. On the other hand, there is a string impulse to reject all national symbols as inevitably nationalistic (xenophobic as well as sexist and homophobic). (...) Can such a tradition be reclaimed by a struggle for gender equality? Can a feminist patriotism (as distinct from nationalism) exist without fuelling the very discourse it hopes to contest? (474)

As Graff also mentions in her text, right-wing groups have previously sued queer-feminist activists for ‘blasphemy against patriotism’ (or for ‘offending religious beliefs’), for example for the reworking of the Warsaw Uprising symbol, the anchor, from ‘Polska Walcząca’ [Fighting Poland] to ‘Polka Walcząca’ [Fighting Polish Woman], or for the famous Rainbow Madonna, an adaptation of the icon of the Black Madonna of Częstochowa with a rainbow-coloured halo representing the queer movement. Is this the right battle to be fighting?

In the 2020/21 wave, artistic interventions were a significant part of this tug-of-war over national(ist) symbols. During one of the protest nights, the Polish epic drama *Dziady* [best translated as ‘old croaks’] by Poland’s most famous bard Adam Mickiewicz, was restaged with the modern ‘Dziad’ Kaczyński in a starring role, in a building opposite his house in Warsaw’s Żoliborz district. In Poznań, one of the city blockades was accompanied by the sounds of the polonaise — a national dance — thanks to which the next morning’s headline in *Gazeta Wyborcza* read ‘Drivers applaud. Gays Dance the Polonaise’.[7] A particularly resonant case is the renaming of Warsaw’s Rondo Dmowskiego [Dmowski Roundabout] to the Rondo Praw Kobiet [Women’s Rights Roundabout]. Dmowski was one of the main ideologues of Polish nationalism at the turn of the 20th century. The name change was first done symbolically throughout the protests,

with activists mounting self-made signs to mark the name change; the petition to make the name change official was approved in December 2021 by the Warsaw Council and is currently awaiting further legal steps; in Kraków a square opposite a PiS party office has already been officially renamed to the Skwer Praw Kobiet [Women’s Rights Square]. In a country in which the majority of public sites are named after religious, political, and military figures — you would be hard pressed not to find a street named after the General Józef Piłsudski or Pope John Paul II in any Polish town — these symbolic changes signal small steps towards carving out alternative sites for public memory.



Figure 5: Activist changing the name of the Dmowski Roundabout. © Archiwum Protestów Publicznych / Wojtek Radwański

Such actions can be understood as a rendering of a feminist redefining of the public-private sphere binary, using already existing tools and the well-established mechanisms of politics of spectacle (Debord) and an exercising of a right to the city (Levebvre). Additionally, the relationship with national(ist) symbols is a fight for belonging in the imagined community of the Polish nation — one that also has space and celebrates women, queer people, and other marginalised groups.[8] Arguably, this is the process of creating “a feminist people” that Gunnarsson Payne references with regards to the Black Protests, echoing Judith Butler’s

writings on a construction of “the people” (*Notes Towards*) and Chantal Mouffe’s thesis on a “left populism”. There is a personal ambivalence with regards to the reclaiming of national symbols as a tactic, echoing Audre Lorde’s oft-cited “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house”, but its prolific use is testament to the broad coalition of actors and positions that made up the protests, as well as its specificities with regards as to who “the people” (the feminist protesters) were targeting as their enemy (“the elite”): the Catholic Church and the PiS party.

Art of the commons

Should we be trying to reclaim a system that is built on our exclusion, or should we be building alternatives? What does it mean when artists/activists focus on reclaiming national or nationalist symbols? Returning to Ewa Majewska (*Feminist Antifascism*, 82), she proposes the notion of “weak resistance” as an alternative to the heroic displays of reclaiming national symbols. This is resistance that is not heroic, but one that invites alliances, heterogeneity, and non-individualism. It requires participation. It is not glamorous or individualistic, but functions on the premise of building a new reality based on a utopic idea of the common(s), and not on the reclaiming of the current system. It is about building a sense of belonging through the finding of “common ground”:

Solidarity involves commitment, and work, as well as the recognition that even if we do not have the same feelings, or the same lives, or the same bodies, we do live on common ground”. (Ahmed, Cultural Politics of Emotion, 189)



Figure 6: © Archiwum Protestów Publicznych / Rafał Milach

Centering on this idea of the *commons*, as argued for by many feminist theorists (including many not directly cited in this text), it is also this kind of non-heroic, non-individualistic art, created by artists-activists during, for and around a movement, that informed the feeling of belonging during the protest wave. This is also the point at which the line between artist and activist — both of which are tasked with an imag(in)ing of a different future — disappears. A similar phenomenon was observed by Yates McKee during the Occupy movement (of which he was also a participant):

Artists were not the only participants in Occupy engaged in [artistic] activities, nor did they play a privileged role qua artists – a professional identity that was of secondary importance even while specific artistic skills and resources proved highly valuable. Reciprocally (...), organisers and participants in Occupy with no professional training in art per se found their own work influenced by aesthetic concerns with visibility, performance and poetics. (McKee, Strike Art, 26)

McKee also talks about the practice of “commoning”, citing Hardt and Negri and their attuning to “the subjective, affective and imaginative dimensions of the movements in their practices of commoning” (20) and Majewska talks about anti-fascist art strategies, which “diversify and traverse the old borders between legal and unregulated, institutional and squatted” (“A Bitter Victory?”, 8). One of two clear examples of the commoning of art is the red lightning bolt. The red lightning bolt was designed by Ola Jasionowska as the logo of OSK (Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet [All-Poland Women’s Strike]), a now NGO-ised organisation, which took over the leadership of the protests in Poland. Ola Jasionowska, a designer who has been working with the City of Warsaw, gave this symbol to the movement, and its meaning shifted according to its mood — at times meaning rage, warning, power. The symbol was on face masks, on protest signs, graffitied everywhere, on people’s social media profiles. Its use on social media allowed people to rehearse participation in the movement online, before taking to the streets physically, as it allowed people to see common ground with others in their network (Majewska, *Feminist Antifascism*).

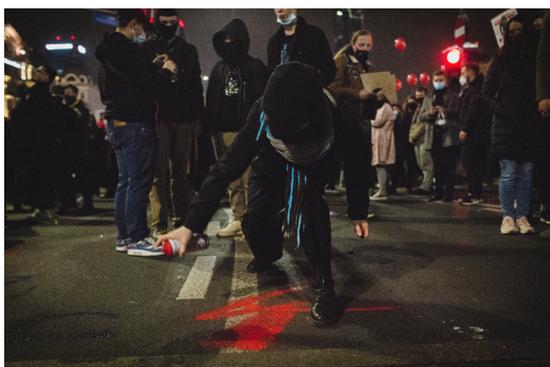


Figure 7: © Archiwum Protestów Publicznych / Agata Kubis

The red lightning bolt was added to the famous neon of the volleyball player in Warsaw, it was in the aerial image of a flash mob that formed the word ‘Strajk’ [Strike] in one of Kraków’s main parks, and it was on the OSK flag planted atop a mountain near Zakopane. Each such intervention was additionally and intentionally documented for social media. The ubiquity of the red lightning bolt in both public and digital spaces over that three-month period transformed this simple symbol into a symbol of belonging to a movement and to a community. On walks through Polish cities, you can still see it displayed in people’s car windows, hung on people’s balconies, or sewn onto their clothes. It was all part of the spectacle of the protests, which when taken as a whole can be understood holistically as a performance and a work of art. By understanding spectacle as “a social relation between people that is mediated by images” (Debord 2), the use of social media in this particular protest wave becomes an even more integral part of the equation. Remembering that these protests were happening during an instated official ban on social gatherings, including protests, due to the pandemic, many actions were executed with the digital audience in mind.

A second example of art of the commons were protest signs. They were humorous, informative, political, and theoretical. Some would reference feminist thinkers, including the Polish theorist Maria Janion, some would criticise the interference of the Church in matters of healthcare (which includes abortion) and education, others would make comparisons between Kaczyński, Poland’s current de facto leader, and General Jaruzelski, who introduced martial law to quell the Solidarity movement in the early 1980s — once famously depicted as a Tinder match between the two men. Others were puns on the acronym ‘PiS’ or swear words, adorned with the symbolism of the red lightning bolt, as well

as variations on the vocabulary and themes referenced earlier on: care, revolution, hell, war, strike, solidarity, as well as direct references to abortion as a right.

Are protest signs art? Many Polish artists and museums seem to think so: they were displayed in one (Warsaw's Museum of Modern Art), were collected by one (Gdańsk Museum), and were due to be displayed — but ultimately censored — by another (Kraków's Cricoteka). They also contributed to the coherent visual identity of the movement (its spectacle): the black and red colour scheme, the vocabulary and references on protest signs, the signs themselves in their extraordinary volumes, the red lightning bolt.

Majewska wrote in 2019:

So far, avant-garde art projects and efforts to transform institutions into counterpublics and parts of the common have not gained the popularity required to generate a mass sentiment of anti-fascism. Yet this is not a sign of the failure of the anti-fascist project but rather foregrounds the need to open these initiatives to a wider public — and, better, to realise them with the public rather than for it. (“A Bitter Victory?”, 8).

Has this outburst in 2020/21 achieved a mass sentiment of anti-fascism by unleashing an art of the common, by dissolving the line between artist and activist, by embracing the notion of the “emancipated spectator” (Rancière)? It certainly opened up Polish feminism to more radical discourses that have their root in a feminist antifascism, whether it was directly named or not during the protests. Protest signs will be returned to in the section on archives, but in this section they serve as an example of a rendering of the moods and ideologies permeating

through the movement, as well as creative outlets for each participant. They show that art belongs to everyone, that everybody can be an activist and an artist, and that art of the commons can lead to the forming of a sense of belonging and to give an outlet for thoughts and emotions in the resonant setting of a protest, as well as being a catalyst for radicalisation. This ties in well with Ramme and Snochowska-Gonzalez's study on the protesters' self-definition as “ordinary women”, as well as their “emotional solidarity” with one another (80). Taken as a whole, they are the visual rendering of the demands, ideologies, and actors of the movement, in their entire complexity.



Figure 8: Another example of the comparison between Kaczyński and Jaruzelski, displayed on a balcony in Kraków. © Archiwum Protestów Publicznych / Joanna Musiał

Affective sounds

As argued by many scholars working on populism, social movements, and feminism — many of whom have been referenced in this text — a key driver of a sense of belonging, common ground, and solidarity, as well as being a key motivator for joining the protests, is emotion. Butler comments that emotions can range from hope and joy to fear and rage, all of which often intermingle with one another and Lilja argues for the

performativity of emotions that “binds figures together, which then creates the effect of the collective” (347). When examining the rendering of impulses and ideologies within a movement, underlying discussions on the commons, community, and belonging is affect. Social movements are highly emotional, and an art that allows us to focus on and analyse the affective side of protests is sound.

Henri Levebvre’s last work on “rhythmanalysis” and the related figure of the “rhythmanalyst” can give us a first framework of examining the protests through sound:

More sensitive to times than to spaces, to moods than to images, to the atmosphere than to particular events... [the rhythmanalyst] is always ‘listening out’, but he does not only hear words, discourses, noises and sounds; he is capable of listening to a house, a street, a town as one listens to a symphony, an opera. Of course, he seeks to know how this music is composed, who plays it and for whom. (Levebvre, Rhythmanalysis, 87).

Here is an attempt at a rhythmanalysis of the 2020/21 protests:

When listening to what sounded out in the streets during each protest, you could typically hear chants, samba bands, speeches, as well as music — DJs playing techno, recordings of the polonaise, and other songs that became associated with the movement. Sometimes you could hear laughter, and the sound of feet stomping on the ground, in a walking rhythm or in a dancing rhythm. You could hear mostly femme voices. You could hear lively conversation, clapping, or sometimes a concentrated silence.

You could hear dystopic police announcements, most often delivered in a masculine voice, telling protesters to disperse as they were breaking the ban on public gathering. You could hear screams and shouts and protests as the police attacked protesters with tear gas. You could hear negotiations with the police, and announcements, most often delivered in a femme voice, instructing protesters on what to do next. Sometimes there was so much to hear, you would only hear a chaotic cluster.

The above description is not of one specific protest. It is an amalgam of protests personally remembered, experienced, read about, or watched the footage of. As per Levebvre’s rhythmanalysis, it brings up some questions: who was composing these protests? Was it the mass of protesters, was it its leaders, was it the police — or was it ultimately the government orchestrating it from above? Judith Butler talks of bodies assembling in public as a performative exercise of the right to appear (*Notes Towards*, 25) — is the sound of these bodies in public (silence is also sound) then an exercise in the right to be heard, and an expression of the fight to be listened to? If we see protests as performances (Kurylo, 14-15), then the protest-performance is not only visual, but has a sonic element too. Outside of sound studies, sound and music rarely get a mention in academic texts discussing protest aesthetics, beyond a nod to self-ascribed “anthems”[9] and mentions of chanting, shouting, and screaming. What about the music played at a protest? What about the totality of sounds that were heard? What about how the sound and music made the protesters feel?

The echoic and sensory memory of sound can be manifested in a physical way and the emotions associated with sounds of movements can be broad. As Brandon LaBelle argues, “sound and listening are highly adept carriers of compassion and the forcefulness of one’s singularity — the intensification of affective sharing” (7). From personal experience of organising protests, the choice as to what music is played and how sound is used during a demonstration is deliberate — activists become directors, or curators, and through their choices they can affect the atmosphere and emotions in a protest. A silent protest will be experienced differently to one led by screams. A technoblockade will attract a different emotion to a blockade where what is played is the polonaise.

As many scholars have argued, emotions bind together the people that assemble, and through this collective feeling they are able to form a community, or “a people” (Gunnarsson Payne, Mouffe, Lilja, Butler, and others). The fact that this movement sustained itself in the streets over a three-month period can be partly attributed to a feeling of belonging to a community, and belonging tends to be associated with positive emotions — whether they were joy, hope, or solidarity (Segal). These moments of what Lynne Segal calls “collective joy” (60-65), often sparked by a memorable event, tie a group of people together and are crucial in the process of community-building. It’s an almost utopic concept that, through histories of resistance, argues for the power of collective emotions in the pursuit of social change. Segal often refers to Barbara Ehrenreich’s book, *Dancing in the Streets*, which looks at histories of large public festivals that often became catalysts for revolution. A particularly memorable moment, to the point of absurdity, was the moment Eryk Prydz’s classic dance track, ‘Call On Me’, was played during one

of the early protests. This track was quickly repurposed into a protest song by including the chant ‘jebać PiS’, meaning ‘f*** PiS’ in the chorus, and was later remixed into a new track, “JBĆ PIS”, by Polish hip hop artist Cypis. It became a de facto anthem of the 2020/21 protest wave — it was funny, it was fun to shout and dance to, it brought energy. It brought joy, and relief, in the midst of a situation of high tension; it was often a response to a real-time need of bringing up morale.[10]

LaBelle has been working with the concept of “sonic agency”, through which sound “is expounded upon as a means for enabling new conceptualisations of the public sphere and expressions of emancipatory practices” (4). In the context of the 2020/21 protests, unlike ‘Call On Me’, the purpose of which was to cause an immediate emotional and energy shift, other sounds heard during these protests were a direct rendering of the demands — particularly in the speeches and chants, but also in the rhythm analysis of the overall symphony of sounds. A useful term for the discussion of sound as a rendering is “sonic fiction”. Sonic fiction is a term first ‘undefined’ by Kodwo Eshun in his text *More Brilliant Than the Sun* and recently expanded by Holger Schulze. Rooting his thesis in afrofuturism, Eshun sees sonic fictions as sound vessels for inventing new histories and fictioning alternative futures, based on and processed through histories of violence and oppression. During the Strajk Kobiet protests, the shouts of ‘jebać PiS’ (f*** PiS) or ‘wypierdalać’ (get the f*** out) countered the preconceived idea of female propriety in public spaces — anecdotally from personal experience, the impact of hearing this shouted by thousands of people is much more emotionally and physically impactful than seeing it written on a sign — but these chants focused their energy on the resignation of the political elites currently in power. [11] On the other hand, chants of ‘the female

revolution is happening now', 'you will never walk alone', 'our message is clear: abortion has been, is, and will be', 'if the state won't protect, your sister will' focused much more on collectivity, feminist notions of care and empathy, and reproductive justice. The former was perhaps more pragmatic, but the latter fictioned an alternative commons, one led by radical feminist thought.

The resonance of sonic interventions, which ranged from a new version of the anti-fascist song *Bella Ciao*, titled "Tortury Ciało" [Body Tortures] filmed in Kraków to videos of thousands shouting 'wypierdalać' [get the f*** out][12] to JBC PIS was intensified through wide circulation on social media. The streets were also digital during this protest wave. What they were all doing is sounding a new sort of community — of women swearing in public spaces, of using strong language to take up space, of shouting their radicalising politics, of a collective emotion that comes from what Lynne Segal describes as the "exhilarating joy of resistance" (206). Joy and rage, as Butler argues (*Notes Towards*), mix and flow into each other — as do hope and despair. All participants were musicians in the symphony of the protest, and through the sounds they produced and that surrounded them, they were bound together by their experience of collective emotions, perhaps — at least momentarily — forming "a feminist people" (Gunnarsson Payne).

Archives

Writing about social movements and protest waves from the perspective of a participant, once some time has passed the process of experiencing shifts to an exercise in remembering. As Butler argues (*Notes Towards*), social movements are necessarily fleeting — but especially in a country so obsessed

with memory politics, how can we ensure this movement has its place in public memory, beyond our individual or collective memories of participation? Archiving becomes an important part of this intersection of academia and activism, as whose hands the collecting, curation, and knowledge-making fall into may determine future narratives. Archiving can be understood as building a record of 'our' history — in the case of this movement through, hopefully, intersectional, queer-feminist practices and methodologies. What materials and what archives will future scholars be looking at when writing about these protests?

This text cannot go into an in-depth analysis of the following archives and will only briefly sketch out their nature and relationship with the protests, leaving at the end a list of questions to be explored in the future and a signal for the importance of archiving work that needs to be done for and with the movement — archiving being at the centre of the loop of activism-art-academia. There are two broad types of archives that can be clearly delineated as emerging from these protests: living archives and institutional archives.

The first example of a living archive is the *Archiwum Protestów Publicznych* [Archive of Public Protest]. APP is a photographers' collective, which documents protests and collects them in a semi-open access online repository. In 2020/21 they began printing 'Strike Newspapers', made up of slogans, testimonials, and photos from the demonstrations, which could be used as a mobile exhibition, held as protest signs during demonstrations, or plastered in public spaces; the collective also ask participants to tag them on Instagram whenever they newspapers were used. One of its members, Rafał Milach said in a recent interview: "by creating this alternative circulation of images, we control the narrative and their usage."

APP is a living, digital, public archive for distributing images from protests, and most of the images in this text come from their online repository. The objects in this archive (the photographs) are moments of the protests as experienced through the eyes of the members of the photographers' collective — then narrowed down to what they chose to include in the repository. Their strike newspapers are curated, physical renderings of the digital archive.



Figure 9: A protester wearing a slogan from the APP Strike Newspaper. © Archiwum Protestów Publicznych / Joanna Musiał

A second, unspecific and nebulous, example is the social media archive. Activists, collectives, and individual participants have become custodians of digital archives. Whether on Instagram feeds or collected story highlights, Twitter and Facebook feeds, Youtube uploads, or personal phone photo albums, this volume of digital material all

forms a massive, decentralised archive, though one where questions of ownership are disputable and there is little to no methodology; they are snapshots of that time. Similarly, the corporate, proprietary, and unstable nature of these archives mean they are vulnerable and unreliable at best — and through algorithms somewhat curated by programmers.[13][14]

A third example of a living archive brings us back to protest signs. On 30 October 2020, eight days after the start of the protests, a group of activists (artists-students) mounted a spontaneous installation of protest signs on the grass outside the Warsaw Museum of Modern Art, which they called 'Las Transparentów' [Forest of Protest Signs]. They asked participants of the protests to leave their signs outside the museum with the call: *don't throw away your protest sign! Let it continue resonating in public space!*. The Forest of Protest Signs was taken down soon after, but this intervention clearly showed this blurring of roles of artists and activists, of who is a curator; it also showed that sometimes an archive only needs to exist for a short amount of time — with the aim to intervene or disrupt.

Protest signs, as mentioned earlier, have been treated as art by several institutions since the protests ended in January 2021. At around the same time as the Forest of Protest Signs took place, the Gdańsk Museum put out a call for 'souvenirs' from the Strajk Kobiet demonstrations just ten days after the protests began. They published the call, which ended with these questions: "What will future generations say about the protests in 50, 100, or even more years' time? Will material evidence of the protests survive in the future? Who should be keeping it?"

The same Warsaw Museum of Modern Art, outside of which the Forest of Protest Signs was mounted, put on an exhibition in the winter of 2020/21, entitled "Who Will

Write the History of Tears: Artists on Women's Rights". As part of this exhibition, they included the same protest signs in a white cube setting. In a recent discussion-interview published by *Magazyn Szum*, several activists and thinkers criticised the exhibition for focusing on 'tears', the idea of victimhood, and weakness, as opposed to broadening the scope of the exhibition into a diversity of experiences of people who have abortions, and reflecting the unsanitised, messy, joyful, rebellious, and chaotic experience of the performativity of the protests.[15] This situation sparks the question as to who should be collecting archival materials of the movement and constructing the narratives around it; the curators of this exhibition were criticised by those who have been deeply involved in the protests. Nevertheless, the signs were displayed in the Museum without an artist name – echoing the notion that everybody was an artist during the 2020/21 protests.



Figure 10: Warsaw Museum of Modern Art. Own photo.

In May 2021, an exhibition was due to open at Kraków's Cricoteka entitled "Powaga Sytuacji" [Gravity of the Situation], and one of the exhibited works was to be Krzysztof Powierża's *Banery z Placu Wilsona* [Signs from Wilson Square], a collection of protest signs the artist gathered after one of the demonstrations in Warsaw's Plac Wilsona [Wilson Square] on 30 October — the same day the Forest of Protest signs was mounted. However, the Museum decided to pull this work just days before the opening, claiming it could be read "as a political manifesto, and that (...) cannot take place in Cricoteka, which is convinced of the need to strive towards a neutral world-view" (quoted in *Krytyka Polityczna*, own translation). This same exhibition also censored a performance of activist-artist collective *Czarne Szmaty* [Black Rags], who instead performed an 'arrest' of Cricoteka during its opening, with the activists dressed as policemen displaying black rags with slogans such as "the future will come anyway" and "your fear is your responsibility for our disappearance". Unlike the Warsaw Museum, which tried to engage with the protests and its actors, Cricoteka recoiled in fear of repercussions from the state. Both Museums are state-funded — if even otherwise progressive museums and galleries cannot or do not display representations of this social movement, covering in the shadow of the state, how can we ensure that these protests are archived, and their stories get told?

What do the above examples show us? Firstly, they show us that there is a need for activist-led archives in order to safeguard narratives as emerging from within the movement. Who is going to be forming the narratives, and constructing their framing in the future, and how can we ensure the ownership of the archive is representative of the movement's collective nature? Activist-led archives are prone to instability and precariousness

these things come together to shape the narrative, direction, and development of a social movement. Art, in its broadest sense, can act as a rendering of emotions and ideological threads within a social movement, as well as being a tool for knowledge development and community-building. When engaging with art as a form of collective, common creativity, it can not only engage participants but also crystallise the messaging. The choices made by political organisers are deliberate, if not always made with sufficient time. The question remains how to harness the potential of rendering research within social movements more consciously, while the masses are in the streets. How do we make sure we learn from previous peaks, and counter the so-called 'left melancholy' (Brown 19-20) to seize the potential of the present? Or can we only hope for the nebulous "unknown possibilities and impassioned energies it unleashed" (McKee 19)?

The observations and explorations of this text are poised to be looped back into spaces of political organising. Social movements *move*, and the shifts observed during its peaks (masses on the streets), as well as in the troughs (day-to-day organising by a handful of people), can and should be built upon. Through the look at changing narratives, the (re)claiming of national symbols and public space, commoning artistic practices, and the affective potential of sound, this text has aimed to sketch a broad overview of the role of art within social movements. Explorations of its role were anchored in questions regarding rendering research, as means of developing knowledge, political strategies, and narratives. What emerges is that archiving becomes a crucial element within this development, and there is much work to be done in this area. Systematic and methodologically sound archiving has the means to allow for space of reflection and to build a collection that constructs a narrative

that exists outside of patriarchal and nationalist institutions — a particularly important exercise in the current Polish context and its governments nationalistic memory politics.

Feminism is an autocritical ideology that aims to constantly move forward. Both artists and activists task themselves with an imag(in)ing of a better future. Closing this loop is a task that feels existential, as we search for answers to how to change the fascistic course taken by the Polish as well as many other global political elites.

Notes

[1] For a longer discussion of this tension, see Bohdana Kurylo, "Counter-populist performances of (in)security: feminist resistance in the face of right-wing populism in Poland". *Review of International Studies*, pp. 1-20, 2021.

[2] 66% of respondents are for the legalisation of abortion up to the 12th week of pregnancy. The support for a liberalisation of the current (as of 22 Oct 2020) abortion ban is even higher, at up to 80%. Source for the first statistic: OKO.Press, <https://oko.press/66-proc-za-prawem-kobiety-do-przerwania-ciazy-do-12-tygodnia/>

[3] 'Women' is the term used by the movement and is therefore also used here, but these issues relate to all of those who can become pregnant, including cis-women, trans-men, and non-binary people, with the acknowledgment that neither trans-men nor non-binary people are women.

[4] 'Strike' was used in reference to the Icelandic women's strike in 1975.

[5] For an English-language text, this recent article by Judith Butler is a good introduction into the perceived threat of 'gender' around the world: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/commentisfree/2021/oct/23/judith-butler-gender-ideology-backlash>. For the Polish context, see Graff and Koroluczuk.

[6] Source Noizz.pl: <https://noizz.pl/spoleczenstwo/gdzie-dostep-do-aborcji-na-zadanie-burza-na-fanpageu-ogolnopolskiego-strajku-kobiet/rf6rgkn>

[7] *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 26 October 2020: <https://poznan.wyborcza.pl/poznan/7,36001,26438900,blokada-ulic-w-poznaniu-w-protescie-przeciwko-zablokowaniu-prawa.html>

[8] Ramme and Snochowska-Gonzalez's 2018 study observes that while there were many uses of patriotic or nationalistic (used both ironically and affirmatively) throughout the earlier protests they are writing about, there were no direct references to an idea of the nation, patriotism, or Polish women within their interview pool; this is not necessarily indicative of this not being a part of the movement, but rather is a signal of the ambivalence or tension surrounding this topic as well as being an example of using 'the master's tools' in a fight to dismantle 'the master's house'.

[9] Kurylo, for example, mentions a release by Mapa, a Polish band, which re-recorded 'Kiedy Krzyczę' [When I Shout], a song by a Polish punk band Post Regiment, during the 2020/21 protests; the song circulated briefly on social media, but was — at least from a personal perspective — not one that resonated widely, and on YouTube it has less than 10,000 views: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v3gde1BSmp8>. The reviewer of this article mentioned Karol Krupiak's "Osium Gwiazd" [Eight Stars] (a reference to 'F*** PiS', which in Polish has eight letters, and was also a symbol used

in these as well as other protests), which used video footage of the 2020/21 protests; this song had a much greater commercial circulation, and currently has over 5.6 million views on YouTube, but again — from personal experience — was not one that was played during protests: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dJen3vZbHbU>. This is unlike Cypis' remix of 'Call On Me', titled 'JBĆ PiS', which was played constantly during protests and also has over 12.7 million views on YouTube (all views as of 11 August 2022): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FQq6Mwv_jpw

[10] Arguably, it also satisfied the need of many protesters to focus the problem on the ruling party, PiS, rather than a broader systemic issue. This was a constant debate during my personal experience of organising protests, and we use this song knowing how participants would react, despite being apprehensive about too much focus on this messaging.

[11] Kurylo (2021) briefly discusses the change of these 2020/21 protests to a more vulgar aesthetic, as compared to the earlier Black Protests, in her text.

[12] Video available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=95_ZIOxiQCE

[13] For more discussions on big data and digital archives, see Thylstrup et al, *Uncertain Archives: Critical Keywords for Big Data*, MIT Press, 2021.

[14] There is another digital archive started by activists in Poland, the Social Unrest Archive, but it does not cover the 2020/21 protests and for this reason has not been included in the main text: <https://movement-sarchive.wordpress.com/>

[15] <https://magazynsum.pl/nie-czas-na-lzy-dyskusja-wokol-wystawy-kto-napisze-historie-lez/>

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