

“Queering Polska – Interventions in Humanities, Activism and Art since 1970”

Workshop Report

This PhD. workshop was organised by Julia Austermann and Tim Veith (University of Siegen) and supported by Prof. Dr. Susanne Regener (Chair of Media History/Visual Culture, Siegen) and Prof. Dr. Claudia Kraft (Contemporary European History, Siegen) and financed by the Equal Opportunity Commissioner and the Centre of Gender Studies. It took place on October 26 and 27 2017 and aimed at creating a network for academic exchange between researchers interested in the history of gender and sexuality in Poland. Research projects from all kind of disciplines focusing on this topic, as well as queer interventions, were presented by academics from all over Germany and Poland. This workshop united research on many subversive cultural movements in Poland since 1970 – from performance art to drag culture and gay magazines – with a particular focus on depicting resistance in a country which is more often than not portrayed as conservative and devout.

In his key note, “Global, eastern and Polish Homosexuals in times of Communism”, LUKASZ SZULC (LSE, London) presented his research from three years contributing towards his publication *Transnational Homosexuals in Communist Poland* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017). According to him, there has been a globalisation of sexualities, spreading throughout the world. The discussion of USSR and post-Soviet LGBTQ movements evolved simultaneously with four central myths: homogeneity, essence (and the binary between East and West), a transition narrative¹ and the assumption of a near total isolation of USSR LGBT movements before 1989. Due to the global distribution of these myths, homosexuality in Eastern Europe was dehistoricised, rendered almost invisible.

While SZULC focuses on the deconstruction of the above mentioned myths in the first part of his publication, the second part, and the main content of his key note, deals with the analysis of his collected data. This data included examples of gay magazines from Poland, *Biuletyn/Etap* (1983-1987) and *Filo* (1986-1990), and interviews with people involved in the production of these magazines. Interestingly, despite the common assumption of isolated USSR countries, SZULC was able to prove the existence of transnational connections before the fall of the USSR. The main sources of contact were people immigrating or travelling to the West, mail exchange with people from the West, connections with gay sailors and contacts to Western gay magazines. Most publications SZULC dealt with focused on gay identity and everything related to gay activism. More often than not, the publications included letters from readers and an active discourse around the identity formation through using particular phrases or words. SZULC also looked at how gay activism first formed in Poland and came to a very unusual conclusion: unlike in other countries, many local publications for gay men started an activism movement, as they have to be regarded as the space within and around which the modern LGBTQ movement was created. With his key note SZULC

¹ It was assumed that after 1989 all post-Soviet countries strived towards Western standards – including the LGBTQ movements. At the same time, the fall of Communism is being fetishized as the point of change. SZULC emphasised here that the movement of towards Western standards can never be completed, but has to be regarded as a never-ending progress towards a non-achievable goal.

provided not only a thorough insight into the differences of eastern European gay cultures and its Western counterparts. Additionally, he was able to present meticulously collected data to explain how transnational connections not only shaped a Polish gay and lesbian movement before 1989 but was shaping Western movements in return.

CORINNA KÜHN (WWU, Münster) continued with the presentation of her recently published PhD thesis “Challenging and Transforming (Socialist) Gender Norms: Performance Art in Central Eastern Europe during the 1970s”. Her main focus lay on the exploration of the body and its entanglement with politics, art and the dominant culture of 1970s Poland. According to her research, most performance art of Central Eastern Europe took place in (semi-)private spaces and was only accessible to a small audience. They formed a transnational network of art galleries and supportive groups, intertwining the dominant culture with their alternative art circle. Performance art of 1970s Central Eastern Europe managed to combine these two cultures within the body of the artist: it not only revealed contemporary ideology, but also incorporated subversive and revolutionary acts. KÜHN compared the performance art of the Polish artist Natalia LL and of the Romanian artist Ion Grigorescu in order to prove how their art challenged contemporary gender norms. She argued that, through means of involving viewers, or playing with gender roles, both artists went beyond heteronormative body depictions. Natalia LL’s work “Sztuka konsumpcyjna” (1972) challenged contemporary gender roles through (almost) pornographic imagery, regaining female agency through controlling her own depiction. At the same time, Grigorescu went one step further: he questioned heteronormative boundaries of the body and used subversive acts to reinvent the body’s physicality.

JULIA AUSTERMANN (Universität Siegen, Siegen) provided insights into homophobia and queer activism in Poland since 1980. In her presentation “Queer Interventions in Polish Art and Activism since 1980” she focused on two sources. Firstly, she discussed images in Ryszard Kisiel’s magazine *Filo* (1986-1990) as form of protest and visualization of homosexual desire in a historical context. According to AUSTERMANN, the publication of *Filo* can be placed within the context of gay group formation in many Polish cities during the “Akcja Hiacynt” (1985-1987), a nationwide police action against homosexual men. In a second step, AUSTERMANN presented her research on the public performances of Polish performance artist Krzysztof Jung (1951-1998). Jung’s performances were dominated by a state of vulnerability, often embedding elements of threading around naked bodies, creating his so-called plastic theatre. AUSTERMANN argued that Jung’s performances have been a queer protest to contemporary homophobia in Poland. He, according to her, rendered the physical body vulnerable, while turning the audience into silent observers, or even accomplices, as they were watching a body trying to escape its entanglement. It is thus, as explained by AUSTERMANN, necessary to see both aspects of her presentation as queer interventions and visualisations against the homophobia inherent to Polish mainstream culture of the 1980s.

In her presentation “Gender Variance and the Sexual Transformation of Poland: the Case of Drag”, LUDMILA JANION (University of Warsaw, Warsaw) provided insights into a chapter of her PhD research dealing with the Polish drag movement of the 1990s and 2000s. Although there existed a small “scene” already in the 1920s², her main focus lay on the analysis of

² The Polish drag movement of the 1920s consisted mainly of cabaret acts influenced by the sexual liberation movement in Western Europe.

Polish gay magazines published between 1990 and 2001 (*MEN!*, *Nowy Men*, and *Gejzer*), as well as media coverage of drag. JANION argued that in the 1990s a transition took place, from subcultural cross-dressing to a more westernised and entertainment driven version of drag performances. Drag performers presented themselves in a low-key and everyday style (unlike the often glamorised version typical to modern drag), and insisted on being seen as pure performers. They thus distanced themselves from everyday camp and feminine attitudes often associated with gay men in Poland. At the same time, they used images of everyday luxury and glamour, as well as sexual freedom, to visualise the fantasy of the availability of certain items to everyday women. JANION emphasised that this act not only commented on capitalist structures but on the economic transformation happening to Poland in the 1990s.

TIM VEITH (Universität Siegen, Siegen) focused his presentation “Male Bodies in gay magazines (1980-2000) – Germany, Italy and Poland in comparison” on the transnational traces of the male body ideal represented in different gay magazines. His research included examples taken from the magazines *Filo/Facet* and *Inaczej* (Poland) from the 1990s, *Du&Ich* and *Männer* (Germany), and *Babilonia* (Italy) from the 1980s and 1990s. The material analysed was already able to prove how certain expectations of an ideal gay body were spread throughout Europe. Presenting examples for both normative and queer bodies, VEITH was able to establish the impossibility of one single queer body. Instead, he argued, one had to trace non-normative body depictions through a historical lens – while a certain body type might be regarded normative in our present understanding of male bodies, they could certainly have been placed outside the norm at the date of their publication. Nevertheless, a common visual strategy was used to create the normative body, while queer bodies are mainly absent from the mainstream discourse. One of VEITH’s examples was the establishment of the fit body as the ideal of the 1990s. In all the magazines he presented to his audience VEITH discovered articles, advertisements, interviews and “lonely heart ads” which in one way or another played into creating a universal image of the ideal body. Additionally, his findings proved how Polish images of the 1990s already veered towards a Western concept of the ideal consumer body.

KATHARINA KINGA KOWALSKI (EUV, Frankfurt/Oder) introduced the audience to her PhD project in her presentation “Women’s and Gender Studies in Poland. Structural, local, political chances and pitfalls for feminist research”. At present, most researchers focus on explaining why there is no feminist movement in Poland even though it can be traced back to the establishment of several feminist groups in academia over thirty years. Through transnational connections and travel, Polish feminist groups had similar ideas to Western feminist groups. KOWALSKI presented her research on different groups formed in Kraków, Łódź, Poznań and Warsaw, as well as networks connections abroad and found that the university was seen as a space to showcase the importance of feminism in Polish academia. Additionally, she was able to detect how the fall of the iron curtain enabled the import of Western influence into feminist circles. As there is no official documentation of the Polish feminist movement, KOWALSKI analysed historical sources such as journals, letters, protocols, lists of participants of (informal) seminars, and many more. She was already able to detect points of interest similar to Western feminism, such as the participation of women in politics or women’s rights, but has been able to find unique interests such as self-reflective discussions about Polish feminism between the East and the West, as well.

The last presentation, “The right wing takeover and discursive counter-strategies by feminists/LGBTQ*s in Poland”, was held by JENNIFER RAMME (EUV Frankfurt/Oder). Being part of her PhD project, RAMME focused this presentation on the importance of NGOs for LGBTQ activism. She started by exploring how a political discourse around a Polish national identity was established, determining the popular notion of an ethnic nationalism where it is assumed that a national identity exists without the legal boundaries of a state. According to RAMME, Polish nationalism has been ignored for a long time, despite crimes inspired by a nationalist mentality being committed as early as the 1980s. She argued that the main reason was the common assumption that, as a state which was hit by fascism during World War II, the Polish could not develop a nationalist movement. In a further step, RAMME posed the question whether Feminism and Nationalism are necessarily “natural” opposites. To trace her argument, that indeed, both ideologies have developed a co-existence within certain groups, RAMME provided ample examples where nationalist symbols were used for advertising feminist conferences or during protest marches.

As Poland seems to be moving backwards in terms of equal rights and a, at least from a Westernised lens, “modern” society, this workshop provided the audience with an overview of resistance against the mainstream culture in Poland since the 1980s. Most importantly, it was made obvious that analysing certain cultural patterns from an outsider perspective would render subversive acts of this culture invisible. From gay magazines to feminist groups in academia, it was shown how Polish resistance had to be made visible again with dedicated research and the ability to look outside Westernised analysing tools.

By Maria Hauf (University of Siegen)