

Mikolaj Sobczak in conversation with Katharina Wendler

Email, September 2020

KW: Could you briefly describe the works that you decided to show at Haus? What are they about, what is their story?

MS: At Haus I am showing three videos starring representatives of sexual and national minorities – at the same time dear friends of mine – and the series of ceramic tiles. The scripts of the videos were based on historical events that we decided to interpret from our perspective, subverting national mythologies. The ceramic tiles play with the tradition of “Delft Blue” pottery and illustrate narratives that have never made it into “the official history”.

KW: What do you consider to be the core of your work?

MS: At the core of my work stands the need to create images of alienated and othered visuality and narratives which were forgotten, erased or marginalized in “the official history”. I can still see a tremendous lack of them and the processes of eliminating those which already exist from the public sphere. I mean here especially the images of minorities’ movements which were fighting against the oppressive system. I try to familiarize people with this visuality and narratives in order to show how history eradicates and manipulates memory.

KW: In order to create these visuals for otherwise forgotten narratives, what are your research methods? Do you look into written documentation, do you make use of oral history and/or do you use image material? Are you mostly dealing with contemporary phenomena or do you go back in history (and if so, how far back)?

MS: My research methods are very wide and organic – they never have a clear beginning neither an end. That’s the ongoing process. Because of that, the collected material is very diverse. It includes photos, illustrations, comics, paintings, texts, posters or even costumes. Hours spent in archives, between documents and magazines from different eras, are as valuable as hours spent on phone calls and talks. We need to remember that many of those narratives never got written down. So listening is the key of my method.

What’s important for my artistic practice is also seeing time as a structure of links. Not a line, with a clear division for past, present and future. Some episodes from 16th century are fantastically reflecting modern anti-neoliberalism movements; or extinction of giant dinosaurs and survival of little mammals might be used as the metaphor of a dying system, where minorities will survive because years of hiding made them flexible and clever. That’s why in my paintings, videos or performances historical characters often support contemporary heroines and heroes.

KW: Is history repeating itself?

MS: Not really. We can find many analogies between now and then but it will never be the same. There are always extra different factors: like economics, politics, law regulations. For example we can

observe how many politicians today sound like fascists. But we cannot see them as a copy of this almost 100 years old movement. It would just make our attention not sharp enough. However, we can definitely notice waves, tendencies in history – like reactions for an economic crisis – and learn from them, get a feeling what to watch out for and how to fight against specific forms of evil, e.g. already mentioned fascism.

KW: Which movements / characters / narratives / phenomena most interest you at the moment?

MS: Recently I am highly interested into folk beliefs and mythology. I trace in them echoes of activities against the oppressive apparatus of a society or a state at large. A good example might be perceiving heretics, people standing against the Catholic Church as vampires in the Polish Slavs' mythology. Also, I always look for elements of mass culture that were in fact activities of a minority. Here I could mention blue and white ceramics that were brought to Poland by a group of 'vampires' – Mennonites that were hunted and burnt on stakes all over Europe but they got asylum in 16th century Poland. They brought, for example, the recipe for Gouda cheese, which one can buy in every shop today, and the technique of "Delft Blauw" ceramics which nowadays is a standard home decoration all over the country.

KW: Is the arrival of a product (Gouda cheese) or a habit (breeding hair) in mass or rather mainstream culture a sign for approval and/or acceptance of a group of people that were previously considered a minority?

(My feeling is: no, it's not. I think here especially of many aspects of black culture that were appropriated by mainstream (pop) culture, which sadly doesn't mean that racism towards people of color has disappeared.)

MS: Of course, I share your feeling. Sadly, it does not mean acceptance. We could sometimes even see it simply as stealing a cultural heritage. My task as an artist working with minorities and belonging to them, is to check the borders of those acts of appropriation by mainstream. I trace these processes, examining how to turn them into a tool of fighting for equal human rights; proving that what you find "your own national heritage" was in fact often made by people about whom you are "...fobic". One of my methods is to fill the lack of the images of those creators. I show them hand in hand with all others during protests, social movements, historical and modern events. All interwoven. Mixed. In order to break up with linearity. So, I look for similarities between Stonewall Inn riot and "Solidarność" ("Solidarity"), a 1980s worldwide famous anti-communist regime movement in Poland. I am tired of the binary – we/them. I believe, the politics of pointing at an enemy, the politics of fear always spectacularly fails.

KW: Do you consider your art to be a form of activism?

MS: That's the only way I see my art – as a form of activism.

KW: If we consider the range or scope of art as activism for a moment, would you say your art/activism reaches an audience beyond the art world? Is this something you are interested in?

MS: Yes, it does reach an audience beyond the art world. Today, the easiest way to reach them is the Internet and its social media platforms. The range of viewers is very different. I am very interested in opening up my art especially to younger viewers, with different capacity of reading art codes, which are so familiar to us. I see here a very important educational aspect for us both. I must admit that one

of the most interesting talks about art and the modern world, I have had lately with people more than 10 years younger than me. I feel that they widen my perspective, see things already differently and I was very honored that my works became a catalyst to their reflections on recent politics.

KW: On the one hand, the Internet grants us access to much more information than we used to have, on the other hand certain narratives (may they be true or false) spread quicker and more widely and therefore shape opinions more quickly. For many, the Internet and particularly the apps and tools that they're using online have become the primary source of knowledge, of research. Would you say that the Internet is an essential tool for your work? If so, in which ways do you like to make use of it?

MS: The internet is not an essential tool of my work. It is a multiple platform: of research, of presentation, of political activities (for example neutralizing -fobic comments), of dialogue and often of an argument too. And that's how I make use of it. I use the Internet as another tool of activism that can be performed from home. Lately, I was thinking how to make it the most efficient and also how this efficiency should be even defined. For example, in comparison to a street protest, the virtual one should be, in my opinion, more directed towards educational aspects and should last much longer than a day. But another question is how to keep it 'hot' and don't overwhelm yourself and each other with information? That's the biggest danger and one of the key reasons why I don't want to see the Internet as 'the essential tool'. It must stay hygienic in our minds.

KW: Does activism need to be loud or does such a thing as 'quiet activism' exist? Which way do you consider more efficient?

MS: That's a very good question! I posted it myself already several times. That's why I decided to analyze the history of the greatest social movements. With 'the greatest' I mean those who managed to change our reality. I noticed that before all these spectacular events – riots, mass protests – there has been a long series of events, discussions, secret reading clubs, printing zines, street theaters, kitchen talks, gathering in cafeterias... that we could easily name 'quiet activism'. And it all led to those well-known 'explosions'. Because of that I am far from judging which form is more efficient. I even think that there is no loud activism without quiet activism. This discovery had a big influence on my artistic practice. I lately decided to push the focus from key social movements' figures to this crowd of unknown persons who slowly, quietly, from their living rooms were proving that we need equal rights.

KW: Are these movements in need of head figures that people can look up to? In other words, does activism need leaders? (I am of course thinking of important spokes persons such as Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Greta Thunberg, to name but a few)

*MS: My answer must be ambiguous here – yes and no.
Yes, because many of us were still raised in a neoliberal system, in which an individual is the key figure. So, it's easier to identify with one person. But...
No, because we finally need to realize that we cannot push the responsibility on a single person to represent our problems in the public. Changes are a group thing. Coming from this ambiguity, I paint groups of people, in which unknown individuals are mixed with the most famous spokes persons, activists from different periods of times, in order to show that only a group united in the name of a common goal can achieve it. Spokes persons, without our support, are powerless.*

KW: How important is collaboration with others for your work or your artistic practice?

MS: It's absolutely crucial. It became crystal clear during the pandemic when I couldn't meet even with my closest friends. From the first euphoria that all of a sudden I have a lot of time to work, it all turned quickly into the realization that without being intellectually stimulated by others through listening to them, discussing and exchanging with them, I cannot get any good idea for a new work. Now I care about collaborations even more than before. Literally, there is no me neither my art without others. (It's a bit funny that my two last answers sound very similar. But that's what I really believe in.)

Mikolaj Sobczak (born 1989) graduated the Academy of Fine Arts Warsaw (PL) in the Studio of Spatial Activities, followed by a scholarship at Universität der Künste Berlin (DE), and studied as well at Kunstakademie Münster (DE). He works in video, painting and ceramics, often including performative actions as well. He frequently collaborates with German artist Nicholas Grafia. His most recent exhibitions include shows at MoMA (Warsaw), Museum Ludwig (Cologne), Capitain Petzel Gallery (Berlin). In his work, Sobczak is focuses on political issues and historical policy. Emphasizing the perspective and life of marginalized subjects, he builds narratives, and tracks down the reasons for current global and social issues.

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Katharina Wendler (born 1988 in Hamburg, lives and works in Berlin and Weimar) is an art historian and exhibition maker. She studied Cultural Sciences and Psychology at Leuphana Universität Lüneburg as well as Art History at Humboldt Universität zu Berlin and the University of Iceland. From 2013 to 2017 she directed the project space Safn Berlin/Reykjavik and since 2014 has realised and coordinated numerous exhibitions, publications and other projects with German and international artists. She currently works as Curator of the Bauhaus University Gallery and Artistic Associate at the Faculty of Art and Design at Bauhaus-Universität Weimar as well as a freelance curator and writer in Berlin.

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In early 2018 she initiated the exhibition format *__in conversation with__*, that takes as its goal to bring people into conversation and thus into collaboration. Artists are invited to enter into dialogue and to develop an exhibition from it. The conversations are formulated into texts and serve to accompany the exhibitions as text material. They enable the visitors to develop a deeper understanding of the working methods of the artist and their artworks.

__in conversation with__ is based on the assumption that artists themselves are best able to provide information about their works, their working methods, their ideas and inspirations. One simply needs to ask.

Exhibition

Das Haus

September 21–27, 2020

Haus Wien, Kobelgasse 3, 1110 Vienna

<https://haus.wien/>