

## Rafał Milach / Summary of artistic projects

### **“Refusal”. Visual gesture as a tool for deconstructing the mechanisms of political control and manipulation.**

Describing the present is difficult. It is hindered by the emotional temperature of disputes, lack of distance and time for reflection, the fleeting nature of events, the radicalisation of views, and inability to analyse historical facts exacerbated by the growing manipulation of news. Recent years have deprived us as society of neutral, apolitical and conflict-free areas. The atmosphere of divisions and disputes extends from political salons to the virtual space. Some gestures that used to be innocent several years back are now perceived in modern contexts, thereby gaining new meanings, which often contribute to the deepening of the conflict.

The current post-transformational reality of the former Eastern Bloc, with a short experience of self-determination and independence, a shaky democracy or lack thereof, and enfeebled but often ambitious economies, is an area extremely susceptible to political and economic manipulations. It is a region that still finds it difficult to shake off its historical traumas associated with the Soviet domination. Torn apart by conflicts in many places, it desperately searches for an identity, brutally experimenting with the social fabric.

Careful observation of these processes and shifting the attention from the private to the public space has been the central focus of my artistic practice for almost a decade. The visual analysis of the models of ideological propaganda in various countries of the former Eastern Bloc I propose reflects the concept of ‘slow-journalism,’ which examines the consequences of political and social transformations in the long term. Often, these processes take place at the periphery of the media’s attention, being thrown out of mainstream coverage and social discourse. The mechanisms I investigate are a collection of seemingly innocent gestures which, when seen in ideological contexts, make up a metaphor of the structures of political violence and oppression. Frequently, it is a message camouflaged under non-figurative and non-representational visual communication, where the tension between the context and the image is crucial. The project, which I started in 2010, premiered in 2017 at the Atlas Sztuki Gallery in Łódź. It was the first of the *Refusal* exhibition series, which has now grown to become a constantly expanding and transforming critical archive of gestures commenting on contemporary ideological models.

In 1971, the Soviet television broadcast a popular science programme presenting mechanisms by means of which human consciousness can be effectively manipulated. The youth invited to the studio were subjected to experiments which were to show the viewers to what extent suggestion and conformity can affect the perception of reality by eliminating even the most obvious facts from it. It will not be an exaggeration to conclude that the image – though not expressly – exposed the techniques used by the Soviet authorities on a day-to-day basis. At the time, no one noticed the subversive potential of the TV programme, with the propaganda mouthpiece of the regime presenting it as a scientific curiosity having no reflection in reality.

Modern autocracies, especially those in the post-Soviet territory, have successfully adopted the techniques presented in the programme for collective management of citizens’ awareness. They have created a gigantic laboratory in which a model social structure is being

built regardless of the consequences.

*Refusal* is an attempt to portray various systems of control and exerting pressure. Both innocent gestures and well-tested social engineering techniques can be treated as examples of processes whereby reality is formatted, meanings shifted, and new ideologies created. Depending on the region, they vary in intensity, scale and methods, but all of them work towards building a specific utopian vision imposed by those wielding power. In the project discussed here, the only instance when the above pattern has been defied was the incident in the Kreyvanca kolkhoz, where the plowman Waleriy, a local shock worker, refused to cooperate with me, i.e. the photographer, despite having been instructed to do so by his supervisors.

*Refusal* is a collection of 8 projects produced between 2010-2018, in which I use various visual tools and languages: from photography, video, drawing to spatial objects. All of them make up a coherent picture of the problem addressed by the project.

Chronologically, *The Winners* (2010-2013) is the first project in the archive of gestures known as *Refusal*. The work is a collection of images of winners in competitions organised by the administration of Alexandr Lukashenko, the autocratic president of Belarus, who has been in power since 1994. I was inspired to explore the topic of propaganda of success when I saw the so-called *doski pachota*, that is notice boards where images of the heroes of local communities are displayed. Installed in the central points of cities, towns, villages, and factories, the boards promote the vision of an ideal social structure in a spirit of fraternal rivalry. *The Winners* is a compilation of photographs of people, animals, places, and objects that have been 'tailored' to meet the needs of the Belarusian authorities.

In order to be able to convey the spirit of this facade-like vision in the best way, I needed to adjust the method of my work and the visual structure of the project to the social engineering used by the presidential administration. The official reporter's accreditation I was granted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the quick method of work with those portrayed I adopted, eliminating any personal undertones, my submission to supervision by Belarusian officials and their instructions regarding the shooting locations and selection of motifs to be photographed, as well as the typological, distanced visual language, helped me to build a picture consistent with the message proposed by the authorities.

The several dozen photographs from *The Winners* project function as a collection that disregards the personal stories of the heroes of Belarusian competitions. Rather than commenting on attitudes of individuals, the pictures are a commentary on the oppressiveness of the state. The subjectivity of the persons portrayed is reduced to them performing a function that resembles a facade and is treated instrumentally. 'The best welder,' 'a couple in love,' or 'the winner of the contest for Jennifer Lopez's doppelganger' are to convince society that the policy of the despotic president does not require any adjustments.

One of the key assumptions underlying the project is the ambiguity of the interpretation of the work depending on the background against which it is set. *The Winners* will have critical overtones if seen against the background of the West European democracies, or could be affirmative in nature if the material was potentially used by the Belarusian authorities. Thus, not only does the project expose the control patterns, but it can also be a pretext for discussing how an image can change its meaning depending on the context.

The uniqueness of the Belarusian project also lies in the above mentioned crack in the matrix investigated by *Refusal*, when one of the heroes, namely the victorious ploughman Valeriy, refuses to cooperate with the authorities.

The next stage of my work on the *Refusal* project was a series created in 2013 in Georgia, which, not being the most glaring example of abuse of political power, deserves full attention in this respect. Georgia is considered one of the few post-Soviet republics where initially the political transformation proceeded in an exemplary way. Over the decade of his rule, a pro-Western lawyer and politician, Mikheil Saakashvili, who took over presidency following the bloodless Rose Revolution in 2003, changed the face of the Caucasian republic. His controversial, though effective, police reform made Georgia a much safer place. However, during his presidency, Georgia had the largest number of political prisoners of all the post-Soviet countries, while the bloated investments pursued by this poor country had the sole purpose of building a facade of civilisational progress and prosperity. Saakashvili cannot be considered a typical political tyrant, but the methods he resorted to did not differ much from those used by present-day satraps. I created my project entitled *Chasing a White Horse* shortly after the charismatic leader lost his presidential and parliamentary power and was forced to flee the country after having been accused of corruption. The project is a collection of traces left by Mikheil Saakashvili: the unfinished investments in Batumi worth millions, and the Black Sea concept cities: Anaklia and Lazika. These two peripheral towns located in the former conflict zone on the border with the hostile Abkhazia were to become Georgia's largest seaport. After the president was ousted, all his initiatives were brought to a halt, which created a vast map of modern architectural and urbanistic ruins. Makeshift settlements for 128 thousand refugees from South Ossetia are one more element in the list of traces of Saakashvili's political activity. Supported by the Russian Army, the republic seceded from Georgia as a result of a 5-day conflict that broke out in 2008. The imprint of the charismatic president can also be found in people, former employees of his administration or ardent supporters, who believe uncritically in Saakashvili's vision of the state. *Chasing a White Horse* addresses the problem of ostensible modernisation of the country whereby the leader camouflages his abuse of political power and financial embezzlements.

While the status of Georgia as an authoritarian state is debatable, Azerbaijan quite easily fits into this category. Heydar Aliyev began his way to power as an officer of the Stalinist NKVD. He was a member of the Politburo of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, an opponent of Gorbachev, and objector to the *glasnost* policy. In 1993, he became the president of independent Azerbaijan. After his death in 2003, he was replaced by his son Ilham, who has been holding the office of president since. The despotic rule of the Aliyev family has practically eliminated the political opposition, with any criticism against the government severely punished by fines, persecution, imprisonment, or loss of employment. The series *Museum*, which is part of the *Refusal* project, was created in 2016 to explore the problem of the personality cult in a state under an authoritarian rule. As with Georgia, the series is a collection of photographs focusing on the architectural projects of the dictator. After the death of his father, Ilham Aliyev ordered that a Heydar Aliyev Centre be erected in the capital of each of the country's 70 districts to cultivate the memory of the deceased ruler. Nearly each of the buildings houses a museum dedicated to the life of Heydar Aliyev, a

chess school, and the seat of the local song and dance ensemble. The ambitious plan of the oil-rich Azerbaijan was halted in 2015 by the financial crisis caused by a decline in the price of oil, which is a strategic asset for this Caucasian republic. The Centres, which were put into use in contradiction to their intended functions, fail to activate local communities and are only used occasionally. For example, in April 2016, they hosted academies commemorating a 'victorious' 4-day border war in Nagorno-Karabakh. The *Museum* is a project documenting the empty, monumental architecture, whose scale and grandeur remind the Azeri people of the stature of their first leader in the modern history of Azerbaijan. In addition to the architecture, the photographs depict a collection of geometric figures and models that produce optical illusions, some of which were made by the students of the chess school in the Heydar Aliyev Centre in Khirdalan. Building and observing these objects helps young Azerbaijanis to develop their spatial imagination and abstract thinking. As in the case of the popular science program broadcast by the Soviet television in 1971, also the typology of the colourful figures photographed in Khirdalan can be seen as having a subversive potential. The white and black pyramids used in the television program could be interpreted as exposing the strategies used by the Soviet regime. Likewise, the illusory nature of the innocent objects, if seen in the political context of the architecture of Heydar Aliyev Centres, can be read as a metaphor of propaganda, which, by using pretence, distorts people's perception. In both cases, use is made of neutral models on a micro scale that illustrate processes on a much larger scale.

The threads of *Refusal* related to Poland are among the most demanding ones. In analytical and research terms, I find commenting on places that are culturally and geographically remote, but belong to the same post-transformational category, easier than commenting on the environment where I live, since in the latter case, observation is burdened emotionally and is often deformed by lack of distance and immediate proximity of events. This makes it much more difficult for me as a researcher to adopt the position of an unbiased arbiter, even though this would be desirable given the clinical and distanced nature of the *Refusal* project.

*The Reconstruction*, which was produced in 2017, is the only part of *Refusal* in which photography gives way to drawing. I created the comic strips in response to the controversies surrounding the 2010 Polish Air Force Tu-154 crash and the question how our collective memory manages it, aided by the government's interpretation of that tragic day. The drawings, which were made on the basis of photographs, combine several orders forming an enigmatic statement evocative of the aura of conspiracy and mystery surrounding the tragedy. The first of the three sets of drawings is based on photographs documenting a group of men who are reconstructing a rescaled model of the wreck of the presidential Tupolev during the regular monthly commemorations of the Smolensk crash in Warsaw. The second set refers to the film *Smoleńsk*, in which the director Antoni Krauze attempts to prove the theory that the president was assassinated by the Russian secret service. The third part consists of redrawn fragments of the assembly instruction attached to a plastic model of the Russian passenger plane TU-154 in 1:144 scale. The cloud of associations that is produced by the combination of these three different areas does not form a specific story with a solution, nor does it give any answers. Instead it illustrates the ideological noise provoked by the ruling party around the Smolensk tragedy.

Another of my works that, in addition to referring to ideology, addresses manipulation of the context, is a copy of the *Gazeta Polska* daily, which is the mouthpiece for spreading the populist right-wing ideology of the Polish government (*Finisage*, 2018). Issue of 12.12.2017, #288 (1900) The newspaper includes an announcement of the closing night of Rafał Milach's exhibition *Refusal* in the Szara gallery in Katowice. The publication of an announcement about the event, which is clearly critical of the ideology promoted by the newspaper creates a unique tension. The publication may be explained by the lack of awareness among the editors of the nature of the artistic event they advertise or by them overlooking some of the context of the exhibition. The third, and probably least probable, scenario assumes subversive activities within the newspaper. Regardless of the motives, the issue of *Gazeta Polska* raises questions concerning ideological shifts in the media, which can freely manipulate the message by narrowing down the context.

The problem of the distribution and manipulation of the image through the context is addressed by the works from the *Pressident* series (2017). Here, propaganda photographs found in advertising catalogues distributed by Heydar Aliyev Centres in Azerbaijan, change their meaning by them being cropped in a radical way. The pictures, which glorify the president of the republic who is opening successive production lines in industrial plants, are reduced to images depicting his finger or hand pressing the red button. The typology, composed of this meaningful gesture of power, which should additionally be seen in the context of the 2017 international nuclear tensions, is confronted with Aliyev's authoritarian rule. Once subjected to manipulation, the non-violent gesture whereby the president opens a production line becomes an allegory for an oppressive situation. The rescaled hands and the enlarged raster, which evidences the appropriation of the images, change their meanings as a result of the intrusive interference.

The Czech Republic rarely comes up in the context of dysfunctional democracy. The social formatting mechanism analysed by the *Refusal* project addresses the concept of a nation state. When perceived in the context of the present-day political and social tensions, an event loses its ostensibly neutral character.

Founded in 1862 in the Czech Republic, the gymnastic-paramilitary Sokol organisation, laid the foundation for the contemporary idea of the national Czech Republic. Its synchronised gymnastic shows in the interwar period became a symbol of the massification of the nationalist ideology and of the mental and physical renewal of society. Having sympathisers both among the left wing and the national socialists, Sokol was banned twice, first by the Third Reich and then after 1948 by the communist authorities of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. As an influential and ideologically divided organisation it was perceived as a serious threat to those in power. Even though they had legalized Sokol, the communist authorities of Czechoslovakia used the format of mass shows for decades by organising what was referred to as 'Spartakiades,' i.e. official sports events with the participation of the military. Reactivated in the 1990s, the organisation is trying to restore the pre-war traditions, even though the military context has been marginalised, and it is mainly women that participate in the synchronised shows. The only Sokol formation whose members are almost exclusively men is the *Borcy* group. A highlight of its choreographic program is human pyramids or reconstruction of the canon of Sokol gymnastic figures to the rhythm of solemn music. This clear demonstration of masculine strength and fitness brings to mind Reni Riefenstahl's *The Triumph of the Will*.

The series *Forming* (2017) documents the formation of human pyramids by members of the Borcy group. It consists of a set of photographs presenting gestures of uncertainty, devoid of pathos and monumentalism. The photographs focus on the moment of preparation, when the Sokol gymnasts look at each other, touch each other hesitantly, and when their bodies begin to entwine. The ambivalence and perversity of the photographed gestures lies in the introduction of an intimate, sensitive, and at moments homoerotic situation to an ideologically conservative and monumental area. The persons depicted in the pictures are experiencing a moment of decision. In a few seconds, the human pyramids will be formed and the constellation of male bodies will merge with the pompous context of the event. In addition to other elements of *Refusal*, *Forming* can be included in the 'archive of warning gestures,' where ideology interacts with the social fabric.

In addition to analysing the different models of political propaganda, *Refusal* also explores the problem of image perception. The illusory, abstract and often ambivalent dimension of the works set against a specific historical or political background creates a space in which the audiences are forced to make a series of decisions. Firstly, they must define what they are looking at and decide whether the documentary photographs, which form the core of *Refusal*, reflect what is referred to as reality. Following this, they must find how the perception of images changes when confronted with text. The next step in reading the exhibition involves identifying the tensions that exist between the individual works and series and how they interact with each other, strengthening or shifting meanings. Viewers are subjected to deception at each stage of their moving about *Refusal*, with perception distortions present on several levels, ranging from the basic optical illusions depicted in some of the works to sociotechnical manipulations to which individuals and wider social groups are subjected.

The latter are exemplified by the video *Both White* (2017) and the series of objects *Field of View* (2018). The popular science program *I and the Others* (1971), directed by Feliks Sobolew, in which one of the participants must decide, under pressure from the group, whether differently coloured pyramids are of the same colour, is illustrative of the mechanisms of manipulation that are detrimental to self-determination. The video installation *Both White* (2018), which is a re-edited version of the above television experiment, focuses on forceful elimination of perception from the decision-making process. The objects from the series *Field of View* (2018) also deal with the problem of observation and tension between visuality and contexts of violence.

Reconstructions of military instructional cabinets photographed in the abandoned Military School of Logistics and Supply in Odessa in 2015 are a trace of the war which has been going on in Ukraine for more than five years. The university was partially closed just before the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2013, which, according to the Ukrainians, was a deliberate action aimed at undermining the military potential of the country. Two years later, the area of the former military unit was transformed into a training ground for voluntary units of the newly formed, private Ukrainian army, and into a temporary shelter for refugees from areas affected by the conflict. The cabinets are a visualisation of the military flight control rooms. Although they depict three-dimensional spaces, they use flat images and slight relief, which creates an illusion of spatial form when they are looked at from the right perspective. The cabinets were photographed in a state of decay, where the abstract arrangement of the layers, often deprived of detail, masks the previous function of the objects. *Field of View* is a

metaphor of a hybrid war that has been pushed by the international community to the peripheries of attention and has become invisible.

The works described above, which make up the archive of the *Refusal* project, are a visual attempt to describe the control mechanisms used by politicians in the area of the former Eastern Bloc. The issues related to perception and its distortion are to draw attention to the facade-like and manipulative dimension of propaganda, which forces society to believe in a picture of the world formatted for the needs of the authorities.

