Grassroots Political, Intellectual and Art Activism versus Censorship, Soccer Hooliganism and Far-Right Threats in the City of Lublin

1. Art representing Roma, gays and Jews has been banned and destroyed in Lublin, Poland, twice host to Transeuropa Festival. *Stop Toleration for Toleration*, a far-right soccer hooligan march, with hate speech chants, has lashed back against the social-artistic campaign *Lublin for All*, led by Szymon Pietrasiewicz. The campaign included bus tickets with the images of national and sexual minorities who have shaped this city for centuries as a hub of Jewish, Romany, Protestant and queer cultures. City Hall, under pressure from the soccer hooligans, censored and shredded this art. As the municipal authorities have caved in to the extreme right, Lublin – it appears – is not welcoming at all.

The destruction of art crushes the human geography of Lublin: this is a blow to the heritage of this intercultural city and to the current art activism working to make Lublin hospitable.

We need to reclaim Lublin from the far-right soccer hooligans. That’s why the ground breaking Holocaust scholars Jan T. Gross and Irena Grudzinska-Gross of Princeton, Poland’s leading feminist Kazimiera Szczuka, and this country’s only out gay MP
Robert Biedron have all signed an open letter “Let’s not give Lublin up to intolerance, aggression and social exclusion,” authored by Agnieszka Zietek, a political activist and lecturer at Maria Curie-Sklodowska University in Lublin.

2. “Lublin free of fags!” “Run Pietrasiewicz out of Lublin!” “F … Gazeta Wyborcza [Poland’s progressive newspaper]!” “A boy and a girl are a normal family!” “Lublin, a city without deviations!” These were the chants of the soccer hooligan marchers. As editor-in-chief of the local branch of the Gazeta Wyborcza broadsheet Malgorzata Bielecka-Holda writes, the catcalls were received with sympathy by City Hall. This is just one element of the rise of the far right in Lublin. Other ominous developments: the mobilization of the National Radical Camp (ONR) and the hosting of these Brown Shirts by the local Solidarność trade union, evictions and layoffs of the underprivileged, the predicament of refugees and women, refusing abortion to the fourteen-year-old rape victim Agata, and attacks on those who are reviving Jewish life.

3. Activist for Jewish Lublin, Tomasz Pietrasiewicz, 57, has been assaulted with swastikas sprayed on his flat and with an explosive device. In 1990, he established Grodzka City Gate Centre-NN Theatre, devoted to the commemoration of Jewish culture in Lublin through plays, exhibitions, a publishing house and workshops for high-school students. Pietrasiewicz was also attacked with anti-Semitic posters that were pasted in his block of flats and in bus stops throughout Lublin. The perpetrators have not been found. As Pawel P. Reszka reported in Gazeta Wyborcza, the National Radical Camp (ONR), at a press conference hosted by Solidarność, insinuated that Pietrasiewicz attacked himself.

4. In 2006 Tomasz’s son, Szymon founded Tektura Space for Creative Activities, a squat with concerts, exhibitions and campaigns for human rights, women, LGBT, the homeless and seniors. This alternative collective opposes consumerism and neo-Nazism. Tektura is often threatened by skinhead raids, but, significantly, it is also not respected by economic neoliberals because of its stance for fair trade, the redistribution of goods and social justice, countering Poland’s widespread belief in the infallibility of the free market.

5. This year Szymon Pietrasiewicz started the Studio for Socially Engaged Art Rewiry, responsible for the campaign Lublin for All. The Rewiry has worked intensively in the deprived areas of Lublin, involving their residents in art activism. Pietrasiewicz’s Studio has also invited such artists as Joanna Rajkowska and Rafal Betlejewski to work with the local residents. The Rewiry is planning to bring the representatives of the international scene like David Cerny as well as Svajone and Paulius Stanikas to Lublin, too.
6. Tomasz Pietrasiewicz was a dissident in the 1980s, active in alternative theatre and underground publishing. Now two generations of nonconformists run the Grodzka City Gate Centre-NN Theatre and Tektura that champion independent culture. NN and Tektura hosted Transeuropa Festival which foregrounded LGBT, intercultural Lublin and refugees.

7. Chechen asylum seekers have told us at Transeuropa Lublin that they don’t feel that they’re treated as human beings here. A country of traditional emigration, Poland doesn’t welcome refugees. In October 2012 over 70 refugees in detention centers throughout Poland held a hunger strike against the legal and material conditions to which they had been condemned. A woman journalist from Georgia, Ekaterina Lemondzawa, wrote a dramatic letter to *Gazeta Wyborcza*, in which she described the humiliations that she had been subjected to as a refugee in Poland. The broadsheet later reported: “Poland is allegedly the only country in the European Union, where refugees, including children, being held for months in detention centers, are called from their rooms by whistle to stand at attention.” Helsinki Human Rights Foundation representative Karolina Rusilowicz confirms that “these detention centers hold a penitentiary regime.”

At Transeuropa Festival, Chechen refugees shared their problems — in fact hardships — with us. Generally, asylum-seeking should be decriminalized and immigration facilitated in the European Union. Migrants and refugees must not be treated as criminals. The Seyla Benhabib-inspired Lublin political scientist Sylwia Nadgrodkiewicz writes that one needs to go beyond the logic of exclusion in order to make immigration easier.

8. International experts, in a report on Lublin as an intercultural city, indicated that refugees should be more visible in this city. Szymon Pietrasiewicz’s campaign *Lublin for All* attempts to present Lublin’s coexistence of different cultures and the need for acceptance and cooperation; these images embody the ethics and aesthetics of diversity and equality. The censorship, ban and destruction of the bus tickets hurt the cause for an open Lublin.
9. The art expert and political economist Mikolaj Iwanski writes ironically: “Lublin’s leadership have begun a race to see who can condemn the action [Lublin for All] faster … It turns out that a smiling black man shouting Motor [the name of the club] is a deadly threat to the city, to this second-league club and to the municipal transportation.” On a serious note, Iwanski adds that “anti-Semitism, homophobia and ethnic prejudices are still present in Polish stadiums.” The Lublin area is very poor. Amidst economic hardships, scapegoating, conspiracy theories and prejudices are rampant.

10. Submitting to the far right could not be more dangerous here. That is why an MP Michal Kabacinski, 24, protested against Lublin City Hall’s submission to the soccer hooligans. “The mayor has failed to respond to these events. This was show of hate speech, a presentation of anti-Semitic and xenophobic positions. A scandal. We must not accept these events.” On the door of Lublin city hall Kabacinski hung a picture of the mayor next to a portrait of Adolf Hitler and an image of the Ku Klux Klan. The MP explained how he had intended to demonstrate that City Hall agrees with the promotion of ideologies which these figures represent.

11. Lublin has been a city of women, minorities and migrants. Let us remember the residents of Lublin: Jews, Roma, Ukrainians, Russians, Italians, Greeks, Germans, Armenians, Scots. Nowadays we must encourage contemporary migrants, including economic ones. Lubliners have enjoyed hospitality abroad, and metaphysically we are all migrants to this world. We must not allow prejudices in our region — that is why social change is badly needed. Let’s find within ourselves more than toleration: acceptance, more than integration: recognizing otherness as value, more than dialogue: cooperation among cultures. Zygmunt Bauman recently spoke about such a collaboration at both the Grodzka City Gate Centre-NN Theatre and at the Catholic University of Lublin.
12. In the sixteenth century, Lublin was a hub of anti-war and anti-feudal religious group Socinians who – exiled to Transylvania and the Netherlands – influenced the political philosophy of John Locke. In the Renaissance, this city attracted dissenters; in modernism: the avant-garde; and in the 1970s and 80s: conceptual artists and alternative theatre. Today it boasts young artists: Robert Kusmirowski (featured in the recent Liverpool Biennial), Urszula Pieregonczuk (who queers Dostoevsky and war history) Mariusz Tarkawian (whose drawings will be on show at the Glasgow School of Art Mackintosh Museum in January: ) and Piotr Brozek who has authored the FB profile of a Jewish child murdered in the Holocaust, Henio Zyтомирski. Brozek updated the profile with newsfeeds in the first-person, using the present tense. Invitations to add Henio as a friend read: “I would like to tell you the story of one life.” Internet users befriended Henio, and sent him messages, comments and even gifts. Mariusz Tarkawian drew a monumental panorama of bloodshed throughout human history in Lublin’s Biala Gallery. The Holocaust was presented, as was the Armenian genocide (the artist’s ancestors were Armenian, who had for centuries been living in Poland). Tarkawian also graffitied a house with the lyrics to a Yiddish song in order to commemorate Jewish Lublin. Such artistic-social initiatives are necessary in Poland, where mourning for the victims of the Holocaust is lacking. Unmourned millions, unmourned life.

13. In a book *Jewish Lublin: A Cultural Monograph*, published by the Grodzka City Gate Centre-NN Theatre and the Centre for Jewish Studies, Maria Curie-Sklodowska University, the Jewish Mexican sociologist Adina Cimet writes, “What had been home became hell and much was severed: lives, culture, faith, hope, and humanity. The Majdanek extermination camp, just a bus ride away from the city, remains one of the tombstones of that destruction.”
“I encountered young people that were struggling with the past they had inherited: the city they were left with and the silence they were handed. These young pioneers – as I see them – were working to imagine the obliterated past; they struggled to conceive and recognize the Jewish contribution to their history in order to be able to understand ‘their’ past. Some ached from the slaughter that was staged in those streets. But their work revealed to me that, out of that past, they sought to imagine a future for themselves. They dreamt of rebuilding their world based on values of decency, respect to others, and the recognition of Jewish memory.”

14. Among these pioneers are the Grodzka City Gate Centre-NN Theatre and the Centre for Jewish Studies, Maria Curie-Sklodowska University as well as NGOs: Homo Faber and The Well of Memory (Studnia pamięci). Intercultural Lublin is presented in and fostered by the photo campaign Open-create Lublin! O-tworz Lublin!, initiated by Barbara Wybacz. The tradition of this Jewish city is researched into by Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska, Robert Kuwalek and Dariusz Libionka whose car was sprayed with swastikas.

15. We need even more grassroots art activism and opposition to the wave of ultranationalism which has gripped Hungary, Russia and Poland. Contemporary art is repressed here, as it explores the traumas of the past and of the present (Pussy Riot, layoffs of curators, Orban’s takeover of art institutions). East European societies are polarized economically and politically: the moneyed few vs. precariousness of the transition; far-right militias on the rampage vs. socially engaged (Marcusian-Kristevan-Rancierian, albeit always local!) aesthetics.

16. Lublin itself has also been home to groundbreaking thinkers: the philosophers of science Emile Meyerson and Ludwik Fleck, the specialist on Bergson, Romuald Jakub Weksler Waszkinel, who serving as a Catholic priest discovered that he was Jewish (a Holocaust survivor who had been handed over to a Polish family by his mother). This city is exceptional through outstanding women and LGBT personalities: the lesbian writer Narcyza Zmichowska (whose Gothic novel The Heathen Woman was translated into English by Ursula Phillips), The Bund leader Bela Shapira, the novelist Malwina Meyerson and her daughter poetess Franciszka Arnsztajnowa.
whose friendship with this city’s avant-garde gay poet Jozef Czechowicz is depicted by Hanna Krall in her reportages. The Grodzka City Centre-NN Theatre is presenting Czechowicz’s photographs of Jewish Lublin, as well as the life and work of Krystyna Modrzewska, a transgender Jewish doctor, scientist and writer, forced out of Poland when anti-Semitism reached its climax in 1968.

17. This month the cultural historian Marina Warner lectured fascinatingly on iconoclasm; in fact, iconoclasm against art are taking place in the streets of Lublin. Culture wars are being waged which pit a camp for openness against jingoists and pseudo-religious crusaders when Poland, Hungary and Russia have transitioned from false Communism to false Christianity. We need an eastern Europe that holds true to Transeuropa’s belief in “democracy, equality, culture beyond the nation state,” when we deplore the punishment of Pussy Rioters, the destruction of art in Lublin and Fidesz’s witch hunt of outstanding philosophers such as Agnes Heller:

18. The ambivalence of Lublin and Eastern Europe can be defined through the Derridean neologism of hostipitalité. Hostility and hospitality blend here: on the one hand, art activism is effervescent; on the other, censorship is crushing it. The Bakhtinian Pussy Rioters and Femen perform human rights, whilst extreme right ideas are employed by the political class. The hunger for profit (ubiquitous privatizations) and classism are intensifying.

19. The Polish word for hospitality (goscinność) embraces otherness (inność). This linguistic phenomenon indicates that hospitality hosts alterity as hospital-alterity. Drawing on the Hebrew Bible, Lublin should become an open city (ville franche) or refuge city (ville refuge). The philosophers Simon Critchley and Richard Kearney define this city as a space where “migrants may seek sanctuary from the pressures of persecution, intimidation, and exile.” The feminist thinker Hélène Cixous also employs this idea of hospitality in her extraordinary plays and other texts. At his Lublin Labirynth Gallery lecture, the art historian Piotr Piotrowski elaborated on his concept of the critical museum as a place which could be paralleled by a “critical, self-critical city”; a self-critical, open-refuge city is of the utmost
importance in our here and now. How can we enhance our common humanity — shared with refugees dying at the borders of the EU, and with women, migrants-turned-slaves, Jews, Roma, the homeless, the unemployed and the LGBT communities?

20. The destruction of the Lublin tickets has revealed social fissures. Artistic freedom has been jeopardized by controlling and vandalizing public artworks. It is our duty to reclaim the right to Lublin. We are following the activist and academic Ewa Majewska who has critiqued the evictions of both ordinary residents in Warsaw and Poznan and artistic venues (Warsaw’s Museum for Modern Art); similarly, in *The Art Newspaper* Julia Michalska has analysed anti-Romany hostilities in Hungary and political pressure to evict the Roma Parliament in Budapest.

21. We dream of Lublin becoming a hub of participatory democracy where minorities and majorities enjoy equal rights, are visible and decide together on the affairs of our *polis*. This city should cultivate hospitality, a truth Zygmunt Bauman has reminded us of. The commitment to opening Lublin to otherness depends on all of us.

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