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Queer Enclaves: Warsaw Clubs in the Early 2000s

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abstract

In this paper, I analyze selected art shows, that took place in Warsaw clubs (Le Madame and M25) in the early 2000s. I describe the performances of the art collective Suka Off and the play "Miss HIV" directed by Maciej Kowalewski, as well as the reception of these shows. Described actions boldly and innovatively addressed issues of human carnality and non-normative sexuality. In the article, I attempt to include these performances in a local queer history – while trying to analyze the story (which I produce) critically.

keywords

queer history; Warsaw clubs; Le Madame; performance; the 2000s in Poland

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, one of the most important places for Warsaw's non-heteronormative community was the Le Madame club. It was founded in 2003 by Elżbieta Solanowska and Krystian Legierski, who hoped to create a space in Poland similar to those they had seen in Berlin and London – a club characterized by openness, diversity, and attractive cultural programming. They found a spacious venue at 12 Koźla Street, near the Barbican in Warsaw's New Town. The club's location in a tenement building within the historic city center created a unique atmosphere. The glass roof over the main room endowed the interior with the aura of post-industrial lofts which had become fashionable in the West at the time. When, three years later, Le Madame was shut down by Warsaw's conservative authorities, it became a legend that is still alive today (Müller, 2022). Meanwhile, some of the regulars began frequenting the popular M25 club, founded in 2005 by Krystian Legierski, located in a former factory building that had been adapted for musical events.

Prior to this, Polish cities only had "pubs where you drank beer, or student clubs where you went to concerts and drank beer. After 2000, venues run by people interested in culture began to appear, as spaces for concerts and meetings," wrote Bartosz Sadulski (2017: 21) in the anthology *Delfin w malinach*. Admittedly, already in the early 1990s there had existed clubs like Filtry, Fugazi, and Alfa, known not only for parties but also for concerts played by alternative bands, but it was the venues established a decade later, such as CDQ in Burakowska Street or Galeria Off in Puławska Street, which showed that a club could be a new type of cultural center, hosting festivals, exhibitions, and discussions. "Here

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we learned to stage events that were about something more than stimulants or dramatic conversations. The nucleus of Le Madame was created at Galeria Off," recounted Le Madame stage director Katarzyna Szustow (Sadulski, 2017: 26).

The fashion for "cultural clubbing" coincided with the opening of the first "out clubs" in Poland (Tomasik, 2016). At the turn of the century, homosexual people, who had been closeted during the communist era, were able to frequent such popular clubs as Paradise in Wawelska Street, Utopia in Jasna Street, or Mykonos at the Babka (Radosława) Roundabout. As activist and researcher Krzysztof Tomasik points out in *Wyborcza*, they no longer exist because "LGBTQ clubs have a short life in Warsaw" (Tomasik, 2016). However, none of these venues was the site of a struggle like that over Le Madame, whose occupation lasted several days and ended with protesters being forcibly dragged out of the premises into the street. In the anti-eviction protests Tomasik identified a potential for the rise of a legend similar to that of the Stonewall rebellion which became the founding myth of the modern LGBT movement in the United States.

Today we can explore the bygone era of club prosperity by following scattered traces of those events. Taking subjective experience into account is crucial for the success of my project of writing a cultural history of clubbing. Paradoxically, of all the activities associated with the queer clubs, it is the ephemeral performances that have turned out to be an invaluable medium of memory; their reviews, documentation, and participants' recollections constitute a record of the emotions experienced in the clubs. Consequently, the goal of this article is to reconstruct several events staged in the early 2000s at two Warsaw clubs, Le Madame and M25, whose artistic program was extraordinarily rich and original. Based on primary materials, I analyze below selected performances and their reception. Focusing on *Miss HIV* directed by Maciej Kowalewski and performances of the Suka Off group, I attempt to show the many ways in which these shows challenged taboos surrounding sexuality.

Miss HIV

Le Madame's openness to young artists and "controversial" topics made it possible to produce a play about AIDS that went against the stereotypes dominating Polish narratives about the virus. In 2005, Maciej Kowalewski staged a play there titled *Miss HIV*[1], inspired by a Botswana beauty pageant whose contestants were women with HIV (*Miss HIV Stigma Free*). When he first heard about the pageant, Kowalewski found its idea unseemly. "But when I read that in Botswana 37 per cent of the population is HIV positive, I stopped being surprised that they held such a contest there. They can't stigmatize almost half of the population," Kowalewski (2005) explained. The Polish National AIDS Center's contest for the best

HIV prevention drama served as a pretext to develop the initial idea into a drama. In terms of form, his play, titled *Miss HIV*, alluded to the reality show genre which was gaining popularity in Poland in the early 2000s. However, the play was rejected by the jury, which said it did not have sufficient educational value and its characters did not meet the terms of the contest, for the plays were required to describe "heterosexual couples between 18 and 29 years of age" (Kowalewski, 2005).

During the first part of the performance eventually staged at Le Madame, the spectators are shown the "backstage" waiting room of the candidates for the title of Miss: Julia (Patrycja Szczepanowska), Irmina (Maria Seweryn), Klara (Izabela Kuna) oraz Urszula (Ewa Szykulska). Strolling among them is Rafael (Tomasz Tyndyk), the contest director, with a naked torso, wearing only fishnet stockings and high-heeled shoes. He chats with the contestants to loosen up the atmosphere. While nervously waiting for the finale, the women begin to share their stories of the way they got infected with HIV. Julia tells hers first: she and another girl played truant from school, met two boys at a railway station, and spent the whole day with them. One of the boys raped Julia. "Luckily I didn't get pregnant. I only got HIV." The twenty-five-year-old Irina says she had many sex partners in her life and doesn't know which of them was the carrier. Klara says she was infected by her husband, who, as it turned out, had been living a double life: "he preferred to get married rather than tell his parents he was gay." Urszula, in turn, announces that she "kind of" has HIV because she is standing in at the contest for her twin sister, who recently died of AIDS. The twin was a missionary and allegedly got infected through a skin abrasion, by a patient she had been assisting.

The lights go out, loud music begins to play, Rafael enters in a glossy wig and black evening gown studded with diamonds, and the show proper begins. Reportedly, Rafael's erotic dance and provocative lines addressed to the bewildered audience had a seductive effect: "I let myself go. I went with the flow," Tomasz Tyndyk (2011) recalled in *Replika*. The video then shows the contestants who enter with dancing step. Julia approaches the microphone first, and in response to the question "How did you happen to catch HIV?" she makes up a story about a junkie who accosted her at the railway station and jabbed her in the stomach with an infected syringe needle when she refused to give him money. Speaking these lines, Julia recycles a motif from a widely circulated urban legend transcribed by anthropologist Dionizjusz Czubala (2005: 45-53) in a book chapter titled "Sensational Stories about AIDS."

Next in line is Irina, who recounts a sentimental tale about the HIV-positive girl Katya whom she had adopted and taken on a trip to Mexico. While hiking in

the mountains, the girl was bitten by an adder. Sucking the toxic blood from Katya's wound, Irina "knew that with every sip of blood her illness entered my body, but her life was far more precious to me." The girl died, Irina says, and Irina has been seropositive ever since. The next contestant, Klara, makes no effort to tell an extraordinary story about the virus; instead, she exposes the hypocrisy of the contest. "All this is great – these lights, cameras, the contest. Really great. But when I wake up at home in the morning, I'm alone, and there are no lights or cameras [...] So I want to say, I fuck you all," Klara exclaims before she storms off the stage, leaving the audience in dismay. Urszula breaks the silence, announcing that she doesn't have HIV and she is participating on behalf of her sister who was a missionary. She explains that although she would rather believe her sister had become infected by being careless when tending to a patient, this is not the case. "On her deathbed, my sister confessed that while on a mission she had sex with a Negro [*Murzyn*]." The fact that in 2005 the Polish equivalent of "the N word" – which is considered to be offensive today – probably still sounded neutral does not change the racist implications of the scene[2].

The analysis of Kowalewski's show confirms Łucja Iwanczewska's (2020: 357) claim that "in Poland the dispute over AIDS was a dispute over morality." The contrast between what actually happened to the contestants and what they can say in public indicates tabooed areas of experience. Inventing stories is shown to be a strategy for concealing the uncomfortable truth, and it brings out the fact that only some AIDS narratives are acceptable in public discourse. From the perspective of sepology, AIDS was a problem limited to homosexuals, drug users, and "promiscuous individuals" (Iwanczewska, 2020: 356). Sepology, whose name is derived from the abbreviation SEP for "somebody else's problem," is a field of research concerned with issues considered unimportant. Analyzing the Polish history of HIV, Iwanczewska (358) argued that the presence of such subject matter in the public sphere did not affect Polish social norms: "the conservative cultural dominants regarding values and mores have remained entrenched." HIV naratives and attempts to counteract the epidemic did not translate into greater acceptance of sexuality deviating from the norm defined by monogamy, heterosexuality, and procreation. The government's prophylactic programs were aimed mainly at families (Kampanie... 2003, 2006), while other people, including drug addicts and "faggots," personified moral corruption and were supposed to inspire fear among "normal citizens" (Starosta, 1990 in Iwanczewska, 2020: 351). Kowalewski managed to demonstrate that HIV can be narrated in a less puritanical manner, untainted by class prejudice and homophobia, and he managed to do so without deepening social fears.

The fact that Kowalewski found inspiration for his show in the Botswana Miss HIV contest can be viewed as a departure from the paradigm of talking about

AIDS laid out in the 1990s by American pop culture. Instead of making the Polish version of *Angels in America*, he constructed a local social typology of the virus, referring to the South African context (where the HIV incidence ratio was initially the highest in the world), a fact that can be viewed as a conscious gesture of resistance to the appeal of Western culture. While Kowalewski thus produced an original narrative, the show needs to be critically examined. He successfully challenged the stereotypes that had accrued around AIDS in Poland, and ridiculed the naïve moralizing narratives of HIV. At the time, Kowalewski expected controversy to arise from the fact that he did not treat seropositive people as victims and allowed himself to (inappropriately) joke about the virus. However, today's critical analysis brings to the fore the show's treatment of race. First, one may wonder whether transferring to Poland the format of a contest held in Botswana should not be considered cultural appropriation. A second and perhaps more problematic issue concerns the story told by Urszula, which is based on the stereotypical figure of the black man, associated with sexuality and spreading venereal diseases. The lines spoken by the character played by Ewa Szykulska evoked hilarity in the audience, triggered by the recycling of a common joke about overseas mission work. Existing stereotypes concerning women and, above all, black men were the source of the humor in this instance.

As Joanna Krakowska (2019: 174) has observed, Polish theater at the beginning of the twenty-first century eagerly used the category of otherness, which made it possible to represent "a community of normal people against which otherness was defined" (Krakowska 2019: 174). She had in mind performances in which homosexuality served as the manifestation of otherness (for instance, in some of Krzysztof Warlikowski's theater productions). *Miss HIV* stands out against this backdrop because sexual identity does not mark the line of social division in the play. One may argue, however, that this function is performed by race. Urszula's manner of speaking suggests that she understands her story to be shameful, scandalous, and grotesque, and that contracting HIV on a mission to what was probably an African country, through sex with a man she met there, served as the comic punch line of the second part of the performance. The tension created by juxtaposing a supposedly "civilized" country like Poland with a place that has no name but is certainly distant, poorer, and "exotic" evoked laughter and allowed the audience to become part of the imagined community of "normal" Europeans. Viewed from today's perspective, this situation seems to be an unacknowledged manifestation of prejudice, revealing the fact that Poland lagged behind Western Europe and the U.S., where a similar "joke" would most likely have encountered opposition as symptomatic of racial prejudice.

The fans of Le Madame also frequented the M25 club in Minska Street. According to Katarzyna Szustow, the Katowice-based group Suka Off was invited to perform at the M25 because showing *Flesh Forms*, at Le Madame would have been "too perverse" (Krawczyk, 2005). M25's large postindustrial space not only resonated with the character of the show bit also put the audience at ease because it afforded a physical distance from the performers.

Suka Off was founded by Piotr Węgrzyński, who collaborates with Sylvia Lajbig and music producer Mirosław Matysiak, with the occasional support of other artists. The group draws on the traditions of visual theater, performance, as well as video and body art. They have performed extensively abroad, not only in Europe but also in the Americas and Asia. In Poland, they initially showed their art mainly at theater and performance festivals. The story of Suka Off "aptly illustrates the transformations that were taking place in the Polish art market at the time," writes Pola Sobaś (2005). "The period when this group went from being 'promising' to becoming 'valued' was marked by two phenomena: the decline of alternative theaters and the gradual shift towards clubbing" (Sobaś, 2005). Suka Off performed at the M25 club for the first time on November 18, 2005. They presented *Flesh Forms*, "a series of tableaux depicting the duality of the sexes" (Suka Off), using bondage art and piercing techniques. On the following day, a performance of *Clone Factory*, featuring bondage artist Kumi Monster, took place at the same venue. The group presented a simulation of a laboratory where beings were cloned and then used for transplants, sexual practices, and medical experiments – "a bitter picture of the modern microcosmos of human body" (Suka Off).

"They call such monstrous abomination art," the newspaper *Fakt* reported a few days after the shows, in an article illustrated with photos of the nude performers: "Naked and shaved, in a wild frenzy, they pull out each other's teeth with pincers and drink urine" (Krężlewicz and Wyżyńska, 2005). A day later, Tomasz Koziński (Law and Justice Party), mayor of the Praga Południe district, read the scandalous report in the daily paper and notified the prosecutor's office that the M25 club was propagating pornography. Although the prosecutor's office ultimately decided that no crime had been committed (in Poland only forcing pornographic content on those who do not wish it and those under the age of fifteen is a punishable offence), the scandal unleashed by *Fakt* and the mayor had a significant impact on the reception of Suka Off's art. After their performances at M25, they were labeled scandalmongers.

Piotr Węgrzyński was not happy about this, and he dismissed journalists' suggestions that scandal was an excellent publicity vehicle for the theater. When an interviewer claimed that the media hype had made the collective more famous ("It's always a plus, isn't it?") Węgrzyński (2006) retorted, "It's a minus!" and pointed out that before the "Warsaw affair" the collective had received more invitations to perform in Poland. In the wake of the media scandal, *Clone Factory* was dropped from the Łódź Theatre Meetings program. Journalists interviewing Węgrzyński after the scandal were not interested in art; instead they focused on the political context. "I know a few people from artistic circles who even suggested that we deliberately provoked the whole 'scandal,'" writes Węgrzyński. "Why would I have wanted to do this after ten years of stable work?" (Węgrzyński, 2006). Following the accusations of propagating pornography, the narrative about Suka Off's performances was shaped was by the scandal, which clearly irritated Węgrzyński. "If someone is expecting a joyride, they are in for a surprise. We don't put on a freakshow and the rougher scenes are just part of the story; taken out of context, they are simply boring," said the collective's founder before a *Flesh Forms* performance in Poznań. "I would like to warn all those who expect live sex, the killing of animals, drinking urine, the use of vulgarisms, etc. that they will find none of those things in our show on November 19" (Wegrzyński, 2006).

Joanna Derkaczew (2005), who unlike the *Fakt* journalist actually saw the performance, described it very differently in *Gazeta Wyborcza*. What the performance offered was a powerful sensory experience, enhanced by trance-inducing music, a slide show with anatomical diagrams, and above all, the proximity of the performers to the audience. At the beginning of the show, a woman in a latex dress and wig is lying on a catafalque, while a barefoot man dressed in overalls and a gas mask mops the floor. After some time, their bodies begin to "gradually decompose":

> He spits out black slime, she curls up, bald and exposed. Since they are undressed, it is hard to tell them apart. [...] They form a closed system, a single organism inside which identity, pain and (artificially prepared) physiological fluids flow freely. To get undressed in the chilly industrial building is a heroic feat, and the couple engages in play that involves lighting candles stuck on the forehead of one of the exhausted artists. [...] a spectator obligingly pulls out a lighter and lights the candles on the actor's living skin (Derkaczew, 2005).

For years, Suka Off has showcased "all the biological and physiological aspects of human carnality." The collective does not aim to shock, judge human behavior, or persuade anyone to do anything. The problem, as Łukasz Guzek explains, is that "in Poland sex is an awkward subject" (2013: 54).

> Nothing in our culture (except pornography) provides imaginative models for individual bodily sensations. Works of culture are devoid of the sexual imagination. Nowhere is the disjuncture between official culture and human behavior and needs more apparent than in the sphere of sexuality. This is also one of the reasons why the viewers of Suka Off's performances do not really know how to respond to them, how to understand them. Because if it's not pornographic SF, then what is? (2013: 54)

M25, dubbed the "hardcore cousin of the old bitch Le Madame" (Ferfecki, 2005), hosted Suka Off once again in 2006, during the Express EC 47 Theater Festival co-organized by the German Goethe-Institut and the Polish Theatrical Institute. On this occasion, the collective performed *White Room*. According to the artists, the title signifies a place inside each of us that is filled with repressed fears and fantasies. "If you look into the 'white room' you will see yourself" (Suka Off, 2006-2018). Like the previous performances, this one referred to the aesthetics of the laboratory. It involved one performer inflicting pain on and humiliating the other characters. In the finale, the person playing the torturer was hung on hooks driven into his shoulder blades.

"I was yawning, and so was the man next to me," wrote one viewer on the *Ultramaryna* forum after seeing the Suka Off performance (helo, 2006). "I saw nothing scandalous that would call for the intervention of the prosecutor's office! [...] After 10 minutes the audience was already bored. Some left (not on account of weak nerves or the iconoclastic nature of the performance), some smiled or yawned when they were supposed to be shocked," another spectator reported (ef, 2006). "Mutilation in public doesn't work on most people anymore," wrote Derkaczew (2006). These reactions show that Węgrzyński's fears were justified: audiences expected, first and foremost, to be subjected to extreme experiences at Suka Off's performances. Yet their passive attitude prevented them from attending to their own feelings, leaving them disappointed. Thus they missed the opportunity to experience transgression.

Piotr Piber (2006) wrote in *Didaskalia* that it had been a long time since he had seen "something so tedious, tiresome, and irritatingly monotonous" and, worse still, derivative: "Chris Burden crucified himself on the roof of a car way back in the year I was born, and I am almost middle-aged." In an interview, Węgrzyński (2006) responed, "In Poland (and nowhere else!!!) we constantly hear that this or that has already been done. Where have you seen it done, I ask? Because we do not hear such accusations even from people who were involved in the development of body art." Rather than a sign of Polish audiences' familiarity with the body art movement, the talk about boredom and derivativeness seems to be a desperate attempt to avoid the uncomfortable feelings evoked by Suka Off's performance. Skepticism and weariness allows "normality" to remain safely intact.

"Those performances were hyper-corporeal, involving self-mutilation that verged on fetishes and BDSM," I was told by Dominika Szpinda (2021), once a regular at Le Madame and M25. She still has vivid memories of Suka Off snows, which she found "definitely transgressive and eye-opening, for they showed that one can consciously mutilate oneself for pleasure."

The disjuncture between the artists' intentions and the effects of their performances shows that drawing on Western inspirations often produced ambiguous and surprising results in Poland. When analyzed form a present-day perspective, the club scene hit *Miss HIV* turns out to be controversial not so much because it violates social conventions of talking about the HIV virus but because it invokes racial prejudices rampant two decades ago. The perception of Suka Off as a group of scandal-mongers who propagate pornography testifies to the power of sexual taboos at the time, while the tendency to describe their performances as morbid and boring can be read as an attempt to repress disturbing feelings so as to remain within the comfort zone of "normalcy."

Temporary Autonomous Zone

During the post-1989 systemic transformation in Poland, there was a common assumption about the superiority of Western cultures, leading to a strong desire to imitate them, as well as a fear that achieving the status of the original is impossible (Szcześniak, 2016: 50). Cultural studies scholar Magda Szcześniak asks us to look at the Polish transformation from socialism to liberal capitalism through the lens of "mimicry," a concept Homi Bhabha applied to colonized communities. Mimicry is a strategy adopted by the subject who wishes to resemble the colonizer and "who is almost the same, *but not quite*" (Bhabha 1984: 127). According to Szcześniak (2016: 50), "mimicry" allows us to understand the Polish "transformation schizophrenia." Yet the case of Le Madame demonstrates that Poland's queer history does not constitute a series of inevitably flawed efforts to mimic Western cultures. Although the attempts to transfer the paradigm of a multicultural community discovered by Poles traveling to London or Berlin were not fully successful, the Western clubs did inspire them to create in Poland real alternatives to the rigid norms that shaped social life at the time, thus allowing for the partial emancipation of excluded subjects.

Strategies of emancipation that developed abroad at various historical moments were deployed in Poland in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century almost simultaneously (Mizielińska, 2012: 287). This, according to queer studies scholar Joanna Mizielińska (2012: 300), changes "the fairly popular narrative in the West about the way Eastern/Central European countries have slowed down

the progress of LGBT politics." Consequently, the collective coming out, understood as the appropriation of public space by nonheteronormative subjects in Poland in era of transformation, relied from the start on a rich reservoir of rhetorical tools and political strategies. For instance, when the LGBT political movement was still a niche phenomenon, the queer enclaves discussed above were already quite strong. Despite the widespread homophobic discourse in the country, it was possible to experience freedom in clubs like Le Madame and M25, to experiment, and to manifest nonheteronormative identities.

Thus, I would argue that such clubs can be viewed as instances of the Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ), to which the American prose writer and poet Hakim Bey attributed significant value (Bey, 1985). The TAZ occupies "a certain kind of 'free enclaves'" and works through minor shifts. It resembles a revolt rather than a revolution because it is temporary and non-teleological; it does not produce new norms; it is "a guerilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere/elsewhen, before the State can crush it" (Bey, 1985). As meeting places for a diverse nonnormative community, Le Madame and other clubs demonstrated in order to stand – even for a brief moment – "on a bit of land ruled only by freedom" (Bey, 1985) it is not necessary to go through all the stages of emancipation, in line with Western societies. A TAZ can be created here and now. With experience acquired in the TAZ, it is then possible to make changes outside it with greater confidence.

notes

1 I thank Maciej Kowalewski for giving me exclusive access to the video recording. The premiere at Le Madame was filmed by Wojciech Staroń.

2 It was not until 2020 that the Polish Language Council published a declaration concerning the words "Murzyn" and "Murzynka" (masculine and feminine equivalents of the English "N word"), based on the expert opinion of Warsaw University professor of linguistics, Marek Łaziński, recommending that these words not be used. Łaziński lists a number of arguments against the use of these words, including the offensive phraseology associated with them, as well as the conviction that most Poles of color treat them as offensive (Łaziński, 2020).

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