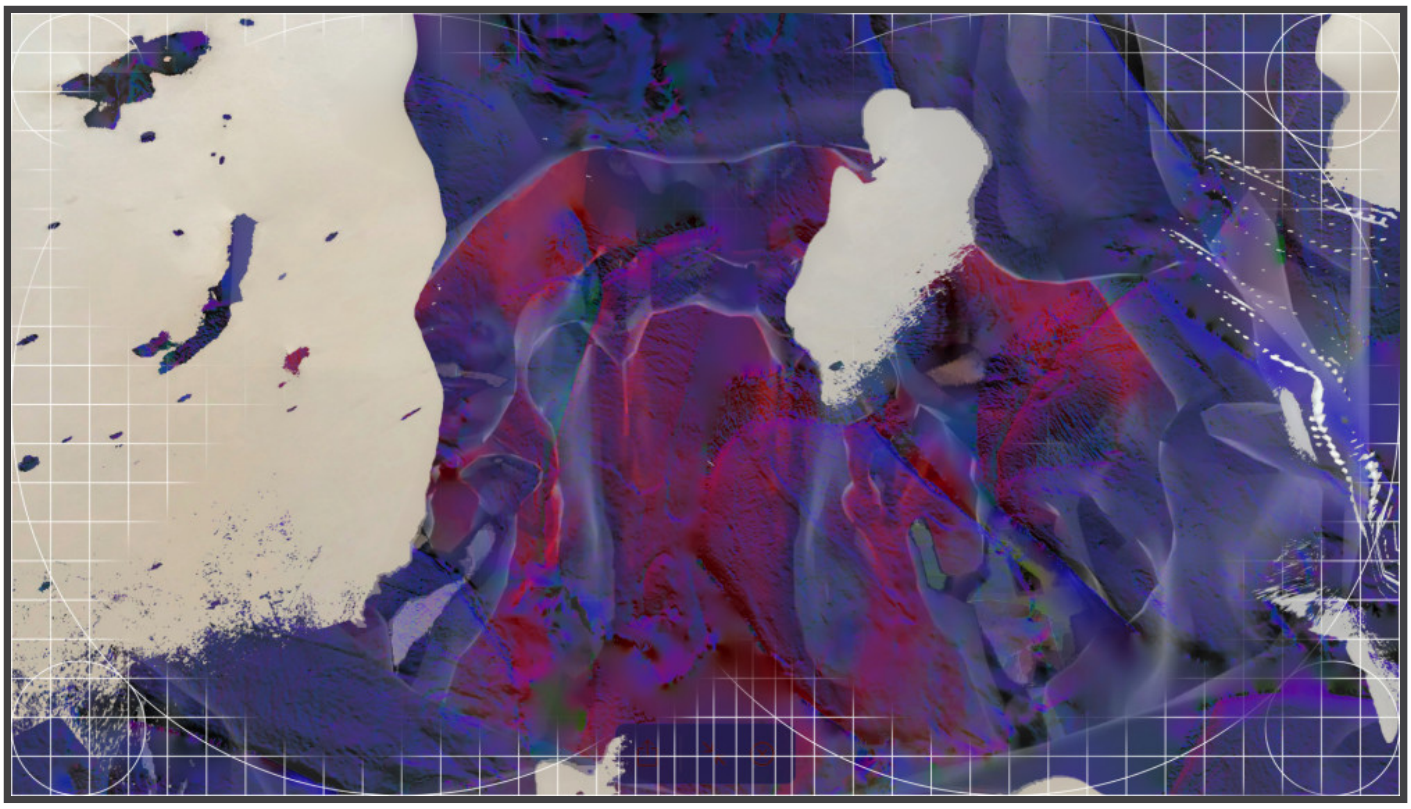
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Shocking Periphery

Katarzyna ?ukasik

Shocking Periphery aims to construct a «potential history» of Poland's reintegration into international capital markets after the collapse of the Soviet Union. It rejects the implementation of the post-1989 liberal economic shock therapy, carried out under Margaret Thatcher's infamous slogan «There is no alternative» (the TINA hypothesis).



The following text was originally delivered as a presentation at the MESH Festival in Basel in October 2024. It stems from an ongoing PhD research project, titled *Shocking Periphery* aiming to rehearse «a potential history»[1] of Poland's reintegration into international capital markets after the collapse of the Soviet Union.
This text is a rehearsal, a prompt, a sketch, an exercise in imagining otherwise. Theoretical inquiries are woven in with archival research and familial conversations. I try to re-trace a history impossible for me to recall, situating my craft and my political inquiry in everyday scenes of material reality of the economic transition.

Rehearsals

What kind of future, or rather what kind of potential, was denied to the people of the periphery through the implementation of Shock Therapy?



Photo: Jan Juchniewicz/ zbiory Europejskiego Centrum Solidarno?ci

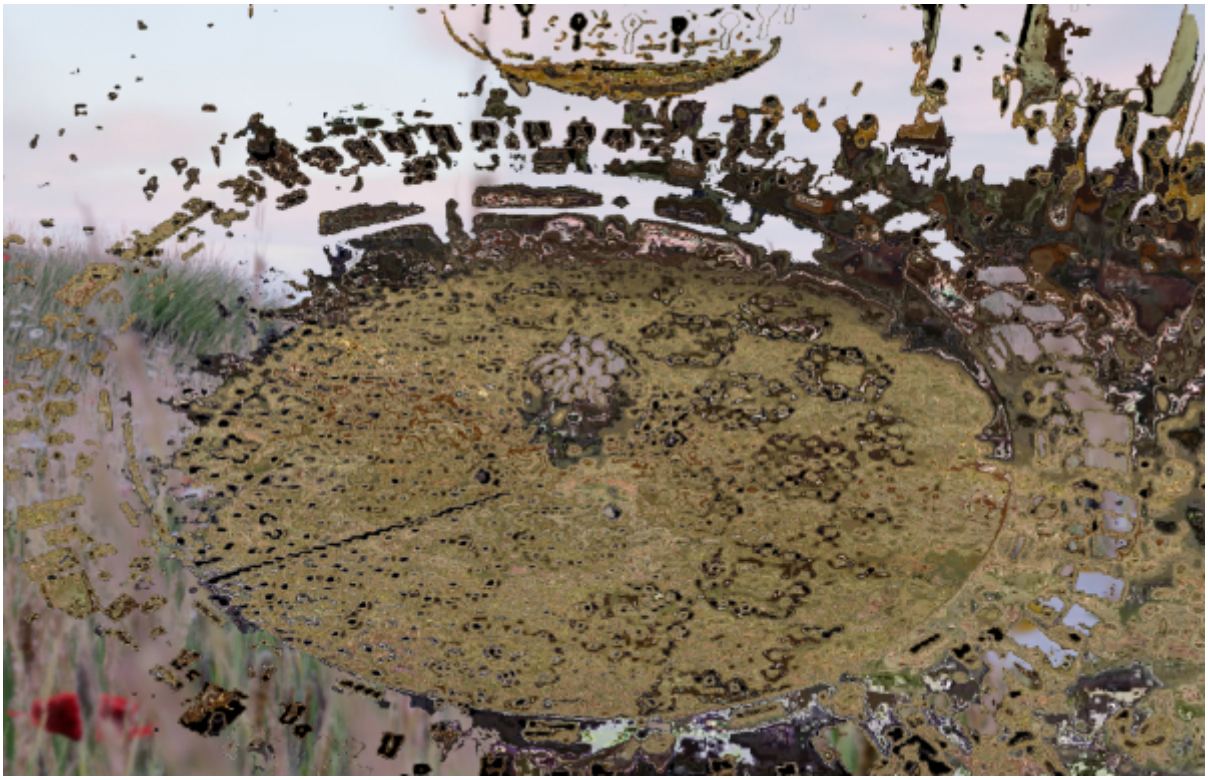
Image 1: A photograph of a building with four signs on the facade. One of them reads: «How to live if the social minimum per person totals z? …»

She was staring at the sign when a young woman passed by with her kids. It was a sunny day with a palpable smell of spring. But nature, awakening to life after a harsh winter, seemed disjointed with the recent so-called democratic transition. The promised freedom swept through the country like an avalanche and left her more disillusioned and depleted than the mass imprisonment of 1981. Bewilderment became her daily companion, a compass at cracking the new political reality–competitive capitalisms, also known as Friedmanism.

The public had little to no knowledge of the Balcerowicz Plan before it was unilaterally pushed through parliament on Monday, January 1, 1990. In a span of few years, re-integration into market economy and thirst for change seemed like the only alternative presented to us. Solidarno??'s initial demand for workers' control over the means of production was squashed. The transition unleashed a new reality of mass privatization, unemployment and evictions.

The social dispossession, economic exclusion and material deprivation stared back at her every day while the celebration of liberty seemed like a psychotic joke. Was she to believe that this transition will lead to political freedom when everyone feels stifled and unable to organize? Solidarno?? in its entirety, as a political project and form of collectivity, became a vacuous slogan. What was it that they had purportedly been liberated from? In fact, it seemed that ‹liberation to› was violently taken away from us. Perhaps that possibility was never there in the first place—a thought that, despite the afternoon sun warming her back, sent shivers down her spine.

Socio-economic context



Still from Shocking Periphery (2024) by Katarzyna ?ukasik

Shock Therapy was a liberal-economic transformation implemented post 1989 in Poland after the collapse of the Soviet Union. It was carried out under Margaret Thatcher’s infamous «there is no alternative» slogan (the TINA hypothesis). This transformation paved the way for a recession of unparalleled proportions, while dismantling socialist elements of the economy and the state.

The adaptation of Shock Therapy laid the ground for the expansion of Western capital into Eastern Europe, creating dependent forms of capitalism, corresponding to the methods of primitive accumulation.[2] The West’s [3] involvement in influencing and steering this economic transformation is illustrative of the imperial logic of metropole-periphery relations. Poland’s reintegration into the free-market economy was used as a model for Eastern Europe, with devastating consequences for the population of post-socialist countries.



Still from Shocking Periphery (2024) by Katarzyna ?ukasik

The collapse of the Berlin Wall— part of a development spearheaded by Poland’s Solidarno??—became a symbol of the superiority of liberal democracy and market economy over socialism. Although Solidarno?? initially fought for socialist reforms during the economic crisis of the 1980s, the next decade saw an anti-socialist stance gain prevalence.[4] On the one hand, their postulates were brutally crushed by the party nomenclature (the ruling party) and introduction of the martial law (1981–83) backed by military support from the USSR. On the other hand, the movement was sponsored by the West and the Vatican, with significant involvement of Polish-born Pope John Paul II.[5]

Contrary to the economic effects of the Shock Therapy, Solidarno?? to this day is celebrated as an emblem of freedom and democracy, affirmed by the nomination of Lech Wa??sa, the movement’s leader, for a Nobel Peace Prize. Western capitalism, beyond its promise of economic prosperity, was also to free Eastern Europe from the Soviet shackle, ending human rights violations. Thus, the neo-liberalization of the economy was also a moral and ethical choice. The events of 1989 became a crucial point in time, where being liberated from one form of oppression led to dependent forms of capitalism.[6] The periphery had to «catch up» [7] with Europe while economic and social deprivation progressed at an unprecedented scale and the socialist utopia became an infeasible project of the past, never to be returned to.[8]


Still from Shocking Periphery (2024) by Katarzyna ?ukasik

On the 1st of January 1990, the Polish Parliament ratified ten bills containing the so-called Balcerowicz Plan, often referred to by its opponents as «shock without therapy» or «Bing Bang.» The package of bills was drafted «using as a model the theories of F.A. Hayek and Milton Friedman and their practical applications by Ronald Regan and Margaret Thatcher.» [9] The rapid privatization led to the selling out of industrial and financial sectors, in some cases for as little as 10 percent of their estimated value. As a result, at the end of the 1990s «foreign capital controlled 35 percent of Poland's industrial stock, 70 percent of its banking assets and 80 percent of its print media.»[10] Another aspect of this transformation was the introduction of property laws that enabled rapid privatization of estates and land, leading to forcible evictions of occupants, to the benefit of the Catholic Church, which became one of the biggest landowners in the country.[11] Poland's working class paid the biggest price for this liberal-economic transformation as the country saw a major surge in unemployment, poverty and inequality.

Potential History

My research project draws on Ariella Aïsha Azoulay's notion of potential history which proposes practicing non-progressive temporality, rejecting the incessant need for expansion that defines capitalist modes of production. This conceptual framework asks what it would mean to attend to the events post 1989 not to repair their consequences, but to reverse the very conditions underlying them. It rejects the separation of past from present or, put differently, «the position of pastness.»[12] This position in turn relegates the struggle for socialism in the periphery as not only no longer viable but never materially possible in the first place. «It is only the confinement of these actions to the past that makes their potentialization unheard of.» [13] Rehearsing potential history proposes practicing non-progressive temporality, rejecting the incessant pursuit of the new that defines imperialism. It allows for «... engagement with options doomed, undesired and, defeated ..., which is the refusal to program the future at the expense of the present from which the ‹past› is inseparable.»[14] Potential history is not a remedy to repair worlds after their destruction but rather rewinds it to the moment before the destruction occurred.



Photo: Jacek Awakumowski / zbiory Europejskiego Centrum Solidarno?ci

Image 2: A photograph of the 1990's INITIATIVE business fair for small enterprises.

The air was pregnant with a mixture of excitement, entrepreneurial spirit and a hint of self-doubt. The smell of newly produced equipment ranging from scanners and printers to modern

farm equipment was adding to his thrill. His ironed suit, bought only a few days ago, was still a bit stiff and rubbed up against his skin. *We have finally arrived!*, he thought. *We are finally catching up with Europe.*

He approached one of the stands with large office printers and with a cocky smile started talking to the company representative. He needed this job badly, he needed to «catch up» today. Perhaps it was his desperation combined with a yearning for a change that worked to his benefit. Perhaps, it was his naiveté. Maybe it was his new suit and a bit of luck that landed him a position as a Nashua sales representative. He didn't have the time to analyze the intricacies and various dynamics at play here. The opportunity arose and he seized it. Nashua had a bright future, and he was a part of it now. They were working to position the brand as the Total Workspace Provider. He wasn't exactly sure what that meant precisely but he liked the boldness and decisiveness in that phrase. They rescued him out of stagnation and their trajectory seemed like the only tangible axis he could move along. Now off he went, using his connections in the city to save the business time, money and to put them on top.

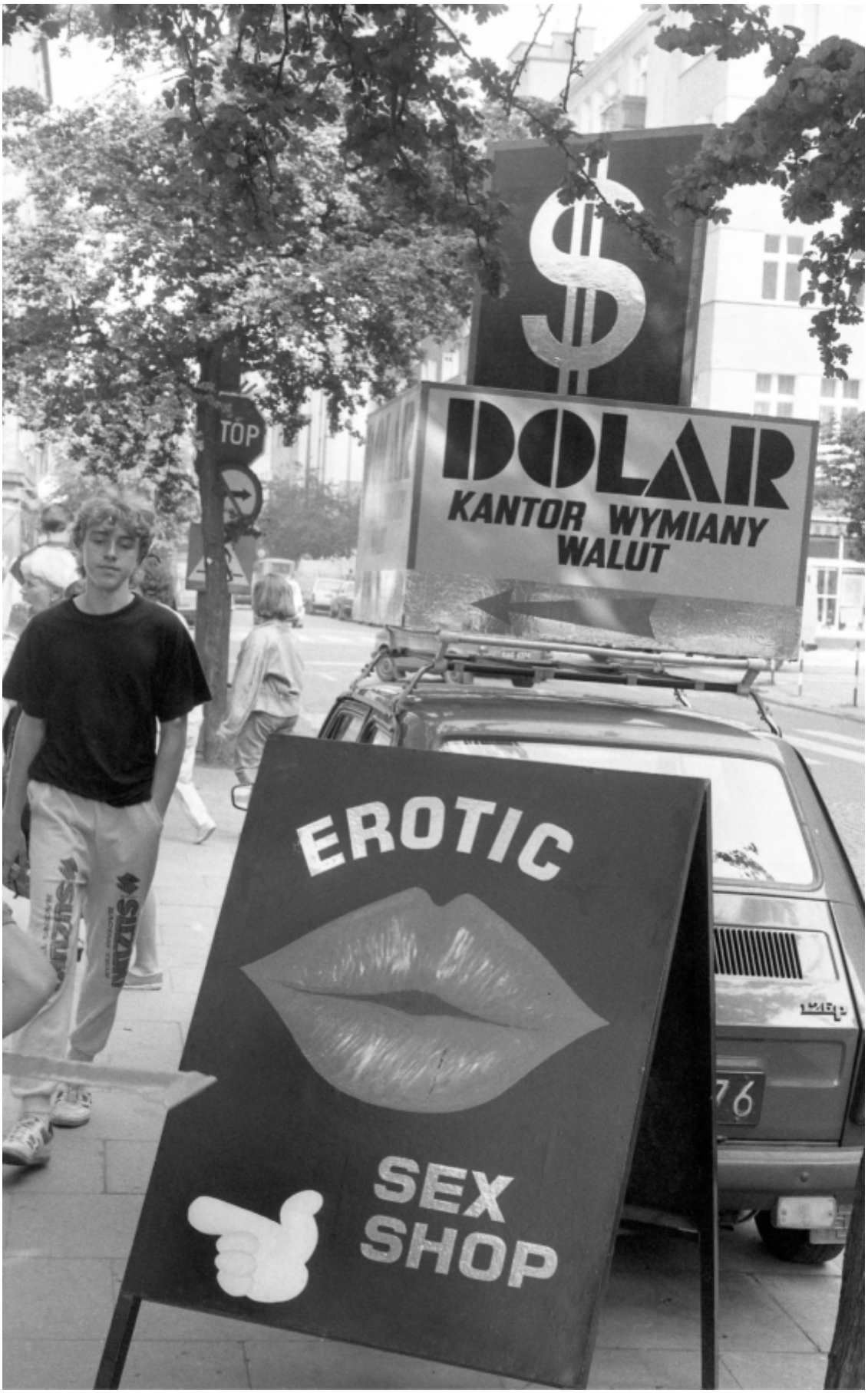


Photo: Jacek Awakumowski / zbiory Europejskiego Centrum Solidarno?ci

Image 3: A photograph of a sign on top of a Maluch reading DOLLAR; CURRENCY EXCHANGE.

He took a right turn to get to the currency exchange which looked like a prison cell, to say the least. The signs inside were handwritten. The walls and the ceiling had cracks and the cheap

linoleum covering the floor imitated wooden panels. The women behind glass exchanging his pounds had a similar demeanor as the rest of the people he came across, appearing abrasive but friendly and genuine at the same time. *Poland is a little like East Germany where people take shortcuts across the lawn. Although, East Germans are far less agitated*, he thought to himself while observing her counting the money. Within a span of a few minutes, he became a millionaire. A one-night stay in a hostel will cost him 30 pence. He exchanged £100. He might not even be able to spend it all during his travels. He went back to the street and stood for a minute in the sun, before taking his camera out. He took his first photograph of what was to become a series, trying to document this peculiar country in the midst of chaos.



Photo: Jan Juchniewicz/ zbiory Europejskiego Centrum Solidarno?ci

Image 4: A photograph of a sign on the roof of a car reading LOTTERY EXTRA, EACH LOTTERY TICKET WILL WIN!

She shook her shoulders and decided to get up. *I'll feel better when I start moving,* she thought. And as she walked the shivers went away. She was so consumed by her thoughts that she stopped only when she reached the entrance of Ewa's building. It wasn't much of a surprise though. Her legs carried her exactly where she needed to be. The elevator was broken again, and she climbed to the 10th floor. Slightly out of breath, she knocked, and Ewa's husband opened the door. *Kasia is here,* he said in a slightly raised voice before helping her out of her coat.

They sat on the L-shaped sofa in the corner of the room, drinking some tea and munching on biscuits. They talked passionately about what it really means to feel free. They didn't hide their feelings of confusion. *It feels like we've been cheated on. But our anger is muted, it's directionless,* she said.

They talked about value, and all its realized and unrealized permutations; about their struggle and their hope for a different world; about the ruins of their reality that seemed to be turning into debris before their eyes. And as the hours passed, clarity was being slowly restored. And that very moment, she knew that their perseverance and unshakable belief that things can be otherwise can't be taken away from them. *We must talk to others,* Ewa said with a spark in her eyes that Kasia hadn't seen in a while.

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Photo: Jacek Awakumowski / zbiory Europejskiego Centrum Solidarno?ci

Image 5: A photograph of a food market. Stacks of carrots are piled up on the muddy ground.

December 31st was cold. She rubbed her red cheeks and nose when she got back from the food shop. She was going to make one of her favorite dishes—spaghetti with tomato sauce. She wanted everything to be ready by 8 o'clock. She sliced the onions and red peppers before sautéing them in a pan. The kitchen was so narrow that she could barely fit her belly between the counters. Before adding the tomato concentrate, she mixed in two tablespoons of flour to thicken the sauce.

She served dinner in the dining room, which was also the living room and their bedroom. They sat at the long coffee table and ate, bending quite uncomfortably to reach for the food. The dessert was leftover pasta with melted butter, crumbled cottage cheese and sugar. She had one small glass of red wine. When she finished sipping it, she looked at her husband and said, *I think you should drive me to the hospital.* They got into the *Maluch* and drove for 15 minutes. He left her in the emergency room and went back home.

Her second daughter Katarzyna (Kasia) was born at 9:30 am on January 1, 1990. Around the same time, the government session started, and Balcerowicz in his speech introduced Shock Therapy. Little did she know then that her daughter, 34 years later, will keep rewinding time again and again, to this day, trying to re-write it and retrieve what has been concealed.

Special thanks to C. Nissim, Lauren Johnson-Ginn, Beny Wagner, Lenka Vráblíková and Iwona Kwiatkowska at European Solidarity Centre.

[1] Ariella Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*, London/New York: Verso, 2019.

[2] Gavin Rae, *Poland's Return to Capitalism*, London: Bloomsbury, 2007, pp. 5–6.

[3] Here I use the term «West» to reflect on the involvement of Jeffrey Sachs, a Chicago School economist who introduced the blueprint of the Shock Therapy to the Polish Parliament during his frequent visits to the country in the late 80's, as well as on the support of Solidarno?? by the American Congress.

[4] Rae 2007, 48.

[5] Pope John Paul II made three pilgrimages to Poland in 1979, 1983 and 1987, providing spiritual guidance to the faithful. During his second visit, the Pope met with Solidarno?? leader Lech Wa??sa, advocating for non-violent protest and supporting the self-determination of the workers' union.

[6] Rae 2007, 58.

[7] Olga Drenda, *Duchologia polska*, Kraków: Karakter, 2016.

[8] Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, London: Verso, 2005, xi, and Tadeusz Kowalik, *From Solidarity to Sellout.*

The Restoration of Capitalism in Poland, New York: NYU Press, 2012, 49.

[9] Kowalik 2012, 55.

[10] Gavin Rae, «In the Polish Mirror,» in: *New Left Review* 124, July–August 2020, https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii124/articles/gavin-rae-in-the-polish-mirror(accessed May 13, 2022).

[11] Ibid.

[12] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History,* Boston: Beacon Press, 1997, 15.

[13] Azoulay 2019, 336.

[14] Ibid., 303.

KATARZYNA ?UKASIK

Katarzyna ?ukasik is a Polish artist based in London (UK). Her practice looks at the relationship between imperialism and periphery. Through film, writing and drawing, she examines conflicting political imaginaries as means of erasure and potential. Her research investigates the economic and cultural subjugation of Eastern Europe, treated as the testing ground for the realisation of Western and Eastern imperial fantasies, tracing histories of imperial formations, capitalism and neoliberalism. Through fictional narratives, she seeks to retrieve the political possibility of the commons and worldly cocitizenship, re-writing the periphery as a site of resistance and potential.
In 2023, she graduated from an MA in Forensic Architecture and she is currently pursuing a practice-based PhD in Art at Goldsmiths, University of London.
Since 2020, she has co-curated Mascara Film Club, a quarterly film programme taking place in the UK and internationally. The Club creates space for screening artists' works outside of institutional organisations, in a more convivial setting, fostering a self-organised infrastructure for moving image practitioners.

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