

Socialist Realism from 1951 to 2022: Genealogy of Remembering and Forgetting in the Polish Art Field

Socialist Realism might have ended as a dominant doctrine of cultural politics in Poland in the first half of the 1950s, but it was only then that its legacy in the field of art and art history began to take shape. My research focuses on how societies remember, forget, valorize, and criticize their own past. It takes up this issue through a sociological analysis of processes that have shaped the memory and forgetting of Socialist Realism in the Polish art field. I develop an interdisciplinary perspective on the Polish case, which makes it possible to trace the universal mechanisms of remembering and forgetting cultural heritage in different cultures.

This project argues that Socialist Realism in the discourse of the Polish art field was filled with content that changed depending on the historical moment, crossing the successive stages of Communist Poland and post-transformation history. It became one of the hallmarks of the Stalinist era, which, at the same time, remained inextricably bound to individual experiences of its propagators, but which was not so much rooted in the experience of the artists involved in it. I have shifted the perspective of research on Socialist Realism from the turn of the 1940s and 1950s to the long duration of processes up to the present. The objective of the research is to answer the main research question: and to answer the main research question: how have social relations in the field of art shaped the memory and forgetting of Socialist Realism from its fall as the dominant doctrine in Polish cultural politics to the present? In order to do that, I combine both qualitative and quantitative methods, drawing on art history, memory studies, cultural studies, and sociology to provide a comprehensive account of the changing perceptions about Socialist Realism over time.

Research combines interdisciplinary tools, providing means to describe and analyze the processes of remembering and forgetting in the field of art. It consists of two main streams, which intersect with each other at various points: discourse analysis, which allows to trace the changes in the discourse on socialist realism from the Thaw in cultural politics until today; and historical analysis of the field of art, which allows us to recognize the socio-political background which influenced the changing paradigms. Combined, the two parts of research account for exposing the mechanisms of discourse production and processes of remembering and forgetting in the field of art.

Research on Socialist Realism developed so far along disciplinary lines and focused on that historical period. Contrary to this approach, I propose a perspective, which, in its core, is an interdisciplinary one: the aim of research is not so much to examine Socialist Realism itself as it is to examine how the field of art constructs its approaches toward the doctrine. To that end, it is crucial to employ methods from different disciplines. Therefore, the project valorizes the approach developed currently within the field of the new humanities, but at the same time offers an innovation in the field. The project includes theoretical, empirical, and methodological contribution into three areas of studies: art history; memory studies; and sociology. The project will contribute to those areas by exposing broader mechanisms: of shaping the memory and forgetting; mechanisms of discourse production; the political stakes of the memory of art.