

# Noah, Gays and the Rainbow

## A sculpture reveals the hypocrisy surrounding LGBT rights

BY KAROL SIENKIEWICZ

Standing at the very heart of Warsaw, Julita Wójcik's sculpture, *The Rainbow*, is an inoffensive work of art designed to bring joy to the passers-by and to be completely apolitical. Yet for two years following its installation in 2013 it prompted violent passions. It was burned down several times, only to be reconstructed by its defenders. The authorities' lack of response to these acts of vandalism is indicative of the worrying situation of the LGBT community in today's Poland.

Julita Wójcik's *Rainbow* had its supporters and unusually fierce opponents. It stood in Zbawiciela Square in Warsaw for several years and was probably the most famous piece of contemporary art in Poland created after 2000. As a result of media interest and political attacks, practically every Pole who read a newspaper or watched television heard about it. Paradoxically, this by no means meant that every Pole knew it was a work of art, let alone whose creation it was. And yet, when it came to *Rainbow* – a steel construction with multi-coloured artificial flowers – they certainly had an opinion. As the victim of numerous torchings, it was the most frequently attacked work of art in the history of Polish art.

It ended up in the eye of a political storm by accident, like Forrest Gump. The paradox was that the artist created one *Rainbow*, while its arsonists destroyed another. While the former interpreted it with generalised slogans of tolerance, joy and European values, the latter saw it as a symbol of the LGBTQ movement, even if the colours on Wójcik's *Rainbow* weren't the same as those of the rainbow flag seen at Pride Parades.

### As the books have their stories...

As the books have their stories, works of art have their own fates. Some start to live a life of their own, independently of the artist's intentions, sometimes even against them. And that is what happened to Julita Wójcik's *Rainbow*. The artist's plan was for it to be apolitical, above divisions, and yet it unexpectedly became the focal point of nationwide debates. It became a thorn in the side of right-wing nationalists; for the PO politicians, who at that time ran both the city and national governments, it was an uncomfortable piece, but they couldn't fail to defend it, even if its interpretation as a LGBTQ symbol wasn't to their liking. Poland,

whether under the governments of PiS or PO, or even – earlier on – the post-Communist Left, was and continues to be in the rear-guard of countries fighting discrimination. In terms of the rights of LGBTQ people, our country is Europe's backwater.

Meanwhile, tensions over *Rainbow* grew and grew, and it was impossible to remain indifferent. One could only love it or hate it. Events gathered pace when *Rainbow* burnt down spectacularly on Polish Independence Day, 11 November 2013. For some, this was the symbolic triumph of Polishness over the values allegedly imposed on Poland by the so-called decaying West, a symbol of Poland rising from her knees, a Poland independent of gays and lesbians. For others – a reason to mourn. Overnight, *Rainbow* was smothered in a layer of political correctness. Because it was the Adam Mickiewicz Institute behind Julita Wójcik's work, and it had previously stood in Brussels to commemorate the Polish presidency of the European Union.

From an unexceptional piece of art, *Rainbow* was transformed into an object of interest for anthropologists. It certainly ceased to be a piece whose meaning was defined by the artist in her commentary. The nationalists who despised it were right about one thing: the Warsaw *Rainbow* was first and foremost "homo" – if only because they destroyed it as such.

It all started in Wigry in the Suwalki region in 2010. For decades, in beautiful natural surroundings, a former Camaldolese monastery housed a centre for creative works. After 1989, it became a peculiar relic of Communism. In its final years, under the guidance of the artist and skilful curator Agnieszka Tarasiuk, it was a relatively dynamic place, where artists gladly came to work, often involving the local community.

## For the Wigry cycle *Flower Power*...

For the Wigry cycle *Flower Power*, in which most installations were created from live plants, Julita Wójcik – inspired by cemetery wreaths – used artificial, multi-coloured flowers to decorate the arc she designed, linking the ground and the wall of the monastery. Through a joint effort, with the help of volunteers (the Benedictine motto *ora et labora* springs to mind), a "symbol of joy" was created. A scene from the Book of Genesis, in which God paints a rainbow in the sky after the flood, as well as an extract from a poem by Maria Konopnicka about a "seven-coloured stripe" painted on "that little cloud" was used to interpret the work.

The fate of the centre for creative work was, however, already sealed, although its closure was postponed from time to time. The Church took over the buildings. Today you can organise a school prom there or sleep in the "Papal apartments".

When, on 11<sup>th</sup> November 2013, Julita Wójcik's *Rainbow* was set alight during the Independence March in Warsaw, and the PiS MP Bartosz Kownacki celebrated on Facebook that the "homo rainbow was burning", Paweł Potoroczyn, the Director of the Adam Mickiewicz Institute, responded with his characteristic eloquence, saying: "You,

sir, are an idiot.” He then immediately recalled that after all, *Rainbow* “first came to life at the monastery in Wigry”. And “it was very beautiful”. It seemed nothing coming from the Suwalki region could ever be “homo”.

The Adam Mickiewicz Institute is a state body responsible for promoting Polish culture abroad. It has a relatively large budget and there was a time when it was often said that the promotion of Polish culture abroad was doing much better than Polish culture within the country. It was indeed easier to organise something in Tokyo than on the banks of the Vistula.

But the Adam Mickiewicz Institute is also an institute in which culture is supposed to align with the country’s official politics, and of course, not everything can fit in that kind of pairing. The Institute worked enthusiastically to give an artistic frame to political events, particularly during the first Polish presidency of the European Union in 2011. Polish cultural institutes received a significant financial injection for projects abroad (for instance the American exhibitions of Alina Szapocznikow, organised by the Museum of Modern Art in New York) – not all of them a resounding artistic success.

Among the many programmes, the six pillars of the presidency and events in various major global cities, a particular emphasis was placed on events held in Brussels. Among others, there was a major overview exhibition of Polish art and a cycle of artistic projects in public spaces under the shared title, *Fossils and Gardens*. Of the initially planned six works, later reduced to four, three ultimately saw the light of day: *Double layer* by Dominik Lejman, *Spectre: Romantic Post-Vandalism* by Maurycy Gomulicki, and Julita Wójcik’s *Rainbow*.

Only Gomulicki’s work had any elements of criticism. By smashing some windows in a building designated for demolition, the artist created an image on its façade. Except that rather than the initially planned skull, the empty windows created the less controversial logo of Bauhaus, the pre-war school of architecture and design that spread ideas of modernism. Dominik Lejman produced a projection in his typical style. And in September 2011, for the first time in the shape of a complete arch, *Rainbow* was erected in front of the European Parliament building. The flowers were created earlier on in the summer, in Sopot. “Together let’s make a rainbow for Brussels,” encouraged the artist. What was created was a kind of flowery welcoming gate. According to the press release, Wójcik’s work “brought joy” to the EU civil servants.

At that point, no one yet saw *Rainbow* as a symbol of the LGBTQ movement, partly because no one would expect anything of the sort from Poland.

It was David Černý who spoke more truth about our country in Brussels during the first Czech presidency of the European Union in 2009, when he installed his monumental work *Entropa* in the headquarters of the European Council. *Entropa* resembled an enlarged model-making kit. Rather than parts of an aeroplane or ship, it was made up of outline maps of the twenty-seven EU Member States, each with an image, object or scene illustrating a stereotype about that country. Černý said he was inspired by the humour of Monty Python.

## Some countries got it worse than others.

Some countries got it worse than others. While Belgium's symbol was pralines and Denmark was built of Lego bricks, the layout of the German motorways formed a shape dangerously reminiscent of a swastika, and Poland was represented by priests erecting a rainbow flag on a potato field, in a pose mirroring the famous photograph from the end of the Second World War of American soldiers raising the flag on Iwo Jima island. (Curiously, Černý also anticipated Brexit – the notoriously Eurosceptic United Kingdom was left out of his jigsaw puzzle).

It would be hard to find a more pertinent caricature of Poland. The issue of LGBTQ rights was a hot potato during the years of the PO governments, and to be on the safe side, any legislative attempts to regulate civil partnerships ended up in the parliamentary freezer. When it came to social attitudes, the party wanting to present itself as distinctly pro-European revealed its conservative nature. The priests also constituted an accurate irony of Poland – the Catholic Church, the most powerful political force in the country, aspires to limit the rights of LGBTQ people, despite the fact that the priests themselves sometimes speak of a “gay lobby” in the Church. The potatoes topped off the picture – when in 2006 the German paper *Tageszeitung* compared President Lech Kaczyński to a potato, even the Polish diplomatic service issued an official complaint. Polish prosecutors investigated the matter, but Germany refused to apologise.

In summer 2010, Černý's work came to Poland, to the National Museum in Warsaw, which at the time was briefly under the direction of Piotr Piotrowski, who tried to bring to life the concept of a critical museum. In Piotrowski's view, a critical museum is one that actively participates in current debates and reflects the complexity of society. At the forefront of this programme, in the Director's own opinion, was the *Ars Homo Erotica* exhibition, curated by Paweł Leszkowicz. The exhibition showed a homoerotic perspective in art (and on art) from Antiquity to the present day, and coincided with EuroPride taking place in Warsaw at the same time.

While the hurriedly prepared exhibition had many weaknesses, it was an unprecedented event, the likes of which will not be seen again in Polish museology for quite some time. “If I were being mean,” wrote Bogusław Deptuła on the pages of *Dwutygodnik*, “I'd say this about the exhibition: it doesn't matter what it's like, what matters is that it exists.” There was a lot of truth in this. A major Polish museum organising an exhibition of queer art was a watershed. And to open the exhibition, in the entrance hall, a fragment from Černý's *Entropa* was displayed – the caricature of Poland.

*Ars Homo Erotica* wasn't as controversial as might have been expected – or at least there were no protests in front of the National Museum. But thanks to some Members' parliamentary questions, it did end up on the agenda in the Parliament, a few months before even opening. The PiS MP Stanisław Pięta wanted to know why Piotr Piotrowski was restricting himself to homosexuality and “thus discriminating against the art of necrophiles, paedophiles and

zoophiles". The Minister of Culture himself, Bogdan Zdrojewski, defended the exhibition, saying it exemplified the concept of a critical museum.

## The cultural programme of the Polish presidency...

The cultural programme of the Polish presidency paled in comparison to the Czech *Entropa*, even if it was prepared with great passion. One could have got the impression, as with many Adam Mickiewicz Institute initiatives, that it enjoyed most popularity in Poland – at least that was the suggestion in the Polish press. All of the projects, both good and bad, including all the workshops held across European capitals in which the motto of the cultural presidency, *I Culture*, was sewn out of rags (even Minister Zdrojewski sat down at the sewing machine), were heralded a success, and the presidency was brought to an end with a summary exhibition in the Zachęta National Gallery of Art in Warsaw. Finally, in June 2012, as a kind of monument to the whole enterprise, *Rainbow* was recreated and erected in Plac Zbawiciela in Warsaw, not far from the Institute's headquarters.

And whatever might be said about it, whichever book of the Bible was cited, *Rainbow* was a shambles. The flowery arch wasn't an arch at all, but a polygon built out of several straight segments. Furthermore, the puny dimensions of the angular creation didn't fit with the architectural qualities of Plac Zbawiciela. The artificial flowers added to the kitsch impression. A few elegant photographs were nonetheless taken for promotion purposes. Officially, *Rainbow* was supposed to be beautiful and officially, it was. But erecting an inflammable installation in the middle of one of the most vibrant and hipster places in Warsaw was inevitably going to end in mischief.

In summer 2012, when the European football championship was being held in Poland and Ukraine, tipsy daredevils clambering over the construction to the other side of the *Rainbow* became part of the square's nocturnal landscape. The patrons of the bar Plan B and the wine connoisseurs of Charlotte mused about when someone would check if *Rainbow's* flowers were as inflammable as they seemed. Foreigners wondered if they had accidentally ended up in the gay district – for them, *Rainbow* could mean only one thing. Thanks to Wójcik's work, from the perspective of Zbawiciela Square Poland looked remarkably European.

It didn't take long for the fires to start. *Rainbow* was already in flames for the first time in October 2012. The Director of the Adam Mickiewicz Institute, Paweł Potoroczyn, issued an effusive appeal written in blank verse, full of direct addresses to the "vandal" and "imbecile". What, in Potoroczyn's view, had been destroyed? A work of art paid for with our taxes, "the work of thousands of volunteers – unemployed, poor, disabled and disadvantaged women, men and children, who had given up their time and energy to bring joy to others," "an object that brought smiles to the faces of thousands of Warsaw residents, visitors and even football fans". "You, you imbecile, have destroyed the sign of Covenant," raged Potoroczyn. Clearly, he too interpreted *Rainbow* biblically.

Potoroczyn also boldly declared that *Rainbow* “fitted seamlessly into our city from the very first day”. Except that before Wójcik’s work became victim of the arson attacks, it was supposed to be a temporary project commemorating the Polish presidency of the European Union (– rather unsuccessful politically, but, as usual in the rhetoric of the Adam Mickiewicz Institute, an artistic triumph). At one point, however, and not without the support of the “Gazeta Stołeczna” newspaper, it was decided that *Rainbow* would be a second palm tree. And every now and then there was a new search for volunteers willing to sacrifice their unpaid man-hours for the art of Julita Wójcik. They threaded paper flowers onto wires, a bit like the marmot with the silver foil in the old Milka chocolate advert.

Joanna Rajkowska’s artificial palm tree, entitled *Greetings from Jerusalem Avenue* and placed on the De Gaulle roundabout, was light years away from Julita Wójcik’s *Rainbow*. While *Rainbow* ornamented Polish foreign policy, the palm tree stuck in the throat of the authorities from the outset, and even the people of Warsaw didn’t like it. The palm tree, both the most striking and successful public work of art in the capital, had to work to earn its approval. Rajkowska’s intention was for it to recall the city’s Jewish past, immortalised in the name of the street on which it was placed. At the same time it became a sort of symbol of diversity and consent for otherness. The palm itself was different, it was a foreign creature.

Rajkowska exploited the palm tree to support various political objectives. When the nurses went on strike in 2007, she put a nurse’s cap on top of the tree in a sign of solidarity. On the opening day of Euro 2012, to support the protests against the holding of the football championship, she scattered leaves from it – unfortunately not all of them, so the sign went unnoticed, and the protestors themselves disappeared in the overwhelming crowd of excited football fans.

## In comparison to the palm tree, *Rainbow* was devoid of significance...

In comparison to the palm tree, *Rainbow* was devoid of significance and left unconstrained by the artist. Indeed, despite the association with the symbol of gay and lesbian emancipation, Wójcik wanted *Rainbow* to be “free from social and political engagement”. *Rainbow* was “supposed to just be beautiful,” she claimed. That’s why it was possible to ascribe it different meanings, as the need arose. In Wigry – a joyful work resulting from a team effort, in Brussels – a Europhile’s rainbow, in Warsaw – an undefined “symbol of the Covenant”, bringing joy to locals and visitors. Paradoxically, the first fires did it quite a lot of good. In its half-burnt state, with the blackened metalwork exposed beneath the external junk, it better reflected the truth about Poland and revealed the tensions relating to the rainbow as a symbol. Because what covenant are we actually talking about here, what equal rights, what tolerance? Laughter from the audience.

As early as March 2013, Hanna Kozłowska wrote about the attacks on *Rainbow* by PiS politicians, then in opposition, in *The New York Times*, precisely in the context of the rights of gay and lesbian people. The radical right-wing and nationalists saw Wójcik's work as a provocation and an insult to Catholics – precisely because the rainbow flag is a symbol of the LGBTQ movements. As a result, activists in turn began to identify with *Rainbow* even more strongly.

In those years, if the LGBTQ issue was raised in public discourse, it was still in rather negative contexts. At the time, Anna Grodzka and Robert Biedroń, respectively, Poland's first openly transgender and gay MPs, were taking their seats in the national parliament. On that occasion, former president Lech Wałęsa, the legend of "Solidarity", took the liberty of making an openly homophobic comment, musing about a gay bench ghetto in the Parliament and suggesting the homosexual MPs sit in the back benches, "or even farther, behind a wall". Wałęsa's homophobia actually lost him the street in his name in San Francisco. Meanwhile, Warsaw had its rainbow.

## The nature of the first fires was, however, never explained...

The nature of the first fires was, however, never explained, and it isn't clear if there was homophobic intent. The situation changed radically after Independence Day in 2013, when TV Republica broadcast its coverage of the nationalists' march with the burning arch in the background, and certain right-wing politicians and religious leaders defended the act of vandalism. Prior to that, both the artist and the Adam Mickiewicz Institute barely noticed that the "homo" rainbow had become a much more powerful symbol than just a rainbow – the Biblical sign of a covenant between humans and God. Because a covenant with God isn't a particularly resonant topic, but the presence of gay and lesbian people in the public space and the fight for their rights are at the heart of the political debate.

The burning *Rainbow* in Zbawiciela Square made the front pages of newspapers. "Faggots get out!" demanded Wojciech Cejrowski. Rafał Ziemkiewicz rejoiced that "the rainbow of the Third Republic is burning". The "W Sieci" weekly wrote of a "holy fire".

People began to poke flowers into the burnt skeleton of *Rainbow*, which from an act of mourning quickly morphed into its caricature. Even the Swedish ambassador followed in the singer Edyta Górniak's footsteps. It turned out that mourning for *Rainbow* required similar gestures as the death of Princess Diana. We found ourselves in a deadlock. As a victim, the Rainbow had to be mourned, and then rebuilt. The problem of homophobic violence went unspoken.

It would indeed be absurd for a country whose laws treat gay and lesbian people as second-class citizens to promote a symbol of the fight for the rights of the LGBTQ community. But when nationalists attacked *Rainbow*, it couldn't be left undefended. That's why even Hanna

Gronkiewicz-Waltz, then Mayor of Warsaw, defended it, and promised to rebuild it after every conflagration. That kind of declaration was made by a politician who throughout her time in office was unable to make as simple a gesture of solidarity as to raise the rainbow flag over the town hall on the day of the Equality Parade, not to mention granting it her patronage.

The situation was more than paradoxical. The nationalists set fire to one *Rainbow*, the “homo” one – as Mr Kownacki MP claimed – while the *Rainbow* rebuilt by the artist, the Adam Mickiewicz Institute and the city authorities was a different one – a biblical-Europhile one.

The act of vandalism was criticised, but the criticism passed over the fact that this was an act of violence against gays and lesbians, that it was violence driven by homophobia. The reaction to the fires thereby resembled the reaction of law enforcement bodies to hate crimes motivated by homophobia or transphobia. In Poland, LGBTQ people are not protected by criminal law. When they report a hate crime, in most cases the police does not note the fact that it was related to their sexual orientation or gender identity. And LGBTQ people are victims of crime twice as often as the average Pole. The burning of *Rainbow* also recalled that.

## It was an open secret that an actual gay or lesbian piece...

It was an open secret that an actual gay or lesbian piece of art in the public space would have no right to exist in Warsaw. It's enough to recall the kind of attacks levied against the *Let them see us* initiative, when Karolina Breguła's photos of gay and lesbian couples holding hands were displayed in Polish cities. It's enough to recall the fate of the mural commissioned by the Museum of the Warsaw Uprising in 2011 by Karol Radziszewski, one of the first openly gay Polish artists, overtly raising the subject of homosexuality in his art.

Radziszewski's mural was supposed to appear on the wall surrounding the museum, turning it into a kind of outdoor gallery. When it was discovered that the line drawing of massed figures against the white background, in the artist's characteristic style, showed the naked male torsos of the insurgents, the management rejected it without explanation. It wasn't about the artistic values of the mural, it was to avoid the legendary Polish fighters possibly being the object of the male-on-male desires of the gay artist.

Previously, Wilhelm Sasnal had managed to slip a gay motif onto the same wall, albeit covertly, when in 2007 he painted some sweet yet sinister pansy-skulls, which quickly ended up on the museum's paraphernalia. As he himself later explained, the word pansy in English was once a pejorative term for a homosexual.

Julita Wójcik didn't want to create a piece of queer art. Evidently, neither she nor the cultural decision-makers realised the power of the rainbow as a symbol of the LGBTQ movement, both in Brussels and in Poland. The rainbow flag was designed in the 1970s



by Gilbert Baker, an activist in San Francisco. Today it flies in gay districts and at pride parades the world over. There are rainbow pedestrian crossings in gay districts. Nowadays, the rainbow has unequivocal associations. And yet initially the artist even tried to argue in interviews that the LGBTQ symbol wasn't a rainbow, but the rainbow flag.

Discussions over the need to rebuild *Rainbow* headed in quite an absurd direction, and few people openly admitted that its burning was a homophobic attack, not so much against the artwork or artist as against the LGBTQ community. Weronika Czyżewska, head of the Citizens' Committee for the *Rainbow*, which aimed to raise funds to restore the installation, said: "What happened is that different groups appropriated the symbol for themselves, which led to discussions and arguments and unfortunately, this resulted in, among others, the events of 11 November on Zbawiciela Square".

Czyżewska, and she wasn't alone, was putting the cart before the horses. It wasn't gay and lesbian people with their symbols who provoked the aggression. Rather, the events of 11 November 2013 showed clearly what attitudes "different groups" had towards the symbol of equal rights for sexual minorities. Nobody had to appropriate anything. The symbol had existed for decades, after all – just as the conflict over the presence of LGBTQ people in the public space existed, as well as the problem of violence against that group, which manifested itself in full.

In the eyes of politicians, *Rainbow* became a symbol of opposition "against" (nationalists, vandalism), but when it was supposed to be "for" something, unfortunately all they could muster were nice-sounding general slogans. Because Noah didn't take any gay couples onto his Ark. What mattered in the Ark was procreation.

## Wójcik's *Rainbow* lived on

Wójcik's *Rainbow* lived on. It returned in April 2014, fitted with a special system of fire-fighting sprinklers, which still didn't protect it from several further arson attacks, including one on the day of the European elections, 25 May 2014. It was just becoming ever more gay. In June 2015, the Equality Parade marched past it. And in August 2015 *Rainbow* said goodbye to Plac Zbawiciela. It ended up in the collection of the Centre for Contemporary Art of the Ujazdowski Castle, and in practice – in storage.

By defending the rainbow as *Rainbow*, we let ourselves be manipulated into having to deal with vicarious topics and a series of arson attacks and reconstructions. The matter eclipsed the artistic intentions and aspirations of Julita Wójcik. It wasn't about the work of art, after all. Setting fire to the flowers on *Rainbow* wasn't targeting any kind of covenant with God, but a specific community – the gay and lesbian people in Poland. The conflict surrounding the piece wasn't about who it belonged to or whether gays and lesbians had exclusive rights to it. It was about which people and which values are the victims of violence.

The people shouting “Run, Forrest, run” were met with deep disappointment. Forrest stopped in the middle of the road when he realised he was tired and didn’t really know what he was running for. And he left the group of followers chasing after him in a similar state of indecision. Running after *Rainbow*, we didn’t really know what we running in the name of. What was at stake was the kind of content that can be seen in public and what still cannot. The work of Julita Wójcik only partially accomplished this task.

Translated by Zosia Krasodomska-Jones

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