

# The Art of Sus a Movement

16  
Nepodległości

Visual and Sonic  
Identity of the  
2020/21  
Strajk Kobiet  
Protests  
in Poland



# staining

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The fascistic aim of Poland's PiS (Law and Justice party) government to control the bodies of those who can bear children was tied to visions of a perfect Polish nation – white, Catholic, patriarchal, and reliant on reproductive labour performed by women<sup>1</sup> for its survival. Controlling women's bodies was a key element in this endeavour. Restricting access to abortion was part of a wider eradication of reproductive rights designed to maintain the current system, while also being a (futile) attempt at encouraging more births. With anti-abortion rhetoric arguing for childbirth be carried out at any cost, it became akin to a “sacrificial” act for the nation – men die in combat, women in childbirth.

When the Polish Constitutional Tribunal announced the de facto abortion ban on 22 October 2020, furious protesters filled the streets of hundreds of Polish cities and towns. This wave of protests was inspiringly creative and artistic, developing a strong visual and sonic identity. The protests lasted until the ruling was published in late January 2021, making it law. While the protests did not succeed in overturning the de facto abortion ban, the movement's success is evident in increased public debate over abortion. This is reflected in all recent polls, which show public support for the liberalisation of abortion laws to be at an all-time high of 72-80% (depending on the wording of the exact question).

## A struggle over public space

The red lightning bolt became the main visual symbol of this wave of protests. It first came to use in Ola Jasionowska's design of the logo for the *Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet* (All-Poland Women's Strike, OSK), and later became synonymous with supporting the movement against the abortion ban – and more broadly for the legalisation of abortion, and women's rights. While the artist initially conceived it as a warning sign to the government, its meaning shifted according to the movement's goals, at times also interpreted to mean rage and power. Although the symbol tied the protests to OSK, who assumed leadership to a large extent, it grew beyond an association with this organisation.

Social media played a significant role in this expansion of meaning: as Ewa Majewska describes it, many people were first able to “rehearse participation” in the movement with their Facebook profile pictures, Instagram stories, or posts, and through this increased courage to take to the streets adorned with this same symbolism on clothes, masks, or protest signs.

The lightning bolt was also very present in public spaces. For example, it was added to the famous neon sign of the volleyball player in Warsaw, it





was visible in the areal image of a flash mob that formed the word *strajk* in one of Kraków's main parks, and it was on the OSK flag planted atop a mountain near Zakopane. Each such intervention was also documented for social media.

The ubiquity of the red lightning bolt in both public and digital spaces over that three-month period transformed this simple symbol into one of belonging to a movement and to a community. Walking through Polish cities, it can still be seen displayed in car windows, hung on balconies, or sewn onto clothes.

This hybrid (analogue-digital) tactic for visual depiction was deliberately adopted by the *Archiwum Protestów Publicznych* (Public Protest Archive), a photographers' collective that documented many of the protests and collected the images in an online archive. They printed

*Gazety Strajkowe* (Strike Newspapers) made up of slogans, testimonials and photos from the demonstrations, which could be used as a mobile exhibition, held as protest signs during demonstrations, or plastered in public spaces. The collective also asked participants to tag them on Instagram whenever using the newspapers. One of its members, Rafał Milach, said in a recent interview: "By creating this alternative circulation of images, we control the narrative and their usage." The APP is a public archive for distributing images from protests, and all the images used in this text are taken from their online repository.



## Reclaiming national(ist) symbols

The right-wing in Poland had been consistently and overwhelmingly claiming public spaces as their own. The right-wing's campaign to dominate public spaces include anti-abortion billboards depicting fetuses, *plodobusy* (vans that drive around displaying gruesome images of aborted fetuses and use their speakers to spread hateful messages), graffiti relating to historical battles and uprisings, and displays of "heroism" by nationalists, such as during the Independence Day marches on 11 November. Particularly on this public holiday, over the last few years mainstream and social media has been filled with images of crowds, largely of men holding red flares. The photos are eerie, and are disconcerting because a closer look shows the nationalist, homophobic, racist and misogynist slogans and blatant displays of neo-Nazi symbolism.

Reclaiming public space is part of the feminist fight against the binary of public and private – with "women's issues" often relegated to the private sphere – and for the visibility and agency of women in public spaces. Stickers, the strike newspapers, billboards with the phone number of the grassroots initiative Abortion Dream Team, and graffiti were all used to reclaim public space.

The OSK logo is black, white and red – the white and red deeply entrenched in the Polish consciousness as the national colours. The red flare was also (re)claimed by the Strajk Kobiet protesters, building towards the overarching question raised by the protests: who does Poland belong to?

Artistic interventions were part of this tug-of-war over national(ist) symbols. During one of the nights characterized by protests, in a building opposite Kaczyński's house in Warsaw's Żoliborz district there was a revival of the play *Dziady* (in this context best translated as "old croaks" though the word also means "forefathers") by Poland's most famous bard, Adam Mickiewicz, with the modern *dziad*, Kaczyński, in a starring role. In Poznań, one of the urban blockades was accompanied by the sounds of the polonaise – a national dance – which led to the headline in the next morning's *Gazeta Wyborcza* reading "Drivers applaud. Gays Dance the Polonaise". A particularly interesting case is the renaming of Warsaw's *Rondo Dmowskiego* (Dmowski Roundabout) to the *Rondo Praw Kobiet* (Women's Rights Roundabout). Dmowski was one of the main ideologues of Polish nationalism at the turn of the 20th century. The name change was first done symbolically throughout the protests, with

activists mounting self-made signs to mark it; the petition to make the name change official was approved in December 2021 by the Warsaw City Council and is currently awaiting additional legal steps.

These different types of actions had multiple purposes – not only did they paint an image of a more inclusive Poland, but they also sustained the movement. It is not enough to march daily towards empty government buildings. There are always new ideas, actions, and reasons emerging for going back out onto the streets, encouraging inexperienced protesters to keep turning up.



## Collective joy

Another important element in the art of sustaining a movement is community building. The feeling of belonging to a community can increase through experiences and memories of protests. Moments of what Lynne Segal calls “collective joy”, often sparked by a memorable event, can bring a group of people closer and can be crucial in this process. One particularly memorable incident was the repurposing of Eryk Prydz’s classic dance track *Call On Me* into a protest song by including the chant “Jebać PiS”, later remixed into a new track, *JBĆ PiS*, by Polish hip hop artist Cypis. The humour and joy produced by dancing to this track while chanting is an experience shared by many protesters. Similarly, DJs often contributed to these feelings of collective joy by organising techno blockades, which were both fun and kept protesters warm in the marathon effort of trying to bring cities to a standstill.

The resonance of sonic interventions, which ranged from a new version of *Bella Ciao*, titled *Tortury Ciao* (Body Tortures) filmed in Kraków to videos of thousands shouting *wypierdalać* (Get the f\*\*\* out), was intensified through wide circulation on social media. This wave of protest was the first to prolifically use swear words as protest chants. The eight stars, which stood for *Jebać PiS* (F\*\*\* PiS), were also present as a visual symbol, although they related to a much broader dissatisfaction with the ruling party. There is a joy that is released when shouting such slogans in the streets, alongside thousands of others, even if other emotions initially led to the outbreak of protests. There was also a joy in the creativity of the protest signs held by protesters – which often used humour – and which were widely shared and documented.

During the months of the protests, there was an arguably arbitrary distinction between professional and spontaneous artistic interventions. Although there were artists who tried to (and did) profit off the back of the movement, many gave support using their skills, feeding their art back into the streets. Art – in its broadest sense – was used within protests as a tactic of building community, awareness and consciousness within and for different communities. Whether shown in humorous cardboard protest signs, a restaging of a national play, logo design, or a rewriting of an anti-fascist song, this collective artistry is what made this a movement that still keeps hold of many hearts and minds, despite its inability to overturn the de facto abortion ban.

## Illustrations

- p. 108: Protest against stricter abortion laws in Leszno. Leszno 2020, Michał Adamski / APP.
- p. 110: Wojtek Radwański.
- p. 111: Adam Lach.
- p. 112: Dawid Zieliński.
- p. 113: Joanna Musiał.
- p. 115: Concert on December 13, Warsaw, 13.12.2020, Marta Bogdanska.

## Endnotes

- 1 “Women” is the term which was used by the movement and for that reason is also used here, but these issues relate to all of those who can become pregnant, including cis-women, trans-men, and non-binary people, with the acknowledgement that neither trans-men nor non-binary people are women.

