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It confounds the ordinary mind to believe the fecund imagination of Jan Sawka – painter, sculptor, illustrator, printmaker, architect, set and stage designer, political refugee, advocate for peace – can be contained in just 23 personal journals, large and small, now on display at the Charles P. Stevenson Jr. Library at Bard College.



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The exhibit, “Personal Equilibrium: The Private Journals of Jan Sawka,” held over and continuing through Jan. 31, documents the journeys of a lifetime in art.

Sawka died in August 2012 at 65 at his home in High Falls, but plans for the exhibit already were under way, according to his widow, Hanka.

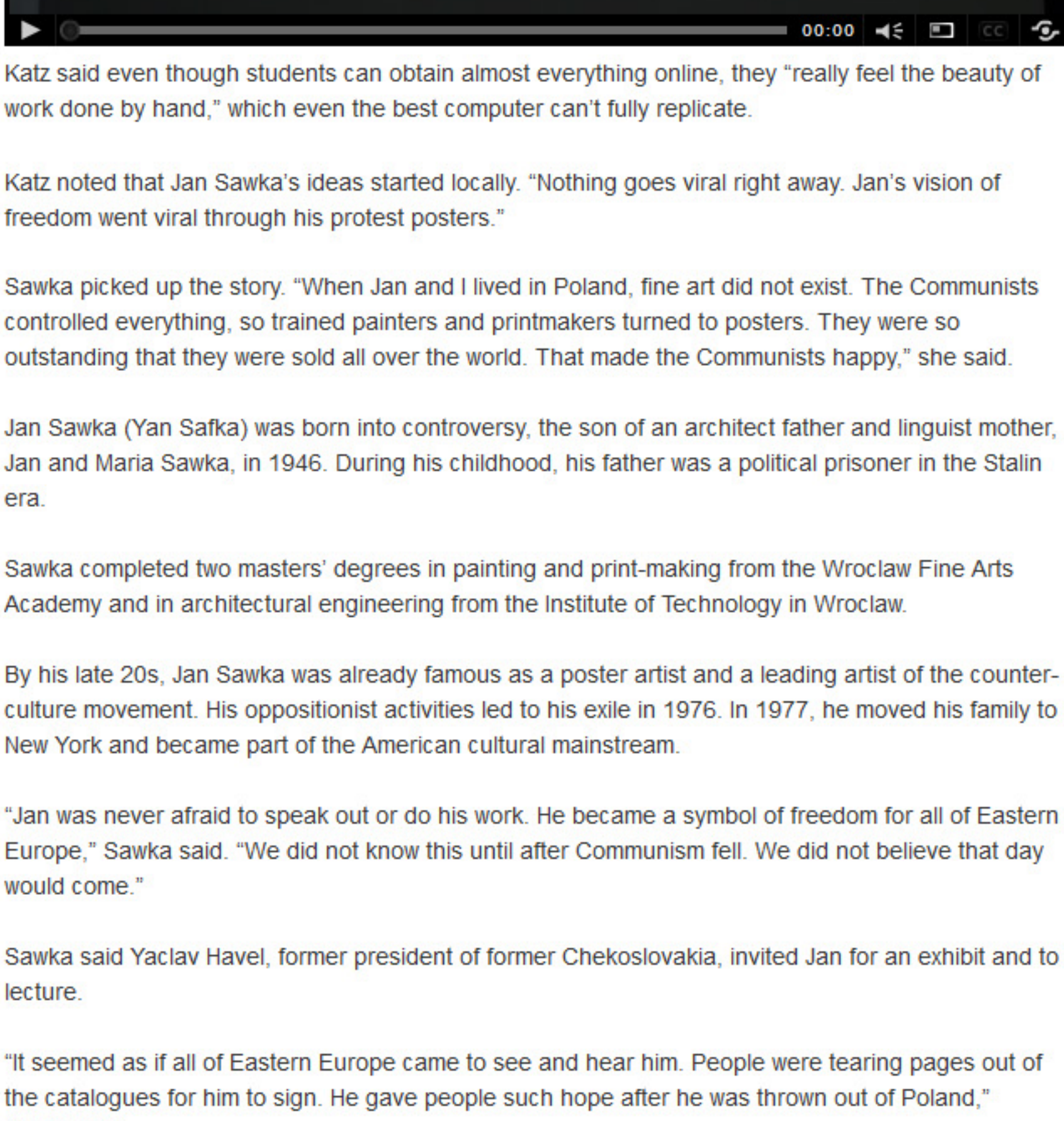
“We were married 39 years and worked as a team. The journals contain his ideas, his drawings, his vision,” Sawka said. “They are dedicated to me and our daughter, Hanna, who is a filmmaker.”



The lively, colorful exhibit, contained in three, large, glass-faced cabinets near the library entrance, was so popular with students and visitors it was held over for more than a month, according to Jeffrey Katz, dean of Information Services and director of the library.

Debra Klein, assistant visual curator for the Visual Resource Center, curated the exhibit.

“It’s really important, in this technological age, to dig down and be reminded of the artisan in our culture,” Katz said. “The students know that.”



Katz said even though students can obtain almost everything online, they “really feel the beauty of work done by hand,” which even the best computer can’t fully replicate.

Katz noted that Jan Sawka’s ideas started locally. “Nothing goes viral right away. Jan’s vision of freedom went viral through his protest posters.”

Sawka picked up the story. “When Jan and I lived in Poland, fine art did not exist. The Communists controlled everything, so trained painters and printmakers turned to posters. They were so outstanding that they were sold all over the world. That made the Communists happy,” she said.

Jan Sawka (Yan Safka) was born into controversy, the son of an architect father and linguist mother, Jan and Maria Sawka, in 1946. During his childhood, his father was a political prisoner in the Stalin era.

Sawka completed two masters’ degrees in painting and print-making from the Wroclaw Fine Arts Academy and in architectural engineering from the Institute of Technology in Wroclaw.

By his late 20s, Jan Sawka was already famous as a poster artist and a leading artist of the counter-culture movement. His oppositionist activities led to his exile in 1976. In 1977, he moved his family to New York and became part of the American cultural mainstream.

“Jan was never afraid to speak out or do his work. He became a symbol of freedom for all of Eastern Europe,” Sawka said. “We did not know this until after Communism fell. We did not believe that day would come.”

Sawka said Vaclav Havel, former president of former Chekoslovakia, invited Jan for an exhibit and to lecture.

“It seemed as if all of Eastern Europe came to see and hear him. People were tearing pages out of the catalogues for him to sign. He gave people such hope after he was thrown out of Poland,” Sawka said.

While in exile, Sawka said her mother, Kristina, was murdered about 1½ years before Communism fell in Poland. She said she later learned that the Polish government created a special unit of the national police, who were given a list.

“These were not random events. A day specific to the person on the list was chosen,” Sawka said. “My mother was killed on the date of my wedding to Jan.”

After the collapse of communism in Poland, the Sawkas’ passports were returned with an apology from the Ministry of Culture of the new government.

“Jan was given a show in Krakow that then traveled to other museums across Poland,” Sawka said.

“We were so happy about the exhibit, but we also visited the graves. It was an incredible time. So joyful that communism had collapsed – we never thought that would happen. And, so sad – so many deaths,” she said.

Sawka said she wrote the book, “At Hanka’s Table,” six or seven years ago to describe their journeys together.

“I was told, though, that the book would not sell unless it was about food. I should include recipes,” Sawka said. “So, I included recipes, but they were somewhat hard to work into the stories.”

As his partner for 39 years, Sawka was asked if she had witnessed Jan’s work changing over the years. The question made her smile.

“With Jan, it was always such a voyage,” Sawka said. “I was somewhat younger and had studied psychology, so I thought I would know where his work would go next. I was always surprised!”

Sawka said her husband had incredible vision, a deep and pure and bottomless well from which sprang the concepts for his drawings, paintings, sculptures and installations. She said his works are in more than 60 museums around the world and he has had more than 70 solo shows at international museums and galleries.

“For Jan, the work was never about himself. It was about us, we human beings, how we make such a beautiful culture, amazing art and sculpture. Then, we let war poison us and destroy the beauty we have made,” Sawka said.

“He had such spirit, such charisma, such joy! His work was always about freedom and living together and all the problems we have going there,” she said.

Sawka said in 1989 Jan designed a 10-story tall set for the Grateful Dead’s 25th Anniversary Tour, 1989-1991. The set included 52 banners painted in acrylic and dyes on canvas; 22 spare banners used for variations of the set, and a lighting system consisting of 380 color instruments, base tracks mounted on moving scaffolds, 120 lights installed on the face and within the structure of the set, four lighting batteries with rotating filters, and two computers synchronizing 180 different lighting changes, according to Sawka’s website.

“He set the theater around the band with those changes of light. The entire stage moved – it was just magical!” Sawka said.

“There were 80,000 fans in the theater when the lights went on. There was one, huge, ‘AHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!’ from the audience,” Sawka said. “I told Jan it was the biggest compliment.”

Jan and Jerry Garcia, Grateful Dead band leader, died on the same date: Garcia on Aug. 9, 1995 and Sawka on Aug. 9, 2012.

In 1993, Jan Sawka created his first full multi-media spectacle, “The Eyes” in Japan, which was the beginning of a longtime collaboration with Japanese technology studios and corporations that included the creation of high-tech interactive sculptures and monumental installations.

At the time of his death, the artist and his daughter were developing “The Voyage,” a full-length multimedia spectacle. The model for it won the Gold Medal in Multi-Media at the 2003 Florence Contemporary Art Biennial.

“‘The Voyage’ is a spectacular multi-media installation with music by the Mickey Hart (Grateful Dead drummer) Band,” Sawka said.

This powerful, 90-minute visual journey symbolically represents an individual life as well as the greater story of humankind, according to Sawka.

“The Voyage visually and musically celebrates the diversity and unity of the human experience, which connects all religions and cultures around the world. My husband believed deeply in this,” she said.

Sawka said “The Voyage” will offer audience members a state-of-the-art multimedia experience, with large-scale and high-resolution projections, accompanying lighting effects and cutting-edge sound.

“A hybrid of concert experience and theater, ‘The Voyage’ is a response to audience expectations for visual elements within performances and it delivers this with imagery of high artistic quality,” she said.

“Jan finished the work just before he died. It is his epitaph, the culmination of his life’s work – art, architecture and sculpture. Just an amazing work, Sawka said, adding, “It is expected to be ready for concert venues, followed by touring, next year.”

Sawka, however, is equally proud of the rendering, “Peace Monument and Complex – Jerusalem,” which won the 2011 American Institute of Architects “Excellence in Architecture Award.”

Sawka said Jan used wooden rods, with Judaism, Christianity and Muslim archetypes at the top, which rise out of marble dust rubble toward the same G-d.

“He believed that using religion for political purposes was wrong. Using the most secret thing inside us to press a button to make a fight is wrong. We are hopeful that the monument will be built,” she said.

Sawka said friends complained that Jan worked all the time, never took vacations.

“There was always something going on in his mind. He loved his work so much he worked from morning to night. But, it was not work for him. It was his passion,” Sawka said.

“And, Jan was passionate about peace, about using that passion to do good, to bring people together,” she said.

Further information on Jan Sawka may be obtained at www.jansawka.com. Further information on “The Voyage” multi-media installation, including a trailer with music, may be viewed at

www.jansawka.com/thevoyage.

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