

- [Contributors](#)
- [Articles](#)
- [Blog](#)
- [Video](#)
- [Topics](#)
- [Names](#)
- [About](#)

## Lecture

Jeffrey Goldfarb

# Jan Sawka: The Power of the Not So Powerless

December 6th, 2013 | [2 responses](#)

*The following lecture was prepared for delivery at the symposium “Jan Sawka: The Artist’s Role in Changing the World” presented by The Paul Robeson Galleries, Gallery Aferro and the Newark Arts Council, Saturday, November 16, 2013, in conjunction with the exhibition at the Gallery Aferro, “Reflections on Everyman: the Work of Jan Sawka.”*

I have crossed paths with Jan Sawka three times, although only one of these times did we meet.

It was at a low moment in Polish history, the early 80s. It was in his small apartment on 58<sup>th</sup> street in Manhattan, in very cramped living quarters, with Sawka, constantly working, drawing and painting, even while the family entertained guests. In the midst of the domestic, he created his own world, responding to life’s public and private absurdities, and tragedies, with his imagination and craft. The intensity of the moment, during the weeks after the declaration of martial law in Poland, the repression of the first nationwide popular social movement in the former Soviet bloc, a labor movement of workers moving against the workers’ state, *Solidarność* against the *Polish Peoples Republic*, was very much matched by the intensity of his artistic concentration. That is what I saw in those dark days, and that is what I think we observe in this exhibit, in each of his works, in his life work.



Theatrical Poster, 1974 © Jan Sawka

Today, our paths cross for the third time. Fortuitously, without knowing that we met long ago when she was the child in a very adult room, Hanna Sawka asked me to present a talk that illuminated the political context of her father’s art.

Email address

Subscribe to PS

Jan Sawka and I first crossed paths when the Communist order appeared to be a permanent part of the order of things, when there seemed to be two kinds of modern orders, Communist and Free, or from the other point of view, Socialist and Capitalist, Progressive and Reactionary, Soviet and American, locked in permanent competition, with nuclear weapons assuring that neither side would decisively prevail.

Here, I respond to Hanna's request by considering the politics of Sawka's art and the art of his politics at the time of our three encounters.

\* \* \*

Though we may have, I don't remember meeting Sawka in the 70s, when I first visited The Polish People's Republic. We were very much in the same social world. I had discovered, and was systematically studying, a theater movement in Poland, Polish Student Theater, and he was the premier visual artist of these theaters. Among other things, I collected his posters. These did not only inform about the specific performances, but also depicted and extended their spirit and their relationship to art and authority, presenting the most serious challenge to the order of things, very much anticipating the logic of the Solidarity movement and the collapse of the regime, before it seemed rational to even imagine it.

It was revolutionary art with a human face.

"Revolutionary art with a human face" has had special qualities. Although the art speaks for itself apart from its political and social context, the context reveals the power of its meaning. It had a geopolitical dimension, embedded as it was in the logic of the Cold War, but its local qualities, the details of the struggle, along with the details of the art were especially important, with a power that moves beyond the circumstance of creation.

(By the way most recently one of those theaters performed here, Akademika Ruchu, and at the beginning of next year perhaps the finest of them all 8<sup>th</sup> Day Theater will be performing at my



"Which Way," Student Theater poster, 1970s © Jan Sawka

institution, The New School for Social Research.)

Two classic essays by Sawka's contemporaries, one Polish and one Czech, illuminate the political power of this art at the moment of its creation. Adam Michnik's "The New Evolutionism" provides the larger context, while Vaclav Havel's "The Power of the Powerless" reveals the specifics of the struggle up close. Michnik's article explains the revolutionary strategy, later called the strategy of the self-limiting revolution, or the revolution of anti-politics, Havel's explores its phenomenology.

"The New Evolutionism" was written in 1976. It explored the means for a political transformation in the socialist bloc, noting that the *revolution from below* of 1956 in Hungary failed, as did the *reform from above* of 1968 in Czechoslovakia, proposing a gradual long cultural march, an *evolution from below*.

Work to take zones of autonomy, apart from the corrupted state ideological apparatus and make them better, reform them so that the logic of alternative cultural models, alternative ways of thinking and doing, are established in a delimited space, not directed toward authority, not directly challenging it, but in a stylized fashion ignoring it. Direct the art to the audience, ignore authority.

Look at the work of Sawka at that time and realize how his was a part of this new evolutionary struggle. Consider how western alternative culture shaped his sensibility and continued to influence him throughout his career, as it shared the sensibility. His work with the Grateful Dead thus reveals continuity, even as the political and cultural change contexts change. The Dead and the Deadheads were new evolutionists of sort. Turn on, tune in, drop out, has significant meaning beyond drugs.

Sawka demonstrates Michnik's program. His work does not illustrate a social and political change. It is the change, as it depicts it. The main political meaning is not in the content of the artwork, though it has that, but it's in the form of the art where the real significance lies. The art itself.

I saw a progression: from my Polish research and engagement in the alternative cultural world, to the democratic opposition before Solidarność, to Solidarność, above and underground, to the collapse of communism. From the works of art, graphic and theatrical, to the association around the art, and like associations not connected to art, to the collapse of an Empire, which was inconceivable before it happened. To appreciate experienced connections between the art and the politics, let's turn to Havel.

Who is Havel? And how is he connected to the world of Sawka and Michnik?

I often explain to people who are ignorant of Polish culture and politics that Adam Michnik is the Polish Vaclav Havel. Havel is better known in the U.S.: the dissident superstar, first president of



Set design for the Grateful Dead's 25th Anniversary, toured 1989-91 © Jan Sawka

Czechoslovakia, renowned absurdist playwright and regular contributor of *The New York Review of Books*. But the explanation is not entirely accurate. Michnik has been an activist, public intellectual, journalist and historian. But he is not an artist. Perhaps here I should say that Havel is the Czech Michnik + Sawka, the theorist and artist of the new evolutionism, most beautifully realized in “The Power of the Powerless.” Havel was in a sense a combination of Lech Walesa, Adam Michnik and Jan Sawka, revealing a less developed oppositional world.

Nonetheless, in his essay all the multiple vocations and talents of Havel are evident. He opens by telling the story of the greengrocer who refuses to put the sign “Workers of the World, Unite!” in his shop window, highlighting the basis of the power of the Communist regime and its greatest vulnerability.

What could happen to the greengrocer? He may lose his shop. His children may not gain access to limited schooling opportunities, from pre-school to university admission. His plan to vacation on the Black Sea may become impossible. Friends might become reluctant to associate with him, perhaps even his wife. His life could fall apart. On the other hand, if he persists and if those around him support his seemingly meaningless gesture, the whole order of things could be challenged.

The issue is not that the greengrocer and those around him believe or don't believe in the regime, but what he does in a limited public space. But what he shows. The same holds true in theater, on canvas, on the shop and factory floors.

In Sawka's case: to understand the power of his artistry back then remember how grey the communist



city was. There was little or no neon, no commercial advertising. Shop signs on the beautiful main squares of Wroclaw, Poznan, Warsaw and Krakow were blandly lettered “meat,” “shirts,” and “bread.” Spontaneity, the sociological condition of the streets, was strictly prohibited. I myself was once arrested for an unauthorized waving of a colorful flag in public. And then note Sawka’s public art and understand its import.

Not showing attachment to political absurdity, living according to one’s own principles, as Havel puts it, “living in truth,” could change everything, and it did. Living according to one’s truth, acting as if one lived in a free society, constituted freedom.

Another character in Havel’s essay is an experienced brew master, more concerned with the quality of his craft and product, than party directives and five year plans. For his commitment to craft over ideological cliché, he is demoted, as Sawka was exiled. Showing commitment to art, against ideology and cliché, Havel maintained in 1976, is the real ground of the power of the powerless.



Poster for jazz festival, 1973 © Jan Sawka

The real power, then, is in the art against ideology, against cliché. The power is not only negative, in the saying no, but in the cultivated capacity to say yes, to show alternative commitments and ideals, to imagine and create alternatives. Not pro or anti-Communist, but a-communist, not pro or anti-capitalist but a-capitalist. Human.

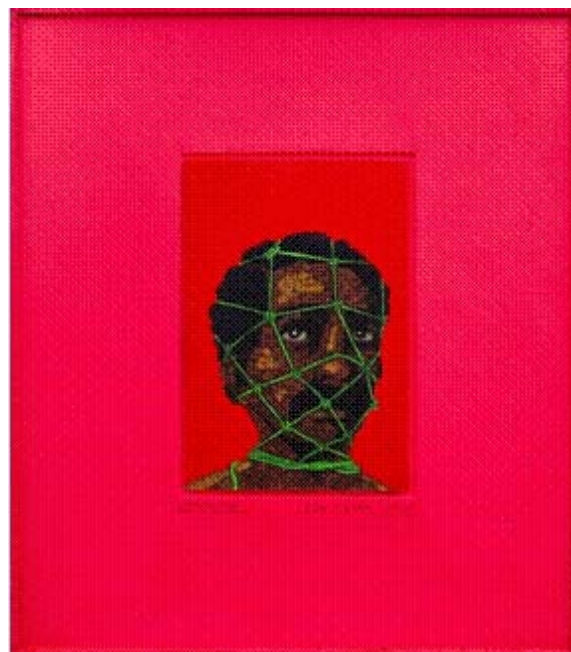
Did you ever wonder why totalitarians bothered with artists such as Sawka? Why they didn’t just leave him and his idiosyncratic images alone? They were viewed and appreciated by a small minority of the public. They would have little impact on the broader population. The logic of a repressive tolerance applied, and it was no doubt utilized in Poland back then to some degree, Poland and Hungary with their reputations for being more liberal, less repressive. But when the power of the powerless was extended by the power of art, a line seems to have been crossed in Sawka’s case.

The power of showing moved from one side of the iron curtain, to the other and back, as Sawka’s career reveals. The boldness of the expression, the power of the craft spoke to actually existing liberal democratic capitalist societies, as it did to previously existing socialism.

The simple act of living in truth, in Havel’s sense, was a key to the progression of the democratic opposition in the late seventies and throughout the eighties, when Sawka and I actually met. Sawka through exile and emigration turned off the censor and directed his attention away from the authorities and toward his public, as this became the great shift in his native land, and he created works to the

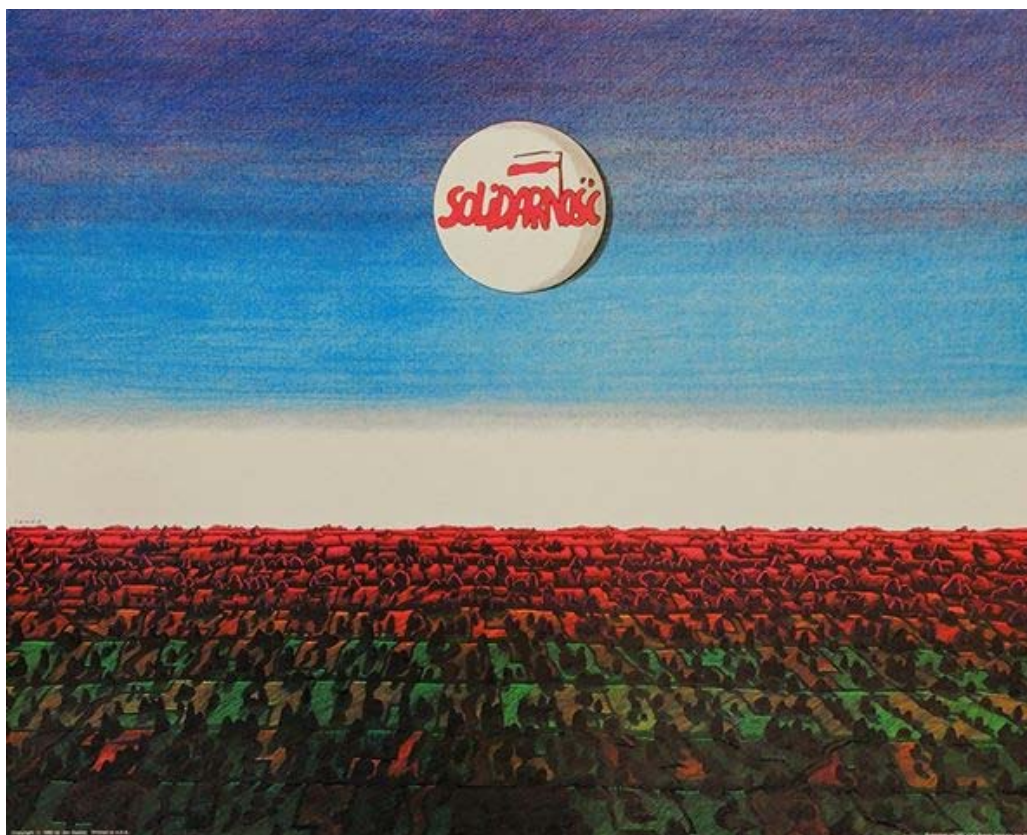
multiple publics, from West to East, and from East to West, to South.

While he was not a propagandist or, in the Marxist sense, an “engaged” or “organic” artist, he was politically involved and his unique independent visual vocabulary brought independent power to his more directly political work. This is how to appreciate his Solidarity poster, sponsored by the AFL-CIO, a work that shares elements with Everyman piece of this exhibit. The poster was used to raise funds in support of Solidarność in the West. This campaign was probably part of a clandestine support by the CIA of the labor movement. Something I vaguely suspected at the time, as I myself was involved in supporting the labor movement, especially after it was forced to go underground. But just because the struggle was embroiled in geo-politics, and Sawka and most democrats, including me, knew which side of the struggle we were on, the struggle involved much more than the fight between the Communists and the anti-Communists.



Golden City, 1984 © Jan Sawka

“The  
masses  
are in  
solidarity  
with the



AFL-CIO “Let Poland Be Poland” fundraiser during Martial Law era, 1981 © Jan Sawka

movement *Solidarność*.” “Under its banner, a better day is on the horizon.” “*Solidarność* is the leading light.” “*Solidarność* leading to a happy tomorrow.” All such clichés are not in this work. Rather there is an attractive composition, suggesting hope and solidarity, in subdued tones, gradually moving from dark to light. I see it as an anti-political political poster, a poster of the new evolutionism, revolutionary art with a human face. Hope imaginatively tempered with realism.

The poster is more subdued than one might expect in an explicitly political work, especially from an artist who is not shy to use bold primary colors in his work, to play with child like images as he confronts very difficult problems, such as he does in his monumental “My Europe.”

This is a piece that has the quality of a magnum opus. It is piece by a citizen of Europe from Poland, personally at the center of the great sufferings of his nation. It is not nationalist in any way. Rather, it is a mournful reflection on national experience on the European killing fields. I read the first post-communist minister of culture, Marek Rostworowski’s reflections on the work, as I prepared this lecture. It helped me appreciate the power of the work.

He described his encounter with Sawka’s “My Europe,” as he experienced it in Seville, Spain, as “a space conquered by the means of his banners...leaving a vivid memory of nightmare and hope.” He describes each banner, from “The Field” which mournfully depicts a nation of suffering, with Catholic in its major register, but with a strong minor Jewish key, “a huge, populated space on which three funeral ceremonial ribbons have fallen. Above – the ribbons burn with colours like prayers; below – they carry some charred icons of faith in One God: the Bible– in the middle; a cross, a rosary and the Virgin with Christ– to the right: the tablets of the Ten Commandments and Star of David– to the left.” He moves on to a banner on Katyn, the grounds upon which the Polish intellectual elite was murdered by the Soviets, to the flag of the Home Army, the largest military resistance of Nazi occupied Europe, to flags depicting the Communist occupation and visions of the end of occupations.

Unbearably heavy experiences, confronted with the gentle touch of Sawka’s art, making the experience of his work non-didactic.

As Rostworowski put it poignantly:



“The Field,” created for the “My Europe” installation, The Polish Art Pavilion, World Exposition, Seville, Spain, 1992 © Jan Sawka



Sawka has imagined all this and presented it in such a simple manner that one might be tempted to call it childish, had it not been for the studied gradation of colours which support the boldly splashed vivid colours; of lines where these colours meet, had it not been for the consciously sparing artistic expression.

Noting that the works depict “the history of a lost Polish generation – the so called “generation of Columbuses” who having survived two occupations, were discovering a new world,” he concludes by observing that:

Sawka’s childhood and young age were, from the very beginning, immersed in the zone of red colour. He returned to his country after the red zone had been torn by Solidarność, although for some time– in the fire of martial law– there were unsuccessful attempts to weld it back together. The idea of invasion and transformation contained in the seven banners and two sequences seems to refer to dramatic events for Europe and mankind in the twentieth century, of which Poland has become a symbol.

Yet, now as I encounter Sawka in this memorial exhibit, Poland is no longer at the center of the world’s attention, as it was during the days of Solidarność, during its repression and at the moment of its victory. And the memory of the political experience of those times is fading. Sawka’s work though moves beyond those times and circumstances. The work stands on its own, apart from its politics.

I think this is a consequence of his talents and accomplishment, but also of the power of the not so powerless aesthetic, which returns to the political.

This brings me to his Jerusalem Peace Monument, a beautiful and powerful piece, which hits close to home. I am struck how closely this project is informed by the ideas of Michnik and Havel, and the early art of Sawka. To be clear, the design has value beyond the politics, elegant and powerfully rooted rods come together abstractly, crowned with religious symbolism, but the politics is familiar. There is no political program, rather understanding is realized in the design and by all who may support its making and may enjoy it.



Peace Monument, Jerusalem, design rendering, 1996 © Jan Sawka

In the context of ever increasing tensions among the Abrahamic faiths, where too many believers are committed to their monotheistic belief as the true one, and in which many politicize the truth, Sawka shows an alternative, a breach, a crack in the ground, with delicate reefs of Jewish, Christian and Muslim understanding depicted.



One of the ironies of history is that the city of peace is anything but. Holy War and extreme antagonism among the faiths have been the rule, making it a hard city. Claims to Jerusalem as the capital of the Jewish State or the Holy City of Al Quds are not reconciled, but in the Monument they would be. In the city with sharp daily antagonism and tension, it would be an oasis, a platform for something else. It cannot create a settlement, but on its grounds a little piece of settlement is realized. This is the politics of the new evolutionism, creating an evolutionary front. It is a powerful example of the power of the not so powerless.



Peace Monument, Jerusalem, scale model, 2009, detail © Jan Sawka

## 2 comments



Best

Community

Share

Login

**Elzbieta Matynia** • 2 days ago

It is not easy to capture the small elements of a big history, and to illuminate them in the process. Who today, after all, remembers the imposition of Martial Law in Poland on the freezing night of December 13, 1981, twenty-two years ago, and the drama of the obliteration of what for so many had been the once-in-a-lifetime hope of infusing life with the absent and hitherto merely abstract qualities of justice, citizenship, equality? The crackdown on Solidarity, a workers' movement of a whole new kind and the first democratic project in the Soviet Bloc that was independent of the regime, took away the hope of millions of Poles, and the tanks in the streets brought us a *deja vu* of 1956 Budapest, or 1968 Prague.

Now, that was the big history. The smaller one has many parts, but one of them, the artistic community and its role in preparing for the Solidarity experience and re-imagining a democratic future, has been grasped superbly in Jeff Goldfarb's piece on the artist Jan Sawka. Some of us may remember Jan from his intelligent drawings for the New York Times' opinion pages, or from his bold posters hanging in many Manhattan apartments. But Sawka, like some of the much earlier Dutch painters, had an unusual talent for capturing a detail that made us dream and then think about change, and think that we were not any worse than our peers who lived in Amsterdam or New York. And

[see more](#)[|](#) • [Reply](#) • [Share](#) ›**Gisela Albuquerque** • 2 days ago

Reading this article was both, pleasant and inspiring. I realized that while I had known many of Jan Sawka's work, I had not related the work with the artist. Thank you Jeff, for your the opportunity to be fair with the artist and for the nice touch of your personal encounters with Jan. But reading the article also send me on a journey of my own. Seeing again the well known piece "Let Poland Be Poland" on the Solidarność movement transported me back to 1981, my first year in college in Brazil. It also reminded me of my first deliberate political act as part of a student elected association of the school of engineering at the University of Brasilia, UnB. There and then, my peers and I participated in one of the first peaceful demonstrations of the "Diretas Ja" movement, marking the transition to free elections for president in Brazil after the military dictatorship period. Thank you for stirring my own memories of first hand experience of The Power of the Not So Powerless.

[|](#) • [Reply](#) • [Share](#) ›

## Topics

---

- Art
- Poland
- Solidarity

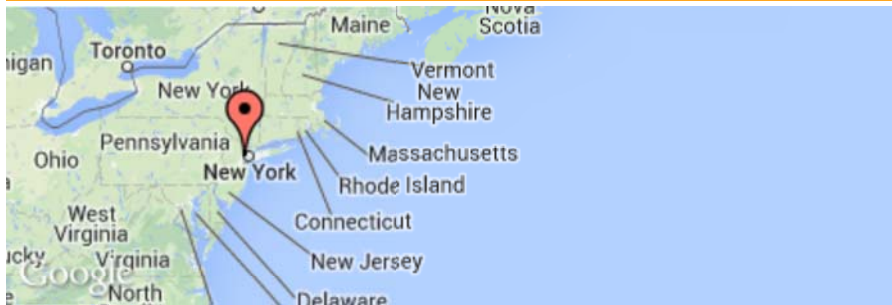
## Names

---

- Havel (Vaclav)
- Michnik (Adam)
- Rostworowski (Marek)
- Sawka (Jan)

## Origin

---



500 km data ©2013 Google, INEGI



✉ to [info@publicseminar.org](mailto:info@publicseminar.org)

ht © 2013

W School for Social Research



