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Sawka was dissident, artist in many mediums

By [Paul Vitello](#) / *New York Times News Service*

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Jan Sawka, a Polish artist, arrived in New York in 1977 with his wife and baby, four suitcases and a portfolio of the theatrical posters that had provoked the Polish government to expel him.

The family settled in a one-bedroom apartment in Manhattan, where Sawka began creating an immense body of work that included paintings, sculptures, engravings, editorial illustrations, architectural installations, peace monuments, light shows and a movable 10-story stage set for the Grateful Dead's 25th-anniversary concert tour.

The head-spinning diversity of it made labeling Sawka difficult, which suited him fine. "I have no idea which trend of art I represent," he told Arts magazine in 1983. "Nothing interests me less."

When he died on Aug. 9 at his home and studio in High Falls, N.Y., Sawka was finishing a multimedia project on which he had worked for 10 years: "The Voyage," a series of 1,200 images to be projected on a set of giant outdoor screens and accompanied by a musical score composed by Mickey Hart, former drummer for the Grateful Dead. Sawka's daughter, Hanna Sawka, said he died of a heart attack. He was 65.

"'The Voyage' is the voyage of humanity, a spectacle about the singularity of all races and people," said Stephen Trombley, a filmmaker working with Sawka on the project. He described Sawka as an "artist of the Communist diaspora" who never lost touch with an ideal notion — especially as it was viewed from behind the iron curtain — of what the 1969 Woodstock music festival represented.

A bearish man of irrepressible energy, Sawka had largely escaped conflict with Poland's Soviet-style censors during the politically volatile '60s and '70s, when he designed posters and stage sets for avant-garde theater groups in Krakow and Warsaw. But by the mid-'70s, foreign art critics had begun noticing the black humor in his work and raving about his subtle style of anti-authoritarianism. The raves helped secure Sawka's reputation among leading dissident Polish poster artists, whose work anticipated the Solidarity revolution of 1980. It also stoked the enmity of the censors, leading to his exile in 1976. His family left for New York after a year in France waiting for visa clearances.

Sawka's productivity in New York was renowned. Within a year he became a prolific editorial illustrator for The New York Times Op-Ed page. While producing paintings at his home studio, he designed theater posters and worked on stage sets for plays at the Jean Cocteau Repertory Theater and the Clurman Theater, including a 1983 production of "Krapp's Last Tape" in which he collaborated closely with the playwright Samuel Beckett.

In an article about Sawka's first one-man show in 1985, Douglas McGill remarked on his whirlwind pace. How had an artist who had arrived as an unknown in New York just eight years before pulled it off? "The best guess that emerges from interviews with his supporters is that apart from the quality of his work, his zestful and enterprising personality has been key," McGill wrote in The Times.

Jan Andrzej Sawka was born on Dec. 10, 1946, in Zabrze, Poland, shortly after his father, Jan, an architect, was jailed by the newly installed Polish Communist government (he was released seven years later). His mother, Maria, a linguist, worked as a teacher. Besides his daughter, his survivors include a sister, Anna, and his wife,

who, like his daughter, is named Hanna.

Sawka studied art, printmaking and architecture during a period of political ferment throughout Eastern Europe, including widespread student protests throughout Poland in 1968 that set off a brutal government crackdown on dissidents. His poster designs for avant-garde theater groups became well known for their wordplay and their deadpan style, in which symbols of protest were often stitched into the graphics.

In one well-known example, a circus poster, Sawka placed a tightrope walker at the center of his composition. In the sea of circus details everywhere, only close inspection reveals that the high-wire artist is dressed in prison garb.

Soon after emigrating, he was commissioned by Solidarity leaders to design one of the movement's official posters. More recent works included a peace monument in Israel celebrating the three Abrahamic faiths, a peace monument in Nagasaki and "The Tower of Light" in Abu Dhabi, a 100-meter glass obelisk in the capital of the oil-rich United Arab Emirates, suggesting a solar-powered future.

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