



Marcin Dudek  
*Slash & Burn I*

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September 3 - December 12, 2020

OPENING OF THE SECOND LOCATION

## *SLASH & BURN II*

JANUARY - JULY 2021

HARLAN LEVEY PROJECTS x 1080

65 Rue Isidoor Teirlinckstraat, 1080 Brussels, Belgium

# MARCIN DUDEK

## *SLASH & BURN I*

SEPTEMBER 3 - DECEMBER 12, 2020

HARLAN LEVEY PROJECTS x 1050

46 Rue Jean d'Ardennestraat, 1050 Brussels, Belgium  
[www.hl-projects.com](http://www.hl-projects.com)

In 2013, we hosted Marcin Dudek's first solo exhibition in Belgium. This presentation marked a turning point in his research from subterranean histories towards autobiographical experiences and the broader social phenomena that shaped them. While the exhibition began underground in both a physical and metaphorical way, it rose up into the public arena to confront issues related to spectacle, participation and public perception; training in the basement was preparation for battle in the civic stadium. Works presented included those made from archival materials such as leather jackets, wood, salvaged steel and images taken with a disposable camera in 1997.

The starting point for the exhibition *Too Close For Comfort*, was a handmade artist publication called *Akumulatory*.

*Akumulatory* (Polish for car battery) is a collection of snapshots of underground gyms in the 1990s, similar to the one Dudek constructed here. Densely photocopied, the images show training facilities set up by young people squatting in empty council estate building basements. The spaces embody an atmosphere of dirty hard work, stripped down to their bare essentials without any decoration apart from the patterns of old carpets on the floors and odd posters on the wall. Welding and constructing the training equipment from scrap metal was a popular way for Polish youths to spend their free time, before pumping their muscles by heaving up barbells on homemade bench presses. In this admiration of DIY culture and the survivalist skill of organising yourself on a limited budget, or no budget at all, the book pays homage to Dudek's

own anti-readymade agenda and childhood autobiography.

*"In that period, communal underground spaces were a vital part of our daily reality. There weren't any alternatives for young people living in the housing projects at that time, so many ideas were born out of basic survival instincts, and the gym was one of those. I miss that creative clarity – now we live in the world of the "hyper-readymade", and those instincts have been corrupted."*

In 2015, Dudek inaugurated our gallery space with his performance and eponymous exhibition *Saved by an Unseen Crack*, and in 2017 we presented Chapter 1 of *Steps and Marches*, which introduced a series of collaged paintings dealing with stadium stampedes, the political

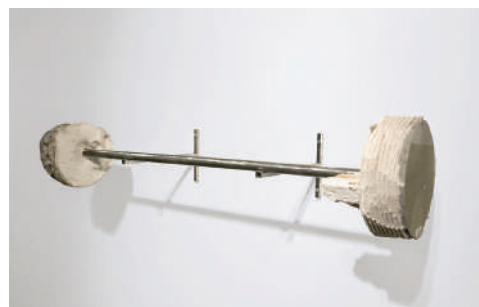
violence of mass events and various aspects of crowd theory: What happens when one become many? His fourth exhibition with the gallery consists of two monumental works and a performance video, which tie these earlier projects, and each other, together.



*More than 10 Individuals*, 2013.  
Steel, wood and oil paint  
118.5 x 131.5 x 74.5 cm - 46 5/8 x 51 3/4 x 29 3/8 in



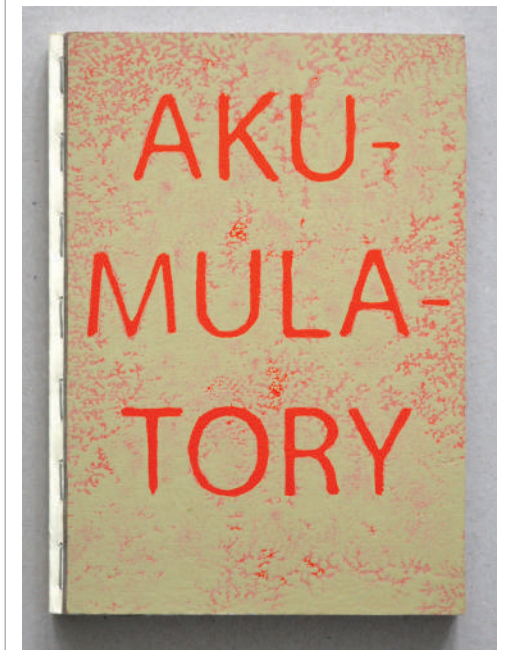
Top: Exhibition view of *Too Close For Comfort*, Harlan Levey Projects, 2013.



Bottom: *Flex Flat Top*, 2013  
Bricks, concrete, oil paint, synthetic plaster and steel  
22 x 113 x 40 cm - 8 5/8 x 44 1/2 x 15 3/4 in



*Cage Branding is Less Exciting*, 2013.  
Leather jackets, wood chips and steel chain  
133 x Ø 35 cm - 52 3/8 x Ø 13 3/4 in



Cover of the handmade artist's book *Akumulatory* book, 2013.

Next page: Inside of *Akumulatory* book.







*Akumulator is a one-to-one scale replica of a gym I built in a squatted basement of a Krakow council estate in the 1990s.*

*Akumulator is an anti-readymade; analogue resistance to mass mechanisation; a sanctuary of neglected materials.*

*Akumulator is not used as an empty exercise machine for repetitive body building movements – it is a manifestation of resistance, a laboratory for solution finding, an alternative pathway for crime-driven youth or a model for survival in economically deprived situations.*

*Akumulator can be activated anytime, anywhere*

Marcin Dudek, 2019

*Akumulator*, 2013-2018.  
Steel, wood, medical tape, acrylic paint, mirror, neon light, paper, leather, silicon, cell phone  
220 x 290 x 220 cm - 86 5/8 x 114 1/8 x 86 5/8 in

*Akumulator* is a memory box. It cost nothing in regards to money to make, but excessive amounts of time and thought, skill and imagination were spent in its production. It brings forward artifacts and their histories. The door is one Dudek knows well, every sticker, screw, slab and scent. He remembers the rush to open a business in Poland after the fall of Communism. His sister began a clandestine hair salon in the basement (still operating 30 years later). His father started a shoe repair business next door (he passed away in 1998). The sign is still holding on to the door:

*“This wooden door was part of the original room. It is totally covered with layers of posters and packaging materials, including the*

*cardboard box from our first black and white TV set. During that period, I remember that nothing went to waste. Even packaging was reused as an insulation material.”*

The memory box also has two collaged elements both constructed with layers of cloth tape. Each hints towards the artist's unique approach to social abstraction, which informs the installation. One is hung like a poster and includes images transferred from the *Akumulator* publication, the other is installed as a carpet without images, besides those of dust from the soles of spectators.

*“Back in the 90s, these rugs became very popular in Poland and for me, they marked one*

*of my few encounters with oriental culture at that time. They were often used to insulate the cold floor of the basement gym. For Akumulator, I made my own version of those carpets using collaged cloth tape. I created a new ornament influenced by the Soviet style of geometric architecture.”*

The bench press and punching bag from *Too Close for Comfort* are present, as are a lingering coffee cup and mobile phone. The punching bag was moved to Poland and sliced open in the performance *Head in the Sand* (LETO gallery, Warsaw, 2015), it's body left limp as the guts spilled out. The innards of the lifeless bag are revealed as the remains of magazines the young

artist informed himself with; the same material used to create the sculpture *Offal*, which was part of his 2017 exhibition *Steps and Marches*.



Details of the installation *Akumulator*.



*Akumulator*, 2020. Installation view, Harlan Levey Projects, Brussels, 2020.



Making-of the work *Slash & Burn*.

## Text by Przemysław Strożek

*Slash & Burn* is a set of 159 painted collages, which respond to the history of the Bradford City stadium fire. The fire broke out on May 11, 1985 during an English League Third Division game between Bradford City and Lincoln City, killing 56 spectators and injuring more than 250. Due to live broadcasting by Yorkshire Television, this event became a mass disaster viewed in real time by football fans in England. Caught on film by media, fans and authorities, the event illustrated catastrophe caused by interdependent human failures.

This monumental work is the most recent in Dudek's on disasters in sporting stadiums, which has included tragic occasions such as those in Luzhniki (1982), Brussels (1985), Hillsborough (1989), and others. Many of these events occurred in the second half of the 1980s (the historical peak of football hooliganism in the



Bradford City Stadium Fire, May 11, 1985.

United Kingdom), after the Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's government set-up a "war cabinet" to combat football hooliganism. *Slash & Burn* is a response to this very period of violent anarchy caused by British hooligans at the stadiums and focuses at the same time on the unpredictable nature of fire, complex system failures and a series of interdependent factors, which lead to crowd-related disasters on a universal level.

The process of creating the set of 159 collages was conceptual. After Dudek created each of the single objects, they were arranged to recall the architectural structure of the stadium in Bradford. Creating the stadium model from the collages, he began to burn them in the same place where the actual fire occurred. He carefully studied the archival material from the recorded game to investigate and reconstruct the movement of the fire as each panel added ash to its composition. Setting his work on fire alters texture and smell in a way that reflects a multisensory experience of the event.

The combination of these laboured panels presents various configurations of images from different viewing perspectives. The archival visual material, which documented the Bradford City stadium fire, is used to create a comprehensive perception from various points of view, as well as a sort of X-Ray vision into the event. While looking at the single collages there is a perspective of football fans behind the goal who are still watching the game; fans, who are in the middle of the crowd or on the pitch watching and escaping the fire. There is also a perspective of policemen, security and photojournalists. Collages presenting the montaged historical material are placed next to collages consisting of non-figurative abstract forms. Dudek refers here to strict geometrical forms of stadium architecture with sets of dots representing moving crowds and abstract shapes illustrating constantly changing flames in flux. While watching the entire frame, we observe a constant movement and exchange between the



*Slash & Burn*, 2020. Installation view, Harlan Levey Projects, Brussels, 2020.

individual panels. Their arrangement does not tell the linear story of the Bradford City stadium fire, but rather refers to universal aspects of crowd-related disasters, which started in the stands surrounding a sporting spectacle.

It is worth recalling the devastation of the Colosseum by the Great Fire of Rome in 64 AD (also the subject of an earlier painting), or the year 217 when the building was badly damaged by a major fire caused by lightning. In Christian Martyrdom stories, Polycarp was the one who was brought into the Smyranean stadium to be burnt alive in front of the thousands of spectators, and in 1968 a Polish bookkeeper, Ryszard Siwiec, set himself on fire at a crowded festival, which occurred at the Xth Anniversary Stadium to protest against the invasion of Polish and Soviet troops in Czechoslovakia. In those legendary

accounts we find interactions between historical and mythical individual figures, the crowds, stadium architecture and fire. The artist investigates these interconnections through visual responses and exploration of the hidden meanings of a football stadium as an embodiment of the ancient topos of "theatrum mundi".





*Slash & Burn, 2020.*  
Acrylic paint, steel powder, image transfer, medical tape, UV varnish on wood, aluminium and steel  
256 x 252 cm - 100 3/4 x 99 1/4 in

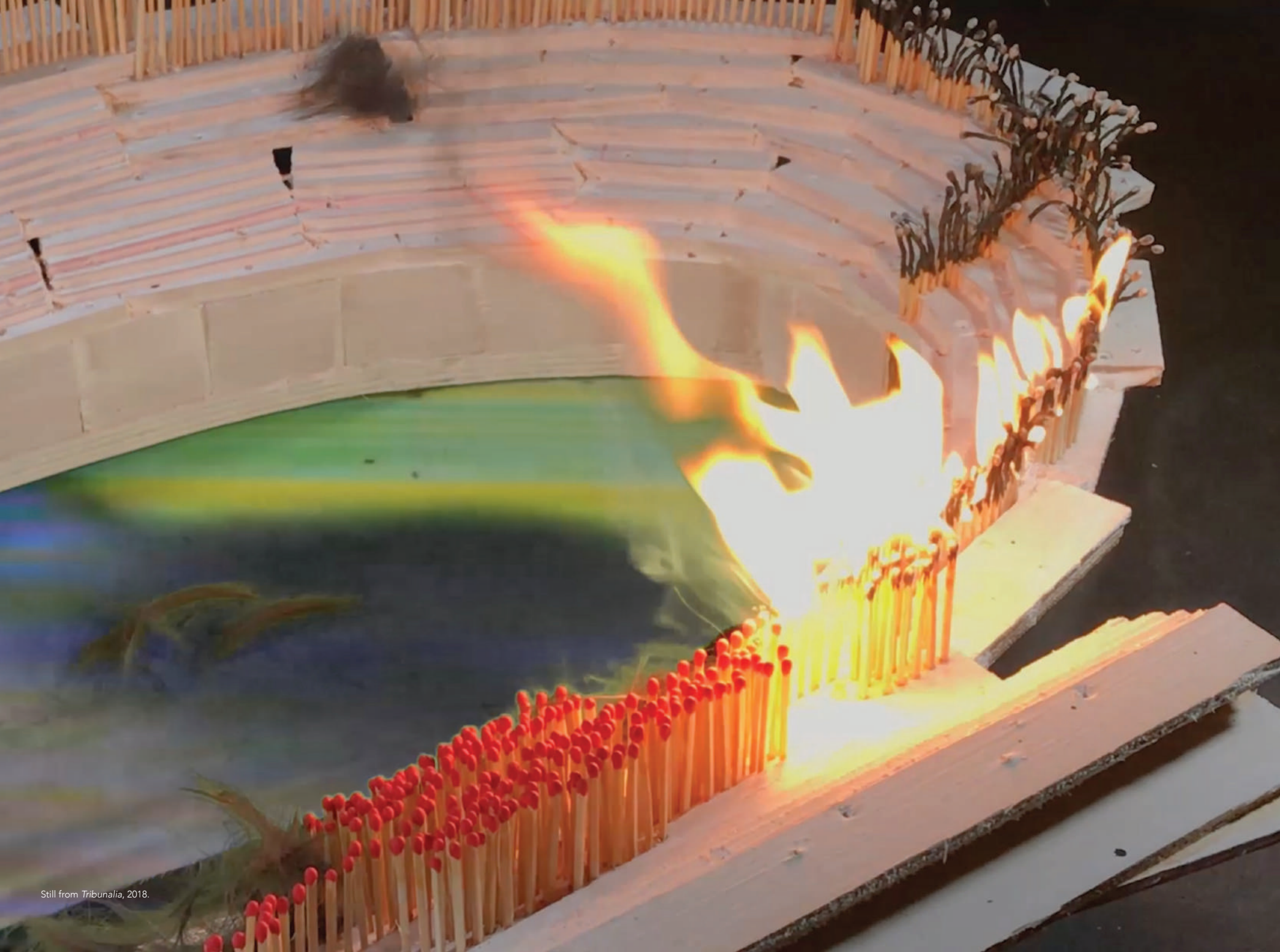




Detail of *Slash & Burn*.



Detail of *Slash & Burn*.



Still from *Tribunalia*, 2018.

Marcin Dudek's 2018 performance *Tribunalia* (his seventh since 2013) is a direct precursor to the monumental work *Slash and Burn*, the most recent in an ongoing series of works investigating catastrophes in football stadiums. *Tribunalia* was conceived as part of the residency *Being in the Body* at Launch Pad LaB in Charente, France, curated by Fatoş Üstek. Intrigued by Pompei's ancient amphitheatre, which, while in ruins, closely resembled the Polish stadiums of the '90s, Dudek reconstructed its architecture using wood and matches. The matches are akin to bobbing heads crowded around a spectacle, and are placed according to Dudek's memory of crowds in his home stadium. This maquette was placed on top of a hollow construction, which was then inhabited by the artist in the manner of a puppeteer hiding below the stage.

The performance commences with a destructive gesture; as if performing a violent c-section, the pitch is sliced in order to give birth to the

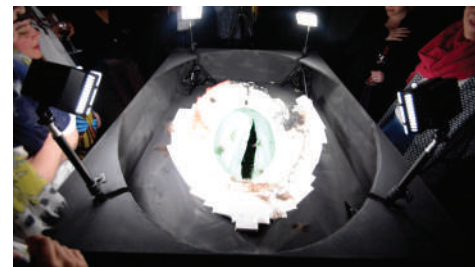
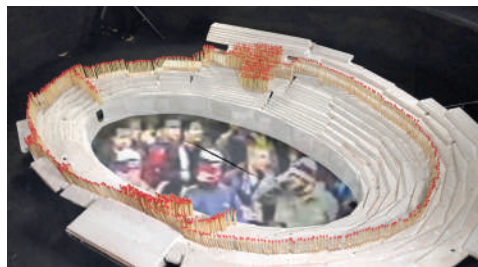
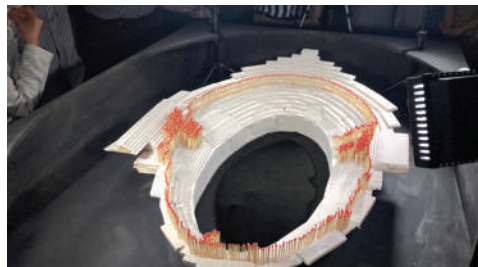
spectacle, revealing bit-by-bit an agitated Dudek, shedding his hair onto the stadium and spitting abuse. At the onset of the vile ramblings, one is not sure where the obscenities are aimed - at the visitors or at the artist himself? "What are you doing? You're doing nothing. You think you belong here?" Is this a critique of the viewer, looking on without any real involvement? Masses of hair are cut off and placed on the stadium, "Now you will be part of us". At this point we understand that a transformation is taking place - urged on by an alter-ego, or by his past self, Dudek quickly becomes a skinhead, leaving his hair on the bleachers along with his more 'tamed' self.

The transposed footage, an archival video from an away match that Dudek attended as a youth in Gdynia, Poland, was added onto the green-screen pitch only after the performance took place. We see his group of cohorts milling around, hesitating, waiting for their moment to rush the field, as Dudek voices the pressure

for action. This pressure is simultaneously social, urged on by shared purpose, and self-invoked, anxious about performing in a way that proves he deserves his spot in this crowd of troublemakers. Although directed towards himself, this dialogue is extremely visceral, creating discomfort for spectators as Dudek's voice is internalized by others who must confront their own inaction and cowardice. There is also a threat of danger: Spectators lose their sense of security as Dudek pushes himself to perform destructive gestures.

As his transformation to skinhead nears completion, the artist relinquishes his identity for the common purpose, becoming one of the many interchangeable agitators in the crowd. At this point, the matches are lit and the stadium starts to burn. Using the matches as a metaphor for spectators, the spread of the fire represents how crowd mentality consumes individuals. Heads are shaven and identities are incinerated. The discomfort of the performance's audience now

shifts from the mental sphere to the physical one. Forced to endure the heat of the matches, the stench of the burnt hair, and the threat of the fire, violence and oppression seem imminent. Only upon the artist's exit from the structure is there a sense of relief amongst the audience who have been assured that it was all only a spectacle.



Six stills from *Tribunalia*, 2018.  
HD video, color, sound, 13 minutes.



Marcin Dudek. *The Crowd Man*, opening of the exhibition and artist's intervention, May 31, 2019. Wrocław Contemporary Museum, photo by Małgorzata Kujda, © Wrocław Contemporary Museum, 2019.

**Marcin Dudek** (b. 1979, Poland) lives and works in Brussels, Belgium.

[www.marcin-dudek.com](http://www.marcin-dudek.com)  
[www.hl-projects.com](http://www.hl-projects.com)

Art as a strategy for living; Marcin Dudek's practice builds from autobiographical experience and expands to explore the broader phenomenon that shaped it. These include the rituals of subculture, DIY economy and crowd dynamics – how one gets pulled into many and what control is lost as a mass gains momentum. Often working with found, salvaged or repurposed materials, Dudek constructs objects, installations, painting and performance, touching upon questions of power and aggression in the context of sport and cultural spectacle. His paintings offer insight into his overall approach, which incorporates a rather obsessive work ethic, meticulously slicing and manipulating medical tape, rubbing images into the cloth and building up a painting through collage. The level of detail and craft is manic and neurotic, meditative and thoughtful, as violence becomes an energetic aesthetic reflecting a lived experience. After leaving Poland aged 21, he studied at the University Mozarteum, Salzburg and at Central Saint Martins, London, graduating in 2005 and 2007 respectively. His work has been exhibited internationally at institutions including the Moscow

Museum of Modern Art, Salzburger Kunstverein (AT), the Arad Art Museum (RO), Bunkier Sztuki Gallery in Krakow (PL), the Goethe-Institut Ukraine, and The Warehouse Dallas (US). His installation *The Cathedral of Human Labor* (2013) is on permanent view at the Verbeke Foundation in Belgium. In 2018, he presented a large installation at Manifesta 12 Palermo, which was followed by a solo exhibition at the Wrocław Contemporary Museum. Current and upcoming exhibitions include the *Psychic Wounds* at The Warehouse Dallas (US) curated by Gavin Delahunty and Socle Du Monde Biennale in the HEART Museum, Herring (DK).



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