



Marcin Dudek, *Passage III, Passage II, Passage*, Installation view *Slash & Burn II*, Harlan Levey Projects 1080, Brussels, 2021

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A Mantle of Flames: Marcin Dudek's Passage Series

Marcin Dudek was just ten years old and living in a housing block outside Krakow when the Berlin Wall finally toppled. It was followed by Poland's freefall into capitalism as the country reeled from severe shortages, skyrocketing inflation, and now-defunct industry. An economic policy nicknamed "shock therapy" fueled wild speculation that sprouted a new wealthy class but left little for the rest. In Dudek's words, families like his were reduced to "living off the offal of society." A frayed social fabric lacking civic associations left children vulnerable to new allegiances. It was not long before Dudek was swept up by Cracovia, one of Krakow's two viciously sparring soccer fan clubs, whose uniform (shared by other clubs across Eastern Europe) was a black flyer jacket with bright orange lining. Members would collectively turn their jackets inside out in the stadium to signal they were ready to brawl. Like the strike of a match, the blazing orange lining would be re-vealed, and all hell would break loose.

Many of Dudek's earlier works are situated in just such stadiums. From the Pompeii amphitheater in 59AD to Bradford City stadium in 1985, they revisit sites of social conditioning and mass tragedy. For young boys like Dudek, sports stadiums roused both the euphoria of shared intimacy and the unarticulated rage of the dispossessed. His performances, sculptures, and collages delve into the inner magnetism of crowds and examine the scaffolding of places and events that shape human behavior.

Dudek's latest series whittles memory down to the singular. Three new collages titled *Passage* (2020), *Passage II* (2020), and *Passage III* (2021) reflect on what it was like to be that matchstick, to feed the flame that came roaring out of post-communism's concrete ruins. Against a backdrop of white primer and acrylic paint on

wood and aluminum, Dudek builds limbs and impossible archi-tectures from meticulously laid strips of medical tape. Emulsified photo rubbings layered through-out create a historical archive of selfhood and nationhood. Many of these images are worn away or effaced by the force of Dudek's hands or the blade of a grinder dragged across their surfaces. With controlled burns he renders each work into a cauterized wound.

Passage depicts three flyer jackets stacked gently like hollow vertebrae. With arms outstretched, each one becomes successively disarticulated into ever smaller squares and slivers of tape. Glimps-es of the jackets' orange linings along the central axis generate an upward surge, as if to tear them asunder. The entire composition is crowned by a head of sorts comprised of image transfers of the floodlights from Heysel Stadium, where in 1985 thirty-nine soccer fans perished in a stampede. The emulsified photo transfers become indexical traces, at times revealed or erased, beneath layers of Dudek's affective outpourings of anger, ecstasy, and grief.

Slipping into the jacket's soft, dark shell for the first time in 1993, Dudek suddenly belonged to something that felt greater than himself. That year, during a match between Poland and England, he turned it inside out and abandoned himself to the melee. From afar, the three jackets are the silhou-ette of a boy collapsing to his knees. At the very bottom edge of the frame, splinters of orange tape pulse like an EKG. They seem to capture the adrenaline coursing through his veins, the blood rush-ing in his ears. Dudek's first passage was a fall into soundlessness, save for the pounding of his heart.

If the garment's black fabric was a protective skin, orange is the emotional and psychological con-nective tissue that spans all three works, along with much of Dudek's oeuvre. In *Passage II* it erupts in sprays of fiery shrap-nel from the jacket's right arm, and it bleeds to the surface where he has cut into the panel with a knife. It is no coincidence that Krakow is nicknamed the City of Knives, a violence which even Dudek's brother was not spared. Here Dudek wavers between fight and flight. In a jacket half outturned, he distills the moment he will either jump the fence and enter the fray or lie in wait. The choice is a calculated one: once exposed, the jacket's vivid color leaves nowhere to hide.

Passage II is poised in this split second of deliberation. Dudek bursts memory and time wide open to look at how bodies lay claim to even the harshest and most uninviting of spaces. Spewed across the collage's surface are image transfers bearing the names and emblems of soccer clubs and cities he visited during away games. Among these are also images of young men and women walking out of council estates. Dudek points to the urban terrain that helped constitute an entire generation brought to shelter inside flyer jackets. At the bottom, tongues of scorched surface, where controlled fire was set to the panel, lash at the garment's almost sacral depiction. Here Dudek draws a fine line between proselyte and zealot. These soccer clubs were their own kind of cult. One he extricated himself from but was never been able to leave behind.

The final work in the series, *Passage III* (2021), is also its most diffuse. Swathes of white primer applied with Dudek's fingers and hands lend emotional volume to the work. Here a single jacket has become many: they emerge as diaphanous clouds or smeared and spread as they take flight in wing-shaped silhouettes. The gesture of arms reaching up in joy, defiance, or surrender evoke fig-ures cheering or embracing. Catenae of orange bodies contrast with the more rigid, black lines to-ward the bottom of the frame suggesting stadium fencing or perhaps a prison trammel. Elsewhere a birds-eye view of stands dotted with crowds as well as a scrubbed-out list of Polish soccer clubs blurs the line between friend and foe.

"Wherever you go, you will be a polis," wrote Hannah Arendt, quoting that ancient Greek catch-phrase. For Arendt, the polis resided in neither square nor arena but in "the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together." This moment of formation was what she deemed the "space of appearance," or the site in which dignity and importance could be conferred through the act of mutual witnessing.¹

A polis cannot be borne of an individual. It must be summoned by a crowd, and it must be seen. As the disaf-fected youth of the Cracovia soccer club exited their concrete housing estates and en-tered soccer stadiums,

they did not yet exist. It was only when they turned their jackets out to bare their flame-colored linings that they stepped into the space of appearance. In that moment they be-came actors, albeit violent ones, of a polis that had made no room for them. Convoking a spectacle of fury, they demanded to be seen and to be reckoned with the only way they knew how.

What Arendt understood and Dudek affirms is that to wear the flame's mantle is fleeting, and it is ultimately self-immolating. *Passage* delivers us to the point of dissolution. The space of appearance, like memory, relies on a collective. Not just to be remembered but so as never to be repeated. Dudek gathers the ash and invites viewers to bear witness with him in the hope of creating a new form of public assembly. One that can make sense of turbulent childhoods amid great social and political upheaval and endow them with new possibilities, with other futures. At long last, this is a passage he will not make alone.

(1) Hannah, Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1958), 198.