DW 1 15 1 1 30/11/09 15:13 Page 14

Eastern edge

Poland is rightly famous for its poster art, but what's the latest generation of creatives up to? **Trish Lorenz** catches up with three graphic artists whose subversive work reflects a country that is in rapid transition

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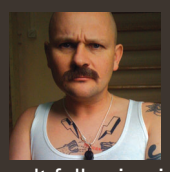
THINK of Polish graphic design and you probably think of posters created during the Communist era. Strongly visual, hand-drawn right down to the typography and with a clever use of metaphor and humour, post-war Polish designers elevated posters to an art form.

The fall of Communism created a hiatus as people adjusted to a new way of life, but now a new generation of Polish graphic designers is making its mark. Most are graduates from art schools such as the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, where hand-drawn work still predominates and the focus is firmly on helping students develop their own original style. As a result, the best retain the visual strength and artistic integrity of their past melded with a subversiveness that would not have been possible under a Communist regime. Here are three to watch.



JANEK KOZA

Graphic artist Janek Koza is diffident and shy, not what you'd expect from a man his colleagues call 'the Polish Banksy'. They're referring to his graphic novels and short movies, which have attracted a cult following in Poland. In the main they are wry tragicomedies about Poland in transition, such as the Everything is Wrong series of illustrated stories. Other work, including an in-progress graphic novel that deals with the Jewish genocide, offers a more serious comment on the scandals and issues affecting the country.

Born in 1970, Koza studied fine art at the Academy of Fine Arts in Wroclaw, in south west Poland. He graduated in 1993 and created a much-lauded series of vignettes for television called Erotic Confessions, which gave rise to his graphic novels. Today he also works commercially as the graphic designer for Polish MTV and creates animated short films and music videos for other clients, all featuring the same fragility and lack of slickness as his printed work, as shown in his Political Reportage installation in London last month, part of the Ctrl Alt Shift Unmasks Corruption exhibition.

Much like Banksy, Koza doesn't use his real name. 'Janek Koza' (which translates as John Goat) is often used in Polish jokes to imply someone lacking in guile and sophistication. 'It started as a joke at college, but I kept on using it. Now even my parents call me Koza,' he says, laughing at the silliness of it all. It's typical of the man and his work, which offers a simple, yet often devastating critique of contemporary life – one that makes you laugh and wince at the same time.

DW 1 15 1 1 30/11/09 15:14 Page 15

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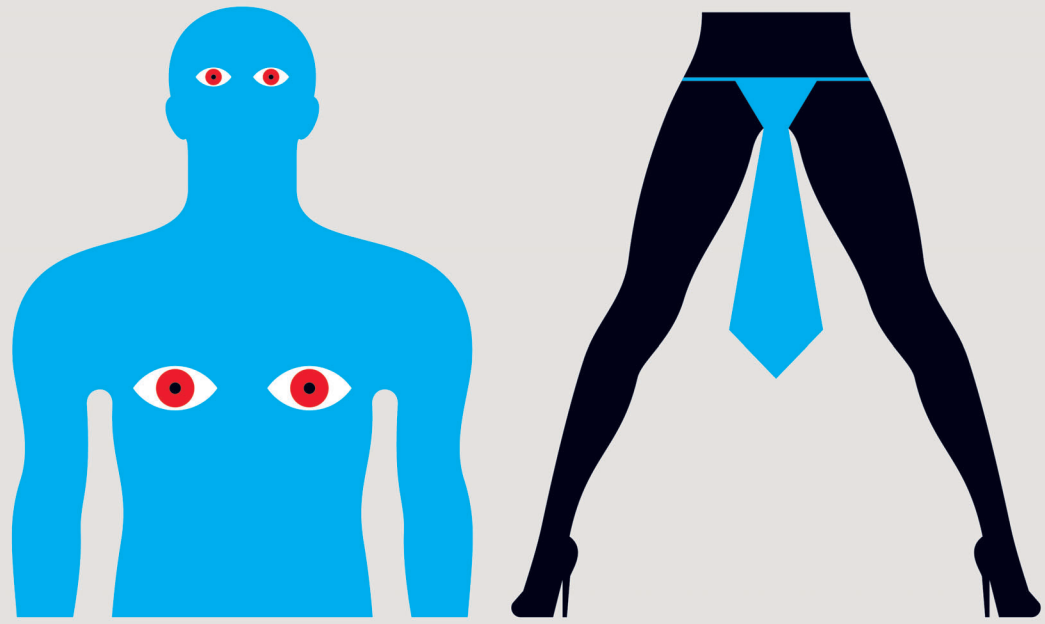

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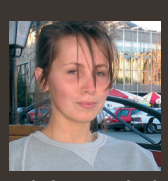


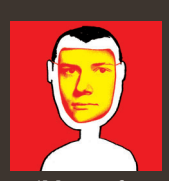
MONIKA ZAWADZKI

Monika Zawadzki is best known in Poland for her distinctively styled posters – simple monochrome palettes only occasionally enlivened by a touch of colour and the reduction of forms to the very minimum. In her work, people become simple shapes or a dark colour stain, an anonymity that enables her to represent personal and intimate subjects. 'All the works are about me. They're like self-portraits or genetic diagrams,' says Zawadzki.

Zawadzki studied graphic arts at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw and graduated in 2002. In 2003, she opened Zoo, an independent non-profit gallery. 'I worked in an advertising agency for four months, couldn't stand it and quit. I decided to create a job for myself, so I opened a gallery that shows work by new artists, and I design the posters for the shows,' she says. Alongside her work for Zoo, she's commissioned by cultural organisations and creates educational campaigns for the Polish government.

Like Koza, Zawadzki has a subversive streak. She considers herself a feminist and much of her work deals with the perception of women as sexual beings. Her work also addresses other taboo issues. Homosexuality is still quite underground in Polish society and Zawadzki is art director of the country's first gay magazine, Dik Fagazine. Beautifully produced and with an eclectic art direction, it makes a style statement along with its political message.

Zawadzki's next project, an exhibition in Wroclaw in January, will see her translate her graphic designs to 3D black plexiglass sculptures.



TOMASZ WALENTA

A graduate of the school of poster design at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, Tomasz Walenta says his playful, colourful, old-school style was 'born of frustration'.

'My professor was happy with my ideas, but not so much with the execution. I spent six months experimenting with the same image and he kept tearing it up. One night on the sofa I was so angry while I was drawing that I created something almost just to wind him up. But what came out was my personality, my style,' he says.

Born in Poland in 1974, Walenta grew up in Canada and graduated from the University of Quebec in Montreal before returning to Poland and completing his MA in 1999. He worked in Web design until the recession that followed 11 September, 2001, when he started to turn his hand to poster design and editorial illustration.

Today he counts The New York Times, The Washington Post and The Wall Street Journal among his editorial clients, and he also designs posters for a range of cultural institutions around the world.

He's inspired by the likes of Saul Seinberg, reacting with wit and irony to what he perceives as the hypocrisy of modern society. 'In my illustrations I try to use the language of posters, and when I work with a subject that has a political or social dimension, I aim give it a subjective view, to express my opinion on the matter,' he says. ●

1, 5 and 7 Cover of Dik Fagazine, Poland's first gay magazine, which Monika Zawadzki art directs, and two posters designed by her, entitled Women's Rights

2 Illustration for a story about abuse of the Caesarean procedure in Asia, for Time Asia, 2008, by Tomasz Walenta

3 Dziennik newspaper cover illustration for an article on a Nigerian woman raped in Poland (top left); illustration for a Dziennik story about the presence of Vladimir Putin in Russian life (bottom); and a poster for Krakow film festival, all by Tomasz Walenta

4 and 6 Extracts from two stories in Janek Koza's Everything is Wrong series: The Fraud from Gdansk Wrzeszcz, and Source