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Crip Intimacies in Concrete: Polish Post-War Mosaics and the Architecture of Touch

ABSTRACT

The article analyzes Polish post-war mosaics and architectural ceramics to expand understandings of crip intimacy and our relationship to bodies, both human and architectural. The history of ceramics is rooted in touch and physical intimacy, and its use by the Polish United Workers' Party to further their political agenda had profound, lasting psychological implications. By implicit design, tactile materials that would have otherwise enhanced the experience of architecture were covertly used as tools for propaganda to strengthen the Iron Curtain. Illusions in concrete and meticulously constructed mosaics promised visions of a utopian future in Poland, as in other states in the Eastern Bloc. Since these monuments were commissioned by and under the supervision of the state, artists would often encrypt secret messages into their compositions, evading decryption and countering propaganda. As a result, new aesthetic concepts that prioritized the sense of touch and disablement began to emerge. However, architectural ceramics and mosaics eventually disappeared from Polish cityscapes, and this erasure of history encourages reflection on the legacy of the Polish People's Republic and invites artistic actions and discussions concerning buildings created during the socialist period. Through my research, I will connect how the human body mediates and interacts through these architectural spaces, processing the various facets of tactual information that span Poland's complex history. I will give autoethnographic accounts detailing my personal experiences with these art objects, from the perspective of blindness. Looking at architecture from a marginalized perspective forms another kind of archive we ought to consider when thinking about disability or the disabling of a nation state.

Keywords: disability aesthetics, crip intimacy, Polish culture, postwar architecture, mosaics, waste material.

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INTRODUCTION

The art of mosaics has a long and distinguished history, often associated with once great civilizations, such as Ancient Greece and Rome, and flourishing across the Byzantine Empire from the 6th to 15th centuries, primarily for decorating temples. By the turn of the 20th century, mosaics were typically found only in churches and historical sites. However, the communist state dramatically reappropriated this art form to promote its ideology, essentially storming the gates of heaven to dethrone God and install a new faith. It was crucial for the Soviet republics to mimic or impose this fiction of a grand empire upon newly occupied territories, as this narrative drew power from its undeniable link to centuries of historical authority. Under Stalinism, mosaics were stripped of their original religious context and rigorously forged into the state-sanctioned style of socialist realism. Mosaics were favored for their cost-effectiveness combined with ostentatious opulence, as well as their inherent durability against freezing winter temperatures. The facades of factories, schools, and bus stations became ubiquitous canvases, where vibrant colors and hues were deployed to transform otherwise grey Soviet cities into images of a happy socialist society triumphing over darkness. These depictions typically promoted muscular, heterosexual bodies toiling in fields, often contrasted with engineers and scientists pointing towards the cosmos in a hyper-driven pursuit to establish the promise of an attainable sci-fi utopia.

Ruins, or rather, mosaics, act as an antidote to the flat, manufactured imagery of the urban landscape, instead serving as markers of reality within a post-catastrophic condition. In Poland, they represent a mysterious topographical element, one that could further define the country's development if allowed to remain intact; Poland is littered with mosaics—hidden and unstudied, they quietly decay behind the facades of socialist modern architecture or peek out from behind housing blocks; they linger in courtyards, caged and obscured from the touch and gaze of both the socialist and subsequent capitalist eras (Elżanowski, "Manufacturing Ruins" 740). My concern centers on these ruin-mosaics and their fraught representation as aesthetic objects—or, more precisely, the significant gap in their representation. Regardless of whether they are formally interpreted as works of art, their very existence invariably summons images of disability. Most often, they register as wounded or disabled bodies, representations of irrationality or cognitive disability, or effects of warfare, disease, or accidents (Siebers 64). Given that aesthetic feelings of pleasure and disgust are often inextricably linked, particularly in connection with trauma, these critical concerns risk disappearing from public discourse altogether. Yet these objects are crucial: what do they tell us about the underlying ideals

of a nation, especially when viewed through the lens of art and its public display? My analysis thus intends to examine the material condition of the country, specifically how artists emerging from the shadows of World War II engaged in a process of manufacturing ruins at an accelerated rate—often in the form of mosaics and architectural ceramics—which then became indelible components of the urban fabric.

Research for this essay was conducted on foot via railway and public transportation across the country of Poland between September 2024 and July 2025. As a blind researcher working within a foreign context with limited resources, my methodology paradoxically necessitates the utilization of photography. Working primarily in painting, photography has not been a primary focus of my artistic practice, but its adoption has been compelled by the unique assemblage of circumstances: navigating a landscape defined by decay and the abundance of waste material mosaics. These mosaics—whose historical records explicitly cite "waste material" as their primary medium—have, through my engagement, become sites of rigorous aesthetic inquiry. Though often situated in public spaces, these objects remain largely unobserved, their unintentional beauty tragically obscured. I am thus engaged in a systematic exploration of these overlooked architectural sites, frequently located in interstitial and marginalized urban spaces. Despite their conventional inaccessibility, their profound tactile and sensory allure actively demands investigation. These architectural spaces, imbued with a latent communicative capacity, seem to whisper their histories, demanding a prolonged engagement that transcends mere visual observation. This research, therefore, posits that a sustained, multi-sensory encounter with these sites reveals an intimate narrative otherwise inaccessible through conventional visual analysis.

For the better part of a year, I lived on the train, sustaining myself on vending machine coffee and Żabka[1] offerings. To document my findings, I used a Sony DSC-HX99 equipped with a Retissa Neoviewer, a device designed specifically for blind and low-vision users—a technical choice that places my work within a specific lineage of artistry. Much like Alice Wingwall, a photographer who became blind mid-career and whose work deals with architecture and memory, my use of the camera is not an attempt to mimic sighted vision but a way of using photography to navigate architectural space. In contrast to her use of the camera as a preservation tool, where her work depicts a vanishing snapshot of what was, mine is a haptic collision with what remains.

While I have visited several hundred locations, the exact number of surviving works in Poland remains difficult to pinpoint. No comprehensive

[1] A Polish chain of popular small convenience stores.

national inventory exists; current research is largely fragmented, focusing on specific regions like Warsaw or Małopolska. Many sites remained out of reach, guarded by bureaucratic gatekeepers or buried in remote, inaccessible areas. My research eventually became a personal mission to seek out every known site, consulting city records and online archives to cross locations off a growing map. Navigation was a digital choreography: Google Maps for direction and Seeing AI to translate visual data into descriptive language. For interior works, the process took on a comedic edge; I would have to negotiate with receptionists, stating my case for entry. Some were elated, fully aware of the treasures they guarded, while others were merely bewildered by my presence. Yet, even as I documented the mosaics, the material history continued to vanish: a mosaic in Pruszków was systematically demolished, while another in Kiekrz—once obscured by graffiti and slated for destruction—was cleaned by a group of local volunteers only to be dismantled by city officials. It now sits in a storage facility, its future location and fate entirely uncertain.

What does it mean to want to see? My research distinguishes itself from previous scholarship through a unique set of experiences: that of a blind person with a studio practice grounded in visual art, and as someone generations removed from my Polish ancestry. Looking at architecture from this marginalized perspective forms a vital alternative archive—one that documents not just the disabling of a body, but the disabling of a nation-state.

Studying ruins condemned as waste material reveals profound errors and misunderstandings that lead to poetic conclusions about our relationship to bodies, both human and architectural. What is particularly compelling about ruins, or images depicting a city in ruin, is their inherent lack of relationality when a singular image exists in isolation; it conjures an abstraction of its own logic, appearing surreal. For instance, a photograph of a crumbling mosaic becomes an image without a clear object—the "object" spreads throughout the frame, filling it to the point of bursting, rendering any attempt at conventional signification meaningless. The ruin, then, is effectively without image; it can never be truly corrected into focus. Paradoxically, the very optic means for gathering such information produces further ruin, generating more images without image. To genuinely see in the face of ruin, the conventional image must be vanquished, abstracted into obscurity, left teetering between life and death (Pijarski).

It is in this space of visual death that a different kind of life begins. For me, intimacy is not just romance or touch, but a collective survival strategy and a disability justice necessity. Crip intimacy is not a polite social arrangement or list of accommodations; it is a radical, haptic alliance between my body and a world that is often dormant or apathetic to my presence. It is the codified language shared between the disabled body

and the ruined environment. This intimacy is further negotiated through a rigorous act of contact. It is the blind leading the blind into a world where scars are scripts and touch is the ultimate form of truth. We learn the world through the friction of it: the roughness of bark, the coldness of stone, the ache of the climb. This is not just physical; it is psychic. Our bodies are maps of where we have been and whom we have touched. If the chunks of ceramic waste constitute ghosts within these mosaic walls, then my pilgrimage across Poland is an act of crip lineage—finding my own reflection in the broken, discarded, and freakish shards of a previous era's failed vision for utopia.

BELONGING IN THE MISFIT

The way modern cities are built is a quiet global catastrophe affecting all our lives. Buildings are too flat, too plain, too straight, too shiny, too soulless, too boring (Heatherwick 3). The bumps and lumps and disfigurations in buildings matter. This monotony fosters an indifference to reality, a pervasive plague of boringness that extends into a form of architectural oppression, compelling individuals towards insular digital existences. While monotony can sometimes be entrancing, this should not serve as an excuse for further self-oppression. This manufactured environment disproportionately accommodates certain bodily forms while marginalizing others; consequently, only those privileged bodies feel truly at home in this constructed world (Ahmed 129). It is precisely within this paradox that I find belonging. I feel at home here, among the dislodged and misfitted ruins, and the people who frequently maneuver through them.

Vasilis Galis states that different bodies are not merely recipients of architectural design; they are mutually constitutive with it, such that produced space actively shapes social norms (qtd. in Boys 64). These crippled structures are not tacked-on decorative embellishments; they are disabled bodily forms that are constitutive of the whole. Similarly, these objects reveal themselves as neither distinct entities nor archetypal projections, but rather as modes of relevance invested with meaning, deeply embedded in specific situations and bodily modalities. Within their very fabric, there are secrets hidden in these cracks and crevices—unheard conversations, worlds within worlds nestled into every nook and cranny. Each fractal of the ruin is characteristically unique, offering a wealth of irrefutable tactile information, an encrypted language of survival that is felt through touch.

This personal sense of belonging in the misfit finds a historical parallel in the widespread urban decay of the socialist period. The withering and rotting of structures under the omnipresent gaze of surveilling eyes is

analogous to the frailty and woundedness experienced by the disabled body. This is particularly evident when examined through the lens of what Filip Springer calls an "ill-born" building, namely those created during the socialist period (6). Springer vividly describes this architectural neglect:

> [A]nd it was to such banishment that the best works of that period were sent; we forgot about their existence, we stopped caring about them, we did not look in their direction. They existed, but for us they were invisible. They appeared for a moment only when we had to face them. This is what happened at the Central Station, whose undergrounds until recently were the true vestibules of hell. We hated them and gave vent to that hatred. (6, translation mine)

If these buildings can be described as ill-born, then one could argue that the country of Poland was symbolically reborn disabled. As Magdalena Gajda further describes, much of the Polish population experienced some form of disablement in the immediate aftermath of the war:

> In every family there was someone who, after fighting, camps, prisons, or torture, never regained health and emotional balance. Passers-by with amputated limbs, moving in wheelchairs, the deaf or the blind did not arouse unhealthy curiosity—they were next to clerks heading to their offices and children playing on top of the rubble. (translation mine)

The analogy of the ill-born building serves as a provocation regarding the legitimacy of post-war structures, yet it finds its true depth when translated into the reborn disabled identity of the Polish state. Here, a distinction is vital: while a building may be ill-born—conceived within a flawed ideological or material framework—the nation is reborn disabled, meaning that it emerges into its new sovereignty already bearing the functional impairments of World War II. As Magdalena Gajda's testimony suggests, this is not a metaphor for a lack of health, but a description of a specific mode of being. The rebirth is not a clean break from pre-socialist history, but a synthesis where the new state (the nation) must inhabit the ill-born structures (the architecture), using the specific, adaptive strategies of a disabled citizenry.

This profound mass disablement created a disorienting context from which works of public art began to emerge, surfacing from the vast sea of bricks that dominated the postwar landscape of Poland, particularly in Warsaw. For instance, the reconstruction of Muranów, Warsaw's former Jewish Ghetto, largely utilized salvaged materials, with several sections built directly atop compacted rubble. While the precise number of bodies, treasures, or personal belongings buried beneath remains unknown (as no

large-scale systemic excavations were ever made), these aspects simply did not factor into the immediate necessity of reconstruction. Reeling from the slaughter and devastation of the war, the city had no choice but to look forward. As Jerzy Elżanowski suggests, this material reality extends to the very foundation of the city:

> There can be no possible study of Warsaw that escapes a profound reflection on wartime destruction and the materiality of corpses gathered into ruins. . . Even if architecture in Warsaw is physically suffused with human remains, it would be unimaginable to pursue an empirical analysis. But it is equally impossible not to imagine that such a possibility exists and to consider its deep implications on the relationship between people, violence, and architecture. ("Ruins, Rubble, and Human Remains" 115)

If one has ever stumbled through the streets of Warsaw and felt an irreconcilable haunting presence, the pins and needles of innumerable ghosts, it is precisely for these reasons. The city's very fabric is permeated by this buried history. Consequently, when such bastardized waste material is directly wedged into wet, heaping slabs of rubble-concrete, the relationship between the body of architecture and the human body becomes undeniably phantasmagoric, brutally blurred beyond recognition, thus perpetuating a cycle of destruction, death, decay, and rehabilitation.

Architecture reflects the political, economic, and social relations of the period in which it was created, and for Poland, it was an antidote to socialist realism. In the years following World War II, architects faced the formidable demand of rapidly meeting the housing needs of a burgeoning population. Cheap and affordable housing solutions needed to be implemented in accordance with the ideology of socialist realism, meaning that designs had to undergo strict approval processes. Polish architects in this early postwar period felt increasing pressure to serve the Party's agenda, yet they skillfully manipulated the political situation to satisfy their professional ambitions. The ubiquitous deployment of brick and concrete represented a reaction against the excessive, even "mad," application of ornamental facings and plasters that had characterized earlier periods, particularly decorative Socialist Realism. Concurrently, there was a compelling desire for "bad" brick—shamefully exposed due to physical imperfections or aesthetic disfavor—to be transformed, or perhaps concealed, into "good" brick (Springer 281). The alchemical solution to this pervasive scarcity of decent brick was the widespread application of mosaics and ceramic cladding. It is my understanding that mosaics themselves were not of aesthetic interest to these architects; rather, they were more inclined to emulate contemporary international trends, such

as those championed by Le Corbusier. The implementation of mosaics, therefore, served as a means of covering up and diverting attention from the "bad brick," functioning as a monumental bandage to a relentlessly oozing wound. Thus, the addition of architectural ceramics and mosaics functioned as a form of adaptive equipment, reanimating the building process and necessitating a fundamental reorientation of urban space. The mosaic, then, is the point where the ill-born structure receives its prosthetic, turning a site of misfitting into a site of radical, tactile creation.

A PERIOD OF ERRORS AND MISTAKES

Pervasive censorship paralyzed artistic activities and industries, effectively stifling the country's natural cultural development. "What was permitted one year was forbidden the next, and vice versa; what was tolerated in literature was condemned in painting; what one artist might be permitted would bring dire consequences to another" (Wallach 76). This oppressive climate fostered a form of self-policing, where adherence to the authorities' whims subtly created a disabled body/mind. To make one's work public as an artist was to risk being labeled as "infecting" others, a dangerous contagion. However, as David Crowley notes, "some fields of art and design were less strongly policed than others; [architectural ceramics and mosaics] lay at the edge of the ideologues' field of vision" ("Stalinism" 80). In effect, this created a uniquely tenebrous condition in which a disability aesthetic could subtly flourish. A discourse centered on individualism, and the expressive quality of materials were thus nourished in practice, even as such formalist experiments remained officially prohibited. For many, painting abstractions became a subtle strategy for outsmarting the system.

Disability has been characterized historically as a mistake or an error in genetic purity, and such "errors" powerfully challenge our conventional understanding of art and aesthetics. This resonates deeply with the Stalinist years in Poland's history, often regarded by both Polish and foreign observers as a cultural nadir, described in Party jargon as a "period of errors and mistakes." Art and design until Poland's "Październik" (the political "Thaw" of October 1956) were typically considered, by observers abroad, uniformly poor and corrupted—an unfortunate derailment on the modernist journey of the 20th century (Crowley, "Building" 187). This pervasive cultural isolation produced an overall frustration that the country desperately sought to overcome, scrambling to compensate for inherited neglect through new architectural forms and means of expression. This historical neglect, whether cultural or architectural, measurably cripples the body; a neglected body is a broken body, denied fundamental access

to care. This period in Poland's history, therefore, reflects a profound derangement of epitaphs. Isolation itself is a disabling experience, reaping severe mental consequences. All these interconnected factors must be considered when appraising the value, or indeed the devaluation, of these works of art.

The transformation of a mosaic into a ruin is a temporal process driven by neglect and collective orientation; even the invisible mosaic, draped in camouflage, is categorized by its evasion of detection. This image of ruin, then, embodies the tension between death and survival, loss and life, destruction and preservation. However, in an age of artificial remakes and sanitization, we risk erasing the very evidence of how we came to be (Pijarski). Rather than simple conservation, I argue for recognizing the ruin-mosaic as a powerful embodiment of memory that is in danger of being swept away by the infrastructural debris of constant urban updates and reboots.

These structures are what I call "un-monuments"—they defy conventional criteria of monumentality. Unlike their formal counterparts, un-monuments embody a struggle for mere existence, a daily fight for survival. They lack the luxury of concern for public perception. Paradoxically, un-monuments welcome acts of vandalism and defacement, often blurring the lines between intimacy and violence, precisely because they are accustomed to nothing else—any form of attention serves as positive reinforcement. Abuse and neglect have become their inherent condition. Yet, in their ruination, they become unintentional jewels. In stark contrast, traditional monuments overtly command attention, often displaying a form of architectural narcissism, caring deeply about external validation. People do not protest, retaliate against, or demand the removal of un-monuments; instead, un-monuments are willfully ignored into obscurity—a disfigurement of memory. When an un-monument finally reemerges into perception, it is met with shock and confusion, akin to encountering the sublime. The eyes desperately wish to be plucked from their sockets, yet they cannot look away from the decaying abomination.

SURVEILLANCE AND THE POLICING OF TOUCH

Given their ubiquitous presence, what then are we to do with these mosaics? The Greeks can neglect certain things because they have a ton of ruins. For Poland, however, post-communism presents a unique challenge regarding its material remnants. Clay, specifically, holds profound significance here, both historically and due to its prevalence in the country's reconstruction. In ceramics, the term "plastic memory" is used to define clay's inherent ability to retain its initial form and resist subsequent alterations. Yet

there are instances where clay surrenders its memory, refusing any fixed shape; when it does, it is irreversibly lost, necessitating a complete recommencement. This phenomenon aptly mirrors the psychic landscape of postwar Poland. Just as the manipulation of clay enables individuals to confront the constructive and destructive aspects of the self, so too does plastic memory serve a similar function for Poland's fractured history. It embodies the materiality of a collective memory, resilient yet susceptible to erasure. When these resilient material memories are embedded into the walls of the city as mosaics, they become sites of tension—surfaces that demand contact, which the state often deems suspicious.

Because these material histories are so fragile, my physical entanglements with them often trigger unexpected, confrontational encounters. For instance, in Kraków, I was twice reprimanded for photographing mosaics: first at a district court where trees had been strategically planted in front of the mosaics—an effective solution that circumvented the need for outright demolition—and again at the "Kłos" housing cooperative, despite its unobstructed invitation for public engagement. Given that both these mosaics are registered monuments, one might ask: is this how history is effectively swept under the rug? My grasp of the Polish language wasn't yet refined enough to argue with authority, so, contrary to my iconoclastic nature, I succumbed to obedience and clumsily fled the scene of any future crime. But what exactly is my crime? Photographing the body of architecture, practicing rituals of intimacy, being curious about something otherwise not worth being curious about, being blind in a foreign country—more precisely, being blind with access to a camera?

When I engage with these imperfect surfaces, I fear committing some kind of Orwellian crime. This touchcrime, I have come to realize, is the deliberate act of prioritizing touch over vision—a direct challenge to ocularcentricity and its pervasive supremacy. Ironically, touchcrime has nothing to do with keeping one's hands to oneself. Whose responsibility is it to monitor and report suspicious mosaic-related activity, how committed are they to this task, and do they get paid a decent wage? Admittedly, a truly intimate experience with these mosaics feels almost impossible. There are bodies everywhere, lingering even in the most secluded locations, as if the mosaics possess a gravitational pull. I perceive not only the surveillant gaze of cameras monitoring my activity, but also the ice-cold scrutiny of distrusting eyes penetrating my body. This policing of touch effectively oppresses our most primal sense—the fundamental need for tactility—which dwindles as our world becomes increasingly homogenized and flattened, as if "flat death" couldn't possibly become any flatter (Barthes 115). Yet it is precisely within the crime of this contact that a deeper, more painful intimacy with the building is born.

This haptic engagement—this touchcrime—leaves a physical record on the seeker. Within the encrypted aesthetics of these mosaics, texture functions materially as its own subversive and codified language, offering a spectrum of touch that oscillates between pain and pleasure. Through my observations, the rigorous act of touch has left its mark, and I have amassed an extensive collection of bodily abrasions: lacerations, punctures, pustules, lesions, boils, sores, avulsions, gapes, rashes, and gashes. The profound understandings these injuries impart are felt through the very act of touching these architectural wounds: groping, fingering, fondling, tickling, caressing, stroking, penetrating, licking, massaging, squeezing, or clenching. Different mosaics offer vastly different experiences of intimacy, or lack thereof. Some express profound indifference, exhibiting an outright apathy towards engagement. Where one mosaic seems to implore touch, another lies dormant, awaiting demolition—perhaps because its fundamental access needs, and thus its capacity for intimacy, have not been met.

HARVESTING WASTE

Fig. 0. National Bank Poland, Świętokrzyska 11/21, Warsaw. Maria Leszczyńska, exterior composition, mosaic in the enclosed courtyard; glass and ceramic waste material, 1967. Photograph unavailable, access not granted.

On Christmas Eve, I set out to document a mosaic, anticipating fewer onlookers given the holiday—a welcome relief from the questioning I often struggle to navigate. The mosaic I was hunting for was located at Narodowy Bank Polski. The building itself proved elusive, tucked away in a courtyard protected by metal gates and listless security guards. Once I managed to stumble into what I thought to be the entrance, I felt initial

confusion and slight disgust, unsure if I had found the correct location, only to soon realize that I had. To my bewilderment, the entire structure had been enveloped in a vinyl fabric, caked in advertisements presumably promoting the joyless pleasures of banking. The mosaic had been concealed in a manner that painfully revealed its obfuscated content, akin to a poorly executed Christo and Jeanne-Claude installation, or a child dressed up as a Halloween ghost with sneakers peeking through the costume. Whoever manages this building had clearly deemed its ugliness unacceptable, determining it needed to be masked from the world. Its perceived disability, in essence, was rendered invisible, yet simultaneously, "violently included" into the urban landscape (Pamuła 858).



Fig. 1. A. Jurasz University Hospital No. 1, Marii Skłodowskiej Curie 9, Bydgoszcz. Marian Kokoszyński, interior composition, mosaics on multiple floors in the waiting area; ceramic waste material, 1980. Photograph by S. Proski, 2025. Courtesy of S. Proski.

The mosaics in the hospital were sterile and sanitized, like the medical devices poised to penetrate each unsuspecting patient. For a disabled person, a hospital waiting room typically embodies hell on earth, but this place was different—perhaps purgatory, but not damnation. Hoping to have found lesions, I found health, as these mosaics were smooth and

glossy, in pristine condition. This prompted a critical question: could these even be considered ruins, given the extraordinary level of care they have received over the years? Whose responsibility is it, I wondered, to disinfect and meticulously scrub the crevices of gunk accumulating between the margins of plastic waste—a spit-shine sonata effectively slowing the process of decay? Furthermore, what is the role of these mosaics as caregivers, ensuring they perform their duty for patients anxiously awaiting diagnoses, treatments, cures, and prescriptions? This implied role as caregivers, mirroring the very medical procedures administered within the hospital, underscores a deeper connection: building a mosaic, in a strange way, feels rather surgical. As an artist, one performs an operation on a building—meticulously and with absolute precision.



Fig. 2. Madonna, Reja 1, Olsztyn. Unknown artist, exterior composition, mosaic on the facade; glass and factory waste material, date unknown. Photograph by S. Proski, 2025. Courtesy of S. Proski.

With curious, trembling fingers, I penetrated the decomposing, neglected wall, towering with abrasions in the freezing rain. Over the course of decades, the calcified waste material had accumulated into a heaping mass of rot, largely ignored by the commuters who day by day willfully avert their gaze from the architectural body disfiguring the landscape, implicitly

wishing it would disappear. I massaged the lumpy, abnormal clusters of growth in a surreptitiously circular motion that bordered somewhere between clinical and sexual, aroused by the otherworldly spectrum of textures. I cannot fix these wounds, nor would I want to; I wish only to ruminate in their oozing imperfection.



Fig. 3. Municipal Cultural Centre, Chopina 101, Sochaczew. Hanna and Gabriel Rechowicz, exterior decoration, mosaic on the facade; ceramic waste material, date unknown. Photograph by S. Proski, 2025. Courtesy of S. Proski.

Every orifice is a portal that transports you to another textured dimension. I reach my hand into the hollow crevice, and I'm met with both pain and pleasure, navigating a labyrinth of blisters and fissures. The surface shifts between rough and slick, slippery and bone dry, a pockmarked utopia of imperfections from the ceramic glazing process, akin to a teenager's unfortunate complexion or the moon's cratered face. As I touch the rock—a fleshy concrete mass embedded with unnamable, unrecognizable shards—the jaggedness of the abnormality cuts an incision into my skin. I'm wounded; my palm seeps blood into the porous rock, leaving traces of smudged fingerprints daubed across the surface. This act becomes a living composition, a collaboration and a contamination, a pact written and paid for in blood. Each loosely held chunk of light-reflecting

rock transforms into its own reading stone, illuminating a whisper from within the wall, seemingly dislodged from time.



Fig. 4. Institute of Ceramics and Building Materials, Toszecka 99, Gliwice. Unknown artist, exterior decoration, mosaic on the facade; ceramic waste material, date unknown. Photograph by S. Proski, 2025. Courtesy of S. Proski.

A mosaic in Gliwice escaped bulldozing and the uniform dullness of thermo-modernization only to be painted over: industrial-grade, banal bright white aggressively smothered its spectrum of light and color. As any painter knows, paint offers the potent illusion of a fresh start—a new ground for a salvaged composition, a clean slate to begin anew, or a means to destroy past work and reclaim the support. It is undeniably alchemical in its transformative power. Yet, there's one thing, as a material, that it is utterly incapable of: truly concealing texture. No matter the pigment load, the viscosity, or the number of layers, the mosaic's inherent topography, its raised points and deep tessellations, simply refused to be flattened. Here, tactility profoundly triumphed over the flatness of image, a material resistance that undoubtedly exasperated those attempting its rehabilitation. Their botched, painfully obvious effort was ultimately thwarted, leaving them no choice but a final, more desperate solution: mounting a vinyl advertisement over their failed, textural battle.

CONCLUSION

Crip intimacy is the moment the encrypted world stops being a barrier and starts being a collaborator, as is the case in these mosaics. It is the feeling of being understood by a material. While the sighted world experiences a mosaic as a flat image, my experience with that object occurs through the pustules, boils, and lacerations of its decay. It is the moment the stone implores touch, and I respond. It is a rejection of the touchcrime—the ableist policing that demands we remain distant spectators. Crip intimacy is finding home in the misfitted. It is the recognition that my blind embodiment—with its mist, debris, and stumbles—is mirrored in the un-monuments of the city. We are both ill-born structures navigating a world obsessed with curation and curative repair. In this intimacy, the ruin is not a tragedy to be fixed, but a peer to be felt. It is the anthropological understanding that I am not blundering alone. I am part of a lineage of friendly ghosts who left their tactile signatures in clay shards and kilns, harvesting this waste material and carrying it into a future where it can be valued.

Contending with the taken-for-granted serves as the basis of our differential being-in-the-world and can give insights into how things might be done differently (Boys 62). So, how can we truly care intimately for these buildings when most have been rendered invisible? Caring becomes a commitment to understanding and actively working against ordinary, unnoticed discriminatory practices, while critically rethinking and redesigning them (66). These mosaics are invisible in two keyways: first, their locations are often skewed and indeterminable, with many destroyed or covered up. Even when a location is provided, it is typically a vague street name, leaving discovery to accidental encounter. Second, even when the mosaics are more spatially intrusive and noticeable within the urban fabric, people rarely pay them attention, despite surfaces seemingly begging to be touched by curious hands and further understood. For me, however, there is a small victory: whenever I am photographing on location, passersby inevitably pause, beginning the slow, arduous process of reevaluation. They scratch their heads, noticing for the first time the ugly majesty of these relics of a not-so-distant past that still linger in the shadows, unforgettable. While arguing in favor of ugliness is nothing new, it is crucial to acknowledge that the interpretation of something damaged or broken can reveal new forms of beauty, inherently challenging our reliance on perfect bodily forms. In other words, perfection is the enemy of the good.

"Only the sick are truly healthy" (Tokarczuk 84). This paradox frames a critical lens through which to view damaged art: beholders of such works discover an image of disability that compels contemplation not as a symbol of human imperfection, but as an experience of the corporeal variation inherent

in all modern life. Art, as Siebers argues, is profoundly materialist—it relies on means of production and available resources but also embodies new conceptions of the human (67). This understanding directly applies to the art produced during the People's Republic of Poland, where artists responded—often through careful, strategic, and covert means—to their new, restrictive reality. The strategic use of rehabilitated waste material in mosaics during this period of intense transformation allowed a unique disability aesthetic to emerge within Poland's modernist architecture. Poland has, in effect, become a landscape garden of both future and present ruins, comparable in its profound layered history to Ancient Greece. These manufactured ruins of the socialist period, particularly through the symbolic use of ceramics, foreshadowed an image of martyrdom, paradoxically serving as a protest to the totalitarian regime. Ultimately, objects of art are bodies, and aesthetics is the science of discerning how some bodies make other bodies feel (63). The fragments of these sites represent a refusal to be sanitized. They are crip artifacts—stubborn, sharp, and physically demanding—forcing the world to grapple with a reality perceived through the skin rather than the distant, surveilling eye. This is the essence of their architecture of touch, their profound crip intimacy. If what one encounters in these works of art is a site of disfigurement and alienation, it is because they unequivocally represent the state of the soul of Poland, an enduring, haptic archive that demands engagement beyond mere sight.

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