PRES Interview – Magdalena Moskalewicz and Daniel Muzyczuk

This interview with Magdalena Moskalewicz and Daniel Muzyczuk discusses the Polish Radio Experimental Studio, otherwise known as PRES. In her introduction to the Studio, Moskalewicz positions PRES as "a site—understood equally as institution, physical space, and a circle of individuals." This exchange departs from this multidimensional approach to PRES, while emphasizing Moskalewicz's and Muzyczuk's work—as curators, art historians, and researchers—along with the Studio's history and legacy.

PRES was the first center for electronic music east of the Iron Curtain—and the seventh studio of its kind in the world—established to explore, produce, and disseminate new sonic possibilities. Founded in 1957, the Studio continued to operate until 2004. Though its inception was predicated on producing requisite music for state radio broadcasts and film soundtracks, the Studio also made autonomous electronic pieces and independent compositions. While its most widely known outputs were undoubtedly film scores, The Warsaw Autumn International Festival of Contemporary Music, which continues to operate to this day, was a key way in which PRES's independent material reached the public. The Studio was spearheaded by Józef Patkowski, with Krzysztof Szlifirski, Wojciech Makowski, Anna Skrzyńska, Eugeniusz Rudnik, and Bohdan Mazurek forming the original team. Later, the Studio would also draw in Grażyna Karaśkiewicz, Barbara Okoń-Makowska, Ewa Guziołek-Tubelewicz, Tadeusz Sudnik, and Ryszard Szeremeta. It constituted a crucial center, attracting both local and international composers to work with its equipment and sound engineers. Some of these artists were Włodzimierz Kotoński, Andrzej Dobrowolski, Krzysztof Penderecki, Bogusław Schaeffer, Elżbieta Sikora, Tomasz Sikorski, Krzysztof Knittel, Arne Nordheim, Dubravko Detoni, Franco Evangelisti, Roland Kayn, and Teresa Rampazzi.

PRES operated out of what was known as the "Black Room." A 6 x 6 meter studio was designed by the renowned Polish architects Oskar and Zofia Hansen. Tightly fitted with modular elements, innovative equipment, rotating frames, and movable panels, the room was both an audio tool and an audiovisual device. It was designed according to Oskar Hansen's Open Form theory, which dictates that architectural space should be adaptable to its users. Crucially, the Black Room was located in the state-owned Polish Radio building in Warsaw.

During the 50-odd years of the Studio's operation, the sociopolitical climate in Poland went through critical shifts. On the one hand, for much of PRES's history, Poland was still the Polish People's Republic (PRL)—operating under Soviet influence, part of the Eastern Bloc, and ideologically separated from the West. On the other hand, PRES was formed at the very beginning of the Thaw which fortified civil rights and artistic freedom. The 60s and early 70s that followed are often understood as a particularly active period in Polish culture. In 1989 Poland transitioned from a communist to democratic state and in 2004 it joined the European Union.

Since the Studio's closure that same year, there has been a newfound wave of interest in their production. Notably, the products of this enthusiasm include: *post*, MoMA's digital research platform with a dedicated section on PRES (with an extended list of sources here); *Sounding the*

Body Electric: Experiments in Art and Music in Eastern Europe 1957–1984, an exhibition held at Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź in 2012 and in Calvert 22 in London in 2013, plus the accompanying catalogue; Bôłt Records, a record label that released an anthological series of PRES music; *Through the Soundproof Curtain*, an exhibition held at ZKM | Karlsruhe in 2018; and subsequently *Ultra Sounds: The Sonic Art of Polish Radio Experimental Studio*, a book released by ZKM | Karlsruhe in 2019. It is hoped this interview will make a small contribution to this rich web of PRES resources.

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What, to you, was PRES? Or rather, what of PRES are you most determined to research, preserve, or extend? Magdalena's introduction notes that it can be "understood equally as institution, physical space, and a circle of individuals," so I am curious which facet of the Studio takes precedence for you and your work.

Magdalena Moskalewicz (MM): To me, PRES is fascinating specifically because it was all these three things simultaneously. Its institutional status cannot be fully detached from its physical location, complete with its design, and that location only makes sense as a place of use, a place of human interaction. Working on PRES made me realize that looking at history through the lens of the sites of artistic production—as opposed to, say, artists or artworks—grants to a historian an unparalleled perspective. While focusing on individual makers always carries with it a threat of the artist-genius rhetoric and looking at artworks alone may erase the social and political context from the horizon, sites—the places where art is made and circulated—are at the crossroads of individual agencies, spatial and aesthetic circumstances, material conditions, and socio-political dynamics.

Daniel Muzyczuk (DM): For me, it is the methodology of working with tape that allows me to think of other audiovisual reconfigurations in the art field as the structural outcomes of technological inventions. The materialization of sound in the form of tape strips is also something that opened doors for scientific research. This is the reason why spaces like PRES are always created in between the experimental laboratory and the artist's studio. That factor also opened doors to the idea of concrete sounds as a reservoir that can be reshaped into universal language. The ambitions of these projects were really spectacular. However, most of the work is known simply through their finished pieces of music, which are listened to for aesthetic pleasure and contemplation. So, there is always this inconsistency between the horizon of intentions and where the actual, pragmatic work ends. However, the sounds ended up influencing people's lives and their ears in a totally different setting—the cinema and pop culture. Even if it is characteristic of most of the work of avant-gardes, I find this collision inspiring. The revolution was incited, but simply not in the area where it was intended.

How did you come to work on PRES? What sparked your individual interests?

MM: Three things came into play that led me to PRES**.** At the time, in 2012, I was working at The Museum of Modern Art conducting research into the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection,

and specifically focusing on Fluxus connections in Eastern Europe. I was also one of the founding editors of *post*, MoMA's digital publication about to launch in early 2013, and together with my colleagues I was planning initial content on modern art from Latin America, East Asia, and Eastern Europe—it was my job to envision a subject for the latter. The first thing was that I had just completed a PhD that looked at experimental art in Poland between roughly 1955 and 1970, and so that was my main expertise. The second, that the Polish connection of George Maciunas in that early moment of Fluxus was Józef Patkowski—the two had met long before PRES or Fluxus ever existed—which led my research from visual arts into the milieu of experimental music. The third was that other content planned for *post* was thematizing Sogetsu Art Center, a major hub for experimental music in Tokyo, which meant that the editorial team gave a lot of thought to the idea of *site* as a conveyor for artistic practice. These three elements: Fluxus, Poland, and focus on sites of artistic production came together to bring to my attention the Polish Radio Experimental Studio as the perfect case study.

DM: There were two decisive moments when it comes to tracing the recent research on the Studio work. The initial impulse came from two curators involved with the music scene: Michał Mendyk and Michał Libera, who started uncovering the archives of PRES in an unorthodox manner. Since access to the musical material made at the institute was restricted, they used publicly available scores to reformulate the questions posed by music on tape. Through their projects they were trying to reimagine the music through commissioning new interpretations of these materials. The scores that were intended to be used as a source for consultation—and were sometimes even created only after the piece of music was completed—started to be treated as an invitation to be shaped anew. This reconstructive look toward the future was truly inspiring. Later Mendyk started a whole series of anthologies at Bôłt Records, dedicated to uncovering different aspects of music produced at PRES. This should be seen as a logical consequence of the initial unorthodox and creative moment. The other trigger was the fact that David Crowley had an idea to organize an exhibition [*Sounding the Body Electric: Experiments in Art and Music in Eastern Europe 1957–1984*] around the theme of the intersection of art and new music in socialist countries after 1956. He approached Muzeum Sztuki and I joined him in this journey. The research was focused on the involvement of PRES with cinema and visual arts, so it formed a natural alliance with Bôłt Records. The research was used for two iterations of the exhibition, which took place at Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź in 2012 and Calvert 22 in London in 2013. On a more personal level, as a curator interested in the influence of new technologies on art of the 60s and 70s, PRES is a natural treasure trove. It entered socialist pop culture through cinema, so even if you had never heard of the composers that were working there, you would probably have known their music. But this just scratches the surface of a lot of cutting-edge research and projects.

I am interested in the myriad of ways you have approached the subject. In your work on PRES, you have dealt with original audio, video recordings, score reprints, and documentary photographs through a digital publishing platform, as well as books, interviews, commissioned essays, exhibitions, and an ongoing bibliography. What has your experience been with making these available through such a wide range of platforms?

MM: Working as an editor of a digital publication alongside art curators, who have at their disposal magnificent physical galleries, while you only have the vastness of the immaterial online space, you think about projects that would complement other museum programing rather than trying to compete with it. Sound pieces are actually very challenging to feature in a gallery space, as are multipage rare books (in this case: sheet music). *Post* provided the perfect space to spotlight the multifaceted character of the Experimental Studio while PRES turned out to be the ideal subject to highlight the full functionality of the platform. On the combination of formats—essays, interviews, archival materials, multimedia—this variety is a feature of the platform in general, as it had been conceived as a hybrid between an online magazine, a digital archive, and a project space. Looking at PRES as a site—rather than a group of people—allowed us to include a variety of materials without imposing an artistic hierarchy. I have seen people calling the PRES material on *post* an "online exhibition," and I guess that is not incorrect, though I do think that doesn't account for the hybridity of the format.

And what about bringing PRES specifically into an art context?

DM: Works of art are naturally the primary material for an exhibition. By this I mean pieces that were originally intended to be presented in a gallery or a museum, sometimes even made by a visual artist. Closer to the gallery world are film stills, even if they were originally circulated in the cinema context. Of course, the interest of a curator representing a specific institutional context changes the classification of a particular object. Graphic scores are in this group. Even if some of the authors were connected with the gallery world, like Bogusław Schaeffer, others were producing these forms of notation as a method of mediation between composer and performer (or, in the case of the sound engineer, music on tape). However, the visual qualities of these scores, which appeal directly to those familiar with the whole tradition of conceptual art, change their status into an object of aesthetic contemplation. We also needed to consider reconstructions of key intermedia works that were not preserved or well documented. The methodology offered by the graphic score proved to be adequate. Hence, for the *Sounding the Body Electric* show, we were able to document a new performance of a piece written by a visual artist Krzysztof Wodiczko and composer Szabolcs Eszténvi. The same principle was used to build the reconstruction of the first sound installation in Poland—Spatial-Musical Composition by Zygmunt Krauze, Teresa Kelm, and Henryk Morel in 1968. The work of this team—consisting of a composer, an architect, and a sculptor—was also treated as if it was a score, which allowed us to construct another performance.

In an effort to build on the history of PRES, where do you position musical (re)interpretations? For example, I am thinking here about the establishment of the PRES sound library in 2018 and the subsequent music competition in 2019, which asked participants to use samples from the library to create new compositions. Is this what it means to extend the history of PRES? To continue its ethos of recycling sound? To make its sound contemporary?

DM: This is a direct continuation of the efforts of Mendyk that I mentioned earlier. Both Libera and Mendyk saw their curatorial work with the PRES archives not only as archival, but also as

intermediary—those that create the context for past works to feel relevant. There is one more level to this activity. Unlike GRM in Paris or EMS in Stockholm, PRES was closed. These other studios still welcome composers, who are allowed to use their equipment and archives. The works from the 60s have a natural continuation in the pieces by younger generations. The opening of the sound library is an attempt at a similar effect—it is not simply about the culture of remix, but more about the continuity.

What did it mean for PRES to be situated within the building of the Polish Radio, a national entity that continues to operate under governmental rule?

MM: PRES was not only situated in a state-owned building as a part of a state institution. It could only exist and function specifically because it was funded and protected by the state. It is one of the paradoxes that is difficult to understand particularly from the US American perspective, where state funding for culture is automatically equated with state censorship and control. The realities of the Polish People's Republic, with its cultural politics and administration, were rather complex. In this case, it was enough to receive the support of one influential individual, Włodzimierz Sokorski, who was the Minister of Culture and Art between 1952 and 1956, to automatically get a free hand in experimentation.

DM: The spatial arrangement of the studio and its location were of course due to the state of technology. Naturally, with the cheaper production of instruments and tools, access became more democratic. Also, this location's proximity to power was not a coincidence. There was a very curious mixture of elements that resulted in the operations of PRES. A politically charged location where composers and artists were working strictly on invitation from the Studio itself. The tools were available, but only for a limited number of people belonging to the club. The atmosphere was built on the elitist character of new music, as well as a bit of hermetism founded on the fact that the specific tools and methods were rather hard to understand. The state also needed that element in order to appear progressive.

Following from this, Daniel, I wanted to open the next question with a reference to an incredible segment from an interview you did with Eugeniusz Rudnik, where he said:

> **Did the creation of art ennoble that empty shell of a state? Should I be proud of that? Or should I be ashamed that I legitimized it to the world, with my own hands, as the producer of these works? To the first question, I answer, "Yes, of course." . . . [It] meant that Poland was alive. . . . Was it worth making art? Yes, it was worth it, and it was needed. Fortunately, we created works that lasted, that successfully function today in the free world, in free Poland.**

Especially from today's perspective, there seems to be contradictions about living and working under communism. Could you speak to the political climate of Poland during PRES's epoch and how it shaped the Studio's possibilities?

DM: The Studio was an instrument that allowed the authorities to present the Polish People's Republic as a progressive state. PRES was well known in the new music world and there was some public exposure through its role in the creation of film soundtracks. But it was mostly recognized as a space for autonomous experimentation. In that sense it was politically safe, as this kind of music did not have to be heavily controlled because it never had any direct political message (except for times when it was used for direct propaganda). However, when you look closely at individual works, some of them do stand out as political statements.

Agnieszka Pindera recently published a biography of Patkowski—the first director of PRES. It gives a good idea of the politics of new music and the role of the employees of Polish Radio. Patkowski, as the head of the Polish Composers' Union, decided that during martial law the Warsaw Autumn Festival would not take place. This was probably one of the decisions that led to him losing his position at the Studio. PRES took part in the discussions on the passive role of the viewer/listener of new music and on the process of emancipation of the performer. This was not only seen in music. A similar movement of visual artists connected with the GRAV collective was associated with the restructuring of public space and politics around May 1968. Thus, all the projects connected with the emancipation of listener and performer should be seen in a political horizon—even if, for the authorities, they were solely reserved for internal discussions. Then there was a group of works that were also posing more direct political questions. This includes the works of Krzysztof Wodiczko, an industrial designer who entered the field of audiovisual art with questions on autonomy of art and its efficiency in real life. His *Personal Instrument* is exactly the kind of project that allows us to see how sound can be political. He created a set of gloves with photo sensors and microphones that controlled the sounds delivered to the user via headset. So the piece allowed one to control the sonosphere of a strictly controlled public sphere. Some of Krzysztof Knittel's compositions from the 70s also touch on the possibility of creating spheres of autonomy for the artist, along with the social and political limits of these spaces. Finally, there was a group that was directly and socially involved. For the Scandinavian Pavilion at the Expo in Osaka in 1970, Arne Nordheim, with assistance from Rudnik, created a piece that used a live mix of audio recordings indicating ecological struggles. Art was used to direct the gaze of the listener towards these issues.

MM: With that question, you are pointing to one of the biggest dilemmas that art historians of the period are dealing with today. Is the official art made between 1945 and 1989 automatically Communist? Should art that originated as a state commission be dismissed en masse? Or should its aesthetic form and/or its later functioning be allowed to define its ultimate value on a case by case basis? The one way that I can answer this question very concisely is to say that I don't believe that "freedom" and "lack of freedom/dependence" are categories that are helpful in understanding art produced under Communism. These are the categories—together with "original/derivative"—that have been often used by academics in relation to this material, but I find them rather limiting.

I wanted to mention a project called *Cities and Memory*, which is a crowdsourced site for pooling together field recordings from across the world. Recently, it has charted how our aural lives are changing under the pandemic lockdown—it brings together the sound of a

near-silent Times Square, the clatter of the NHS clap in London, the first time a man living in central Warsaw can hear birdsong. This made me think of how PRES focused on sonically "rediscovering the mundane"—concrete noises, discarded sounds, etc. Do you think the PRES sound library gives us something temporally and geographically specific?

DM: There is a set of common denominators in early electroacoustic and electronic music that make it into the universal language that Pierre Schaeffer was after. But of course, there are personal traits in the work of individual composers. What makes PRES special is that there were engineers on permanent contracts that were working with composers to realize their ideas. And since some of them, like Rudnik or Bohdan Mazurek, were also composers themselves, it led to working with a certain set of sounds or ways of doing things. You can sometimes hear the same sounds used by Rudnik in his own work and in the work of Nordheim. But there is also another community of sounds: a shared library. Some of the sound objects were shared between different users. This was the case with the collection of percussion sounds that was commissioned by Michael Ranta. The engineers were also exchanging sounds with each other. One also needs to add another factor to the equation—the fact that everyone is looking for innovation. Hence, as always with modern art, we have this delicate balance between familiarity and novelty.

The Studio has been described as "an island of international connection." Especially in its earlier years, this was a central part of its significance and success—the ability to host and collaborate with composers from abroad. When you were charting the history of the Studio, how much of the narrative felt distinctly local and how much felt principally international?

DM: The Studio drew attention to itself from the start, as many Western composers were looking for opportunities to work behind the Iron Curtain. Some were politically oriented towards the left, others merely curious. The Studio became a meeting hub, just like the Warsaw Autumn Festival. The state was also investing in infrastructure and promotion in those early years. In the late 60s PRES was also accepting Fulbright scholars. As the years passed, the state radio became less interested in preserving international connections.

How important was PRES as a physical and shared space? And would it be any different if it were still operating today? I am thinking about how digital and cyber technologies were a significant factor in the downfall of the Studio and wondering if you would argue that cyberspace or bedroom studios could become the sole site for creating and fostering artistic experimentation, or if it remains important to maintain physical, shared spaces. In the context of PRES, this applies to music production specifically, but it remains a relevant—and, indeed, timely—question for all cultural practices.

MM: Bedroom studios have my full support, especially under the current circumstances of a global lockdown. But there is something to be said about the power of a shared space—not just a physical room, but also a legal entity with all the institutional implications (the good and the bad); a more conceptual, imagined nod that creates a sense of belonging and allows for creative solidarity, not to mention fostering intellectual and artistic exchanges. The digital space gave birth

to unprecedented new models of art making. But it cannot serve as a full replacement for being together, as I think we are all becoming painfully aware right now . . .

What about the Black Room, PRES's studio space designed by the famous Polish architects, Oskar and Zofia Hansen? Józef Patkowski's dedication to creating a special space for electronic music has been described as an "unheard-of phenomenon," lauded for looking to pair function with impressive architectural design. Since then, it's been heavily mythologized, described as "an instrument" and "sound laboratory." In reality, how much of that was the space itself? Has it been lost forever? Does it matter? I've read that Warsaw's Museum of Modern Art had the intention of rebuilding it, but I haven't been able to confirm what's happened since.

DM: The Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw has indeed announced that the new building of the institution, which is currently being erected, will feature a reconstruction of the Black Room's interior. The museum was involved with the estate of Oskar Hansen, so it's a logical move. However, the interior was highly criticized by Rudnik for a number of reasons. The blinds that were meant to allow the composer to change the sonic qualities of the room were really hard to move. Moreover, their presence was due to the fact that initially the studio was also meant to be a space for microphone recordings. However, they were usually done elsewhere, so nobody really needed more reflective or more absorbing surfaces. The other problem was the miniaturization of equipment that soon led to it not fitting into the custom equipment racks. This is connected with the main problem—that the studio was simply too small and that one needs space in order to have infrastructure that is flexible and can be adjusted to the needs of the user.

MM: Hansen's was a cutting-edge functionalist design that did not exactly serve its function. Not an unseen situation in the history of modernism. Still, utterly fascinating. As to the reconstruction, I am generally somewhat suspicious of all the reconstructive efforts, so common in the art world these days, especially when it comes to recreating art and exhibitions from the 1960s. Some of the art that's being reconstructed was never meant to last. Exhibitions are, by definition, short-lived. I understand the pedagogical impulse and even identity with it. But sometimes the past should be allowed to stay in the past. Will we understand the studio better by rebuilding it and putting it inside an art museum?

Magdalena, I wanted to turn to your essay on magnetic tape as an instrument. In it, you mention the first electroacoustic concert in Poland, which took place in 1960—an event that was part of the Warsaw Autumn Festival, which had notable overlaps with the Studio. It was the first occasion for playing Włodzimierz Kotoński's *Study for One Cymbal Stroke*, one of the first and most famous compositions to come out of PRES. It's a unique and notable concert, because, save for loudspeakers, the stage was virtually empty. What do you think liveness meant for PRES? And gathering?

MM: The fact that Kotoński's *Study* even debuted at Warsaw Autumn Festival, with loudspeakers placed on the stage, shows commitment to the established ways of experiencing music—as well as the commitment to the shared aspect of musical experience, since Warsaw Autumn was a

major international event. This concert took place at a high point of Polish modernism (*nowoczesność*), about five years after the political and cultural Thaw allowed any artistic experimentation on a larger scale after Stalinism. Nineteen sixty was a moment when people were still genuinely excited about the possibilities granted by new technologies; a time when such technologies were seen as a tool for emancipation. And so the elimination of live performers was not conceived as a threat to live music—such dystopian views only enter much later—but a welcome and necessary experimentation.

I have a twofold question about PRES's audience. You've both emphasized that during its time of operation PRES was a "hermetic place," a "niche" that was principally of interest to musical experts, connoisseurs, and specialists. Composers and artists would come to PRES specifically to access this expertise—a notable example is Krzysztof Penderecki's long-lasting collaboration with Eugeniusz Rudnik. This translated into a large share of their autonomous work not being familiar to a wider public—aside from the radio, most people didn't have musical equipment at home and the Studio rarely shared musical scores. Rudnik cites special but poorly attended concerts in the basement of the National Philharmonic. But of course, its dual role as a musical and commercial entity meant that some of PRES's work was widely heard—I am thinking specifically of its non-autonomous work for television and films. With this in mind, I am curious about the contemporary interest in the Studio. Would you say this is still a niche subject, pursued most actively by those with a pointed interest in early electronic music of the Eastern Bloc? And, thinking more specifically about the reception of your research, were you met with an equally specialist audience?

MM: You could probably call it a niche, though it is one that cuts through disciplines (music/art/new media) and attracts various audiences: from music amateurs on one end and scholars of Eastern Bloc on the other end of the spectrum. And some of the music that came out of the Studio—think Krzysztof Penderecki, for example—went right into the international mainstream of contemporary classical music. As it comes to the reception of this material in New York City, the people most enthusiastic were, indeed, scholars and amateurs of experimental and contemporary music, plus musicians and sound artists. But it's a pretty big crowd there that one can hardly qualify as a "niche."

DM: On the one hand, the pieces produced in the studio are still listened to by a rather closed circuit of people. On the other hand, the activity of different researchers and curators opened doors for an audience that was previously not aware of the existence of PRES or its role as a laboratory for audiovisual arts. The show I curated with Mendyk at ZKM in Karlsruhe [*Through the Soundproof Curtain*] and the accompanying publication [*Ultra Sounds: The Sonic Art of Polish Radio Experimental Studio*] expanded its recognition. Another element was the sample library mentioned previously and the commissions of new music using the Studio's soundbank. This is expanding the audience of people that appreciate Rudnik, because Matmos referenced his work in their music.

To close, I wanted to turn to Bolesław Błaszczyk's words, which read—"Rescued from near-oblivion, PRES is finally becoming recognized for its important contributions to European music and art. The galaxy proposed below, just like the celestial galaxies, is still extending. There are still more stars to discover." Why do you think PRES stayed in the shadows for so long? And what do you think has to happen so that it never recedes back into them again?

DM: The situation of other similar venues is not so different. The renaissance of interest in the BBC Radiophonic Workshop or GRM is fairly recent. Starting somewhere in the mid 2000s, revisiting the heritage of both of these was easier with more records and releases and less significant issues related to language barriers. Since then a lot of the work by Bôłt Records, Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, or Adam Mickiewicz Institute has been invested in archiving, preserving, recontextualizing, and translating. At Muzeum Sztuki we are also collecting works that are connected with the Studio and putting them online, creating a new space for the variety of this production. It simply takes a bit longer for foreign researchers to get involved with this material.

MM: I sympathize with Bolek Błaszyczyk's sentiment. The truth is, though, that this rediscovery of PRES is very much in line with the more general interest in art of the period—the 1950s and 1960s—in recent art historical scholarship. And, more globally, with the interest in art practices that emerged in the former Eastern Europe under Communism. Even the basis for our collaboration, Daniel's and mine, was a museum endeavor that speaks to that growing interest: a global research program at MoMA, called C-MAP, that the Museum started in 2010. And the amount of scholarship about PRES that has been produced in the past years in Poland and abroad assures the Studio's history and cultural contributions are now universally recognized.

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