

# Slow Burn Out

By Harlan Levey. Published on the occasion of the exhibition *Punch to the Sky*,  
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*Punch to the Sky*, is the newest work in a series Marcin Dudek (Poland, 1979) began at the start of the year with his exhibition *Too Close for Comfort*, and continued with his installation *Wild*. All three titles hint at the biographical lines that see Dudek return to the stadium where standardized polarization techniques suppose to divide and protect opposing supporters. This authoritative tactic only works in the build up. Inevitably, flairs are thrown and benches are broken down into makeshift weapons as trophies are brutally claimed. The scarves that appear throughout the exhibition are references to such rituals, where items are pried from rival fans, sewn together and burned apart as an insulting reminder of physical inferiority.

What begins however with macho hooliganism, easily extends to more considered forms of political dissent; any behavior found inappropriate, or questionable, by general consensus. Defacing recognizable references, Dudek avoids sport, spectacle, and political parody as he works himself out of organized structures through an auto-destructive approach that leads to calculated material and visual abstractions. The title of the exhibition, *Punch to the Sky* brings to mind not only flag burning, but also other potentially trivial events that led to dramatic controversy. Sporting celebrations that appeared to rattle the comfort zone of dominant sensibilities, such as the Black Panther Salute given by American athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos on the Olympic stage in 1968. Their unexpected gesture is one of the most direct political stances in the history of the modern Olympic games and reminds us that sometimes the deadliest of punches never actually connects. No matter how hard you punch at the clouds, the sky remains an unscathed scapegoat, but with a fist flung towards it, the frame is carved apart and hooliganism becomes an act of love.

Having exited the scene by kicking down the back wall of the space at the opening of *Wild* (Brussels, September 2013), in London he begins by burning a hand-sewn flag. This 27m charred collage shelters smaller works made of textile, tape, thread and recuperated sheets of steel. While the former materials speak of building, healing, stitching and saving, the steel works possess the brilliant polish of survivors.

Draped across the periphery of the gallery, this is nobody's flag and nobody is exactly who is subjected to humiliation as the work goes up in flames without the risks of moral panic, outrage, or imprisonment that tend to accompany the incineration of any icon intimately related to collective identity. This is not a wildfire. It can be viewed with detachment in place of urgency. The destruction remains physical, but here violence is purely symbolic as country and club are absent. The object is reduced to cloth, colour and lines before being set ablaze in a slow, controlled burn, similar to a farmer's attempt to clear the landscape and nourish the potential of next season's crops. In the absence of spontaneity, rage and emotion, space is left to carefully harbor conversation about what constitutes useful dissent.