

Paulina Ołowska, a project for the 5th Biennale in Berlin –
enlarged paintings by Zofia Stryjeńska



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THE FUTURE SHALL SET US FREE?

Reconstruction as an Artistic Strategy in Polish Visual Arts after 1989

To propose an open hypothesis: perhaps for artists today the past serves the same function that the future used to serve for the artists of the previous century.
N. Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*

INTERREGNUM

The fall of the Polish People's Republic hardly brought a breakthrough in the Polish visual arts. On the contrary, the political and economic changes did not seem to have any significant impact on artworks – at least not those artworks which are considered the most interesting and culturally significant in that period. By 1989, some innovative Polish artists had already been living abroad for approximately 10 years (among them Krzysztof Wodiczko and Zdzisław Sosnowski), while others had been active in a semi-legal context. The latter artists went underground and presented their works in unofficial exhibition

spaces. They circumvented the restrictions of censorship by using a visual language which rarely addressed political issues, and when it did, it was to utter a sarcastic comment or to criticize the system rather than to oblige those in power. In terms of both form and themes addressed by innovative art at the time, the Round Table was an event of relatively minor significance.

This state of affairs is presented and pinpointed in the editorial and exhibition project by the WRO Art Center with the telling title: *Hidden decade. Polish video art 1985–1995*. The project demonstrates that artistic developments in Poland had their own pace and rhythm, completely unrelated to the milestones of the political timeline. This is also true of other disciplines of art. In one development, the year 1993 saw the revival of performance art

(one example is the creation of the Bytów Castle of the Imagination performance arts festival), while in another, the Centre for Contemporary Art at Ujazdowski Castle held an exhibition of *Ideas outside Ideology*, which along with the 1995 *Antibodies* (also by CCA Ujazdowski Castle) came to be regarded as a baptism of fire for critical art. The latter, flagship movement in the Polish visual arts of the 1990s was the first original phenomenon since 1989, and it still remains a reference point of identity for generations of young artists today.

It is not unusual that the set of phenomena we today consider characteristic of the 1990s took shape as late as around 1995. We may observe similar processes in the economic and political systems, which only then, during Aleksander Kwaśniewski's term in presidential office, assumed the form we know nowadays. Also, it

would seem self-evident that the foundations of the new societal identity were built in the mid-1990s, and not during the Round Table negotiations. The period between the late 1980s and early 1990s, therefore, may be regarded as a kind of an interregnum, when many actions necessary but not sufficient for the construction of the new identity were undertaken.

A TRAUMA OR A GADGET?

In his book *The Return of the Real*, Hal Foster ponders the post-World War II phenomenon that is the repetition of elements and artistic techniques characteristic of the first avant-garde.¹ Quoting the late works of Freud, he notes the mechanism by which “one event is registered only through another that recodes it; we become who we are, only in deferred action (*Nachträglichkeit*).”²

This manner of mapping the relationship between the present moment and the past, in which the present acquires meaning only in the context of past events, seems typical also for the Polish visual arts of the last two decades – which remained ostensibly focused upon the past throughout that period. Although Foster cites the Freudian concept chiefly in order to capture the meaning of formal reiterations in the arts, the same approach can also be applied to certain non-formal aspects of the phenomenon of artistic repetition. If we agree that the present is not given to us directly, but is revealed as the mediated and recoded past, then the reconstruction of past events must also constitute

reflection upon a certain manner of being in time. We may suppose that this orientation is dominant in the whole of Polish culture after 1989; Przemysław Czapliński notes similar trends in the literature of the period.³

If constant reference to the past may be considered a necessary condition for the constitution of identity on both the individual and societal levels, the manner in which that relationship with the past is established may vary. This variation, it seems, is generation-dependent: artists of two generations who marked their presence in the art of the discussed period “use” the past in unquestionably distinct ways. The first model for presenting the past was adopted by proponents of critical art; the second model was shaped by the generation of artists active at the beginning of the 2000–2010 decade.

THE PAST AS A SOURCE OF SUFFERING

Although we would be hard pressed to find a work by Artur Żmijewski, Katarzyna Kozyra or Zbigniew Libera relating to the reality of communism, it is easy to note in their oeuvre the significant presence of historical threads (in particular the Holocaust) and the subject of corporeality. Until the case of Jedwabne, the Holocaust existed in the popular awareness of the Poles as an international issue only, while an interest in corporeality implied a lack of concern for the problem of setting the record straight in relation to communism. It follows that both these themes thus permitted artists to remove the artistic discourse far away from strictly national contexts and to get involved

in the discussion around the categories of *différance* / difference, the abject, *queer*, and the culture of the self – the staples of postmodernism. These notions, already popular in Europe in the 1980s, sounded fresh and new in Poland at the time, and although critical art wanted to be seen as a subversive commentary on contemporary social reality, the subject matter of the works by the aforementioned artists, as well as by Grzegorz Klaman, Alicja Żebrowska or Konrad Kuzyszyn, had very little to do with the real social problems of post-communist countries, such as structural unemployment, turbo-capitalism or hyperinflation. Critical art, considered the cornerstone of the visual arts in the Third Polish Republic, constructed its image of post-communist identity by using emphatically international elements, and when it referred to the past, it tended to be in the context of World War II experiences rather than that of the legacy of communist Poland.

This manner of addressing and working through the past seems typical for the generation that opened a new chapter in the history of Polish art after 1989. Art critics and art historians studying the most recent contemporary art have managed to squeeze dry the oeuvre of critical artists who evoke historical motives, while academics have enlisted them among the canon, for obligatory exploration in students’ BA and MA theses on critical art or the art of the 1990s. So much has been written about Artur Żmijewski’s *Berek/Game of Tag* (1999) and *80064* (2004), and Zbigniew Libera’s *Pozytywy/Positives* (2002–2003), that no introduction is now necessary.

Although critical art was full of postmodernist fascinations, and although the encourag-

¹ See: H. Foster, *The Return of the Real. The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, MIT Press 1996.

² *Ibid.*, p. 29.

³ See: P. Czapliński, *Język historii*, [in:] *Historia w sztuce*, M.A. Potocka (ed.), Kraków 2011, pp. 49–73.



Stills from *Berek* video by Artur Żmijewski, 1999



ing critics abundantly quoted such names as Foucault, Deleuze, Guattari, Derrida and Baudrillard, the attitude of the movement's representatives towards the past was in fact anti-postmodern. According to Fredric Jameson, in postmodernist discourse, the experience of the past loses its original status, while the moment of parting, traumatic to the point of being definable in the categories of mental disorder, leaves postmodernists with nothing beyond playing with images, themes, and styles – empty *signifiants* disconnected from their *signifiés*. Juxtaposed against that concept, critical art seems extremely conservative, romantic even. By ignoring postmodernist juggles with signifiers, but also modernist valorization of the future, which would be perfectly understandable in the political and economic context after 1989, it goes back to a time when the world seemed naturally accessible in its straightforwardness.

Positives, like *The Game of Tag* and *80064* – to focus on the best known and distinct examples – touch upon traumatic events in order to rework them. Their comical quality is undeniable – in *Positives*, we see laughing faces of Auschwitz “prisoners”, while *The Game of Tag* features unabashed streakers running around a former gas chamber. However, the comical is applied purely as a structural element to reveal the absurd tragedy of the situation and to increase its impact upon the viewer. Thus the past deserts the safe order of memory, only to become subject to the viewer's personal experience. The shock quality and particular intensity of the emotion constitute – particularly as the author of *The Game of Tag* intended – the condition of transgression, and therefore they allow personal understanding and adoption of

the truth, which had previously been merely a piece of information.

In the creative practice of critical artists, the threads of corporeality and the Holocaust are closely interwoven, as both the experience of the past and the experience of the body are presented here as original, primary experiences. In the works of Kozyra, Żebrowska and Żmijewski the body is treated as a primal element, constitutive for the shaping of subjectivity; placed at the very centre of critical art's concern, it demands to be freed – it demands actions to reverse the charm resulting from the corrective and standardizing practices described by Michel Foucault, so profusely quoted at the time.

POSTPRODUCTION OF THE PAST

It is difficult to pinpoint the moment when the public space in Poland became a stage for performances re-enacting events from the past. Whatever the genealogy of this phenomenon, it became particularly visible through the spectacular actions of Rafał Betlejewski. In May 2010, following a meticulously developed promotional strategy – after all, the author of the idea, and coordinator of the happening, comes from the world of advertising – the mass media reverberated with discussions on the performance entitled *Plonie stodół/Burning Barn*, a “re-enactment” of the notorious events in Jedwabne. Journalists did not refer to the portion of guilt the Poles bore for the murder of the Jews, but they spoke of the morally ambiguous nature of the reconstruction itself. On the one hand, Betlejewski was accused of superficiality in his gesture, and of its popularistic, even entertainment-style character, at odds with the gravity and tragedy of the



Preparations for the *Barn is burning* action, 10 July 2010

the flashes going off, the bizarre folk costume Betlejewski is wearing, and the script written with a view to its media attractiveness, conspire to turn the audience into consumers of a spectacle. His other historical re-enactments – such as *Ostatnie dni getta – Będzin 1943/ The Last Days of the Ghetto – Będzin 1943* or *Grudzień '70 – za chleb i wolność, i nową Polskę/December 1970 – for Bread and Freedom, and a New Poland* were similar in character. Although the audience were in many cases invited to participate in the dramatization, the spectacle dimension often precluded the possibility of maintaining critical distance in relation to the re-enacted events, so that they served not to make sense of the memories, or to plumb their sources, but instead to fabricate memories by using existing moulds. The whole thing was about putting on a show rather than undertaking a critical reconstruction of the circumstances which had led to the given event.

reconstructed crime. On the other hand, some supported the initiative of the performer (as Betlejewski defined himself), seeing it as an important reminder, and turned a blind eye to the popular aspect of the action and the element of self-promotion of the author necessarily embedded in the venture.

Regardless of how we assess Betlejewski's intentions and the overtone of his performance, we are clearly faced with a concept for depicting history that is completely different to the actions of Żmijewski or Libera. Betlejewski treats history as a gadget, an attractively packaged PR message, in which the traumatic dimensions of the events reconstructed are merely an excuse to create a spectacle, while the pursuit to make sense of the past is subordinated to the limitations of a simple mass media communication. Although the participants in the happening witness the performer setting the barn on fire – the repetition of a macabre gesture – the presence of TV cameras,

The performances mentioned in this text fall within the model reminiscent of the reconstruction pattern used by the generation of visual artists who debuted at the beginning of the last decade. In Kuśmirowski's *Fontanna/ Fountain* of 2003, inside Gallery XXI in Warsaw, a spa building for "taking the waters" was rebuilt, with the central element a fountain with rusty coins inside. For the 5th Berlin Biennial, Paulina Ołowska blew up five paintings by Zofia Stryjeńska to monumental proportions, accompanying them with a selection of mass-produced merchandise decorated with Stryjeńska's motives, and historical documentation on the artist. Whereas showcase reconstructions by the critical art movement treat the past as a source of experience, in the works by Ołowska and Kuśmirowski the



Rafał Betlejewski, the initiator of *I miss you, Jew* action, a part of which was the project titled *Barn is burning*

past becomes the subject of an eclectic mosaic. These artists do not attempt to approach the *signifié* of memory, but instead they produce ironic simulacra, thus creating a casual play of copies and originals. Karol Sienkiewicz expressed it aptly in his description of Robert Kuśmirowski's installation *D.O.M.* (a reconstruction of a cemetery):

On the one hand, Kuśmirowski creates a mock-up of reality which is just like real; on the other hand it seems more akin to a cinematic rendering of a cemetery out of a horror movie or a Disney animation than a real necropolis. In the world of the movies, which the artist perhaps relates to, death either occurs with such frequency that it cannot be treated quite seriously enough, or it is impossible – even the fall of the heaviest anvil cannot annihilate the protagonists of children's stories, who are always revived in the following scene.⁴

Artistic practices of this generation fall into the strategy of postproduction – what Nicolas Bourriaud believes to be the pattern followed by the generation of artists growing up in an age which values DJs remixing other people's songs over musicians playing live originals. When this attitude is cross-pollinated with irony, the fruit it bears is often a “playful” usage of historical motives, which – detached from their original context – become part of a visual patchwork and lose their specific gravity in the process. Therefore, even if political motives appear in the reconstructions by

⁴ K. Sienkiewicz, Robert Kuśmirowski: „D.O.M”, http://www.culture.pl/baza-sztuki-pelna-tresc/-/eo_event_asset_publisher/eAN5/content/robert-kusmirowski-d-o-m [accessed: 22 December 2011].



Robert Kuśmirowski and Paulina Ołowska, or in collages by Jan Działkowski, these are completely devoid of any worldview, any ideological function, and in most cases they act as visual gadgets in the new, popular context.

We may wonder whether this excessive exposure of fascination with the past notable in the visual arts of the last two decades comes at the cost of devaluing the efforts of other artists – those who get politically involved in an attempt to influence contemporary reality, and who propose models of social development. Nevertheless, looking back on the past remains one of the most distinctive features of contemporary art in Poland, while references to a particular perception of history – as a source, or as a gadget – have become an important mark of generational identity for

contemporary artists. While it would be an oversimplification to treat these two models of perceiving the past as mutually exclusive, the distinction seems feasible and useful as it allows us to trace and, to some extent, to capture the process of identity metamorphoses developing in the Polish visual arts after 1989.

TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH BY DOROTA WĄSIK

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