

INTERVIEW

Ewa Gorzadek: In your work titled Toys and in the project Transparency, you seem to get involved artistically, but you also work intensely with the people who are the subjects of these pieces. It's an unusual form of collaboration that requires you to enter their world, basically to access certain spheres of intimacy that are otherwise completely saturated with illness or loneliness, spheres inaccessible to those from the outside. This seems a very important, psychological, even human aspect of your works. From whence this interest in their lives and how did you initially make contact with them? How do you see this experience?

Anna Konik: I can't answer that question immediately or directly, but I can start from a certain story that Jerzy Jarnuszkiewicz once told me in trying to explain the third dimension in sculpture. He told me to imagine Saski Square, and to imagine old people sitting on benches, a boy riding around on roller skates, a beautiful young girl passing by, children chasing each other and a mother pushing a trolley... I was surprised by the fact that he, a classical sculptor, chose to explain this concept to me in this manner. I did not then realize the significance of this metaphor, but now it serves as a very good definition of my explorations. It was years later that I realized that Jerzy was talking about the inner, psychological aspect of sculpture, that humans cannot be reduced to the three dimensions of an inanimate object. The human dimension was unavoidable to him in art. You could feel that this existential sensitivity was cultivated by his students with whom I had the opportunity to study, i.e. professors Grzegorz Kowalski and Krzysztof M. Bednarski. To me this was a kind of explosive mixture – the discovery of my own corporality combined with the development of self-awareness. At the same time, I was an actor in Roman Wozniak's Teatr Academia, and this acting experience of becoming someone else, someone I am not. Two years later, I met Katarzyna Winska, who was beginning to work with people afflicted with schizophrenia and who proposed that I work with her.

These are all experiences at different levels, but they all focus on the human being and on what is inaccessible, what very strongly defines him or her. Intimacy. Feeling. Body. Fear... It is difficult to link this to sculpture, though I still feel that I am a sculptor.

In my work I do everything to avoid manipulating the emotions of others. In recording confessions in my films, I strive to reveal the ambiguous. I seek the thin border in between. Individual contact that occurs face to face, proximity and the chance to affect another individual is my greatest and most important need. Meetings of this kind enable me to enter another world. This is not always simple, as it was for instance when I was working with a psychotic actor from Katarzyna Winska's Opera Buffa Theatre. Everything was extremely intense. I was in contact with people who feel in a different way, who feel things more deeply. The two films that are projected simultaneously in Toys are specifically about that. They are about what lies between what we call "normal" and "abnormal." In Transparency what occurs between each person and myself is very intimate. At times I get the impression that I was the "transparent" one, not the people I want to tell of.

E G: I am under the impression that in your works you decidedly exceed "three-dimensionality," that there is a fourth dimension in there that consists of what you are able to draw out of these people. It is a mental dimension, their personality, way of experiencing things, their emotionality. This is something that is very difficult to capture and convey, which requires unusual concentration and empathy from the observer. What you are doing is a kind of "participatory" art. Perhaps this was the source for what you mentioned – your feeling transparent. It also brings to mind the role of a medium; as the artist you awakened in your protagonists a need to tell their stories and reflect upon them. This working method allows you to accumulate vast amounts of "raw" material, initial documentation from among which you then select and about which you make hard decisions as to what is to ultimately be the artistic material. Tell me about this process and the way you come to the final form of your works.

A K: Feeling and experiencing, or participating, are important elements of my projects. Watching Transparency requires the viewer to concentrate and demonstrate some "good will." Everything is almost suspended in time, or to put it differently, between the past and the present, between life and death. My protagonists live with their memories of loved ones who are no longer with them. Memory and time travel constitute the "substance" of my films. Time consumed and time transpiring. Everything is configured according to the number 2. Each story is built on duality, each dialogue has its echo. This resulted in a very closed, introverted whole, in which the main ingredient is empathy. This word, used by both yourself and by Krzysztof M. Bednarski in his text, is a very important definition of the whole.

Arriving at the right result required patience. I met the people who appear in the project and who are its focus more or less accidentally. They were "closed," not only in their rooms or apartments, but also in terms of what they had experienced, lived. Their entire world is on the other side, although they themselves are here. Living in their microcosms, they humbly await...?

I met Mija in Berlin. She lived in the same building as me at Osnabrückerstr 21. We would often pass each other in the courtyard, say Guten Morgen or Guten Tag. She would only go out to the store and return immediately afterwards. The neighbors didn't like her, they detested the urine odor that exuded from her apartment. She was lonely. She would often sit at the table in her kitchen, gazing out the window.

I met and made friends with Tadeusz in Warsaw. Inconspicuous, perhaps more noticeable with his packages that hide newspapers and books... Someone who lives between his apartment and a passion for collecting, someone enclosed within a world of dreams and memories.

Mr. Broza and Mrs. Wichmann are two people I met in Stuttgart. They lived in retirement homes, were cared for by the staff there and awaited biweekly visits from friends and relatives. They covered the walls of their rooms with "memories of others," simultaneously forgetting about themselves. Our meetings were very intense, although they required noting from me besides setting up the camera and listening. Their need to tell their stories was so strong that it took on the nature of an obsessive dialogue with memories. Painful candidness and solitude.

The material I present basically corresponds with the actual material I recorded, which is something I consider very important. I have only removed sequences that were technically flawed or made things confusing. These are hard decisions to make, especially when you have the trust of people who talk about things that others hide or show themselves in a way that others would never dare. In their final form, the films are doubled not only in their image, but also in the text, which is equally important. The images are very slow, composed statically, and "action" is confined solely to movements of the hands, head, facial gestures, gazes...

E G: How were you able to interest these people in a project in which they would be the protagonists? What do you think – or do you know – this contact with you meant to them and this participation in a project that they surely must have seen as something outside the realm of art? Was it important to them that they were working with an artist and that they would be, in some unique manner, inserted into artistic material, or did the essence of this experience for them lie in something else entirely?

A K: Coincidence played a significant role, although in the final result this has been reduced entirely. That was also the case with the people I met and ultimately "chose." The need for contact was nevertheless the primary impulse for their interest in the "project." That is what Mija talks about: "I'm not used to being alone," "I'm always alone. This being alone is going to kill me." In this context it's hard for me to use the word "project." "Project" is a strictly technical term for me. I focused on the artistic substance, on what I wanted to do and what form I wanted it to have. Certainly, for Mija, Tadeusz, Mrs. Wichmann and Mr. Broza, the entire idea of putting their "I" on display, playing the main role in the film, was meaningless. I show the figures head on, because composing them that way provides viewers with the most

intimate contact. But the essence of the experience lay in something else entirely... Purification? In this confrontation the artistic aspect was unimportant. Art is a surrealistic word when juxtaposed with bare Life. Artifice against sincerity. In moving about within the limits of art, I think through form. In Transparency the projections assume the form of a passage. The entirety is very rigorous, although emotions underlie it.

E G: Your works, and I have both Toys and Transparency in mind, touch upon the very important issue of people excluded from society, rejected because of illness, old age or other symptoms of difference relative to universally accepted norms. Projects like your own or Artur Zmijewski's confront the viewer with the sensitivity and expression of the excluded, and accustom viewers to the same, as a result of which they open up and enrich the viewer's sensitivity. This is tremendously valuable, even more so because it is conveyed through artistically conceived forms. The artifice and aesthetization of art, the repetition formula you have assumed, paradoxically reinforce the authenticity of the substance you dealt with.

A K: The list of projects that focus on this subject should include In the Middle of the Way, the creation of which I have purposely spread out over time, that is, it develops each time I travel. It focuses on homeless people and the concept of travel, forced movement from place to place, a constant being on the road. It refers not only to physical changes of place, but also to mental journeys. In The Glass Bead Game, Hermann Hesse defined this metaphorically as "the journey east."

Both films became reportages in which in addition to seeing the places where Hermann (Berlin 2002) and Tadeusz (Warsaw 2001) spend their days, we also witness their inner voyages.

These projects certainly all share the subject of people who live in the margins of society, who are a "caste of the transparent," but they also share a manner of storytelling, one in which the word corresponds with the image.

The realms within which Artur Zmijewski and I operate may at first seem the same. But we are as different as the people in our films, in spite of both focusing on individuals who vegetate at the fringes of life. There may be some way in which our subjects complement each other...?

I cannot stand yelling, I am partial to whispering.

Ewa Gorzadek is a curator of Polish Exhibitions Programme in Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle in Warsaw

(Translation by Borys Pugacz-Muraszkiewicz)