

## CINEMA OF THE ROAD

The beginning of one from among Anna Konik's films belonging to the cycle of *In the Middle of the Way* reminds the first scene of quite another film entitled *Down by Law* by Jim Jarmusch. Both pictures open with a panorama of an American city filmed from the car's window. There is a great metropolis, with low buildings, a horizontally composed landscape, with no points of reference, an America looking like a Baudrillard's desert. Anna Konik is going through Cleveland, Ohio. Jarmusch has shot his *Down by Law* in New Orleans, but in Cleveland he was on another occasion – in that city is set one of the episodes of his film *Stranger than Paradise*. Still, this would be quite not bad alternative title for the Konik's project, since in her films she shows people that live Differently (than in the Paradise). In any case, Cleveland or New Orleans, Warsaw, Moscow, Berlin or Dobrodzien – no matter where we are, since we are always just *In the Middle of the Way*.

The analogy with Jarmusch is valid on the level of iconography. It is not accidental that the Konik's project, which has been shown at galleries, is associated with cinema, and not with this or that work from the very rich tradition of video art. The artist offers a range of experiences, all of them being film-oriented: from a televised "penetrating reportage" in the first, Warsaw episode of the cycle of *In the Middle of the Way*, up to the inspired cinematographic work realised in 2005 in Cleveland.

The simplest thing would be to call *In the middle of the way* a series of documentary films. Each of them has got a subtitle – the name of the city where it was shot – Warsaw, Berlin, Moscow, Cleveland, and Dobrodzien. In each of these cities the artist selects a stranger, the Other. She is looking for them among people functioning, as it is nicely called, on the margins of society. Therefore Konik's protagonists are people that live in the street. They could be called homeless, even if in reality some of them have their homes. Others could undoubtedly have them, if only they wanted or, to be more precise, if they were capable of having homes. We deal here with a wider meaning of homelessness, understood not as only a social category, but rather as a specific state of the spirit. Homelessness is here non-participation in the commonly accepted model of life, non-membership, alienation. In some cases it is the exclusion, in others – the desertion from the ranks of the so-called normal citizens. Each film is a story of Anna Konik's meeting a stranger in a foreign city. At the same time each of these films is a penetration of the margins of existence – the protagonists of these films are the artist's guides to such peripheral areas.

In Warsaw Konik meets Tadeusz. Men like him had once been called "eccentrics". He is a cultural older man, a timid flaneur, a bit vagabond, a bit artist and art-lover (in one of the scenes Tadeusz and the author are visiting together the Kantor's exhibition at the Zamek Ujazdowski Contemporary Art Gallery). Tadeusz is not a person easily distinguished from the crowd – he could be its participant, if he only lives in a bit different way. From a formal point of view he isn't a homeless. He's got a flat, however he almost cannot use it, since it's difficult to enter there. His imperative of collecting objects, especially all kinds of printed matters, leaflets, books, journals and magazines led him to a catastrophe. Tadeusz's collection filled his flat like a ghastly Merzbau – in result even the door almost cannot open, to say nothing of living there. For himself the occupant, who neither can nor wants to stop collecting and bringing various things home, has left only a little tunnel – but even this becomes almost overgrown. The protagonist lost control of his flat, so he wanders about the town; Anna Konik is faithfully accompanying him.

Herman, who lives in Berlin, it's quite another story. This homeless middle-aged German seems to be the embodiment of the romantic myth of clochard. With his grey dreadlocks, the beard, dark glasses and youth dress he seems to be a denial of the tragedy of exclusion; he's homeless in cool version. Herman is the opposite of Tadeusz and his obsession of collecting things. The German vagabond wanders about Berlin with a little rucksack – he has got nothing and he doesn't want to have anything. He identifies homelessness with freedom,

and maybe tomorrow will quit Berlin in favour of Salzburg or Lisbon. He introduces himself as a veteran of flower children revolution. In stories told by this oldish perpetual hippie we can hear rhetoric echoes of 1968 about revolution and protest actions from heroic times. Herman swims through the present, boozing and giggling. In the welfare German state the struggle for survival in the street hasn't to mean desperation – sometimes it boils down to a visit in the appropriate welfare department. Herman's existence reached an amazing lightness – this is at least the way he presents it to the artist.

Swietlana from Moscow doesn't have her head in the clouds like Herman. She is tough, practical and resourceful – otherwise she couldn't survive. Swietlana is one of the innumerable victims of wild capitalism à la russe, which without sentiments has left millions of those who lacked strength, chance or possibility of participation in the benefits of new economy to their own fate. Like Tadeusz the hero of the Russian episode of *In the Middle of the Way* has something looking like home. However Moscow is limitless, and Swietlana's accommodation is on the outskirts. The way home is too long and too expensive, and the protagonist should be in the city centre, since only there is money to cadge. Swietlana treats her meeting with Anna Konik most seriously from among all the protagonists of the cycle. She knows Moscow inside out; she knows how to feel at home in the snow-covered city jungle. Step by step she shows to the artist her technology of survival: places where one can get a warm meal, ways of getting money, and nooks, in which one can sleep safely through the frosty Moscow night. Swietlana, harmoniously joining the pragmatism on the level of life tactics with the "eastern" fatalism on the level of strategy, doesn't complain about anything, reconciled with the fate. Only sometimes she is surprised that her fate is so difficult and that neighbours treat this burden so easily and indifferently.

Against the background of busy Swietlana, bustling about her survival, the protagonist from the Cleveland episode seems to be almost lethargic. His name remains unknown and his face effaced digitally by Konik. He's completely homeless, sleeping in the street or under a bridge. He's Black – in any case, all homeless we see in the film are Afro-Americans, and the one and only White homeless seems to be the exception that confirms the rule. Konik's protagonist, who speaks rhythmically and with deliberation, as if reading the Bible or reciting a rap text, is a man who seems to be finally and irrevocably excluded. "Life goes on", he says, looking at the night panorama of Cleveland skyscrapers – and it's clear that he himself doesn't take part in that life. Obviously, the racial issue plays here the crucial part; it is unsolvable, then causing a mixture of resignation, apathy and resentment. At a moment his dislike becomes directed also towards the artist – this is the reason why the main character from the Cleveland episode appears in the film as an anonymous person without face.

People who took part in the episodes of *In the Middle of the Way* have neither work nor money. As a matter of fact, from the point of view of a capitalist economy they don't exist, and from the point of view of the System they are a side effect, a non-functional element in the purposeful machine in working order. However they can be seen otherwise as an alternative to the dominant model of functioning an individual within society. Anna Konik, who doesn't judge the situation of her heroes, takes just such a perspective. "We see the hypocrites walking past us", say in her movie some homeless from Cleveland hanging around a pavement and indicating at the indifferent crowd of busy passers-by. We, who come to the gallery to see *In the Middle of the Way*, we are also hypocrites. However the artist avoids the trap of political involvement, she doesn't want to move the viewer to pity or to shake his conscience. Konik doesn't speak here about a social problem, but rather about various options of existence. She indicates at the individual ways of existence, neither better nor worse – simply the other.

The artist is talking, but not interviewing the "outsiders". She is not interested in exoticism that is inscribed in homelessness – even though sometimes the exoticism is, by the force of events, also present here. Konik doesn't want to learn everything about everybody, she lets her protagonists lead her; they show her, only and as much, what they want to. The artist balances on the edge of reportage, however she never crosses it. Konik's camera is the eye of a sensitive voyeur, objectively describing the fragments of reality. Nevertheless the artist's ambition seems to be beyond the description; her true theme is elsewhere.

In her film *In the Middle of the Way* the author appears at first sight as a reporter, a filmmaker “among animals with the camera”, a prying person that satisfies our curiosity, venturing to the peripherals of society and showing specific “lifestyles” of the eccentrics functioning on the margin. As the artist changed into a reporter, Konik would inscribe in the contemporary dream of realism. This dream tells artists to doubt artistic forms and art language, which is burdened with tradition and conventions, and stigmatised with conventionality to such an extent that it can describe only itself. This is the reason why today artists willingly import the reality to the gallery, omitting the mediation of art in the process of import. The exclusion of artistic forms from this process can be realised through the direct action of directing reality, as are the cases of Pawel Althamer or Cezary Bodzianowski. Appropriating extra-artistic languages (of advertisement, politics, and media) can be another similarly efficient solution. Film, especially film documentary, is of particular usefulness, since with its aura of objectivism it seems to be perfectly matching to what’s real (even if unnecessarily true). Basing on film documentaries that don’t pretend to be “art” the great art exhibition Documenta X in Kassel has been recently built. In Poland this formula is successfully used by Artur Zmijewski, no matter how we call him – a visual artist, a filmmaker or even a reporter. In this respect only distribution is truly decisive; Zmijewski uses the institutional mechanisms of contemporary art in making and distributing his films. The same does Anna Konik, who yet shares with Zmijewski the experience of the Kowalnia. Konik artistic strategy is inscribed in the vision of art propagated in that Professor Kowalski studio, according to which a “work of art” understood as a petrified artefact gives way to a direct dynamic experience. In that conception speculation is not credible – everything must happen truly and be experienced by the author. A modernist work as a theoretical model of reality is replaced by experiment; the creative process is not a means but the end – and the chief postulate is participation, since the consciousness of the originator is the final matter of art.

In *In the Middle of the Way*, but also other realisations of Anna Konik, as for example her superb video installation *Transparency* or her earlier workshops with schizophrenics are based on resignation from the haughty (modern) autonomy of the originator. The creative process is realised here as the interaction with another man. Also numerous projects by other artists educated in Professor Kowalski studio like Pawel Althamer or Artur Zmijewski consist in the figure of meeting and the attempt of communication with Others. In these gestures we can see the heritage of Hansen theory of the Open Form, on which the practice of Kowalnia has been founded; in Hansen conception, art is first of all a platform and a framework for interpersonal communication and social experience.

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Konik’s films presented as video installations can be read as a contemporary version of genre (video) painting, the realisation of Beuys theory of “social sculpture”, a project in which echoes the tradition of the Open Form – or simply as the documents brought to the gallery. As I mentioned earlier, films from the cycle *In the Middle of the Way* can be called documentary, and the artist can be called a reporter. As usual, however, appearances may be illusory. Konik’s films are documentary, but still there is a question what are they truly documenting, and who is their true hero. The answer comes with the fifth episode entitled *Warsaw-Berlin-Dobrodzien*, which I understand as a deciphering of the whole project. The artist called this scene of the cycle a “postscript”. And in fact it is a special episode of *In the Middle of the Way*, since this time Anna Konik is not wandering about any town with anybody and the only person she meets is... Anna Konik. Instead of the talk we hear the off-screen voice presenting the internal monologue of the artist. The protagonist/narrator/observer spies on herself in trains, in travels, in foreign cities, in Warsaw, Berlin, and in Dobrodzien, from where she comes but to where she hasn’t already belonged since long. She’s always in between, always in the middle of the road. She’s discreetly present in all the parts of the project, effacing herself behind her interlocutors and guides – but she has always remained the true hero of *In the Middle of the Way*. This cycle is the story about the nomads of social peripherals, but the more it is the story about an Uprooted, who examines herself in the

mirror of other Uprooted. The artist – a (techno) nomad, whose e-mail address is the only domicile, and whose almost all belongings can fit in her laptop – is portraying the people she met in her way. These portraits serve at the same time and may be first of all as mirrors; in her protagonists the artist recognises various aspects of her own existential situation. Is she pragmatic and resourceful like Swietlana? Free and careless like Herman? Excluded and alien in the strange land, like the anonymous man from Cleveland? Or overwhelmed with her obsessions like Tadeusz? The nomad artist continuously constitutes her identity anew, verifying it each time in relation to new places and new people. In the Middle of the Way is therefore the cinema of the road without ending, since a nomad has no end to reach. To be in the middle of the road is here the existential condition – but also a definition of identity, which always remains open.

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