

ANNA KONIK

Anna Konik (born 1974) makes video installations, and her practice combines video semi-documentary, installation, performance, and sculpture. What matters for the artist are people, with whom she engages emotionally and whom she makes the protagonists of her works.

The experience of alternative theatre played an important role in shaping Konik's artistic personality. But theatre-as-acting is no longer the natural element of her art - what is important lies outside acting, it is the search for genuine interpersonal relations. Konik collaborated, for instance, with Katarzyna Wińska's Opera Buffa, where the actors are schizophrenia patients. She had to do there with people who suffered, but were unusually sensitive.

Even though Konik is a graduate of the Warsaw Art Academy Faculty of Sculpture in the studios of Krzysztof M. Bednarski and Grzegorz Kowalski, it would be wrong to count her among the so-called "Kowalnia artists," because her art stands in opposition to that of Żmijewski or Kozyra.

The realm in which Konik operates is very hard to verbalise. The material of her work is that which is invisible but perceptible: desires, emotions, indefinable intuitions, the inner world accessible in dreams, in poetic imagination, mental introspection, inner pain and silent grappling with it. Tragedy, often imperceptible for others, often unfolds under the shelter of people's thoughts, dreams, and desires. That is the mental state that Sylvia Plath writes about in her novel *The Bell Jar*.

Konik directs the viewer's attention towards those aspects and fields of existence that he is unwilling to acknowledge: loneliness, confusion, disease, over-sensitivity. Her protagonists are people existing at the fringes of reality, unnoticeable, transparent. It is them who matter for her.

As far as form is concerned, space plays an important role in Konik's works. "Space additionally defines, complements my works with its 'body,'" the artist says. It also has metaphysical significance. "In *Transparency*, this is a round passage which isolates every narrative in word, image, and space. In *In the Middle of the Way*, the narratives are shown simultaneously, so that the physical and mental journey virtually never ends."

Stories told by the excluded often take the form of confessions - in *In the Middle of the Way* (a project started in 2001 and continued

to this day), the artist talks to homeless people, in *Transparency* (2004), she listens to the life stories of lonely, elderly people, in *Toys* (2001), she makes the video documentation of the work in and outside a therapy centre. The dialogues, interviews, lend her works quasi-documentary character, though the narrative often breaks off, and dialogue gives way to empathic presence.

The artist becomes invisible so that others could talk. That is the case, for instance, with *Transparency*, a video installation presented at the CCA Ujazdowski Castle in 2004. The protagonists are elderly people, nearing the end of their life, who agreed to tell their life stories in front of the camera. Those are: Doris Wichman, Mia, Tadeusz, and Mr Brozy. The video image of each of the interviewees has been doubled, each has a mirror image. Monologue turns into a bizarre dialogue with one's double. The whole is like an improvisation on painful loneliness. The mirror image, the varied pace of the projection, cannot overcome the paralysing monotony of the discourse, the constant repetitions. "Only one surprise is possible," says Konik, quoting from critic Jan Błoński's essay on Beckett, "that one of the repetitions will be the last one."¹

Konik's protagonists are eternal wanderers - homeless tramps whom the artist meets on the streets of Warsaw, Berlin, Moscow, forced by life to be always on the move. Others travel in the realm of imagination, living amid memories, enclosed within the four walls of their home, outside time. The motif of travelling, of being always on the road, is the second - besides loneliness - of the main themes of Konik's practice. This is not only about travelling in space, but also about inner time, about the spiritual journey Jung wrote about.

Konik's most recent work, *Our Lady's Forever* (2007), is her most poetic one to date. It has been inspired by a play written by a schizophrenia patient: a story about an unhappy love and unquenched longing, about waiting...

The video that is an impression on the text, was made by Konik in Dublin, Ireland, in *Our Lady's*, a former mental hospital, whose architecture visually complements the story. The video is a seven-channel projection, without the beginning or end, full, like an Irish song, of secret metaphors and repeated incantations: "210 empty rooms..."² "you whisper silently

when fear knocks on my slashed eyes..."³ The protagonists are a man and a woman who appear, never together, in different scenes. Suspended in time, they are like characters from Beckett's play, moving like ghosts across the empty rooms and corridors, searching for each other. Even though they are in the same place, they constitute two separate universes and they move through the empty spaces alone.

The wandering shadows intensify a somnambular theatre, the narrative breaks off, the scenes arrange themselves into sequences of poetic images: the woman facing a white wall, light entering a room, the man sitting on a chair, smiling children holding each other by the hand. The changing images form a bizarre puzzle - as if they were supposed to reflect the protagonists' emotional states, their repeated passages through the hell of the soul.

The scenes from the deserted hospital are accompanied by the images of a sea stretching towards the horizon and a ship on churned up waves. Watching these sequences, we hear the roar of the sea, the gusts of wind, and almost feel the breeze on our face.

In her artistic, and existential, at the same time, journey, Anna Konik goes beyond the traditional notion of theatre or sculpture. In her early work *Disco Relax* (2000), a huge polyester-resin skull, covered with mirrors, was hung under the ceiling in one of the Ujazdowski Castle's rooms, like the disco light ball. A disturbing sculptural object - a lifeless object. What matters for the artist is interaction with another human being. In Konik's works we shall find neither celebrated suffering nor the voyeurism typical for such documentaries. Konik does not humiliate people, does not manipulate, and often, through her work, helps them regain their sense of dignity. Provocation is replaced by empathy, conversation eliminates distance, removing the invisible wall separating the protagonists from the world, reintroducing them to it.

¹ Quoted after Jean-Baptiste Joly, in: *Transparency*, CCA Ujazdowski Castle, Warszawa 2004, p. 28.

² *Our Lady's Forever*, English-version soundtrack, Zachęta, Warsaw 2007.

³ *ibid.*



1. **Disco Relaxaction** fragment of the installation
skull made of polyester resins, two channel video, Okna Gallery CCR Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw, 2000



1. **Our Lady's Forever**
video stills, t-channel synchronised video, colour, sound, (10 min. 14 sec.), 2007



1. **Transparency**
8-channel synchronised video CCA Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw, 2004
2. **In the Middle of the Way**
work in progress, 8-channel video, 2001/7