

# CoCAin...

Review of Contemporary Art Centres and Museums



No. 2

CONTEMPORARY ART CENTRE (CAC)  
IN VILNIUS / Meštrović Pavilion in  
Zagreb / National Art Centre in Tokyo

# COLLECTION OF THE CENTRE OF CONTEMPORARY ART ZNAKI CZASU IN TORUŃ

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- NATIONAL ART CENTRE IN TOKYO (NACT) JAPAN
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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Paweł Łubowski

Dear Readers,

You have in your hands the latest edition of CoCAin, a magazine which focuses on centres and museums of contemporary art.

I would like to thank you for the great interest in our magazine. We have received numerous responses and declarations of cooperation from institutions promoting contemporary art from both inside and outside Europe.

In this edition, we pay a visit to the Centre of Contemporary Art in Vilnius. We present the buildings and people working in this important European institution. In connection with this, we also consider the specific nature of Lithuanian art and its influence on the Centre. These materials were prepared by Marta Kołacz and Piotr Lisowski. Meanwhile, Gaella Alexandra Gottwald, in light of Croatian history, tells an interesting story of the building of the art centre she runs in Zagreb, and Marta Smolińska's interview with Endre Tót brings us closer to the hard years of Hungarian avant-garde in times of communist regime.

We have not restricted ourselves to just European issues. In this edition of CoCAin, Jerzy Olek presents the National Art Center in Tokyo, Rosa Lleó discusses an art museum constructed in the tropical forests of Brazil, and Mateusz M. Bieczyński shows art at the back of beyond in his relation from "In situ - art in public space" festival in Bariloche, Patagonia. Ewelina Jarosz presents the Museum of Hysterics, which exists solely in the contradictory work of an artist, one of the leading creators of the conceptual art of the 1970s, Leszek Przyjemski - *enfant terrible* of the socialist regime, in which every public institution was a tool used by the government to apply pressure on society. In turn, a museum exhibiting products created with contemporary technology, and in particular Mercedes-Benz cars, is described by Tadeusz Sawa-Borysławski, and the problems of contemporary art entangled in the *art world* system are dealt with by Sławomir Marzec. We hope that you will find something of interest in this edition. Once again, we invite you to cooperate with us and hope you enjoy reading our magazine!

## CONSTANTLY REINVENTING ONESELF

### Interview with Kestutis Kuizinas, Director of Contemporary Art Center (CAC) in Vilnius

Marta Kořacz

*A cold Saturday evening, lots of snow outside, Mr Kuizinas finally found some time to talk with me. Despite it being the weekend, I caught him at the office. As I had heard, he's a workaholic, and never has enough of the place he's been creating for almost 22 years. We had already exchanged some e-mails, so I was under the influence of the openness and positive aura he creates during contact with others, which also explains his numerous collaborations, and the position of director he has held since the beginning of CAC. Before this talk, I had read a lot about the CAC history and challenges the institutions had been dealing with since its beginning, and lots of those where similar to CoCA (an institution with just 5 years of history), where I work, so it made me even more curious how they had reached the position that CAC is in now - how did they do it?*

*We agreed we would have an informal talk via Skype, over a cup of coffee. When we started the conversation, I had plenty of questions already prepared in my head and started with the one that interested me the most, (since CoCA as a young institution is dealing with quite the same problems as CAC from the times of opening) does he see changes that were made in Lithuanian Art under the influence of the CAC program and activities? He started with an anecdote about the beginnings of his career..*

**Kestutis Kuizinas:** To understand what Vilnius art life is today, you need to look at history and what the conditions were back then. I will tell you a story from the beginnings of my career which sounds



Kestutis Kuizinas. Photo: Archive of CAC in Vilnius

funny from today's perspective, but was not so funny at that time. After winning the competition for the position of director at the Vilnius Palace of Art Exhibitions in January 1992 (I was only 23 years old at that time), on one of the first days of my work, I received a letter from the Artists Union<sup>1</sup>, there were just two pages with a list of artists – about seventy names in total. It was a list of well-known artists who in the year 1992 were supposed to celebrate their birthdays or anniversaries – 50, 60, 70, 75, etc., with no other comments. Obviously it was a hint for a new director about how to start his programming activities. I put the list aside, and one year later, when none of the artists from that list were presented in our program, many people realized the upcoming changes. Changing the name of the institution, which we did in June 1992, was nothing really special, many organizations did so in Lithuania those days, but only seldom did that mean an actual change of the content and the way the institution operated.

You need to know that at that time the Artists Union, formed in Soviet times, was still very influential in the official and political life. The programs of such institutions like ours were based on submissions of individual artists and various art organizations. So a recommendation from the Artists Union played a crucial role in getting the green light for a solo or group exhibition. So what we did at the very beginning of CAC was that we undertook an initiative to invite good artists rather than just wait for an application with “advice” from the outside... To win some independence from the Artists Union was not enough. After the changes in the 90s, contemporary art as such was just appearing in the country and we needed to speed up the processes in order to fill our vast exhibition spaces with proper content and in a good fashion. So, besides changing the interiors of the representational palace architecture into more regular white cube spaces, we simultaneously started to work with young artists. Some of them were just grabbed from their studios at the Vilnius Art Academy and we did projects together. The main advantage was that we had relatively large freedom in creating the program, we were a young team of people with very good energy, we didn't have to make any compromises and that is how we started to be noticed by foreign curators and artists. We didn't have a large budget, but we were open and we let people experiment. As you see, the first ten years were really exciting, and at the beginning of the new millennium we had already started to be recognized as one of the best known contemporary art venues, not only in Lithuania, but in the former “Eastern block”.

<sup>1</sup> The Lithuanian Artists' Association (Lietuvos dailininkų sąjunga)

So, back to answering your question about what Vilnius is today in terms of contemporary art. First of all, we have a much better developed infrastructure for arts than 20 years ago. There are quite a few good programs and new institutions to present local as well as international arts in our capital city, including the newly-built National Gallery for Art. So we are not alone any more with CAC. But most important thing is that Vilnius has got a lot of good artists. I think it was the Swedish curator Maria Lind who pointed out once that, if you compare the German and Lithuanian art scenes, Vilnius has a fantastic number of really good artists, which is incredible for such a small country as Lithuania. So, the artistic life of the city is much more intense and better organized. Of course, human nature is that one is never satisfied with what you have and there is still lots to do, but I have just come back from Latvia, which is a neighbouring country of almost the same size, similar conditions and historical aspects, and I have to say that my impression is that the rhythm of artistic life is much slower and much more quiet there. When I realized that difference, I somehow became happy about the situation in Lithuanian contemporary art, which I like to think somehow adds to the success of CAC.

**Marta Kołacz:** How do artists and curators coming from western Europe find your gallery? I ask about it because here in Toruń, visiting artists are always pretty impressed that a building with such a scale and professional level of activities stands in this part of Europe, in such a small city.

**Kestutis Kuizinas:** How big is Toruń?

**Marta Kołacz:** 200 000 people. It's small from a Polish perspective, but for many reasons it's similar to Vilnius. Our building, despite being much younger, is also close to a historical old town. But I still hear how amazed our guests are by the scale and level they didn't expect.

**Kestutis Kuizinas:** Well, I think people coming to CAC already know the institution. After twenty years we have a certain reputation and now we're trying not to disappoint them. I'm very pleased whenever I travel abroad to hear some stories, even legends about CAC already from the time of the late 90s, when our invited artists could implement the most crazy ideas and could act the way they wanted there.

**Marta Kołacz:** Chris Dercon, the director of Tate Modern, compares his job with running a public broadcasting company. He compares Tate's program activities with productions such as 'The Wire' or



Audrius Bučas & Valdas Ozarinskas, "Black Pillow" at Contemporary Art Centre, formalism\_failures exhibition, 2010. Photo: CAC in Vilnius archive

'Homeland', with each episode directed by someone else. CAC even has its own TV show called CAC TV. There seems to be an equal emphasis on a range of other activities than just exhibiting: Television, the CAC Interview magazine, Reading Room... What is the main idea behind the CAC program? What makes CAC stand out in the art gallery scene? What do you see as CAC's most important contribution to international art in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century?

**Kestutis Kuizinas:** We are always trying to think internationally and act independently in creating our program. Of course, now we have some shift in the team, with a young generation of people that bring their new ideas. I'm probably the oldest person working here now, which is completely opposite to the picture when I arrived - I was the youngest in the house then. When I hear questions about how you can maintain and renew the institution constantly, I like to joke about the refreshing of the blood - in other words, to have young people around and to avoid sticking only to your own generation. I think that the CAC TV project that you already mentioned can be that kind of contribution. CAC TV was a unique project. I don't think that, up till now,

any other art institution has produced a regular television program that is broadcast on a public TV station. We were screening for three seasons, coming up on the air every Wednesday, around nine o'clock in the evening. From my point of view it was very experimental and very entertaining at the same time, not to mention that, by the format of TV, we were able to collaborate and to seduce almost any artist we wanted to work with.

But as the most contributory thing made by CAC, I would assume that we are working to build the system for artists to help them implement their ideas, and by that I mean not just Lithuanian artists, but all artists. Many of the big, international names today, were presented at CAC just as they were becoming famous and therefore hard to afford. Those artists still value their collaborations with CAC as they were able to implement truly ambitious and complex projects at the very beginning of their international careers.

**Marta Kofacz:** It's nice that you said that, because, maybe on a smaller scale, here in Toruń, we are also trying to give a generation of young artists from our Art Academy an opportunity to show their works

and experiments, also trying to promote what they are doing. And since I have a chance to curate it, I'm very curious about what will happen with them in the future...

Speaking of the future, what do you find as the biggest challenges facing CAC?

**Kestutis Kuizinas:** Well it depends how you define a challenge, as an ambitious task for the future, or just a temporal obstacle to overcome?

I'm quite happy that we still have new challenges to face. I think that the ones that we had at the beginning of the institution - legitimization of contemporary art language, integration of Lithuanian artists into the international context and building a proper infrastructure for art, in many ways we have succeeded in, and they are not key issues any more. But there are always new challenges, and one of them for example is the drain of intellectual forces.

The migrating of labour is a normal thing in today's world, but we have to remember that we are living in a small country with very limited resources. So it is hard to stop people leaving to work abroad for better conditions and salaries, and it is even more difficult to find a replacement for those who have

left. But as always there are solutions to different problems. During the years of its activities, CAC has produced a number of good curators who are now very successfully living and working abroad, but at the same time it has become a home institution to foreign curators in Lithuania. There was even a period in our recent history when our staff meetings were held half in Lithuanian, half in English... And to complement the story, I'm happy to mention that Rupert, which is a new artist-in-residence program in Vilnius to open in June of this year, has just chosen its director, Juan de Nives - a curator from Spain.

Getting back to the question of real challenges, I think that they should be something that each institution has to generate from within - a new, dream-like idea that would accelerate and make its being meaningful. In the case of CAC, we are constantly looking for something new and challenging.

One year it can be an idea to start publishing a first contemporary art magazine in Lithuania and building a new library (CAC Reading Room) or like it was last year - to open a new cinema hall at CAC. Of course, it's not the first art house cinema in Vilnius, but it is a cinema with a very special



*The lunatics are on the loose, European Fluxus Festivals 1962-1977 2. Photo: Archive of CAC in Vilnius*



A part of "Big in Japan" exhibition, 2009. Photo: Archive of CAC in Vilnius

idea for its interior design and, obviously, it is part of the contemporary art venue, which allows us to program it differently from any other cinema in Vilnius. Now, we also have some ideas to start working with the experimental music scene, so we are preparing a space in the basement for this kind of activity. We're always trying to implement new concepts and new ideas to the CAC program and space, and to be one step ahead of what our public might be expecting from us.

**Marta Kołacz:** It's nice that you brought up the subject of space. During my visit to CAC I was impressed by the range of different activities you've

put into the CAC space. It's not an easy architecture to work with, so I admired your way of dealing with it. How do you think the building is affecting people's experience of CAC?

**Kestutis Kuizinas:** CAC is the only Soviet modernism building in the historical old town of Vilnius, which is very cosy and rather a place for tourists. So CAC is already emblematic in that context. CAC has an architecture with a twisted history, that somehow refers to the transformation period of Vilnius. Built as an Art Exhibition Palace for Soviet regime artists, then after 1990 a new type of institution was created, that also made its

mark in the space. We've made social activities an important part of the concept. For example, our cafe, with its interior design originating in 1967, is a very important part of the building. It is a popular meeting place which has its own history. Therefore, whenever it is possible, we are trying to create dialogue between the new institution and old architecture, and that's why we keep original details from the design of Vytautas Čekanauskas.

**Marta Kołacz:** It seems that you are very thrilled about your work, but could you tell me about the other art galleries you're currently most excited about?

**Kestutis Kuizinas:** Fortunately, I have had a chance to travel extensively from the very beginning of my career. Soon after CAC was established, I was fascinated with the work of many galleries. I was inspired by the activities of many kunsthouses and museums, but at the same time I realized that, if you want to be successful internationally, you have to create a strong profile of your own. At some point I was truly fascinated by the work of such institutions as Rooseum in Malmo, Palais de Tokyo in Paris or Witte de With in Rotterdam, but as I have said already, those institutions soon became real or imaginary partners rather than models to copy and follow.

**Marta Kołacz:** As a last question, I would like to ask you what advice you would give to a curator who is beginning his career today?

**Kestutis Kuizinas:** heh... Probably I won't say anything new or special. It's very important to create and follow your own way of doing things. If you repeat some existing models, it won't work. If you want to open your own gallery, or if you want to become a curator, you need to find your own artists and to have your own ideas. In 1995, I was invited by the Vilnius Art Academy to give a series of lectures about art management, which we would name curatorial studies today. Some of my students from the first year classes were invited by me to join the CAC team even before graduating from the academy. Some of them, like Raimundas Malasauskas, later became internationally known curators, with very smart ideas and independent visions of what they are doing.

**Marta Kołacz:** Do you see any difference in being a curator in western and eastern Europe?

**Kestutis Kuizinas:** I don't think there are many differences left, besides the obvious fact that we cannot change the geography. I mean that the

contemporary art scene is still more vivid and dense in the West, things are closer in terms of distance there and therefore curators living in the West have a better chance for seeing and interaction. The support system and art market is better developed there too.

For a few years there was a very good gallery here in Vilnius, *Tulips&Roses*, that presented really hard-core conceptual art, which is not very easy in reception, and even more difficult to sell. So, after some time, they moved to Brussels, because, as they explained, it's a place where people are more eager to collect contemporary art, and the art market is much bigger. Nevertheless, there are some ways to minimize the distances between countries just by working hard and making your own place into some sort of centre of attraction. That was the idea behind the Baltic Triennial project when we decided that we needed a big international event at CAC in Vilnius in 2001. By creating an art event with a strong international profile, you can expect a higher traffic of people and media attention towards your institution, I mean you can plan the arrival not only of an invited artist and his/her gallerist or his/her boyfriend or girlfriend to follow, but also some wider foreign public and art lovers to join them for a project.

**Marta Kołacz:** I couldn't have said it better...

**Kestutis Kuizinas:** How's the weather in Toruń?

**Marta Kołacz:** It's very cold. We can't wait for spring to come, but instead of that there is plenty of snow outside my window.

**Kestutis Kuizinas:** Same in Vilnius, minus 10 degrees outside today.

**Marta Kołacz:** heh... too cold, European countries waiting for a new season that will bring new possibilities... Thank you Kestutis. I had a great time talking to you, please expect a nice parcel with Toruń's famous gingerbread biscuits and a new issue of CoCAin inside your postbox.

**Kestutis Kuizinas:** hahaha... Thanks, bye... /

## BEHIND THE WHITE CURTAIN. CONTEMPORARY ART CENTRE IN VILNIUS

Piotr Lisowski

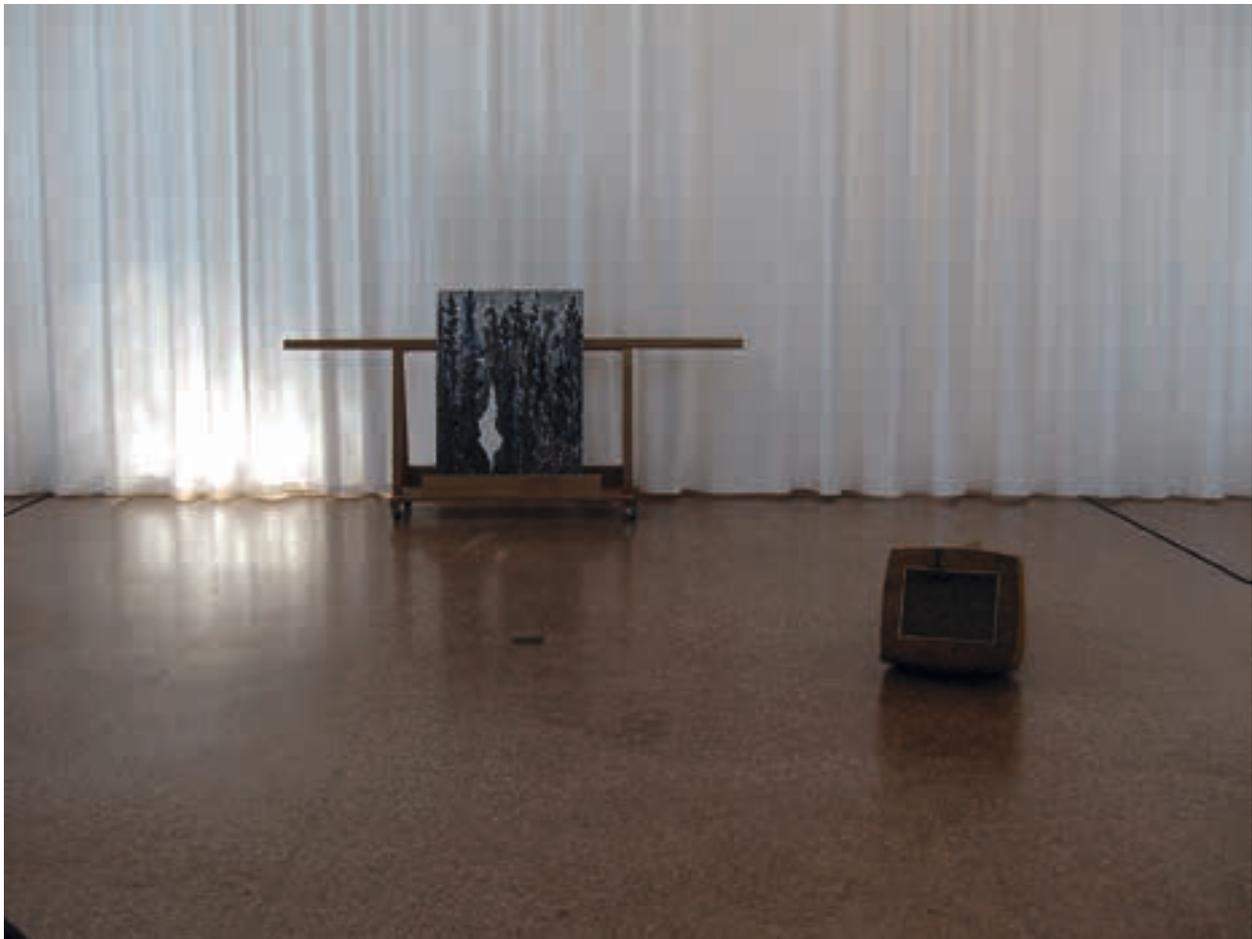
In 2011, while preparing the project of the Lithuanian pavilion for the 54<sup>th</sup> International Art Exhibition in Venice, Darius Mikšys had the double role of artist and curator. The exhibition entitled “Behind the White Curtain” was something in between a warehouse of art, an archive and a meeting place. Mikšys invited 173 Lithuanian artist to take part in the project, selecting them according to the key he adopted.

The determinant was a quite simple, yet symptomatic, fact. Each of them, within the last two decades (1992-2010), i.e. since Lithuania’s liberation from the USSR, had received a national scholarship from the Lithuanian Ministry of Culture.

The eponymous white curtain constituted the central element of the exhibition, dividing the space of the pavilion. On both of its sides, throughout the entire time of the Biennale, a peculiar performance was carried out with the active participation of the pavilion’s visitors. On one side of the curtain, there was a collection of works assembled by Mikšys. As a first impression, concealed, covered for the viewer, kept in drawers, boxes, on store shelves. On the other side - the open one - there was space where each of the visitors, using the catalogue of artworks, could arbitrarily build, change or extend



Darius Mikšys, “Behind the White Curtain”, 2011. Lithuanian Pavilion at the 54<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale. Photo: CAC in Vilnius archive



Darius Mikšys, "Behind the White Curtain", 2011. Lithuanian Pavilion at the 54<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale. Photo: CAC in Vilnius archive

the exhibition by selecting works of artists from the store section. Thus, an enormous installation was created, which in a rotational manner, each day, could transform according to the viewers' hints, interests or taste. "The concept - as the artist himself puts it - was to create a metaphorical mirror for the state and society, where they would be reflected or metaphorically see themselves. This took place as follows: the state selected artists to support, but I combined them in a catalogue, where they could all be seen in one place. [...] My goal was to show this totality of works as fully and clearly as possible. Various media were represented, including installations and video works."<sup>1</sup>

Mikšys has created a specific kind of archive, presenting, to a certain degree, the twentieth-century image of the Lithuanian contemporary art development, or, in other words, the process of its formulation after the transition of the political system and obtaining independence.

At the same time, the project may be perceived as

<sup>1</sup> *Hard as a Flint*. Anna Iltner interview with Darius Mikšys, "Arterritory", [http://www.artterritory.com/en/texts/interviews/8-hard\\_as\\_a\\_flint/1/](http://www.artterritory.com/en/texts/interviews/8-hard_as_a_flint/1/), Feb. 12, 2013.

a kind of critical game attempting to expose the condition of this art, simultaneously, referring to the mechanisms of the state's cultural policy or the art market. The white curtain played an equivocal role here, being at the same time the symbol of concealing and uncovering, which, in the context of the Venetian Biennale, also inscribes the project into the on-going debate concerning art from the post-communist countries.

The pavilion initiated a fierce debate, at the Biennale itself, it was awarded for its form as well as the equivocal presentation of Lithuania's national art. The trajectory taken by Mikšys, to a great extent, resulted from the desire to create a complete collection, enabling the presentation and positioning of art originating in Lithuania within the last two decades. Stressing the process of contemporary art's emergence in independent Lithuania also seems crucial in the light of its rather slender tradition and reference, which could be associated with modern art (Avant-garde), which in turn was explicitly connected to the Soviet cultural policy, in principle, effective till the end of the USSR dependence. One of the key roles in the process, initiated during the time of the



Andrius Rugys (PB8), "Close to Number", 2005. Photo: CAC in Vilnius archive

regime transition, was played by the Contemporary Art Centre in Vilnius (CAC), *nota bene* being the faculty coordinating the work surrounding the preparations for the national pavilion at the Venetian Biennale. The sole fact of creating the institution in 1992 is symptomatic and overlaps with the time of radical social, political and cultural changes associated with the formulation of new institutional structures within the realm of artistic action.

Kestutis Kuizinas, the director of CAC, is of the opinion that the transformations in art itself were parallel to the general reforms taking place in Lithuania at the time. He indicates the three main phases of this process<sup>2</sup>. The first, named by him as the "revival", came in the years 1988-1991 and was related to the fall of the Soviet domination in Lithuania as well as to the consequent declaration of independence. The second stage is the time of reforms in 1992-1993, when the fundamental state organs were being restored and the social, political reforms legitimized. The final phase is the period of stabilization from 1994 up till the present day.

In the art world, the process of transformation constituted a time of reflection on developing an

<sup>2</sup> K. Kuizinas, *Lithuanian Art from 1988 to the present*, [in:] *Art of the Baltics. The struggle for freedom of artistic expression under the Soviets 1945-1991*, New Jersey 2002, p. 354-361.

institutional model, changing programs of academic education, adapting new forms of art as well as quite a fierce discussion concerning the nature of contemporary art, tradition and the functioning of a creator within the art circulation. In 1992, important institutions came into being, such as CAC or Soros Center for Contemporary Art, slowly, private galleries began to emerge, art criticism surfaced, as well as a new generation of artists, and curating attitudes also started to take shape. In a relatively short period, radical and sudden changes occurred that concerned not all tendencies in art, or the artistic paradigm, but also issues connected to institutions, art criticism, the market and the audience. At the time, CAC was one of the most open and active discursive platforms relating to contemporary art.

The Centre remains one of the greatest exhibiting spaces dedicated to contemporary art among the Baltic countries. The place itself, as well as the building, designed by Vytautas Čekanauskas, has existed since 1968. Back then, the location was home to the Art Exhibition Palace which, up until 1988, comprised a part of the Lithuanian Museum of Art. After the political transition, the institution was transformed into an independent unit dedicated exclusively to issues of contemporary art. Lolita Jablonskienė, a leading art critic and curator,

as well as the director of the National Art Gallery in Vilnius operating since 2002, while commenting on the transformations that took place in the 1990s in Lithuanian art, stresses the significant position held by the Centre: "It was the most important exhibition space, the laboratory of the most progressive curatorial ideas, and the most exciting meeting spot."<sup>3</sup> From the very beginning, CAC's program aimed at opening itself for the international stage and presenting the latest trends in art. This course of action seems essential for the program of Kestutis Kuizinas' crew. On the one hand, creating one's own identity, swerving between the local/historical tradition, the international context and the geographical location belonging to Eastern Europe, but also to the Baltic countries. On the other hand, what remains significant is the care for developing a broad institutional infrastructure enabling dynamic, creative and influential operation. In one interview Kuizinas stated: "At first, one of my goals was to establish operational standards that would enable us to collaborate and communicate on an equal basis with analogous institutions in Eastern and Western Europe."<sup>4</sup>

Building these relations is reflected in the exhibition program, where a certain scheme is to be distinguished in that, apart from the native artists, attention is directed at international phenomena, or at bringing closer the current artistic trends and strategies by presenting foreign exhibitions. Such collaboration is particularly strongly consolidated within the Baltic countries. CAC is one of the main organizers of the Baltic Triennial of International Art, one of the biggest artistic events in Northern Europe.

Similarly, the Fluxus archive remains a crucial element in building the institution's identity. In 1997, due to the efforts of George Maciunas, it was handed over by the famous collectors from Detroit, Gilbert and Lila Silverman. The gift became the basis for the George Maciunas Fluxus Cabinet created in CAC as a permanent exhibition. The set consists of nearly a hundred objects including archived materials, documentation from actions and Fluxus festivals, prints and publications, as well as art objects by the key authors associated

<sup>3</sup> *Post-post-Soviet contemporary art, artists and the audience*, [in:] *Lithuanian Art. 2000-2010: Ten Years*, CAC, Vilnius, 2010, p. 120.

<sup>4</sup> *Deimantas Narkevičius interviews Kestutis Kuizinas*, "Flash Art" July-September 2004, p. 57-59.

with the movement, among whom one can find artists such as George Brecht, Dick Higgins, Henry Flynt, La Monte Young, Yoko Ono, or the aforementioned Maciunas.

Kuizinas recalls: "The Fluxus exhibition was one of the first I initiated. When we founded CAC and began to propagate the art of a new era, we also needed some historical reference to unite and consolidate many different forces and points of view. The legendary George Maciunas was a very adequate choice. [...] All things considered, the Fluxus project really turned out to be an explosive moment in the history of CAC, and it was one of our best-attended shows so far."<sup>5</sup> Recently, the materials from the archive were used in an international project *Fluxus East: Fluxus Networks in Central Eastern Europe* (2007-2010).

With all of its specificity, CAC is to play the role of a living place, which is capable of responding to reality and changing its identity. Hence, the institution comes closer to a laboratory rather than an art museum. The significance of this place for contemporary art is well established not only by its international exhibition program, or via the creation of a professional infrastructure for artistic action. Equally important is its activity in the theoretical, publishing and promotional fields, which enables the uncovering of the most interesting phenomena from behind the white curtain.

The curator, Simon Rees, borrowing from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, compares CAC to a machine of desires, being a place that produces lust, into which other devices are plugged and that in turn regulate its efficiency<sup>6</sup>. It seems that for a long time it had been its function, but today, as Kuizinas notes, it may sigh with relief "since an actual museum (the NGA) is now established in Vilnius, and other elements of art infrastructure are gradually taking shape, CAC will finally have a chance to hone its activity, reject the monopolist's position [...] and concentrate its attention on its real mission – that of a dedicated »Contemporary Art Centre«"<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 58.

<sup>6</sup> S. Rees, *Nothing you can believe is not coming true. The case of Lithuanian contemporary art 2000-2010*, [in:] *Lithuanian Art. 2000-2010...*, op. cit., p. 129.

<sup>7</sup> *Post-post-Soviet contemporary art, artists and the audience*, op. cit., p. 126.

## IN CONSTANT MOTION OR TRANSFORMATION AND IDENTITY AT THE CONTEMPORARY ART CENTRE IN VILNIUS

Marta Kofacz

*To be interesting, a museum or art centre must be able to stay lively during a longer period of time. It must be able to renew itself constantly and to change the rules of the game by itself. The size of the institution does not matter. [...] it would be pointless to copy others or to try to do similar things. You can only offer your own alternatives, or in other words start a dialogue, from your own specific point of departure and with your own and different possibilities<sup>1</sup>.*

Kestutis Kuizinas  
director, CAC Vilnius

In 1992, two years after declaring independence, Lithuania found itself at the onset of a political and economical transformation that was to shape the new image of the country. In one of the buildings located in Lithuania's capital, Vilnius, the director of a newly established institution, housed in a palace which had served the former political system, welcomed a delegation of American curators on his first day at work with these words: "We're changing the name of the institution to the Contemporary Art Centre. I'm not sure if we have it - contemporary art in our country - but we are going to make contemporary art here."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> K. Kuizinas in *Deimantas Narkevicius interviews Kestutis Kuizinas*, "Flash Art", July-September 2004, p. 58.

<sup>2</sup> R. Ganga, *From Soviet Exhibition Palace to the Contemporary Art Centre. Cultural Democratisation or Elitist Enclosure?*, [http://www.academia.edu/1809503/From\\_the\\_Soviet\\_Exhibition\\_Palace\\_to\\_the\\_Contemporary\\_Art\\_Centre\\_Cultural\\_Democratisation\\_or\\_Elitist\\_Enclosure](http://www.academia.edu/1809503/From_the_Soviet_Exhibition_Palace_to_the_Contemporary_Art_Centre_Cultural_Democratisation_or_Elitist_Enclosure).



A building of Contemporary Art Centre in Vilnius, architect: Vytautas Edmundas Čekanauskas, 1968. Photo: PL



A building of Contemporary Art Centre in Vilnius, architect: Vytautas Edmundas Čekanauskas, 1968. Photo: PŁ

### From a modernist palace to a white cube

The white structure erected in 1968 stands out from the surrounding tenement houses. One of the prestigious investments made in the previous system brings the recent history of the city to mind. Although the form suggests otherwise, the building was called the Art Palace for many years. This is, however, thoroughly functional architecture and one of the most interesting examples of post-war modernism in Vilnius. When the young architect Vytautas Edmundas Čekanauskas designed the building, artistic life in the Socialist Soviet Republics was enjoying a period of the Thaw initiated by Khrushchev. Eager to take on challenges, the post-war generation of designers willingly undertook the task of constructing buildings in a modern style appropriate for new times. For architects wishing to develop innovative projects, the possibility of designing prestigious public constructions provided a chance to test new solutions in opposition to mass-produced, typical residential areas. For many years, the building hosted exhibitions organized by the Lithuanian Artists' Association as a unit of the Lithuanian Art Museum. In Soviet days, the

functional typology of the building acquired a special meaning – it partook in the establishment of a new, secular tradition. Until 1990...

In the 1990s, new institutions began to sprout up in Lithuania, including the Contemporary Art Centre (CAC). According to Kestutis Kuizinas, the first and – so far – the only director of the institution, who differentiated between stages of the transformation of the country, the idea of CAC emerged during the period of ideological and political challenges as well as artistic experiments that determined the identity of the gallery. Having replaced the Art Palace, CAC became an independent institution subordinate to the Ministry of Culture, aiming to modify established reality and create favourable conditions for the development of contemporary art in Lithuania. Changes occurring in Lithuanian art as late as the 1990s were rapid and tumultuous. Video art first came to Lithuania in 1989, and in the early 1990s there were only 2 video cameras in Vilnius, shared by a number of artists willing to experiment with the new medium.<sup>3</sup> Art movements, artistic

<sup>3</sup> R. Dubinskaitė, *The Artist's Roles in Lithuanian Video Art in 1990-2003*, p. 1, <http://lkti.lt/athena/pdf/3/156-172.pdf>.



*Fluxus room, permanent exhibition. Photo: Archive of CoCA in Toruń*

forms and ideas, which reached their culmination in the West in 1968, appeared in Lithuania only in the 1990s along with the development of happening, performance, installation and video art, defying the previous socialist formula. Thus, the CAC mission was to promote contemporary art, to present international artists and their work to the local community and to provide Lithuanian artists with the chance to exhibit abroad.

The new identity and function of the building was accentuated by a new language of interior architecture. The stately rooms of the Palace were unified and reduced to a white cube, giving a hint about the character of the upcoming programme and exhibitions. Heading in the direction defined by Western galleries, the interior of Čekanauskas' project was transformed into a homogeneous and objective space, where viewers' attention could be concentrated on artworks. White walls, grey flooring and only necessary technical equipment were to help CAC achieve Western standards. The conventional nature of the white cube facilitated a system in which an object becomes art.

Viewers did not, however, find the conversion of the Palace into a white cube controversial. The architectural character of the building remained unchanged. It was the programme that was

drastically altered. It turned out that the radical opening of CAC to the aesthetic language and exposition practices of the international art world, which was very different from what viewers were accustomed to, was a problem. Kuizinas remembers the expectations of the audience, used to judging works by their aesthetic value, towards pieces exhibited in the new institution. A work of art used to be judged by the intensity of its content and the skill of the artist.<sup>4</sup> Retrospectives were replaced by curatorial projects dedicated to specific themes. But this was only the beginning of changes introduced to the matter of the building and the programme.

#### **Search of context, expanding horizons, constructing identity**

Although the exhibition space of 2,400 sq metres at CAC makes it the biggest institution dedicated to contemporary art in the Baltic States, it does not have a collection or a permanent exposition. The only exception is the George Maciunas Fluxus Cabinet, donated to CAC by the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection, the biggest compilation of works by artists connected with Fluxus, on display since 1997.

<sup>4</sup> K. Kuizinas, *Lithuanian Art from 1988 to the present*, [in:] A. Rosenfeldt et al. (eds.), *Art of the Baltics: the struggle for freedom of artistic expression under Soviets, 1945 - 1991*, New Jersey, 2001, p. 357.

Publicizing Fluxus' activities was one of Director Kuizinas' initiatives. As the institution which aimed at promoting new art began to function, it seemed necessary to highlight the references to the creative output of established contemporary artists. In 1996, Rene Block curated an exhibition presenting the achievements of the group to the Lithuanian public and, a year later, the figure of George Maciunas, an artist of Lithuanian origin and the founder of Fluxus, became a permanent feature at the centre following its donation. This move was meant to unify and consolidate various forces and viewpoints, to stress the value of new art exhibited at CAC, and to constitute it in acknowledged historical tradition. George Maciunas - the main figure in one of the most influential art movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,

better known in the West than in his motherland, seemed a perfect choice.

A modest-sized room housing the collection creates the impression of a private room into which viewers happened to stray. The exposition encourages visitors to slowly explore the study, looking at books as they wait for the host to brew tea. We are dealing with an extraordinarily valuable thing. The almost 100-piece collection includes works by such artists as George Maciunas, George Brecht, Dick Higgins, Shiego Kubota, Henry Flynt, La Monte Young, Yoko Ono and Ay-O. Documentary materials pertaining to events organized by Fluxus, photographs of innovative Festivals in Wuppertal, Nice and New York, as well as publications and newspapers are



*Fluxus room, permanent exhibition. Photo: Archive of CoCA in Toruń*

also to be seen. As a matter of fact, this scientific mini-institute constitutes an archive of knowledge concerning contemporary art and ideas, which shapes the institution that it is part of: Maciunas was an advocate of what is lofty, spontaneous, incidental and frequently amateur in art. Similarly to Fluxus, whose activities were characterized by removing boundaries between traditional art and everyday life, CAC does its best to provide a platform for artistic experiments, both stylistic and radical in form and content, and to be a new type of institution on the Lithuanian art scene – a *kunsthalle*, a cultural centre and experimental space, constantly developing by initiating new projects. The Baltic Triennial of Art, CAC TV – a programme broadcast on public television, the bilingual magazine “CAC

Interviu” and the use of the centre’s own space for the permanent transgression of limits suggest that there are many diverse things happening here at the same time.

### **Removing boundaries, private versus public, airport of ideas**

It is surely the eagerness to experiment that urged the institution to enter into a dialogue with the architecture of the building. Valdas Ozarinskas, assistant director and designer of CAC exhibitions, responsible for both the technical and the aesthetic aspects of expositions, an acknowledged artist and curator, plays a significant role in the construction of a new identity. In 2006, Kuizinas



Valdas Ozarinskas, “Emission Cycle” exhibition – part of the lobby, 2006. Photo: Archive of CAC in Vilnius



A specialist reading room “ŠMC skaitykla”, architects: Anouk Vogel, Johan Selbing and Bart Guldemond, 2009. Photo: Archive of CAC in Vilnius

asked him to recreate the public space of the lobby in the form of artwork within the framework of the exhibition “Emission Cycle”, which included pieces by artists whose careers took off after 1990. Ozarinskas redesigned the lobby by uncovering the austere concrete construction of the building and transforming the space into an industrial site. Typically, he decided to turn things “the other way round” and change the aura of the public space by introducing private features to it. He refurbished the place as if it were his own studio, bringing in elements which he found comfortable – a table, seats and a TV set. The artist wanted to create the impression that “Ozarinskas [had] just left the building.”<sup>5</sup> The architect explains that the monumental CAC lobby is hardly ever seen by the public as comfortable or cosy, regardless of its arrangement. Its architecture is as unattractive as that of waiting rooms at railway stations. This image of the place, difficult to overcome, was transformed into the idea of “colonization” as a method of the appropriation of space. The objects that have been placed inside are mobile, every visitor can change their arrangement and thus influence the space. The aura of the waiting room, as Ozarinskas points out, emphasizes the metaphor, willingly made by the

<sup>5</sup> The private Public Space of Valdas Ozarinskas, CAC INTERVIU “conversation about art”, Vilnius 2005, no. 6, p. 43.

team, of CAC as an “airport of ideas.”<sup>6</sup> Upon entering the building, an uninformed visitor feels like they were in a cultural squat rather than in an art gallery.

#### **Tea with a curator, rest in the garden, distribution of knowledge**

The transformation was continued in 2009, when one of the exhibition rooms was converted into a specialist reading room “ŠMC skaitykla”. It was created by the Dutch architects Anouk Vogel, Johan Selbing and Bart Guldemond, who undertook the challenging task of designing an informal space in a modernist building with a rich history, which had carried the mark of the charismatic Ozarinskas for more than ten years.

The new space was to accommodate collections of artistic publications and audiovisual materials; at the same time the reading room, run by curators, was meant to be a slightly informal and rather experimental artistic space. The designers from Amsterdam came up with a solution very different from the CAC style defined by Ozarinskas in aesthetic terms. The idea for the project was inspired by two nearby spaces of more or less the same surface, situated next to each other. The

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

reading room is located next to the courtyard and therefore the choice of some features was affected by the possibility of repeating them outside. The concept for the design of the reading room involved creating an “inside garden” – a place to entertain friends, to read, to have tea, to rest, to get inspired or simply to think. As a consequence, the multitude of thin white table legs look like an abstract birch grove. The original idea was that they should reflect real birches which were going to be planted in the garden. The garden is dynamic as it follows the changing seasons, and the design is supposed to be equally dynamic. Numerous individual elements combine to create the whole “garden”. Although each table has a different dimension and shape, they form a giant rectangular top at which everyone can sit. Every chair is unique; their backs are covered with embroidered floral patterns. Together, they look like a minimalist “flower bed”.

Today, the Reading Room is an informal place dedicated to self-education and meeting people. The programme for the audience constitutes a sort of horizontal platform where gallery curators share their interests and explorations with visitors, and everyone can partake in the process of knowledge acquisition. The curators admit that the Reading Room project gives them the opportunity to educate themselves, which they willingly do when

they have a spare moment.<sup>7</sup> The light and clear space inviting everyone to rest, where visitors immediately feel at home, creates favourable conditions. An individual will find a private space here, a group can unite in cooperation, and the institution has a platform around which a community holding the same values can form.

#### **A black box in a white cube and comfort from IKEA**

The idea to create a cinema room has been present in CAC plans for a long time. Yet it was only in 2012 that it was possible to implement. The cinema was incorporated into the original tissue of Čekanauskas' architecture, forming an independent structure like a cocoon hidden in the exhibition space. Designed by Audrius Bučas and Valdas Ozarinskas, the cinema looks like an art installation, reminding viewers that nothing here is what it seems to be. Placed in the white cube of the gallery, the black box is most comfortable. When we enter the structure, we find many evenly distributed white bourgeois sofas from IKEA. Their well-known shapes and neutral character invite everyone to sit down, even the most sceptical visitors. Created for the screening of artistic films, this installation encourages people to linger at CAC.

<sup>7</sup> R. Ganga, op. cit.



*Audrius Bučas and Valdas Ozarinskas, cinema hall, 2012. Photo: Archive of CAC in Vilnius*

### From the author

When I visited the place in December, I was deeply impressed by the architecture of the Contemporary Art Centre in Vilnius and the way in which the CAC team enters into a dialogue with it. We observe a conscious and consistent process of constructing identity, exceeding one's own limits as well as the will to experiment. Much attention has been given to the creation of social spaces, or sluices that reduce the distance between the public and the artworks displayed at the gallery. Invented by the CAC team, the metaphor of the "Airport of Ideas" seems particularly interesting. Similarly to an airport, the skilful team, clear functional division of space and well-constructed messages facilitate a further journey for our ideas and I am most interested in what the reception of these experiments in the local community is like. Can it be said, after twenty years, that we are dealing not with a palace but with a live platform of artistic experiments open to artists and the public, and will it ever be possible to announce the end of this permanent process of transformation? /



*Atrium space in Contemporary Art Centre in Vilnius. Photo: Archive of CoCA in Toruń*

## MUSEUM OF HYSTERICIS AND LESZEK PRZYJEMSKI'S ANTI-INSTITUTIONS

Ewelina Jarosz

The *Nonexistent Nodding Gallery "YES"* (1970-74), the *Institute of Indifferent Research by the Nonexistent Nodding Gallery "YES"*, *Die Gaskammer der Kunst* (1981-2012) and the *Museum of Hysterics* (1968-2012)<sup>1</sup> are four concepts which immediately set Leszek Przyjemski's work in the context of institutional questions. Conditioned primarily by the moment in history that witnesses their creation, the latter two seem to stand as testimony to the artist's intention of making them part of contemporariness, as their dates suggest. In this article, I am going to focus on their status, hinted at in the name of the first one. Distinguished by the paradoxical fact of non-existence, these anti-institutions are products of living in the People's Republic of Poland (PRL), which determined the specifically abstract nature of their creator's thought, forms of his artistic expression, as well as his existential attitude that saw both staging and creating fiction as an important social catalyst of reality. They resulted from the necessity for the artist to cope with traumas caused by living in a country overwhelmed by communist ideology. Genetically linked with the peculiar make-up of the official art system in the PRL, they defied it and formed an alternative structure. In this article, I am going to focus on Przyjemski's anti-institutions, explore the assumptions underlying them as well as their programmes, wishing to analyse the specificity and typicality of their references to the PRL. The individual attitude towards the reality of a communist state emanating from them and the role of an artist active in such circumstances will also be scrutinized. All these aspects will help me interpret the status of these anti-institutions within the context of historical and artistic references.

It is important to find a place for Leszek Przyjemski's work in the history of artistic reality. His creative output has been given little attention in the history of Polish art. By assumption, his work belongs to the fringes of the art world and influential creative communities, or *establishment*<sup>2</sup> as we would call it today, but it also remains on the margins of what art historians are willing to deal with. In his book on the Polish neo-avant-garde of the 1970s, Łukasz Ronduda mentions Przyjemski in the chapter entitled *Soc-art, czyli próba polityzacji estetyki*<sup>3</sup> (Soc-art, or an attempt

<sup>1</sup> In literature pertaining to the artist, *Punkt Konsultacyjny Artystycznych Służb Specjalnych* (The Consultation Centre for Artistic Intelligence Agency, 1968-2001) is also mentioned, however, it will not be discussed in this article.

<sup>2</sup> In 1973, the artist described his place in the history (of art) as "involved isolation. A margin, isolation as I wish to avoid any dependence or relationships, even social ones, which could disturb my painting". Mirosław Komendecki, Leszek, "Literary" 1973 no. 7, quoted after: *Museum of Hysterics. 1968-2012*, op. cit., p. 29.

<sup>3</sup> Łukasz Ronduda, *Sztuka polska lat 70.: Awangarda*, exhibition concept Piotr Uklański, Jelenia Góra: Polski Western; Warsaw: Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej Zamek Ujazdowski, 2009, pp. 225-243.





Leszek Przyjemski, "Museum of Hysterics", Centre for Contemporary Art Zamek Ujazdowski, Warsaw, 1995. Photo: L. Przyjemski's archive

at politicizing aesthetics). His view on strategies employed in a communist state by such artists as Zofia Kulik, Przemysław Kwiek, Zygmunt Piotrowski, Paweł Kwiek or Anastazy Wiśniewski offers a perspective of a revision of the allegedly a-critical stance adopted by avant-garde artists of the decade in question, discussed by Piotr Piotrowski in the 1990s.<sup>4</sup> If we were to use the categories of description of neo-avant-garde art proposed by Ronduda, Przyjemski would be a pragmatist<sup>5</sup> of

<sup>4</sup> Intending to describe postmodernist aspects of art created in this period, Piotrowski uses such terms as "a-criticism" and "pseudo-criticism" in reference to Polish artists active in the post-totalitarian system in the 1970s to demonstrate the limited scope of their activities and the conformity of experiments suggesting that the system was politically irremovable. Piotrowski, *Postmodernizm i posttotalitaryzm*, [in:] "Magazyn Sztuki" no. 4, 1994. See also the same author's, *Dehada*, Obserwator, Poznań 1991.

<sup>5</sup> Ronduda differentiates between two stances typical of neo-avant-garde artists of the 1970s, i.e. post-essentialist and pragmatic. The former relates to the question of the essence of artwork in postmodernist reality. Activities performed by pragmatic artists consisted of "activistic entering into the non-artistic world and removing the functions and meanings imposed by humans and human culture from the physical dimension of various aspects of reality. Ronduda, op. cit., pp. 9, 12; For the representatives of this trend "a critical attitude towards established social and symbolic orders, ideologies that determined perception and colonized imagination" was also significant, p. 13.

the New Red Art.<sup>6</sup> Admittedly, this classification allows a more precise characterization of Przyjemski's work - his subversive use of elements of the PRL rhetoric and state-related visual environment, while omitting the internal complexity of the critical stance that was the basis for this work, commented on by Grzegorz Dziamski: "... this is not straightforward, direct criticism but a most ambiguous kind of it."<sup>7</sup> In my previous article discussing Przyjemski's work, I pointed out that it shifts the accent from a critical stance to a meta-critical one. Exposing the omnipresence of the process of politicizing artistic reality, Przyjemski's work exudes an aura of crazy dedication to the "mentally contaminated" sphere, thus escaping the possibility of being included in the category of critically engaged art. This is not only because it took a democratic order for strategies employed by the artist to become obvious, but mostly, in this case, because a one-man anti-institution tends to be a fairly low-key enterprise; besides, questions arise as to the ultimate objectives of art created in such circumstances, one of its motives being the need

<sup>6</sup> ... or "new socrealism" or simply "soc-art", by which artists understood a new, subversive formula of getting involved in the oppressive reality of the 1970s, not possible to be subordinated to the ideology of a socialist state but directly referring to its language and means of expression. Ronduda, op. cit., pp. 224, 231.

<sup>7</sup> As quoted in: Ronduda, op. cit., p. 242.



Leszek Przyjemski, "Museum of Hysterics", Galeria Miejska Arsenał in Poznań, 2001. Photo: L. Przyjemski's archive

to express the emotional state of an individual. What was then the point of artistic actions and forms which, since the late 1960s, have served the artist to foreground the presence of the non-existent anti-institutions he founded? On the one hand, they belong to the paradigm of conceptual art, while on the other, they are firmly rooted in the bureaucracy of the PRL, turned by Przyjemski into artefacts in a *hysterical* archival fever. The fact of existence of his anti-institutions was confirmed by official notice boards, documents of various types, letters<sup>8</sup>, posters, bills, fliers, stamps and seals.<sup>9</sup> There were also prints and paintings termed as anaesthetic. The striking visual obsolescence of Przyjemski's style and means – an observation illustrative of his entire output – can be interpreted today in relation to Benjamin Buchloh's analyses within the context of the associations between this work and the processes of acculturation and institutionalization. Describing Marcel Broodthaers's fictitious museums, Buchloh addressed, in a contextual manner, the question of foreseeing and including acculturation processes in the structure of artworks produced by such artists as Marcel Duchamp or El Lissitzky.<sup>10</sup> In the case of Przyjemski's pieces, resistance to their becoming objects of aesthetic contemplation is also a structural element. Moreover, his creative output provides a treasury of materials for researchers in the field of Central and Eastern European art, presenting them with numerous intriguing problems to be scrutinized. Its painting aspect may serve to challenge the stereotype of conceptualism being divorced from painting. The analysis of the artist's pieces performed within the scope of this article is going to illustrate the ideological background of the non-existent institutions under whose auspices they were created.

### ***The Nonexistent Nodding Gallery "YES" and the Institute of Indifferent Research by the Nonexistent Nodding Gallery "YES"***

The policy statement of the *Nonexistent Nodding Gallery "YES"* was registered in the bureau of

<sup>8</sup> Przyjemski received and wrote many letters. Publication of private and official letters constitutes an integral part of his *Museum of Hysterics*. In 1988, a collection of private correspondence from various people (Ryszard Milczewski-Bruno, Andrzej Matuszewski, Jerzy Pluta, Jurgen Blum, Andrzej Pańta, Andrzej Ekwiński, Janusz Styczeń) to the artist was published under the title *Przeniknęłam bezszmerowo; Andrzej Matuszewski, Listy do Leszka Przyjemskiego 1984-1987 z archiwum Museum of Hysterics*, Galeria Miejska Arsenał, Poznań 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Przyjemski's work serves as the most striking example of using stamps and other forms relating to the bureaucratic system of the PRL by neo-avant-garde artists in the 1970s. See: Andrzej Truszkowski, *Sztuka hrytyczna w Polsce. Część I. Kwiek. Kulik. Kwiekulik 1967-1998*, Galeria Miejska Arsenał, Poznań, 1999, pp. 20, 25.

<sup>10</sup> B. Buchloh, *Fikcyjne muzeum Marcela Broodthaersa*, [in:] *Muzeum sztuki. Antologia*, ed. M. Popczyk, pp. 491-506.



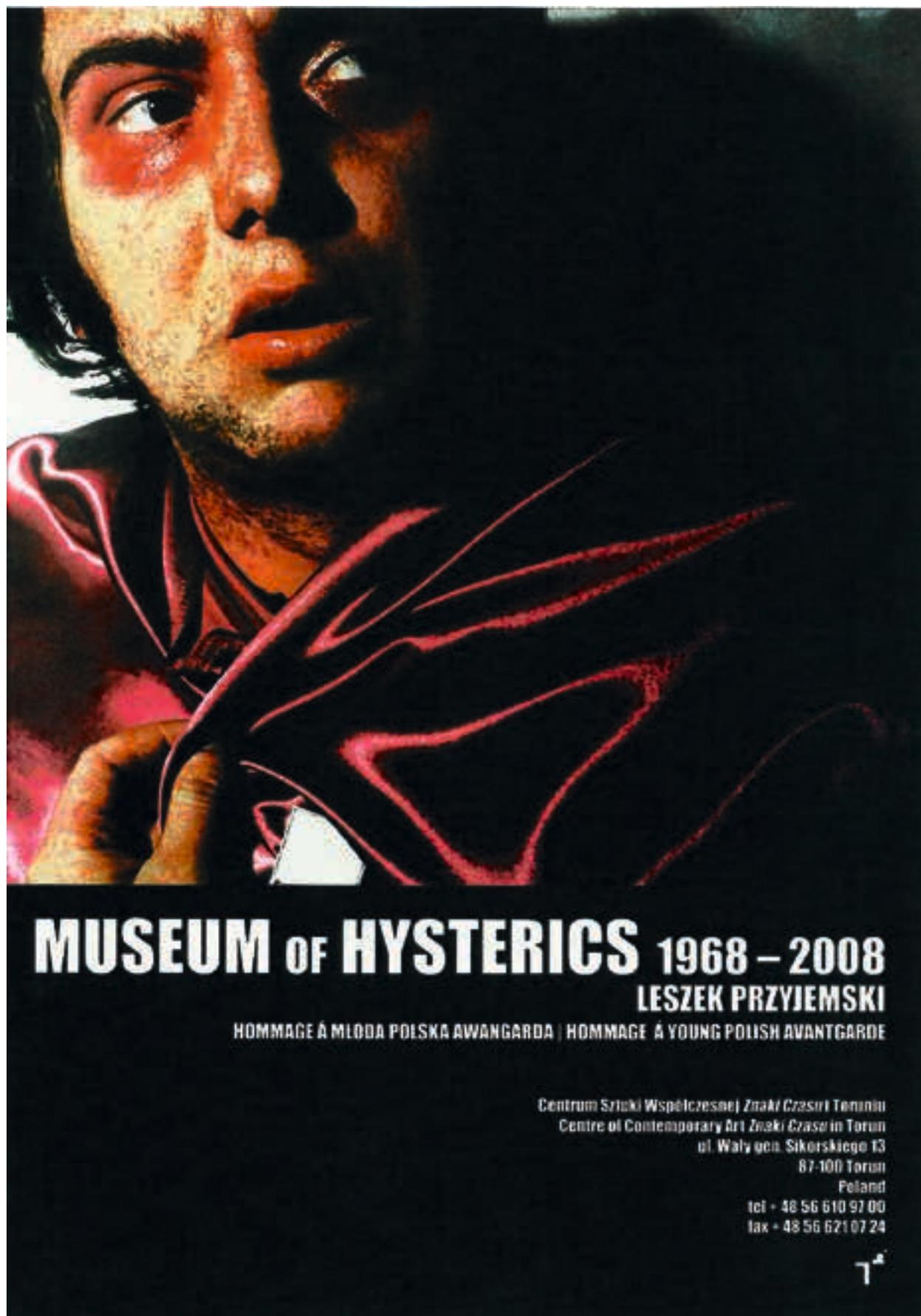
Leszek Przyjemski, "Museum of Hysterics". Photo: L. Przyjemski's archive

ensorship in Bydgoszcz in 1970. The initiators of this first anti-gallery<sup>11</sup> were Anastazy Wiśniewski and Leszek Przyjemski. The statement included such slogans as "We nod to ourselves", "Nonexistent coma nodding gallery", "The «YES» Gallery nods to any artistic activities", "The «YES» Gallery wishes to be informed about all artistic activities", "Coma to nod coma". The statement was issued in Bydgoszcz, Warsaw, Wrocław and Poznań. Its telegraphic form legitimized, to some extent, the impugning of schematic thinking typical of citizens of a socialist state. Slogans propagated by the NNG "Y" exposed the absurdity of "consent" originating in civic and artistic passivity expressed by nodding in agreement to those in power. They became an image of the semantic void hiding behind the surface; irony and emotions that could hardly be vented openly were implied in them. Przyjemski's first anti-institution involved making various statements, for instance: "I declare that my view of reality is a masterpiece". According to Grzegorz Borkowski, this meant broadening the notion of an artwork to include the entirety of the PRL and was a mockery of "the modern image of the country created by propaganda".<sup>12</sup> I believe that the artist also sought autonomy and wished to achieve a position where he would be independent of the authorities. Borkowski points out that a significant change in the state's policies could be observed in the 1970s, when Edward Gierek was the head of state, as faith in socialism was supported by consideration for the consumption requirements of the society: "A social spectacle began that was initially highly dynamic – a dramatic modification of the ideological make-up of the authorities was taking place before a nationwide audience."<sup>13</sup> Highlighting this make-up and attaching existential value to it constitutes a key aspect of

<sup>11</sup> Ryszard Milczewski-Bruno describes it as "a noninstitutionalized institution, a thing selfless in its essence and – in Poland – unique." Eadem, *Prowincja z cudzysłowami*, [in:] *Museum of Hysterics 1968-2012*, op. cit., p. 39.

<sup>12</sup> Borkowski, op. cit., p. 16.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem.



Leszek Przyjemski, "Museum of Hysterics" and Centre of Contemporary Art in Toruń, 2010. Photo: Archive of CoCA in Toruń.



Leszek Przyjemski, "Museum of Hysterics". Photo: L. Przyjemski's archive

Przyjemski's work. Additionally, formally simple or even poor pieces created by the artist represent more permanent and abstract values today because they bear testimony to that period. The statement saying: "I hereby inform that I have forgotten what I have to say, write or paint etc." reveals its historical meaning in the context of pressure and violence exerted by a post-totalitarian state on the realm of creative freedom. From today's perspective and in relation to Przyjemski's entire output, it suggests that this violence has left an indelible mark on the psyche of the artist, whose work, including the conditions of its production, was reduced in the communist system to the status of an internalized ban.<sup>14</sup>

The historical peculiarity of the first anti-institution is very well exemplified by Przyjemski and Wiśniewski's action entitled *Individual Conversations* (1972). It took place at Paweł Freisler's Galeria Repassage in Warsaw. In his description of the event, Ronduda points out that it parodied the procedures of recruitment to the party apparatus.

<sup>14</sup> The statement can also be interpreted in the context of censorship, which was removing any traces of Przyjemski's activities in Bydgoszcz, Warsaw, Poznań and Elbląg in the 1970s and 80s.

The artists "prepared a fake party room where (...) conversations were held, and decorated it with a red-and-white piece of cloth. Next, they invited volunteers to take part in the simulation of being admitted to the party and asked them nonsensical, utterly absurd questions. At the end of each conversation the *International* could be heard."<sup>15</sup> This action revealed a very important feature of Przyjemski's work, that is, ostentatious use of occasional decorations, including, first and foremost, the motifs of flag and fern. In one of the photographs documenting the action, the artist is lying on the floor, basking in red cloth and staring at the light emitted by a lamp hidden underneath the fabric, as if hypnotized. In this way, he literally became an inseparable part of his own leitmotif – the national flag – which was also markedly foregrounded in *Mój ulubiony krajobraz* (My favourite landscape) – a poster designed independently of the anti-gallery and showed at the *Dreamers' Meeting* (1971, 4<sup>th</sup> Biennial of Spatial Forms, Elbląg).

The *Institute of Indifferent Research by the Nonexistent Nodding Gallery "YES"* played not only a supplementary role in relation to the programme of the gallery but also, as can be surmised from

<sup>15</sup> Ronduda, op. cit., p. 242.

the fact that the artist tended to be omitted and excluded,<sup>16</sup> a compensatory one, granting him more rights and the possibility of doing things his way.<sup>17</sup>

### **Museum of Hysterics**

Przyjemski was the sole initiator of the *Museum of Hysterics*. The decision to found this anti-institution, which came to be most often associated with his name, was reached at the *First International Nonexistent Galleries Congress* held in Brzeźno in 1975; the museum encompassed the artist's activities since 1968.<sup>18</sup> In 1960-74, Przyjemski used the stamp of *Powiatowy Mistyfikator* (County Hoaxer),<sup>19</sup> but after 1975 he got another one representing a new, fictional concept for which the term *hysterics* was coined, thus defining the mental atmosphere of the day as a disorder. Under its auspices he creates typically conventional images. The one entitled *Muzeum* (1978) is a reference to the building of socialism in Poland in terms of content. It depicts a display case containing miniature, stereotyped figures holding banners with propagandist slogans, for instance: "We are right about everything", "For people through people", "The point is that tomorrow should be made today". This is openly straightforward. The case has a caption: "Display case no. 423. A model of a human being that has been invested in." Hung in the abstract space of a bigger picture, a fern on each side, it looks like an ascending curve implying economic development of the state. There are also brush traces visible on the canvas, irregular daubs of red paint and the words: "I've gone mad," placed parallel to the case in the bottom right-hand corner where one would rather expect the artist's signature. This is not direct criticism of the rhetoric of communist authorities; elevated to the status of easel painting, this rhetoric unexpectedly becomes a unique and substantial theme. The image of progress becomes an image of a museum with walls.

The *Museum of Hysterics* is also identified with the help of photographs in which Przyjemski is holding a banner, a poster or a plate. The artist is sometimes replaced by members of his family in the act of posing for a picture, holding a plate. His cats can also be seen in these photographs. These are non-artistic

<sup>16</sup> Analyzing actions performed within the framework of *NNG "Y"*, Ronduda, and also previously Bożena Kowalska in her popular book on avant-garde, suggests that Przyjemski's role in his collaboration with Wiśniewski was marginal. Eadem, op. cit., p. 242.

<sup>17</sup> See: footnote 14.

<sup>18</sup> See: Borkowski, op. cit., p. 14.

<sup>19</sup> *The County Hoaxer*. Leszek Przyjemski's stamp is an example of artistic use of stamps and other forms relating to the bureaucratic system of the PRL, popular in the 1970s. See: Jerzy Truszkowski *Sztuka krytyczna w Polsce. Część I. Kwiek. Kulik. Kwiekulik 1967-1998*, Galeria Miejska "Arsenał", 1999, pp. 20, 25.



Leszek Przyjemski, "Museum of Hysterics" and Johan van Geluwe representing "The Museum of Museums", Bydgoszcz, 2003. Photo: L. Przyjemski's archive

or even prosaic pieces of evidence of the non-existence of the museum, archived by its founder in multiple forms (*Museum of Hysterics Archive*, 2006). Although the same theme is stubbornly multiplied in modified arrangements, possibly the most striking element remains perfectly visible in the photographs – the face of a man filled with sadness and morbid excitement at running his one-man anti-institution. Przyjemski follows the myth of a romantic and cursed artist, which is reflected in his leaving of Poland in 1981. The date (the introduction of martial law) suggests that he must have accepted an emigrant's fate. He is a figure lurking on the margins of history, a stranger in his homeland, whose transformation he failed to participate in, and a stranger in the place he chose to live in, Germany, where he found no community that would understand his historical situation. A branch of the nonexistent museum is soon created, *Die Gaskammer der Kunst* – another anti-institution facilitating conceptualization of the artist's ideas regarding martial law and the oppressive and parochial atmosphere of the place which he had managed to abandon. Paintings created at that time, from the cycle *Polskie Orły, Stan wojenny* (Polish Eagles, Martial Law, 1983-84), seem to relate to medieval miniature paintings depicting the massacre of the innocent.

Przyjemski's enforced exclusion from history and his belonging to the so-called "lost generation" continue to affect the process of updating the concept of the *Museum of Hysterics*. After political transformation, the spectacle became – as it were

– a sustained hysterical simulacrum of historical, national and authorial symbols. A new, self-contained graphic symbol appears – SY-F (a chemical formula for mental contamination), demonstrating the condition of the one-man institution in the new capitalist system that determines its status. The motif of the flag remains typical of Przyjemski's work. However, its presence exposes the appropriation of a national symbol for political purposes, rather than uncovering semantic misuses on the part of the authorities.

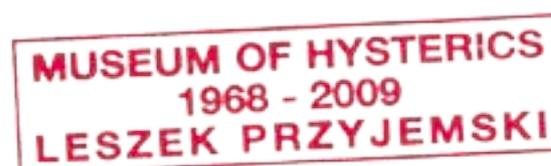
In the *Museum of Hysterics*, one can see the German and the European flag. They are not only biographical markers for the artist's life away from his homeland but they also imply his involvement in another oppressive system, where art is governed by ruthless economic and commercial rules. A new image can be found in his pieces as well – a skeleton holding the German flag (*Leszek Przyjemski. Die Gaskammer der Kunst. Museum of Hysterics*, 2004). Considering the context of Przyjemski's work, one may wonder whether this skeleton is Polish, German, or perhaps European. The conventional symbol of the European Community with skulls added by the artist (*Jubilie3 edition-Museum of Hysterics 1998-2009*) becomes another *signum temporis*, raising questions of identity in relation to bigger structures that affect them.

Here, more reasons explaining the necessity to relate Przyjemski's work to the history of art, and namely to include his nonexistent institutions in the liberal, defiant anti-institutional tradition in art, distinctly exemplified by André Malraux's "imaginary museum", can be quoted. The most important of Przyjemski's fictitious institutions, the *Museum of Hysterics*, was established in response to real and metaphorical walls of social and political reality. Disturbances in periodization have a different meaning in Przyjemski's than in Malraux's work. The Polish artist keeps changing the dates for his museum and recently made a radical announcement that it will exist "until the exhaustion of Reality". Considering the historical and political background, Marcel Broodthaers's unreal museums, also founded in the symbolical year of 1968, seem more consistent with this idea. Since 1980, Przyjemski has been collaborating with Johan van Guelwe, who runs *The Museum of Museums*<sup>20</sup> in Wargen (Belgium); in 2011, he signed an agreement to cooperate with the Centre of Contemporary Art "Znaki Czasu" in Toruń, represented by Paweł Łubowski (who is currently the director of this institution, but also an artist). To celebrate this event, a plaque was set in the hall

<sup>20</sup> For more information see Borkowski, op. cit. p. 38, as well as essays by Thomas Strauss and Janusz Styczeń in *Museum of Hysterics 1968-2012*, op. cit.

of CoCA, commemorating the *Museum of Hysterics*.<sup>21</sup> Looking for real sister institutions can be seen as the final destination of the concept of the *Museum of Hysterics*, as Przyjemski began historicizing it in the new millennium.

To sum up this synthetic discussion of Przyjemski's anti-institutional concepts, I would like to stress once again that the paradoxical status of the *Museum of Hysterics* lies in the fact that this project cannot be easily categorized as utopian thinking. It does not announce the coming of ideal, impossible worlds. Instead, it offers an image of collective hysteria and contemporary symptoms, therapeutically developed in the imaginary world of their creator. Its "non-existence" is not prospective; it provides no remedies or solutions but hyperbolizes the absurd features of historical time. Therefore, I have interpreted them in a new way, without stressing the fundamental experience of being separated from reality, observed in Przyjemski's work, a reality which fails to generate the desired meaning and thus leads to self-driven, healing escapism. In this analysis, the "non-existence" of the institutions founded by the artist is treated as paradoxical evidence of his association with everyday life, or his involvement based on dreams but also on conscious abandonment of being an unconscious part of it.



<sup>21</sup> See Leszek Przyjemski: *Nieistniejąca Przytakująca Galeria «Tak» (1970-1974)*, Instytut Badań Obojętnych przy Nieistniejącej Przytakującej Gallerii «Tak», *Die Gaskammer der Kunst (1981-2012)*, *Museum of Hysterics (1968-2012)*, op. cit.

## ART WITHOUT A MUSEUM

Mateusz Bieczyński

Bariloche. A town in Patagonia, Argentina, with just over 100 thousand inhabitants, lying at the foot of the Andes in a picturesque valley with seven lakes. Tourists have named it the Switzerland of South America. It is equally famous for winter skiing, its beautiful scenery, water sports and mountain climbing, however, there is not even a single art gallery, never mind a museum. It has been reported on numerous occasions that there is a lack of cultural events in the region and limited access to cultural institutions – the nearest contemporary art museum is found in Bahia Blanca, a distance of 1000 km away. It's therefore obvious that the author of this article did not visit the region because of the latest art (or any other art for that matter).

Life, however, likes to surprise us. I'm sure it will seem to be slightly paradoxical when I tell you that the first feeling I had that there was something in this place connected with art was immediately after my arrival, in an ice-cream parlour, to which I had been invited by friends. While trying to select which one of the tens of flavours I should choose – and it's worth noting that each of them appeared attractive due to their intensive colour and sumptuous delicacies – I noticed six untouched containers with ice-cream in various shades of grey. They appeared to be similar to freshly-mixed cement. This can't be a coincidence – I thought to myself. Ordering them turned out to be harder than I had expected. I was



*Tomas Espina during the project From Cordoba to Bariloche. Photo: copyrights Secretaría de Cultura de la Nación*



Ruth Viegner, "Floating Object". Photo: copyrights Secretaría de Cultura de la Nación

dragged away by my friends, who convinced me that they wouldn't buy me grey ice-cream, because nobody would be able to forgive such tactless behaviour towards foreign guests. I gave in, although my instinct told me that cement ice-cream could not be a coincidence.

In actual fact, I hadn't been mistaken. The next day, I discovered that the town was in the midst of a festival, "In situ - art in the public space". The cement ice-creams represented the project of one of the invited artists - Joao Loureiro, who was expressing his reflections on the volcano dust which had covered the area. The artist had decided to conduct an experiment and test the parlour's clients. With the consent of the owner, but without public knowledge, he created volcanic ice-cream and placed it among the others, which were available everyday. He wanted to check if someone would buy it. In view of the fact that the contents of the containers were untouched when I arrived there, and judging from the reaction of my companions, they lost the competition with the colourful and delicious flavours.

It is worth highlighting that other installations exhibited during the festival appeared in equally unexpected ways. Meetings with them were a great surprise for people who had not paid attention to the few posters with information concerning the event.

For instance, it was difficult to work out that the greetings performed with an expressive gesture by the driver of a bus driving along the main streets of the town and near the national park were, in fact, part of the artistic performance of the Argentinian artist Tomas Espina. In Cordoba, situated over 1200 km away, he purchased a mini-bus, on which he painted a map of Argentina and marked the route which he wanted to follow. When he arrived in Bariloche he began the second part of his action, based on socialization - he gave a lift to the people he met by chance to wherever they wanted and, meanwhile, told them about his journey in great detail.

The main curatorial assumptions were to carry out large-scale interventions, which visibly inscribe themselves into the landscape, and to enter into bilateral dialogue.

The assumptions were perfectly matched by the Chilean artist Bernardo Oyarzun, who created a series of the anthropomorphic figures Chemamülles - in accordance with the patterns of traditional art of the Indian Mapuche tribe (literally People of the Earth) resident in the southern-central part of Chile and the south-west of Argentina. This project seems to have at least two meanings. Firstly, it contains a critical message regarding the territorial division which doesn't necessarily match the ethnographic





Ruth Viegner, "Objeto flotante". Photo: copyrights Secretaría de Cultura de la Nación



Bernardo Oyarzun, "Chemamules Mapuche". Photo: copyrights Secretaría de Cultura de la Nación

one. Secondly, it represents a connection with the initial significance of the figure, which was to take care of the area in which it was set. This is the next example of art which perfectly covers its presence – it gives the impression that it has been standing there forever.

Two other works have a similar ephemeral character – one created by Edgardo Madanes placed in open space and the space installation by Ruth Viegner. The first of these works, titled *The Lookout Point*, is a tent frame in a shape resembling an igloo with three longitudinal chimneys heading off in different directions. It was created with climbing plants transported from the Lujan River delta from near Buenos Aires. This hemispherical installation represents an alternative to the stone cathedral located in the same square. It is a symbolic call for a return to nature.

The second work carries the title of *Floating Object 46/11*. It is also a kind of frame, but this time built

from construction wire. From the right perspective, this ten-metre-high installation looks like a woman jumping into the Nahuel Huapi Lake behind it. The described festival was organized by the Argentine Ministry of Culture and Art. The selection of works and curatorial concept for each of the events was carried out by workers of the Visual Arts Office. This initiative is evidence that, despite the lack of any kind of institution dealing with modern art in the region, it is possible to find funds and people ready to highlight its presence. “In situ – art in the public space” is also a significant voice against the accusations directed towards contemporary art that it is targeted exclusively at large cultural centres and avoids provincial centres. The most important aspect in all this is, however, the fact that the transfer of this type of initiative to a local centre with no previous experience in the field took place without any loss in the quality of the presented works. Something worth imitating!



Joao Loureiro, “Uyehue Vulcano”. Photo: copyrights Secretaría de Cultura de la Nación

## MERCEDES-BENZ MUSEUM – STUTTGART

Tadeusz Sawa-Borysławski

A contemporary megalith or menhir – such an impression imposes itself when one beholds the museum situated on a gentle plateau slightly above street level. Subconsciously we classify this block as hi-tech new generation architecture. We may call it *new* since it has none of the futuristic aesthetics of Antonio Sant’Elia’s sketches or the idiosyncrasies of his successors from the last few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as Richard Rogers, Norman Foster or Nicholas Grimshaw.

It wasn’t so long ago when the progress of technology and science prompted a different kind of artistic fascination. These days, most industrial objects, gadgets or electronic devices are highly saturated by technology, however, they attempt to hide it. Contemporary technology is all about hiding technology, wrapping it up, so to speak. An industrial plant, an offset printer or a car – they are all made up of various composites featuring control systems. They are nothing more than sets of blocks, mechanisms assembled like Lego. Carefully designed with an abnormal attention to detail and packed with electronics, with their driving systems reduced to bare necessities, those objects have generated demand for compact and hermetic solutions. When speaking of buildings or mechanical objects there is one more level of complexity. It’s closely associated with Kazuo Shinohara’s observations, expressed in his essays more than three decades ago. Shinohara coined the expression of “an invisible machine”. He pointed out that when we look at objects like machines and technical devices what we really see is just the tip of a larger yet invisible mechanism, of a technological, social or economic origin. Their real extent is nearly impossible to comprehend, which is exactly the point that today’s hi-tech architecture is trying to make.

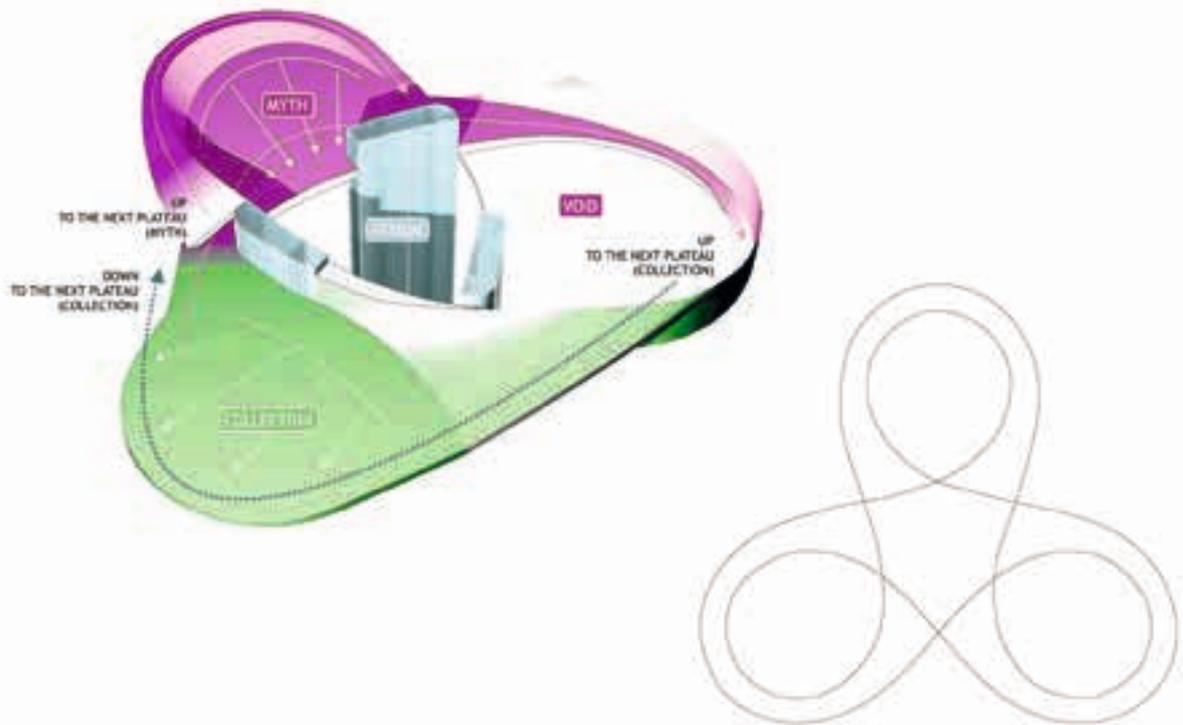
Mercedes Benz Museum with its narrow glass sheets cutting into the silver-grey façades may create some associations with car design from the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. More than anything, this kind of aesthetics represents today’s obsession with technology. Their very form – we’re talking about the museum with its detail (hi-tech) and its surroundings (megalith) are expected to appeal to the modern viewer. This stone-like formula is clearly drawn from some other concepts of UN Studio from the last decade. I am thinking of the furniture series designed in 2012 titled “Seating Stones” visibly corresponding with the very same formal trait. The gentle slope the museum is situated upon offers an unusual angle of approaching it, where the space of the square generates a specific mood. It bears similarities to an ancient *polis* by the way of shaping urban space around major edifices like temples, palaces or forums. Nowadays, large shopping centres



*View from the outside, the entrance section. Photo: T. Sawa-Borystawski*



*View from the outside, fragment of the façade. Photo: T. Sawa-Borystawski*



Primary drafts of the museum: two-dimensional sketches. Photo: from the UN Studio archives

(for example, Arena in Barcelona by Richard Rogers and Partners), multi-storey car parks (“Szewska Center” in Wrocław by Stefan Müller and Partners) or luxury motor retailers (Mercedes, Porsche, BMW, Ferrari...) have replaced agoras, temples and libraries in becoming significant landmarks of modern urban space. Their composition and structure are nearly as grand as the Vatican Palace, which is to be expected since their importance and global reach is enormously influential. They claim the same power and authority through various activities once restricted to those ancient buildings we’ve just mentioned. Megalithic references are set off mostly by the bulky form of the museum and the way it was processed and inserted into a public space, but a Celtic coil, a symbol of eternity, also springs to mind as a less obvious association. The structure of the interior and its layout serves as a frame for the whole building. It has two levels: flat and three-dimensional, which aids in presenting space as a framework of three loops, interconnected by passages, echoing the prehistoric trefoil spiral from Newgrange in Ireland – megalithic remnants over four thousand years old. This space-time model symbolized by a spiral constitutes the original idea behind the whole setting. The exposition has been arranged on two parallel

levels, conceptually speaking. One of them is fairly easy to read and occurs in most displays of this type. Each car company attempts to present its history and development chronologically. So there we have them: the founders, their first achievements and progress they’ve made. At the end, we are shown the latest models, straight from the production line. It’s extremely fascinating to be able to look closely at the masterfully designed Mercedes cars timelined from the earliest and finishing with a brand spanning new model. Passing of the time is a dominant concept behind this exposition and the obvious unfolding of the time and progress. Still there is another, alternative chronology presented through the series of glass displays mounted on the walls of sloped passages connecting respective levels. They document our most profound historical moments. Each cabinet is devoted to just one event and, along with short information, a picture or a copy of a relevant document, we may find some souvenirs from the past. Notably, the shameful tragedies of WWII with its forced labour or even death camps have not been obliterated. And so the shining bodywork of a Mercedes has been confronted with a humble clog belonging to a concentration camp prisoner. It certainly does make an impact. It makes the whole experience more complete and



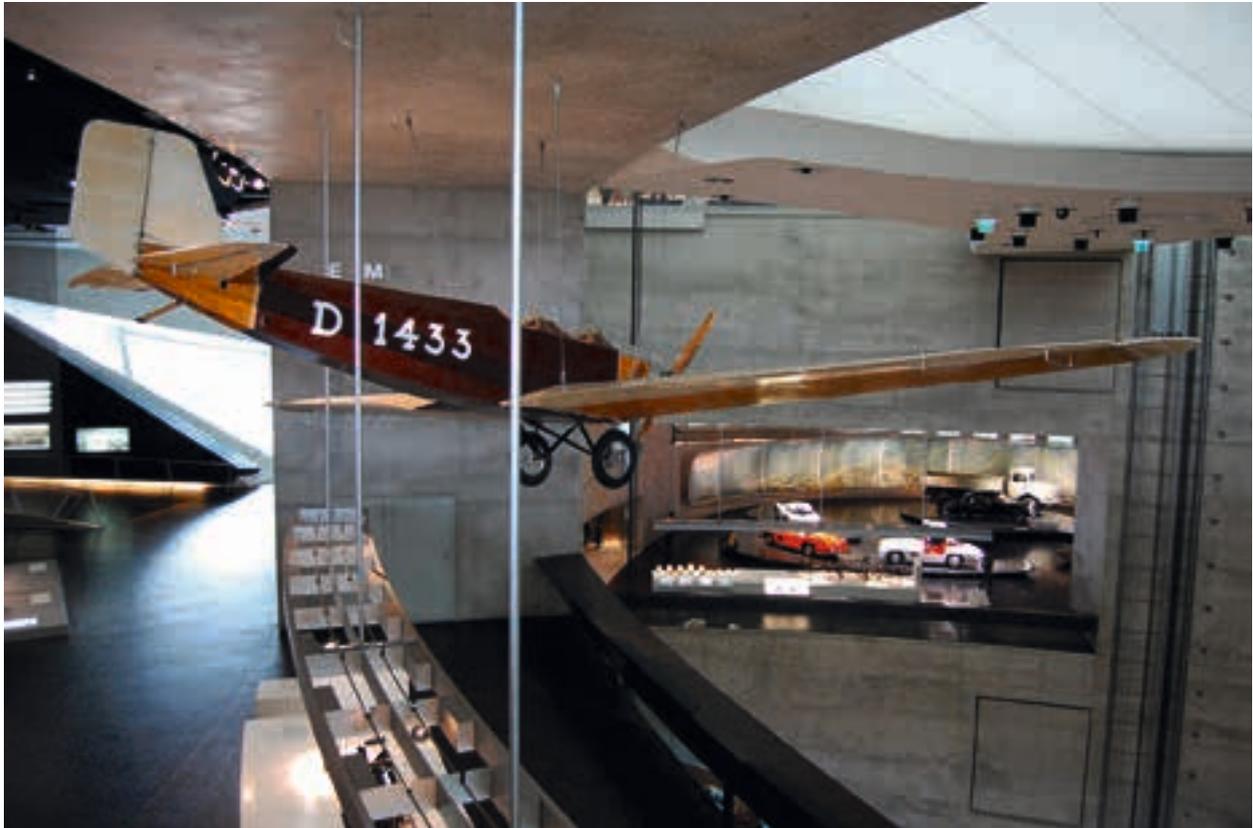
Primary drafts of the museum: three-dimensional sketches. Photo: from the UN Studio archives

just, when talking about the history of mankind, giving us the ability to appreciate luxury in its real proportions. The main exposition to be admired is the one presenting car production and the constant advancement of its technical excellence, but as far as those interested solely in modern history are concerned, the former can be skipped and still it would make a fascinating experience! We can investigate, step by step, the complex history of our civilization through technological progress and inventions. It consists of joys, tragedies, catastrophes, triumphs and failures, scientific inventions, and times of prosperity next to the periods of austerity. Thanks to the magic created by great technology, this museum devoted primarily to motorization serves quite a different kind of educational purpose. It would be unfair not to recognize the special value those two perspectives put into the whole experience.

At first, when we enter the building, its spatial layout doesn't seem clear or easy to comprehend, but swiftly we become at ease with it, as there is no hostility. Visitors can easily find their way to the atrium located in the very centre of the building. Its *open plan* layout allows them to locate the ramps where the glass cabinets have been placed. Slowly the geometry of this space unfolds its complex

structure, but logic and simplicity quickly follow as we start to comprehend its design: atrium first, followed by a ride in a futuristic elevator to the top level where we start our journey through the exhibition, beginning from the early days of the company. Consecutive ramps contain additional extensions for resting and chilling out. From there we may observe the other levels, find connecting ramps or simply pass through. The interior makes an impressive view with its richness and the multi-layered design. There are other elements adding up to an overall excitement like an LED lit ceiling, glowing with changing colours. The interior designers are extremely proficient with utilization of artificial and natural light, here they use light to cleverly aid the spatial awareness. All the materials, textures and features like elevators are designed and executed with the utmost care and great attention to detail, creating a sense of unity. It also makes a wonderful backdrop for all the exhibits.

This is entirely our choice then, whether we want to experience Mercedes Benz Museum only as a beautifully designed building and contemplate the luxury of its ambience, or simply limit ourselves to the journey through time, learning about the history of the car industry, or the history of our society of the last few decades. We are spoilt for choice



The interior; on the left - ramps with glass displays, in the centre - lounge, on the right - the exposition. Photo: T. Sawa-Borystawski

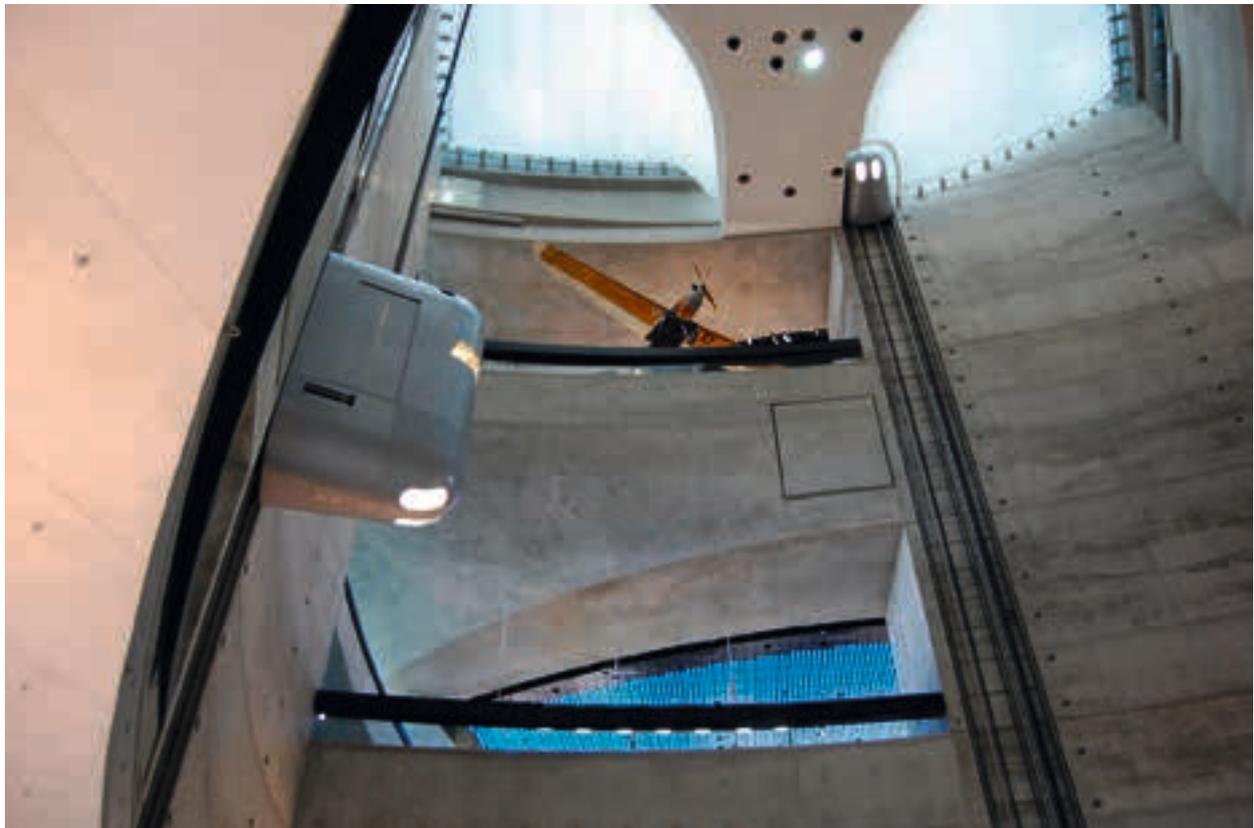


Exposition. With the row of glass displays further behind. Photo: T. Sawa-Borystawski

anyhow, with not two but three different tracks that we can follow. We may even choose all of them, making it a total experience, an exhausting but worthwhile task that leaves us with something more than just car industry trivia facts to ponder on. /

Mercedes-Benz Museum, Stuttgart, Mercedes Strasse 100 (Germany)

- content: car museum, souvenir shop, restaurant, offices, conference centre
- investor: DaimlerChrysler Immobilien, Berlin
- project: 2001-2006, UN Studio - Van Berkel & Bos, architects: Ben van Berkel and Caroline Bos and partners
- finished in May 2006



*The main hall – atrium and futuristic elevators. Photo: T. Sawa-Borysławski*

## I AM GLAD IF I CAN... Interview with Endre Tót

Marta Smolińska



Endre Tót, "I'm glad if I can stamp" (stamping on Cosey Fanni Tutti's bottom), London, 1976. Photo: E. Tót's archive

**Marta Smolińska:** I am glad if I can conduct an interview with you. Are you also glad, or perhaps would you be happier if you didn't have to do anything?

**Endre Tót:** When you mentioned in Istanbul during STARTER, an exhibition curated by René Block, about the idea of an interview, you immediately captured my imagination. What questions would you ask me by mail and how would I answer by mail? Your first question has surprised me a little, and is almost hurtful. In my life (what kind of life was it?!) there have been 1 or 2 times when, for a longer or shorter time, I have done nothing. Was I glad that I did nothing? You see, I also ask myself that question. Let me leave it unanswered. I have always been like a crocodile that is motionless for a long time, almost as if dead, but suddenly starts to attack fiercely.

**Marta Smolińska:** The expression "I am glad..." is typical of your artistic creativity and your actions. Was it an ironic form of rebellion in the communist reality of the 1970s in Hungary?

**Endre Tót:** I don't believe that, during the dictatorship, I could be included in the group of political artists, especially as I wasn't a political artist at all.

I resigned from direct political confrontation, it didn't suit the nature of my activity, but when I was withdrawn in my loneliness I reacted to the dictatorship in which I came to live.

My first Joy is from 1971. Just one sentence printed on cardboard: "I am glad that I could print this sentence - Endre Tót." In socialist countries everything that was printed, apart from business cards, was subject to censorship. The sentence was printed for me by an acquaintance, who worked in a printing house, secretly and illegally during the night shift in exchange for a bottle of wine.

Stamps were also censored. I obtained my first one at the beginning of the 70s, not in Budapest, but in Zurich with the help of another friend. "I am glad, if I can stamp." This sentence surrounded my smiling face. The risk connected with the stamp was clear for me: the stamp could also be used to produce thousands of leaflets in an hour, with a message: "Russians go home!", for example.

You could only find photocopiers in Budapest in official government offices, and they were under strict supervision. Photocopies were out of reach of private individuals.

In 1975 I was invited to take part in the Expanded Media Festival in Belgrade. I wrote on a piece of A4 paper: "I am glad if I can xerox." Then I copied the page a thousand times, but all of the cards differed slightly because, fortunately for me, each of them



Andre Tót, "Der Kommunismus macht mich froh", 1978/89. Photo: E. Tót's archive

had the sentence in a slightly different place. After three days of the Xerox-Aktion campaign, gallery spaces were full of photocopies. Yugoslavia was then a world with much greater freedom. *TÓTAlJOYS*, a film I made in 1972 in Balázs Béla's Studio, was shown to the public for the first time in Belgrade. One of the many 16 mm films, *Joy* showed: "I am glad if I can take one step." For three minutes I stood in an empty room and then, after three minutes, I took one step. The Party Committee in the film studio immediately banned this: "In this country, can you only be glad when you take one step?" We lived in an absurd world, in which you could only react with absurdity.

**Marta Smolińska:** What did the so-called goulash communism mean for you? Did that period awaken and inspire your artistic activity in any particular way?

**Endre Tót:** In the West, there was a saying: Hungary is the "funniest barrack" in the socialist camp. In actual fact, the pressure was "lukewarm", the whole country sat in lukewarm water. I would call it mud, the mildness of the system reminded me of a puddle, a spiritual puddle.

Until the end of the 1960s I was still quite active in the Budapest artistic scene. I was an exhibitor in semi-legal exhibitions, I belonged to the *Iparterv-Gruppe* - a group of young unofficial artists, who in the years 1968-1969 exhibited their artistic works in the *Iparterv Firma* cultural centre and who bravely spoke out against official art. This artistic approach became political activity.

In 1970, I gave up painting and started to deal with conceptualism. At the same time, I broke off all contact with the Hungarian artistic community. I lived in *TÓTAl* isolation, which I chose myself. I had no choice, this was the only road to cross into a completely different world. During my internal emigration, which was also aimed at my own underground environment, I worked intensively. In the mid 70s, my work became known in the international avant-garde. I, however, lived in a dictatorship, so how was it possible? Solely thanks to mail. My parcels, which I sent from my ivory tower to all corners of the world, flew through the "Iron Curtain". The parcels I received and sent kept me alive. But what kind of life was it...

**Marta Smolińska:** What significance does rebellion have for you? You left the Academy of Fine Arts in Budapest after a conflict with your professor - was that the first real rebellion in your artistic life? Could you tell us about the next steps along that road?

**Endre Tót:** I didn't mention my exclusion from the Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts during our meeting

in Istanbul. I am curious to know how you found out about that incident?

My professor, Gyula Papp, had earlier been a student of Bauhaus and in the Weimar he became part of a surprising event. During communism, he didn't remain faithful to his Bauhaus past, as a representative of social realism he even denied his past. This poor guy reminded me of the terrible head of the KGB, Beria. We were afraid of him. We didn't learn anything from him, but he just bombarded us with ideology which I ignored. He expelled me either because of that, or because he believed I was untalented. Untalented in the traditional understanding of the word talent. That was for me like a kick up the backside. However, as Tatlin said: "The future belongs to those who have no talent for traditional art."

I can't say anything about amazing rebels connected with revolution.

My work became *TÓTally* against official "art", but my disgust was expressed in the tranquility of loneliness, and not in provocation in front of a wide audience. Was I a coward? My cowardly behaviour saved me from becoming a hero.

**Marta Smolińska:** Are you glad today when you can create your art in a democratic country? Your art is, after all, very closely connected with resistance and is set in the communist times. Were you still glad when you left Hungary to live in Germany?

**Endre Tót:** That question has awoken in me reflections and I'm not able to give you an unequivocal answer without hesitation. In 1978, I travelled from a country with a dictatorship to West Berlin, to a free country. The wall was still standing. The western part of the divided city was an island of freedom, in a totalitarian system, in the very centre of another country. That contrast strengthened the feeling of freedom even more so. After Budapest, I finally felt *TÓTally* free there. It was an amazing experience. However, homesickness for my country kept me in a state of anxiety for a long time, because I knew that, for at least 5 years, I would not return to my homeland. I felt *TÓTally* free for the first time in my life only when I could travel to visit my home. I cannot say that I was always glad that I left Hungary. My journey out of Hungary does not belong to my most beautiful memories, although I have lived in Germany for over 30 years, since 1980 in Cologne. I have never thought that I made the wrong decision, at the time it was the only possible one, but even after the political breakthrough I never considered returning to Hungary for good. Answering your question has awoken some strange ambivalent feelings inside me.

**Marta Smolińska:** Is rebellion still possible today? If it were possible, would you like to once again begin your journey as a young artist?

**Endre Tót:** Reincarnation belongs to the world of fantasy. To be young again? To once again experience the same life in a completely different way? You see – I also ask about it. Why am I asking? I think that the age of rebellion has passed, it doesn't seem to be modern any more. I ask myself if I have made a mistake? During the street demonstrations in very many different countries, I constantly expected various forms of rebellion, but there weren't any, nothing happened! (nothing ain't nothing). During the leaflet actions in Gandaw and Budapest, from behind a black mask, I handed out blank cards of A4 paper to passers-by. People calmly looked at the card from both sides, and then continued on their way. The annulled message vanished into nothingness.

**Marta Smolińska:** While artists in America were sharply criticising abstract expressionism, you combined informel with press photos and phrases taken from newspapers in your pictures. So you combined two very contrasting trends in your pictures: abstract expressionism and elements, which seem typical for Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. I assume that such a set was only possible in Eastern Europe, where artists worked in a completely different context to the one in America. Why did you combine these two contrasting trends? Was it also an expression of criticism against the modern world?

**Endre Tót:** My abstract-expressionist works, which I painted in the mid 1960s, are almost unknown outside Hungary, that's why your question about those pictures surprises me. Probably you have seen a few reproductions (*On the street*, 1965) in Piotr Piotrowski's book *Awangarda w cieniu Jalty*. Piotrowski wrote only a few lines about my abstract-expressionist pictures – in Polish, so I unfortunately don't and won't understand them until my Polish daughter translates them to me. This combination was, in fact, an Eastern European phenomenon which didn't occur in America. Why did I combine these two contrasting trends? By using letters and photos between angry brush strokes, I wanted to evoke daily life in my pictures. I was definitely influenced a little by Rauschenberg and Johns, though I knew very little about their work with black and white reproductions. It was rare for an art magazine from the western world to reach us.

**Marta Smolińska:** Why did you stop painting pictures? Did you consider that in the 1970s that medium had become outdated?

**Endre Tót:** I have been asked that question in Budapest a hundred times already. Above all, the older generation is confused, that's why I radically broke my painting career. Many years ago, one of the most well-known Hungarian art historians, Géza Perneczky, wrote in one of the art magazines: "Perhaps Tót was the most phenomenal painting talent among the artists living to the east of Amsterdam in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, Tót, at his own will, stopped painting because of the reality he recognised and believed to be more important." The first part of the quote troubles me, but the second part is fine with me. I am looking for an answer to your question. My short painting period developed inside me a deep feeling, which cannot be described in a few words. I was a pioneer of Hungarian informel painting, and my experiments were then severely criticised, however, it didn't disturb me, I was occupied by the matter. What made me suffer was my terrible living conditions. My little kitchen was also my studio, and in this small area I painted hundreds of pictures on paper and cardboard. I had no money for canvas. I dreamed about larger sizes, about the American size of pictures, like the ones of de Kooning and Pollock. The small area was not enough for me. I even thought about painting live in public in the theatre (as an action). My work was completely against the ideology of "art" of the dictatorship, but this couldn't be the reason why I stopped painting. What finally made me stop was the lack of free communication through my paintings. I couldn't exhibit at all, and definitely not on the other side of the "Iron Curtain". I missed TÓT freedom and I found free spirit in non-material art. My problem with the studio was instantly resolved, because I didn't need one any more. Materials were not necessary either, my Joy was created with just a few cents: I spent all my money on postage stamps. That's right, the mail! It liberated me. The mail was the only instrument of the Eastern-European avant-garde, allowing them to move to the free world. The mail saved me from drowning in the puddle of Kádár's regime.

**Marta Smolińska:** How would you describe conceptualism in your work? After a break, you began to paint again, but in your pictures it was possible to see many traces of conceptualism and its influence. These pictures are simply absent...

**Endre Tót:** In the early 1960s, I began my artistic career with abstract-expressionist pictures. By the end of the 60s I had introduced many stylistic changes and had begun many things again. Eagerly I went in any direction – like in a panic. My panic finished in my resignation from painting. Then I





Endre Tót, "I'm glad if I can stamp" (stamping on Cosey Fanni Tutti's knicker), London, 1976. Photo: E. Tót's archive

moved painting into the non-material world. In the book *My unpainted canvases*, which I produced in 1970, I discovered pictures which I still intended to paint. Painting still lived inside me virtually. The medium which immortalized my “night visit” in the National Gallery in London was also an art book (*Night visit to the National Gallery*, Beau Geste Press, Devon, Great Britain, 1974). I covered all the reproductions in the official National Gallery catalogue with black paint.

These non-material works have led to my thoughts on the idea of “Absent pictures”. After a long break, I began to paint again. Although I used traditional painting tools (brushes, paint and canvas), I turned my back on what we call traditional painting. I work on classics to make them invisible, to hide them behind an empty white canvas.

**Marta Smolińska:** What role do words play in your pictures?

**Endre Tót:** Even between the wild brush strokes of my informal pictures of the 1960s, scribbled words and letters, quotes from the past and my deep memories sometimes appeared. Integrating words into the visual world has accompanied me in all my creativity, they also appeared in my conceptual “pictures” – in quotation marks, that’s why those pictures don’t have much in common with painting.

**Marta Smolińska:** You play ironically with the tradition of painting. Can your path in this area also be regarded as a kind of rebellion? How would you like to stretch, widen or even open the borders of traditional paintings?

**Endre Tót:** If by rebellion you understand a certain type of revolution, maybe this appeared in my “Absent pictures”, but in a very gentle, quiet version, which was played out in the four walls of my studio. An experiment to stretch the borders of painting. I made painting non-material and removed it to the world of imagination.

During my retrospective exhibition in Museum Ludwig in Cologne it can be followed best of all: beside the original [sic!] painting of van Gogh’s *Drawbridge* I hung a “reproduction” of the Dutch painting which I made myself. A canvas of the same size presented a fragment of the original canvas as a contour, and the real painting as an empty white surface. By suggestive presentation of the frame and placement of a description underneath in the form of a true legend, usually connected with the painting, I left the calling of the drawbridge to the imagination of the audience. I can clarify one question (or 100): what is the difference between a visible and invisible painting? Between reality and

fantasy? Why am I asking the question? Was I ironic towards Vincent’s painting, did I deconstruct or maybe even destroy it? No! I am drawn by the mystery of emptiness, lack and absence.

Van Gogh relied on what he saw. This is totally normal. I do the exact reverse: I paint what I don’t see. This is also TÓTally normal.

**Marta Smolińska:** In 1972 you gave an impulse to mail art in Eastern Europe. Was that also a type of rebellion against the communist system? Were you glad when the Hungarian police didn’t know who sent the messages? Were you ever revealed?

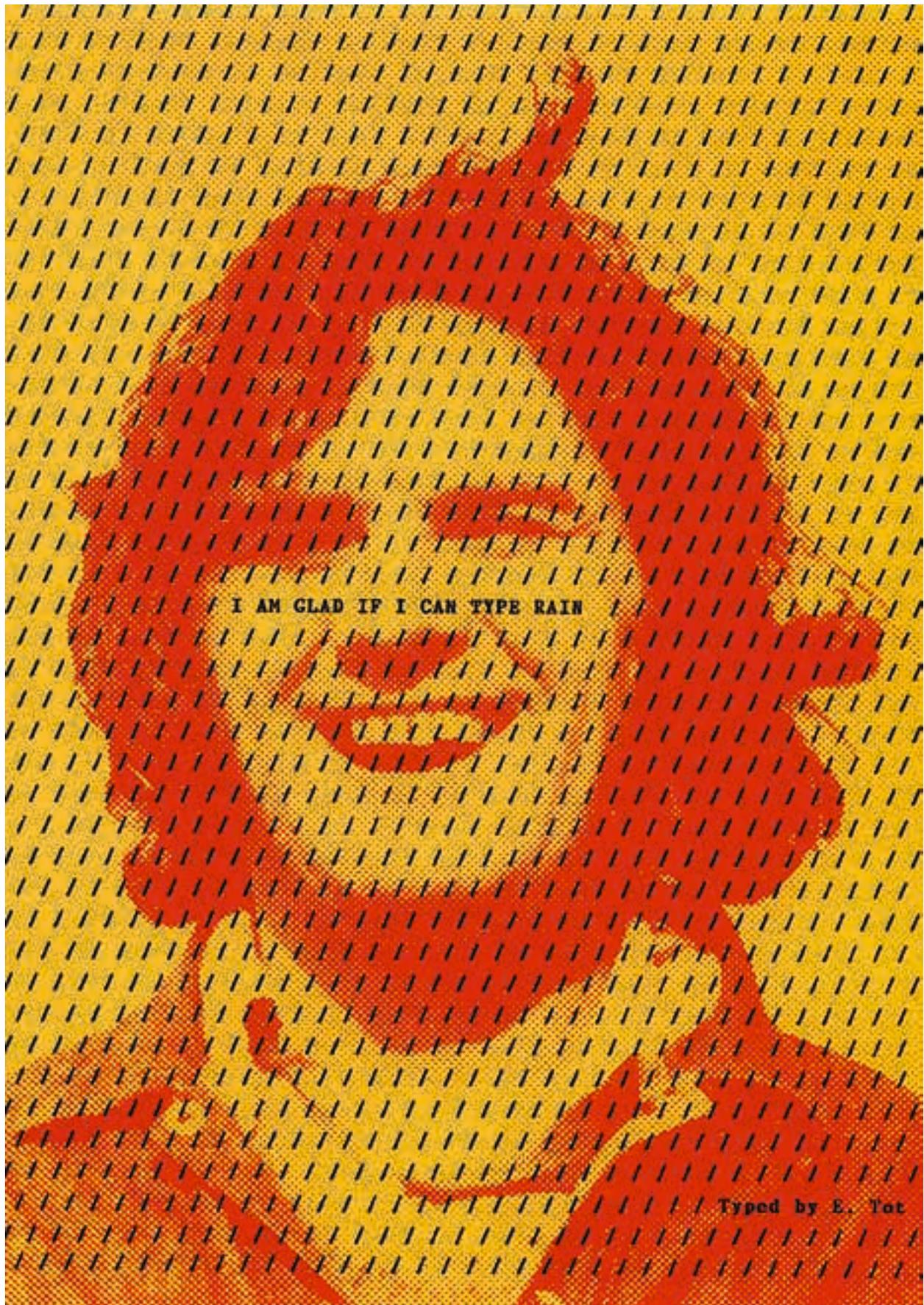
**Endre Tót:** As I mentioned before, the mail had a special significance for me in Budapest. I can not stop highlighting the importance of the mail being the only possible break from isolation (the motto printed on my paper letters was: “I am writing to you because I am here, and you are there”). If I hadn’t discovered the post, my life would look completely different today.

In 1971 I took part in the biennial in Paris in Envois Section – an exhibition which was historic as it was the debut of mail art. Beside the old precursors, such as Duchamp, Yves Klein and Ray Johnson, there were also representatives of Fluxus and early conceptualism, such as Ben Vautier, George Brecht, Genesis P-Orridge, Cosey Fanni Tutti and Nam June Paik. A year later, J. M. Poinot, the curator of Envois Section, published his book: *Mail art – communication à distance*, concept. The book published my first Zero-Stücke (letters, postcards, telegraphs). C. Richard, a good friend of Ray Johnson was also included in the book. For years we sent each other special, personally created postal packages, but never wrote a “normal” letter to each other. Our relationship ended only when he passed away. My mailbox was also filled with wonderful packages from Brecht, Maciunas, Vostell, Dieter Roth, Abramović, Pierre Restany, Higgins, Filliou and Ken Friedman. Thanks to mail, I quickly became part of the international avant-garde. Mail art is the strangest chapter in the history of art: artists sent each other wonderful works without any economic interest. These were poetic works, often combined with philo-physical considerations. Far away from the art market. It never became a commodity for the galleries. The mail, despite the dictatorship, worked surprisingly well. It was always a mystery for me as to why. I believe that the censors didn’t know what to do with the strange parcels entering and exiting the country.

Besides the reality of the mail-art parcels, I also used the post office to establish contact with non-commercial galleries, museums and publishing



Endre Tót, "Outdoor Texts", Amsterdam, 1980. Photos: E. Tót's archive



Endre Tót, "I am glad if I can type rain", 1973/94. Photo: E. Tót's archive

houses. The majority of my artistic books from the 70s were published in the West, all of them in English. I had to get the permission of the censor for that, show the manuscripts and layout before sending them.

I remained faithful to the mail in Germany. I still used it as intensively as in Budapest, however, when I had to move to e-mails, my mailbox suddenly began to be empty, that's why life is given a nostalgic feeling from "good old mail".

**Marta Smolińska:** Were you ever afraid as an artist, that you would have to pay a high price for your actions? Where did you see the borders of rebellion? Were you in danger of going to prison in Hungary?

**Endre Tót:** In the middle of 1978, I received a DAAD scholarship for a year in West Berlin. In the eyes of the government of the Eastern Block, the scholarship was an irritating red rag. From the start I knew that it would not be easy to reach West Berlin. Even well-known opposition writers, artists and musicians from all the Eastern Block countries were able to receive permission only with the help of the international press. My application for permission to travel was rejected four times in one year, after the fifth rejection I started to live in fear that I was attracting too much attention and becoming too noticeable. My first direct conflict with the rulers. Finally, thanks to protests in the western press, I was liberated from the hopeless position. In the early hours of the morning, around sunrise (I have, for many years, got up at midday) I received a telephone call that "we ask you to immediately" appear in the Ministry of Internal Affairs. "Immediately" they pushed a passport in my hand. My case had become a political one, it was even dealt with by the Politbiuro, because they didn't want the refusal of permission for my journey to be spread in the international press. The government gave in. However, I was not allowed to return to Hungary, my flat was confiscated, but my brother managed to save all of my work. The furniture and other fittings, just like my bed, on which I nursed many "friendships", remained.

**Marta Smolińska:** Can you imagine yourself holding a sign with the sentence: I am glad that I have a child with the Polish artist Ewa Partum? When you hear about that, it's possible to conclude that, in the 70s, contact between Polish and Hungarian artists was very close, right?

**Endre Tót:** Poland in the seventies was the only Eastern Block country where I felt free. It was unthinkable for me to show my conceptual works in Budapest. However, I could show them in Kraków,

Poznań, Warsaw, Wrocław, Łódź and Gdańsk. I was personally present at all of the exhibitions. In 1972 I had an exhibition in Galeria Foksal, in 1974 at the International Drawing Triennale in Wrocław and even received an award for 3 large-scale drawings. On one card, for example, it was possible to see a line with the writing: "I am glad, if I can draw a line." These drawings are currently placed in the collections of the Museum of Art in Łódź. Even the Ministry of Culture in Budapest found out about the events in Wrocław - I had to go there and listen to a reprimand, because I had not requested permission for the exhibition, in other words, I had not given them my work to be censored.

In Galeria Akumulatory in Poznań, during the Zero-Typing event, I wrote only zeros for three days: "I am glad if I can type zeros." We first stuck thousands of pieces of typed sheets on the wall, and a week later we sent them with my "Zeropost-Briefmarken" stamp around the world. (Action + exhibition + mail art).

In Gdańsk, during the F.A.R.T. Festival, I met some wonderful young Polish artists, as well as Teresa Murak (my heartfelt greetings!). In the spring of 1973, the Galeria Adres (Łódź) invited me to do a one-man show. Did I arrive with a question, ten questions? The tenth question was: Why am I asking?

I didn't spend the night after the opening alone. Nine months later I received a telegram from Łódź ... from Ewa.

**Marta Smolińska:** What would you be the most glad about now? Which artistic project would you propose now?

**Endre Tót:** I had to think about the last question a little. I was close to an answer... but finally nothing came to mind. "I am glad when nothing comes to mind." /

## / HDLU - THE CREATIVE CIRCLE

Gaella Alexandra Gottwald

### **The Croatian Association of Visual Artists (HDLU)**

The Croatian Association of Visual Artists (HDLU) is a non-governmental, non-profit and politically neutral union of professionals. Its membership consists exclusively of visual artists of all generations, working in all forms of expression and disciplines. The Croatian Association of Artists, once known as the Society of Arts was founded in 1868. It came at a time when its founders wanted to modernize domestic arts and, modelled on the Austrian Museum of Art and Industry, its purpose was to bring Croatian art into the European framework. The association evolved according to the times and political events and changed its name, location, secretaries and presidents, but was continuously active. The desire for international exhibitions and exposure began to be achieved during the first decades of the existence of the association. The first international exhibition was held in Trieste (1879/80, 1881/82) after which there were a number of successful exhibitions at art centres all over Europe: Budapest (1885, 1896), Copenhagen (1896), Paris, Rome, Prague, which created the foundation for the equal participation of Croatian artists on the European art scene.

Between the two wars, the association organized the construction of its own building, for holding regular exhibitions.

The House of Artists, or as we currently call it, the Meštrović Pavilion, stands as an unbelievable monument to the intertwined relationship between politics and art. Since its conception, this circular building has been unique—with a history shaped by the turbulent and fascinating political changes of the region.

### **The Art Pavilion**

It was in 1933, during the times of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes - the Kingdom of Yugoslavia - that the Croatian art society formerly known as “Strossmayer” began looking for a new exhibition space in Zagreb. As they began their search, a monument to King Peter I the Liberator (Karađorđević) was commissioned to the then leading Croatian sculptor and president of the Art Society, Ivan Meštrović. Seeing an opportunity, he ingeniously suggested that, instead of a sole sculpture of the King on horseback, the monument to the King should be raised inside a new majestic building. Despite the sociopolitical crisis under the monarchist-fascist dictatorship of King Alexander, and thanks to persistent diplomatic negotiations, Meštrović’s proposal was finally accepted. As a result, Zagreb became the only city in the Kingdom to have an art pavilion that also doubled as a political monument. Meštrović envisioned the building not as a roofed structure, but as a modern Tholos with a tiered,



*Meštrović Pavilion building in 1930s. Photo: HDLU archive*

open central section. As engineers and architects were brought in to collaborate, the building's design evolved, resulting in a new solution which entailed covering the central area with a reinforced concrete dome with inlaid glass prisms.

It was the architect Zvonimir Kavurić who constructed the dome. A significant engineering achievement, the dome was made of reinforced concrete 19 metres in diameter and with a thickness of only 6 centimetres. Produced in Sweden, the inserted glass prisms provide the building with ideal natural diffused light, creating an incredible effect. On all fronts, the building broke from the usual architectural trends of the times. Instead, it was a reflection of Meštrović's vision of space. According to the renowned art historian Dr. Ivo Maroević, "It was not architecture of an architect but rather that of a sculptor."

The result of Meštrović's vision was a modern rotunda, with a colonnade of 36 reinforced concrete pillars lined with stone tiles. The pillars suggest traditional building techniques of monolithic stone, reminiscent of antiquities, whilst also evoking the Dalmatian renaissance, planted within a central European context. The interior space is structured for polyvalent programs, so that the large central hall was primarily assigned to sculpture exhibitions, while the first floor ring, balcony of the central hall, and the ground floor were assigned to exhibitions of other forms of visual arts (painting, drawing, photography and design).

In the period when it was built, Meštrović's pavilion was a unique exhibition hall in Europe and the world. Positioned in an exclusive neighbourhood, slightly to the east of the main square, its

monumental circular design meant that it stood out amidst the rectangular architecture of the surrounding buildings of the 1920s and 30s.

The grand opening of the building was the last monarchist manifestation in Zagreb, just prior to the fall of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The program of the Art Pavilion included numerous permanent and travelling exhibitions and began with the formal opening of the exhibition "A Half Century of Croatian Art" on December 1, 1938.

Through the summer of 1941, the Art Pavilion fulfilled its function as Meštrović had envisioned. However, due to its monumental character and prominent location, the round pavilion attracted political representatives and found itself frequently in their grip.

#### **From a parking lot for tanks, through a Mosque, to the Museum of the Revolution**

When the German occupying forces arrived in Zagreb in the spring of 1941, they used the pavilion as a parking lot for their tanks. From 1941-1944, the pavilion was converted into a mosque. Having been expelled by the politician Ante Pavelić, the art association was given only three days to evacuate. By removing the artists association, Ante Pavelić tightened the alliance between the Catholic and Muslim fascist factions.

Each change of use created specific interventions, from total demolition to inventive approaches and renewal for the building. For example, the interior was renovated during the conversion into a mosque. Under the architect Zvonimir Pozgaj, the problems of thermal and acoustic insulation were solved with the introduction of a new arched ceiling made



*Meštrović Pavilion turned in 1940s into a mosque with added minarets. Photo: HDLU archive*

of iron and concrete, and a massive, internal wall surface was divided into niches. In addition to the large central prayer space, an office was built for the imam, as well as a study room for religious studies, two small apartments, and one for the imam and another for the guards. The walls were covered in calligraphic verses from the Koran and ornamental decorations that evoked both Slavic and Islamic iconography. All the galleries and windows faced towards Mecca.

The architect Stjepan Planić designed the exterior of the mosque. He placed three 45-metre-high minarets about 10 metres in front of the building, using stones from recently demolished synagogues. The mosque, just like the previous art pavilion, did

not last even half a decade. At the end of the Second World War, German political prisoners were used to demolish the minarets. The building once again became an exhibition space, but this time as the Museum of the Communist Revolution.

In the early 1950s, a new architect took on the task of converting the interior from that of a mosque into the permanent exhibition space for the Museum of the Revolution. Vjenceslav Richter was radical in his alterations of the space. He deconstructed the original circular floor plan and introduced a console balcony and central staircase. The intervention was made in parts and not as a solid structure. He also covered the glass prisms with asphalt. The Museum of the Revolution displayed various artefacts and

documents from the Second World War, heavy artillery and a huge mural created by the painter Edo Murtić, to depict the revolution.

By the 1980s, there was more and more pressure to change the purpose of the pavilion, the communist bloc was falling apart, and it was felt that a more contemporary use of the space was needed. The curator of the museum invited the architects Ivan Crnković and Dubravka Kisić to draw up a feasibility study on restoring the building to its original form.

### 1990s - Home of Croatian Artists

However, it wasn't until the 1990s that real change came - again, in tandem with the political shifts in the region. In 1990, the Museum of the Revolution's collection was moved to the army barracks in Črnomerac, and in 1992, on the 900<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the city of Zagreb, the pavilion was almost given a new role, as a mausoleum. It was to become the final resting place of the most important Croatian leaders and kings. It was to be a monument to the Croatian greats.

This new conversion of the pavilion met with much protest. Ante Rašić, the president of the Croatian Association of Artists at the time, along with art historians, art critics, curators, visual artists, a wide range of intellectuals and more than 200 students from the academy, as well as all the humanistic faculties, rose up and organized an exhibition "Document-Arguments", which argued the case as

to why the building should be returned to its rightful purpose and why its rightful successor is the HDLU. Soon afterwards, the Croatian Association of Artists moved into the circular venue.

The third renovation ensued in 2001. Following designs of the architect Andrija Mutnjaković, all the layers of the various conversions were demolished. The double layers of the domed ceiling were removed, the half floor removed and a circular fence was built on the upper level. In 2003, the first phase of reconstruction was completed.

### Circle - inspiring site specific works by contemporary artists

Today, the building is composed of three galleries: the Barrel Gallery, the Ring Gallery and the PM Gallery. Each has its own specific function, and can work as both a separate entity and part of a whole. The singularity of the circular form along with the ideological context that has always been included in the history of this monument and building are often the reason for various interventions, performances and site-specific installations.

The Meštrović Pavilion, with its incredible history and form, is an example to everyone of a very special and diverse history and, with its mission and openness, is fostering all expressions of creativity, from prestigious world premieres and biennials to grass-roots movements, with the desire to inspire and motivate the public through art.



The building today, during the Astra Zeneca Conference. Photo: HDLU archive

## INHOTIM: ORCHIDS AND CONTEMPORARY ART

Rosa Lleó

**Built from the collection of a mining magnate and surrounded by more than 1,500 different types of plants, Inhotim is an alluring place, rife with contradictions.**

Inhotim is located in central Brazil, hundreds of miles away from the major coastal cities. To get there, you have to fly in to the Belo Horizonte airport and then take a bus from the central station. Either that, or rent a car with a GPS to lead you along the reddish dirt roads to the remote town of Brumadinho. On the outskirts, a few women stand waiting in front of the deserted bus station; the trains here cater only to the mining industry. A handful of farm workers sit in plastic chairs drinking *pinga* under an asbestos roof. A few mangy dogs roam the unpaved streets. The hope that the park will serve as an economic motor by attracting tourists has yet to become a reality.

Inhotim is like something out of science fiction. There are no traces of the reddish soil that stains the houses and clothing of the inhabitants of this region, Minas Gerais. After long hours of car travel through dusty towns, past tractors and through field after field, we arrive at a tropical oasis, where we find a full parking lot and a footpath lined with tropical plants. Uniformed employees welcome us from atop golf carts. It feels like walking into Dr. No's lair.

Inhotim's history began in the 1980s when Bernardo Paz (a businessman who made his fortune selling iron to China) used a portion of his wealth to buy nearly 600 acres of land. He wanted to build a country house where he could keep his collection of contemporary art. With the help of a friend, the renowned landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx, he slowly transformed the plot into an enormous botanical garden where he installed a number of pavilions to house the pieces in his collection. Encouraged by his connections among the *intelligentsia* of the Brazilian art world, in 2004 Bernardo Paz opened his collection to a group of professionals for the first time as the Inhotim Contemporary Art Center. A new team took over in 2006 and the Inhotim Cultural Institute was constituted as a new legal and administrative entity. The name comes from the previous owner of the land, Mr. Tim (Inho, is a diminutive of the word *senhor*, "mister" in Portuguese). The collection currently includes more than 500 works of art.

The complex is spectacular; no artwork could ever seem tedious in such a powerful setting. National artists like Cildo Meireles, Helio Oiticica and Tunga are given a privileged position, with pieces that



*Dan Graham, "Bisected Triangle Interior Curve". Photo: E. Eckenfels, INHOTIM archive*





*Cildo Meireles, "Desvio para o vermelho". Photo: P. Motta, INHOTIM archive*

might be difficult to accommodate elsewhere because of their size – like *Desvio para o vermelho* or the *Cosmococas*– along with Brazilian artists from subsequent generations like Ernesto Neto, Rivane Neuenschwander, Adriana Varejão and Irano do Espírito Santo. As far as international artists are concerned, nearly all of the heavyweights from the contemporary art scene are represented, such as Albert Oehlen, Olafur Eliasson, Zan Huang, Paul McCarthy, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Pipilotti Rist and Doris Salcedo, among many others. Anish Kapoor is working on a new installation in the woodlands.

Pieces that can't be housed in museums – because of their size or due to budgetary or political concerns – can find a home at Inhotim. The collection includes pieces that are housed in the different pavilions, as well as open air sculptures. In this setting, it stands to reason that some of the artists whose work is exhibited are outshone by nature's abundance, which silences some of the most interesting discourse usually associated with their work. Some of the pieces that are particularly suited to these surroundings include *Beam drop* (Chris Burden, 1984), a sculpture made out of 40-foot-long recycled steel beams that are a homage to the mining region where the park is located. The artist uses discarded railroad materials which, aside from taking on a near ancestral presence, are placed on a small hummock and act as lightning rods. *Bisected Triangle*, *Interior Curve* (a version of one of Dan Graham's legendary pavilions, 2002), standing outside the museum hall, draws attention not only to the viewer, but to the idyllic surrounding landscape, which takes on a new meaning.

Other artists, like Simon Starling or Dominique Gonzalez Foester, explore concepts related to the Brazilian sociopolitical context. Rirkrit Tiravanija recreates a *Maison Tropicale*, the prototype for prefabricated housing built in 1951 by the French architect Jean Prouvé for administrative workers and traders in the African colonies. In the interior we find documents and research on the palm tree, a plant that has been transformed into a cultural reference associated with the idea of the tropics.

The cement buildings are hidden amid the brush or along the shore of one of three idyllic lakes, like hideouts from a James Bond movie. They have housed mainly photographic work and videos from the collection, by artists such as Eugenio Dittborn, Luísa Lambri, Franz Ackermann, Steve McQueen and Tobias Rehberger.

All of this is surrounded by a botanical garden containing more than 4,200 plant species, which

is also home to a scientific laboratory dedicated to the study of biodiversity and the promotion of public awareness through research courses. There is an interest in fomenting the scientific ventures undertaken at Inhotim in parallel with the efforts to promote contemporary art, in order to put it on the map as one of the largest botanical research centers in Latin America. There is a unique relationship between the landscape and the pieces on exhibition here; nature becomes part of the experience of the artwork, as paths wind between rolling hills, through woods and labyrinths. These elements meld together into one giant work of art, called Inhotim.

### Another Brazilian Utopia

"Tell me about your dream. I want to bring it to life." Bernardo Paz spoke these words to Allan Swartzman, one of Inhotim's curators, as he recounts in the essay he wrote for inclusion in the collection catalogue. When we consider that this is the same country where the architects Oscar Niemeyer and Lúcio Costa, with the help of the dictator Juscelino Kubitschek, built an entire capital city out of thin air, Paz's intentions are not surprising. Inhotim can be read as the evolution of unique constructions like the MAC in Niterói (1996), built by Oscar Niemeyer as a 360 degree observatory over Guanabara Bay where the landscape seen through the windows becomes the museum's best piece. Lina Bo Bardi also has outstanding constructions like the MAM in Salvador de Bahia (1963), literally suspended over the beach, or São Paulo's Modern Art Museum (1959), which sits in the middle of Ibirapuera Park.

In contrast to what is happening in the Middle East, where the institutions look for franchises of the main European and American museums, Inhotim makes a statement drawing, both visually and conceptually, directly from Brazilian Modernism and maintaining a strong connection with the landscape. The park stands as a symbol of the country's current economic position, which does not depend on 'first world' histories. Proof of that is last year's São Paulo Biennial, beautifully titled *The Imminence of Poetics*. Curated by Luis Enrique Pérez Oramas, curator of Latin American art at MoMA and a poet himself, it showed how it is possible to create a joyful, young and genuinely Latin American biennial. But it is not only this event that leads the country's art scene. São Paulo might be a grey metropolis, but it has proudly created its autonomy and leadership in the southern hemisphere with major galleries and foundations.

Coming from southern Europe, where a series of public art institutions were built in the nineties but are now closing down due to deplorable political

management, and the atmosphere of precariousness and pessimism is causing a massive diaspora in the younger generation; and then visiting places like Inhotim, makes you rethink the future of the institution and the emergence of a new paradigm. Perhaps our prejudiced eyes are not able to read a new and different language of seduction, exuberance and optimism that creates the opportunity for artists to create works of art never thought of elsewhere?

Going back off the beaten path, it is hard not to think about the numbers and about the wealth of contradictions that such an enticing scenario as Inhotim inspires. Despite the fact that the employees are hired locally and that the center runs educational programs for schools and universities in the region, the real value of each of the commissions is something that does not go unnoticed. A large part of Inhotim's audience comes from the cosmopolitan upper middle class in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. Recently, *e-flux* has announced an international course for curators and there are rumours about the construction of a luxury hotel nearby. The park is becoming a prestigious destination which provides entertainment for domestic visitors and exclusivity for tourists in the art world.

As soon as we leave the grounds, though, I can't help but think back on the words I've just seen in a photograph of a piece by the Welsh artist Cerith Wyn Evans, taken from a song by Caetano Veloso: "*Aqui tudo parece que ainda é construção e já é ruína.*" (Here everything looks like it is still being built, but it is already a ruin). /

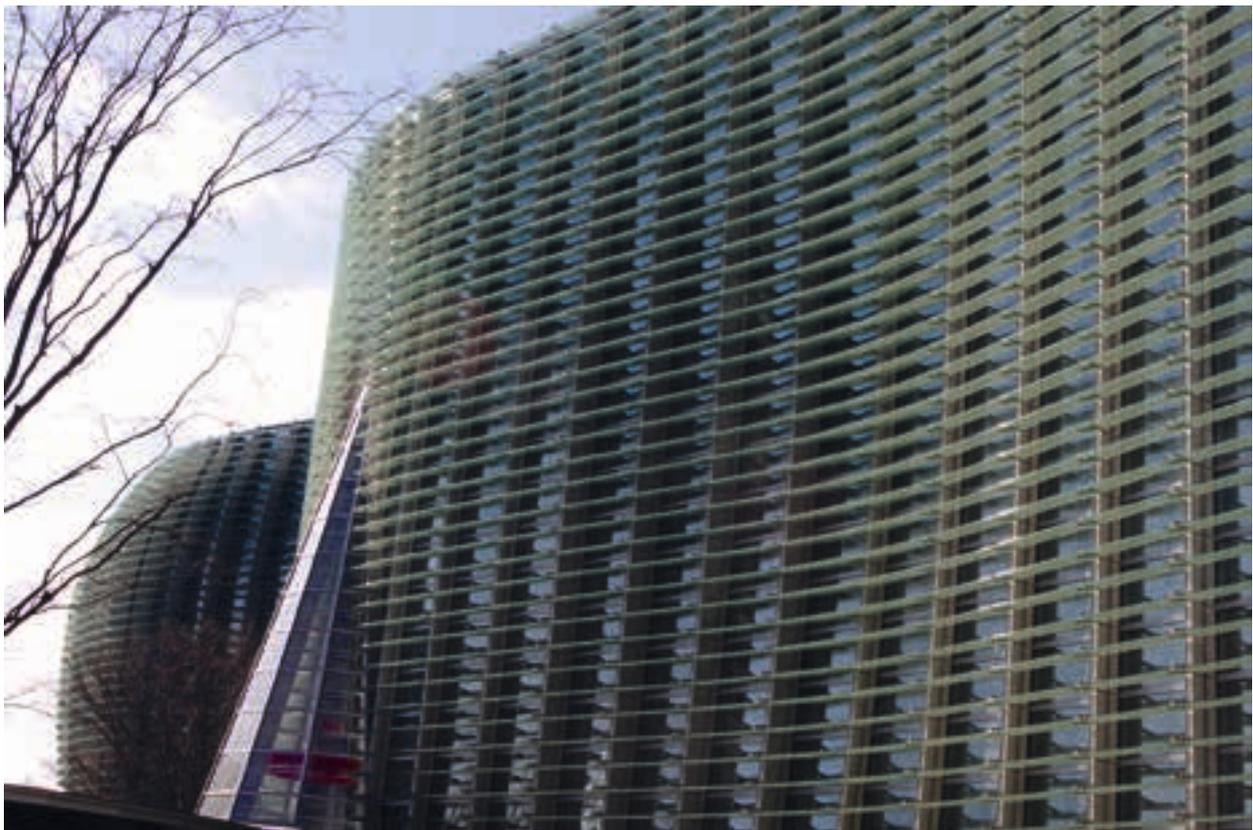


Simon Starling, "The Mahogany Pavilion". Photo: N. Siqueria, INHOTIM archive

## TOKYO'S ENORMOUS EXHIBITION MACHINE

Jerzy Olek

Tokyo. An unbelievably huge and densely inhabited metropolis with no organized urban model to speak of and therefore we, Europeans, think of it as chaotic. Nevertheless, it's full of examples of great architecture scattered all over the city. In this maze of buildings, with some luck we may find small art-galleries priding themselves in promoting the hottest trends and showcasing the latest works by daring young artists. There are hundreds of them although they are not easy to find, mostly situated on the top floors of high-rise buildings, advertised only at the intercom, in Japanese! Still their pace is intense with exhibitions lasting only about a week. This means short arrangements on the "one out, one in" basis, with one show being taken down and another fixed on the same day. Time is precious, so there is no need to hold up for a month if there is something even more exciting in the pipeline. There is a whale among the small fish and it is called The National Art Centre (NACT) - the first place for modern art presentation and promotion in Japan. It was established in 2006, designed by Kisho Kurokawa, who was involved in Metabolism in the 60s. The Metabolism movement was committed to creating high blocks of flats out of capsules, replaceable modules stacked up one onto another. The famous Nakagin Capsule Tower, made of capsules designed for living and office work, was Kurokawa's project. Today it is considered a



National Art Centre, Tokyo. Photo: J. Olek



National Art Centre, Tokyo. Photo: J. Olek

classic, a listed building even though it was erected as recently as 1972. Unlike Capsule Tower – where space is restricted – NACT is vast and roomy with virtually unlimited space. When approaching the centre one can see a glass curtain-wall with a cone-shaped entrance in a middle of it. It is connected to the nearby greenery with an *ironwood*-decked floor coming out of the building. The idea was to give this brand new architecture slightly antique detail with the rough and coarse texture of Borneo-cultivated timber. This is just one example of such symbiosis, but there are more, for example, a small bamboo shrubbery on the roof-terrace, or wicker furniture. A flowing glass façade wraps itself around two inverted cones, one containing a café and another – a gift shop. Introducing nature into this highly modern urban concept had a simple reason, it was meant to create an oasis for those tired of the utterly industrialized and urbanized Japan. The exhibiting space is rather impressive; the enormous 15,900 sq. m of the airspace, makes it the largest single exhibiting space in the world. The whole place, together with the library, lecture room, shop, technical maintenance rooms and storage, takes up nearly 50,000 sq. m. The main space is taken up by seven open plan rooms of 2,000 sq. m each, with no props like pillars or beams, which can be divided into smaller ones using the available sliding doors. One of the rooms



Capsule Tower. Photo: J. Olek



National Art Centre, Tokyo. Photo: J. Olek

is 5, another one 8 meters high. This means very large objects can be easily displayed here. NACT boasts 6 storeys with another two hidden from our sight below ground level. New arrivals are stored downstairs, which is also where committees and juries gather. Those which have been accepted for display are hoisted up in the elevators. There are window shutters, dividing walls and specially designed windows to prevent light from entering the showrooms.

Kisho Kurokawa, author of the renowned *Each one a Hero* treatise, devoted his concept to the idea of symbiosis when designing NACT. The floating glass façade enveloping atrium, here becomes his ideological calling-card, where he makes a statement of his beliefs. He doesn't try to smooth and unify visible contrasts, which would create nothing more than a superficial and rather compromised harmony. Kurokawa took those tensions and irregularities and used them in a positive way, injecting movement and energy into the whole place.

"One of my intentions with the design was to be fuzzy. Great art and architecture should be fuzzy. If it is easy to understand, it is functional like a factory. People can say, 'this is the entrance way, this is the exit.' But this is not art. I wanted to create ambiguity and a little bit of confusion. This is what makes people think, or takes them into a maze."

This fuzziness is best observed in the floating line of the façade. It echoes a certain musical quality and brings association with a sea wave or rolling hills, harmonious in its nature but non-repetitive. It stands as a wonderful background for a small park that had been there long before the art centre. Those two become natural neighbours and the museum, with its grand presence, seems as natural as the trees surrounding it. There is a new type of museum without a permanent collection - this is how Kurokawa sees it, as a cultural airport where art from all over the world arrives (sometimes they are just virtual images) and so do visitors to admire it. NACT is situated in Roppongi - the posh part of Tokyo with a choice of entertainment and trading venues, renowned for numerous embassies among other important establishments. The National Art Center designates one peak of the artistic triangle that could be drawn on the map of this part of Tokyo, the two remaining points are marked by the Suntory Museum of Art and the Mori Art Museum. Mori is stretched across 5 floors of a tall high-rise and is probably the highest situated museum in the world. I visited it myself four years ago to see an extraordinary exhibition "Medicine and Art". Leonardo's anatomy drawings from the Royal Collection were displayed at the front, by way of an introduction. Consecutive rooms were filled with pictures, photographs and objects or even

installations mingled with medical instruments and equipment from the earliest years and spanning through ages until present. The works displayed were formally and ideologically varied with such examples as *Argument from Nowhere* by the Filipino Alvin Zafra, who covered a long plank with a pasty-coloured dust. In order to obtain it he sanded a human skull, which took him a fortnight. Visitors could see the footage of him doing it on the nearby screen. But back to NACT. Another admirable idea spread by the centre is to support amateur artists. It is a rare concept that should be seen as a patronage over budding unprofessional talents. Nitten Japan Fine Arts Group gathers such amateurs and gives them the ability to participate in an annual exhibition held in NACT with over 12,000 works displayed over 10,000 sq. m.

The main showcase however is “The Artist File”, also held annually. There have been five exhibitions so far since NACT opened its doors. There is no set keynote for the artists’ selection other than their works must reflect their consideration for the modern world, its problems or their own private struggles. Curators want them to have a certain weight and be fascinating and insightful in this way or another, but most of all, their works must express a new way of thinking and latest trends within contemporary art. Each year, only a few artists get invited to participate in “The Artist File”. This year it’s going to be eight names, five of them from Japan, one from the UK, one from India and one from South Korea. This is not really a singular



Takamasa Kuniyasu, “Spiral of MIDOU”, Mont-de-Marsan, France, 1997.  
Photo: Takamasa Kuniyasu Photo: courtesy of The National Art Center, Tokyo



The installation view of Kengo Kito in “Artist File 2011 – The NACT Annual Show of Contemporary Art”. Photo: courtesy of The National Art Center, Tokyo



Darren Almond, "Fullmoon@Eifel 2", 2002. Courtesy of Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin / Darren Almond

exhibition, but eight individual displays. While it lasts, the public can meet artists as they hold 1.5 hour sessions during which they talk about their art, sometimes they run workshops and performances for people to join in. The exhibition is accompanied by an eight volume catalogue, one per artist. Last year the main attraction was a collective showcase by the Gutai group, a unique presentation of their work. It was the first complete exhibition on such a scale demonstrating their achievements. The famous Gutai group, aka The Gutai Art Association, was established in 1954 and stayed active until 1972. The group was unique and extremely radical by the standards of those times. The leader of this group was Jiro Yoshihara, an abstract painter who gave the group its direction and became their guru. For eighteen years he was the one in charge, setting their rules and goals. *Gutai* stands for unquestionable proof of one's independent spirit, and that's exactly what Yoshihara demanded from other members, to give proof of their originality and total freedom. This spirit was expected to exist as a separate abstract entity, different for each member. The word *gutai* means substantial. Yoshihara enforced sheer originality, he postulated art that carries no resemblance to anything seen before. He constantly encouraged his colleagues to create abstract situations, objects or performances. In return they would come back with innovative work that was strongly rooted in fantasy concepts. Gutai had their exhibitions arranged in parks, on stages and even in the sky. At the same time, in Japan they wouldn't get much acknowledgement. Even in the 80s there was still a common belief among the Tokyo avant-garde artists that it takes overseas recognition in order to be noticed in Japan.

For Gutai it was Michel Tapié, the French art critic, an Art Informel expert, who introduced them to the western world with numerous shows in Europe and the US following as results of this acquaintance. Their career had probably received a considerable boost due to the general admiration for the growing economic power of their native country during the 50s and 60s. It couldn't have been a complete coincidence that the end of the group fell in the same year as the oil crisis.

The NACT exhibition titled "The Spirit of an Era" is truly impressive. To assemble all of the exhibits couldn't have been an easy task. With many coming from private western collections and public museums, some of them managed to find their way back to Japan after half a century. One of the most sensational pieces is certainly the long-lost footage of their performance that took place in Tokyo in 1955. Over 150 works from the bygone era made it to the show's display. They were arranged in a chronological order and divided into subsequent parts:

1. *Prologue* 1954.
2. *The Creation of the "Unknown Beauty"* 1955-57. This part helps to appreciate Yoshihara's unusual expositions and the original concepts he inspired.
3. *Mr. Gutai: Yoshihara Jiro*, as a supreme ruler.
4. *Gutai Goes International* 1957-65.



Yeondoo Jung, *Wonderland - 'Snow White'*, 2004. © Yeondoo Jung



Kazuo Shiraga in the process of making "Challenging Mud". A half-naked artist entered the mud and used his entire body to create the work. Ohara Hall, Tokyo, 1955. Photo: courtesy of Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Art



Shozo Shimamoto creating a work by throwing bottles filled with paint at a canvas. Ohara Hall, Tokyo, 1956. Photo: courtesy of Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Art

5. *New Developments* 1965-71. The group had managed to gain international exposure thanks to developing their unknown beauty, with many new opportunities in Japan and abroad following shortly.

6. *Epilogue* 1972. Around that time, the group's energy and actions became somewhat worn out. To

bring new ideas and inject fresh blood – Yoshihara introduced new members to the group (together there were 40 artists moving in and out of it). Still the decline was inevitable as the once bright, new ideas lost their value and became over-exploited.

NACT has some huge potential but also significant challenges in store. It is most likely they will try to promote their home-grown talents while presenting western and any non-oriental art to the Japanese audience through carefully selected shows. Let's hope that all those native values and artistic traditions guarded and maintained for centuries will prevail over the unified mediocrity of global culture, while principles conveyed by the terms *wabi* and *sabi*, standing for modest simplicity and humility, will never give in to pretentious pseudo avant-garde. Let's hope their austere dignity will not get muddled by westernisation and lose its power of expression. What would be genuinely welcomed are images that change the viewer's state of mind in accordance with his or her cultural code. /

## WHO IS VAHAP AVŞAR?

Vahap Avşar

I was born in Malatya in 1965. My father was from a small village in the mountains, abandoned at the age of 5 when his father died and his mother remarried. He made his way through many obstacles and jobs and returned to the village around 1960 to marry a 15 year-old by the name of Rukiye. They settled in a small room in the nearby city of Malatya. He was sent away for military service in 1962. Three years later, my father returned from his military service and I was born in a small, rented room on the outskirts of Malatya. My father worked hard and my mother was frugal with the money he brought home. They prospered slowly and moved frequently to improve their living standards.

I went to a good elementary school just by our home. In the neighbourhood my brother and I were admired for our good manners and my parents for their generosity. They told us to study hard, and to do well at school in order to do well in life. My parents did not want us to be singled out like the other Alevi kids, so we were asked to disguise our identity. We both did well at school. I won a national prize for painting at the age of nine and became obsessed with painting from that point on.

By the mid 1970s, Malatya as a city was divided. Alevis usually lived in poor neighbourhoods; they did not go to mosque. Instead some Alevis embraced Sufism. They were most often liberals who believed in the secular state introduced by Ataturk or, in the extreme, supporters of socialism from the neighbouring USSR. Groups of Sunnis, usually fundamentalist Muslims led by politicians, local government and police, began to organize, in the whole of eastern Turkey, the elimination of the Alevis, "the non believers". Streets and schools became increasingly politicized and dangerous. The beating and killing of Alevi youth and the burning down of Alevi houses became a daily practice.

Our family spent weeks, and in one case an entire month, locked in our house for fear of being killed. I was content staying at home painting. My family found my obsession with painting a nuisance in such difficult times, and tried to stop me.

As the looting of Alevi homes and businesses and the killing of Alevis increased, we were unable to disguise ourselves any more. The wealthy neighbourhood that had given us some security was no longer safe. One night we awoke to rocks breaking our windows. My father took this message to heart and decided to leave everything and move west, to a big city that was more liberal and tolerant. He sold everything he could for cash and in the summer of 1980 we headed west with our belongings in the back of a truck. We crossed Anatolia; the road seemed endless.

We settled in a house surrounded by pine trees on the outskirts of the city. The change of geography,



Vahap Avşar, "Supreme ist". Photo: V. Avşar's archive





*Vahap Avşar, "Hotel Europa". Photo: V. Avşar's archive*



Vahap Avşar, "Arms and Wings". Photo: V. Avşar's archive

the city, the sea and people were fascinating to me. My mother and brothers hated it, we did not know anybody, and we lacked basic amenities, including running water. My father tried to set up several businesses and failed with each attempt. We ran out of money after a year and my father started to disappear for days, sometimes weeks at a time. After a terrible first year at the new high school, I quit school. I tried several jobs including selling simit (pastry) in the street, making bead jewellery, and working in a supermarket. I wanted to be an artist, not a street vendor, but my family was opposed to my painting so I left home at the age of seventeen and found a gallery to sell paintings.

I tried mimicking classic paintings of the local landscape but I discovered customers preferred the impressionist landscapes of the Swiss Alps and floral still lives. In 1983 I rented a store-front on a side street in Bornova and called it Gallery Avsar. I painted in the back and displayed and sold the paintings in the front. After painting more than a thousand paintings, I decided to go back to finish high school so I could qualify for Art College in Istanbul. I finished the last year of high school while continuing to paint full time.

I was accepted to the new art faculty in Izmir in 1985. The school was a year old with a stimulating environment, and fresh, dynamic faculty members including Cengiz Cekil. Cekil studied at the Beaux Art in Paris during the late seventies and was heavily influenced by the conceptual art movement of 1968. Cekil included my work in two major shows where I was introduced to the works of Sarkis, Fusun Onur and a few other conceptual installation artists. Installation art was a new form in Turkey practised by a handful of artists mainly trained in the West and rejected by the establishment. Most galleries only showed paintings and sculptures mainly from professors of leading art academies in Istanbul and Ankara.

I spent four years at the art school in Izmir, where I worked mainly with Cekil, who was firmly committed to revolutionizing art in Turkey. His agenda was to apply Western European conceptual art tactics to social situations and political elements in Turkey, in order to come up with a form of expression that was unique. He wanted me to be his deputy in that mission. We spent most days working at the school and most nights at his apartment. During this period I produced several installations including "Living Picture", and "Camouflage". After I graduated, I took up a position in the painting department of Bilkent University in 1989.

At Bilkent, I worked with Vasif Kortun, a curator who had just arrived in Ankara from the US. Kortun was mostly supportive of my approach - which was often considered to be political and dangerous. I spent five years studying, painting and writing about art at Bilkent. I worked on a series of Ataturk and Marlboro men paintings from 1990 to 1991. I spent one year studying in Ateliers Arnheim in Holland where I had two shows, one at Cosco in Utrecht and the other at W139. I produced the "Come Whoever You Are" installation in 1992 at W139. The work was received well in Holland, and the piece was shown for a second time at the fifth Havana Biennial in Cuba. Back in Turkey, "Come Whoever You Are" was received with silence. Until now, it has never been shown again. My struggle continued even though I found camaraderie in two new faculty members, Selim Birsil and Claude Leon. The three of us combined forces and together we curated the Gar Show in Ankara in 1995. The Gar Show included some significant site-specific installations from leading alternative artists that were installed in the central train station in Ankara. The day after the opening, the exhibition was closed down by the authorities due to its political content. That event coincided with and precipitated my leaving of Turkey.

I met Lexy Funk at the Art Omi residency program where I was invited to work. We collaborated on art projects, and we tried to run a film production company together from 1996 to 1997. We finally started Crypto Inc., a company that designs the Brooklyn Industries clothing line. In 1998 I decided not to be involved in the art world any more. We spent the next 10 years learning how to design, manufacture and market Brooklyn Industries, an innovative clothing line in New York.

I returned to art in 2008 when I realized the mission was complete as I had mastered the challenges of building a design brand and a successful company. I transferred my responsibilities with the design company and returned to making art full time again. I now have a studio in Brooklyn, New York, where I am producing new projects as well as some of the unrealized projects from the past 10 years.



Vahap Avşar, "Consensus". Photo: V. Avşar's archive

## ARTWORLD, OR... ARTHOME?

Sławomir Marzec

It is my firm belief that we are about to reach a point where art has to be reconsidered. Art as a whole, rather than its particular aspects, facets, functions, determinants, uses or criteria. Not art institutions and forms of exhibition, mechanisms for promotion, selection or museal inclusion. The time has come to redefine art; to ask whether art is still possible nowadays. Or are we to make do with substitutes and simulacra? Might it be that performative marketing and aesthetically refined advertisements suffice? Only internal fluctuations of the artworld?

Art has become radically pluralistic; specific concepts, interpretations, styles and trends are not the only ones that have acquired autonomous status, as have particular isolated features and components of art. We have seen the concept of art expanding to include picture frames with no pictures, bare spaces where paintings used to hang, titles without artworks, or empty galleries. These separate fragments lead their own existence; they evolve and undergo... further radicalization. Admittedly, they may produce an intriguing outcome, providing a fresh stimulus to our reflection and our senses, but most often they are misused as alibis legitimizing trite, shoddy and



From "Siła Sztuki" [The Power of Art] series, 2007–2011. Photo: M. Dryja



From "Sita Sztuki" [The Power of Art] series, 2007–2011. Photo: M. Dryja

frequently crude works whose message is nothing but mercenary arrogance. We may, of course, agree that this is the price which has to be paid for artistic freedom, the highest value in art. Still, these "unwanted side effects of our modernizations" (Ulrich Beck<sup>1</sup>) dramatically increase in numbers and become... dominant. As a result, variety is boosted but almost immediately neutralized, and isolated extremes are given a free hand. The reason for this is that, confronted with a massive accumulation of issues, we are only capable of perceiving the most schematic and aggressive phenomena. This state of affairs prevents or, at least, substantially deforms any reflection, and namely judgement, symbolism, etc. Is this still art that we are dealing with? Let us view this situation from a distant perspective, adding only a little colour to it.<sup>2</sup>

In the Modernist period, the task of solving enormous problems about defining art was assigned to professionals: curators, art critics, artists and

<sup>1</sup> Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, trans. by Mark Ritter, London 1992.

<sup>2</sup> For an in-depth discussion of this subject see my book *Sztuka polska 1993-2014. Arthome versus artworld*, Warsaw 2012.

gallery owners etc., who constituted a magma-like phenomenon called the artworld.<sup>3</sup> It was to act as a go-between for the society and creators in the process of democratizing the access to artistic goods and values. The exchange of expert opinions in a spirit of freedom and independence brought hope that all the contradictions and paradoxes of art could be overcome; that they could be "happily

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Danto's contextual definition of art. George Dickie's institutional one.



From "Sita Sztuki" [The Power of Art] series, 2007–2011. Photo: M. Dryja

functionalized” by means of transformation into an ongoing debate.

This hope tends to be forlorn. Nothing but deleterious fiction! A cocoon of self-sufficiency has developed, a micro-environment – the artworld. A close and hermetic community with a monopoly on the social redistribution of art – its public functioning, hierarchies and presentation; a community promoting and shaping the subject matter of art (the terror of political correctness) and specific creative strategies. The present artworld has become highly institutionalized, ritualized and personalized. There are very clear divisions in this world, into the leading and mediocre institutions, into influential and marginal people, into major and local events. And censorship is still there; only this time it is pragmatic, “technical” – in the form of failing to mention certain things. How does the declared openness and creativity of the artworld turn into rigid hierarchies of works and creators? What is the logic of this? No-one wonders any more how it is possible to be competent in giving an ultimate assessment of art that is currently taking shape. The artworld generates tendencies, trends and stars that are tailored to our needs but it increasingly follows the logic of its internal fluctuations simply to stimulate the economy. Artefacts are created which have no connection with our existential experience, our hopes and dreams. Instead, they are entangled in risky abstract interpretations or conspicuously trivial fraternizing with everyday life and mass culture. Such absolutization of physiology and informality practically excludes all facets of experience and existence. Moreover, a suspicion appears that this never-ending carnival of transformations and multiplying ambiguities is meant to maintain the monopoly of the artworld and the lack of an alternative – would any outsider dare define or judge new art in an unorthodox fashion? I sometimes think that the artworld relies on the transformations and the indefinite nature of art, rather than art itself.

After all, variety is never absolutely pure; it is always of some kind. Therefore, as Paul Virilio claims, the limits of art are set by both political and optical correctness.<sup>4</sup> Art develops its own internal normativeness but also mediocrity. This conformist mimicry is displayed to the outside world as rebellious and alternative. It is no longer a secret that the artworld is dominated by the new left rhetoric which openly declares that art is to be transformed into direct political involvement. Of course, we live in a pluralist democracy and we do not all have to be (post-)Marxists. Schematisms and

<sup>4</sup> Paul Virilio interviewed by E. Bai, “Corriere della Sera”, 20.03.2001.

stereotypes of some people cannot be the remedy for schematisms of others. Replacing one’s fetters with the latest model does not exactly denote freedom. Moreover, we should ask who is going to liberate and emancipate the artworld from its new left schemata and slogans. Besides, why do we impose the imperative of openness and tolerance upon others, while demanding nothing but freedom of speech from ourselves? How does this relate to democracy and creativity?...

We are currently witnessing the process of increasing unification and centralization of the artworld. Global standards and formulas of dealing with art are being developed. Large centres, festivals and art fairs enforce a specific language, a set of metaphors, mental leaps, strategies, “significant” problems and subjects of art. Whoever refuses to conform is automatically considered to be a benighted dilettante.

In the twentieth century, the artworld rejected consecutive identifications of art in its aspiration for freedom of creation. Rather than turning into an unlimited field of artistic creation, it metamorphosed into total submissiveness to the dominant narrations of late modernity, that is, the market, the mass media and ideologies, which promote the idea of art as a commodity (Baudrillard’s “perfect purchase”). Or novelty – anything as long as it is new. Sooner or later, “novelty” comes to describe only mediocre, negative or banal things. In this fashion, impudence eventually becomes the new sensitivity and obtuseness the new imagination. The mass media reduce art to an event, an attractive anomaly. They treat artists as idols (ideologization of art) and the experience of art has grown to be an empty, ritual ceremony. One should also mention the increasing ideologization of art, which tends to be used as a mere tool in the fight for cultural hegemony. Unfortunately, in these circumstances we are all losers, the activists and the re/educated masses. It is art we are losing! Not even the maximum efficiency of indoctrination can compensate for the effects of the loss and deformation of art. Deprived of internal identifications, the artworld is helpless in the face of the discussed determinants and its pragmatics can be expressed with a few simple questions: how can the idiomaticity of particular artists be reduced to a mass media event and a commodity? And, first of all: how is the mainstream to be generated and fixed?

As a consequence, the work of art becomes its own substitute: the work as a price, the work as a place in a museum or in an exhibition catalogue, the work as an exponent of a tendency or a generation, the work as a subject of interpretation or a debate. All

these “the work as”-phenomena form the work-without-work; they all accentuate its absence. They change art galleries and museums into streets; they change us into a faceless crowd. Not only metaphorically, as the point of reference is the huge scale of the street, including motion, drone, passing by, visual aggressiveness, temporariness, anonymity and crowdedness. Logistics, the ability to organize major events and media communicativeness are valued more highly than the creative act. An eminent artist is someone proficient at office, media and institutional games. Not to mention marketing ones.

The artworld creates the aura of no alternatives mainly by keeping “the rest” of society consternated, embarrassing it with obscenities, banalities or the naivety of adolescence problems now and then. Some people perceive crudeness as a synonym of authenticity or even democracy! Bare physiology becomes a substitute of truth, while provocation (even most stupid and futile) or biased determination is expression of social involvement. It is frequently suspected that the main objective of the artworld is to incapacitate the audience. This is evident from the fetishizing of art and the work of art, which is equated with only one interpretation, price, position, renown and the place in a prestigious collection. And all these appear at once, along with the creation of a new artefact, to make it impossible for anybody else to participate in the constitution of a work of art, in its “identification order” (Jacques Ranciere). Besides this, the dominance of psycho/sociologism reduces the flexibility, symbolism or expressiveness of art to a sign, or a symptom. All an artist does is to express general social processes or personality models. The simpler, the more banal this is, the better their work because it is... more legible. The more brutal, the better... the more pointed and convincing.

Moreover, in some countries, for instance in Poland, there are people who play a variety of roles in the artworld, simultaneously being curators, art critics, jurors and merchants, etc. This means that they promote a particular product in the press and on TV, they award it as jurors, purchase it for national collections as members of a committee, they send it to international festivals, and so on. Something like a policeman, a solicitor, a defender, a judge and a prison guard in one person. Performing a number of functions is a very efficient way of applying the principle of “nationalizing costs and privatizing benefits”. Self-degeneration of the artworld reverses the perspective by shifting the centre of gravity from the creative act to procedures of developing hierarchies (or fetishizing, perhaps?), or successful participation in the games of the artworld.

It is high time we asked ourselves the question of what the *topicalities* generated by the artworld, all

these tendencies, rankings and stars, have to do with us? And what about art? It is only functionaries of the artworld that want post-art liberated from aesthetics, artistic values, symbolism and expressiveness, etc., one that is only *topical* and only *different*. Produced to satisfy their needs alone, post-art tends to be expensive and celebrated, reduced to political correctness and simplified didactics, slogans and teenage problems. Unfortunately, this fuels fears, which are commonplace anyway, that new art merely legitimizes banality and insolence. Therefore, we need art that is free not only from the *ignorance of the masses* but also from the usurpation of the “omniscient” specialists and virulent activists. If the dispute concerning art is dying down, this is not because it has been resolved but because it seems pointless. It is possibly never to be settled, and so we ought to make sure to improve its quality rather than focus on efficacious persuasion.

As I have written at the beginning of this essay, we have to reconsider art. We have to decide whether there is an alternative to the present monopolization of the artworld, in which art is equivalent with its public functioning, the logic of the market and the mass media as well as new left ideologization. Can ARTHOME be this alternative? The arthome fighting for subjective singularity inscribed in the definite existential experience. The idea, however, is not to reinstate the romantic cult of individuality and escapist strategies. The dynamic and complex multidimensionality of our *late modernity*, in which our subjectivity constitutes an inalienable moment, but nothing else than a moment, must remain the point of reference. Therefore, singularity is a rather polemical concept here, constantly re/constructed in the dialogue with the general. This genuine and refreshing dialogue - between the general and the singular is the optimum.

The aesthetics of the arthome is one of individual consciousness and independence, consisting mainly of the creation and protection of differences and distinctions. Even the illusory and fictitious ones, so that their complexity necessitates the perception of every mature person as an exceptional configuration. Art can also be a domain of idioms (Mikel Dufrenne’s “Racinian world”), rather than a set of general and abstract classes, types and tendencies. That is because art is more than simply a social phenomenon, *glamour* or *decorum*; it is, first and foremost, an individual existential necessity. Maintaining differences ought to also pertain to the various natures of differences, their multidimensionality, and mostly to the division into the public and the private sphere; we do not have to be specimens and representatives of



4<sup>th</sup> Biennale of Spatial Forms, opening of the Dreamers' Congress, 1975. Photo: L. Zawistowski. Courtesy of El Gallery in Elbląg

generality. As a result, critical anti/fragmentariness appears, a search for wider dimensions of individual existence, some kinds of transversality. The need arises for resistance to the terror of topicality and situationality, a sort of 'transtopicality' - even by means of juxtaposing one's own biography with random discourses and contexts. By juxtaposing self-narration (self-construction) with topicality, even if it was to assume the form of sagacious solitariness and provincialism. They are also what we contribute to what is common and general. The arthome should make use of deliberativeness, (self-) reflection as a form of inconclusive participation,



The Dreamers' Congress organizational committee meeting. Courtesy of El Gallery in Elbląg

to look for interdependencies and optimum configurations. This implies persevering in the state of vigilant non-fulfilment rather than searching for aesthetic or, at least, symbolic satisfaction. This also implies the complementary character of experience and contemplative self-reflection, rather than reducing the work of art to a verbal message or an ecstatic incident.

We are thus doomed to the hardship of never-ending specifying of ambiguities instead of an ultimate and explicit crystallization. The arthome understood in this way provides us with the chance to contrast globalization with personalization. Everyone should be able to have art tailored to their needs. Forcing everybody to accept a particular kind of art as *the only right, topical, international one*, etc. constitutes nothing but blatant usurpation in the fight for social dominance. Even if it is fought under lofty slogans of emancipation or justice.

A model for the arthome is not so much Hölderlin's tower of reclusion but rather the multitude of initiatives developed by artists, trying to regain independence, adulthood, to liberate themselves from the schematization and limits of the artworld. I would like to mention one initiative, namely Gerard Blum-Kwiatkowski's idea of an "art station", formed as early as the 1970s. It was supposed



Gerard Blum-Kwiatkowski's installation, 1<sup>st</sup> Biennale of Spatial Forms, 1965, Elbląg. Courtesy of El Gallery in Elbląg

to be run by one artist as a workshop, a gallery, a meeting place, as well as a place of exchange for invited artists and education for local people. Bloom managed to put his idea into practice, first in Kleinasassen, then in Hünfeld and Świeradów-Zdrój. With phenomenal success.

Striving to reject the artworld would naturally be utopian. What should be done is this: its... functionalism should be functionalized, its pragmatism should be de pragmatized - it should be considered a mere possibility, an opportunity rather than the ultimate source of judgement and meaning. Any hierarchies in art constitute nothing more than an invitation to discussion. As Pierre Bourdieu insisted, any arrangements and assessments in the artworld are nothing but conspiracy.<sup>5</sup> Paradoxical though it seems, it is only through certain anarchism that we can gain the right to make art, understood as what is best, most lofty and beautiful about us in view of the increasing unification and dehumanization of the artworld.

This essay is by no means to be interpreted as an attempt at total criticism of new art; on the contrary, it is an appeal for this art to be protected and its meaning to be disputed. An appeal directed at all mature people, not only activists and functionaries of the artworld. Opportunities should be created to experience and produce art not only to fit the streets and the crowd, but also to suit the individual scale. Instead of the streets and monumental halls in new museums, we could imagine labyrinths of small rooms and nooks dedicated to particular artworks and a single viewer. Collective exposition tends to exert a neutralizing effect, exhibited objects are reduced to pure "aesthetics" or ideology.

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. by Susan Emanuel, Stanford, CA 1996.

Art ought to and has to be diverse. At various stages of development, everyone should have an opportunity to discover a concrete and topical form of art for themselves. A form that suits their imagination, experience, sensitivity and existential intuition. This is why art circulation has to be genuinely pluralistic, a challenge and a task we must face. We must maintain not only artistic variety but, first of all, the multidimensional character of this variety. /



4<sup>th</sup> Biennale of Spatial Forms. Photo: T. Kawiak. Courtesy of El Gallery in Elbląg



*A building of Contemporary Art Centre in Vilnius, architect: Vytautas Edmundas Čekanauskas, 1968. Photo: Archive of CAC in Vilnius*

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Yong Baek Lee, Angel Soldier, 2005, videostill, courtesy of Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo

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