

Strategy

In 1994 the opening of the IKONOPRESS exhibition was held in the Castle of the Pomeranian Dukes in Szczecin. Włodzimierz Borowski, an active artist, though already considered a classic of Polish art, was taking part in the exhibition. He was a non-conformist who avoided in his work anything that would constitute a low compromise, a concession to the system of authority that takes control of all artistic activity in order to legitimise itself.

Even he, however, had his weaknesses. In the 70's when he was a conceptualist he deliberately avoided creating artefacts. He painted two pictures for commercial purposes because one of the Polish state museums wanted to buy a work by a famous artist, which in the case of a determined conceptualist was rather difficult. But like everyone Borowski has to live, so he painted two pictures. The deal fell through, but the pictures remained as a qualm of conscience, a blemish on the honour of the conceptual artist.

In 1994 Borowski gave an interview for the Art Magazine (1, 1993). He expressed his hope that 'an ecological movement will arrive, which will also clean out the world terribly cluttered up with art'. It is difficult not to associate this statement with the gigantic board at the Venice Biennial, which bore the names of the several thousand participants of the event, the chosen artists who no one would be able to remember, and many of whom would be forgotten, or at least would remain unknown outside the local context. These artists were authors of statements which usually did not report anything more than (hopefully) the uniqueness and originality of their creators, the artists. But are artists original because they create, or do they create because something extraordinarily original in them demands expression? It is alarmingly possible that this a situation is comparable to the phenomenon of our media obsessed era - people become famous because they are shown on TV, and they are not shown on TV because they are famous. In both cases one might suspect that these are self-creating spheres, which lose contact with reality as they do not refer to it, and are devoid of all function beyond the confirmation of their own importance.

In 1994, after many years, Wiesław Borowski wanted to extract himself from this tangle, and perform an act of expiation for producing superfluous works of art, fetishes painted for a museum. He wanted to carry out his own public execution, an act of cleansing, and return to the purity of his own intentions. The ceremonial destruction, as always with Borowski, was embarrassing, tacky and blown out of proportion. But that was how it was supposed to be - otherwise it could, for instance, have passed into the history of performance art as a 'documentary fetish'. And this was not about replacing one fetish with another.

Of course the act was not altogether a success. I myself appropriated one piece of the shattered picture, which I keep as a cherished memento, which proves how difficult it is to break the art 'consumer' out of his comfortable habits, and just how corrupting is his relationship with the artist. However, this is rather a point of interest for the psychology of religion, and Borowski himself gave an example of the 'cleansing of the world' he envisaged, thereby proving his integrity and cleansing his conscience. The act was carried out, and there is little that can be done about the fact that a crowd hoping to witness the extraordinary should see a relic in the remains of an act of self-cleansing, despite the fact that undermining trust in a work of art as a 'carrier of values' has long been an artistic 'device'. In spite of this new works are constantly being created, which are at once consigned to oblivion, but which are yet stored, painstakingly preserved, and committed to a time capsule that will never be opened, in which they will pass into eternity undisturbed by anybody's interest.

'Machine gun cart strategy' is one way to react to this situation. After all, artists as people have the right to any manifestation (within certain boundaries of course). Formal termination of artistic activity would be ineffective as an administrative act - it could even result in an increase in such activity, as the author is obliged to be a non-conformist. It could even be argued that self-declaration of a break with art or with one of its forms has been fashionable since the time of Duchamp. In fact Duchamp himself created his last work, though in secret.

At the turn of the millennium it is difficult to resist the temptation to make a general summary. I think that one might risk the proposition that we are witnessing the completion of a two-hundred year period in art. Let us assume that at around 1800 'absolute art' came into being. This term may be compared to the term 'absolute music' introduced by Karl Dahlhaus in order to name the phenomenon of the birth of the autonomous sphere of music. Roughly until the time of Romanticism this type of music fulfilled a clearly defined menial role in court or religious ceremonies, in daily life, in cafes, and at the tables of aristocrats and the middle class. Also within the conventions of opera, a seemingly autonomous sphere, it was an element of the spectacle serving as much social as artistic purposes, as part of a high-class entertainment. In simple terms one could say that along with Romanticism, music obtained its own space - the concert hall. This was a shrine for contemplation, though only musical because of the nature of the music itself, and the spectacle became the performance of the music in the form of concerts or virtuoso performances. A certain autonomous sphere was created with quasi-religious prerogatives.

Though it may not be concluded directly from the historiography of art, one might risk the proposition that in traditional arts - painting and sculpture - there developed a comparable process based on the adoration of genius. Today, after two hundred years of the social consciousness being dominated by the romantic myth of the artist as a priest with his own temple, the gallery, this process seems to be passing into history. It was already questioned at the beginning of the century by Duchamp and also partially by the constructivist movement, both with regard to its sublime autonomy and its conception of the artist-demiurge. We can see attempts to escape the traditional sanctified autonomous space of art, and the penetration of artistic intervention into the iconography of the city, into audio-visual and electronic communication channels.

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The aim of these manifestations is to introduce the 'virus' of criticism into the dominant visual culture, to expose the ideology of domination of the reified consumer concealed behind mass culture icons, and to create inside this culture an enclave of distance. This is an attempt to overcome the dualism of 'pure' art and utility art, which was basically absent before the arrival of 'absolute art and music', as there can be no doubt that art was strongly connected to what we may call life. Its autonomy had a fundamentally guild-based nature and concerned technological standards that had to be met when carrying out commissions. Fundamentally, it was only the institution of the museum that isolated the sphere of pure art. The current references to early modernist thought about art in social terms, now devoid of romantic charisma, betrays the urge to immerse it once more in the fabric of life and return to the situation where the artist was not in fact a priest in his own temple, but had a calm assurance of his own functionality.

Such a non-conflictual return is impossible for many obvious reasons, but the ways in which art functions allow us to perceive it in terms of

the 'critical moment' present in culture understood as an area of the ideology of authority exercised with the aid of the visual sphere.

Perhaps, therefore, it is no coincidence that the metaphor which suggested itself by chance as a certain problem associated with the theory of installation, and then as a slogan of the present exhibition 'machine gun cart strategy', describes a method of waging war favoured by anarchists. Their army, described by Isaac Babel, was not the avant-garde of the Bolshevik coup, but the margin of the totalitarian political movement, which it opposed in the same way as any other dominant megastructure.

'Machine gun cart strategy' involves the creation of a new quality from elements that are easily obtained from everyday reality. The machine gun cart is a mobile war vehicle constructed from a peasants cart, a harness, and a heavy machine gun. It is easy to assemble and dismantle, after which the individual elements return to their usual functions. An artistic structure created according to this strategy does not have to possess a permanent identity, and its exhibition depends on the context, the place of presentation, and the opportunities provided by the surroundings. The fixed element is the element the artist is able to take with him on his travels, like a nomad carrying his worldly goods with him. This may be the idea of the work's construction, or a small structure around which the exhibition is arranged.

To use more practical language one may put it like this:

the elements of the artistic structure should be replaceable,

it should be possible for the artist himself to transport the elements of the work, or to send them by post, without having to make use of specialist means of transport.

It is immediately obvious that the most typical example of this are some of the works of Nam June Paik e.g. Buddha contemplating his own image on TV. There are several versions of this installation. Each time there is a different statue of Buddha, a different television and a different TV camera.

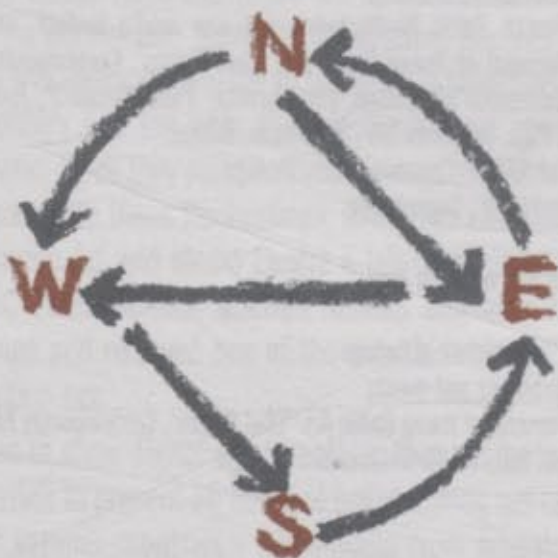
On the other hand because of their gigantism and great cost, the monumental towers and gates constructed by Nam June Paik out of monitors, although theoretically meeting the first condition, become monuments to the financial and technical capabilities of the institution which realises such a work. Here technology dominates artistic invention, whereas in 'machine gun cart strategy' the whole point is that the artist shows his ability to organise elements easily drawn from the surroundings into a significant whole. Technological and material gigantism may easily subvert 'machine gun cart strategy' into its opposition, because some works may formally fulfil our requirements, but they essentially cross the boundaries of art, whose fundamental element is nomadism and simplicity of construction, where invention of the artistic object is dominant with regard to technology.

Another example, which was created in Szczecin, is the work of Jan Svenungson, presented at the last Baltic art exhibition in Szczecin (Baltic Ikonopress 97). It consisted of around 60 sheets of A4 paper showing a map that changed each time by a certain degree of the scale. The essential feature of the work was that one could take in the entirety of it with a single glance. Although the work was sent in an ordinary envelope it required a wall area of at least 10 m in length to be assembled. Also, there was no necessity here to supplement the structure in the venue. This is important for the conception of the N.E.W.S. exhibition because it also includes this kind of work - fully ready, yet reduced to a small package.

At the first IKONOPRESS exhibition in 1994 the work of Waldemar Wojciechowski was presented: 16 mounds of sugar poured onto fluorescent lights with a diameter of around 30 cm. The elements of this work may be obtained anywhere (16 fluorescent lights and around 100 kg of sugar). For purely technical reasons it is in fact better to transport the box of fluorescent lights from place to place rather than buying new ones each time, though this is an issue of exhibition pragmatics which does not affect the idea itself.

Setting aside technical details, the conception of N.E.W.S. serves to emphasise the role of the artist as a wanderer, an arrival from nowhere, who organises the elements of our daily lives into a new structure that reveals hidden things, though it may turn out that what is revealed was lying on the surface and was invisible for precisely this reason. This is definitely not the role of the priest, but rather that of the wanderer, metaphorical and actual, of the 'stranger' who brings into reality the ability to juggle its elements which seem to be arranged in a fixed order.

At the same time the direction of our wandering stretches out on diachronic (the direction of reading letters on a wind rose) and synchronic axes (the journey of a project through four points on the Baltic Sea: Szczecin (south), Riga (east), Visby (north), Bornholm (let us say west, as Denmark lies to the west of Szczecin)). This is why the following logo was selected:



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which reveals our project, or rather the obsession with the Baltic region (once after a certain symposium, an eminent Polish literature expert from Szczecin, Erazm Kuźma, remarked that culture develops rather through obsessions than sessions).

The presence of art is more important than its fame, which is why the area of our wanderings is marked by our local obsession, and not by art world highways.

Lech Karwowski