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The Necessity of Existence: Grzegorz Kowalski and the Milieu of the Repassage Gallery in Warsaw

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The Necessity of Existence

Grzegorz Kowalski and the milieu of the Repassage Gallery in Warsaw

Karol Sienkiewicz

In recent years, the most vivid discussions about contemporary art in Poland have centred on so-called socially engaged art. Even though it is the painter Wilhelm Sasnal who galvanizes popular media (as his paintings reach high prices) and this or that critic announces that artists are "tired of reality" and want to paint surrealist canvasses using their imagination (as opposed to artists engaged with burning social and political issues)[1], it is generally the artworks and essays of Artur Żmijewski that arouse most interest – but also suspicion. One of the most heated debates followed the presentation of his work *Repetition* (*Powtórzenie*) in the Polish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2005, and just afterwards, the publication of his text "Applied Social Arts" in the leftist socio-political magazine *Krytyka Polityczna*[2]. The text was soon nicknamed "Żmijewski's Manifesto" and the artist himself became artistic editor of the magazine. In 2011, Żmijewski was appointed curator of the Berlin Biennale 7. He and his team – Joanna Warsza and the Russian group Voina – have redefined the biennale format. The event's slogan "Forget Fear" applied as much to the political impact of art as it did to the art machine. The curators decided to ignore certain rules of artistic decorum, which was probably why they had to overcome a certain amount of institutional friction as well as face unprecedented criticism from the art world. Many accuse Żmijewski of an approach akin to social realism, not acknowledging the fact that social realism was a doctrine that imposed a single accepted form of political engagement, turning art into a tool of simplistic and often naive propaganda, as a result of which, those who did not wish to take part were not allowed a voice

in public discourse. This was not the case with the Berlin Biennale; quite the contrary, in fact. As its curator, Żmijewski offered a space, tools or simply support for groups and individuals who were often regarded as marginal or too radical, as posing a threat to modern society.

My introduction may be misleading, however, for this essay is not about Artur Żmijewski. This essay is about Żmijewski's teacher at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, who imbued him, and other artists such as Paweł Althamer and Katarzyna Kozyra, with the idea of art as a tool of social communication. Grzegorz Kowalski, the main protagonist of this essay, wrote about the process of teaching and studying art as "delving into the reality of life and art. We learn through perceiving the complex processes of this reality." For Kowalski, there is no distinction between the "reality of life" and the "reality of art".[3] They are one and the same "reality". A "polymorphous" language of art, as he called it, is formulated ad hoc according to current needs. These and other tenets of Kowalski's didactics strongly influenced his students, or at least the most progressive artists. But his didactical approach was an extension of his own art practice, and was rooted in his personal experiences as a citizen and artist in a totalitarian state – the People's Republic of Poland – as well as in the ideas and attitudes of his own teachers. This brings me to the beginning of the story.

The beginning of an unfinished career

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Grzegorz Kowalski might have been regarded as a highly promising contemporary sculptor, engaged in a vision of the modernisation of Poland, which was still rebuilding itself following the destruction wrought by World War II. After graduating from the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw in 1965, he took part in a range of significant artistic events in the second half of the 1960s, including the Symposium of Artists and Scientists in Puławy (1966), the 2nd Biennale of Spatial Forms in Elbląg (1967) and the Wrocław Art Symposium '70 (1970). The first two events took place in large industrial locations, namely the Zamech factory in Elbląg and the Nitrogen Plant in Puławy. The intention of the organisers of all these events was to establish artist-worker connections, and/or strengthen the Polish presence in the so-called Recovered Territories (Elbląg, Wrocław), which was an official term used by the People's Republic of Poland to describe those parts of pre-war

Germany that had become part of the Polish state after the war. By contributing their artworks and projects, artists unwittingly acknowledged these polices and propaganda strategies.

Unlike many other Polish artists, Kowalski had the opportunity to travel abroad on grants and scholarships. In 1968, he was invited to the International Meeting of Sculptors in Mexico City (which accompanied the Olympic Games), organised by Mathias Goeritz. In 1970, he attended the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign on a one-year scholarship. In Warsaw, he exhibited at the Foksal Gallery, widely regarded as the most avant-garde venue. He managed to achieve all this in less than five years after receiving his diploma.

Kowalski's work in the 1960s featured abstract, kinetic sculptures, such as his *Manipulative Composition* in Puławy and a never-executed project for Elbląg. He referred to spatial forms as shaping the human environment. When the opportunity arose, he willingly employed large-scale structures, as in Mexico City, where in the immediate neighbourhood of the Olympic Village he created a *Sundial* made of gigantic cones. For Wrocław, he proposed inserting five geometric shapes from 1.2 to 12 metres in height into the urban environment in order to "exhibit the Gothic background [of the architecture of the city – K. S.] through contemporary forms."[4]

The superficially neutral, abstract forms utilised by Kowalski embodied modernity. The *Manipulative Composition* in Puławy, which was set in motion by passers-by, aimed to shape the human environment and liberate its dynamics. Years later, Kowalski recalled, "It seemed to us that we were wiser than the pioneers of modernism by virtue of one additional experience. We had no intention of creating open forms; we wanted to create the programmes of their spatial and social interaction."[5] Elsewhere he added, "I believed that only the advance of civilisation could rescue us from stagnation and despair, and that art was the instrument of this advance."[6]

Both quotations attest to the influence of Jerzy Jarnuszkiewicz and Oskar Hansen (particularly the latter), both of whom were his teachers. Jerzy Jarnuszkiewicz, in whose studio Kowalski studied sculpture, was extremely unorthodox in his teachings. He placed the emphasis on individuality and advocated the importance of the process. Students could choose their means of expression, often using photography, not only as a documentary medium. Following diploma studies with Jarnuszkiewicz, in 1965 Kowalski became assistant to Oskar Hansen, author of the theory

of Open Form, at his Plane and Solid Figure Design Studio in the Sculpture Department of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. He took part in the activities of this architect-visionary's group, developing the Continuous Linear System (LCS), an urban development project which proposed four belts of settlements stretching through the territory of Poland, in order to "replace the existing non-egalitarian division between country and city, facilitating an egalitarian use of materials and spiritual resources on a nationwide scale."[7] The LCS was a utopian attempt to implement Hansen's theory of Open Form in macro scale. As early as 1959, Hansen wrote, "Today we are able [...] to begin creating a new, more organic art of our time, an art based on the compositional basis of Open Form. It will create a sense of the necessity of the existence of us all, help us define ourselves and locate ourselves in the space and time in which we live."[8] Thus the concept of Open Form, formulated mainly in the field of architecture, assumed, among other things, the participation of users/recipients in shaping form, creating spaces favourable to communication and inter-human relations, as well as the integration of art. It appeared to be based on a fundamental faith in man's good intentions and an egalitarian approach, according to which a plurality of attitudes should be given space for free expression. The aim it set for creators was to express the voice of "users". These ideas greatly affected students at the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts. This was certainly the case for Kowalski, although in the 1960s and 1970s, the Faculty of Sculpture where Hansen and Jarnuszkiewicz taught was a place where students, encouraged by their teachers, started testing the potential of processual, participative praxis and collective and interdisciplinary actions.[9]

Kowalski regarded his abstract forms in the manner of Hansen's Instruments of Visual Effect.

Somewhere here

Kowalski's working methods (and his career) changed around 1970. A new approach was brought about by the events of 1968 in Poland and abroad. Student demonstrations in Warsaw violently dispersed by the police led to purges throughout educational institutions and an anti-Semitic campaign by the communist government. Kowalski observed these riots from the window of Hansen's studio: "This was like cold water poured over us. Unreality turned out to be a brutal reality. It

evoked feelings of helplessness and rage. I believe that the result of the first of these feelings was my own attitude and strategy – and not only mine – for the whole decade to come. That was a turning point."[10]

Soon afterwards, he found himself in the other hemisphere, in Mexico, New York and Paris. Never having travelled outside the Eastern bloc, the experience was a culture shock for him. At the same time, he observed developments which in the West took on a different, more libertarian aspect. In Mexico he witnessed the bloody suppression of the student revolt shortly before the opening of the Olympic Games.[11] During a brief stay in New York, he saw the legendary musical *Hair* and frequented the Electric Circus nightclub, where he saw performances by The Velvet Underground and psychedelic light-projections in which melting abstract images were juxtaposed with photographs from Vietnam. Above all, he immersed himself in the atmosphere of street life in Greenwich Village: "The reality of the streets transcended art."[12] Later, in Paris, he was only able to observe the consequences of May '68: "The remains of the destruction, the barricades were no longer there, but the wind whistled through the place where the trees in the Latin Quarter had formerly stood."[13] In the French capital, he bought books published by the Literary Institute (*Institut Littéraire)* run by Jerzy Giedroyć in Maisons-Laffitte, including *Diaries* by Witold Gombrowicz. This journey of a lifetime enabled Kowalski to experience new creative possibilities (his *Sundial* in Mexico), a new culture (in New York) and literature inaccessible in Poland (in Paris). At the age of barely thirty, he was able to reassess the possibilities of functioning in a communist country and the role which art was expected to fulfil in such a society.

While at the American university in 1970, he listened for news of events from the Polish coastline about the violent suppression of workers' demonstrations. Edward Gierek, the newly appointed First Secretary of the Polish United Workers' Party, who replaced Władysław Gomułka, made his famous challenge during a meeting with striking shipyard workers in Gdańsk on January 1971. At the end of his speech, he suddenly approached the audience, asking, "Well, will you help us?" The response of listeners was confusion and disorientation. However, official propaganda reported a unanimous response of "We will help you!" as "the first challenge of the new decade." Kowalski observed these events from the perspective of the somewhat parochial University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

In the following decade, the 1970s, the period of Edward Gierek's "prosperity on credit", cultural life conformed even more closely to the

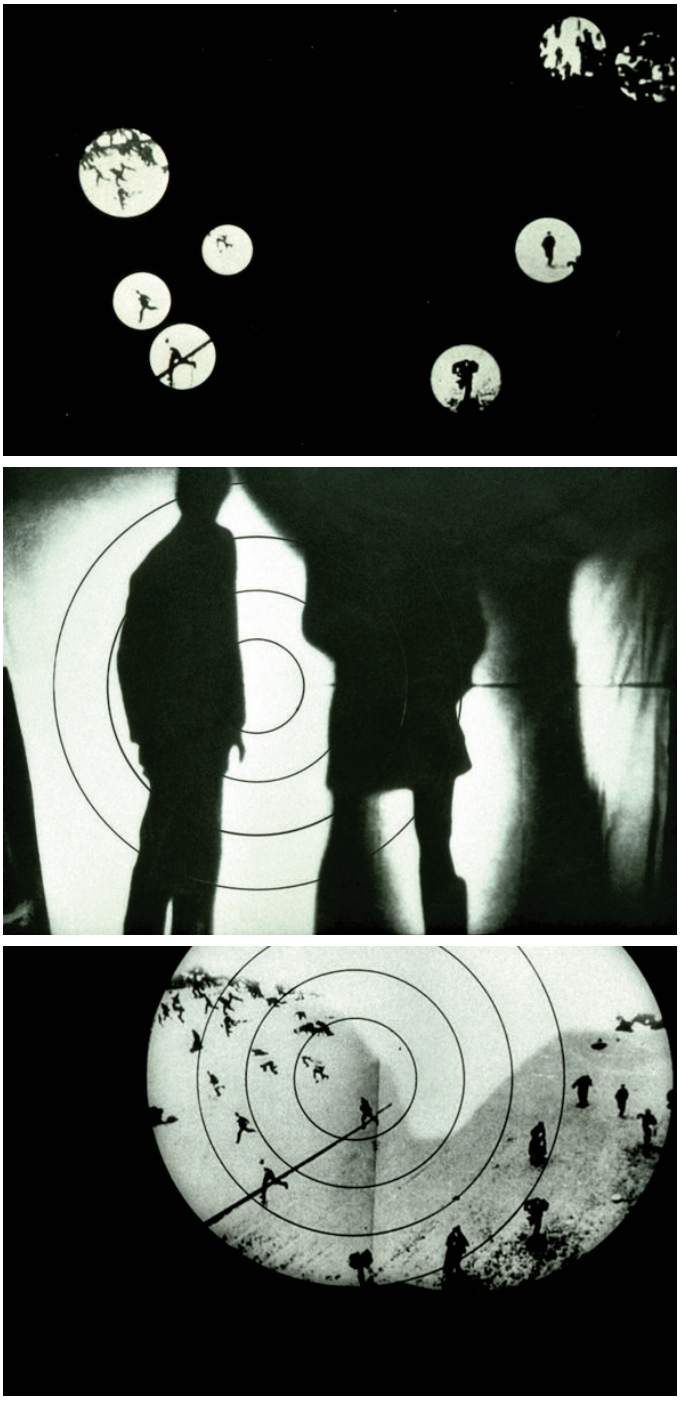
official rhetoric of accelerated development. A relative tolerance on the part of the authorities, accompanied by a superficial westernisation (the purchase of licences for western products, the appearance of consumer commodities new to the Polish market), gave an illusion of progress. It was expected of artists that, confronted with Gierek's appeal, they too would overwhelmingly reply "We will help you!"

Kowalski's artistic career in the 1970s might have developed into that of a competent executor of forms who had agreed to this slogan. This was, however, not the case. His reaction was initially one of resignation. A few years later, he spoke about the events of 1968 and 1970: "This is an image of disappointment with the abilities of an artist. Once we believed so much, that you could change the world. This is the crisis of Hansen's concepts which did not stand the test of reality."[14]

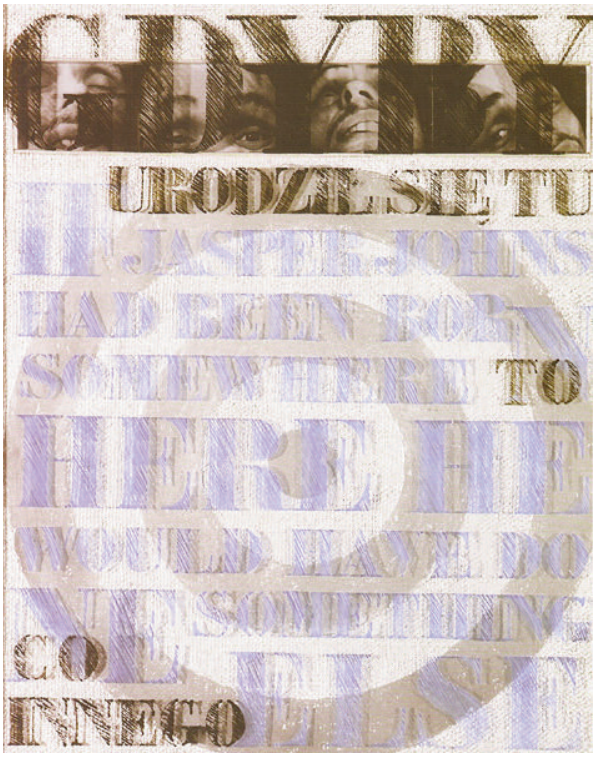
While he was in Mexico in 1968, Kowalski received an invitation from Professor Jerzy Jarnuszkiewicz to become his assistant at his sculpture studio at the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts, which he accepted, leaving his position as Hansen's assistant. In the following years, he became increasingly close to Jarnuszkiewicz's position: "Jarnuszkiewicz inculcated the principle of internal motivation for creativity into his students, or in other words, that one had to have something to say and then pursue one's own language to express it. Hansen instilled in them the conviction to make an impact on people and society using the form of the environment."[15]

In the 1970s, Kowalski consciously rejected this notion. He was critical of the concept of the Linear Continuous System, realising that its implementation could only be conceivable under a totalitarian regime. He also began to regard state patronage in a different light. Not only did he come to doubt the intentions of those in power, he also ceased to believe in the illusion of the artist's ability to change the broader reality, not to mention the illusion of cooperation between artists and workers. "In time I realised", he later stated, "that art is a mirage for them, briefly giving them a sense of mystery. Afterwards, the remains of the activities of artists become covered in dust and rust, and no longer interest anybody. And on the other hand, I realised that we are prey to, that we are in fact complicit in, our subjection to manipulation by propaganda."[16] What was needed was an art which could not be manipulated, but which would play an effective role in interhuman relations and communication. In the light of these new conditions, sculpture in a modernist mode was no longer sufficient.

The change in Kowalski's approach, however, had already been announced in *Kieszeń* (*Pocket*, picture 1), his first exhibition at the Foksal



1 Grzegorz Kowalski, *Pocket*, June 1968, illustration from the exhibition guide, courtesy of the artist



2 Grzegorz Kowalski, *If Jasper Johns had been born somewhere here, he would have done something else*, 1970/71-1997, collage, courtesy of the artist

Gallery in Warsaw in June 1968, shortly before his journey to Mexico. In order for the installation to "work", at least two people had to remain within it. Those present in the "zone of activity", by virtue of the shadows they cast, projected visible images onto a screen which allowed for projection from both sides, while at the same time framing them. Others who found themselves in the "zone of passive observation" were able to see the images thus framed. The images were carefully selected photographs, both historical and borrowed from contemporary photo-reportage, from *Paris Match* and the Magnum archive, depicting crowds, military parades, processions, violence and war. Forty years later, Kowalski stated that *Kieszeń* "wasn't something bold; it did not embody elements of criticism. I tried to make a work that was universal."[17] However, a photograph reproduced in the exhibition-folder of a scattering, fleeing crowd echoed the atmosphere of events in Warsaw in 1968. The photographs on the following pages were framed as in a rifle-sight, with a small circle capturing only one individual in the crowd. It was as if the artist was asking himself the question, "Who is this fleeing person, or who is chasing him or her?"[18]

In one of the collages produced after his return from the United States, which combined target motifs from paintings by Jasper Johns and short sentences, Kowalski included the ironic text, "If Jasper Johns had been born somewhere here, he would have done something else" (1970/1971, picture 2). By this, he indicated that an artist in Poland had different possibilities, but also different responsibilities. His rifle-sight, like that in the folder for the Foksal Gallery exhibition, focused again on the individual with all his fascinations and fears.

Kowalski's projects – that which was staged at the Foksal Gallery as well as an unrealised work for the Współczesna [Contemporary] Gallery using sources of sound activated by people in the room – took a critical stance on the reality of the here and now. In his written explanation for the latter piece, Kowalski claimed that "The project is intended for a gallery or another public space enjoying the immunity of art."[19] Thus on the one hand he foresaw the need to conceal his activity behind a special immunity (owing to the criticism embodied in this work), and on the other hand, he interpreted the gallery as a location which was able to guarantee such an immunity.

Community, Repassage

Kowalski shared this experience of soul-searching with many artists who had likewise studied under Jarnuszkiewicz and Hansen, and who in the 1970s formed the core of the Repassage Gallery, located on Krakowskie Przedmieście Street in Warsaw.[20] In this new decade, the 1970s, they decided to establish an immunity for themselves, not one imposed by the sacralising power of art, but built from mutual trust among friends.

Concurrently, the late 1960s and early 1970s were marked by a focus on new artistic forms and media among students of Hansen and Jarnuszkiewicz. What their teachers supposed to be didactic tools – visual games, for instance – their students often perceived as the means of a work of art. Documented games and cooperative tasks were conducted, for example, by the KwieKulik duo, consisting of Zofia Kulik and Przemysław Kwiek. The artists wrote in 1978, "We believed in the possibility of non-conflicting cooperation with other artists, in the possibility of group work, free from the problem of authorship [...]. The artist should be free and disinterested, and 'the new' should emerge on the verge of me-others, during cooperation."[21] Artists communicated (played) both by means of

visual forms and various types of actions. The game experience was connected with the consciousness that one is conditioned by the "statements" of others and that one influences the conduct of others through one's decisions, such as by limiting or broadening their possibilities of choice.

As students in the early 1970s, Waldemar Raniszewski and Wiktor Gutt had the radical idea of dedicating their entire artistic activity to one person only. They chose a craftsman living in the Powiśle district of Warsaw, who from that moment on was supposed to be the only recipient of their art. The idea was never realised, but what they started was a process of "conversation" between each other, using visual language. They conducted *Visual Conversations*, interactions, used the body and visual tools which took on different forms – from simple visual dialogues using pieces of paper to complex actions. The artists conducted a *Grand Conversation* with each other from 1972 until Raniszewski's death in 2005. Contrary to KwieKulik, Gutt and Raniszewski were fascinated by "primitive cultures" and bodily expression; they cooperated with children and the mentally ill (seen as "the Others" of contemporary civilization).[22] They also made significant shifts within the framework of the artist-model relationship. In their actions, a model was not only the object of an artist's work, but rather became an equal participant in their interaction.

In 1973, artists who gathered at the Sigma students' club, predominantly current or former students at Jarnuszkiewicz's and Hansen's studios, met to decide collectively about the future of the locale, which was to become a regular art gallery. There were two proposals: KwieKulik, Raniszewski and Gutt wanted to make it a venue for "constant artistic action", with presentations of documentary material.[23] Emil and Elżbieta Cieślar, together with Kowalski, wanted a more traditional kind of gallery. The Cieślars won the ballot. They ran the Repassage Gallery from 1973 to 1977, although the gallery continued to operate until the declaration of Martial Law in Poland in December 1981.[24] Thus Repassage became the venue for Kowalski's artistic activities. Community was the deciding element of this art; community was at the very heart of its existence.

Many of the projects at Repassage took place within a tightly-knit group of the gallery's friends, a generation of artists for whom the events of March 1968 had been an important formative influence. They focused on small-scale activities undertaken in relation to friends, held in a closed circle which created an enclave that was opposed to the hostile world outside. Maryla Sitkowska, monographist of the Repassage Gallery, wrote, "In the realizations of the gallery's artists, there is a common thread of treating the

3 Grzegorz Kowalski, *Could You and/or Would You Like To Become an Animal in Front of the Camera?*, 1977-1978, action-question, Maciej Pałyska's response, courtesy of the artist

processes of life as a material, the role of the artists – as initiators and 'regulators' of those processes, finally abandoning by the majority of artists of the materialization of artistic accomplishments in the form of an object (unless it took on a form of documentary tableaux) [sic]."[25] The Repassage methodology stemmed from the teachings of Jarnuszkiewicz and Hansen, but also from a post-1968 doubt in the modernist faith professed by Hansen which aimed to elevate society by "shaping human surroundings". However, they did not entirely reject Hansen's theory of Open Form.

This was the case for Kowalski, who changed his approach and started creating work with a different "recipient" in mind, also altering the scale of his projects and the scope of his interests. He spoke of "nursing one's own, individual view of the world", with which he would confront others – seeking these "recipients" among his friends and acquaintances. Thus in the 1970s, Kowalski's concerns transferred from the casual viewer of spatial projects to a specific individual. In interpersonal, often intimate contact with people, he sought not just inspiration, but the very motivation of art. In this way, he was able to say, "I never resigned from the role of artist, although at Repassage there was a powerful tendency, represented above all by the Cieślar couple, to question art as a channel leading nowhere,

4 Grzegorz Kowalski, *Would You Like to Return to Your Mother's Womb?*, 1987, action-question, courtesy of the artist

serving only itself. I, on the other hand, saw in art an alternative to everyday reality."[26] Such an alternative was probably envisaged in photographic sessions organised by Kowalski in his studio. Their effect was that of a happening, with the use of often eroticised photographic tableaux, but also broader action-questions, during the course of which people invited by Kowalski were asked to reply, in verbal and visual form (through their expressions in front of a camera), to questions relating to the nature of existence. These questions included, *Could You and Would You Like To Become An Animal in Front of the Camera?* (*Czy mógłbyś i chciałbyś wcielić się w zwierzę przed obiektywem*, 1977-1978, picture 3) and *Would You Like to Return to Your Mother's Womb?* (*Czy chciałbyś wrócić do łona matki?*, 1981-1987, picture 4). Later, he exhibited photographic documentation along with short texts. Sometimes, the answer to his questions was simply, "No."

5 Grzegorz Kowalski, *Could You and/or Would You Like to Treat Me Like an Object?*, 1979, action-question, Krzysztof Jung's response, *Turning Into an Object*, Scene 4, courtesy of the artist

Mirrors

The issues that concerned Kowalski were fully formulated in the action-performance piece entitled *Could You and Would You Like To Treat Me Like An Object?* (*Czy mógłbyś i czy chciałbyś potraktować mnie jako przedmiot?*, pictures 5 and 6) from 1979, in which he handed over his body – and himself – to his fellow artists. Several people answered his question, referring to ideas of personal freedom, relationships between people, or questioning the very possibility of the objectification of the human being. In Wiktor Gutt's reply – a performance set in the studio in front of a photographic camera – he turned Kowalski's question on its head by asking him, "Could you and would you like to be treated as an object in the mental sphere?" Gutt placed a hammer and a sharp spike in Kowalski's

6 Grzegorz Kowalski, *Could You and/or Would You Like to Treat Me Like an Object?*, 1979, action-question, Krzysztof Jung's response, *Turning Into an Object*, Scene 2, courtesy of the artist

hands, tied his hands with string and held the end of the string. "Beneath the hand armed with a hammer lies an earthworm. Beneath the hand armed with a spike lies your son. I let go of the string," he said. The whole situation was half-imaginary, half-real.

In reply to the same question, Krzysztof Jung answered with a series of artistic actions, each of which made reference to Kowalski's previous action-performances in which he had invited others participate. This time, Kowalski and his body were the focus of attention. All of Jung's interventions took place on 9 October, 1979, in Kowalski's studio. Jung travestied Kowalski's *Horizontal Composition II* (1972/1973), *Compilation* (1977), *Reproduction* (1977), the action-question *People/Animals* (*Could You and Would You Like to Become an Animal in Front of the Camera?*, 1977-1978) and *Chair* (1975, picture 7 and 8). Considered together, the performances and happenings held in the studio that day summed up Kowalski's activities of the previous decade and offered a critical perspective on his work.

7 Grzegorz Kowalski, *Chair*, 1975, photographic tableau, courtesy of the artist

Towards the end of 1972, Kowalski produced more than a dozen concrete casts of masks of his friends and acquaintances. He made use of these in three photographic variants of his *Horizontal Composition II*, placing them alternately in snow, on grass and on rough earth, as if the faces of the individuals themselves were emerging from beneath these surfaces. In Jung's performance in October 1979, he placed Kowalski on the floor, covering his body with a white cloth and surrounding his head with flour. He placed mirrors on either side of him, so that the image of his face was multiplied, making reference to the snow version of *Composition*.

Chair is a tableau composed of hundreds of photographs, in which forty-eight men and women pose naked with chairs. "Twelve photographs recorded their individual expressions, or rather their decisions as to how they wanted to be photographed,"[27] explained Kowalski. Concealed behind the camera, Kowalski created the conditions in which the expressions of others might be freed. Travestying *Chair*, Jung placed Kowalski (clothed) in front of a mirror, with a row of chairs behind him, on which

8 Grzegorz Kowalski, *Chair*, 1975, detail, photographic tableau, courtesy of the artist

sat the naked participants of his tableau of four years earlier – as he wrote, "the people objectified by G. K. in *Chair*".

Another work Jung alluded to was *Compilation* (picture 9), a happening organised by Kowalski at Repassage based on Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* and fragments quoted from *Diaries* by Witold Gombrowicz. The performance was reminiscent of hermetic mysteries (staged for the artist's friends and "gallery people"): Elżbieta Cieślar performed a kind of chromatic make-up session on the body of a "youth", Jerzy Słomiński, "darkening the arcs of the muscles of the breasts and belly, circling with lipstick the musculature of the thighs and tibia, combing the pubic hair." At first, she heightened his anatomical structure, but then "the make-up exceeded the limits of anatomical probability." She placed a permed wig on the "youth's" head, and in conclusion, Słomiński rose, took off the wig, put on his coat and left.[28] In the excerpt of *Diaries* quoted by Kowalski, Gombrowicz wrote, "I do not deny that there exists a dependence of the individual upon his surroundings – but for me it is

9 Grzegorz Kowalski, *Compilation*, 1977, Warsaw, the Repassage Gallery, courtesy of the artist

far more important, artistically far more creative, psychologically far more profound, philosophically far more disturbing, that the individual is created likewise by an individual, by another person. By means of random contact, at a particular moment. The strength of this is that he is always 'for somebody else', dependent on another's vision, able to exist solely in a manner defined by somebody and for somebody, existing as a being – only through another."[29] In Jung's performance parodying *Compilation*, a change took place. Here, it was Kowalski who lay naked upon the table (partly covered with a cloth bearing a drawing of his torso) and Słomiński who read the text by Gombrowicz (although the quotation was valid in both cases).

The third of Jung's works related to *Reproduction*, a feast organised by Kowalski at Repassage based on the theme of Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* and the photographic work resulting from this performance[30], and to the action-question, *Could You and Would You Like to Become an Animal in Front of the Camera?* In 1979, Jung placed the naked Kowalski among

his clothed friends following the model of *The Last Supper*, himself embodying an animal positioned in front of them.

In his complex, multi-action performance piece, Jung highlighted a certain subversive element in Kowalski's work. It is not possible to unequivocally determine the extent to which Kowalski allowed others to develop his work, or the extent to which he made them actors in his own scripts. One may ask if the "objectification" of *Horizontal Composition* differs from that of his action-questions – this appears to be the question asked by Jung. In this period, Kowalski produced many photographic works in which the human body was subjected to objectification and submission, such as *Devotional Objects* (1974), in which nudes bring to mind the tied-up bodies in the photographs of Nobuyoshi Araki.

What role does the artist play in performances composed in this way? Writing about *Chair*, Łukasz Ronduda notes that, "In a way, the piece was a narcissistic attempt to confront oneself and one's own limitations, to overcome them, to move on to another stage of personal development."[31] Narcissism is, however, a specific quality – in order to achieve it, the artist requires "a multiplicity of reproduced reflections, as in mirrors, in the experience of others."[32] Kowalski hardly ever worked alone in a closed studio. His art was not only realised through contact with the viewer, but arose from intimate contact with another person.[33] Consequently, it appears as partially inaccessible, as if a mystery were contained within it, known only to the artist and the participants of his performances – the "gallery people". In the eyes of the Repassage artists, the search for individual freedom constituted an expression of their position towards socio-political reality. In 1988, shortly before the fall of People's Poland, Kowalski, who never aspired to a belligerent role, said, "In a country with a totalitarian character, each attitude based on the internal reason of the individual, expressed publicly, must be an expression of opposition."[34]

Another path: the Cieślars

Kowalski negotiated his relations with others, his friends Elżbieta and Emil Cieślar, who ran the Repassage Gallery, confronted political reality more and more directly. Their double performance in 1977 was blatantly oppositional: in the first part, entitled *Well*, Emil Cieślar played "the painter", while his wife Elżbieta played "the fool". Clad in white clothes, she sat motionlessly on scaffolding, her hand and legs cuffed. Her smiling

face was accompanied by a comic caption, "Well." "The painter" painted everything red, while the sound of a "choir of happy Poles" was heard, singing "Well, well, well" to the melodies of popular songs.

In the second part, held on a different day, Emil Cieślar played Stańczyk, the court jester of the Polish king in the 16th century, as depicted in the famous historical painting by Jan Matejko. The figure of the dispirited jester Stańczyk became the symbol of thoughtful reverie on the fate of Poland. Seen from the open window of the gallery, Cieślar-Stańczyk sat in red clothes wearing a characteristic cap as in Matejko's painting, engulfed by grief. "The painter", Elżbieta Cieślar, painted him white. When his colour changed, his face started smiling, as if in bliss, and he sang the words, "Well, well, well" to the melody of The Internationale, the anthem of the workers' movement. Early the following year, documentation of the performance was shown at the gallery together with the authors' text entitled *Confession of Madness*: "To put reason into question, to put into question the necessity of the feeling of safety. In the world, in which everything that serves the state authorities is rational and functional, in which the people's needs are against the authorities' safety, in which it is impossible to reveal views on important matters that differ from the official, in which the common expression 'Well, well' means the personal approval of one's incapacitation, any discussion about traditional systems of value, modes of coexistence, the meaning of life [...] will end up being directed to a man who has to deny any thoughts other than the day-to-day struggle, finding an excuse to justify the need for security. Questioning the necessity of the need for security in order to satisfy the need for freedom and individual autonomy."

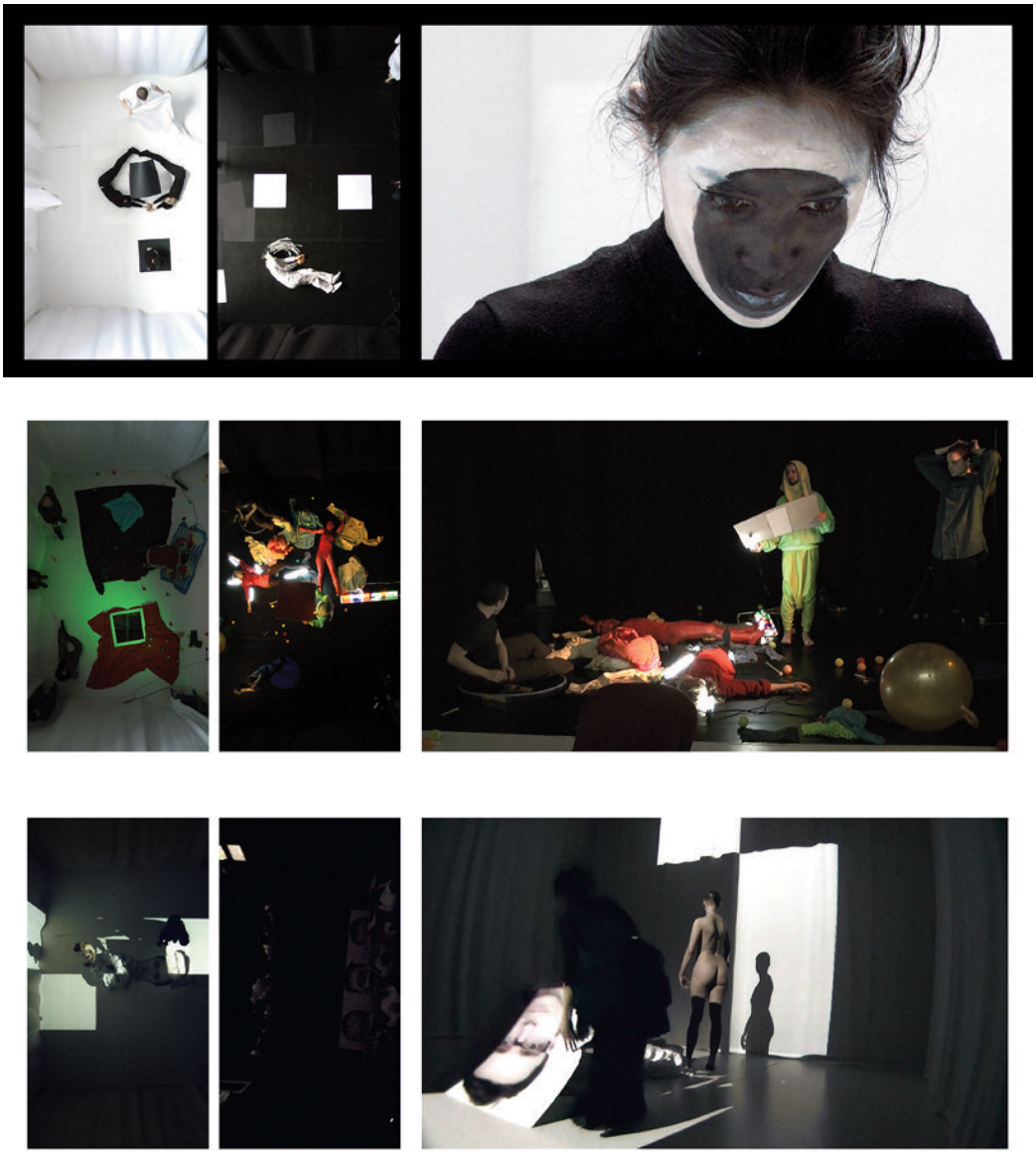
Soon afterwards, the Cieślars emigrated to France and their projects took an even more overtly political direction. In 1979, they opposed the Paris-Moscow Exhibition at the Georges Pompidou Centre, organizing an event entitled *Malevich's Coffin*, in which they denounced the mendacity of both partners of this enterprise, French and Soviet. A copy of the famous coffin designed by the artist himself was taken to the Pompidou Centre in a procession of Russian dissidents. The following year, the Cieślars protested in front of the same institution against the Olympic Games in Moscow. Their protest event *Olympic Peace*, which was repeated several times, referred to the war in Afghanistan. In 1980, the Cieślars co-founded the National Committee of Solidarity with Solidarity (Comité National de Solidarité avec Solidarnosc), which raised money to support the Solidarity movement in Poland. They were involved in a range of endeavours, including designing posters, producing prints and leaflets,

participating in and organising protests and events, such as against the reception of a parliamentary delegation from the People's Republic of Poland at the French National Assembly in 1984. Travestying Kowalski's statement about Jasper Johns, I would risk a comment here: "If Kowalski had been somewhere here, he would have done something else."

Didactics

As Maryla Sitkowska observed, "Grzegorz Kowalski personifies two stages of the Polish: i.e. involved in reality in a specific, avant-garde way: the progressive and pro-social one of the 1960s and the counter-cultural one of the 1970s." [sic][35] His doctrine is based, on the one hand, on a belief in the social effect of art, relating (as Oskar Hansen would put it) to large numbers of people shaken by the events of 1968 and 1970 in Poland, and on the other, on collaboration with a relatively narrow circle of friends-artists, which was constituted by the Repassage Gallery which operated in the 1970s in Warsaw. Kowalski's reaction to the shift in consciousness in Polish society in the early 1980s, the emergence of the Solidarity movement and the introduction of Martial Law in Poland, was twofold. On one side, he took part in a popular boycott of official institutions initiated by artists and in exhibitions organized by Janusz Bogucki in churches[36], and on the other, he made his enclave of close artistic collaboration even narrower and more reclusive.

After the closing of the Repassage Gallery the day of the introduction of Martial Law, Kowalski moved the model of Repassage to his studio at the Academy of Fine Arts. In the early 1980s, he was appointed professor in the Industrial Design Department, and in 1985, in the Sculpture Department, where he took over Jarnuszkiewicz's studio. Independently, he developed his own didactic style based on Jarnuszkiewicz and Hansen's achievements in this field. His style remains focused on a search for a balance between one's "own problems", one's own identity, individual expression and interpersonal relations, between events in the collective memory and functioning in society. With the limitation that in his studio, this second aspect is usually limited to a small group of students. And while Kowalski speaks about the primacy of experience over the work of art, the tension created does not lie at the border of art and life, but between individuals or between the individual and the group, as in Kowalski's own case.



10 *Common Space, Individual Space* XIII, 2010/2011, the Atelier of Audiovisual Space run by professor Grzegorz Kowalski, Warsaw, Academy of Fine Arts, stills from film documentation

Common Space, Individual Space (*Obszar Wspólny, Obszar Własny*, abbr. *OWOW*, picture 10) is an idiosyncratic task undertaken at the studio, which takes place every few years. Described briefly, it consists of a process of non-verbal communication: students, the professor and assistants meet in the studio space and act, using the language of the body, gestures and all possible visual forms. During *OWOW*, the studio becomes a laboratory in which young artists must react in an ad hoc manner to other people's gestures, at the same time checking whether what they are doing themselves is being interpreted according to their primary intentions. Thus *OWOW* sensitises them to the fact that art does not operate in emptiness; it has its receiver, and that art in its most basic function is a means of communication.

It is not surprising that it was largely graduates of Kowalski's studio who, after 1989 and the final collapse of communism in Poland, confronted society in this new era. Katarzyna Kozyra, Paweł Althamer and Artur Żmijewski, who studied under Kowalski between the 1980s and 1990s, attempted to utilise these methods on a larger scale. Żmijewski's criticism of Kowalski's didactics was formulated exactly from this perspective. The former student of Kowalski defied the studio's limitation to only what happened inside, ignoring what was going on outside of it. As a teacher, Kowalski clings to the idea of the studio as a place of experimentation.

But Kowalski and Żmijewski share far more than they disagree on. The specific work methods developed by Żmijewski stem from Kowalski's approach and didactics. Yet, reaching back to another generation, he builds upon the tradition initiated by Hansen and Jarnuszkiewicz. The new socio-political reality, new threats and new institutional possibilities allowed Żmijewski to move forward. Blurred authorship permitted him to shift the focus from the position of the artist to the problems he addresses, with social experiments and documented workshops enabling him to formulate broader theses and to challenge old assumptions. A similar approach served as the basis for the Berlin Biennale 7. The courage to undermine existing hierarchies and systemic interdependencies came hand in hand with the conviction that art is a platform for communication.

I guess that Kowalski envies the scale of Żmijewski's endeavours to some extent. Known mostly as the famous teacher of famous students, Kowalski's role is often downplayed. However, one has to see his didactic theories as a creative continuation of his artistic practice, which also suggests that sometimes, to gain freedom and express the "necessity of existence", one has to limit oneself.

1 It was Jakub Banasiak who announced the new trend of artists who were "tired of reality" in a series of texts and interviews with young painters. He later established the Kolonie Gallery in Warsaw, representing their work.

2 Artur Żmijewski, "Stosowane sztuki społeczne", *Krytyka Polityczna*, No. 11/12 (2006), pp. 14-24. English version: Artur Żmijewski, "The Applied Social Arts", in Artur Żmijewski, *Trembling Bodies. Conversations with Artists*, Kronika, Bytom, DAAD, Berlin, 2010, pp. 25-33.

3 Grzegorz Kowalski, "Teaching Art or Training Artists? (A Few Remarks by a Charlatan)" ["Uczyć sztuki czy kształcić artystów (kilka spostrzeżeń szarlatana)"], in *Two Studios. Kowalski-Gutt* [*Dwie pracownie. Kowalski- Gutt*], exhibition catalogue, Salon Akademii, Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts, 2012, pp. 49-55.

4 *Sympozjum Plastyczne Wrocław '70* [*Wrocław Art Symposium '70*], "Kalambur" Centre for Open Theatre, Wrocław, 1983, p. 100.

5 Grzegorz Kowalski, "Marginal Comments", in *Prace dawne i nowe* [*Old and New Works*], exhibition catalogue, Muzeum Okręgowe im. Leona Wyczółkowskiego, Bydgoszcz, 8.4.1998-17.5.1998, Bydgoszcz, 2002, p. 229.

6 "Brawurowy rok: z Grzegorzem Kowalskim rozmawia Maria Brewińska" ["A Heroic Year: Grzegorz Kowalski interviewed by Maria Brewińska"], in *Rewolucje 1968* [*Revolutions 1968*], Warsaw, 2008, p. 167.

7 Oskar Hansen, *Ku Formie Otwartej/Towards Open Form*, ed. Jola Gola, Warsaw, 2005, p. 38.

8 Oskar Hansen, "Forma Otwarta", *Przegląd Kulturalny*, No. 5/535 (1959), p. 5; reprinted in *W kręgu Formy Otwartej*, exhibition catalogue, Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts Museum, 25 April-23 May 1986, Warsaw, 1986, p. 8.

9 Compare Łukasz Ronduda, Michał Woliński, "Games, Visual Conversations, Activities and Interactions", *Piktogram*, No. 5/6 (2006), p. 27. See also other articles published in this issue of *Piktogram*.

10 Grzegorz Kowalski, "A View of the '60s", in Grzegorz Kowalski, *Prace dawne i nowe,* op. cit., p. 227.

11 In his writings, he noted: "I took photographs of the demonstrations. These photographs were destroyed by plain-clothed agents. There were three of them, they seemed to emerge out of the ground, they caught me by my arms and almost carried me into an empty café. They pulled out the roll of film and looked through my bag. This all took place in total silence." (17.8.1968); Grzegorz Kowalski, "Walizki" ["Suitcases"], in *Grzegorz Kowalski: Tableaux i kolekcje* [*Tableaux and Collections*], catalogue of an exhibition at Centrum Rzeźby Polskiej w Orońsku, April-May 1992, p. 5.

12 *Brawurowy rok*…, op. cit., p. 172.

13 Ibid.

14 Transcription of a conversation at the Repassage Gallery following the opening of the exhibition *Dokumentacja prac Grzegorza Kowalskiego* [*Documentation of the Works of Grzegorz Kowalski*], January 1976; quoted in *Grzegorz Kowalski: prace dawne i nowe,* op. cit., p. 253.

15 Grzegorz Kowalski, "Marginal Comments" …, op. cit., p. 229.

16 Grzegorz Kowalski, *A View of the '60s*…, op. cit., p. 226.

17 *Brawurowy rok*…, op. cit., p. 169.

18 Grzegorz Kowalski, *Kieszeń* [*Pocket*], Galeria Foksal PSP, June 1968, folder accompanying the exhibition, designed by the artist.

19 Grzegorz Kowalski, *Prace dawne i nowe*, op. cit., p. 244.

20 See *Sigma, Galeria, Repassage, Repassage 2, Re'Repassage,* text by Maryla Sitkowska in the exhibition catalogue, Galeria Zachęta, Warsaw, 28.6.1993-1.8.1993.

21 Quoted from Łukasz Ronduda, "Od odmian czerwieni do odmian szarości. Sztuka i polityka w działalności KwieKulik w latach 1971-1987", in *KwieKulik. Forma jest faktem społecznym/Form is a Fact of Society*, exhibition catalogue, BWA Wrocław, 16 July, 2009-7 February, 2010, Wrocław, 2009, p. 15.

22 See also Łukasz Ronduda, "Visual Conversations by Wiktor Gutt and Waldemar Raniszewski", *Piktogram*, No. 5/6 (2006), pp. 72-80; "Grand Conversation by Wiktor Gutt and Waldemar Raniszewski, 1972-1976", *Piktogram*, No. 5/6 (2006), pp. 81-97.

23 While KwieKulik never exhibited at Repassage when the gallery was run by the Cieślars, Gutt and Raniszewski played a key role in the Repassage milieu.

24 After the Cieślars, the gallery was subsequently run by Krzysztof Jung (Repassage 2, 1978-1979), Roman Woźniak (Re'Repassage, 1980-1981) and Jerzy Słomiński (1981).

25 Maryla Sitkowska, "Wstęp", in *Sigma, Galeria, Repassage, Repassage 2, Re'Repassage*, exhibition catalogue, Zachęta Gallery, Warsaw, 28 June-1 August 1993, Warsaw, 1993, p. 11.

26 "An Interview with Grzegorz Kowalski" by Wiesława Wierzchowska, in *Grzegorz Kowalski: Prace dawne i nowe,* op. cit., p. 235.

27 Grzegorz Kowalski, *Prace dawne i nowe,* op. cit., p. 216.
28 See *Sigma, Galeria…*, op. cit., pp. 104-105.
29 Quotation cited in *Sigma, Galeria…*, op. cit., p. 104; also in Witold Gombrowicz, *Dzienniki 1957-1961*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków, 1997, p. 8.
30 Compare the replies of participants in the performance in Grzegorz Kowalski, *Prace dawne i nowe*, op. cit., pp. 220-222.
31 Łukasz Ronduda, *Polish Art of the 70s*, Jelenia Góra, Warsaw, 2009, p. 189.
32 Grzegorz Kowalski, "Co to znaczy dzisiaj być artystą" ["What It Means To Be An Artist Today"], in *W kręgu pracowni Jarnuszkiewicza* [*In the Circle of the Studio of Jarnuszkiewicz*], exhibition catalogue, Muzeum Akademii Sztuk Pięknych w Warszawie, 25.4.1985-23.5.1985, Warsaw, 1985, p. 49.
33 This kind of artistic activity was continued by Kowalski and his students in the studio he inherited from Jarnuszkiewicz in 1985.
34 "An Interview with Grzegorz Kowalski" by Wiesława Wierzchowska, op. cit., p. 235.
35 Maryla Sitkowska, "Pracownia Grzegorza Kowalskiego", in *Transhumacja, Transkumacija, Transhumation*, exhibition catalogue, Kaunas, Kaumo Paveikslu Galerija, 1996, p. 3.
36 In the 1980s, the Catholic Church in Poland supported art initiatives, and many exhibitions were held in churches or spaces that belonged to the Church. The Church, however, did not guarantee ideological freedom, and the majority of exhibitions expressed sincere, but naïve patriotism and created new martyrs. Janusz Bogucki was an exception to this, engaging the best Polish artists and developing an independent reflection on art and spirituality.

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