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Polish Socialist Conceptualism of the 70s

Zofia Kulik, Przemysław Kwiek, Paweł Kwiek, Anastazy Wiśniewski, Zygmunt Piotrowski, Marysia Lewandowska & Neil Cummings, Paweł Althamer, Igor Krenz

Curated by Łukasz Ronduda
in collaboration with Barbara Piwowarska

Artists such as Anastazy Wiśniewski, Zofia Kulik, Przemysław Kwiek, Paweł Kwiek, Zygmunt Piotrowski belonged at the beginning of the 70s to the "Soc Art" movement (known also as socialist conceptualism, second socialist realism or New Red Art). They wanted to create a new avant-garde political art. In these attempts to re-define the relationship between art and politics, a far-reaching critical stance toward the communist regime can be observed. This critical stance, applied to the new Communist Party leadership (in the person of Edward Gierek), whose declarations about improving communication between the ruling circles and society, an openness to modernity and innovation, were taken seriously by soc-artists.

Soc-artists belonged to the Communist Party, they tried to re-define it from inside. As is typical of subversive art, the position of the Soc Art artists was based on imitating - almost identifying with the object of criticism, and slightly shifting the emphasis. They made clear distinction between the communist state, which realized a "real", authoritarian and non-democratic form of socialism, and the socialism understood as the "solidarity of working people", the real potential of people for spontaneous self-organization and self-representation. Soc Art artists wanted to return to the origins to the most fundamental understanding of the words and values of socialism and communism. For them the formation of social structures should proceed from the bottom up, from local, small communities and councils to larger structures, not the other way around: from abstract state structures based on abstract ideology down to the people. They wanted to invent truly socialist artistic activity whose goal was to provide the subjects with the tools for self-realization, self-representation, and competent collaboration with other subjects in order to form initiatives and communities from the ground up. In 1971 Piotrowski wrote: "To improve socialist society is to improve the ways in which people communicate with each other, to improve their ability to cooperate and coexist with other members of the group. The democratization of public life is only the beginning of a process of forming new interpersonal relations. The power which shapes them is not the state, but the "solidarity of the proletarians". "All power to autonomous local councils!: Lenin's directive is nothing but a confirmation of how significant revolutionary processes are in our society".

It must be mentioned that for Polish artistic circles at the beginning of the 70s any kind of political involvement still had negative associations with Socialist Realism. Soc Art artists were confronted with the task of proposing a form of socially engaged art that would at the same time differ from the Socialist Realist formula. They strove to achieve this by grounding their avant-garde, politically engaged work in attempts to combine the so-called new languages of art (process-based art, minimalism, conceptualism, interactions, structural cinema happenings, collaborations) with politics. An essential principle shaping their work was chance and spontaneous collective improvisation with no script. For example, they tried to transform official state celebrations into happenings, into fluxus-like events. Soc-artists permanently addressed the communist authorities with several proposals to organize political or "propaganda" events based on their artistic achievements. In 1971 they organized political spectacles (*Think Communism*, *Proagit*) that were structured by interactions, and based on chance and the improvised and spontaneous communication between participants. In these events artists used several political symbols and elements: the anthem *The Internationale*, Lenin's head, red flags. The interactions used in those spectacles could only propagate ideas and models of a non-authoritarian social system composed of free, responsible individuals who

maintain open, effective communicative relations based on freedom of thought and tolerance toward other worldviews or lifestyles. The interactions were structurally incapable of propagating the ideology prevailing at that time. This attempt to create propagandist spectacles through a method of improvised multimedia interactions turned out to be a rebellion against the models of propaganda prevalent in socialist Poland.

The artists' proposal unveiled the structural inability of the authoritarian system to change its models of social communication, since such a change would be linked to the necessity of sharing power with others. It would require a transition from the system of command to one of social dialogue, from one-way social control to a dialectic of controlling and being controlled, and so forth. The Soc-artists' attempt at politicizing aesthetics constituted a third way, as against autonomous modernist art on the one hand, and art aestheticising politics on the other.

The actions carried out by the Soc Art artists were rejected by the communist authorities, and the artists themselves were subjected to repressive action. The story of their "flirt with the revolution" can be compared to that of the Constructivist avant-garde in Russia of the 1920s and 30s. The pattern of relationships between avant-garde artists and the communist authorities was similar. Soc-artists were doubly repressed: they were excluded by the political authorities from the sphere where art and politics intersected, and by the anti-communist artistic community, from existing art institutions, and finally, from Polish art history.

In Communist Poland there was no situation outside ideology, just as today in Capitalist Poland there is no situation that is free from the laws of the market. It is for this reason that the subversive strategies employed by Soc Art figures like Anastazy B. Wiśniewski (and his Yes Gallery) recall those employed by contemporary anti-corporate artists (like Yes Man for example). As for the work of Piotrowski, Paweł Kwiek, Przemysław Kwiek and Kulik, their analyses of collective thinking, interaction, mutual cooperation among individuals, mobilization aimed at achieving artistic, social and political goals, the right of the individual (and of the group) to self-representation and self-realization, a concern for the common good and for common public space, all demonstrate tropes taken up by the most up-to-date Polish contemporary artists - by Paweł Althamer, Igor Krenz, Marysia Lewandowska and Neil Cummings.

Polish Socialist Conceptualism of the 70s presents a selection of films and documentations of actions, performances and conceptual gestures, most of them unknown, forgotten or excluded from art-historical discourse in Poland. The show has the structure of an archive representing Soc Art activity from the 70s, as well as documentation of artistic projects by a contemporary younger-generation (from the last few years, even months) referring to neo-avant-garde strategies or revitalizing forgotten artistic productions, like the totally unknown, though very active amateur-film movement in Poland in the 60s and 70s, gathered and reinterpreted by Marysia Lewandowska and Neil Cummings, or Solidarity TV from the 80s, reconstructed by Igor Krenz. "Self-organization" is one principle of the show, and equipment was found and lent by friends from New York and with the kind support of Orchard.

Łukasz Ronduda and Barbara Piwowarska

Participating artists from the 70s:
Anastazy Wiśniewski, Zofia Kulik, Przemysław Kwiek, Paweł Kwiek, Zygmunt Piotrowski

Contemporary artists:
Marysia Lewandowska & Neil Cummings, Paweł Althamer, Igor Krenz

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