ARTUR ŻMIJEWSKI

Democracies, The Game of Tag, My Neighbors, Repetition, Singing Lesson I, Them, 80064

On the second floor of X Initiative, Artur Żmijewski exhibits a selection of his groundbreaking videos, offering the American public the first large-scale presentation of his work to date, which coincides with his participation in the *Projects* series at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, on view through February 2010.

Ranging from social experiments to crude documentaries, from investigations of complex moral issues to descriptions of everyday conflicts, Żmijewski's videos sketch a multifaceted fresco of humanity, depicted with the cold eye of a documentarian and the piety of a passionate witness. The first ever American mid-career survey of this artist, the exhibition also features the US premiere of one of his most ambitious works, ***Democracies*** (2009), a video installation composed of 20 monitors documenting public events and protest scenes from various political credos around the world. Images of rallies, strikes, and uprisings are combined with footage from reconstructions of historical events, parades and funerals of controversial political leaders.

Żmijewski's methodology usually consists of setting a scenario or a situation, which groups and individuals are invited to enter in order to perform simple tasks that will eventually reveal strong personal convictions and deep cultural prejudices. Usually unscripted, these "workshop videos" – as the artist calls them – are often based on a therapeutic approach: they are experiments in which participants are encouraged to act out their beliefs and confess their fears. Part sociological investigations, part public confessions, Żmijewski's videos pay particular attention to processes of victimization, exclusion, and segregation, exposing disquieting memories and traumas in order to shake up our assumptions.

Originally presented at the Polish Pavilion in the 2005 Venice Biennale, ***Repetition*** (2005) is inspired by a 1971 experiment by psychologist Philip Zimbardo. For his re-enactment, Żmijewski has constructed a prison block and invited a group of paid volunteers to play the roles of guards and prisoners. As we witness in the video, an escalation of psychological and physical violence takes place: the guards and the prisoners become more aggressive as they sink into their roles, leaving behind any civilized behavior as they wear their uniforms. While the original experiment aimed to reveal constant patterns of behavior, Żmijewski's video shows the guards and prisoners slowly teaming up against the prison institution and against the artist himself. *Repetition* is also a comment on the contemporaneous episodes of tortures and abuses in Guantanamo Bay and in Iraq.

Recently shown at Documenta 12 in Kassel, ***Them*** (2007) is one of Żmijewski's most complex workshop videos. The artist brought together four different social groups representative of contemporary Poland: women from the Catholic Church, a Polish right wing radical youth group, members of leftist organizations, and an association of young Polish Jews. Each group was asked to create, on a large sheet of paper, a symbol that would represent their beliefs. Afterwards – according to the principles of democracy and freedom that all the groups supposedly embraced – the participants were invited to improve each others' work by altering the creations of the other groups. As the members of the different factions fail to recognize each other's values, Żmijewski impartially documents the explosion of hatred and violence among the participants to the experiment: what had begun as a game turns into an exposure of our most destructive instincts.

Also on view is ***My Neighbors*** (2009), the most recent production by the artist. The video was shot in Israel, in Holon, where Żmijewski lived during an artist residency. For this video, the artist asked a group of neighbors in his building to depict, on a simple sheet of paper, the situation in Gaza.

Żmijewski's work often portrays the weak, the wounded, the physical impaired. The body is at the center of the artist investigation: naked, mutilated, broken by physical forces or consumed by the

weight of history, the bodies in Żmijewski's work are often stripped bare, in an attempt to understand where the natural and the cultural begin. Combining empathy with voyeurism, Żmijewski challenges the very essence of compassion. He shows us the uncomfortable, what we don't usually want to see: deaf-mutes singing, guards fraternizing with the victims, and various states of physical and psychological pain. Without offering easy solutions, the artist interrogates the very condition of 'bare life', the point at which humanity is suspended and turned into an exposed body.

For ***The Game of Tag*** (1999), Żmijewski invited a group of people of different ages and sex to play tag naked in two different rooms, one of which is a gas chamber of a concentration camp. After an initial embarrassment, the participants gradually start playing. Some feel ashamed, while others are completely at ease and play on, laughing. The whole action takes on a ghostly appearance: a contemporary dance macabre, *The Game of Tag* raises questions about the contagious power of violence, while inviting us to consider the possibility of forgetting or re-experiencing the traumas of history.

In ***Singing Lessons I*** (2001), Żmijewski filmed a choir of hearing-impaired teenagers in a church in Warsaw as they sing the 'Kyrie' from the *Polish Mass* by Jan Maklakiewicz. "In this holy place, in this holiest place, our voice rises to You and erupts as the sea roars from the deep abyss. O Christ, hear us! O Christ, listen to us!": written in 1944, at the height of the Second World War and in the midst of the Holocaust, these words resonated with all their tragic power. Sixty years later, with its joyful cacophony of sounds, the video challenges our preconceived assumptions about standards of perfection and acknowledges the value of difference, while it also comments on the fact that the Polish church used to deny the deaf the Holy Sacrament, telling yet another story of exclusion and violence.

80064 (2004) is another dramatic exploration of memory: the artist asked a concentration camp survivor to have his fading prisoner number re-tattooed on his arm. The video records the dialogue between the old man and the artist as he attempts to persuade him. Memories and recollections of the past re-emerge literally inscribed in the body of the prisoner. The survivor worries about the possible loss of authenticity of his number while the artist stresses the need to re-actualize history, so that it does not simply fade away. A painfully poignant testimony of the atrocities of the Holocaust, *80064* continues Żmijewski's investigation of violence and human dignity. As the artist explains: "Emotions are also hidden. Emotions from the time of extermination, the emotions of an eyewitness, are shut in; recovering and revealing them may be a testimony greater than words, stronger than any text – an irrefutable proof of the atrocities of the past and, for us viewers, also a demonstration of history as it occurs, the history that lives in people and can flow from them as a cry, terror, weeping, a sigh, or recurring horror and grief. This is a history different from one described in words, a history that can really wound – and the witness himself is the least secure. But such testimony is irresistible, aggressive; it penetrates the viewer's emotions as pain penetrates the body".

Artur Zmijewski (1966, born in Warsaw) represented Poland at the 51st Biennale in Venice in 2005. In 2007 he participated in Documenta 12 in Kassel as well as in the second Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art. Zmijewski's work is also currently on view at the Museum of Modern Art with "Projects 91: Artur Zmijewski", where he is premiering the video *Sculpture Plein-air. Swiecie 2009.*