Orchard
47 Orchard St.
NYC, NY 10002
www.orchard47.org
212- 219-1061

Polish Socialist Conceptualism of the 70's

Curated by Lukasz Ronduda in collaboration with Barbara Piwowarska
Exhibition dates: Jan. 7 – 28
Gallery hours: Thurs – Sun, 1-6 pm

Front of Gallery:

Paweł Kwiek's film is a mix of various formal elements and styles. It includes animations, actor sequences, 'found' elements (both images and sounds), and its underlying construction principle are chance and spontaneous improvisation (without a script) or a 'play' with formal elements. Kwiek treated all such elements in a very 'cold', material way, which is why he 'manipulated' rather freely the 'political motifs' thrown into the mix (e.g. Lenin's image, scenes from a May Day parade, the film school rector's speech about socialism). The strategy meant that elements of political connotations could be interpreted both ways (depending on the context in which they found themselves). It is impossible to say whether the film is an affirmation or a critique of the given symbols (which is why its screenings in the 1970s often shocked the audiences). The idea was to 'talk' about ideas via form, via the formative principle, rather than via the representational layer. Because of this aspect, Kwiek's film was structurally unable to promote the only correct (period's dominant) ideology. Its supreme principle was the openness of interpretation, deliberate non-determination of meaning. Moreover, by treating the film solely as a collection of stimuli, Kwiek referred ironically to literature-based films encouraging the viewer to actively read and interpret the cinematic work, inviting hermeneutical activity.

Zofia Kulik, Przemysław Kwiek
Variants of Red. Edward Gierek's Path
Slide show
1971/2006

The *Variants of Red* show (carried out for the first time as part of Zygmunt Piotrowski's spectacle *Think Communism*) consisted of a selection of hundreds of slides by the KwieKulik duo that featured any element of the colour red: a detail, an inscription, a fabric etc. The archive of red-featuring slides, the colour being situated in various material and spatial contexts of reality, was a result of KwieKulik's art-meets-science strategy aimed at analysing and capturing the 'possible configurations of everything with everything in the potential spatial arrangements', in this case the configurations of the colour red with other appearances of the material reality. This was a utopian idea. It should be stressed that KwieKulik were interested above all in artistic-scientific activity, a kind of scientism connected with cataloguing the visual dimension of reality, rather than in creating any special message or symbolic meaning. Instead, they wanted to present the viewer with a set of images, or forms, that he himself could imbue with meaning. Still, the colour red also had obvious political connotations. The originally analytical work obtains new meanings when introduced to the political context. Its structure doubles, becoming both analytical and political.

The *Edward Gierek's Path* show, in turn, consisted of monochromatic front-page photographs showing the national leader visiting factories and meeting worker delegations in various places throughout Poland. The synchronised screening of the *Variants of Red* with *Edward Gierek's Path* produced the effect of confronting the artists' own achievements with what Edward Gierek had achieved during the same time. Such a confrontation of two, seemingly completely different, realities provoked comparisons between the new art and the new regime, identified by the artists on the level of notions such as creativity, dynamism, energy etc. The

confrontation of the two shows was a postulate directed at the ruling elite to demonstrate the same values the artists analysed in their experiments.

Paweł Kwiek
Niechcice
1971-1973

As part of his strategy of the *Objective Documentary of Man* Paweł Kwiek made several assembling films. They were collections of short cinematic sequences that were to constitute an 'objective' portrait of their protagonist. One of the most interesting such films was made as the result of a socio-artistic action carried out by Kwiek in a small state-farm village of Niechcice. The artist enabled a group of local youth to make a number of one-minute movies based on their own script, himself adopting the role of an obedient cameraman fulfilling all of the 'director's' orders. The *Niechcice* assemblage film, put together with three such movies, represented one of the best manifestations of Kwiek's formula, being developed by the artist in the 1970s, of sociological art, consisting in penetrating deeply into the given context of social life, into the life of specific people and communities. By making it possible for a group of small-village youth to make their own films, the artist wanted to mobilise their activity, to provoke a critical and creative attitude towards reality, as well as to help them realise the circumstances determining their existential experience. It was the socio-artistic process itself ('giving a voice to those who so far had lacked it') that mattered for the artist, less so the final product, the finite assemblage film *Niechcice*

Center of Gallery:

Przemysław Kwiek, Zofia Kulik
Video-decoration
1978

In *Video-decoration*, KwieKulik refer critically to their own utopian concept from the early 1970s of making their version of conceptual art part of the process of the socialistic state's self-renewal and reform. The work is above all a critique of the authoritarian communist regime that only wants artists to aestheticise its image, to create decorations for its shows, secular altars. KwieKulik show the process of performing a sideline job – a decoration for the Polish Journalist Association congress. They film the original graphic design and then the screen of a TV showing coverage of the event (featuring party officials Gierek and Łukaszewicz), which takes places amid the decorations designed and made by the artists.

Zygmunt Piotrowski
Excerpt from *Film Statement*
1977

Zygmunt Piotrowski's film was made as part of the assembling from work *Film Statement* (Pracownia Dziekanka, 1977). The artist comments on his strategy from the early 1970s of creating space-time political posters. Piotrowski, once a leading representative of soc-art, continues his critique of the communist state and its inability to fulfil the socialist ideals.

Igor Krenz
Solidarity TV, 2006

In 1985, working in secrecy, a group of astronomers at the Toruń University built a television transmitter to broadcast subversive messages during the evening news.
On 14th September 1985, during the evening Dziennik Telewizyjny news programme, and on 26th September 1985, during the screening of one of the parts of the *07 Zgłoś się* crime series, the following messages appeared on the screens: 'Toruń Solidarity, Enough Price Rises, Lies and Repressions', "Toruń Solidarity, Boycotting the Elections Is Our Duty'. During the second broadcast, the authors of Solidarity TV were arrested by the secret police.

Professor Jan Hanasz at the Mikołaj Kopernik Astronomical Centre in Toruń was one of the co-

authors of Solidarity TV. He speaks of the transmitter's construction:
The idea of superimposing messages on the TV screen was based on using the frame signal to synchronize the image being broadcast by us with the officially broadcast image. The device consisted of a TV set equipped with a receiving antenna, a transmitter operating in a on/off mode, a transmitting antenna, and a delay line connected to the, historical today, Sinclair ZX Spectrum computer. The delay line sent the 'turn on' message to the transmitter with a set delay relative to the frame signal (from the TV set). The intervals were set by the computer, which was owned by Zygmunt Turło. Thanks to that solution, which he invented, the image wasn't jerky, was well synchronized and very clear. Our signal didn't try to compete with the official one, quite to the contrary, it actually used it for synchronization. As a result, the outlines of our messages were visible even where the transmitted signal was very weak. Particularly important, such a solution didn't require a powerful transmitter, and all we had were several dozen-watt transistors. It turns out the eye reacts to interference quite differently than the ear.

The captions were created in a rather primitive way. We copied them onto graph paper and then numbered the grid fields in the 16 system so that the numbers could be understood by the delay line. The field number in the caption was equipped with the 'on' function ('turn on the transmitter') and the field in the background was marked 'off'.
Before broadcasting, we wanted to see how powerful the transmitter was and what was its coverage. Tests consisted in broadcasting meaningless geometric figures.

The only material trace remaining of the Solidarity TV transmitter are three photographs made at the Police Headquarters in Warsaw following the arrests and the seizure of the equipment.

Rear of Gallery:

Marysia Lewandowska and Neil Cummings
Love
Film program
(A part of the enthusiasts/enthusiasm project)

In their project Enthusiasts, Marysia Lewandowska and Neil Cummings summarize almost two years research into the "ruins" and remains of the amateur filmmaking movement that flourished in Poland from the early 1950's to the end of the 1970's. The artists present a singular "compilation" of items, mainly films, amassed during a collection-driven, allegorical search. I have to emphasize that Lewandowska and Cummings have striven to disrupt the collector's passion - aimed at preserving the value, meaning and history of an object or phenomenon - with an allegorists desire to inject their own ideas into the object. Although counter to the dominant post-modernist strategies of allegorization, Lewandowska and Cummings have avoided "assassinating" their object of analysis through reducing it to a mere metaphor for endless additional signification. Instead, their treatment of the films they have gathered shares much with Benjamin's understanding of allegory as a means of rescuing the past by "establishing a second level of meaning," they have sought to create conditions for restoring public awareness in previously forgotten material.

This approach has resulted in a project shaped by a specific tension between two main levels of meaning. At the level of Collection, their endeavor is both sociological and artistic. It consists of the desire to re-present films made by amateurs between the 1950's and 1970's, and to turn attention to the work of a socially and historically marginalized group. At the level of Allegory, on the other hand, in reading a phenomenon that interests them and arranging the collected materials, the artists have produced a highly relevant critique of contemporary material culture.

In many cases, the productions of amateur filmmakers were expressions of "basic" creative needs or genuine artistic ambition in environments rarely conducive, to this kind of activity. But they were also something else - something not burdened by "artistry" and unrelated to contemporary art. Lewandowska and Cummings like the idea of a "film proletariat" joining in the means of symbolic production - through cameras and film stock - by exploring their

immediate surroundings; projecting their bold dreams and intimate desires. The artists are fascinated by the emergence of ambitious individuals who organized themselves into Amateur Film Clubs in order to create films about their own realities; a "grassroots" energy that redefines relations between culture and everyday practice. In The Esthetics of Resistance, Peter Weiss accurately describes this desire for cultural participation through the example of the cultural self-education of Berlin's workers in 1937: "Our understanding of culture very rarely correlated with what appeared as a colossal reservoir of goods, accumulated inventions and discoveries. Stripped of ownership, we approached this amassed wealth at once frightened and pious, until we realized that we needed to fill all this with our own evaluations, that the general concept would become useful only once it said something about our living conditions and the difficulties and peculiarities of our thinking" (Weiss, 1995).

In presenting this image of the micro-community of amateur filmmakers, the artists focus our attention on the mechanisms that contributed to its creation. Enthusiasm, self-organization and self-awareness are among the principle "motors" that co-create culture and enable existence within the public sphere of signs. These are also guarantors of the healthy functioning of this sphere. Lewandowska and Cummings acknowledge these values as "essential" and independent of any political system.

www.enthusiastsarchive.net

Paweł Althamer, Bródno 2000

Organized at the occasion of the Millennium's New Year's Eve, *Bródno 2000* is one of the most known and spectacular actions by Paweł Althamer. It was organized in enormous block of flats where he has lived for many years in Bródno - an ugly and poor district of Warsaw. As described by an artist, it was the best time for "the miracle in Bródno".

Since the 90's Althamer has focused on social activism while examining the role of the artist in big cities through an engagement of local communities. He has closely observed the lives of these people, collecting examples of spontaneous artistic social activities involving children, senior citizens and the general public. He also engages the social dimensions of performance and public spectacles. *Bródno 2000*, was treated as a miraculous public performance which involved the cooperation of over 3000 people living in the gigantic building complex. Residents were asked to turn lights either on or off at a specific moment in order to spell a gigantic 2000 in the windows of the entire building. The action took approximately 30 minutes and culminated in block party generating great enthusiasm for all residents, participants and an artist. It revealed power and "mystery" of common mass activity and meanings could be evoked - by social spectacle and *misterium*: "directing the reality".