

Curatorial and Artistic Practice as Political Process: an interview with Artur Żmijewski

by Anne Koskiluoma and Anna Krystyna Trzaska

Excerpt of telephone conversation with Artur Żmijewski, 9th of January 2013

Anne Koskiluoma/Anna Trzaska: In an interview with the curator Pierre Bal-Blanc, for *Flash Art* in 2010, you state: "Maybe art is not as innocent as we think." You believe that art could help transform ruling orders based on hierarchy into a system based on cooperation, participation an engagement of individuals.²

In your curatorial practice directing the 7th Berlin Biennale, did you see new possibilities for this important change emerging? What were the outcomes?

Artur Żmijewski: The greatest importance for this Biennale was to check, whether art is able to create substantial results in political life, in social life, in our collective reality. I didn't think about economical results, which of course art creates. I had been thinking about certain political processes that people are involved in or conduct. The question was, if art is able to support actively such processes. That is, what the story was about, then my curatorial effort was to find and define these processes and to search for people who support them using artistic tools.

AK/AT: We read, that you managed to open up the Biennale for a different kind of public. For instance by deciding to abolish admission charges.

Could you tell us, if this opening towards the citizens of Berlin was noticeable during the event? Did the people use the opportunity by visiting the different exhibition sites, maybe even various times?

AŻ: Probably people who usually have no money to buy tickets came this time. Students and

people, who really count each Euro and each Cent and think about how much they will spend to buy lunch. You know, the majority of the citizens in Berlin are not rich at all.

AK/AT: Compared to the rather specific group of people that usually frequents art exhibitions, beside the students. Do you think the Biennale was attracting a broader audience also due to the fact of how it was discussed in the press?

AŻ: I hope so. I mean a good example of an audience; we usually do not meet at exhibitions are the people from Palestinian minorities. At the Biennale there were two projects concerning Palestinian issues. The first one: *The State of Palestine* by Khaled Jarrar, stamping passports with the Palestinian stamp. The second one: *The Biggest Key in the World*, the giant key, was dislocated from the AIDA refugee camp and brought to the Biennale. Therefore, many Palestinians were coming and visiting the projects. Some were even guarding them, especially this key, which was situated in the courtyard of the Berliner Kunstwerke. So, it was quite ordinary to observe Palestinian women spending time next to the key, some would even bring their kids along. Very unusual, let's say, very well visible people were present mainly because of this symbol, which was so important to them.

AK/AT: The 7th Berlin Biennale gathered enormous attention from the day you were announced as the curator. How did you react to this?

AŻ: The "enormous attention" itself was not of interest to me, but the potential to introduce certain

ideas to the people. I was focused on the formulation of the issue of the Biennale, which was from the very beginning a kind of political substance that is generated by art and culture in general. Later on when our work advanced, I realized what was very unique about this situation. It was the fact that I somehow “had” the institution, that I had access to the internal life of the institution. To the big secret of art industry, which is strongly institutionalized.

Now I had the possibility to use the institution, not in artistic terms, but in a political way. The state is composed of its institutions. The culture sector, including its institutions is part of the state. In this sense, we had access to the state itself. Metaphorically speaking, we had access to the state logic which is represented by administration logic, vertical power structure, oppressive execution of internal rules and paragraphs of the law, loyalty dilemmas and so on.



AK/AT: You received full praise for creating a sphere for discourse and reflection. At the same time there were strong reactions from behalf of the art scene and also some scandalising in the press. Do you think they felt attacked to a certain extent or even unmasked?

AŻ: Media or art critics write comments from a certain position. They usually understand art as a spectacle, as an activity conducted by individuals who produce fetishes, which corrupt peoples’ fantasies and emotions. The art object is constructed as a paradox or as a question without answer.

The art world is based on endless competition, which reduces relations between artists and cultural workers and fights for economical and symbolical profits. Of course art can be concerned with serious problems, like poverty or lack of democracy, but this discourse produces just questions and doubts. The knowledge educed out of it, hardly ever get’s transformed into political practice. The social engagement

of artists appears in form of an exception; a beautiful exception from a horrible, unchangeable reality. In other words, the prevailing art ideology is very dominant. If you represent such an ideology, how can you understand an art event which is driven by different wishes and by substantial political ambitions? An event that is set out to work as processes and where culture is understood as a kind of locally defined policy – goal oriented, effective and creating consequences in human reality. The 7th Berlin Biennale was occupying people who transform their political ambitions into practice, who are not afraid of working collectively, who create not fetishes but certain tools useful in this reality. No paradoxes, rather activism and art journalism – and purely defined goals – no questions.

For example, we were working with Marina Naprushkina, a Belarussian artist and member of the Belarussian opposition. She lives in Berlin and her goal is to liberate Belarus. By the time we met, Marina was working on a large publishing project. She was editing a newspaper in form of a cartoon book for the Belarussian people. So, she was smuggling the freedom of speech and a vision of the future to Belarus – different from the turbo-capitalism and different from the way of life called “consumption”. We offered her money from the budget of the Biennale and proposed to treat her on-going work as a Biennale project, in order to secure the continuity of it. The result we expected was the free circulation of information in Belarus, a country that is fully controlled by a dictator and his corrupted network; to publish a free magazine in a police country. We can call it art, because Marina is an artist, but at the same time it is pure politics.

Other artists, with the vision of art that is specifically based on this individual approach and competition, resulting in the production of strange fetishist objects, came looking for results of our research and claimed that it failed. And exactly, our Biennale failed the fetishist objects! There were no artist celebrities, no individuals. Even Olafur Eliasson, who is known for his object based work, proposed a Biennale project in close cooperation with a professional politician. Eliasson, who is perfect in constructing light objects, who is perfect in using advanced technologies to create installations, this time was just working with a person from the political world. No material presentation, just an exchange of concepts and experiences between two worlds: The world of professional art and the world of professional politics. Two different languages started to

be negotiated and the Biennale initiated this instance.

AK/AT: It is interesting that you decided to include your own work *Berek* (1999), this caused quite a stir within the art scene. Did you expect to face criticism for its inclusion?

AŻ: The film *Berek* was included, because it had been excluded from a show at the Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin in 2011³. So, if the people had no chance to watch it in one Berlin based art institution, they should get the opportunity to watch it at the Kunstwerke. In this sense my decision was a reaction to an act of censorship. So, in fact not the specific art work was exhibited, but the act of resistance, the reaction itself. This kind of censorship shouldn't take place, especially not in Berlin. I was blamed for being an anti-Semitic, while I was trying to deal with the cruel history for which in fact the Germans are responsible. In some perverted way I was transformed into half a Nazi. Later I realized that it was a strategy of, let's say, reversed attack. And this was not the only incident that we faced. The preparation

process of Martin Zet's campaign *Deutschland, schafft es ab!* against Thilo Sarrazin's book *Deutschland schafft sich ab*⁴, resulted exactly with the same. Martin Zet proposed to reduce the number of copies of this racist book, that were available on the market by asking people to send it to Kunstwerke, in order to make an art work out of the collected copies. Someone compared this collecting action with the book burning by the Nazis. As a result for his proposal Martin was berated half a Nazi, an emblem of evil. Not Thilo Sarrazin. We could observe how the access to internal German politics was controlled by German fear-slogans. Just one association with the action on Bebel Platz in 1938 activated a media hysteria, as a result the internal German politics and the internal debate became like a fortress.

AK/AT: The 7th Berlin Biennale closed in July 2012. There must be a huge evaluation process in the wake of such a large project. What is your personal aftermath or conclusion?

AŻ: You have to remember about one thing that I already said. What was unique about this situation



as a curator, was to somehow “have” the institution. Everything we did at the Biennale was done because we controlled the power of the institution. We decided.

I cannot really repeat this. At the moment as an artist I cannot do the same, because I’m weak. It depends on the institutions, if they give me a budget for production, if they invite me or not. As a curator I had the opportunity to experience this absolutely powerful and unique situation and make use of it. Of course many people who work as professional curators, to them it’s daily routine. But I don’t know if the majority of them are aware of the power they have and what they can do with it.

We were trying to examine what we can do, how we can employ the institution of culture in a different way. We used this power to support artists who operate in terms of politics.

AK/AT: Speaking of artistic authorship, in your manifesto *The Applied Social Arts* you suggest that art could try and restore the original meanings of the terms: Autonomy, originality, opaqueness. “Autonomy then, would mean the right to choose a sphere of freedom, instead of being an extreme personality trait. Originality would be a sign of creativity and not novelty at all costs. Opaqueness would be indicative of the difficulty and density of a message and not it’s inability to communicate.”⁵

How important is artistic authorship to you as an artist? Do you see it as a form of self-proclaimed immunity while navigating all these social artistic structures? We are wondering what is your own position as an artist?

AŻ: I was blamed many times for not being original or innovative enough. Usually I answer, that there are many other artists who are original and create novelty. Why do we need new proposals again and again, if we aren’t able to consume what has been already proposed? What I’m saying in the essay is, that we should stop for a moment and think about what is already on the table and how we can use it, instead of looking constantly for something new.

For the Biennale I didn’t invent the idea of useful art, I didn’t invent the idea of political art or artists involved in political processes. It was done before, years ago. But this idea has been discredited so many times. People say it’s dangerous, because it reminds them of Stalin, Lenin, Speer, and so on. The counterpoint in these discussions about political art

is always Stalin, or Leni Riefenstahl. Our intention was not about confronting people with completely new ideas, but to use the old idea and check it again. Our aim was to forget about artistic autonomy, to transform such an idea into a spectrum of substantial projects; a proposal for substantial transformations. If we want to be involved in political processes with our work of art, how can we keep autonomy? If we want to take part in the on going transformation of society, how can we keep distance to it? So, the main idea behind the Biennale was to join society. Art and artists should join society – really forget about the distance to it.

AK/AT: After having the opportunity of curating the Berlin Biennale, has it also changed your relationship towards curators; since you now have all this background information through your own experiences?

AŻ: It can’t change my relationship to them. I depend on them. But in some cases I know what kind of power they have. I think an alternative use of this power is blocked by the dominant ideology of art and culture – that art and culture are somehow for nothing and never have a political aim.

AK/AT: Is that the notion of the “end of art”?

AŻ: No, I don’t think it’s the end. I believe in art. It is a great tool, which activates and supports human creativity. I think it could happen that art and culture create real changes. There are very good examples of artistic actions, which transform reality.

For instance Antanas Mockus⁶, who is the son of a Lithuanian sculptor, has been creating long-term social projects, supported and even initiated by artistic actions, with no fear. He’s a mathematician and philosopher who quit his job at the Colombian University to run for mayor of Bogota. He was using art strategies in political work.

Among the actions that he organized was for instance this gun exchange, where people could come and exchange their guns for toys. I don’t know how many guns they collected, but it was a lot. They collected a significant number of guns. I think this an example that can be universalized. I heard lately of a similar action in Mexico, this time for kids. The children could come and exchange their toy guns for other toys, puppets, balls, and so on. These actions really transform reality on a very basic level. Less guns – Less killing!

Notes

1 FORGET FEAR, ed. by Artur Żmijewski & Joanna Warsza, Köln 2012, Buchhandlung Walther König

2 Flash Art, No. 272 May-June 2010, Pierre Bal-Blanc: In and out of CAC, Interview by Artur Żmijewski

3 Tür an Tür – 1000 Jahre deutsch-polnische Nachbarschaft / September 2011- January 2012 Martin-Gropius-Bau

4 *Deutschland schafft sich ab*, Thilo Sarrazin 2010 DVA Verlag München

5 APPLIED SOCIAL ARTS Artur Żmijewski, krytyka polityczna 2007

6 *Knowledge empowers people. If people know the rules, and are sensitized by art, humour, and creativity, they are much more likely to accept change.* Antanas Mockus. *Academic turns city into a social experiment*, Maria Cristina Caballero, Harvard gazette, March 11, 2004



Captions

1 Draftsmens Congress, 2012, Photo credit: Artur Żmijewski

2 State of Palestine, 2012, Photo credit: Kahled Jarrar

3 The Key of Return, 2012, Photo credit: Artur Żmijewski

Artur Żmijewski was born in 1966 in Warsaw, Poland, where he studied sculpture under Grzegorz Kowalski at the Academy of Arts from 1990–1995. Żmijewski's film and video work is highly recognized as an important artistic contribution. Best known for its uncompromising studies on the human nature, monitoring sociopolitical structures from an angle of being witness to psychologically violent acts. His work has been displayed in numerous international solo and group exhibitions. In 2005 Artur Żmijewski represented Poland at the 51st Biennale di Venezia. In 2012 Artur Żmijewski curated the 7th Berlin Biennale.