

ART MUST NOT ALWAYS SPEAK MEEKLY

Artur Żmijewski in conversation with Miklós Erhardt¹



Miklós Erhardt: *You became renowned in the international art world as someone having a special interest in facing and confronting the viewers with hopeless situations, deep existential dramas; some of your works are quite a torture to watch. Still, the current exhibition in Budapest represents a more “sublime” side of you: in these films there is always a way out of the situations depicted in them. Don’t you consider this selection to be too soft?*

Artur Żmijewski: Perhaps I do confront the spectators with images of difficult situations, but certainly not hopeless ones. The way out of them is precisely these films. They contain a double message: they show difficult situations, and at the same time they represent an exit, a way out of those, seemingly hopeless, circumstances.

I don’t want to terrorize the spectators, this is not my aim. Of course, I use radical language in these videos. You can watch for example 80064, it’s about re-tattooing the ID-number from Auschwitz on the arm of a former prisoner. It is the most radical among the films presented here – maybe the most radical I’ve ever made. It is about radical modes of memory, about the fact that trauma infects the body, engraves itself in the mind and refuses to be symbolized, and thus eventually tamed, neutralized.

I was rather thinking of movies like Out for a walk which is similar to An eye for an Eye presented here, but the former at the same time is much more hopeless and, it feels, the characters in it are much more manipulated.

There can be a competition to decide which one is crueler than another, but maybe it’s not my role to be the jury. What is interesting is that for me this is not even radical language – the definition comes from the outside, it represents the spectators’ point of view. For me, for

¹ The interview is based on the artist talk held in Trafó Gallery Budapest on the 26 th January, 2008. See: Radical Solidarity – Artur Żmijewski’s solo show, 25 January – 2 March, 2008

example, re-tattooing the ID-number is not exceptionally radical. In my subjective world, greater extremities are possible, which is to say that my image of the world must contain a radicalism that is impossible for others to accept. I often think that artists, with their transgressions, radical languages and so on, are still innocent, because science or politics produce far more dramatic, and sometimes outright tragic events or ways of treating people. Art mustn't always speak meekly when the other discourses use violence and speak to us from hegemonic positions.

This (80064) is the only film – as far as I know – where you made a permanent physical change in the body of someone else. In other films, the farthest you go is that you show terrible, hopeless situations, maybe provoke terrible states of mind in the persons you're filming, but you don't change them physically.

I would say, I only worked with the effects of a change which had already been done in the body – and also in the mind – of this person. We can not say he „was” a victim – he still is. So, in fact, I didn't do anything new. I only confirmed his status. I would have really hurt him if I had tried to erase the number – as that would mean erasing his basic identification. Removing the number would cause the man to disintegrate, cease to exist.

You mean you didn't do anything he wouldn't have accepted – as in the end he accepts it indeed...

The fact that he was a prisoner in Auschwitz is constitutive of him, something which makes him a human being, a persona – someone. I suspect he was really born for the world only when the number was tattooed – before that, he 'didn't exist'. All his subsequent life, he was visible only because of and through the number – it was almost his sole capital. The number and the coagulated, frozen story about the camp. Józef Tarnawa died last summer – and it's not him we remember, but the number. No spectator has ever asked me who the man was by profession, whether he had kids, and so on. It's incredible how permanent the perception of this man as a number, initiated by the Nazis, proved to be.

This can be said from his point of view. What about considering it from your point of view? What is the meaning of your role as the „perpetrator”? Because what we actually see is that someone from the majority (you as a Polish) or someone with privileges, that is, with power (you as an artist) is again tattooing a number onto a Jewish person, thus repeating what had happened back in history.

I don't know whether he was a Jew or not, I never asked him about that. I don't believe in ethical immaculacy. Ethical purity doesn't exist. I'm not a judge of my brothers, rather, I'm among the defendants. Poles have a rich tradition of violence against their Jewish neighbors, so I'm in the right place.

What is your method when you are working with people who are either victims of historical, political, social traumas or victims of incidents or are just disabled from birth? How do you approach and convince them to take part in your films?

My method is to get to the heart of the trauma, or at least to its peripheries. And to approach the trauma 'casually'. There's this new method of treating catatonics: you sit on their lap and treat them as objects. After some time, they start fidgeting because they're uncomfortable. And soon the stupor goes away. Of course, I tell them about my intentions. And I listen

closely to what they have to say. Most of them have a kind of a message for the others but they have no chance to express it, to speak it out or to publish it. So I might appear as a possibility for them to tell people their stories, their message, to include their story in the repository of all stories. Moreover, they know their story will be heard out, so it will have the potentially political power to effect change, create knowledge, or aid the paradigm-transformation process. That is why my proposals are usually welcomed. There's another useful key word: adventure. For all of them, I guess, this is an exciting adventure. It is a kind of an offer from my side, like an offer made by a travel agency. I give them the chance to travel. This world we live in doesn't offer too many adventures. And if it does – then they are not so interesting: working in a corporation, earning little or a bit more, watching movies or soap operas, reading books and so forth.

I've read somewhere that you never introduce yourself as an artist, and never talk about art when you try to convince them to participate in a film. Why is that?

My experience is that people are afraid of art. They don't understand what art is. It is better to tell that I am a filmmaker working for a TV-channel. Any other explanation is better than to say that I am an artist. Artists are somehow suspicious. In the common view, they destroy the order of reality and are characterized by some fundamental contrariness. Which, in fact, is true – artistic strategy consists, above all, in denying the obvious and challenging every status quo. If you ask an artist for green, he'll make it transparent, or use sand. This scares most people.

In your writings you often say that art should reintegrate into society and claim back a practical, concrete position in the social-political discourse – among science, religion and other entities shaping social life. Isn't it a contradiction that you voice this claim but yourself are not trying to explain to or convince those small circle of people you are in contact with that art is something useful? Aren't you missing a chance there?

Art is a part of reality. Can anything exist, function, be present in the field of human consciousness, and at the same time, not be a part of reality? What is reality and what is art? And where is the border between the two? I don't think I should advertise myself as an artist. In fact, my goal is different. What I want is to confront and combine different orders, such as the order of science and politics, with the order of art. The representatives of the respective disciplines could stop disregarding and ignoring each other and instead start taking advantage of the possibilities offered by the other discourses. Persuading them to do it, corrupting, seducing them, or even employing a kind of intellectual lobbying seem to me to be a more effective way. And not just telling people: 'Hey – I am an artist!' That's not enough.

How is it going on after you convinced them to take part? I've heard that you pay the participants. What is the role of that?

They sell me their labor. It's simply a contract. They are my employees.

But you just said they have a message and you are the carrier of that message. Why don't they pay you?

And where's the contradiction here? A writer gets money for his writing, politicians, who constantly change our world according to their ideological beliefs, are also paid. Writers are paid for their books, the documentators – for their documents, actors – for their acting. Why

should it be different here? So I pay my actors because I respect them, respect their time and courage. What they have to tell me is sometimes difficult, unexpected, painful for those listening to them. So, payment is a very good alibi for the speakers, a kind of smokescreen. They can tell the world: 'Hey, I'm only doing it for the money', but the alibi lets them speak openly and frankly.

In the part of the movie, 800064, when the time came to re-tattoo the number, when he was saying that then it's gonna lose its authenticity and you said that he'd agreed – do you think he let you do it because he agreed or because you paid him.²

Of course, he said 'yes', because I paid him. It was a deal: we met before and he signed a contract stating that I pay him 500 Euro for renewing the tattoo. But as I said, this is also a kind of alibi; it's very comfortable for people to hide their actual intentions behind the cover of working for money. Working for money is commonly accepted, bearing witness and speaking the truth is not. Thus I don't think the main reason why Józef Tarnawa gave me permission for renewing the tattoo was money. In general, we can say that these people are forgotten, the Holocaust in fact is forgotten. Of course, there are museums, like here in Budapest the Museum of Holocaust, the Jewish Museum in Berlin and Yad Vashem in Israel – a lot of places in which the Holocaust is documented, but that's also a comfortable way of forgetting. The best way to forget is to set up a museum of the Holocaust, because then people don't have to experience pain anymore or can experience it in an acceptable level. This means that the museum lives through history for us. At first sight, it is a collection of objects, in reality, it is an entity that feels, suffers, and remembers for us. The museum creates the impression that it is not the body that remembers but objects. Our goal therefore was to change the way we remember: to augment the pain, to turn the body back to be the reservoir of memory, to make it responsible for the past, to restore it with the trauma that lives in it anyway. Only that this time the trauma adopts the very visible form of a tattoo being renewed – and it has a specific name: 80064.

Is payment a kind of alibi for you, as well? It can somehow calm your conscience? Something like: 'Okay, even if I didn't show these people in the best ever light, but I paid them so I am not responsible.'

No, I don't need an alibi, I like to be responsible. I like to be able to say openly that I made something bad, immoral or unethical. Also, I never show my characters in bad light, never smear them, never mock them – I respect the courage with which they accept my proposals. Both I and they are responsible for our choices.

But when you are not quick enough to say that you are immoral, maybe others will tell it about you. Is that any different?

People have the right to judge each other's behavior – I enjoy this right, too, and judge them, too. So I often say: 'You are right, it is immoral or at least morally suspicious'.

What do you think of social morality and political correctness in general? Are you testing them, are you trying to provoke people who believe in political correctness as the highest communicational value today?

² Question from the audience

I think that political correctness is a mass-scale social acceptance-training project. Let's change our language and the way we think will follow. This is smart, because it's rooted in religious practices where, for instance, asceticism and bodily discipline are to produce faith. The terms proposed by political correctness are performative, that is, every time we use them, we create a new reality – instead of racism, for instance, the acceptance of minorities. There's a boundary to political correctness, of course – it is the boundary of declarativeness, beyond which the demons of hatred are at large. As long as we call something 'political correct', we know the issue is unsolved and while we say 'African American', we think 'Negro'. This means that the process of change continues. It's a bit like with my films *Singing Lesson 1* and *Singing Lesson 2*. By singing, the deaf manifest their intransgressible difference. To really accept them, we have to transgress the declarative dimension of political correctness and accept the deformation of the language of sounds – the proper language of the hearing. And only then we can accept them, consenting to the fact that what makes them different – their bizarre, deformed speech, their indifference to sounds – is okay. It's the same with the Roma people – their lifestyle makes them freaks. We'd accept them if only they didn't marry their daughters off at the age of thirteen. We can call them Roma instead of Gypsies, but behind our political correctness rejection is lurking. We would accept them if they stopped doing all those things that make them what they are. And this, of course, is impossible.

How did the idea for this particular piece come? I'm sure you didn't start out from this theory that you've just articulated. There must have been an idea...

It is simple, I was reading a book about sign language called *To see the voice*, by the neurologist Oliver Sacks, and there he says that sign language is our first language. We use it before starting to use verbal expression. This is the primal language of all people. Sometimes verbal expression isn't enough. Aggression, for example: it's very easy to communicate aggression with our hands. Love can also be expressed more easily and more convincingly with gestures than with words. So I started thinking about deaf people, whether they can sing – and I made a film documenting their attempts at singing Bach. I started thinking only later about how they are treated by society, that they are excluded and so on.

Yes, this consideration comes later. The viewer is first grasped by the striking contrast between one of the highest expressions of European music – and deaf persons singing it...

Yes. Bach's cantatas – the mathematical mastery of composition – are still not meant for deaf people. If we were to think radically, we should view them as a means and, at the same time, a proof, of their exclusion. When these cantatas are sung by deaf people, it is an act of egalitarianism. It's democracy in action.

Shortly after you finished the art academy you made photographic and video works in which you always played a part yourself. These were visually quite aggressive pieces in which you were torturing and manipulating your own and your colleagues' body. This was before you started to use and manipulate other people's body and adopted the role of the initiator / documentator. Do you remember why were you so aggressive or angry? Was it to test your own capacity, or the limitations of audience or was it to test art itself?

This is your interpretation that I was aggressive that time. I used my own body because it was the only thing which was ready to use. I had a direct access to my body. An analogous thing to this can be what I saw in Palestine two months ago – I was in a city in the northern part of the Western Bank called Janin, where I saw posters advertising gyms and body-building. This

is always a symptom of a crisis. If you have no influence on the shape of collective reality, if you are not able to change it, the first thing you change is your own body. I must have been in the same situation after completing my studies, that is, that I was unable to exert visible influence in any way. With time, however, I found ways to do it. A certain period was finished when I stopped using my own body. It was a sign that I had found ways to effectively interfere with, to change, the content of collectively-produced ideas and narratives.

Could you tell something more about your studies? I became interested in this after having read your catalogue and I've also heard of Grzegorz Kowalski on other artists' account. It seems to me that his course at the academy was a quite special place. I can imagine it having a quite Dionysian atmosphere: the focus on the body, exposing your bodily essence, this seems to me as being the main interest in that kind of approach to sculpture.

It was a special place, for sure, the workshop of Grzegorz Kowalski. He has this idea that the students are his partners, that they are not more stupid than he is, that they have equal positions and that is why they can really discuss or fight against each other. There's no clear point from which you start to be an artist. When you entered his studio, he treated you as an artist, as someone with the same potentials and possibilities he has. Kowalski also tries to follow the ideas of Oscar Hansen, another professor of the Warsaw Academy. Hansen was an architect but he also worked with sculpture students. He developed the theory of Open Form, saying that an art piece (architecture) is never complete, the moment never comes when it is done – it always remains open to the intervention of other people. It was an offer and proposal for the audience to continue, consciously or not, the work begun by the artist. Kowalski also taught his students never to isolate themselves from their community – this is perhaps his main idea. The artist isn't a Narcissus, isn't privileged, and their duty is to cooperate with other members of the community. Kowalski's goal was to produce artistic personnel able to see and be engaged with the problems of the community, and willing to serve it with their skills. One of the ways to achieve this was a group exercise forcing the participants to respect the grammar of a collective visual language. The exercise turned the uncoordinated crowd into a linguistic community.

What would be the optimal or ideal role of art in society, for you?

This is too general a question. See, maybe art has a role to play that we don't want to accept. Let's imagine that there are dangerous ideas circulating in society, some people are infected by them, and then there is a group of artists able to transform this danger into something stupid and useless, into – a nice term coined by Grzegorz Kowalski – “art pollution”. Perhaps this is a sort of collective defense strategy, i.e. that there is a group of people (artists) who are able to intercept these dangerous ideas and turn them into something neutral, stupid, just harmless rubbish. Maybe this is art's main social role today, even if we aren't aware of it or don't want to accept it. Of course, such a strategy can also result in the neutralization of useful ideas.

You very often speak about ART – more often about art in general than about your own art...

Still, I would like to remove this word from my vocabulary.

It seems difficult.

But it would be nice. I am sure if we did this, something would open for us because this very word protects us from what is behind and beyond our activity. Let's do this, let's decide one day to remove the word 'art' from our vocabulary! It would be highly liberating, I think.

This would be a fitting statement to finish the conversation with but I'd like to go a bit further. You wrote about art as a blind force in society, a discourse which is not causal but instead is based on intuition and through being blind somehow finds things that would not worth be found if one was reasoning in a causal way. In the same time, you are claiming that artists shall not remain ignorant (because you also said artists are often ignorant), so they should learn and educate themselves in order to be competitive with science and other social forms of knowledge. Isn't this a contradiction? Maybe art can be this useful blind force because artists are not forced to be very intelligent, in the consensual meaning of the word?

I think that art is a discipline which is not fully controlled by society and it should remain so. Art and science should not be closely controlled and should not be forced to be responsible, they should be able to go astray and make mistakes. So that artists would be able to conduct ethically dubious experiments, and science would be able to do the same. The limit, of course, is the penal code. When we don't have to act responsibly, we can really create something new. Art keeps eluding social control and practicing its irresponsible, risky activities. It jumps into an abyss. There, knowledge waits for it. You asked about the 'ignorant artist'. S/he is ignorant partly because s/he wants so, and partly because society suspends his/her intellectual obligations – thus letting the artistic confusion produce new knowledge. Or, as I said, letting the various risks and threats be utilized there.

I can see the point as far as art is concerned, but it seems to me that science has often been, on the contrary, blamed of not having moral scruples or much feeling of responsibility in order to produce new scientific knowledge – cases vary from Mengele's experiments through atomic technology up to genetic modification and cloning. How would you relate to this?

Mengele was a pseudo-scientist and his experiments had no cognitive value – they were just another way of cruelly murdering people. He was just a criminal. As for the other examples, we've long been in high-risk territory and we don't know the long-term effects of using scientific inventions or ideological inventions in the service of politics. I think it is part of our human equipment – this risk is in our toolbox. But what's really dangerous is, for instance, voracious capitalism that turns science into its servant.

Yesterday you told me that you are a "traditional artist" as making and exhibiting videos counts as a very traditional thing today. I would add that if we watch your videos from a kind of formalistic point of view they result as not being very experimental, either. You are experimenting rather with the content, with what is documented. How did you find video and film and what do these mediums mean for you?

Video and movie are absolutely transparent for people, they are 'invisible' media. People don't see that what they are watching was edited, that, say, the entire soundtrack was recorded in the studio and merged with the image later. Everyone who watches TV has been trained not to consider film a mediated image of reality. I like the medium's transparency. It really helps the message included in the work. And why I use video and not, say, sculptures? I started my studies in 1991 when the Kuwait war was going on, and we listened to the radio in our studio at the Academy and thus had a kind of a permanent relation with the front, since that was the topic of those days. I was preparing a nude or something like that, using all those unwieldy

tools: clay, plaster, hammers, chisels. And then I felt that what I was doing was useless – I had just started doing it but understood right then that it was useless; that this was not the proper way to talk about what was going on around me – for example about the war in Kuwait. Maybe you have seen the documentary movie by Werner Herzog about the landscape in Kuwait after the war. It was a very risky visit for the director and his team to enter that country, that area, and observe the effects of war, the burning oil wells, everything around thrown into chaos, destroyed by US bombings and the retreating Iraqi army. That is why I think video is the right medium. How to make a sculpture of the war in Kuwait? I don't know. Sculpture is a tragically ineffective medium.

If we're already speaking about how to best approach reality, than we should maybe speak about your newest film, Them, which in my view is a bit similar to another piece you did for another big international event (as Them was made for documenta 12), the Venice Biennale, the film called Repetition. In these two pieces I find a linear narrative structure, a kind of dramatic evolution which is not there in the other works. Them is different also from the point of view that it is the one most strictly related to daily politics – a concrete political situation within one nation, within one larger group of people. Is it something that you think is a new start in your work?

I don't think I must forcibly continue anything in my activity or follow my first ideas. I hope you don't expect me doing all the time movies about disabled people, like I did in the 1990s. I can imagine it would be terribly boring for all of us. I hope in the future I'll keep on being able to work freely rather than derive my projects from the logic of my prior practice.

The last two-two and a half years in Poland were very interesting. We had this coalition government composed of right wing political groups. One of them was actually fascist – the League of Polish Families, or LPR. Its leader, Roman Giertych, became the Minister of Education. He erased sexual education from the curriculum, deleted some of the more interesting items from the required reading list, introduced uniforms and his ministry paid for a TV commercial about school discipline where pupils were divided into two groups: the good ones, which are let in, and the bad ones, which are not and will end up in a correctional facility. These, and many other things, made people really active – there was a large-scale resistance against the government, against the neo-fascists in the cabinet and also against the fundamentalist Catholic right-wing and its leader, Father Tadeusz Rydzyk.

People got politically active and it was really nice to observe this desire of politicality appearing in the public sphere. That's why it was interesting to make a film about the political passions that had gripped Poles from left to right.

So you made up this stage and gave them the rules of how to represent themselves, how to fight against each-other's visual representations. There are these groups – the fascist group, the catholic ladies' group, the 'freedom-group' and the Jewish group – and I suddenly had to realize that the most aggressive of all of them was the freedom group. These are the guys who are cutting out things, throwing away and burning things; all the others are just somehow following them. What do you think of that?

What appears as aggression – the painting over, cutting, setting on fire – are in fact statements formulated in the language of images. Like in verbal discussion, your argument can be defeated by mine if mine is stronger. You don't call this aggression, but a legitimate mode of

discussing things. And this is exactly what they do. They exchange arguments, only these are visual arguments.

The idea of the movie is to follow imagination, to reduce control and self-censorship. The proposal towards the participants was: fulfill your dreams, follow your ideological fantasies! If you want to make a revolution, do it, this is the right place for it. And, in fact, they staged a small revolution. They radically transformed the surrounding ideological scenery sketched with simple symbols – the cross, the eagle, the sword, the words ‘liberty’ and ‘Polin’, which is Hebrew for ‘Poland’.

It was rather a total destruction...I would like to ask you about failure. We have to face various kinds of failure while watching your films: from the failure of the body to the failure of memory. What does failure mean to you? Has it ever happened that you had to finish a shooting or cancel a project because the participants were no longer collaborating with you?

For example there is a movie presented here about soldiers, *KR WP*, where they perform songs and march naked. They told me during the shooting, ‘You have one hour!’. It was a mutiny, but I had to accept their ultimatum. What I and the participants of my films have is not always like a polite conversation, it is often a struggle. The film about the re-tattooed camp number also contains a quarrel scene – it is an obvious example of conflict-based cooperation.

But they never actually stopped the shooting?

No. Don’t picture me as being so nice that if someone cries, ‘Let’s finish, it’s painful for me!’, I will say, ‘Oh sure, I didn’t know, we finish’. The participants of *Repetition*, for example, had to decide themselves when to end the cruel situation in which they had allowed themselves be entangled. So, sometimes it’s a fight whose traces remain visible in the films.
