

THE APPLIED **SOCIAL ARTS**



Two Monuments, Artur Żmijewski (2009), Video still.

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Artur Żmijewski

All photos and video stills courtesy of Artur Żmijewski, the Folksal Gallery Foundation and the Fire Station Artists' Studios.

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Two Monuments, Artur Żmijewski (2009), Video still.

INTRODUCTION

LIZ BURNS, *Fire Station Artist's Studios*

The political theorist Chantal Mouffe coined the term ‘agonism’ when calling for a reconfiguration of our understanding of democracy, from the commonly perceived harmonious pluralist perspective, to one which recognises conflict, antagonism and difference as essential parts of the democratic order. While antagonism is understood as a we/them relation involving conflicting sides who share no common ground, Mouffe’s ‘agonism’ perceives of a we/them relation where adversaries may share common symbolic space, within which conflict can take place.¹

It is perhaps between this space of antagonism and agonism that the work of artist Artur Żmijewski best sits. Belonging to a generation of Polish artists who have offered different responses to the complexities of the post-Communist condition, Żmijewski’s ‘social documentary’ type films, frequently examine mechanisms of power and oppression as well as exposing social conflicts, trauma and human weakness. Central to his work is the influence of the radical pedagogy of Professor Grzegorz Kowalski at the Academy of Fine arts in Warsaw, whose famous studio influenced an entire generation of significant Polish artists including Pawel Althamer, Katarzyna Kozyra and Żmijewski himself. In his studio Kowalski developed a kind of pedagogy based on open communication and non-hierarchical dialogue with students, much akin to Jacques Rancière’s notion of the “ignorant schoolmaster”.² Through the language of visual symbols students were encouraged to observe, describe and attempt to understand human behaviour. As Żmijewski explains “the most important quality was curiosity and a desire to learn. Ethics and morality are suspended, since they aren’t conducive to knowledge. As in anthropology, say, it is important to study, describe, and attempt to understand human behaviour and ritual rather than judge and valorise them.”³

- 1 Chantal Mouffe, “Which Public Space for Critical Artistic Practices?” *Cork Caucus: on art, possibility & democracy* Eds Shepard Steiner and Trevor Joyce, (Frankfurt: Revolver, 2006) 151-171.
- 2 Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (Stanford University Press: Stanford, California, 1991)
- 3 Artur Żmijewski’s “A Storehouse of Limbs” Artur Żmijewski speaks with Katarzyna Bieleś and Dorota Jarecka, in Artur Żmijewski, *If it happened only once it’s as if it never happened* (ex.cat) (Warsaw: Zachęta National Gallery of Art, 2005), 83.

However not satisfied with the confines of the artist's studio, Źmijewski relocated his practice to what he calls a "social studio", reflecting his theory of "The Applied Social Arts".⁴ In this manifesto, Źmijewski calls for art to abandon its claim to autonomy which he believes has disconnected it from society and made art "inconsequential". He argues for art to rethink its relationship to society, to enter a type of "dependency" with the other discourses of science, sociology, politics, and anthropology "in order to produce useful tools for the implementation of power and knowledge".⁵ To produce these useful tools, Źmijewski developed different methodologies using the medium of film which he sees as an artistic medium not afraid of entering into various forms of dependence: film is used to entertain, educate, provoke, tell stories while at the same time reaching a wide audience.

For Źmijewski, an operative metaphor for this non autonomous art is the algorithm. In mathematics, computing and related disciplines, an algorithm is a procedure for accomplishing a particular task, or a mode of purposeful action. Part of Źmijewski's *modus operandi* is to invent his own algorithms in which he sets up a particular situation, invites specific people to take part, films the results and then edits the footage. This methodology clearly has its roots in Kowalski's studio but has been adapted to reflect Źmijewski's interests in how art might reconnect with wider society, address social issues and thereby contribute to a new kind of knowledge production. This 'social studio' type methodology is best exemplified in two key works *Repetition* (2005) and *Them* (2007). *Repetition* is a recording by the artist of a re-enactment of the Stanford Prison Experiment, the infamous 1971 psychological experiment studying human behaviour in prison conditions, conducted by professor Philip Zimbardo at Stanford University USA. In order to test the results of this seminal study of the pathologies involved in how power and submission is negotiated amongst humans, Źmijewski invited participants to restage this experiment in a purpose built jail and filmed the results. *Them* (2007) documents a social experiment devised by the artist in which representatives from conflicting social groups in Poland are brought together through a series of workshops. Each group (consisting of a right wing Polish youth group, an assortment of leftists, a Catholic women's group and young Jewish liberals) is asked

⁴ In 2007, Źmijewski wrote a manifesto titled *The Applied Social Arts*, which was first published in *Kytyka Polityczna*, a influential left wing journal founded in Poland in 2002. This journal engages with political philosophy, current political affairs, literary criticism, modern art and theatre. This manifesto is reproduced in this publication.

⁵ Ibid.

to construct a symbolic centre and then to comment and react to the others, thereby forcing participants to interact, to negotiate, to flight or to withdraw. While adversaries share this common symbolic or 'agonistic' space in which conflict is enacted, it eventually descends into antagonism where the artwork is destroyed and the groups withdraw.

In 2008 I invited Artur Źmijewski to develop a project in Dublin as part of the Fire Station Artists' Studios Annual Studio Award.⁶ The aim of this award is to support socially engaged arts practice and to contribute to critique and debate around this ever expanding area of arts practice. I was interested in Źmijewski's methodology and aesthetic, and the provocative questions his practice raises around socially engaged arts practice, and the ethics of collaboration. It was at this precise time that the previously booming Irish economy was in decline and the new immigrant workforce many from Poland and other Eastern European countries were starting to feel the impact. I proposed to the artist, as a starting point, a project that would explore issues around the changing nature of Polish Irish relations. The artist was interested in the proposition and over a series of visits in 2008-2009 developed the project '*Two Monuments*'.

Two Monuments (2009) is an extension of Źmijewski's "social studio" methodology in which the artist invites a group of people (in this case Polish and Irish unemployed men and women) to take part in a series of workshops over a period of time, then films and edits the results. In the film unemployed Polish and Irish men work together to make one sculpture, while unemployed Irish and Polish women make another. As Dave Beech highlights in his essay in this publication "This is not about the objects that are produced, but the social tensions behind the scenes". During the workshops the participants speak candidly about the situations they find themselves in, sometimes finding common ground and other times points of tensions. While both groups complete their tasks, and make sculptures promoting equality and co operation between their respective countries, the meta language within the film suggests an inability to communicate or articulate, particularly amongst the women.

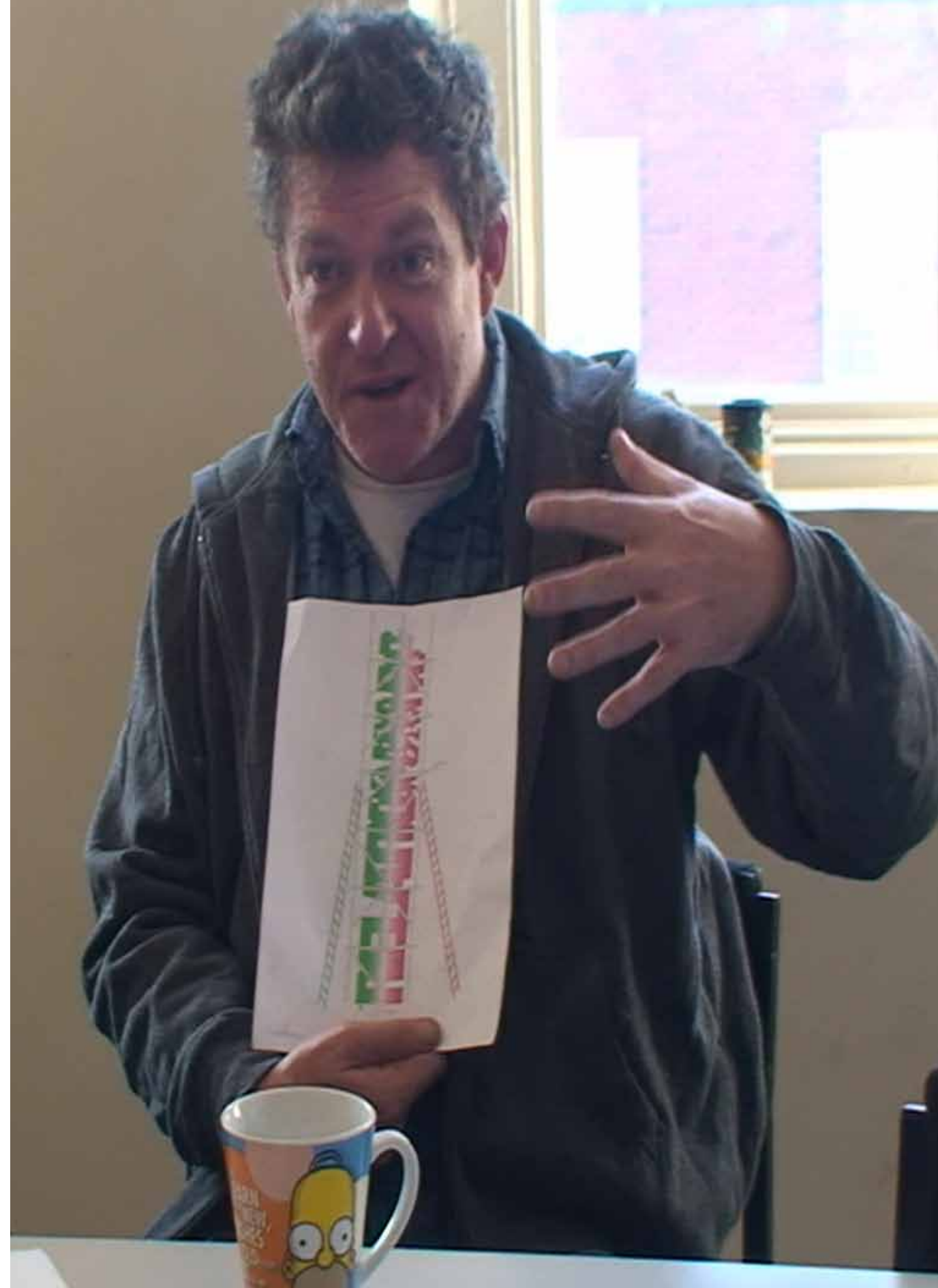
⁶ www.firestation.ie/projects/awards

Another stylistic variation on Żmijewski's methodology is to move from the constructed social studio to observing a ready made situation playing itself out. Here we observe a detached observational style as is evidenced in *Democracies* (2009). *Democracies* is a series of 20 short documentary videos that play simultaneously, creating a cacophony of sound and image. Each video records a demonstration, parade or re-enactment, where people have gathered to express their opinion or allegiance or opposition to a cause. Filmed by Żmijewski between 2007 and 2009, in cities and towns across Europe, the films include a protest against the Israeli occupation in the West bank, a re-enactment of the Warsaw Uprising, a Loyalist parade in Belfast, the funeral of an extreme right wing leader in Austria, and a crowd of German and Turkish football fans.

In 'A conversation on Democracies'⁷ reproduced in this publication, Żmijewski discusses the essential "democratic paradox." as highlighted by theorists such as Chantal Mouffe. As Żmijewski points out "I chose the title Democracies, because it's a lie. These are not all democracies". Using what he terms a form of radical documentarism, Żmijewski stresses that he "is less interested in the rightness of justice of a cause, but more in this inner drive that moves people to debate, to publicly show their needs, demands requests, opinions..."⁸

In his embrace of antagonism and agonism, and at times suspension of a moral or ethical framework in his practice, Żmijewski's work sits uneasily within the realm of socially engaged arts practice. Through not providing easy answers, but rather provoking, questioning and oftentimes embracing conflict, Żmijewski's art, while often uncomfortable viewing, challenges how we view our world and ultimately our place within it.

Two Monuments, Artur Żmijewski (2009), Video still.



7 "A conversation on Democracies" Artur Żmijewski and Maren Lübbke-Tidow. First published in Camera Austria 107/2009 and reproduced in this publication.

8 Ibid.



Repetition, Artur Żmijewski (2005), Video still.

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Does contemporary art have any visible social impact? Can the effects of an artist's work be seen and verified? Does art have any political significance – besides serving as a whipping boy for various populists? Is it possible to engage in a discussion with art – and is it worth doing so? Most of all, why are questions of this kind viewed as a blow against the very essence of art?

Yearning to be done with all this consequence

Art had long struggled to gain autonomy, to free itself from politics, religion, authority, and everything else that sought to use art for its own ends. Independence was to have made art more important: every avant-garde movement saw art as being equal in stature with such reality-shapers as science, knowledge, politics, or religion. Aleksander Lipski wrote:

“Non-figurative art has struck at the inviolable core of the traditional artistic paradigm requiring the depiction of figures. The global artistic revolution is therefore the culmination of the emancipation of art. The process whereby art severed all ties and allegiance to externalities such as politics, religion, philosophy, technology and the mores of the day was complete with the abandonment of one last principle – that of signification.”¹

Polish art owes its sense of shame to its fling with socialist realism.

The desire to be an active agent creating the social and political

environment came up against a hidden enemy, however. That enemy was – and still is – shame. Politically committed art has often come to a tragic end. Artists supporting totalitarian regimes, like the Nazi sculptors Josef Thorak and Arno Breker, or filmmaker Leni Reifenstahl, compromised the very possibility of art becoming an instrument of politics. Polish art owes its sense of shame to its fling with socialist realism.

¹ A. Lipski, *Elementy socjologii sztuki. Problem awangardy artystycznej XX wieku* [“Elements of the Sociology of Art. Issues of the Artistic Avant-garde of the 20th Century”], (Wrocław: Atla 2, 2001).

That tangle of shame, fear of appropriation, and the desire for influence has led to alienation.

Guilt and shame associated with the past alongside

the desire for art to be an active, contributing presence in public life has produced a paradoxical effect. All consequences attributable to art are now suspect; every visible change occasioned by its commitments has come under fire. Even the unseen authority that comes from the co-creation of symbolic realities that lend structure to our shared world, whether we like it or not, is being challenged. That tangle of shame, fear of appropriation, and the desire for influence has led to alienation. Shame has set in motion the mechanisms of repression and denial. Instead of drawing enjoyment from the outcome of their actions, the visual and performing arts are content merely to dream of such outcomes: fantasy has supplanted reality.

The autonomy of art has therefore made it “inconsequential.” The actions of art no longer have any visible or verifiable impact. The deficit that Peter Bürger once discerned in bourgeois art has made its way into high culture: “the exaltation of art above day-to-day experience [is] typical for the status of a work of art in a bourgeois society... Aestheticism is also a manifestation of art’s failure to produce social consequences.”² Naturally, social consequences have occurred, but not necessarily the ones that were

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most desired. Over the last fifteen years or so, these consequences have included:

- 1 scandals breaking out over the topics art proposed to introduce into public debate;
- 2 the continuing brutalisation of public debate has been attributed by Gazeta Wyborcza journalist Anna Zawadzka to the violent language used by art in the 1990s and the resulting media backlash;
- 3 players from the realm of politics “learning” how to use subversive strategies that had once been proper to art. Subversive strategies “are the best example of Benjamin’s proposed shift of emphasis from ‘content’ to ‘apparatuses of production’ that enable one to use ‘foreign’ representations in making one’s own work.”³ One instance of such subversive action was when right-wing deputies to the Polish parliament

² P. Bürger, Theory of the Avant-garde.

³ Ł. Ronduda, Strategie subwersywne w sztukach medialnych [“Subversive Strategies in the Media-based Arts”] http://www.exchangegallery.cosmosnet.pl/subwersywne_text.html

Witold Tomczak and Halina Nowina-Konopczyna removed the stone (meteor) from the prone figure of pope John Paul II (Maurizio Catellan’s La Nona Ora) during an exhibition in Warsaw’s Zachęta

gallery in December 2000. Tomczak and Konopczyna demonstrated they could “read and understand” the strategies of art, and

Art may be political as long as it stays away from politics – it can act politically in galleries but not in real-life debates unfolding in a different communal space, such as the media. It may be social as long as it does not produce social consequences.

were capable of using them. Once Tomczak and Konopczyna learned how to perpetrate a transgression, and violate the taboo associated with gallery spaces, they simply responded “in kind,” using the language of gestures and visual action, the language of performance. In 1997, Katarzyna Kozyra used a hidden camera to film women in a Budapest bathhouse, and did the same in a men’s establishment two years later. The resulting film was shown at the Venice biennale, causing the inevitable uproar in the Polish press. Repetition and media coverage helped bring this “denunciatory” strategy into the mainstream. In 2002, newspaper editor Adam Michnik secretly recorded film producer Lew Rywin when the latter came asking for a bribe, while in 2006 member of parliament Renata Beger filmed her privately conducted negotiations with other politicians and released the recordings to the media. Kozyra, Michnik and Beger all engaged in similarly questionable behaviour while emphasising the ends justifying their choice of means. Transgression has thus become a valid political strategy. Since then, a whole series of “negative” transgressions or violations of democratic taboos, have been perpetrated by education minister Roman Giertych.

- 4 violating one set of taboos leads to the emergence of other taboos (Joanna Tokarska-Bakir); perhaps art contributed to redrawing the map with its focus on some parts of the body politic, as a result of which others became taboo.

Art has therefore struggled to retain its power to act, but it should have remained as perpetually neutral as Switzerland in its exercise. And what

would constitute fair use of that power? Let me quote an exhibition invitation sent out over the Web: “A profound interest in the physical and mental limitations of human beings has become the wellspring of Żmijewski’s artistic inquiries, leading to questions his bewildered viewers ineffectually seek to answer.” The foregoing provides a simple definition of what artists should make viewers: bewildered recipients ineffectually looking for answers. Evidently, art produces states of helplessness and generates questions to which there are no answers. The word “ineffectually” bespeaks the alienation art has unknowingly lapsed into. Asked what made him become an actor, Jeremy Irons, known for his portrayal of tragic lovers (*Swann’s Way*, *Lolita*) answered that he wanted to be “outside of society.”

Duty and Rebellion

The consequence of the trauma of “being used” is refusal. Guilt and shame have been encoded in art as a “flight from” – an ongoing process of inner negotiation well-expressed in the title of an exhibition Grzegorz Kowalski and Maryla Sitkowska mounted on the centenary of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw: *Duty and Rebellion*.⁴ Even though the exhibition concerned the academy as an institution, its title was indicative of a split present within art. A split that allows art to “work for” the state and the national economy, to serve society as a shaper of environments, producer of visual information systems, designer of interiors and industrial goods, in short – to do its duty. On the other hand, art is kept from lapsing into dependence on the authorities by its rebelliousness, because it insistently challenges the taboo, nurtures dreams, proliferates freedom, and produces social knowledge, (art can be said to be an open university of knowledge). Art constantly offers and denies its services to the powers that be. In doing its duty it usually does not cross a certain line marked out by shame. The deadlock between duty and rebellion does not permit identification or affinity with other discourses that are somehow associated with authority. At most art can impersonate or lampoon them: imitate the language of politics and religion, lampoon the language of the media, go for the grotesque. A sense of duty attenuates all attempts at rebellion, while outward rebellion compromises duty. This sets the frame for art, confined within the bounds of duty and subject to an ethics of, necessarily noble, rebellion delimited by shame. Thus

does art erect a cognitive barrier for itself. Shame acts as an inner “parole officer” making sure rebellion is not taken too far. Art may be political as long as it stays away from politics – it can act politically in galleries but not in real-life debates unfolding in a different communal space, such as the media. It may be social as long as it does not produce social consequences.

Defiance can only be taken so far nowadays, and besides; the art market will also commodify rebellion. Art is becoming more and more anodyne.

In the Nieznalska affair, for instance,⁵ the accusations in the media, the indictment,

the hearings in court, were treated by Dorota Nieznalska and her circle as a calamity rather than an opportunity to practice art “by other means.” They balked at the prospect of exerting social impact.

Having an effect implies some kind of power, and having power is what art is most afraid of. The problem being that it already has power. Art has the power to name and define, to intervene in the workings of culture, exert pressure on elements of the social structure by turning them into artefacts (art works). And every artefact is after all an apparatus for actively modelling fragments of reality. If politics is the power to name things, art has that power – perhaps even in spite of itself. Even a love story is an agent of cultural power because it can induce or channel emotional needs.

Let’s get back to the freedom associated with rebellion. Is rebellion in art a manifestation of freedom? No, because it is limited by duty. Rebellion has its limits, and these are reached much earlier than the ones laid down by civil and criminal law. Rebellion has been harnessed to achieve a dialectical rupture. Where there is no rebellion, duty reigns, and art is reduced to the ancillary function of satisfying social needs and supporting the authorities. Rebellion must be present to offset the performance of shameful duties. That is why it is part of the package with its illusion of autonomy. Rebellion is, so to speak, “a duty.”

Since the 1990s, art has been growing increasingly institutionalised. Institutional critics, now in charge of defining the remit of art, have been moving to mitigate art’s “ideological turpitude.” Fantasies about the alleged “needs” of the market-place are also discouraging more radical forms of expression. Defiance can only be taken so far nowadays, and besides: the art market will also commodify rebellion. Art is becoming more and more anodyne.

⁴ Powinność i Bunt. Akademia Sztuk Pięknych w Warszawie 1944-2004 [“Duty and Rebellion. The Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw”], Galeria Zachęta, 2004.

⁵ In 2001, Dorota Nieznalska showed a cruciform lightbox at the Wyspa gallery in Gdańsk. In the centre of the cross was placed a photo depicting male genitalia. The object was accused of offending religious sentiments, and a lengthy court case ensued.

The Idiot Savant

Shame constitutes a deep emotional substratum of art. Shame at having been implicated in power relations and endorsing totalitarian regimes prevents it from engaging in politics or explicitly creating discourses of knowledge. Anything political and scientific can only be a by-product of art. Owing to this reluctance to “take ownership of knowledge,” attempts to call attention to social problems or discuss areas society would otherwise be indifferent to are accompanied by opposition and even hostility towards discourses appointed to handle these problems and issues, i.e. science and politics. Autonomy in art has gone so far as to become a measure of ideological purity, an acid test of “artistic integrity.” Symbolic power, strength through knowledge, openly political attitudes are simply rejected.

That makes the artist an idiot savant of sorts; someone with interesting and important things to say but no idea how these things came to them or what use to put them to.

On top of it all, one has to contend with the ignorance of artists. As Marcin Czerwiński wrote

back in the 1970s, artists do not have “the ability to translate intuition into discursive language” and thus rely on “the germs of truth scattered across reality that have the potential to develop into either ideas or images.”⁶ That is one of the reasons why art has been called a social symptom. The euphemism refers to the unwitting, intuitive way it performs an assigned task. Artists as creative individuals are, according to this view, unwitting mediums of social processes. Willingly or not they visualise its crucial junctures in a perfectly mindless way. That makes the artist an idiot savant of sorts: someone with interesting and important things to say but no idea how these things came to them or what use to put them to. Czerwiński calls such a state “ideological abstinence,” while Joanna Tokarska-Bakir has this to say on the subject:

the artists of today might in a somewhat 19th century way be perceived as secularised high priests who, acting ‘through the symbolic medium that is the physical human body,’ try to act out ritually a certain form of unexplored social relations that has come to dominate the world. The problem being that the relations they want to express through art are understood neither by themselves nor by the societies they want to reveal them to.⁷

⁶ M. Czerwiński, *Samotność sztuki* [“The Solitude of Art”], (Warszawa: PIW, 1978).

⁷ J. Tokarska-Bakir, “Energia odpadków” [“The Energy of Waste”], *Res Publica Nowa*, No. 3/2006.

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cognitive procedures of art based on risk and intuition seem threatening. The lameness of theoretical education in art schools might be a symptom of unconscious reluctance on the part of the community to enhance the intuitive tools of art.

Overcoming alienation

Is there a way out of this trap? Is it possible to stop defining what does and does not befit a client of the authorities, of business, and even a rebel? Art has already made a step towards doing away with this dialectics. It has assumed the position of a judge, an evaluator – the paradoxical position of an “involved observer.” It has elaborated strategies of social critique – a hermeneutics of the “socially evident.” With her action where she peeled potatoes in Warsaw’s Zachęta gallery Julita Wójcik encouraged us to read that commonplace activity as a statement about the shifting battlefield, a nod at things that are really hidden and outside the pale of high culture. Wójcik contributed to changing the protagonist: the nature of reality is determined by an “invisible majority,” not by exotic exceptions. Critique along these lines can involve either artistic identification with “the causes of evil” or interventionist and remedial action in so far as that is possible. These are the constituents of a paradigm shift involving explicit support for processes of modernisation or discourses of knowledge, sometimes even agreeing to undertake topical intervention and negotiate on behalf of vulnerable groups. One can say that this has partly helped overcome the alienation of art, its shying away from consequence, its refusal to exert any real and verifiable influence. But there is more at stake: regaining control over the ideology that leads to the unthinking generation of autonomy and is the cause of continual regress, and limiting the audacity and scope of artistic action.

The Ignorant and the Illiterate

One of the reasons for the alienation of art is that it relies on the language of images.

The findings that artists put forward are seen as too ambiguous and not verifiable in any scientific way. But this only shows how bungling science is when faced with an intuitive medium, how prone to cognitive fundamentalism.

Despite their immediacy, images remain unclear to representatives of other disciplines. Pictures are not texts,

they are read “all at once,” all their meanings are taken in with a single glance. Such a suspension of linear reading, and the fact that meaning reveals itself in a flash and opens up a whole range of associations is tantamount to “cognitive violence.” There is less scope for “proprietary images” than reading a text provides. Texts stimulate the imagination: when we read we see images – a mosaic of visualisations emerging from the memory and “superimposed onto” the text. Therein lies the blankness of words: a word is not the things it names. Images are bolder in the way they refer to the object depicted. “In a picture the object surrenders itself entirely and its image is sure – as opposed to text and other perceptions that render the object blurred and debatable, and as such cause me to mistrust what I seem to be seeing.”⁸ Confronted with a picture, the imagination works not to fill in the blankness of words, but to determine “what is it that I see?” Yet what else can the thing I see be, since it is already “everything there is?” The inability to read images is surely a form of illiteracy, and experts from other fields could do with a few remedial classes. The ignorance here is twofold: artists are seen as ignorant by experts in other fields and vice versa: experts in the field of, say, science or politics are as helpless as children when it comes to “reading” images. Anthropology, for one, holds the view that art’s involvement in various kinds of social criticism brings unclear effects:

Documentary practice has come to resemble fine arts photography – by drawing on the more subtle and abstract forms of photographic expression – at a time when photography as an art form is evolving into some kind of fuzzy social criticism, ambiguous rather than straightforward and literal: a function of how photographers perceive society than of systematic analysis.⁹

The findings that artists put forward are seen as too ambiguous and not verifiable in any scientific way. But this only shows how bungling science is when faced with an intuitive medium, how prone to “cognitive fundamentalism.” The result is another ideological debate in which opposing arguments are derided as being unclear, vague, ambiguous, etc. The passage quoted above also tells us that science has learned “more subtle and abstract forms of photographic expression” from art. Now that it has “become aware” of the cultural ubiquity of images, does science not want to dominate over the ways they are read? Just as it has dominated our thinking about knowledge, by peremptorily persuading us it is the only credible source of that knowledge?

... the cliché that art is merely a producer of aesthetics is so ingrained that it produces an ‘indifference effect’ among experts in other fields.

Furthermore, the knowledge that emerges as the product of artistic

activity is obstinately reduced to the status of a merely aesthetic proposition by experts from other fields. Even though art literally “shows” what it has come to know, and its knowledge is discursive and lends itself to reasoning, the cliché that art is merely a producer of aesthetics is so ingrained that it produces an “indifference effect” among experts from other fields. The knowledge art has generated remains inaccessible to them – they are unable to read it. Meanwhile it was none other than an anthropologist who wrote the following passage:

“In this language [of film] individual images/frames are words, shots and camera angles are the inflectional elements, while editing provides the syntax. [...] A series of images, arranged – organised – according to a certain convention (the grammar of cinema) into a collection of takes directly linked to one another in terms of meaning, makes up a phrase of editing. [...] Depending on the way images and shots are spliced together, on the phrases used in editing, the idiom of film may be used to construct ‘epic phrases’ declarative sentences of sorts, depicting a slice of life, an action sequence, fragments of an event. One can also compose (edit) so-called ‘reasoned phrases’ – through the skilful arrangement of semantically unrelated visual and/or sonic (verbal, musical) fragments – thus evoking associations, bringing out analogies, and even constructing

⁸ R. Barthes, Camera Lucida, 1980.

⁹ D. Harper, “On the Authority of the Image: Visual Methods at the Crossroads,” in: K. Olechnicki (ed.), Antropologia obrazu [“Anthropology of the Image”], (Warszawa: Oficyna Naukowa, 2003).

metaphorical sentences. In effect, a cinematic text may assume forms resembling discourse, and thus satisfy the basic requirement made of a scientific language.”¹⁰

Virus or Algorithm?

As I have indicated, art has, of its own accord, rejected consequences, and turned its back on effects. Nonetheless, it still manages to come up with useful cognitive procedures. Existential algorithms, the use of which makes it possible to “keep your eyes open” when exploring social structures, to enter into hidden places and true relations. In the cognitive equation we construct out of known and unknown qualities so that we may, in solving it, make the world a more transparent place, art has replaced speculation with existence. Existence speculates, thinks,

Algorithms imply something operational and positive, a mode of purposeful action... One that would allow us to consider the possibility of impact, to see art as a device that produces impact.

and comes to know itself. Rather than drawing graphs, art becomes involved in real situations. Its

cognitive strategies do not place reality in brackets like science does. It goes beyond the bracket – knowledge emerges within life, it springs out of emotion, visions, and sensations, out of real experience. It is all these things at once. It is suffused with contradictions and anxiety, mistakes and hopes, good and ethical deficiency, authoritarianism and timidity. In order to know reality art does not patronise but becomes one with it. “Impossible,” science would protest, “the observer must be external with respect to the object under observation. S/he is placed outside by the very act of observation.” Art, meanwhile, claims that this need not be the case. The bracket and its observer intermesh in a total cognitive experience. The observer emerges out of it through the image which becomes both the gateway to knowledge and its source – a referent, an address, a hotlink. Images as an extremely capacious form of writing in which contradiction and incoherence may be inscribed without detriment to the discourse, convey total knowledge – everything there is to know. But there are, in that simultaneity, orders of reading, layered like a theatre stage: upstage, centre-stage, downstage, wings...

The problem has to do with the language of critical practice whose associations make it possible for art to be defined as inimical to society. One example is the language used to define the concept of an “artistic virus.” Art, it claims, produces artefacts: social and cultural events that “infect” various parts of the social system just like viruses infect an organism. They “damage” or “alter” it. The infected system must change: heal or be cured. The problem is that the associations produced by the word “virus” are all negative: poison, disease, parasite, enemy. The concept of art as a virus infecting and operating in various parts of the social system leaves no room for verification – what is the impact of the infection? Does it ever occur at all? How do we check what an “artistic virus” has done? Can the impact be anything other than just infection? Infection which is in itself an achievement because it sets in motion fantasies of change and influence.

Why must we talk about viruses, and not algorithms for instance? In mathematics, computing, linguistics, and related disciplines, an algorithm is a procedure (a finite set of well-defined instructions) for accomplishing some task which, given an initial state, will terminate in a defined end-state. “In mathematics and computer science algorithms are finite, orderly sets of clearly defined actions necessary to perform a task in a limited number of steps... Algorithms are to guide a system from a certain initial state to a desired final state.”¹¹ Such rigorous procedures would, of course be dysfunctional when applied to art. But if a virus can be a metaphor for action, so can an algorithm. Algorithms imply something operational and positive, a mode of purposeful action, I am not proposing that we artificially replace one term with another, but that we change the meanings of language. One that would allow us to consider the possibility of impact, to see art as a

What ought to be done, now that too much autonomy has led to the alienation of art, so that it is not heard and most of the knowledge it generates is being squandered?

“device that produces impact.” As guiding the system from a certain initial state to a desired final state.

Restore Effectiveness

Neither the immunity of art nor its stature have any effect on science, and neither science nor politics are afraid of art. What ought to be done, now that too much autonomy has led to the alienation of art, so that it is “not heard” and most of the knowledge it generates is being squandered?

¹⁰ R. Vorbrich, “Tekst werbalny i niewerbalny” [“Verbal and Non-verbal Text”] in: Antropologia wobec fotografii i filmu, [“Anthropology and Photography and Film”] (Poznań: Biblioteka Tęgli, 2004).

¹¹ Wikipedia; <http://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Algorytm>.

- 1 The first way could be for art to instrumentalise its own autonomy and thus regain control over it. Instrumentalisation would mean reducing the role of autonomy to that of a tool like other tools. Autonomy would then once more become useful for the carrying out of plans and would no longer be a means of controlling our (the artists') "ideological purity." Instrumentalisation is a "choice of dependency." Art could once again serve as an instrument of knowledge, science, politics.
- 2 The second way would be to encroach upon other fields, such as science or politics, as a way of proving oneself. The point is to work with people who are not in awe of art. Stature is what protects artists and critics from being "called." There is the famous story about Duchamp submitting a urinal he signed R. Mutt for an exhibition. The qualifying committee rejected the work, with only Duchamp himself voting in favour. The piece could only be shown once Duchamp admitted it was his work. What made the difference was the stature of the author.

Since art is interested in social issues, what better interlocutor for it than a sociologist or social psychologist?

The stature and immunity that protect art are unknown in sciences such as,

say, anthropology or sociology. There, an artist's statement is a verifiable hypothesis that can be refuted with the aid of other, more convincing arguments. Experts from other fields are substantively better prepared to debate the claims art makes. Since art is interested in social issues, what better interlocutor for it than a sociologist or social psychologist? I do not want to overestimate specialists in other disciplines – they too are limited by the invisible assumptions of their fields. Nonetheless art reviewers lack competence. They need sociological, philosophical and psychological expertise. Karol Sienkiewicz in *Sekcja*, an Internet magazine run by art history students at Warsaw University, sums up the discussion around Repetition as follows:

"less relevant are the artistic merits of the project – "project" because it cannot be brought down to a forty-odd minute long film. I am not referring to the editing, the aesthetic categories or whether this or that critic was bored during the screening – such categories are irrelevant when trying to judge or interpret Repetition. Perhaps art history and

criticism with all their tools are still helpless in the face of [the work]. An art historian wanting to take part in a discussion among sociologists and psychologists can only assume the role of a homespun connoisseur."¹²

Perhaps art history and criticism with all their tools are still helpless in the face of the work.

Critics often do not know enough, and this lack of knowledge can lead art back to aestheticising. In the archaic,

circular mode of communication where critics mediate between the artist and the viewer, lack of knowledge on the part of critics "forces" artists to simplify their message. It forces them to return to a reduced art – one that is restricted to the bounds critics have set for it, an art their competence is able to "handle." For what the critic cannot understand cannot be expressed and never makes it into the circuit of knowledge, is not revealed within the work. That, too, is one of the effects – and causes – of alienation.

It would be interesting if a work of art were "defeated" in the course of a genuine discussion, a clash of arguments. At the moment, a discussion with such an ending is not possible: art overwhelms its opponents. You could say that the ability to defeat opponents is embedded in a work of art. Embedded in the tangle of its ambiguity, stature, and immunity. Opponents find this knot nearly impossible to disentangle; and it perpetuates the symbolic violence encoded in art. Usually there is no dialogue in the first place, only a monologue where the artist provides a single canonical interpretation, and if there are any battles at all, they are waged to maintain the supremacy of that interpretation.

- 3 It is also worth trying to keep statements by reviewers from being treated as decrees. Since the turn of the century we have been witnessing a clear ideological asymmetry – the voice of artists is growing fainter. It is being drowned by successive teams of reviewers proclaiming the emergence or obsolescence of certain subjects in art. Such was the case with the new banalists; with art meant to be helpful; with art addressing issues of globalisation. The most notorious statement to that effect was made by Magdalena Ujma on the website of the Bunkier Sztuki gallery, when she said that taking an interest in power has become "passé." The following year sociologist Jadwiga Staniszkis published *O władzy i bezsilności*¹³ ["On Power and Powerlessness"], a book taking up the

12 K. Sienkiewicz "Bezradność krytyka. Uwagi na marginesie dyskusji o Powtórzeniu Artura Żmijewskiego" ["The Helplessness of the Critic. Comments on the Discussion about Artur Żmijewski's Repetition"], http://www.sekcja.org/miesiecznik.php?id_artykulu=107.

13 J. Staniszkis, *O władzy i bezsilności* ["On Power and Powerlessness"] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2006).

Since the turn of the century we have been witnessing a clear ideological asymmetry – the voice of artists is growing fainter. It is being drowned by successive teams of reviewers proclaiming the emergence or obsolescence of certain subjects in art.

issue of new forms of power, its changing image and means of control, and last but not least its networked nature. Would

Staniszkis also regard an [academic] interest in power as being “passé?” In a world where the authorities fall back on “the terrorist threat” in order to reassert their prerogatives, where the government eavesdrops on law-abiding citizens, and changes the meaning of language, can power be so naively dismissed? Magdalena Ujma’s comment brought out a crucial problem, that of the loss of an acquired competence. Encroaching upon the study of power relations gave art valuable competence in that field. But such competence has no chance of holding its own against the asymmetry of strength and frequency that obtains between statements by critics and artists. Artists “keep quiet” – they are reluctant to defend and explain their actions, and leave that task up to reviewers. What art will and will not be interested in can be determined by the skillful management of fads, by terming this or that “passé,” and by alternately praising and wounding the narcissist within every artist. This is where something I would call ideological amnesia and the amnesia of competence come in. Art becomes skilled in carrying out certain cognitive procedures; when these become useful and universally applied, they are compromised. This is what leads to ideological amnesia, or the loss of an acquired competence. Just as art accumulates knowledge about modes of visual action: composition, colour, spatial relations, so could it, in theory, verbalise and accumulate knowledge about the cognitive and critical procedures it applies.

Does that mean that extending the scope of freedom in art is not merely an illusion? “The decrees of reviewers” have left us with an internal hegemonic discourse where pluralism should have been. A true area of freedom could be obtained by simply using the plural: if we had areas, fields of freedom. A variety of fields of interest and, above all, if we kept and developed the competencies we had once acquired.

The Applied Social Arts

Instrumentalisation of autonomy makes it possible to use art for all sorts of things: as a tool for obtaining and disseminating knowledge, as a producer of cognitive procedures relying on intuition and the imagination and serving the cause of knowledge and political action. Naturally, art may still perform its classical function and express “the most poignant moments of the human condition.” Control over autonomy is not the only kind of control that should be achieved. There is still the problem of originality and opaqueness. These too should be tools that can be used freely when the need arises. One would have to strip originality of its judgmental function, that is its propensity for control and exclusion.

Just as art accumulates knowledge about modes of visual action; composition, colour, spatial relations, so could it, in theory, verbalise and accumulate knowledge about the cognitive and critical procedures it applies.

I think that art could try and restore the original meanings of words. The term autonomy would then 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. And, finally, opaqueness would be indicative of the difficulty of a message, not its illegibility and inability to communicate.

Will dependence on other discourses: politics and science not lead to an ideological reduction of content to what is useful from the standpoint of a group’s political interests, for instance? Such a risk does exist but there are at least two reasons why it should be taken up:

- 1 Art manages very well in risky areas, while the “uselessness” artists feel can encourage risky behaviour. Wilhelm Sasnal said he sometimes feels like a “gallery louse” in collaborating with an art world that produces tautological references. Dependence on clearly “utilitarian discourses” is in all likelihood a subconscious desire on the part of artists expressed in fantasies of change that could occur through the agency of art.
- 2 Politics, science, and religion can do what art no longer can: achieve a connection with reality by producing useful tools: tools for the implementation of power and of knowledge. By becoming once

again dependent art may learn how to be socially useful, even at an operational level (it already knows how to challenge reality and can count on support for its proliferation of rebellion).

A good example of an artistic activity not afraid of entering into various forms of dependence is film. Film is literally “used” by various discourses. Film is a way to intervene, fight for something, inform, educate, update knowledge, tell fairy tales, persuade, call attention to problems, critical junctures, etc. And film is very close to the realm of art. Today, the camera is the artist’s best friend.

Instrumentalisation of autonomy makes it possible to use art for all sorts of things: as a tool for obtaining and disseminating knowledge, as a producer of cognitive procedures relying on intuition and the imagination and serving the cause of knowledge and political action.

In a text about Elżbieta Jabłońska critic Dorota Jarecka asked: “Whom should art serve today, and for what purpose?”... [Should it] engage in political

discussion that will always be inadequate when placed against the discourse of philosophers and sociologists?”¹⁴ Yes, it should engage in such discussion. Art will enhance that discussion with its ability to use different strategies, its familiarity with intuition, imagination, and premonition. Unfortunately, art also has severe weaknesses and tends to dismiss its own importance. It has infused its discourse with self-compromising, amnesia, and recurring ignorance. Theoretical subjects in art school are taught as if they were merely a device for expanding the memory rather than exercises in thinking and discovering the world. There is doubtless some political interest in keeping art weak by forcing it to flounder between ignorance and knowledge. By having it perpetuate seemingly useful clichés regarding beauty and the artsy types who produce it. In the collective circuit of power, art is never “charged” as its “inventions” are not accepted. Arrested on the verge of the rational, it makes its actions out to be nothing more than vivid yet irrational fantasies. In the 1990s it played the rube, paying its share of the bill for the changes happening in the country (that would partly account for the scandals around art in recent years) – knocking on a weak discourse pays off in the economics of national frustration. In any struggle for power somebody has to play the useful idiot – and art with its naivete and lack of defensive strategies was

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often used for such a purpose, notably by the LPR¹⁵. We all lost out on our

the failure to use the cognitive procedures developed by art to any greater extent. Procedures based on intuition and imagination, procedures based on denying one’s righteousness and giving up judgementalism.

Intuition and the imagination embrace repressed and denied fantasies, desires and needs, and help search for ways to satisfy them. Renouncing the role of judge will reveal our collective and individual complicity in the injustices of the system. Then it will no longer be “them” but us who will share responsibility for the way our shared reality looks.

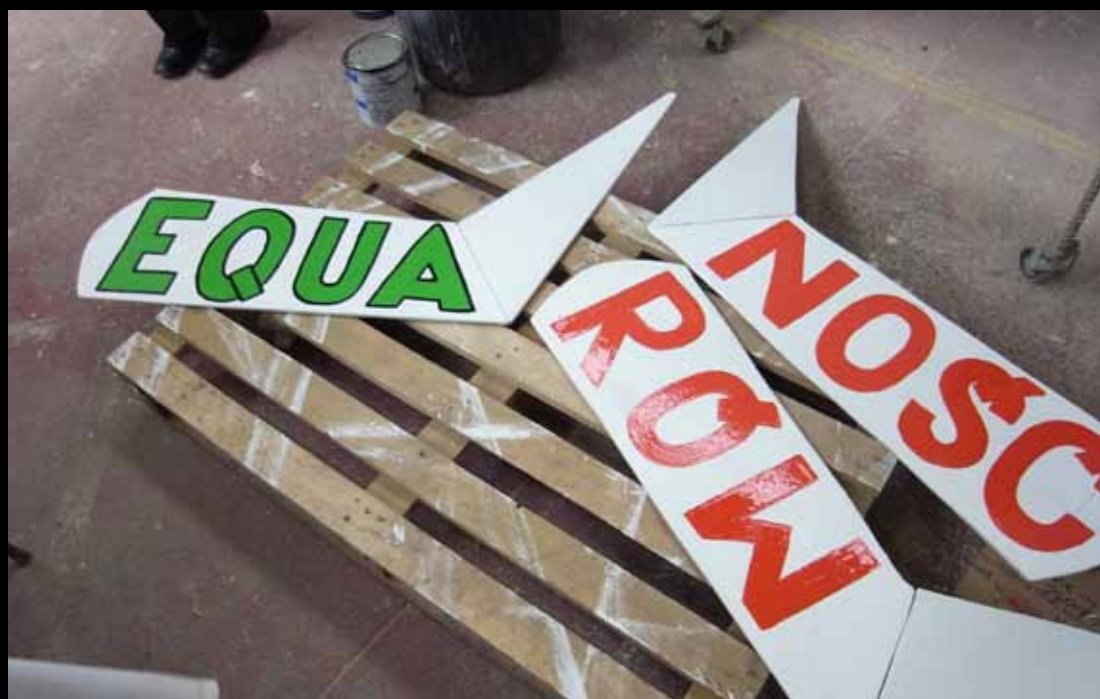
Artur Żmijewski, *The Applied Social Arts*, 2007, first published in *Krytyka Polityczna* no 11. www.krytykapolityczna.pl

14 D. Jarecka, “To ju_ fanaberia Jabłońskiej” [“A Bee in Jabłońska’s Bonnet”], *Gazeta Wyborcza*, April 7, 2006.

15 The League of Polish Families, political party established in 2001 following the merger of several Catholic-national factions.



810 apologises to prisoner 960 for this night count because of my insubordinate behaviour.



Above, right & overleaf: *Two Monuments*, Artur Żmijewski (2009).
 Documentation of workshops with participants in the Fire Station Artists'
 Studios, Dublin. Video stills.





Above, right & overleaf: *Two Monuments*, Artur Żmijewski (2009).
Documentation of workshops with participants in the Fire Station Artists' Studios, Dublin. Photographs and video stills.







Democracies, Artur Żmijewski (2005), Video still.

A CONVERSATION ON **DEMOCRACIES**

ARTUR ŻMIJEWSKI & MAREN LÜBBKE-TIDOW

Maren Lübbke-Tidow: Characteristic of your artistic practice up to now has been its experimental nature, a practice that has continued to foster controversial discourse: The first work that I recall included photographs of amputees that you presented in a Graz exhibition in 2001. For the 2005 Venice Biennale you staged a remake, “Repetition”, of Philip Zimbardo’s famous 1971 Stanford Prison Experiment. You have worked with deaf children and youth as well as with other disabled persons – in short, you have developed various forms of social experiments involving disadvantaged groups in society. For your new series of videos, you have chosen a form of radical documentarism: “Democracies” – a series of documentary films on political declarations of will in various European countries and the Middle East – juxtaposes opinions and forms of enactment, such as demonstrations and parades, re-enacted historical battles, the Football World Cup in Germany, and Jörg Haider’s funeral. What inspired you to pursue a new artistic strategy for this series? And why did you select the title “Democracies”?

Artur Żmijewski: Do you really want me to produce artworks about the same issue? For example about amputees? It would be much too boring for all of us – for me as a producer, and for you as a spectator. I am interested in different aspects of reality – and I follow these interests.

I chose the title “Democracies” because it’s a lie: These are not all democracies. Are the Autonomous Palestinian Territories a democratic country? I do not think so – they are occupied and fully dependent on Israel (are under its military control, in fact) and on the international community. Is Israel democratic? Maybe, but only if we add the term “colonial” – it’s a “colonial democracy”, or maybe a “military democracy”. Northern Ireland is still under British occupation. Of course it is a democracy, but

on occupied territory. Maybe Poland is a democratic country? Sure it is, but in this democracy women do not share equal rights with men. One of the basic democratic rules is to observe the equality of citizens. That's why I described these movies as "Democracies" – because of the lack of democracy in these countries.

ML: How did you come to decide on which places and events, on which demonstrations and parades, to visit with your camera in the different countries?

AŻ: I knew, for example, about the anniversary of the Nakba, and I went to Israel to film this event. Usually I had no plan – I was reading newspapers and waiting for information about ongoing events. I was also checking posters on the streets and asking people for information – there is nothing mysterious and difficult about it – this is information that is available to everybody. This was also my intention – to be one of the masses, similar to the others, with reduced political possibilities. And I was simply open to each kind of so-called "political event".

ML: As far as the selection of locale went, did you focus on particular aspects? Were there specific phenomena in the type of events that you strove to highlight in particular?

AŻ: Yes, these phenomena can be named: political drive and radical democracy, participation in conflict, and so on.

ML: Can you roughly describe which places you visited and where these phenomena became apparent to you?

AŻ: Where I was? In Belfast – anniversary of the Battle of the Boyne – there was excitement on the streets: a combative atmosphere, UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force) supporters screaming slogans, and people were drunk – a spectacle of power. I was also in the Saint Stanisław Kostka church in Warsaw where during Holy Mass the letter of the Polish Episcopacy about artificial insemination – which is of course not allowed according to Polish Church ideology – was read by the priest. This reading was really insulting for the listeners – it strongly confirmed that none of them is owner of his or her body, that they are not able to make decisions for themselves. And

people were not able to protest or to even discuss because during Mass they have to be silent. I also observed two re-enactments of battles which had originally taken place during the Warsaw Uprising (1944) – it was a very realistic spectacle of patriotism mixed with violence, killing, and so on. Actors and actresses were writing their own version of Polish history – a strongly nationalistic version of it.

I was travelling through Europe, and I was also in the Middle East. Shortly after all of these journeys I was thinking that Europe has made a turn to the extreme right – all of these symbols, slogans, the militancy, the reactionary, and obscurantism appear in excess. This overshadows the existence of demonstrations which demand social rights and social equality, which are anti-war protests, et cetera. It was interesting to see how this is translated into political spectacle – how these murderous feelings are transferred to a symbolical level and safely performed there.

ML: With your camera you were primarily focusing on specific regional conflicts. Would you say that by contrasting or combining these different regional conflicts in a large installation, comprising more than twenty films, a certain global development becomes evident?

AŻ: I mostly think about political drive – it needs to be seen, needs to be brought to the surface. The best stage for presenting political drive – for emancipating it – is a politically oriented event. I like this logic: if you want to write a successful detective novel, the best way is to use a detective story as a matrix. It is a different logic than in visual art – so, I followed this very obvious logic.

But we should ask: Who is the spectator? Some people will recognise their own demands in extreme right-wing opinions. Many spectators will identify themselves with strong anti-feminist or homophobic opinions. What about the opinion that trade unions are obstacles for the development of a free market economy? How many spectators will agree with this opinion? There are a lot of emancipation demands presented in "Democracies", but some people will see in these movies the promise of the world in which the position of women will be reduced to second-rate, in which Arab people will be the object of disgust and hate, and so on. This is not my aim, but I cannot control people's thoughts. It already happened once.

ML: It is interesting to see how extremely emotionalised the people in your videos tend to be. Would you agree with me if I say that your work magnifies a theoretical debate on democracy, and on closely related concepts like nation/nationalism, to include the notion of emotion as a constitutive element of democracy?

AŻ: Sure – emotions are a substance of politics. My political choices are based on my emotions since it's usually feedback. What I like is that demonstrators do not fully control themselves – they are controlled by invisible rules of democracy, in fact accepted by them – they do not usually cross the border to direct violence. In “Democracies” direct violence has happened twice: in Strasbourg during protests against NATO and in Berlin during the celebration of 1 May. In most cases people do not fight with the police if they are not attacked. What I want to say is that they are more democratic than are state services and politicians. The people who deny access to demonstrations and usually boycott them are politicians – exactly those who are recipients of demands by the people. The opinion exists that the majority of people are idiots who would like to control others, put them in prisons, or kill them. That's why we need states and professional politicians to protect us from ourselves – to “protect me from what I want”. Maybe ... but we also have so many examples where people need to be protected from their own states and politicians who represent danger for them. There were two Polish politicians who went to visit Augusto Pinochet in London in 1999, after he was arrested, to declare their admiration for his political skills. Both of them are currently in politics: Michał Kamiński and Marek Jurek. There are hundreds of examples of politicians who function in democracy but who constantly pose a threat to it. So, I want to say that idiocy is dispersed not only among ordinary people but also among politicians. We need our emotions – a sense of grievance, a sense of justice, a sense of abandonment, self-esteem, and anger – to protect ourselves from injustice, from states that are not truly democratic, from our own states in which we live.

ML: In watching your videos one gets the feeling that you were experiencing the respective situations from a somewhat distanced perspective, that you were not really part of the group. On the other hand,

you seemed to have on occasion become very involved in the action. How would you describe your position as observer, as participant in all of these different demonstrations, parades, and ceremonies?

AŻ: What is funny is that there were five people filming these events for me – and I was there too – which means that all of us were distanced. Okay – but what does it mean to be close? How to present it? Sometimes the camera's point of view is subjective. The problem is different, I think – those of us watching the movies, we need distance. We do not prefer to come closer to these crazy nationalists, Christian believers, screaming Arabs, to all of these fundamentalists who appear in the whole series of movies. We need distance to keep our nobleness, to keep the differences, to protect our ideological identity, to keep it untouched.

ML: It seems to me that a decisive quality of your work lies not in differentiating between the various political actions and statements but rather in showing a wide range of political opinions and convictions – and really in not passing judgement on “good” and “bad” citizens of democracies, on “right” and “wrong” interpretations of the notion of freedom.

AŻ: For example, I also wanted to film on the side of Israeli soldiers shooting, with rubber-coated or with real bullets, at unarmed demonstrators in Bil'in on the West Bank. There are usually two groups involved in demonstrations: for example, Palestinian activists and Israeli soldiers, divided by the fence. I was less interested in the rightness or justice of the cause but more in this inner drive that moves people to debate, to publicly show their needs, demands, requests, opinions – and to defend them with their own presence, showing their own faces, even if their point of view is terribly shitty. For example, during a feminist march in Warsaw, opponents of the march were screaming “Feminists are Nazis”, “Better listen to the priests than to queers and communists”, and so on. They know that it is completely disgraceful to be a fascist nowadays – but they are fascists, and they present their faces with no shame. Political forces drive them to extreme points – to do without shame something that is terribly shameful.

ML: With her essays on the “democratic paradox”, Chantal Mouffe questions the characterisation of modern democracies as systems that are only representative, parliamentary, constitutional, or liberal. In her view, this characterisation of democracy is a limited one. She argues for the return of the old-fashioned democratic principle of popular sovereignty in the form of an attribute that can shed a truly modern light on democracy today. Her thesis is that the current lack of popular sovereignty in the concepts of contemporary modern democracies has paved the way for a return of right-populist tendencies. Rejecting democratic popular sovereignty would in fact facilitate the re-emergence of a folkishly/racially motivated agency. Do you agree with Mouffe on this matter? And would you likewise advocate the radical return of popular sovereignty to concepts of contemporary democracies?

AŽ: What was the moment when people really achieved their subject position in politics? Maybe an example of it was the Solidarity movement in Poland in the 1980s. They really changed the country – ten million members. It was in fact a political party, which really represented the needs of the people. I think that we could observe how during demonstrations people became sovereign – they somehow created a new, temporary order. This is the moment when people really enter the political stage – and when they are unpredictable, when they are depositaries of a different order. They break the silence and locate themselves in the subjective political position – they become sovereign. This gesture – going to the streets, screaming, presenting their demands – is a gesture of dignity. It opens spheres of dignity for themselves and for others.

But it’s ambiguous – in Belfast, Protestants take part in a huge parade to terrorise their Catholic neighbours, to produce a threat. They produce really tremendous, murderous feelings. And the democratic order accepts it.

ML: The videos are very short and precisely cut. What approach did you take in editing the different videos? How did you decide what you wanted to show and what not?

AŽ: All footage, each event has its own logic and specific scenario – I just followed this logic and these scenarios.

ML: Can you give an example? Perhaps a fitting example might be your video on the memorial ceremony for Jörg Haider, where you decided to film the live broadcast from St. Stephen’s Cathedral in Vienna and edit it into a video.

AŽ: Haider’s funeral, an easy scenario: to present as many kitschy elements as possible – fanfares, marching soldiers, colour guards, the fire salute, singing girls, and so on; and to hide two important messages in it. The first one was presented by the priest: “But in the Christian tradition, we do not find fault with the dead, but beat our own breasts”. The second one was presented by one of the members of Haider’s party: “Our leader cannot die”. This is the economy of power presented in front of the public. So, it was enough to present these two speeches and some of the kitschy elements of the funeral in chronological order to make a movie – that’s what I mean by “scenario”.

ML: Can you describe another scenario?

AŽ: Sure. The mourning ceremony after the massacre at Albertville School in Winnenden. Easy and pitiful scenario: people are in a stadium to observe live broadcasting of the ceremony, which is located in the Protestant church. In the church are Angela Merkel and Horst Köhler – in front of them friends of shot kids lighting candles and listing names of victims. And the most important moment – the pastor who gave a speech said in front of the members of the German government and the victims’ families: “Today is not the time to think about why the tragedy happened and how we should change ourselves because of it”. Why did he say this – to not disturb the victims’ families or members of the government? So, it was enough to convey this unclear message, to show members of the government who didn’t say even one word. All of them were silent and closed in their privacy – and that was the message: be silent and hide your pain in privacy – follow your silent political leaders. Be satisfied by the belief that your relatives are in the “open arms of God”.

ML: Upon seeing your videos, I was immediately reminded of the French philosopher Alain Badiou, who wrote: “We cannot understand what is gripping us and causing us to despair if we do not return again and again to the fact that our world is not at all a democracy, but rather an imperial

conservatism under the guise of democratic phraseology". Can you identify with this statement?

AŽ: No, I cannot, though I also have doubts about democracy – I do not think that my interests are really represented and defended by the candidates for parliament that I voted for.

I remember the reality of the communist regime in Poland – no freedom – where people were not allowed to choose ideological identification. There were in fact two main options available: adhering to the system or resistance. People in Poland have a wider spectrum of choice nowadays – the local democracy here is a space of free ideological identifications. Of course, most people are seduced by the sexy face of liberal capitalism. So, I prefer the word "colonial" over "imperial" – people's minds are colonised by the unique beauty of shopping malls, by the impression that the EU is a happy island among the ocean of poverty and terror, by the conviction that art is a conspiracy of tricksters, and so on.

People feel better when they are limited by borders of ideology. That's why the Catholic Church still has a dominant position in Poland – it offers one of the strongest ideological identifications here. It means that democracy is not enough ideologically, not limited enough. For instance, if you are gay or lesbian and you fight for equal rights for this group, it doesn't mean that you are fighting for abstract freedom – your freedom has a name. You do not want a society that will accept whatever – you want a society that will accept gays and lesbians as fully equal citizens. This is the internal limit of democracy and open society. That's why I think that the people who were filmed by me are fighting for a somehow limited version of democracy – with clearly defined principles.

ML: Does this mean that with "Democracies" you are aiming to capture the horrible results of democracy? To explore how flexible the concept of democracy may or may not be?

AŽ: Yes, that's what it is. That's what I wanted to do. To show, for example, the situation in Israel and its version of democracy which accepts violence and terror, which has license to kill – a country that doesn't observe human rights. All of these political events present demands, which are not complete,

and it shows the lack of political attention – governments don't listen to these people who scream on the streets, don't fulfil their needs. Democracy means that you can present your demands, but maybe we make a general mistake when we elect politicians. Do we really need people who perfectly manipulate our emotions but don't fulfil our ordinary needs – job, financial safety, social security and social care, equality, social justice, non-ideological education, secular state, and so on? Who – as Žižek has written – don't want to support children living in poverty but are fine with transferring billions of euros to protect financial institutions, which are on the edge of bankruptcy, which provoked the crisis by their overly risky steps.

ML: During our first conversation, you described your strategy of radical documentarism as a method for producing and conveying something like direct speech, a direct voice, an open text. But what about your position as producer of the work, as artist? What you have described here – what you have seen, what you have filmed, how you have edited – gives me the impression that you are deeply involved in a critical debate that can be related to, for example, Michel Foucault and his analyses of the dispositifs and configurations of power. Are you a critical artist in this sense?

AŽ: Sure, I am in a critical debate – but this time I'd like to say something really direct, easy, and ordinary via my movies. As an artist I know all the tricks of art – and I can choose different artistic methods – I can also entirely erase "art content" from my art. And I have done it – but you and I are slaves of art ideology, of the art world that ultimately defines what is art and what is non-art. We are slaves of this automatism, which forces us to define me as artist and my activity as art activity – this is the power of our field. Who am I – artist, producer, film director, anthropologist, self-made scientist, idiot? Which discourse should control my activity? Which one should criticise it? It's a truism, but my critical activity is understood by scientists like pop culture – for art critics it's serious critique, for philosophers it can be just a stream of mysterious images, for some spectators it's entertainment. That's why I have to comment on and defend my movies. And explain, for example, that in "Democracies" we can observe relocated power or "travelling" power – people who temporarily share power with its official beneficiaries, who make the political reality visible, who are on the verge of unpredictable change and produce political threat.

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Democracies, Artur Żmijewski (2009), Video stills.





Left, above and following pages: *Democracies*, Artur Żmijewski (2009), Video stills.





I climbed the mountains, I took up the fight,
I did the impossible and broke the fetters.





Democracies, Artur Żmijewski (2005), Video still.

UNCOMPENSATED TRAUMA

On Art, Technique and Division.

Today one of the key debates within art turns on how it is encountered. What kinds of experience, both individual and collective, ought to be developed for art, and what kind of art can be developed to facilitate and provoke new types of encounter? Socially engaged art is among those contemporary practices that are involved in the reconfiguration of art's social relations, and with them, what used to be called art's viewer. Artur Żmijewski is one of a number of contemporary artists who regard the spectator with suspicion, part a generation or two of artists, critics, curators and others pressing the case for various forms of participation, interaction, community-specificity, co-authorship, collaboration and counterpublics in art. His installation *Democracies* (2009), which consists of 20 videos played simultaneously of public displays of political activism, is as hard on the spectator as it is on the activists, leaving no room either for contemplation or for decisive political opinion formation.

Two Monuments continues Żmijewski's examination of the tensions between spectator and participant, contemplation and action, by devising a social cocktail of Irish and Polish unemployed, and asking them to co-operate and collaborate with each other. Even though the two groups complete their tasks, what we watch on the video is not a documentary of the production of the monuments, like we might watch a documentary about the building of the Guggenheim in Bilbao. We watch the social cocktail curdle. This is not about the objects that are produced, but the social tensions 'behind the scenes'. And this is an important set of questions today, in a period when the artworld has been pursuing the intersubjective (ie subjects encountering each other) rather than the more familiar subjective experience of art objects. At the same time, however, Jacques Rancière has been arguing that we should give the spectator another chance. Rancière, following the logic of his earlier book *The*

*Ignorant Schoolmaster*¹, defends the passive, ignorant spectator as the *part des sans-part* of the art system. The reason Rancière does not see the aesthetic spectator as the privileged holder of cultural capital is that, for him, the aesthetic is one of the ways in which the 'partition of the sensible' is reconfigured.

The critique of the spectator is self-defeating according to Rancière because the spectator already 'observes, selects, compares, interprets'². These are the narrow virtues of the contemplative aesthetic onlooker. Rancière never invokes any other kind of subjectivity for his plagued spectator. But there is simply no reason to reduce the aesthetic to such a narrow set of Romantic tropes. Except that this reduction explains why his defense of the spectator is twinned with a critique of socially engaged art: "The very same thing that makes the aesthetic 'political' stands in the way of all strategies for 'politicizing art'", he says. Rather than accepting that the passive spectator holds the place of the *part des sans-part*, though, we might, instead, understand the spectator as occupying a very central and powerful role within the ideology, economy and knowledge of art. The spectator is the repository of art's established ideologies and cultural practices. It is the specific body adapted to art's institutionalization. In fact, since the death of the author we might go so far as to say the spectator is hegemonic. It sounds to me as if Rancière wants to emancipate the privileged.

If we keep in mind the fact that the critique of the spectator today is an inherited component of a stream of modernist and avant-gardist critiques of art (each critique proposing new formal, technical, aesthetic and social possibilities for art), then we can see that it is false to separate the critique of the spectator from a set of questions about cultural and social transformation. It is impossible, in fact, to produce new works and new configurations of art without at the same time questioning the existing spectator. As such, the critique of the spectator simultaneously calls forth new publics and new experiences, new kinds of art, new institutions, new social forms, new ideologies and a new world.

Insofar as Artur Żmijewski's socially engaged work challenges the established roles and experiences of the spectator by reconfiguring the encounter with art as an ethically loaded, tense and even chilling reflection on identity and society, he is in good company. Santiago Sierra, Rod Dickinson, Plastique Fantastique, Mark McGowan and Laura Oldfield Ford, all develop socially engaged practices that inevitably challenge the spectator (the hegemonic aesthetic subject). I have chosen these examples because none of them abandon the viewer in favour of participation. In various ways they splinter art's encounter rather than opt for one preferred mode of engagement or another. In their different ways these artists do not so much criticize the spectator's passivity as mine fissures in the cultural and social fabric that demonstrate the falsity of the aesthetic spectator's universality.

Sierra cuts through the public by presenting one part of it (under duress) to another part of it. The key to understanding Sierra's work is not to analyze the way he treats the prostitutes, immigrants or homeless people that participate in his work, but to analyze the way he addresses a second public (those who view the work) by presenting to them a different sector of the public and a different type of encounter. In a similar vein, Dickinson appropriates the techniques of mass psychology for displaying society to itself. Like Żmijewski whose work *Repetition* (2005), revisits the 1971 Stanford Prison Experiment, where volunteers are designated either as guards or prisoners and allowed to play out the situation, Dickinson has restaged the famous experiment from the early 1960s Professor Stanley Milgram, of Yale University, in which volunteers were asked to administer increasingly painful electric shocks to others (secretly in collaboration with Milgram). Earlier, too, Dickinson has tapped into the conspiracy-laden subculture of corn circles, operating somewhere between the artworld, a secret society, the mass media and hysterical fiction. Plastique Fantastique mix the carnivalesque with sci-fi scenarios of post-apocalyptic futures to portray (and call forth) a multitude of monstrous subjectivities. McGowan inserts himself into the existing mediascape to shatter art's autonomy and thereby stages the unresolvable collision of art and popular culture. Oldfield Ford revives a militant version of urban subculture to draw battle lines across gentrified territories such as the Olympic zone.

1 Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Stanford University Press: Stanford, California, 1991

2 Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Verso: London and New York, 2009, p.13

Žmijewski prods and pinches social fissures, often the tender relic of world historical trauma, such as *80064* (2004) in which he cajoles an Auschwitz survivor to have his identity tattoo reinstated. Žmijewski uses the politically obscene encounters as the very basis of the relationship between the artist and his 'public'. He does not compensate for these troubling and traumatic encounters with the social niceties of tolerance, kindness and conviviality. In fact, to do so would be utterly objectionable, as if genocide could be made less intolerable with diplomacy and delicate handling. There is no technical solution to social and cultural division, not even in social technique such as good manners and good management. As such, the cruelty, coldness and manipulation in Žmijewski's work might be bad social technique, but there is critical potential (and even virtue) to be found in bad social technique when good social technique is so pernicious. His illiberalism might have something to say to the liberalism dominant in the art milieu, as Charles Esche argues, but it has more to say to the current debate on art's encounter, on the so-called responsibility of the artist to the public, on the misplaced devotion to conviviality in relational art, and the immanent questions that must be addressed today by socially engaged art. This is a harsh testing ground for art's encounter, to be sure, but milder inquiries lower the stakes.

Having said that, and still fully opposed to a purely ethical critique of Žmijewski's treatment of his participants and spectators, there are elements of his working methods that do not ring true. He cajoles, asks leading questions, manipulates situations, edits wantonly, and so on. He seems to know what he wants to show and is prepared to use any trick in the book to depict exactly the tensions that he expects. I am not complaining here about his manipulation of the participants, but his manipulation of the work. He cherry picks data, orchestrates events and choreographs the very scenes he is claiming are always already there. This is a questionable methodology for science, of course, but it is also, interestingly, a questionable methodology for art. We can sum it up by saying the outcome is guaranteed with technique. And you're unlikely to find a better definition of academicism. But the specific problem that this questionable methodology raises in terms of art is the reinstatement of the author as the orchestrating centre of meaning for the work. And just as we are critical of those who turn the clocks back to defend the spectator in its old aesthetic form, the reinstatement of the author has to be challenged also.

What remains interesting in Žmijewski's work is the way it figures and refigures a sequence of real and potential encounters. The participants and the viewers are set apart from one another, not treated recursively as two instantiations of the same conduct. Watching the works can be harrowing and uncomfortable but the viewer looks on from a safe distance and is not the object of scrutiny. The spectator does not view other spectators, but participants. Sometimes this might be felt as a loss (participation is closer to the action) but sometimes it is a relief (the participants get all the flak). Either way, there is a rift in the social relations of the work. And it is not a failing. What is clear in Žmijewski's work, is that the universality of the spectator has dissolved, its hegemony dissipated in a world – and an artworld – characterized by dissensus, conflict, antagonism and trauma.

It would be a mistake to focus only on Žmijewski's treatment of his participants or only on the kind of onlookers he wants the rest of us to be. The important thing is the relationship between them. And in order to understand this relationship we need to distinguish actual individuals from the roles that they adopt. That is to say, Žmijewski's work might victimize people, but that is neither because he is a sadist nor that they are always already capable of victimhood. The point, rather, is that, just as the literary work structurally implies an author and a reader (not as actual living beings but places to occupy in relation to the text – the latter are called actants to distinguish them from actors), Žmijewski's work implies places to occupy that instantiate a field of power, not a field of aesthetic interpretation. Within the current conjuncture there is certainly a good case to be made for art courting with cruelty but not the reaffirmation of authorial control. In effect, therefore, the tense relationship between different publics in the work are political and ethical ones.



Above: *80064*, Artur Żmijewski (2004), Video stills.
Right and following pages: *Democracies*, Artur Żmijewski (2009), Video stills.





everyone who respects Abu Ammar!
one who respects the dead! All together



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BIOGRAPHIES

Artur Żmijewski was born in 1966 in Warsaw, Poland, where he currently lives and works. He is an artist of international standing and was the co recipient with Hamsa Walker of the 2010 Ordway Prize administered by the New Museum and Creative Link for the Arts New York. He has had solo shows at MOMA, New York; Kunsthalle Basel; BAK, Utrecht, Cornerhouse Manchester, and represented Poland at the 51st Venice Biennale. His work has been included in major international exhibitions such as the 11th Istanbul Biennial, Documenta 12, Kassel; The 2002 Liverpool Biennial and Manifesta 4, Frankfurt-am.Main. A graduate of the Sculpture Faculty at the Warsaw Art Academy (1990–1995) he studied in the studio of Professor Grzegorz Kowalski. Żmijewski's 'social documentary' type films, frequently examine mechanisms of power and oppression as well as exposing social conflicts, trauma and human weakness. He belongs to a generation of artists who have offered different responses to the complexities of the post-Communist condition.

Dave Beech was born Warrington 1965 and studied Fine Art at Leicester Polytechnic and the Royal College of Art. Beech is a member of the art collective Freee, writer and lecturer at Chelsea College of Art. He is also a regular writer for Art Monthly and other art magazines. He edited *Beauty* (2009) as part of the *Documents for Contemporary Art* series, and co-authored the book *The Philistine Controversy*, Verso (2002) with John Roberts.

Located in Dublin's North Inner City, the **Fire Station Artists' Studios** provides subsidised living and working studios for Irish and international artists, as well as training and sculpture workshop facilities. A key policy of the Fire station is to contribute to the debate on collaborative and socially engaged arts practice, through a commissioning process that incorporates critique. As part of its annual studio award Artur Żmijewski was invited to Dublin in 2008-9 to develop a project, the final outcome of which was *Two Monuments* (2009). The Fire Station is currently working on a Think Tank programme with Danish curators Tone Olaf Nielsen and Frederikke Hansen 2010-11.



