

DECA-DANCE

The turn of the millennia and the political changes in Poland triggered off a wave of interest in decadent issues, the flow of time, transience, the revaluation of familiar rituals, a dialogue with the 'collective memory icons.' Characteristic for that art was the way it dealt with its themes, going beyond the traditional framework of artistic narration, a fresh view on daily life, but also a penetration of 'forbidden' areas – taboo spheres of social life and the behavioural patterns involved with them, such as gender identity, physical disability, or the order of the funeral ceremony. It so happened that the works made then, attesting to the artists' sensitivity to the specificity of the time, were very badly received by the public, accustomed to traditional symbolism. The presentation of the works was almost typically surrounded by an air of scandal. Today, after just a couple of years, all these pieces have become the canon of Polish art, and its constitutive element.

The choice of the artists participating in the exhibition is not based on a generational key; the youngest participant (Bogna Burska) is sixteen years younger than the oldest one (Miroslaw Bałka). The former could be the latter's student. And, in a way, she is. Not literally, as in the academy, but through an underlying, instinctive accumulation of an artistic experience indicated by the older colleagues and not entirely exhausted by them yet.

Indeed, it was Miroslaw Bałka who was the first Polish artist to break away from his generation's postmodern paradigm and turn instead towards a personal myth, searching for a universal area to project his childhood experiences onto, an area situated somewhere between the toxic upbringing of Joyce's characters and the sick longings of Burroughs's. He searched in literature. Then, just a couple of years after graduating from the academy, he started to study the emotions present in the memory of places and objects, and the emotions actually experienced merged with those only imagined. Empathy arose. Empathy with others – the degraded, sick, dying. His art became less narrational and more substantial, claiming abandoned fragments of reality and inferior materials, becoming more sensitive to details it previously hardly paid any attention to: temperature, scent, fluid circulation, air movement. Everything in the world revolves around death, has been marked by it since day one, and it has become so universal we no longer notice it.

The moth flight shown in the exhibition, entitled *Tanz*, evokes obvious association with *totentanz*, the medieval 'dance of the dead', a didactic Christian morality play. But also with the fin-de-siècle *dance macabre*, which can be read from Katarzyna Kozyra's impressions on early 20th-century Russian ballet, especially in Nizhinsky's interpretation. *Petrushka* or *Rite of Spring*, pieces that were to symbolise the joy of new life accompanying the entrance into the 20th century, acquire a sickly and decadent quality in the artist's interpretation, particularly pronounced by the emphasis on the conventional, 'artificial' nature of art.

The iconographic models generated by European culture are also the subject of Katarzyna Górna's interest. Her photographic triptych illustrating three periods of life – prime, maturity, and decline – is commonly known as the frieze of life and was interpreted by numerous Old Masters. The contemporary Polish artist does not refer to any obscure symbolism; her models, whom she in fact knows intimately, display without any inhibitions or false shame the 'emotional condition' of their bodies characteristic for their age.

Virtually all of the show's participants make a stand on the existing canons. Some of these canons are very old, almost outdated. Some are new, generated by the present era, established

as icons of wartime violence, of harm done by some nations to others, engraved in the collective imagination by the omnipresent media. These new icons have now become historical too, because the world has accelerated, is heading towards a brighter future and needs positive impulses. Zbigniew Libera makes an effort to meet these expectations, changing the minus into a plus, transforming familiar painful images into their 'positive negatives.' He reverses the senses. Breaks taboos. Applies a shock therapy. He thus refreshes the images' meaning, worn by years of use.

Zuzanna Janin also breaks taboos. She forces her way into an area hedged around with prohibitions in all cultures: the symbolism and ceremonies of death. She places photographs of her loved ones in the hexagonal forms of 'coffin portraits,' overlapping reversed images, building an 'order of departure,' before finally starting to reflect on the possible scenarios of her own death. She impersonates victims of drug abuse, car crashes, suicide attempts. She arranges the situations accompanying these accidents, as well as her own funeral, participating in it at the same time. She walks in the procession as her own grandmother. And she watches herself through the camera lens. She fulfils a secret dream we all share: to witness our own death.

What we have to do in Mirosław Bałka's work is the projection of personal experience onto the area of eschatology; at the centre of his art is suffering. Suffering is also the subject of Artur Żmijewski's interest. But Żmijewski does not transform the witnessed reality into a set of symbols. He does not sublimate it. Does not universalise it. Those who suffer have their faces and their, not always complete, bodies. They live here and now, right beside us. They die beside us in pain and humiliation. The artist confronts us with a world we do not want to see and which, being invisible, fails to win our empathy. We cannot learn otherwise than through art that physically disabled people have the same emotional and aesthetical needs as able-bodies ones. Even greater, perhaps. They want to love and be loved. They want to be beautiful. They want to sing. Even if they are deaf and mute.

Artur Żmijewski sides with the Other. The weaker. Above all however, he is interested in the social mechanisms that breed rejection and violence. He searches for their sources in culture and psyche. He follows Professor Zimbardo, asking about what changes a decent, or average, individual into an executioner. At which point does the democratic community disintegrate into the victims and torturers?

Bogna Burska's artistic practice also revolves around disability and violence in the socio-cultural context. For Burska however, this context is strongly marked with sexism, enhancing its own attractiveness through filmic fictionalisation and historical decoration. The artist watches closely the mechanism of the adaptation of social preferences to images that are a conglomerate of sex and violence, where the victim is usually the woman, just as it is women that usually fall victim to household violence and workplace mobbing. Yet there is no clear equal sign between fiction and reality in Burska's work. We have to guess its presence, just as we have to guess the chain of events that have left a bloody stain on melting snow.

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