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Taking stock of a city by art : Neo-avant-garde art as a repository for images of Łódź from 1970-1990

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TAKING STOCK OF A CITY BY ART. NEO-AVANT-GARDE ART AS A REPOSITORY FOR IMAGES OF ŁÓDŹ FROM 1970-1990.

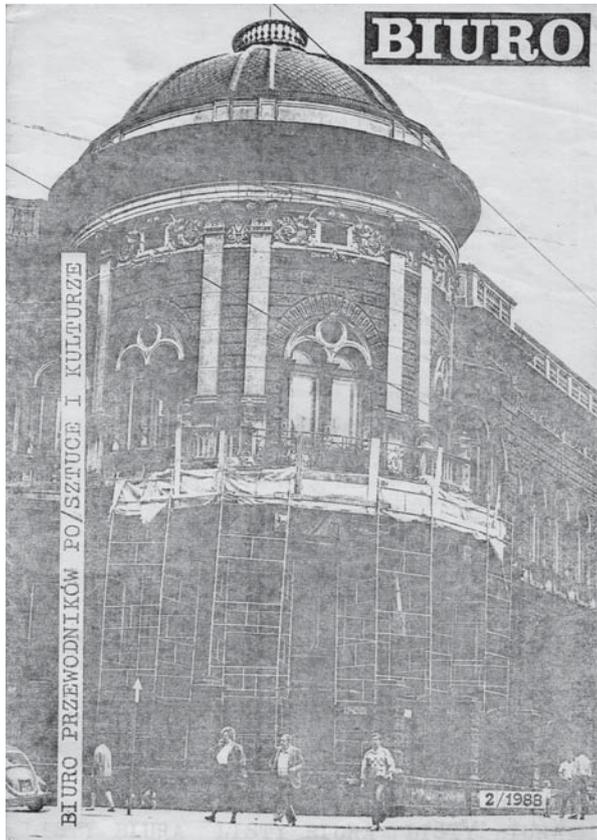
Just as others were active within the realm of the museum's gallery, I wanted to act within the realm of the city where the artist is absent. In 1971 in Łódź I did an artistic action...¹

Józef Robakowski

Łódź has an extraordinary place in the twentieth century history of art. The city has attracted and has drawn many progressive Polish artists since the very beginning of the avant-garde art movement. Many artists decided to settle here, amongst them the artistic couple of Władysław Strzemiński and Katarzyna Kobro is the most significant example. Strzemiński and Kobro amongst others established in Łódź the very first institutional collection of avant-garde art in Europe [The International Modern Art Collection of the a.r. group] just a few years after MoMA in New York had been established². The Muzeum Sztuki that eventually evolved from the a.r. group collection has played an important role in continuing the heritage of the first avant-garde. At the end of sixties, after a regressive Stalinist period, the artistic circle of the city took back a progressive initiative. Robakowski noticed: "by coincidence, the configuration of the alternative art scene in Lodz had been taking shape more or less at the same time"³. The beginning of the seventies "sparked hopes that the museum would promote the youngest generation of Polish artists"⁴. The reference to Strzemiński and the avant-garde played an important role in the constitution of the local artistic identity. By no means did Łódź become one of the centers of the neo-avant-garde movement by accident. It was here where "a dialogue with the historical avant-garde was established, at the same time coupled with a cut-off from the academic and traditional means of expression"⁵. That movement was highly influenced by a tendency for the affiliation between life and art and of treating reality as a starting point for the creative process. Thus, the urban context played more than ever, an important role in the artistic actions. The attention was shifted from the work of art itself onto the process, context and place of their production and exposition. Using such media as photography, film and video, the artists created at the same time both the artworks and the registrations of the city. The images stored by galleries, museums and private collections of contemporary art became in that sense a dense repository reflecting Łódź during that time. Within those artworks one can see an important part of the history of art and on the other hand they can be seen as an extraordinary documentation of the city's peculiarities and features, reflecting places that do not exist anymore or have changed. Hence in this article I propose a different reading of the history of neo-avant-garde art. I am less concerned with the issues of medium, communication, artistic ideas or message relevant to the examined artworks and rather more concerned with their backgrounds and urban contexts. I propose to approach some of the artworks as peculiar vehicles of images and information, as a source of data relevant to the history of the city. In other words, I treat a part of the history of neo-avant-garde art as a repository for historical data, or as an atlas of images of the city. By examining a few examples ordered in a certain way, I would like to sketch a part of the history of Łódź contained within its neo-avant-garde art.



Construction in Process, still from Jozef Robakowski film, action by Sol LeWitt. Courtesy of the author.



First Page of the Andrzej Paruzel's *Biuro* art-zine, 1988. My archive.



Lochy Manhattanu, 1989, exhibition preview invitation. Courtesy of Józef Robakowski.

DISCOVERY OF THE PECULIARITY OF ŁÓDŹ

The legend of Łódź reaches back to the end of the nineteenth century, when a famous novel by Reymont entitled *The Promised Land* appeared in 1898. During less than 100 years, the city grew from a little town at the beginning of 19th century into a big industrial centre. Thus, the development of the city was an extraordinary phenomenon without any possible comparison at that time. The population grew from 767 habitants to almost 600.000 within the years 1820-1914⁶. The city's situation "teemed with dynamic and controversial phenomena – in a much different way than in Warsaw or Cracow. The basic urban and industrial structure of Łódź was developed by a single industrialization-urbanization action between 1820-1928"⁷. In regard to the history of Łódź I cite one theorist – Antoni Szram. This reference is by no means accidental: it was he himself who first acclaimed the downtown area of Łódź as an "architectural masterpiece"⁸. "The urban design of Łódź" – he claimed – "is the most excellent local example of new planning an industrial centre", which was "rare, even on a European scale"⁹. Finally Szram acclaimed Łódź as "the most precious example of urban design during the Classicism of the Congress of Poland period"¹⁰. It is precisely at the beginning of the seventies when he spread widely his ideas concerning the peculiarity of this industrial city. In a time of considering Łódź to be a damned city, horrendous due to pollution and grayness, filled with factory chimneys and exhausted proletarian people, Szram's voice seemed utterly opposite to the general opinion.

Moreover, as a city official responsible for culture he had an opportunity to influence and affect many artists with his fascination towards the city and its rich opportunities. Indeed, some of the above mentioned artists admit his support, openness and understanding towards their artistic projects¹¹. Probably thanks to Szram, Łódź was characterized by a kind of hospitality for new art and its presence in the city. Let me just quote one of the most important Łódź neo-avant-garde artists, Józef Robakowski, who while describing his large exhibition *Lochy Manhattanu [Dungeons of Manhattan]*, admitted: "The Film Museum was the main organizer of Dungeons... and its director was Antoni Szram. A very interesting person, a conservator and an art historian, a nice man, thanks to whom the Museum of the City of Łódź and the Film Museum in Łódź were created. He helped us a lot at the time and thanks to him and funding from the Museum, the exhibition was organized"¹².

CITY ACTIONS

One of the most significant actions in the context of Łódź and neo-avant-garde art is by all means Ewa Partum's installation *The Legality of Space* from 1971. The work played with different contexts; apparently the issues of censorship, permanent surveillance and the totalitarian state were the most evident. Nevertheless, the local context of the space was crucial too. The installation was placed near the square that previously used to play a central position in the city – Plac Wolności (Liberty Square). An empty place remained, left after the demolishing of a tenement building and this contrasted strangely with the representative square. While describing how the idea appeared, Partum said she was often passing by the square and the place intrigued her. She had different ideas about how to use that space but finally she just managed to create *The Legality of Space* between 21 - 23 April 1971. She filled the empty space with different signs, sometimes contradictory and ridiculous, such as "everything forbidden" and "forbidden to forbid".

Partum noticed and elaborated on a phenomenon extremely relevant to the city of Łódź – the demolishing of the urban structure of Łódź. In the seventies and eighties the process of demolishing was part of the urban planning and 'modernization' of the city. Whole frontages of the characteristic tenement houses were erased, often without any specific plan to organize the empty space or further undertaking, as in the case of Liberty square. Moreover, the destruction process did not stop with the material aspects of the space. It went further leading on to institutional abuse, expressed in Partum's work by the signs of interdictions and commands. The pessimism of the work plays with two faces of the social problem – the question of space intermingles with the question of freedom and power.

Ten years later apparently something quite similar led a group of artists to another spectacular event. *The Unveiling of The Monument of The Tenement House* was an action made by young architects preoccupied by the process of destruction in the urban space of Łódź. Although the event is not necessarily considered

an artistic action, I decided to include this example due to its artistic circle. The event was organized by such artists as Włodzimierz Adamiak, Marek Janiak and Zbigniew Bińczyk who eventually played an important role in the artistic movement *Kultura Zrzuty* (The Pitch-in-Culture) in the eighties. The action intended to be a kind of appeal to the people and city officials, exposing the problem of losing the original value of the city.

Just after Martial Law was abolished in 1983, a group of neo-avant-garde artists connected to the *Kultura Zrzuty* movement organized *An Artistic Pelegrination: LONG LIVE ART!*¹³ between 2 - 4 September. Wojciech Ciesielski, an art historian recalls this event as “particularly important” due to “the on-going discussion concerning art and the artistic attitudes of the eighties in Poland”¹⁴. Janusz Zagrodzki claims the event was the first big manifestation of so-called private art¹⁵. *Pelegrination* consisted of various spontaneous events such as exhibitions, concerts, film screenings, performances and talks in different places in Łódź. The artists moved between the particular locations carrying a banner with the words “Long live art!” on it. Apart of being a pitch for different art practices, the event itself became a kind of artistic action. In this respect the process of walking around the city from one location to another, became a collective act of mapping the city’s artistic locations. The process of wandering through the city became as well important as the artistic actions happening in-between were using the city’s structure as a space for art.

Involving the structure of the city within the art practice later became a feature of Andrzej Paruzel’s artistic action. In the mid eighties he established the *Biuro po/sztuce i kulturze* [The Bureau of Guides To/After/Art and Culture] which was a sarcastic way to play with the institutionalization of culture. The idea behind the office project was principally concerned with the city space and research into its immateriality and hidden values. Paruzel in an archeological manner paid attention to the small details of the city, exposing traces of the hidden or no more existing layers of the city history, such as the ghetto, German, Jewish and Russian traditions. Special issues of art-zines were part of that action and became the only form of presentation. Although Paruzel’s action was extremely innovative and original, it remained overlooked and it needs a wider elaboration.

Paruzel’s another initiative was *Hotel Sztuki* [Hotel of Art]. It prompted many art actions in the city space, among them one extremely significant. In 1990 Paruzel invited Antoni Mikołajczyk to make an installation at *Plac Wolności*. It was almost the same place where twenty years earlier Partum had made her famous action. The installation is significantly entitled *Re-Construction*. Mikołajczyk in the accompanying text explains its urban context: “An empty space remained after a building was demolished at *Wolności* square. I filled the space with a 3-d architectural drawing of this building which existed no more, a building which previously lived its own life and had its own important place within the city landscape”¹⁶. By the use of lights the artist tried to reconstruct a part of the city that was strangely erased from the urban structure. The attention he paid to the buildings’ history and its past presence at that place is significant and correlates with Paruzel’s artistic investigations into the urban structure.

REGISTRATIONS

The output by Józef Robakowski is by all means the most representative example of neo-avant-garde art as a repository of images of Łódź. This artist devoted much of his activity to emphasizing both the unique artistic tradition of Łódź and the city’s peculiar character. His opus magnum *From My Window* is a *longue durée* shot from Robakowski’s window, that registered the view for over two decades, between 1978-1999. In that work a substantial historic narration intermingles with the small stories of ordinary people and his own imagination expressed by a voice commentary. The camera directed from a window towards one of the main streets in Łódź called *Główna* [now *Piłsudskiego* avenue] registers the big events such as marches and police actions during Martial Law and small stories, such as ordinary people walking their dogs, parking their cars, taking. “The author, living in a block of flats at 19 *Mickiewicza* Street in Łódź, presents a simple story by filming over years what he could see outside his window” – describes an art historian – “everyday, seemingly banal situations are easily transformed into extraordinary and unique events along with their actors”¹⁷. The work presents not only the visual aspect of the city of that time but also its different social, economical and political contexts. Robakowski played with the coarse reality of late communism, involving humor and sarcasm together with utopian imagery. While working on *From my window* Robakowski used the view from his window to make several other works, such as *Cars, cars!* or *Closer – Farther* (both 1985), but he also registered the city outside his apartment.

Window from Poland (1986) is an extraordinary documentation of Piotrkowska Street at that time. The artist simply put his camera on a tripod and registered the vivid life of the main street in Łódź. As the title suggests, Robakowski saw in this banal and everyday view, something extraordinary and characteristic for Poland at that time. The fact that Łódź is taken as a synecdoche for Poland is quite significant too.

SPACE ANALYZIS

In the field of media-art one can find a huge repository of images of Łódź, which is probably incomparable to any other Polish city. This is due to the presence of Łódź Film School, where in the seventies a circle of experimentalist artists, filmmakers and photographers were consolidated. In the sixties Dłubak started to teach in the Film School and in 1971 the group *Warsztat Formy Filmowej* was established drawing young artists interested in new media. The court and surroundings of the Film School became a playground for the experimenting artists (see: Paruzel, Bruszewski). Rybczyński started his famous animations and most of them are situated in the urban context of Łódź, e.g. *Oh, I can't stop* (1976), *Square* (1972).

There are a few artworks that draw exceptional attention in this respect. I mean the artworks that probably accidentally grabbed images of places and situations no longer existing. There are artworks mostly concerned with the purely formal aspects of the medium. The output of Antoni Mikołajczyk is a good example. Working mainly in the field of photography, he was elaborating on the question of light. Among many abstract compositions, one can find a composition of three photographs of the urban space using different light exposures (*Registration*, 1969/70). The idea behind the artwork most probably does not have anything to do with a particular urban space, but while looking at the picture deeply one can recognize the frontage of tenement houses along one of the main streets, which now does not exist (Mickiewicz Street). Andrzej Różycki paid much of his attention to the city's space. In his artistic practice he was concerned with the spiritual aspect of everyday reality. The city landscape in his art was used metaphorically to express nostalgic and melancholic feelings. At the same time he managed to document some peculiarities of the city, such as a glass-case typical for Łódź and omnipresent on the main streets of the time but now almost disappeared, or the space of different backyards, so typical for the urban structure of Łódź, with details which do not exist anymore.

Andrzej Kwietniewski did a work which directly dealt with such an aura of urban loss. In *Tango*, one of the main art-zines of the 80s, he presented a series of photographs that to a certain extent remain meaningless without their urban context. The fact that the documented address plates belong to the tenement houses demolished in the 80s shows the artist's attention for the urban changes and loss of its peculiarity. Quite a similar meaning is found in a photograph of the Łódź Kaliska artistic group, where in the background there appears the old railway station, suddenly demolished in 1982. One of the main Polish neo-dadaist group of artists from the late eighties by no means accidentally borrowed the name of the demolished building (Łódź Kaliska is the name of the railway station).

ANNEXING THE URBAN SPACE FOR ART PURPOSES

In 1981 the most important event of the Polish neo-avant-garde art movement took place in Łódź. The *Construction in Process* exhibition gathered together the most significant conceptual artists from all over the world. During one month the artists were given the possibility to prepare their installations, present their sculptures, show their performances, happenings and events all around the city. *Construction in Process* was by far the most important international art event in Poland under communism. Over fifty artists from all around the world representing different trends in art during that time came to Łódź¹⁸.

Thus, in a quite natural way, the documentation of their activities registered at the same time the urban context of Łódź. Other big events such as the second edition of *Construction in Process – Back in Łódź*, *Lochy Manhattanu* and many others, in a similar way contributed to both the history of art and the registration of the image of Łódź at that particular time. As I started with the list of artistic actions in Łódź by mentioning *Lochy Manhattanu*, I would like to conclude with the same example, by quoting

one of the observers and participants of that event. Janusz Zagrodzi regards *Lochy Manhattanu* “as a summary of Łódź, because I suspect that if the exhibition had taken place in a different environment, it would have been completely different (...). Lochy was more about this realm of media which could be clearly demonstrated through Łódź’s experiences”¹⁹.

CONCLUSIONS

Concluding my deliberations on a more abstract scale, I would like to make one more reference. What I have presented is just a series of possible examples of how art can be used outside of its most obvious disciplines such as art critique, art history and art theory. To what extent can art serve as a document within a historical or urban discourse? But isn’t it a kind of abuse to use the art just as simple pieces of documentary? Can one move away from the aesthetic layer of the artwork, by paying attention to just a very banal and superficial layer of its visibility (what is on the picture, where and when it was done, does the place exist nowadays, how did it change?). Thus, does the art belong to some particular discourse, or it can be shared by such disciplines as for example, the above-analyzed history of urban structure? Putting the question differently, does the art give some extra information about the urban structure, other than that of normal non-artistic documents? My analysis is aimed at treating neo-avant-garde art not only as a vehicle of visual information but also as an example of how an artistic phenomenon can correlate with the peculiar context of its urban and historical milieu. How history can be told through the means of art history. A history where the documents are being replaced by artworks. If one would write such a history of Polish cities documented by neo-avant-garde artworks, Łódź would probably be best described.

ENDNOTS

- ¹ Józef Robakowski, „Rozmowa Hansa-Ulricha Obrista z Józefem Robakowskim = Hans-Ulrich Obrist interviewing Józef Robakowski,” in *Józef Robakowski. Moje własne kino* (Warszawa: CSW Zamek Ujazdowski, 2012), 19. Exh. cat.
- ² Ryszard Stanisławski, *Grupa „a.r.”: 40-lecie Międzynarodowej Kolekcji Sztuki Nowoczesnej w Łodzi* (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki, 1971), 5. Exh. cat.
- ³ Józef Robakowski, „Lodz Progressive Art Movement,” in *Żywa Galeria*, ed. Józef Robakowski (Łódź: Łódzki Dom – Kultury Galeria FF, 2000), 16. Indeed, in 1966 Ryszard Stanisławski was elected new director of Muzeum Sztuki, simultaneously Zbigniew Dłubak starts to teach at the Łódź Film School, in 1967 Józef Robakowski moved to Łódź, and subsequently drew other artists of artistic group Zero-61, forming in 1970 Warsztat Formy Filmowej; around 1970 such artists as Ewa Partum, Paweł Kwiek, Ryszard Waśko, Zbigniew Warpechowski moved to Łódź.
- ⁴ Janusz Zagrodzki, “About a Place for Art. Piotr Lisowski in conversation with Janusz Zagrodzki,” in *War State*, ed. by Piotr Lisowski (Toruń: CSW Znaki Czasu, 2012), 17. Exh. cat.
- ⁵ Piotr Lisowski, „War State. Expanding the Battlefield,” in *War State*, ed. s by Piotr Lisowski (Toruń: CSW Znaki Czasu, 2012), 74. Exh. cat.
- ⁶ Antoni Szram, *Architektura Łodzi przemysłowej = The Architecture of Industrial Łódź* (Warszawa: Krajowa Agencja Wydawnicza, 1975), 26.
- ⁷ *Ibidem*, 26.
- ⁸ *Ibidem*, 33.
- ⁹ *Ibidem*, 38.
- ¹⁰ *Ibidem*.
- ¹¹ In my own personal interviews with artists working in Łódź, Antoni Szram has been often mentioned as a kind of ‘good spirit’ of different Łódź artistic circles, just to mention a few of them: Ewa Partum, Andrzej Paruzel, Józef Robakowski, Andrzej Różycki.
- ¹² Józef Robakowski, “The post-modern garage. Piotr Lisowski’s interview with Józef Robakowski,” in *War State*, ed. by Piotr Lisowski (Toruń: CSW Znaki Czasu, 2012), 38. Exh. cat.
- ¹³ Wojciech Ciesielski, “Peregrination and Kolęda In Polish Art,” in *War State*, ed. by Piotr Lisowski (Toruń: CSW Znaki Czasu, 2012), 117. Exh. cat. Subsequent details regarding the event I present according to this article.
- ¹⁴ *Ibidem*, 117.
- ¹⁵ Janusz Zagrodzki, *Sztuka w poszukiwaniu miejsca* (Koszalin: Galeria na Plebani, 1988), n. p. After Ciesielski, „Peregrination...,” 118.
- ¹⁶ Antoni Mikołajczyk, statement accompanying the exhibition (Puste miejsce po rozebrany budynku przy Pl. Wolności wypełniam przestrzennym rysunkiem architektonicznym nieistniejącego już domu, który tutaj niegdyś żył własnym życiem, posiadał swoje ważne miejsce w pejzażu miasta).
- ¹⁷ Maciej Cholewiński, note to *From my window*, in *Correspondences. Modern Art And Universalism*, ed. by Jarosław Lubiak and Małgorzata Ludwisiak (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki, 2012), 708. Exh. cat.
- ¹⁸ Janusz Głowacki, *Muzeum Konstrukcji w Procesie* (Łódź: Fundacja Edukacji Wizualnej, 2006), n. p.
- ¹⁹ Zagrodzki, „About a Place...,” 22.

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