

Anti-photography and Continuation (Summary of the Polish text) Museum of Wroclaw October-November 1993

The basic part of this exhibition is a reconstruction of a display of the works of three artists: Zdzislaw Beksinski, Jerzy Lewczynski and Bronislaw Schlabs, which took place in June, 1959, with the addition, at present, of their previous and later works. The 1959 exhibition entitled "A Closed Display" and later called "Anti-photography" summed up many art problems prevalent in those years and brought new propositions into being. The use of existing cultural products such as discovered, often anonymous, photographs or reproductions and the compilation of these pictures into sets expressing the actual creative intention, was a novelty then. Furthermore, these artists, besides their interest in photography, were also active as painters and sculptors; the complexity of the position of photography in art therefore, may be studied on these examples. The display of the various works produced by Beksinski, Lewczynski and Schlabs - together with the reconstruction of "Anti-photography" - will for that reason serve both as a reminder of once underestimated facts and indicate still actual problems of art.

Polish Art in the 1950s

Up to World War II numerous avant-garde groups established modern art in Poland, alas, the War played havoc also in this sphere. Nonetheless, the avant-garde movement redeveloped in the years 1945-1948, a fact summed up by the "Exhibition of Modern Art" in December 1948. Yet, the totalitarian system imposed upon Poland by the communist regime directed from Moscow discarded just then the last semblance of democracy and subordinated culture to the dogmas of "social-realism". This congealed the development of art just as it had done during the War. Only the political "thaw" of the mid-1950s created in Poland a margin of freedom making it possible to develop modern art corresponding to the situation in the West. This was unheard of in other "Eastern Block" countries. It has been tried to explain this phenomenon among others by indicating that the private ownership of Polish farms and craft and the firmly established position of the Catholic Church obliged the ruling Communist Party to make certain concessions from which culture also benefited.

Since 1955 there reappeared avant-garde groups, affined galleries, exhibitions and journals. The drive towards modernity united literary, theatrical and plastic arts circles. Experiments with paintings expressing various abstract forms came into focus. Many artists experimented with

photography and film (including Zbigniew Dlubak, Andrzej Pawtowski, Marek Piasecki, Roman Cieslewicz, Jan Lenica, Walerian Borowczyk, Mieczyslaw Berman, Aleksander Krzywoblocki). This group of artists was joined by Zdzislaw Beksinski, Jerzy Lewczynski and Bronislaw Schlabs.

There were also many photographers who failed to grasp the sense of avant-garde but they found there the possibility to react the "soc-realism" period. Modernity became, therefore, soon a fashion, a fact confirmed by the "I Ail-Poland Abstract Photography Exhibition" held in March 1959, filled to excess by works of photo-amateurs. Following the period of isolation the drive towards contacts with Western culture was unusually strong in Poland for it constituted a recompense for the absence of political freedom. However, the ideas of modernity clashed with prejudices concerning the social role of art, the specificity of its spheres or the notion of realism. This was capped by substantial fears lest "socialist-realism" might return. This was why the "Anti-photography" exhibition was at that moment a demonstration against conservative attitudes and likewise a reaction to the perceptible devaluation of the avant-garde language.

Were it not for the political situation in Poland after 1945, a program similar to that in Germany, known as "Subjective Photography", realized by Otto Steinert, could have functioned in our country. Yet policy necessitated radical solutions. An inexorable "soc-realism" prevailed after 1948 and the fashion concerning avant-garde defined the margin of political freedom in the late 1950s. Yet even the followers of avant-garde thought that that large-scale character lessens the value of this art. Most critics writing about photography linked the greatest expectations with photo-reportages after the fashion of "The Family of Man" international exhibition realized by Edward Steichen. A different attitude was taken by Zbigniew Dlubak who was averse to social publications in photography. According to him art should be restricted to neutral forms, though he criticised the abstract in photography writing that documentary features are inherent in its specificity. Yet another conception was the inclusion of photography into free intermedial searches - Beksinski, Lewczynski and Schlabs were the nearest to this notion.

Beginnings of Co-operation

These three artists came into closer contact in 1957 while taking part in the international photographic exhibition "A Step towards Modernity" organized in Poznan by Bronislaw Schlabs. Living far apart from each other: Beksinski in Sanok, Lewczynski in Gliwice and Schlabs in Poznan, they maintained contact by correspondence. They were never a formal group only the exchange of views and the planning of joint exhibitions brought them closer together in the years 1957-1961.

The oldest of the three, Bronislaw Schlabs, born in 1920, finished his studies in 1949 as a construction engineer. He occupied himself with

photography since 1952 and became gradually interested in avant-garde art. In photography he transformed motifs of nature and came near abstraction constituting a counterpart to "former painting. He prepared his negatives by means of Indian ink, scratching, part burning or the pasting in of other materials. Simultaneously, he created since 1956 relief objects using tar paper, filling compound, solvents, metal and various industrial waste. He made contact with E. Steichen in the U.S.A. and with O. Steinert in Germany. Consequently, his works found their way to the MoMA in New York while Steinert invited him to take part in the "Subjective Photography" exhibition held in 1958.

Jerzy Lewczynski, born in 1924, likewise finished studies as a construction engineer in 1951. He took amateur photographs since the War, lived in Gliwice since 1945, where he came into contact with problems of modern art. Beginning with 1956 he photographed - according to plan - motifs contrasting with "soc-realistic" pomposity: fragments of walls, announcements, discovered notes, damaged objects, tombstones, human beings. At the same time he produced photo-montage and photographic settings kept in a facetious and poetic tone.

Zdzisław Beksinski, born in 1929, graduated as an architect in 1952. During his studies he was interested in photography, film and avant-garde problems. Soon, he decided to devote himself entirely to art, particularly painting. He began with expressionistic-surrealistic works followed by tachism and structural abstraction and - in the late 1950s - picture objects assembled from wires, tin and plastics. In photography he made some attempts at the "New Reality" style and passed on to abstract works: e.g., he photographed lighting points over an extended time or made multiple enlargements of the micro-structure of matter (1956-1957). Afterwards he developed portrait studies striving to achieve a strong and even shocking expression by simple methods.

These artists soon attracted notice at collective photographic exhibitions. Yet the general standard and nature of these displays did not satisfy avant-garde adherents. In consequence, Beksinski, Lewczynski and Schlabs, having established closer contacts, decided to organize their own exhibition. This was made possible by Marian Bogusz, an artist managing the Gallery of Modern Art in Warsaw.

The Warsaw Exhibition in 1958

This exhibition took place in June 1958 and comprised two parts. The first included photographic works of the "Podworko" (Backyard) group from Wrocław dealing with abstract motifs of nature. The second included works of Beksinski, Lewczynski and Schlabs. Beksinski presented acts and portraits in which human figures were divided up, obscured and degraded. Lewczynski displayed common objects on the verge of annihilation, brutal in their material nature; he sometimes enhanced the

expression of his works by photo-montage. Schlabs presented photographic abstractions of the "informel" type. The exhibition created a great impression. Critics praised the invention and standard of works but were unable to fit these works to existing categories. They described it as "formal frolics", emphasizing that only the reportage method can express the essence of photography.

Replying Beksinski published an article in the monthly "Photography" (November, 1958) stating: "The production of particular photographs as artistic works is senseless because photography is unable to get away from an exact copying of reality, this technique lets the author merely to decide what subject to choose" He therefore, proposed to prepare a set of photographs and absorb the impression emanating from their interaction. The method of arranging and hanging of pictures, mutual proportions and links with the place of exposition were to decide the sense of expression. He wrote: "So far, photography as a whole has given us merely faithful images of the world. The time has come to draw conclusions compile particular images, to form a definition of the world and a photographic art of standard value. The idea to establish sets was already described by Beksinski in a letter to Lewczynski in June 1958. They both began to search for various old photographs and negatives. The three of them thought about making arrangements for the next, even more daring exhibition.

The Display in June 1959 (Anti-photography)

A successive exhibition took place on 20th June, 1959, in the assembly hall of the Photographic Society in Gliwice. It went under the title "A Closed Display". Each of the artists exhibited a dozen or so works hung on the walls or arranged on tables. 25 persons were invited to the unofficial opening and the following discussion.

Zdzislaw Beksinski showed there for the first time 11 works in sets comprising from 3 to 5 photographs mounted on large fibreboards described by a single-word motto. As Beksinski noted 22 out of the 37 exhibited photographs were his own, 6 were reproductions he made from photographs taken by others or from press illustrations and 8 enlargements made from somebody else's negatives. The arrangement of photographs and the mottoes stemmed from a free play of associations, often relating to sub consciously felt links between motifs of death and sexuality. Despite fine affinity with surrealist photo-montage or film editing these sets treated the space of the work in a different fashion. Particular elements remained separate entities loosely connected with each other, with the background and farther surroundings. The use of his own and somebody else's works, including both those produced as artistic photographs and also ordinary reproductions, was likewise of significance. Beksinski maintained that such a clash of notional and visual subjects releases

considerably stronger artistic effects than operations on a single picture.

The works of Jerzy Lewczynski also included two sets, each consisting of three photographs. Other photographs though not creating a specific sequence were similar in their registration of various traces of human activities, used up and ordinary objects, inscriptions and signs. Lewczynski showed only his own photographs some of which had been previously displayed.

Bronistaw Schlabs displayed a set of abstract, dynamic compositions representing the result of manual operations on negatives. He rejected the objective identification of the world provided by ordinary photographs. What other authors achieved by contrasting particular pictures suited for notional identification was by Schlabs realized within the framework of a single picture.

Spectators regarded this display as a program manifestation chiefly directed against conventions of realism in photography, whereas Beksinski's works appeared to be the most provocative. An extensive article attacking the conception of the authors of this exhibition, written by Alfred Ligocki, was entitled "Anti-photography" this title was later accepted for the display. Ligocki had already previously demanded that such experiments should be separated from the notion "artistic photography". He represented a general view that photography means the fixation of a commonly perceived image of an object - as it is the case in photo reportage. He dubbed the Gliwice exhibition "Anti-photography" because he associated the endeavors of the three artists in the realm of photography with what the creators of the French "anti-novel" did with the traditional narrative in novels. Ligocki placed Schlabs¹ work simply in the category of graphic arts, he considered Beksinski's and Lewczynski's works to be an attack against the foundations of photographic art: against the artistic meaning of a single picture, the criteria of expression and the very conception of authorship. As regards photography as a document he reproached the authors for digressing from the generally comprehensive narration. Though he admitted that they dared to take the bravest steps in the country towards rejecting artistic stereotypes, he assessed it, nonetheless, as only a prelude towards creating something more appropriate.

Continuation

The exhibition in Gliwice took place in an atmosphere of a crisis resulting from a renewed political pressure on the arts and also from the exhaustion of the carrying capacity of experiments undertaken in 1956-1957 Propositions included in "Anti-photography" contained much freshness but failed to arouse a noteworthy response in those times. They were too shocking for the environment of photographers and remained almost unknown beyond that circle. A more adequate understanding of

photography as a universal art medium was to emerge in later years. Those three artists moving among various art media were yet unable to fully articulate their position. A certain chance seemed to arise from their contact with Otto Steinert who - in 1961 - organized in Cologne an exhibition: "Fotografen aus Polen" embracing the works of Beksinski, Lewczynski, Schlabs and Piotr Janik. Unfortunately, Beksinski was unable to send his sets, this and other restrictions caused the exhibition being perceived as an echo of Steinert's Subjective

The exhibition in Germany practically marked the end of the three artists' cooperation founded in 1957 Henceforth Beksinski and Schlabs concentrated on painting, sculpture and drawing. Yet the future works of these artists contained diverse references to problems which had originated in Anti-photography

The departure from photography became for Beksinski a turning point in his links with the avant-garde In the early 1960s he gave up not only photography but also the simultaneously pursued fashion of painting and sculpture. He later remarked that the strategy of avant-garde art always impeded his imagination; he accepted it as long as he feared not being sufficiently modern. He subsequently entered upon painting which, from the workmanship's point of view, could be associated with the nineteenth century romanticist or symbolist styles and depicted visions of fantastic passages replete with dying biological forms destroyed symbols and enigmatic scenes. Those works were rejected by both supporters of the avant-garde and by traditionalists; it was not until the 1980s that post-modernism made a comprehensive assessment of Beksinski's work possible, there even appeared the opinion that those were the first signs of post-modernism in Poland. Beksinski never set borders between particular art media. When one technique began to impede him, he reached for yet another. Photography has never interested him as a so called document of reality and if he were to go back to it, it wouldn't mean his breaking off with the current fashion of practicing art.

In subsequent years Bronislaw Schlabs set about joining the photographic and painting techniques on one picture. He used photographic portraits of different persons as a base and applied paint or various materials to it Later he produced photo-montages, superimposing pictures of faces, plants and tombstones, to be hued with sepia. He thus tried to bring out the internal, spiritual portrait of chosen individuals. Painting and photography were for Schlabs also closely conjoined areas.

Jerzy Lewczynski was the man who consequently developed the conception of creating sets of his own photographs and of others. Successive arrangements were displayed in 1968; one of them, for instance, was a resume of the author's twenty or so years of life. In 1971 he presented two works at the great exhibition of Polish avant-garde art "Searching Photographers". One was a large (about 3 meters) enlargement of a negative made by someone else (with the author's consent), depicting a

train at the station. Enlargements of human faces seen in these photographs were attached to this enlargement. The second work "A Triptych Found in the Attic" was a set of prints from discovered negatives. This initiated the cycle "Negatives" which, besides prints of found negatives, also included exhibiting the negatives themselves. Lewczynski emphasized that the negative represents the essence and not only a successive stage of a photograph. Of importance for him was the material structure of a picture on a negative and possibilities of a various modeling of this picture. Lewczynski tried to identify the authors of discovered photographs and the individuals they represent which sometimes gave rise to unusual discoveries and contacts. Among his remarkable discoveries were, for example, the works of Wilhelm von Blandowski and Feliks Lukowski. Lewczynski formulated a manifesto, namely the "Archeology of Photography", postulating a most extensive collecting and studying of photographs. In his art he linked his own photographs with materials produced by other authors over various periods, respecting their authorship and the right to preserve the reality of the world they depicted.

The course of events has proved that ideas displayed at the 1959 exposition had not been peripheral experiments but became a signal of a growing cultural trend linked with a change of attitude towards the past and with another view of the problem involving the creation and innovative activities in arts. Since the 1960s the practice of utilizing found objects including photographic series, documenting various things from pop-art stylistics up to signs of conceptualism became increasingly common in the arts. The use of archival photographic pictures as the basis for someone's creative reflection became more and more perceptible, particularly during the post-modernism of the 1980s. A complete conjugation of photographic pictures with the surrounding space - as was projected by Beksinski - was realized in Poland for the first time by Zbigniew Dlubak in the photographic environment "Iconosphere" in 1967.

The authors of "Anti-photography" revealed a broad scale of attitudes towards photographic matter. In consequence, one can see the constant fluctuation created by the presence of photography in art: between pictures representing the free expression of individual imagination and pictures in which imagination must to a considerable degree be subordinated to the criteria of "objectivity" or else search for possibilities to act on another level by manipulating ready pictures. Their accomplishments were in those times not fully appreciated due substantially to restrictions hampering the functioning of Polish culture in those years. The present exhibition endeavors to make up - at least in part - for these shortcomings.

Adam Sobota