



*Lekcja Śpiewu/The Singing Lesson I, 2001*  
*Lekcja Śpiewu/The Singing Lesson II, 2002*

Since 1996 Artur Żmijewski has produced a large body of work of extraordinary emotional intensity. Seen as radical, his art is a reflection on the human condition – on what “living” means to some amongst us. Human beings and their nature are at the heart of his practice, with physical and relational differences the starting point for many of his projects. Żmijewski draws inspiration from individual situations to make visible particular aspects of our world’s reality. His taboo-free aesthetic is reflected in his choice of subjects: the artist’s works are peopled by the afflicted, the handicapped, children with Down’s syndrome, deaf teenagers, individuals damaged by history, naked soldiers, sufferers of degenerative diseases.

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In 1998 Żmijewski made *Okno za Okno/An Eye for an Eye*, a series of photographs and a video featuring people with missing limbs, pictured naked and supported by someone able-bodied. The resulting hybrid figures sometimes have two heads or two pairs of arms, with the whole person’s limb replacing the amputee’s missing one, the disabled and “able” bodies fusing, in a kind of metaphor of human relations. In the 2001 film *Na Spacer/Out for a Walk*, Artur Żmijewski presents the unimaginable spectacle of tetraplegics supported by strong men, who carry them in their arms and push their legs forward to simulate the action of walking.

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It was also in 2001 that Artur Żmijewski worked with a group of deaf adolescents in Poland. After forming them into a choir, he filmed them in Warsaw’s Holy Trinity Church singing a Kyrie by the Polish composer Jan Maklakiewicz (1899-1954). The result is *Lekcja Śpiewu/The Singing Lesson*. To the accompaniment of the organ, music scores in hand and a crucifix in the background, the young people sing: “Lord, have mercy, Oh Christ have mercy.” The words of the Kyrie cannot really be distinguished among the sounds emitted by the deaf teenagers, but Żmijewski’s camera captures on their faces and in their gazes a sensibility and an inner strength that reveal the essence of his subject. “I am interested in mental space, the space of human contact, i.e., contact with another person ... I am not interested in an object which aims at self-sufficiency, but in a defective, unripe object which requires action and care on the part of the artist, his ‘reanimatory activity’ so to speak, one which constantly renders meaning to the object ... It is not that mental space offers more copious possibilities, variations and configurations than physical space, but rather that it is more acute.”

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Two years later Żmijewski repeated the experience in Germany, at the St. Thomas Church in Leipzig, where Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) worked as a cantor for over twenty-five years – from 1723 until his death – and where he composed most of his sacred works (including more than two hundred cantatas). *Lekcja Śpiewu/The Singing Lesson II* opens with a few notes played on the piano during a rehearsal session. The young Germans are nervous, more agitated. It seems as though both those participating and those watching are somewhat suspicious of the artist's project. But without condescension, Żmijewski's camera allows us to share the experience. The deaf adolescents of Leipzig sing Bach's cantata *Herz und Mund und Tat und Leben* – "Heart and Mouth and Deed and Life." "They have their own sounds, rhythm, harmony," says the artist, "music of their own which comes from their world. Music created by them will always be deformed; one may accept that or not, but you can't deny the fact. By singing, they manifest their insuperable otherness." < <

Artur Żmijewski filmed his two *Singing Lessons* in churches. In these sacred places, whose architectural beauty imbues them with a reassuring power, he recalls that the Church used to refuse to allow so-called "deaf-mutes" to take Holy Communion. In the second version, made in a veritable shrine of German culture, he reminds us that an unspeakable twentieth-century regime once condemned such people to death. < <

In 2005, at the 51st Venice Biennale, Żmijewski presented *Powtórzenie/ Repetition*, a 40-minute documentary film in which he recreates a famous US experiment on human behaviour in a prison situation. Conducted in 1971 at Stanford University, the experiment focused on a group of student volunteers, randomly divided into prisoners and guards. Designed to last two weeks, it was ended after only six days because of the violence and sadism exhibited by some of the subjects. Żmijewski's recreation lasted seven days. < <

Artur Żmijewski's artistic practice is a meditation on the violence of power relations, on what "living together" means and entails in the way of exclusion and neglect. Encouraging us to transcend our own taboos, he impels us to perceive in his work the signs of our own vulnerability and of the prodigious precariousness of life. <



Born in Warsaw, Poland, May 26, 1966.  
Lives and works in Warsaw.

## Biobibliography

An asterisk (\*) indicates a publication.

### Principal solo exhibitions

- 2007 *Artur Żmijewski*, Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, Berlin, Germany.
- 2006 *Artur Żmijewski*, Peter Kilchmann Gallery, Zurich, Switzerland.
- 2005 *Artur Żmijewski*, Kunsthalle Basel, Basel, Switzerland.  
*La Biennale di Venezia*, Venice, Italy.\*
- 2004 *Artur Żmijewski*, CAC – Centre d'art contemporain de Brétigny, Brétigny, France.  
*Our Songbook*, Arsenal Gallery, Bialystok, Poland.  
*Artur Żmijewski: Selected Works, 1998-2003*, MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, United States.
- 2003 *Singing Lesson*, Arsenal Gallery, Bialystok, Pologne.  
*Singing Lesson*, Kronika Gallery, Bytom, Pologne.  
*Singing Lesson I & II*, Fondation de la Galerie Forksal, Warsaw, Pologne.  
*Artur Żmijewski*, Baltic Gallery of Contemporary Art, Slupsku, Poland.  
*Singing Lesson II*, Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst, Leipzig, Germany.
- 2002 *Singing Lesson*, Collective Gallery, Edinburgh, Scotland.  
*Karolina*, Peter Kilchmann Gallery, Zurich, Switzerland.
- 2001 *Out for a Walk*, Foksal Gallery, Warsaw, Poland.
- 2000 *The Game of Tag*, Galeria a.r.t., Plock, Poland.
- 1998 *An Eye for an Eye*, Gallery 2, Center for Contemporary Art, Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw, Poland.
- 1996 *Sardines Song*, Galeria a.r.t., Plock, Poland.
- 1995 *The Babes Identity*, A.R. Friends Gallery, Warsaw, Poland.
- 1994 *Nudes*, Galeria a.r.t., Plock, Poland.

### Principal group exhibitions

- 2007 *History Will Repeat Itself: Strategies of Re-enactment in Contemporary Art*, Kunst-Werke Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, Germany.\*  
*Prison*, Bloomberg Space, London, England.  
*Documenta 12*, Kassel, Germany.\*
- 2006 *The Impossible Theatre*, Barbican Centre, London, England.\*  
*Highlights from the KunstFilmBiennale Köln in Berlin*, Kunst-Werke Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, Germany.

*About the Absence of the Camp: Reflections of Contemporary Art on the Topicality of Remembrance*, Kunsthau Dresden – Städtische Galerie für Gegenwartskunst, Dresden, Germany.\*

*Positioning: In the New Reality of Europe*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Tōkyō, Japan.

*Our Songbook*, former Polish Embassy, Berlin, Germany. – *Sonambiente Berlin 2006*.\*

*Une vision du monde : collection vidéo de Jean-Conrad et Isabelle Lemaître*, La maison rouge, Paris, France.

*A Short History of Performance*, Whitechapel Gallery, London, England.

*The Impossible Theatre*, Zacheta – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw, Poland.\*

2005 *Between the Furniture and the Building*, CAC – Centre d'art contemporain de Brétigny, Brétigny, France.

*The Impossible Theatre*, Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna, Austria.\*

*War is Over: 1945-2005*, GAMeC – Galleria d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Bergamo, Italy.\*

*Irreducible: Contemporary Short Form Video*, CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco, United States.\*

*Collective Creativity*, Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel, Germany.

*Poland Overview*, Prague, Czech Republic. – *Prague Biennale2*.

2004 *Passage d'Europe*, Musée d'art moderne de Saint-Étienne Métropole, Saint-Étienne, France.

2003 *Public Rituals: Art/Videos from Poland*, Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, Vienna, Austria.\*

*Art Focus 4: International Biennial of Contemporary Art*, Jerusalem, Israel.\*

2002 *A Need for Realism: Solitude in Ujazdowski*, Center for Contemporary Art, Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw, Poland.

*Manifesta 4*, Frankfurt, Germany.\*

*International 2002: Liverpool Biennial*, Liverpool, England.\*

2000 *Guarene Arte 2000*, Palazzo Re Rebaudengo, Guarene, Italy.



The two works are screened one after the other in a program lasting a total of 30 minutes and 30 seconds, repeated continuously throughout the day.

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The Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal is a provincially owned corporation funded by the Ministère de la Culture, des Communications et de la Condition féminine du Québec. It also receives financial support from the Department of Canadian Heritage and the Canada Council for the Arts.

Artur Żmijewski. Taken from *Lekcja Śpiewu/The Singing Lesson I*, 2001, 14 min  
Polish version. With kind permission from the artist and the Peter Kilchmann Gallery, Zurich

Artur Żmijewski. Taken from *Lekcja Śpiewu/The Singing Lesson II*, 2002, 16 min 30 s  
German version. With kind permission from the artist and the Peter Kilchmann Gallery, Zurich

Artur Żmijewski's remarks are taken from "Lieblingskunsttheorie" ("[My] Favourite Art Theory"), the English version of a text published in *Magazyn Sztuki*, nos. 2-3 (6/7), 1995, pp. 99-109, and from "A Storehouse of Limbs: Artur speaks with Katarzyna Bielas and Dorota Jarecka," published in *Gazeta Wyborcza* in May 2005. Artur Żmijewski is also the author of a number of other essays of art criticism and editor of the magazine *Czereja*, published since 1992.

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