Artur Żmijewski
Na ślepo/Blindly
July 16 - September 28, 2014

Since 1996 the Polish artist Artur Żmijewski has been building a body of work that is striking for its emotional intensity. Seen as radical, this uncompromising art practice constitutes a meditation on the human condition. It is especially distinctive in its subjects, which include people who have suffered some past trauma, or who are afflicted by a degenerative disease or a handicap — individuals rarely portrayed in contemporary visual culture. *Na ślepo/Blindly* records the efforts of unsighted people who have been invited by the artist to execute a painting. Art, writes Żmijewski, can still perform its classical function and express "the most poignant moments of the human condition."[1]

Artur Żmijewski was born in Warsaw in 1966. During his student years, Poland was liberated from the yoke of Communism and the Cold War ended.[2] Between 1990 and 1995 he studied sculpture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, under the tutelage of Grzegorz Kowalski. Subsequently, he began employing photography and video techniques, which enabled him to record real situations using a "documentary" approach. He completed his training at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam, in 1999. Żmijewski is interested in the power of art and its relationship to politics. Most of his projects aim to focus attention on social problems or to explore subjects that society tends to ignore. He generally films a situation that he himself conceives and directs, placing individuals in a controlled context in order to see how they react. Particularly preoccupied with the connection between emotional ordeal and its physical expression, he often explores historical conflict and trauma, such as the Holocaust of World War II and the relationship between Poles and Jews.

In 2001 Żmijewski began working with a group of young people from the Warsaw Institute for the Deaf. Improbably, he formed them into a choir and then filmed them performing the *Kyrie* from the *Polish Mass* by Jan Maklakiewicz in Warsaw's Holy Trinity Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession. The result, a film entitled *Lekcja śpiewu*/*Singing Lesson*, became the focus of the artist's first solo exhibition outside Poland and was subsequently shown at a number of international events, including *Manifesta 4*, in Frankfurt. In 2003 Żmijewski repeated the exercise at the Church of St. Thomas in Leipzig, Germany, where Johann Sebastian Bach was for many years the chapel master and where his remains are now buried. In this version of the project, deaf-mute children perform the Bach cantata *Herz und Mund und Tat und Leben* ("Heart and mouth and deed and life"). The two *Singing Lessons* were presented at the MAC from February 6 to March 2, 2008, as part of the Projections series.

Na ślepo/*Blindly*, made in 2010 and presented at the 2013 Venice Biennale in the exhibition *Il Palazzo Enciclopedico*,[3] explores fundamentally the same theme, examining perception and the right of expression while also raising issues concerning the conditions of expression and its reception. Directed by Żmijewski, six unsighted people — two women and four men, some blind from birth, some not — are asked to paint a landscape, an animal, their own house or a self-portrait. As they interact with the colour and physicality of the paint, they describe what they are doing and the type of image they are making, but they also talk about their life as a blind person and the cause of their condition. Working with both hands and feet, they create images that are highly expressive and dynamic. For his part, Żmijewski is more than simply a spectator: in his role as guide, he becomes part of the action. The film records the participants' attempts to "visualize" or imagine what they are painting, to consider the colours, and to internalize the structure of their actions and their marks upon the paper.

Na ślepo/Blindly looks at the connections between the senses in the process of recognition — the sense of touch but also the privilege of sight — and, like the rest Żmijewski's oeuvre, provokes a reflection on the human condition. "Evidently," the artist writes, "art produces states of helplessness and generates questions."[4]

An artistic militant, Żmijewski is an active member of the Polish political movement Krytyka Polityczna (The Political Critique), a circle of left-wing intellectuals gathered around a journal of the same name founded in 2002, for which he serves as arts editor. In 2007 he published a manifesto that opens with a series of questions: "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?"[5]

"Art," the text continues, "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 becomes involved in real situations. Its cognitive strategies do not place reality in brackets … Knowledge emerges within life, it springs out of emotion, visions, and sensations, out of real experience. [Art] 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 patronize but becomes one with it."[6]

Artur Żmijewski's work has been shown in numerous international group exhibitions since 1994. Notable among them is the 51st Venice Bienniale, held in 2005, at which he represented Poland with *Powtorzenie/Repetition*. For this project he recreated in Poland the conditions of an experiment on human behaviour in a prison environment, conducted at Stanford University in 1971. For the purposes of the famous "Stanford Prison Experiment," led by Professor Philip Zimbardo, male student volunteers were randomly assigned roles of prisoners and guards. Designed to last two weeks, the experiment was stopped after six days owing to the violent and sadistic behaviour of some of the participants. Żmijewski's seven-day version resulted in a film lasting forty minutes.

In 2009 Żmijewski took part in the 11th Istanbul Biennial, which focused on the question: "What Keeps Mankind Alive?" His project for this event, titled *Demokracje/Democracies*, consists of a juxtaposition of twenty short videos of various demonstrations, filmed in Europe between 2007 and 2009. By recording the public expression of attitudes as diverse as those associated with the funeral of a far-right politician in Vienna, a Palestinian protest against Israeli occupation of the West Bank, a German soccer team's victory

celebration, an anti-NATO meeting in Strasbourg and a Loyalist march in Belfast, Żmijewski displays his lack of bias: he acts simply as an observer of political opinion and of the functioning of democracy in the public space.

Żmijewski has also been the object of a number of solo exhibitions, including those held at the MIT List Visual Arts Center in Boston, in 2004; the Institute of Modern Art in Brisbane and the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts in San Francisco, in 2006; the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein in Berlin, in 2007; and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, in 2009.

In 2012 Żmijewski served as co-curator for the 7th Berlin Biennale, which bore the title *Forget Fear*. In the catalogue foreword, the artist defended a curatorial model "based on moderating and negotiating between conflicting political positions attired in the guise of artistic action." The goal, he explained, was to arrive at "real action within culture, at an artistic pragmatism. What interested us were concrete activities leading to visible effects."[7]

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1. Artur Żmijewski "Stosowane Sztuki Spoleczne," *Krytyka Polityczna*, nos. 11-12, pp. 14-24. An English translation, "The Applied Social Arts," is available online at http://www.krytykapolityczna.pl/English/Applied-Social-Arts/menu-id-113.html (accessed June 17, 2014).

2. He was a teenager when the independent trade union Solidarność (Solidarity) was founded under the leadership of Lech Wałęsa, who won the 1990 national elections with a mandate to form the first non-Communist government since World War II. Russian troops left Poland in 1993, and on May 1, 2004, the country joined the European Union.

3. In his article "Modern Art's Last Gasp at the 2013 Venice Biennale," which appeared in the June 5, 2013, issue of *Newsweek,* Blake Gopnik described *Blindly* as the "talisman" of the approach adopted by the show's curator, Massimiliano Gioni.

4. See note 1.

5. Ibid. "The Applied Social Arts" also appears in an anthology on Żmijewski's work published in 2010 by Fire Station Artists' Studios, Dublin.

6. Ibid.

7. "Foreword," in Artur Żmijewski and Joanna Warsza, eds., *Forget Fear* (Berlin: Berlin Biennale, 2012).

Na ślepo/Blindly, 2010
Video installation with soundtrack, 18 min, presented as an endless loop
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