

# Małgorzata Kaźmierczak

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## Performance Art Here and Now

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# PERFORMANCE ART HERE AND NOW

Małgorzata Kaźmierczak

The curator of the jubilee Interakcje festival in Piotrków Trybunalski was Prof. Artur Tajber who based the main structure of the festival on inviting artists who were born within 10 year intervals. Probably neither the public nor the organisers actually focused much upon when everyone was born although classification according to one's age did indicate the existence of some generational waves in performance art. However the issue of a performers' age that earlier had been discussed many times, in this kind of art turned out to be an antithesis – all performance artists are equally ageless because we live here and now. We react to the contemporary world, not historical programs or occurrences. This does not mean, however, that performance artists do not make history, they do make it and their anniversaries just happen from time to time. The 15<sup>th</sup> jubilee of Interakcje featured the same mechanical pump with which the festival opened for the first time in 1998 in the Europa Restaurant. Proof of the anti-generational atmosphere of the festival was the large scope of proposed ideas, quotations, parallel stances and slogans, repetitions, reminders and references. Independent of the artists' age.

The most interesting reference to the past was the re-enactment of a performance by Jean Dupuy, who did not participate in the festival in person. On the first day Ryszard Piegza presented a reconstruction of a performance by Dupuy entitled *Polish Weeper*. Invited participants sliced onions, cried and collected their tears into shot glasses. On the next day Jean Dupuy's video *Sagittarius 22/11 – 00* was shown. November 22<sup>nd</sup> is the date of birth of the artist and 00 is the logically subsequent combination of digits in a row: 22-11-00. The film showed the process of preparing an arrow out of a pencil and a feather and then its journey through the city of Nice filmed from a car. The arrow ended its run in an underground garage.

The **Restauracja Europa** Group performed a few times, each time referring to the festival's past. During their first action, performers cleaned a plate which commemorates moving the centre of the world 15 years ago by **Ryszard Piegza** from Gare de Perpignan (where it was established by Salvador Dali in 1963) to the Europa Restaurant in Piotrków Trybunalski. The performers placed a table belonging to the late Andrzej Partum under this plate. He was one of the witnesses of the previous action from 1998 and the performers invited viewers to sit at it for a while. A similar action which commemorated other artists was a performance by the Restauracja Europa Group in the Trybunalski Square. Performers first ate bananas at the table, which might have suggested a similarity with the famous film shots by **Natalia LL**. Then they took sand out of their pockets, and made a small mound from it on the table, putting chess figures next to it. Ryszard Piegza put his face into the mound of sand and then a small flag was put into it with the name: **Bruno Mendonça**. It was a reference to an action by this artist who died in 2011. Bruno

Mendonça during *Interakcje* in 2000 presented *Earth Chess Game*, during which he placed many tables with chess boards and figures on the Square and in the middle made a huge mound of sand using a digger.

**Ryszard Piegza** also re-created the Circle of Co-existence *AmbaLangua*, which was built for the first time in 1979 in Wrocław. All artists and the public were invited to mutually accumulate their creative energy in this 12-sided space, which one could arrive at by entering through a dark labyrinth and once there, a viewer became an artist. The space connected simultaneously happening actions. In 1979 the space was somehow free from the political situation and today it was free from the omnipresent crisis (hence the slogan: "Crisis, what crisis?"). The feeling of isolation from reality provoked various, most often Dadaist reactions. The space was also used for an individual action by **Alastair MacLennan**, who made a three hour, static performance. He sat on a chair with his legs in earth mounds. On his head he balanced a pitchfork and a shovel connected together. Opposite to the artist, on another chair, there was a black-and-white family photo and a toy parrot.

The action presented by **Charles Dreyfus** focused upon absurd combinations. He started by showing a video on which he made funny faces. During the projection three girls wrapped in cardboard moved around without a clear choreography. Next another video was shown, whose heroes were Chinese revolutionists and the background music was *Beat it* by Michael Jackson. The artist appeared with a mask on his face and stood with the projection in the background. After the projection he invited the public to play "Finger game" at which he is a real master. Indeed, no one was able to win with him. **Angel Pastor** also proposed that the spectators play a game, this time a simple dice game using a computer application that he composed himself. The viewers bet with real money but only a few managed to win.

Performances by **Richard Martel** and **Max Horde** were auto-ironical with banal action in the background. **Richard Martel** used feathers, glitter and similar gadgets of various colours (different for each day of the week) – this way referring to the usage of readymade elements by performance artists. The predictable structure of this performance and its banal content were a great disenchantment. A dispute with other performers is always a counter-creative activity. Martel's "critical" method had nothing to do with the energy of performance art. Similarly **Max Horde** attached clothespegs to his body and clothes. He then moaned loudly this way ridiculing the self-harming "suffering of a performance artist". In order to underline the catholic roots within Poland (and France) he kissed the public on their feet, just like each bishop of Rome. This broadened the context of the action making it supposedly more interesting. Pope-performer (why not?).

The action by **Michel Chellet** started with a scouts song sung by three female volunteers: "When the stream flows slowly" [Gdy strumyk płynie z wolna]. Then the artist read his manifesto of 'anti-action' which refers to an action without an action. On the next day he made an intervention in a public space – at a bus stop. Actually he didn't do anything, he just waited for the bus and the public stood behind him – unaware of the existence of the action art in process. The presentation by Michel Chellet was reminiscent of live art from the 60s and 70s, the art of Fluxus and the anonymous actions of the Counterculture – unnoticeable interventions. A minimalist action by **Roi Vaara** was similar, as he stood behind a line which he drew on the floor and asked the public to stand behind him. Then he threw a phone in front of himself which at a certain point rang signalling the end of the performance.

**Seiji Shimoda** sat crossed-legged on the floor (or as we say in Polish in a Turkish way, but it could be Japanese, Korean or Chinese as well). He slowly covered his face with red tape so that it resembled a Japanese flag. The flag motif often used by American, Japanese and British artists is a puzzling measure introduced often into art. We have two extreme interpretations to choose from – a dispute with the state flag or an uneasy affirmation of it.

**Chumpon Apisuk** in his performance referred to the political situation in Thailand where a coup occurred in 2006. The ex-prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra condemned for corruption and the abuse of power escaped abroad. After elections in 2011 the prime minister's younger sister replaced him. The artist in his performance used clay from terrain affected by a flood, where there had been a duck farm. He put a black thread on his tongue, referring probably to the limitations of freedom of speech. Then he

made a circle out of this thread on a plate, soaked his open hand in clay and put it to his face from both sides, making traces of "bars" on his skin.

**Balint Szombathy** showed a film from an intervention which he has made regularly on the Serbian-Hungarian border since 2000. The artist gets on a train, goes to the toilet and flushes at the moment of crossing the border. He does it regularly as "Still waters run deep" as he says in his film. Then the artist performing live, took out a globe and sprayed it white saying: "no borders, there should be no borders". The film brought to mind a video by Michael Fortune who kept moving the border sign of County Carlow into his neighbours territory of County Wicklow, ridiculing Irish nationalism. Szombathy however, as a Hungarian living for many years in Serbia, fights borders in general. The work shown in the Museum in Hungary caused a great scandal in a situation where the right-wing nationalist government of Viktor Orban would most like to see Hungary occupy its borders from before 1918!

**Valentine Verhaeghe** put white clay on her hair and stood with a projection which showed some industrial space – similar to a electric power plant in the background. Then she approached the public and unrolled maps, on which she marked new "borders" (of states, towns, regions) with a thick marker. On another day the artist made a trip on a public bus with ice cubes on her lap. The action also referred to her performance from the first Interakcje festival and evoked hostile reactions from the passengers. Much stronger than 15 years ago when she almost danced on the bus.

"When the poet jumps, the poetry rebounds" – this sentence was attached to one of the ping-pong balls which at the end of his performance **Nicola Frangione** threw into the public. It was the conclusion of a performance *vocevocevoce*, which referred to the sound alliterations of the word "voce" (sound) and was accompanied by a video projection. It was preceded by a piece *Pin-occhio al ticket*: "Pinocchio, the mythical character of a story by Collodi for a minute's adultery: Pinn...occhio! Watch out for the ticket, because every utopian way has its own Pinocchio, because every Pinocchio pays for its dream, because every way costs you what you do not give, because every gift knows the ticket, watch out! Pinn... loving the fairy, because time flows by and the interval takes delight. Dedicated to all grown-up true lies." Sound poetry by Nicola Frangione is different from other performances of *poesia sonora* as these are not only abstract sounds, but whole sentences articulated in the form of a manifesto. The whole is always very expressive and theatrical.

Similarly theatrical was a performance by another sound poet – **Jaap Blonk** who in his improvised performance *Joys of a Useless Life* used several coat stands. Producing various grotesque sounds he built his tragicomic story, which was open for interpretations. So it was also not only a classical sound poetry piece, in which the artist uses his/her voice, but a whole choreography using the gallery space.

**Nenad Bogdanovic** used live streaming video with a video camera focused on the floor, on which he placed a washing up bowl with water, and with red paint he wrote on a piece of soap the word: LOVE. He then washed it away and washed his face and in this way the end of his performance revealed his face covered with red paint. It also turned out, that there was a hard disk at the bottom of the bowl. This performance, which was simple in structure, was also very energetic. In his earlier actions Bogdanovic invited the public to paint on his body. The artist undertakes the problematic issue of the contact between human beings, which relate to his traumatic experiences in the Balkan war. Even though his performance in Piotrkow had a universal character, the analysis of the "closeness" between people is his fundamental focus.

**Janusz Bałdyga** used props that are characteristic for him – planks of wood clipped together which thrown on the floor formed a M-shape. Then he made different figures out of them – two triangles, a letter T... He smeared one sleeve of his shirt in black paint, introducing an additional contrast. He wrote with white chalk on a white wall: Bałdyga, then crossed it off and placed his back against the wall, holding a circular yellow band above his head. An interesting element of this performance was sliding a pane of glass along a stretched rope in a way that from time to time the glass fell on the floor, but contrary to the expectations of the public, it didn't shatter. So the artist performed a miracle...

**Małgorzata Butterwick** during the 15<sup>th</sup> Interakcje festival celebrated her private anniversary – 10 years of devising live art performance. She underlined this in her action, accompanied with a video projection which was a collage of documentation from her

previous performances. According to the artist, performance art gives consistency to the elements that “keep her alive”. These elements were for example BOSU or kettlebell sport equipments. The artist first exercised with them and then laid down with her head and feet on two chairs. Her performance was therefore mainly about the presentation of her “private” physical effort which is her private definition of performance art.

**Victor Petrov** moves in his performances in a way that can be associated with a visual ritual. With a piece of black fabric on his head he performed gestures that could have religious connotations. In the end he placed a bowl on his head and a ping-pong ball in it, which he was able to hold for quite a while. When it fell down, he placed the bowl and the fabric on the floor and blew a bit of flour off his hand. After viewing the documentation of his art over many years, the issue of accurate photographic documentation of his performances merits a special attention. The photographs are very attractive and refined aesthetically, although when we watch his live actions we are not left with such strong aesthetic sensations. Victor Petrov, as a shaman, certainly knows how to create a “strong image”.

A few artists invited the public to engage directly with their performances. Apart from Roi Vaara and Michel Chellet the public was invited to participate in performances by Omar Ghayatt, Jiri Suruvka and Dariusz Fodczuk.

The performance by **Omar Ghayatt** was a casting arranged among spectators to fulfil the roles of a wife, a mistress, the mistress’s husband and play a hot scene of a love quadrangle. In the scene Omar fulfilled a double role of a director and an actor playing the husband. The performance aimed at testing the viewers and their inclinations towards aggressive behaviour under the influence of emotions associated with the acted scene.

**Jiri Suruvka** in turn organised a performance art Olympics. Four performer-trainers (Janusz Bałdyga, Alexander del Re, Victor Petrov, Przemysław Kwiek) were to prepare the competitors for the best performance competition. Jury including Alastair MacLennan, Piotr Gajda and Małgorzata Kaźmierczak were supposed to pick the winners and losers. However the jury judged all performance art participants equal and there were no medallists.

**Dariusz Fodczuk** fulfilled his mission of depriving the public of their fear of art. He started his performance by weighing people – each viewer who entered the gallery had to weigh him or herself so that one could exactly define the “mass of people” that came. After overcoming the embarrassment that announcing one’s weight causes, the artist incorporated the audience into a mutual performance in a way which is characteristic for him: by organising piggyback fights, a human caterpillar, a wave, a human pyramid etc. and at the same time expressing verbally what he thinks about art. Dariusz Fodczuk adopts his performances according to the specific place and time. After a residency in Copenhagen the element entitled CLEAN, in which he washes the floor with his own t-shirt, adopted the form of three letters wiped out on the floor: REN, meaning “clean” in Danish. In Piotrków a spontaneous decision was presenting a slogan from Przemysław Kwiek’s t-shirt – which read Fear No Art – on his bottom, instead of a smiley face which he had often revealed before.

Two performances – one by Alexander del Re, in which female inhabitants of Piotrków Trybunalski participated and another by James Partaik, used the context of the town. **Alexander del Re** recorded interviews with women who talked about the social roles of men and women, but the recordings – audio and video were presented in such a way that their content was not clear. Alexander invited young women to participate in the performance and laid down with them in a circle placed on the floor, onto which the video was also projected. A game with the opposition of a woman and a man in conjunction with an unclear content provoked many associations and questions.

**James Partaik** in turn recorded the sounds of the town and the festival – of the gallery, pub, hotel, etc. and laid these sounds onto a map of Piotrków. Then using a joystick and a system of sensors, he touched certain points on the map, activating the sounds associated with actual positions in the town. The performance was very technically complicated and prepared in detail.

**Wolodomyr Topoi** while sitting at a table, built a pyramid out of books which he connected using modelling clay. Then he arranged an undefined shape out a tape on the floor and filled it with milk. Then he took the book pyramid from the table and walked on the floor covered with milk. In the end he placed the books on the floor and bowed to them.

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**Yaryna Shumska** used the entire gallery space. She started the performance wrapped in a wide white band that she attached to one of the pillars. She moved dynamically around the gallery unwrapping the band and rubbing herself against the walls, leaving some traces on them with powdered chalk that she held in her hands.

During the Interakcje festival, three artists from South Korea performed, who were invited to Poland by the Art and Documentation Association. **Tal Lee** made a stencil out of torn pieces of paper that he sprinkled with flour. The sentence that he made was: „This is not art”. Performance by **Jaeseon Moon** was quite complex – first the artist stood with his back to the audience, half-naked and shook a bottle with water suggesting a sexual activity, until its content was spilt on the floor. Then he turned on a device which produced intriguing sounds and moved to the middle of the gallery. Then he started a series of movements with a wooden beam, which he flung up, waved and then stood on its top. The performance was surprising and although not quite clear, it was somewhat attractive because of that. The action by a third Korean performer **Sung Neungkyung** was controversial. He performed a series of gymnastic exercises and started to hit the public with something resembling an oblong pillow.

**Przemysław Kwiek** composed live a still life out of tulips in pots, bananas and sickles. He composed them onto a background made from the frame of a painting and into which he put his letters to the Ministry of Culture. From the loudspeakers there was one sentence being spoken by various people: “Art in the time of unemployment.” In the end the artist invited the Interakcje volunteers to take part in his Interakcje Appearance, giving them total freedom as to their actions.

A few performances oscillated around the subject of gender. **Whitney Lafleur** performed in a black taffeta dress. In the beginning of the performance she established contact with the public by giving them matches and telling them to light them whenever she gave a signal with a whistle. She sang the Marseillaise and made a two-gendered person out of herself – she shaved her armpits with a razor and using a broom gathered and tied her dress at the front so that it made a huge penis. She put a mask on her face, which was a sketch of her father’s face. In the end she asked one of the volunteers to take her by piggyback. Earlier she cut a hole in the dress so that the volunteer could put his head through and see where he was going. In this way she left the gallery.

Among performances that took place in the shopping mall the most intriguing was the performance by **Jozsef Juhasz** and **Nastja Säde Rönkkö** who used the moving walkway to make an ideal symmetry by riding in opposite directions to each other. The man holding a board with a knife on it and a woman holding vegetables were never supposed to meet. **Beate Linne** also used an escalator – she rode on it up and down, holding a round aquarium with gold fish on her head.

A performance by **Nieves Correa** and **Abel Loureda** was about the reversal of male and female roles. They both performed naked, and Nieves dragged Abel as he lay on the floor. Then they stretched a wide band and pulled it to the sides until it broke. Then they threw cups to each other. When all of them were broken, they dressed and finished the action. The performance was quite grotesque.

Another real life and artistic duo was **Doyon / Demers**, who presented a performance using devices which emitted an electric current and shocked their muscles into body movement. Despite the pain, the artists tied themselves up only to cut the ties in the end.

**Arti Grabowski** presented an excellent, although very theatrical performance, which consisted of three parts. In the first one, the artist theatrically cleared his throat and adjusted his too-tight collar, infecting the audience by his actions. Then he spread hairspray with a blower fan, which caused a natural cough among the audience. He sprayed red paint on his face and moved on to a second part of the performance which he divided into three elements by the numbers: 1-2-3 written on the wall. Under ‘1’ he stood with a plank of wood placed upright, which then under the number 2 he cut into half. While standing under number ‘3’, he nailed his shoes to the planks making “skis” out of them, and then tried to free himself from them until he finally managed to do it. In the next part of the performance Grabowski started taking off several white shirts but not in an ordinary way. He used a blowing fan, which caused the action to look very theatrical and everything was performed with Michael Jackson’s *Beat it* playing in the background. When he was half dressed, he played for a while juggling with the shirts, which he then put into grey paint and hung under numbers 1-2-3 on the wall. The last element was the

sewing of a small button onto the skin of his neck.

A performance by **Jozsef Juhasz** included a large installation – the artist sat in an armchair in front of a TV, and on his head he had a tunnel made of black plastic, into which people poured water – one glass at a time. He himself drank beer and watched tai-chi exercise instructions (although he had his eyes covered), and the water was pouring down into his eyes and face. The performance was one of a series of absurd physical workouts *Paranormal Sport Activities* such as *City Skiing*, in which he tried to make his way through a town on skis, *Skateboarding*, in which he rode on a “board” made out of an old gramophone, *Table tennis* or *Underground Biking*, in which he rode a bike laying on his back whilst being buried in the ground.

**Sara Letourneau** during her action told the viewers about an accident that she had during the Interakcje festival a few years ago – during a jump she broke her ankle and at the same time she was informed about the death of her grandfather. She asked the volunteers to peel a few beetroots that she then grated, pressed with her feet and made a juice. Then she gave it to the public to drink as a cocktail with vodka.

**Etienne Boulanger** and **Francis O’Shaughnessy** performed together. The first of the artists concentrates on the motor activity of his body and its placement in the space. Hence the series of “exercises” such as balancing on a chair or walking on chairs as if on stilts – with his legs attached to them. At the beginning the artists acted symmetrically, but then their actions became more elaborate – Francis calls his work “performative haiku” and always structures his performances out of three different images. He hammered a nail into a door placed vertically and when Etienne approached the door by walking on the chairs, he detached them from his legs and hung them of the door, which evoked associations with Duchamp and Kosuth.

**Amélie Laurence Fortin** made a clear reference to the performances by Jan Świdziński – one of the founders of Interakcje, to whom a part of the program was supposed to be devoted, in which he makes a house of cards. Amélie made a pyramid out of tins and boards, on which she tried to stand, until at one point, the pyramid collapsed.

**Przemyslaw Branäs** in a performance titled *(non)own* inspired by Miron Białoszewski’s poem, expressed the process of a familiarisation and un-familiarisation of reality registered by the human sense of sight. His action used a surprising element – live grain weevil larvae and human dentures which fell from inside a loaf of bread. He contrasted this image with the reading of a text in which the concept of his performance and his art in general was explained. The text was read by invited people.

Performance by **Julie Andre T.** consisted of a series of colourful, aesthetic and absurd images. The artist performed in a butcher’s apron splashed with red paint, she soaked her face in blue and red pigment and painted her arms blue. The main element of her action was a large red plank of wood which first was laying horizontally on supports like a table, which then she moved to a vertical position using a lot of stamina. A skeleton was hung on it and she wrestled with the plank attempting to keep it vertical but falling on the floor many times.

Traditionally at the end of the festival the **Restauracja Europa Group** always presents the final performance. Almost in total darkness, using only UV light, they arranged a table and invited the audience to drink vodka with them.