

Democratising the Institutional Common/Private Space. Lessons of “[S]election.pl”

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Abstract

This article examines *[S]election.pl*, an exhibition conceived by Paweł Althamer and Artur Żmijewski at the Centre of Contemporary Art, Warsaw in 2005, as a site for enacting radical democracy. The project, organised within a series of retrospective exhibitions entitled *At the Very Centre of Attention* – and consequently with Polish elections opening the country’s path towards right-wing populism – subverted the framework celebrating the growth of Polish contemporary art world by staging a group show gathering former schoolmates, and in later stage, an on-going process open to anyone. Although the importance and controversial outcome of the exhibition (defined by provocative interventions, withdrawals and destruction of artworks) has been examined in the context of continuing Oskar Hansen’s *Open Form* model and Grzegorz Kowalski’s pedagogical understanding of sculpture as a participatory medium, its political agency has rarely been discussed. To assess *[S]election.pl* as a model for democratisation and a political intervention, the paper analyses a range of its ambitions, aspects and outcomes: expanding and complicating the notion of participation, engaging with institutional critique aimed at the role of art institutions in sustaining cognitive capitalism, finally, testing the potential of contemporary art exhibitions as models for radical horizontalization of democratic involvement.

Responding to the agenda of PARSE’s issue “On the Question of Exhibition” – and its interest in the interchanges between the curatorial and socio-politically engaged practices – this paper treats *[S]election.pl* as a case study contributing to the debates on the participatory models of exhibitions and their potential to impact and reflect the socio-political realm with all its aspects, including those that are rejected by mainstream politics. Simultaneously, it reflects on radical democracy participation within the art world as a process containing of social exchange and mutual commitment, rather than a set of independent performances.

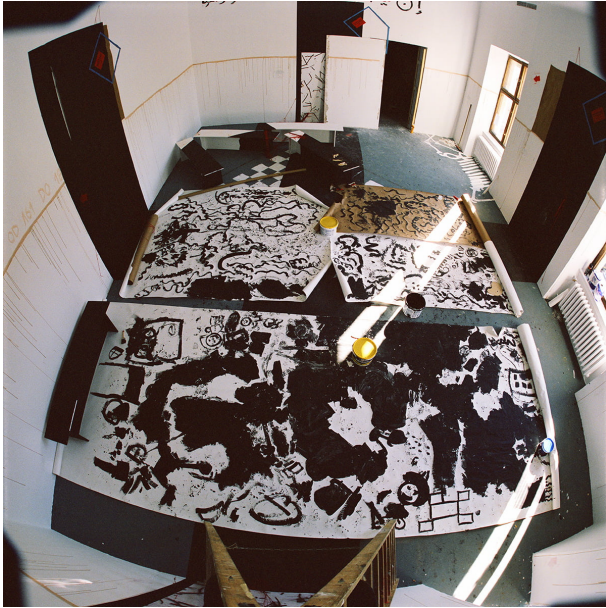
Introduction

“[S]election.pl” (2005) was organised by the Centre for Contemporary Art (CCA) in Warsaw, as part of “At the Very Centre of Attention”, a series of solo exhibitions by selected established artists, each lasting a year and aiming to “reveal the potential of Polish art scene”,^[1] through forms of diagnosis, interpretation and public engagement.^[2] As underlined by Jarosław Suchan the programme’s curator the intention was to showcase the “great period of Polish art” celebrated in the West, but non yet recognised in Poland.^[3] For the first iteration, Katarzyna Kozyra, Artur Żmijewski and Paweł Althamer were approached. Their solo shows were intended to present the impact and phenomenon of Grzegorz Kowalski’s studio from which all of them had emerged. This “Polish year in Poland” was dissembled right at the outset by Althamer and Żmijewski, who decided to hijack the concept, gathering with their former colleagues from the Fine Arts Academy to collaborate once again.

The project evolved through multiplication: the two artists invited by the CCA invited other participants, sabotaging the institution’s original idea. The result was that a completely different set of stakeholders was involved people who were not artists, others who were but did not operate in the mainstream but rather on its margins, while others who were celebrated in the field did not receive an invitation. Instead of a blockbuster exhibition, an unforeseeable process materialised. During its course, and due to the actions of some of its central figures, “[S]election.pl” was expanded to involve several groups: people with disabilities, children, hired prostitutes, in the end anybody invited to take part in the project through a classified ad in the *Gazeta Wyborcza* daily newspaper. Simultaneously, after rejecting the rules imposed by Althamer and Żmijewski (or rather lack of them) some of the participants withdrew.

The launch of the project involved two symbolic moves: taking out the door to the exhibition hall, as well as building a staircase leading from the street directly into the project space through a window. The activities proposed by artists often required destroying others’ work, which occurred in an often contradictory and instinctive manner. The project’s method departed from *Common Space, Private Space*, a now-canonical exercise fundamental to participatory practice and occupying a central place in Kowalski’s pedagogical method.^[4] The exercise is based on a non-verbal process of communicating through signs, signals and gestures depending on the situation and actions of other participants, in which students and teachers participate as equals. At the beginning, every participant has their own *private space* located in the *common space*. The former serves as a private territory, while the latter functions as a form of *agora*. In due course, both spaces are integrated, and ultimately the agora takes over.

This essay examines “[S]election.pl”, aiming to identify its art historical and institutional contexts, the manner in which it operated between artistic and political arenas, investigate its role as a “constructive” (although violent) modification of Kowalski’s pedagogical method, as well as assess its outcomes, reading them through the notion of an exhibition as a tool for (radical) democratisation. To do so, I draw on literature and archival research, as well as two extensive conversations with the authors of the project, Paweł Althamer and Artur Żmijewski.



Exhibition view “[S]election.pl”, courtesy Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej Zamek Ujazdowski. Photo: Paweł Althamer and Artur Żmijewski



Exhibition view “[S]election.pl”, courtesy Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej Zamek Ujazdowski. Photo: Paweł Althamer and Artur Żmijewski

Institutional and Art Historical Roots and Context of “[S]election.pl”

To analyse “[S]election.pl” one needs to consider the changes that happened in the Polish art world in the first decade of the twenty-first century. While throughout the 1990s several Polish artists were primarily exploring the relationship between art and socio-politics, the subsequent years exposed this “social turn” as redundant. An ongoing series of scandals, court cases against artists, acts of censorship, laying off gallery and museum directors and physical attacks on art, resulted in a gradual change in the mindset of the art world, which slid towards creating an image of dynamism, professionalism and optimism including art’s investment appeal. Consequently, local institutions introduced the rhetoric of success understood more as a self-fulfilling prophecy rather than a proven reality applied similarly to other aspects of (neo-)liberal transformation of Poland post 1989. Art world stakeholders recognised that the emerging generation of artists and curators were no longer interested in clashing with reality to test the sensitivity of the public as their predecessors associated with critical art did in the 1990s but instead sought to describe reality through a symbolic system.^[5] It was clear that this change

required fresh faces, coming from the “new reality” and able to negotiate and debate it. Thus, a range of exhibition projects at that time should be approached as resulting from the pressure put on institutions, expected to produce a “young art” boom, which indeed materialised. However, a paradigm shift of that kind requires reference points in the form of art historical myths. Kowalski’s studio ran since the 1980s and borrowing heavily from the Open Form theory translated into a pedagogical method suited this role perfectly; as a time-space in which several personalities and ideas came together and emerged as an internationally recognised and impactful phenomenon.^[6] The *Common Space, Private Space* exercise was a myth within this myth, and thus a suitable subject for “At the Centre of Attention”.^[7]

The roots of Althamer and Żmijewski’s artistic-curatorial approach to the “[S]election.pl” project can be identified in the work of Joseph Beuys spanning the late 1960s and 1970s. The ideas of Beuys and consequently several ambitions of *social* practice came to life as result of seeking an alternative to the repressive and chaotic socio-political structures of Western post-war societies, as well as a desire to restructure and improve economic and socio-political relations through creative, holistic and spiritual forces. Rather than focusing on producing objects with a socio-political meaning, Beuys facilitated the process of communication and alternative (often radical) democracy as artistic media. Drawing on the work of social reformer and philosopher Rudolf Steiner, Beuys developed an idea of *erweiterte Kunstbegriff* (expanded notion of art), which considered art as equal to other human actions involving creativity.^[8] By expanding the practice of art to the wider category of creativity, Beuys attempted to create a larger network of pedagogic, political and dialogic aims intent on producing social change. Interestingly for the analysis of “[S]election.pl”, and several other projects mentioned here, Beuys viewed the art school as a site of change. He claimed: “We want something new that comes out of art! So, we are starting that logically here in an art academy.”^[9]

Significantly, Beuys gave the role of making change to the public. His major influence was his ongoing confidence in artists, curators and institutions, that the relations among the public whether temporary interactions, or long-lasting relationships in already existing communities constitute the work of art. The artist worked continuously on attracting the attention of groups located far from the art world. Through his two seminal and durational projects, *Organization for Direct Democracy* (established in 1972) and *Free International University* (founded in 1973), Beuys connected his ideas of audience engagement, pedagogy, politics and art theory. Simultaneously, they were expressions of Beuys’s model of *soziale Plastik* (social sculpture) aiming to restructure social interactions through everyday processes, and consequently break apart the “repressive” structures of post-war society. Developed in the late-1960s and early-1970s the social sculpture theory at that stage a proposal aiming to heal society rather than an artistic initiative per se centred around the entire “process of living” (consisting of actions, dialogue, thoughts and objects) that could be enacted by anyone, in any place and any time.

Beuys’s idea of social sculpture transformed into a form of art focused not only on its performative nature, but also on pedagogic intentions, political content and diversity of audiences. It became a type of practice that explored individual subjectivity and the potential for social change by materialising through a network of collaborators with diverse opinions, focused on the political rather than solely the sphere of art. We can identify numerous practices since the 1990s that relate to social sculpture, as well as art historical terms that identify work that incorporates participation, civic action and conversation. One can observe a line of continuity from Beuys, through Kowalski, to Żmijewski and Althamer. Despite Beuys’s tangible connection with Poland which materialised in his gift of almost 1,000 works to the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź as part of his *Polentransport* performance (1981) and expressed fascination with the Polish Solidarity movement which according to Beuys reflected qualities of a social sculpture as unleashing previously hidden creative potential of the people all four

artists aimed at expanding the field of art, using similar tactics.^[10] Both Beuys and Kowalski devoted a large part of their practice to pedagogy and saw their work as disseminating through their students. Within the constellation Beuys-Kowalski- Źmijewski, we can see an ability to identify social tensions and explore them through setting up social encounters, although they are employed differently.^[11] The relationship between Beuys and Althamer is most obvious (and well-explored): both have engaged with the notion of the artist as a shaman, created works with members of their social circles, explored the notions of societal and cultural otherness, and employed social sculpture to shape their contemporary socio-political realities.^[12]

The approach to social sculpture established in the United States appeared in the 1980s and 1990s and materialised through “dialogic art”, described by Grant Kester as “the creative facilitation of dialogue and exchange”.^[13] Artists such as Suzanne Lacy or Rick Lowe, influenced by Beuys’s oeuvre from the late 1960s and 1970s, aimed to explore the space located between the artistic and the political, while inheriting his optimism about the transformative potential of expanded art. Both Lacy and Lowe continued exploring Beuys’s curiosity in the spiritual dimension of the public by investigating its creativity a force motivating political, economic and cultural change.^[14] Beuys, Lacy and Lowe all used dialogue, aimed at encouraging creativity, in order to enact change. Significant for the exploration of the relations between those two American artists to the project of Althamer and Źmijewski, Lacy and Lowe depended on the art world as a socio-economic space. Similar to the Polish duo, they hijacked the art system in order to break economic, political and social barriers aiming to support those without access to institutions.

A range of critics and historians highlight the failure of social practice projects to bring about substantial change. An influential social practice work, Lowe’s *Watts House Project* (1997–99) could be understood as a failure in several ways: it was unsuccessful in generating a tangible outcome, it did not create long-term partnerships with residents and other community organisations present in the area, and finally, it was ineffective in navigating the complex politics and policies surrounding the cause.^[15] At the same time, it is worth considering this project and several other social practice attempts as having failed due to the fact that its socio-political and institutional surroundings were already problematic. As an artistic, and simultaneously socio-political tool, Lowe’s project went further than many other attempts to redistribute economic and cultural goods: it confronted several obstacles and attempted to disseminate funds, instead of merely “presenting the creativity” of the underrepresented. Social projects that manage to have tangible impact are an exception. However, those shortcomings and fiascos may be approached and reconsidered productively. In their text *On Failure (On Pedagogy)*, Margaret Werry and Róisín O’Gorman write: “Failure is often disavowed and internalized, mired in blame and shame. [...] Most such projects fail most of the time; fail to democratize, raise visibility, transform understandings or experiences or even gain the understanding and support of those they claim to aid.”^[16]

Another project worth discussing in the context of “[S]election.pl” due to its participatory aspect and engagement with the model of a school is what emerged from Manifesta 6 (2006) and materialised as unitednationsplaza (2006–07). Developed as part of the wave of large-scale curatorial projects with ambitions to become impactful social projects and not only intellectual or symbolic statements Manifesta 6 proposed a format of a biennale as a temporary art school. Since the inception of the project in Cyprus, its curators Mai Abu Eidahab, Anton Vidokle and Florian Waldvogel were devoted to the idea of establishing a vital part of the project in the occupied part of Nicosia. After refusing the ongoing requests to keep Manifesta 6 solely on the Greek-Cypriot side coming from the Greek municipality commissioning the exhibition the project was initially paused and ultimately cancelled, while legal cases against the curators were filed.^[17] From this troubling situation and organisational failure unitednationsplaza arose.

Unitednationsplaza was a durational and interdisciplinary project, consisting of lectures, workshops and seminars, publications, a radio station and online activities. Its main part took place in Berlin and was followed by iterations in New York (as Night School) and Mexico City (unitednationsplaza Mexico DF). Unitednationsplaza turned itself into an exhibition as a school, which was neither an exhibition nor a school. Instead, it suspended both institutional structures and proposed an experience centring around discourse exchange.^[18] Vidokle initiator of the project claimed a necessity to come up with new frame and new realities, in order to avoid “merely variations on ready-made models”.^[19] To do so, unitednationsplaza was launched as a project with its own audience, promotion and circulation. Yet, due to an involvement of a wide-range of high-calibre art world players, as well as incorporating an open call selection of participants who engaged in a series of “private workshops and discussions”, it ended up remaining embedded in the structure of the art world and (intellectual) art market.^[20] Although a learning process and a temporary school, unitednationsplaza remained an artwork shifting the agenda of “art-as-education” into “education as art” with subtle authorship of its curator-initiator-author Vidokle.^[21]

The particular conditions of the early 2000s, with artistic and curatorial practices expected to generate social impact and simultaneous lack of guidelines on how to achieve it and assess it led to what was later conceptualised as the “educational turn” in contemporary art practice.^[22] In this move towards education, several art practitioners recognised the functional role of art and pursued the idea that the limitation of their own field could be identified and overturned by a shift towards pedagogy. Within this framework, participation was a key aspect, while the crucial aim was located in developing the active role of the public, and obtaining a productive engagement in which the traditional roles of the art world were challenged and passive spectatorship bypassed. Creators which could include the roles of artist, initiator and curator such as Vidokle and his establishment of a temporary school, or Althamer and Źmijewski by returning to their school exercise with former classmates saw the format of the school as most potent in transforming the audience from “passive” to “active”, and exploring the notion of the emancipated “public” as a democratised space of the art world. In many cases, especially when it comes to Źmijewski’s explorations of the participatory format, the public was forced to articulate a position in relation to both the project and its socio-political context. The rationale behind it was motivated by the claim that productive engagement is possible only if spectatorship is bypassed and conservative societal and institutional relations are challenged. By operating in a real socio-political sphere, the creators attempted to avoid the trap set for education and participation as art that is, taking a “pseudo-critical attitude”, and consequently remaining as caterer to the top-down structure of the art world, even if operating on the model of a “school” or a “gathering”. Even though it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to establish a definition of what an “engagement with social life” is, we can argue that those attempts of exploring the democratic and horizontalising potentials are the most valuable aspects of educational and participatory turns in contemporary art practice.



Exhibition view "[S]election.pl", courtesy Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej Zamek Ujazdowski. Photo: Paweł Althamer and Artur Żmijewski



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Between Artistic and Political Worlds

"[S]election.pl" came to life as a result of several ambitions and aims: to create utopian spaces (similar to Althamer's *Bródno 2000*), but also to replicate historical situations and destabilise existing norms, mostly to see the outcome (like in Żmijewski's *Repetition* or *Them*), which resulted in the tension between Althamer's Beuysian public invitation to "become an artist" and Żmijewski's destructive tendencies. Althamer pointed at the will to go against the economic and institutional drive towards championing "creative individuality" on the one hand, while on the other there were early signs of the political turn towards the re-growth of xenophobic patriotism and conservative traditionalism.^[23] He explained his rejection of the initial concept by saying "I looked at what was proposed to me to create a portrait gallery of individuals, along with their views on the world. I responded to it by saying: 'I do not want to have an individual exhibition, it is not my interest to show how individual and separate I am. I am much more interested in exploring how art can be a tool, or a space, for communication.'"^[24] The artist saw the *Common Space, Private Space* exercise as a metaphor for contemporary social reality in

which individual attitudes are negotiated within the public sphere and a way to test the openness of the communities both within and outside the art world.

Local art practitioners proposed diverse readings of “[S]election.pl”. Adam Mazur pointed at Althamer and Żmijewski as problematising the celebratory and well-anticipated project organised by the CCA. This challenge, according to Mazur, was meant to “cause consternation and throw off balance” not only the institution, but also the viewer used to conventional exhibitions and the experts having to assess and mediate this “aggressive” project.^[25] In consequence, the artists reflected on the notion of marginalisation, and pushed the debate on power, exclusion and hierarchy so vivid during Polish post-communist transformation towards the field of art. Łukasz Ronduda saw “[S]election.pl” as engaging in institutional critique (visible in Althamer’s practice beforehand) and Żmijewski’s discontent with an “unfair” debate about his recent work *Repetition* (2005) published by CCA’s online publication *Obieg*.^[26] Stach Szablowski writer and CCA’s curator proposed understanding the project as determined by the spirit of Kowalski’s pedagogy, encouraging to constantly question and debate the purpose of artistic practice and its social potential.^[27] However, from its inception “[S]election.pl” emerged as involving breaking the art field’s conventions it was a process constantly questioning terms such as “author”, “artwork” and primarily “exhibition”. The effect was also defined as a statement towards the “unfairness of the art world” with what the artists saw as its low-quality debates, corrupted choices and neoliberal drive towards productivity and profitability.^[28] This last set of aspects was particularly visible due to the presence of “former artists”, “unrecognised artists”, “potential artists” and “never-gonna-be artists”. This game with “institutional consecration”, allowed “[S]election.pl” to create a particular type of collaboration and rebellion, that served as a form of acute institutional critique.

By forcing the audience into the role of the contributor in the crucial part of the project there was no option of remaining simply a viewer: the public were either workshop participants, and invited groups were encouraged to change the physical shape of the space or leave a mark of their visit the project expanded and complicated the notion of participation. The Polish art world of the mid-2000s was undergoing a process of liberal-democratic and market-driven “normalisation”, while trying to capitalise on an unprecedented wave of international attention.^[29] On the one hand, this could be defined as driven primarily by the impact of private galleries and the “mantra of the market shared by the entire artistic community” as pointed out by gallerist and critic Łukasz Górczyca.^[30] In addition, the 2004’s EU accession enabled new streams of funding directed at creating permanent collections and building new large-scale institutions. This period, filled with post-ideological rhetoric of “success”, seeking new figures that could replicate the financial and artistic success of artists such as Wilhelm Sasnal, a lack of stable and sustainable institutional formats, the dominant position of market-oriented endeavours and dealers, and finally, public institutions seeking to capture the spirit of new reality and “young art” (mostly through generational group shows), may be defined as a state of limbo that artists Żmijewski and Althamer sought to question and challenge.^[31]

Żmijewski and Althamer refused to produce solo exhibitions as they did not agree to “a division into the better, i.e. those who managed as artists, and those who dropped out, the worse.”^[32] They decided to travel back in time to the reality of Kowalski’s studio, to the “primary indefinite”, to the openness towards definition, to the state before the process of filtering that institutions apply towards artists and the time before negotiation of the worth of artists and their work. As underlined by Althamer, this questioning of institutional celebration revealed his will to seek creative solutions, instead of limiting himself to “writing complaints and lamenting”.^[33] The project treated the exhibition as a process in which authorship is blurred, in reaction to the CCA’s proposal of showcasing Polish contemporary star artists.^[34] Althamer and Żmijewski approached CCA as a “standard institution, but also a political indication of how to act in order to change institutional structures”, as Althamer put it.^[35] The project

not only broke away from exhibition requirements (in terms of the relationship between creators and audience) and institutional conventions, but also became a challenge to the very principle of the institution's operation forming an institutional critique exercise that occupied a space between the pressures of the market and state.^[36] The aspect of contesting the art world customs and subverting the institution's dignity was particularly visible during the opening of the exhibition: both Althamer and Żmijewski appeared in purpose-made costumes as art and creative directors; CCA's security staff could partake in a balloon ride in order to oversee the opening from above; finally, the opening of the exhibition was a closure of the actual project as no further performative actions were conducted. As explained by Żmijewski:

The institution was raped; its stake was lower than ours. And so Paweł and I worked for our own interest and took advantage of this enormously strong medium, the Centre. We were playing with our own stakes. We turned the place into a lab in which we tried to develop our own tools and verify what we had been using before. It was a trial by fire to see how it all functioned and to form new tools for the future. This was our hidden agenda.^[37]

Overall, the two artists, whose practices at this stage were far from market-oriented and largely ephemeral, developed a project not only undermining the very fundament of CCA's will to contribute to the mainstream turn within the art scene, but also addressed the pivotal parliamentary election that revealed a deep societal division and a slow rise of populist politics. A heated public discussion muddled with populism also influenced "[S]election.pl". The project's preparations coincided with the parliamentary and presidential election, resulting in the right-wing party Law and Justice taking both houses and forming a coalition with the agrarian populist Self-Defence and the radical right League of Polish Families. Consequently, political forces alien to the art world operating far from it when it comes to ideology as well as personal connections took a central role in both governance and public discourse. The 2005 election not only elevated a populist coalition to power, but also reconfigured societal allegiances and Polish politics for many years subsequently. During the campaign, Law and Justice rebranded the economic and political issues into a conflict between a "social-solidaristic" and "liberal" Poland. The rhetoric the party employed mimicked earlier conspiracy visions of Polish post-socialist transformation being taken over by the immoral and corrupt pact of the elites. As an outcome, Law and Justice united the mode of address of its junior coalition partners, the anti-liberal economic narrative of Self-Defence party with the framework of socio-cultural "Christianity fortress" represented by League of Polish families, all embedded into the solidaristic-liberal divide, ultimately merging several conflicts into one meta-narrative the battle between "Liberals" and "Socialists".^[38]

Artur Żmijewski responded to this socio-political condition filled with insistent political declarations and PR statements, campaign stunts and self-promotion by stating that he intended for the art scene to reflect the ideological landscape that could be found in politics.^[39] He claimed "there is no conflict in art instead we have statements and noble manifestos of goodness, kind help, and care. Art has become overly ethical."^[40]

Assumptions vs Reality: Impact and Lessons of "[S]election.pl"

Althamer was not reluctant to admit that he invited Żmijewski to the project because of his interest and experience of working with conflicts.^[41] He predicted that involving him would allow them to test the endurance of CCA as an institution its level of flexibility and openness towards their actions. It was an initial step in their long-term collaboration, which resulted in projects that continued and modified the outcome of "[S]election.pl", such as *Winter Holiday Camp*, another institutional critique intervention pursued at the CCA Warsaw in 2013.

Żmijewski himself emerged as an artist who took a discursive and clearly political position and began exploring contemporary structural mechanisms, such as national chauvinism, the traumatic legacy of World War II, or the societal exclusion of the differently abled. His earlier works, however, were often viewed as harsh, provocative and an aggressive exposure of controversies.^[42] Concurrently, he established a method of arranging a manipulated social situation, introducing a group of people into it and testing how they behaved when confronted. This practice manifested in works such as *Them* (2007) or *Two Monuments* (2009) was usually recorded by Żmijewski with a camera, while he rarely participated in the event (at least when it came to its documented form). This method was closely associated with Żmijewski's critical stance towards the actual socio-political impact of contemporary art. The artist claimed that contemporary art "has no consequences" and remains as an "empty, theatrical gesture", which, although celebrated, remains without any real outcome to the public located outside of the art world.^[43] Large parts of his criticism were directed towards art institutions aligning themselves to systems of power defining the neoliberal democracy project as well as art criticism and curatorial practices that overshadowed contemporary art with their ambition to define the art world. All of this led the artist to the claim that exhibitions as a conservative format no longer satisfied him.^[44]

In 2007, Żmijewski published a proposal for "applied social arts", which motivated his own artistic practice and projects such as "[S]election.pl", and determined the approach to larger curatorial projects, i.e. Berlin Biennale 7 (BB7) in 2012.^[45] In the text, Żmijewski calls artists "functionaries of emancipation", whose work must serve social change and whose art should "possess the power of politics but not its fear, opportunism, and cynicism".^[46] Simultaneously, Żmijewski also pursued explorations of Kowalski's educational methodology outside art institutions, through para-curatorial and private settings. During his DAAD residency in Berlin (2009) he involved a group of artists in a range of exercises based on *Common Space*, *Private Space* and realised throughout the city which led to inviting the group to Warsaw Academy of Fine Art's plein air in Dłużewo, Poland. There Żmijewski arranged a "game" between the "Poles" Academy students and "Germans" artists from Berlin. Spread across eight days and five sessions, the exercise ended up in a failure filled with scepticism and criticism, leading to the inability to act and degeneration for instance, in one of the sessions the group of Poles kidnapped one of the "Germans". At a tipping point, both groups negated the exercise, trying to decide and define who was the leader capable of modifying the situation. The group accused Żmijewski of taking advantage of the participants and aiming to commodify their participation. In consequence, as admitted by Żmijewski, the situation spiralled out of control, revealing the weakness of the exercise once employed in a non-controlled environment and outside institutional frameworks.^[47]

The BB7 project Żmijewski's largest curatorial endeavour saw its own role as a method for conducting politics, instead of examining historical or political events. Żmijewski's approach wanted to break with the discursive exhibition model seen by him as hypocritical, relying on outdated grand theoretical concepts and being too elitist, becoming a privileged form of cultural intervention with the incontestable authority of the curator.^[48] He claimed that this political usage of the institution would allow him to hijack the state itself as this is composed of institutions, including cultural ones. By employing these methods, Żmijewski intended to push art institutions to their limits, using art as a political tool and abandoning usual institutional strategies. Żmijewski understood curatorial tasks not as administrating objects, but negotiating agonistic political positions producing confrontation, "losing control over meaning", giving away spaces and inviting disagreement. The exhibition involved mostly commissioned works and displayed not only art but also political statements. Simultaneously, the Biennale resembled Żmijewski's own artistic practice, with works such as *Them* (2007), in which the artist invited antagonistic social groups to express their different ideologies through voicing disagreement.^[49] In short, Żmijewski put this major biennale into crisis, aligning the project with other social movements, such as the Indignados, which preoccupied the art and socio-political world at that time. Assessing it a decade later,

Żmijewski talks about BB7 as a “borderline experience”, resulting from a belief in the “usefulness of art” and its political potential “in its strict sense”.^[50] Through the biennale, Żmijewski intended to prove the ability of art to operate politically, to support urgent causes and act as a tool for the redistribution of power. He turned the exhibition into his biggest testing ground for the political aspirations of art, although the outcome revealed that people’s identity driven by existential aspects such as fear or desire is more complex than their political activity. The project ended up as an intervention without conclusion, or rather, as pointed out by the artist-curator himself, “even if there were conclusions, there were not satisfying and acceptable.”^[51]

In this context, the outcome of “[S]election.pl” predated further projects of both artists as an anti-exhibition, or rather exhibition without form. The viewers were not able to fully grasp what they should relate to. Many have pointed out that the process of communication between the artists and the audience needed a more conventional approach. The artists themselves admitted that the main force driving the project was the resistance towards the institution, which refused the project in the form in which it materialised.^[52] There was no space for moderated expression often pushed away by aggression and destruction. The observers and participants brought up the radicalism of the situation manipulated by Althamer and Żmijewski, but also the hermetic quality of the project difficult to approach for an outsider entering an already dynamic situation which materialised in an empty space filled with non-legible evidence, mostly in the form of shredded, overpainted paper.^[53] The reason for that could be the involvement of stakeholders with a different state of mind than the one projected by Kowalski in his initial exercise. Although inviting the “intruders” aimed to confront the participants with reality, the final outcome became a spectacle, or rather a sequence of solo actions without any context a stimulated social situation with all its opaqueness, conflict, filth and absurdity. As described by Kowalski, the situation was “filled with screams. The one who spoke softly, was not heard anymore.” In a public letter to Żmijewski, Kowalski wrote “I felt alien at the official opening of *our* exhibition. I did not like all this pretentiousness, those stairs, this balloon^[54] and your costume like from the *Matrix*. All this was overblown, expensive and empty.”^[55]

The actual and most impactful part of the project started once Althamer and Żmijewski received the institution’s approval and finished before the actual exhibition was even opened. As a first gesture, Althamer removed the door from the gallery hosting the project in order to open both the institution and the situation. Participants could visit the space anytime and do anything, based on the agreed rules, or by breaking them. Bigger meetings and actions were pre-arranged by some of the participants. The project was documented regularly, which allowed it to be communicated to the public once the exhibition was opened. Both Althamer and Żmijewski agreed that the project would benefit from introducing additional groups calling them “elements” which could accelerate and enrich it.^[56] Those included Nowolipie Group participants of the ceramic workshop for people suffering from multiple sclerosis with which Althamer has collaborated regularly ever since, kindergarten and school children, sex workers or a gardener. Actions with the “elements” often ended up with the destruction of artworks created by other participants, and resulted in Mariusz Maciejewski’s withdrawal, whose artefact was dismantled by pre-schoolers.



Reproduced leaflet by Bartłomiej Kurzeja, courtesy Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej Zamek Ujazdowski. Photo: Paweł Althamer and Artur Żmijewski



Reproduced leaflet of Bartłomiej Kurzeja alongside responses to it, courtesy Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej Zamek Ujazdowski. Photo: by Paweł Althamer and Artur Żmijewski

In a pivotal moment for the project, a poster of Donald Tusk then a candidate for the Polish presidency in a Wehrmacht uniform appeared in the gallery space. It is unclear how exactly the poster designed by Bartłomiej Kurzeja, a former student of Warsaw's Academy of Fine Arts and an acquaintance of Althamer entered "[S]election.pl", as Kurzeja was not part of the immediate circle of the curators or Kowalski and his studio.^[57] At the time, Kurzeja was circulating leaflets meaning to discredit Tusk on the basis of his (false) family ties to Nazism. Those materials reached Althamer and Żmijewski, who decided to reproduce and exhibit them within the gallery space, willing to "invite Kurzeja to the game" and ultimately provoke a reaction.^[58] The gesture caused a deep crisis among the group and an immediate reaction from the press which mostly expressed its dissent over slandering the politician within the premises of a cultural institution and the mainstream audience. This moment not only provoked questions about participation and the limits of free speech, but also manifested how populism often drawing on regressive fears entered the public debate. It also became a fulfilment of Żmijewski's

goal: for the art scene to reflect the ideological landscape found in politics.

The project went through another crisis as a result of the All Souls' Night event organised at CCA by Althamer and Żmijewski. Under the influence of alcohol, narcotics as well as "forces, ghosts and emotions which accompany this particular day", one of the participants engaged in demolishing the gallery space, while others were involved in brawls. During the night Żmijewski organised a burial and cremation of some of the already exhibited objects. He invited the "elements" once again this time in the form of actual forces of nature in order to deflect others from commitment to their material creations and instead recognising the ephemerality of their actions. The debris resulting from the night was cleaned up by Żmijewski himself, who commented on this aftermath by saying "[i]t is interesting that after this destruction, the space started to be filled with actions, traces of people, as if the wound would heal itself very quickly and there would be no mark left. It is yet another proof that even if the destruction or intervention is massive, we can resist it."^[59] Kowalski also commented on that night, addressing Żmijewski by commenting "[you] touched upon an extremely important matter of restrained aggression, natural desire of destruction and tempered evil. I did not participate in this part of the exercise in which you have unleashed the demons, but from your account, it seems that it was extremely valuable, even if difficult to comprehend."^[60] Those controversies and destructions were swept away by an action of two artists Jacek Markiewicz and Kasia Kowalska who repainted the gallery space, including all exhibited objects, with white paint. In this way "[S]election.pl" managed to heal itself and proceed into another cycle. According to Żmijewski this was proof of the project's resilience.^[61]

Significantly, the most "accessible" documentation of the project was time-based, as the process was most legible via interpretative texts and video documentation.^[62] The 50-minute video depicted various stages of the process, ranging from initial phases, participants gradually modifying each other's work, to introducing outsiders to the activity. One of the most debated sequences was a confrontation between a gallery invigilator and Althamer who took his daughter around the gallery in a shopping trolley and encouraged her to interact with the artefacts.^[63] This clash between institutional prevention and a child's eagerness particularly loud due to Żmijewski's editing was another comment on CCA's actions within the framework of the "museum as mausoleum" to paraphrase Adorno.

"[S]election.pl" was an impactful project for the careers of both artists.^[64] Asked about its outcome, both speak about the value of the process itself, underlining that the communication, exchange and the ability to compare expectations and the real experience, were the most important result of the "game", which itself was unpredictable. The exercise did not demand the production of complete artworks; the focus was on establishing a chain of reactions to previous statements, which did not need to be "coherent" or "good". The aspect of value (whether intellectual or material), so precious in the art world or art education, was put aside, liberating the participants from the demands of contemporary art's field and subverting its evaluation system.^[65] The outcome of "[S]election.pl" was a recording of the process an intuitive snapshot of reality. The works created throughout the project were deprived of "artistic immunity" anyone could modify or even destroy them as demonstrated by several "catastrophes" and "elements" that took over the gallery space.^[66] At the same time, the essence of the project would not have been achieved without the public and participants as the course of events was determined by participants. Artistic creation in its conservative understanding was shifted to the area of curatorial contribution and reduced to creating and presenting the documentation.



Burning artworks, courtesy Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej Zamek Ujazdowski. Photo: Paweł Althamer and Artur Żmijewski



Exhibition view "[S]election.pl", courtesy Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej Zamek Ujazdowski. Photo: Paweł Althamer and Artur Żmijewski

It is difficult to identify a solid conclusion of "[S]election.pl". The only definitive consequence presented to the public was the documentation. The authors, participants and public that entered the project in its pre-exhibited stage, took from it the experience of an exchange as well as a belief that conversation in this format is possible. The totality of "[S]election.pl" with its blending of power hierarchies and the desire to reflect the wider socio-political paradigm however, leads us towards considering this project as trialling the medium of exhibition as site for radical democracy. This proposal drew from Żmijewski's claim that artists as members of society should contribute to resolving societal problems, visible also when it comes to executing democracy in post-1989 Poland. In his understanding of reconfigured aims of art, artists "produce artefacts social and cultural situations which 'infect' different areas of societal system in ways that viruses infect living organisms. They 'pollute' it or modify it. The infected system needs to adjust heal or get healed."^[67]

Żmijewski's way of acting at this point was clearly influenced by philosophical work of Jacques Rancière, a thinker claiming that the political potential of people lies in their ability to generate independent strategies of collaboration, education and resistance. This proposal of Rancière and its rejection by the liberal agenda aligns closely with Chantal Mouffe's position, in which liberal thought characterised by individualist and rationalist approach is unable to acknowledge the pluralistic nature of the social realm for which conflict is fundamental.^[68] Both thinkers recognise the pivotal role of art in the hegemonic struggle that underpins the contemporary democratic order. As Rancière puts it, "the claim that the tradition of societal and cultural critical potential is exhausted, is fundamentally wrong."^[69]

As employed in "[S]election.pl", this model revealed several flaws, particularly when it comes to Kurzeja's chauvinistic statement expressed as political slander, which tested the effectiveness of non-filtered participation. At this point, fear of radical ideological difference and fear of destruction of what they created led participants to withdraw. Simultaneously, the legacy of "[S]election.pl" may open the discussion about participatory models of exhibitions and their potential to impact and reflect the socio-political realm, including those aspects that are refused by mainstream politics. Moreover, the project's outcome renders the radical democratic participation as employed in the artistic field as a process that should contain social exchange and mutual commitment, rather than a set of independent performances. Its most problematic aspects as shown by "[S]election.pl" are located in non-linearity, randomness and unpredictability.

Despite its grounding in *Common Space, Private Space*, "[S]election.pl" was a fundamental modification of this pedagogic exercise something which could be seen as a violation of the rules, but also as a creative elaboration. "[S]election.pl" was meant to correct the "weaknesses of this exercise", seen by Żmijewski as eliminating the forces of reality and limiting perspectives to only a small group.^[70] The actions of participants or the reactions of the public were not planned in any way. The project stepped away from the exhibition as form and educational conventions by enforcing only one rule: any group member could amend, adapt, improve or destroy anyone else's contribution. As commented by Kowalski afterwards, the aspect of destruction whether it came to taming aggression or the natural desire for destruction was not welcomed by some participants (including himself, as he withdrew at this stage,) but cognitively highly beneficial.^[71] In consequence, "[S]election.pl" tested the limits of CCA as art institution on the one hand, while exploring the limits of delegated performance with its ability to bring tangible artistic and curatorial outcome on the other. Yet, when it comes to opening up to new perspectives, new expressions and fields of interpretation it was a revealing move.

Lastly, the project can be seen as a realisation of Althamer's and Żmijewski's employment of art as an autonomous field of philosophy. As manifested by "[S]election.pl", participatory practice may enrich theoretical debates, serving as a ground for testing theoretical assumptions, playing them out through real actions. As an area in which effect is often quickly grasped and assessed by the media, critics, audience or participants it served the role of testing ground highly fertile when it comes to intellectual and social exchange, but also susceptible to destruction, antagonisms and power negotiations, which are often difficult to receive and understand. It is clear that the exercise of "[S]election.pl", or the "game" as Althamer and Żmijewski termed it, could not be directly translated into the political arena. At the same time, its outcomes are noteworthy to those who may want to improve the way in which contemporary art engages with the social and political arena.

Footnotes

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