

What has driven us out onto the Road?

7. Land Art Festival

It would not be an overstatement to say that the 7th edition of Land Art Festival was a turning point in its history. It is due to introducing new qualities to this area of art as a result from choosing its location along 4 km stretch of local road as well as its theme – *Road*. Apart from natural landscape itself which constitutes the festival context and strength, cultural and social background of the region, the issues of physical migration and spiritual journey acquired equally significant status.

The road referred distinctly to the co-dependence of nature and civilization, nature and culture, man and broadly conceived environment as approached by ecology and humanities. What is more, the road in question runs across the Podlasie landscape park, housing the open air galleries of works realized during 2015 and 2016 editions of the festival. They constitute a unique catalog of art where nature provides setting and material as well as inspiration. But it is also a factor that transforms the works irreversibly, a priori accepting the influence of forces they entered into a dialogue with. As a result, we deal with works which while being generated by culture start to integrate with nature. Their complex message is the evidence of a communion, the urge - almost heroic under the circumstances - to create art while maintaining humble respect to nature. Nature does not enter into any discussions but dictates its laws. Experiencing (and realising) this challenge makes us sensitive to the perspective in which we can perceive ourselves, our relations with nature and passing time in a different way. Hence, the notion of processuality, referred to in an art context, acquires deeper and more natural meaning. Walking across the vast space of this open air gallery we can experience total immersion in it, becoming part of it. Physically it is a small part, but essential in generating meaning and value. It provides an opportunity to appreciate the works of artists that focus on still another fragment of the landscape neither competing with nor decorating it, but rather creating its visual and mental counterpoints. In this way, while forming partnership between art and nature, artists look for a model of relationship between man and nature.

This possibility of looking back makes us realize the significance of new developments in this edition of the festival, its opening onto broader understanding of local environment (not only with respect to nature) and, at the same time, emphasizing the continuation of practice and reflections present in the previous ones. As a result, the notion of land art which maintains its strong relationship with the concrete area, absorbs the narratives concerning people who live there and also those who are in the process of migration gets widened. The curators made special efforts to mark the beginning of the road with several vertical realizations, located with a sense of space, but also in a way which

makes them easily noticeable by the drivers or bicyclers, luring them to slow down or even stop. The first work to be discerned while driving from Janów Podlaski is Donald Buglass' expressive sculpture of a human foot caught at such a stage of movement which creates almost vertical form, raising high over the horizon, while still touching the ground with its toes. Sculpted in a tree trunk with a chain saw, it suggests subtly what kind of aesthetics is to be expected on the *Road*. On the hill, at the crossroads with one road leading to Babel Granna, as of an axis mundi raises Jarosław Koziara's austere column constructed from thick slices of wood. It is not a mimetic, but creative form of a tree transformed into wood, not an organism, but construction. Waldemar Rudyk's slim lyrical poles located on the other side of the road form a clear contrast with this epic manifestation; objects made from various recycled materials incorporate handwritten sentences (for example 'a tract of sand, but still sculpting our awareness'), emanating with subtle poetry of everyday life.

Several works evoke the ingredients of the past of the Podlasie region, still present in people's emotional memory and diminishing number of their material traces. Darkened wooden inscription boards bearing words difficult to decipher, fastened to the old pieces of wood, placed densely along both sides of the road, act like menacing and ambiguous signs of dramatic history (Vladimir Topij). The inscription suspended over the little country road *Kda chodysz?* (Where are you going?) reminds of the local language, Ukrainian variation of Podlasie jargon, nowadays used only by a small number of old people (Agnieszka Dudek). Worn out shoes collected among the villagers, mixed with their plaster replicas forming a collection of the exhibits of the existence of poverty – got installed in the ruined bus stop, the relic of the past epoch (Vlodko Kaufman). The Orthodox icon called *The Black Shrine*, in order to manifest the fact that it differs from the Catholic roadside shrines, is located in the close vicinity of the road. The black background does not bear any negative references as the artist's intention was to address the blackness of the cosmic infinity and introduce still another sphere of meanings (Sergiy Radkevych). Robert Kuśmirowski proposed a spectacular still action (*Monumen*) affirmatively commemorating a concrete local person who out of his own choice spent his whole hardworking life in the place where he was born. The sculpture which portrays him was placed on the funeral hearse of 1834 decorated with wild flowers. The artist played the role of a horse to finalize the ritual of returning the man back to the soil.

Pawel Chlebek's monumental wooden object is not concerned with the ultimate issues in such a direct way. Its onion shape, embedded in the line between the sky and the ground, brings association with the Orthodox church dome, but also with a balloon waiting to fly into the sky. It is suggested by an unambiguous inscription: *Waiting for the Sky*. On the same vast meadow Jan Sajdak placed three big insect like wicker creatures – slightly disturbing, but at the same time causing empathy. They look like migrating strangers that arrive from distant places, maybe from another epoch. Khalil Gibran was also a

migrant. Grzegorz Borkowski used his text about the significance of the experience of a life failure placing it in the tent by the road.

There were various references to contemporary contexts of the road. Tatiana Talipowa installed several realistic images of women dressed in a modern way along the road. Our first association with prostitutes gets quickly obliterated. We are left with a feeling of guilt when we notice that their faces are quotations from Renaissance masterpieces. Lorenzo Palmeri built a stop for cyclists (the festival road is a fragment Green Velo, the famous bicycle route of over 200 km). It is a white vertical form where you can park four bicycles. The wind operated device generates meditative sounds. Artur Trojanowski is another artist who used ecological technology. He created another meditative stop for travelers, introducing the industrial elements of a ventilation system. He changed its function as it was devised to emit light. Its main element generated light at night with the energy from solar panel, while two smaller mirrors reflected the light from the sky.

In his performance Valdimir Topij used two antique objects (chandelier and sleigh) to emphasize the inappropriateness of these objects in modern times. At the same time he expressed his fascination, metaphorical and literal attachment to them. Janusz Bałdyga's performance which culminated the vernissage walk referred to the relativity of the meaning of black and white as signs of good and evil, both in the context of social as well as individual experience.

Beyond the festival road, on the classy lawn in front of the Clock Stables in the Janów Podlaski Stud, Ralf Witthaus created a perfectionist drawing with a lawn mower which undoubtedly corresponded to the festival theme. As a result, there were formed two rhythmically intersecting walking paths which facilitated encountering friends and strangers. Another work located in Janów Podlaski (in one of the underground corridors of the Bishop Castle) was realized by Mariusz Tarkawian who created a laborious frieze densely populated with floral forms among which he placed various birds inhabiting the area, perhaps the ones which are in the danger of extinction. *Monades*, the 3D mapping audio-visual show by Bart Wolniewicz projected on the facade of the Castle turned the building into a dynamic object.

The festival provided also a platform for realizing photographic and cinematographic works, hence widening the formula of land art. Dorota and Monika Proba made a short film *Maria*, which portrayed everyday life of an old woman living alone in Bubel Stary. She is a person who looks after her house and garden, talks about her late husband who calls her in her dreams. IN spite of living in an unquestionably restricted space, she is completely at ease with her life. Tomasz Sikora's *The Road* combines the elements of documentary about the region with metaphorical sequences expressing his spiritual approach. Siarhiej Leskiec combined his photographs with ethnographic research of the phenomenon still present in Belorussia (and in the Podlasie region) called *sheptuchas* which designates the Orthodox Church women who heal people with

their prayers. Roman Krawczenko's contribution to the festival is focused on making portraits while using an old photographic technique called wet colloid plate. It was invented by Roger Fenton in 1851 and used successfully during the Crimean War to produce the first photographic wartime reportage.

There was also an educational edge to the festival. In the village community centre in Bubel Granna Marta Ryczkowska and Agnieszka Chwiałkowska ran workshop for children *Little Land Art*, the theme of which was related to the theme of the festival. Children created an object which became a moving element of the vernissage walk.

Land Art festival, this year inscribed into roadside spaces, acquired a more intimate character, getting closer to the audience, including also people in whose life art is hardly featured. The dialogue between art and nature got combined with social contexts, the ones which the artists discovered in the Podlasie region as well as the ones they aimed at introducing there. In order to realise the meaning and specific character of these activities, we should imagine how much these works would lose if they were shown in city galleries without their direct contact with these concrete places. All the references to nature and the character of the Podlasie region would become described, but not experienced contexts. “It is what has driven us here” - said Jarosław Koziara during the vernissage walk, concisely grasping the idea of the festival and reason for which its participants, even for a while, turned this region into the centre of their emotional and intellectual gravitation, at the same time knowing what challenges they were to face. Practical challenges result both from the impact of natural forces (not every work can survive cold, rain or strong wind) as well as human element that can treat artworks mercilessly. On top of it, there was a strong conviction that whereas city audience can cope with current artistic strategies and narratives, country people cannot understand them, hence there is also fundamental educational work to be done. However, more essential is the ideologically limiting conviction that for modern artists anything apart from nature is their natural habitat, while interest in natural landscape is a domain of traditionalists who identify art with conventional aesthetics. In order to overcome these practical and ideological barriers something more than hipster perversity is required. We need to start recognizing the significance of non-urban context for art in a social, mental and visual sense. We are lucky that there are idealistic desperadoes who attempt at questioning these preconceived concepts and undertake challenges, both natural as well as social in order to create a kind of a practical laboratory integrating the area of art, nature and social environment. They are supported by the foundation myth of the sixties land art (which they modify and update accordingly), but also more general feeling that art gallery urban network continues setting aside something very important.

Grzegorz Borkowski