

# Early Years

group exhibition presented by the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw

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When we use the term “early years” in reference to the careers of musicians, artists, or writers we usually imagine the most fiery period in one’s creative time, marked with naiveté, faith in one’s exceptionality, but also full of authenticity, independence, and heroism. Such cliché can also be applied in the context of institutional dilemmas related to another wave of establishing new museums of art, which are in a way a “side effect” of the complicated processes of transformation in Central and Eastern Europe. The exhibition carrying the title “Early Years”, organized for KunstWerke by the team of the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, is based on the effort of exploring the founding myth of a new institution. Warsaw’s Museum of Modern Art was called into being in April 2005, and from its very inception there has been a common belief that this new institution would be a tool in supporting and boosting processes of modernization. The fierce debate, full of antagonisms, clashing opinions, and common prejudices which accompanied the Museum in its “early years” was unprecedented in the entire post-war history of Poland. Much before the edifice has been erected (the construction is planned for 2014), the design project became the arena of conflict, tearing apart and polarizing the artistic, architectural, and political community. It should be emphasized that the previous museum in Warsaw, the National Museum located at Aleje Jerozolimskie, was opened over 70 years ago – in 1938. The new Museum is to be built at Plac Defilad, a place in the very center of the city and irrevocably burdened with ideology. The square, with a stand for party dignitaries who would receive official parades there, was created in 1955 as background for the iconic building of the Palace of Culture and Science. Today the structure is treated as symbol of the soviet domination over Poland and so, as a result, there are systematically recurring appeals to tear the building down, or “annihilate” it by means of urban planning and expansive architecture. The most visible conflict in connection to the Museum is, therefore, the wishful architectural “temperament” of its building.

When in February 2007 results of the competition for architectural design were announced, some of the media, city inhabitants, and even members of the Museum’s Program Council were petrified. The winning design is disciplined and reserved, and its author – the Swiss architect, Christian Kerez – related to the building of the Palace of Culture and Science in a way which was both indirect and very nuanced. The whole project, based on the shape of the letter “L”, is a “levitating” concrete solid which is already being cynically compared to a supermarket. The accusation which was constant and ubiquitous in daily press and public opinion polls could be seen as shocking by researchers of the esthetic likes and dislikes of Poles – the design was said not to be sufficiently *avant-garde*.

The short history of the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, which is intended to become the biggest museum of Central and Eastern European art, is the quintessence of the problems related to seeing an art institution as an effective political tool to be used for the purpose of achieving short term economic or propaganda goals (which remains in contrast with the activities and motivations of the Museum itself). Hence it is now suspended somewhere between hope and

disenchantment, engagement and compromise, but it is also characterized by the deep belief that a museum can be invented anew, regardless of external pressures, traditions, or political games. The "Early Years" exhibition is, in a way, a report from the construction site, or rather from the "battle field" of the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. The photograph by Jan Smaga and the film by Artur Żmijewski were made at Plac Defilad - the place where Kerez's design is to be realized, and which is also the area of tensions between different circles (which was made visible by the riots caused by attempts to evict shop owners from the market hall located there). Most of the works presented were created in collaboration with the Museum, as a sort of a research project on Warsaw and modernity – for example the pieces by Yael Bartana, Tania Bruguera, or Sharon Hayes. At this early stage, the institution is to a large extent formed by its collaborating artists, who have the imagination, intuition, and vision to stimulate the search for new directions of the Museum's development. Yael Bartana's film "Wall and Tower" is a symptomatic example of this - a political hallucination just as much as it is a tale of pioneer years, untainted by cynicism or calculation. The first kibbutz in Europe, a "foreign body" in the Warsaw's city tissue, could be a metaphor of the inconvenient but strategically exceptional position of the new Museum.