

## **Włodzimierz Borowski. The Net of Time**

**18 November 2010 – 16 January 2011**

**Opening: 18 November 2010, 7 pm**

Włodzimierz Borowski (1930 – 2008) was one of those artists whose conceptualist idiom especially strongly emphasized the relationship between aesthetics and ethics. He placed the issue of attitude at the centre of his artistic practice. But his uniqueness is exemplified foremostly by the radical redefinition of the problem of author and subject. With Borowski, we are not dealing with a simple ascertainment of the death of the author, which was meant to be combined with the reader's emergence. Rather, according to the insights of Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes and Giorgio Agamben, we are confronted with the opening of the space of his continuous disappearance in successive expositions: paintings, objects, exhibitions, texts, and finally in the *Syncretic Shows*. This space of the author's endless disappearances and returns became in Borowski's art the birth scene of an unsteady, fractured subject and of all questions related to his condition, position, and responsibility vis-à-vis the reality in which he appears. Borowski's shows from this period never constituted monographic or retrospective exhibitions. However, they were connected with the word's Latin root: *expositio* understood as exhibition-for-show, as evaluation. The exposition concerned the author's ego, which was then subject to such treatments as humiliation and shaming, thus undermining the conventional notion of the avant-garde artist, the master, he-who-knows. Each exposition possessed the characteristics of an autonomous whole, while also carrying the hallmarks of a lecture with narrativistic historical mechanisms, exchanging the linear operations of the positivist machine with heterogeneous points in the space of a dead, standstill time. Borowski made use of his oeuvre by literally opening it onto the destructive effects of time: he deprived objects of value, insisting on their process; by placing them within precise, albeit unstable and fragile constellations, he treated objects like mock-ups. He subjectified objects and processes, leaving behind traditional hierarchical object-subject relationships and the anthropocentric vision of the world.

The exhibition *Włodzimierz Borowski. The Net of Time* focuses on the aforementioned problems. It takes on the challenge of creating yet another ex-position of the Author – this time in His absence, but by using the guidance of this character "ever looming in the stage background." As a starting point, we chose Włodzimierz Borowski's conceptual realisation entitled *Playing Field* – overlooked by art historians – which took place in Warsaw's Współczesna gallery in 1972. It has been overlaid with documentation evoking the *Syncretic Shows*, as well as works documental in character in which Borowski continues the auto-achiving process – detaching himself from his own identity.

### ***Playing Field, 1972 - 2010***

Włodzimierz Borowski's *Playing Field* – exhibited in the Współczesna Gallery in Warsaw (13 July - 5 August 1972) – was an exposition arranged by the artist using

almost all of his works created between 1956 and 1972. The space of *Playing Field* included structural paintings, *Artons*, *Maniluses*, several later independent works, as well as a reference – in the form of the author's reconstructions – of *Syncretic Show III - Closet* (1st National Meeting of Artists and Scientists, Puławy, 1966), *Syncretic Show VIII - Sensitizing to Colour* (odNowa Gallery, Poznań 1968) and *Coda to Show VIII* (Współczesna Gallery, Warsaw 1968).

In the bright, symmetric space of the Współczesna Gallery, the artist – Włodzimierz Borowski, and the curator – Janusz Bogucki, created a kind of black "box" with a drawn out floor layout reminiscent of a sports field, which was then filled with artworks. According to the catalogue list, there were 58 such works, plus "sketches, documents, and props for *Syncretic Shows*," displayed in a side room parallel to the main gallery space.

Though featuring elements of a museum exhibition, *Playing Field* was primarily a critical action conducted on the material of a monographic, retrospective exhibition – an artistic attempt at freeing one's own work from the mechanism of historicization and institutionalization. By questioning the model of a chronological exhibition, reifying his works, and imposing a uniform interpretation on the artist's oeuvre, Borowski treated the works as participants in a game, and himself also as its participant and referee. He granted them the character of individual events, and defined the relationships between them as unstable and unclosed, playing not so much with the fleeing significance, but rather with the signified. By "ruining" his own story in the exhibition space, in the *Playing Field* catalogue he simultaneously undertook the first effort of narrativizing his own oeuvre: an attempt to place it on an axis of time, but devoid of the positivist formulas of historicization (typical of Borowski's later works) operating with the concepts of development, evolution, progress, and a coherent image of events strung onto the linear representation of temporality.

The presented reconstruction is a faithful restoration of the specific space, together with all the relations between objects present within *Playing Field*. It presents 42 works by Włodzimierz Borowski and six reconstructions of unsurviving works. The goal was to recreate as closely as possible the situation and meanings of the 1972 exhibition. This exposition - hitherto overlooked by art historians - can be interpreted as a farewell to Borowski's formula of the *Syncretic Show* – a multiple "show of shows"; the culmination of conceptual art and its parting with conventional formulas, a watershed moment in the artist's work, in which he destorys his *oeuvre*, so as to expose his subjectiveness - his approach.

By reconstructing the 1972 show, we would like to momentarily – *in the net of time* – capture the more dematerialized and disintegrated works of Włodzimierz Borowski: not by historicizing, but by opening their message onto the present and the future, so that the recipient navigating within is able to transform them into new constellations of meaning.

### **Archive materials**

The exposition of the documents concerning Włodzimierz Borowski's conceptual demonstrations from the years 1966-1972, which culminated in the almost over-saturated environment of *Playing Field*, focuses on the aspects of the author's disappearance and the transformation of the artwork and exhibition model, manifested in them. It constitutes a set of footnotes to the neighbouring proposed reconstruction, all the while developing and illustrating some of the aspects of Borowski's reflection interwoven into the complex structure of *Playing Field*. This presentation, which includes the documentation of *Syncretic Shows* and other connected works, contains various materials: unique images (among others, by Eustachy Kossakowski, Tadeusz Rolke, and Jacek M. Stokłosa), video recordings, and other archive material – for the most part previously unreleased. The presentation of *Playing Field* documentation occupies a special place here.

*Syncretic Shows* showed a lack of respect for the purity of artistic genres – they allowed for the use of diverse means, the involvement of various senses, and an opening to chance. The *Shows* which made use of the artist's earlier works questioned the model of the exhibition as secondary to the artwork and the undermined the hierarchic exposition model, which exposed key moments in the artist's oeuvre. They treated the gallery space as a "vessel", in which the artist "discovers art" – takes on the role of catalyst of the artistic process, renouncing to take complete control of it. The vertical mirror constructions included in *Syncretic Shows I* and *V* turned the gallery space against itself, juxtaposing the linear order of time to the multidimensionality and unpredictability of the process. The symmetric – mirror – structure of the exposition additionally fortified the effect of an organic unity.

The identification of art and process triggered a change in the recipient's status. In subsequent demonstrations in the late 60s and early 70s, Borowski initiated a kind of a game with his spectators, aimed at stimulating them to reflect on the integrity of the artistic process. These demonstrations - for example *Syncretic Show II* and *VIII* – deprived recipients of the possibility of "safely participating" in the event, or even of the possibility of "viewing art." They not so much exposed artworks in the finished form, but rather faced the audience with the excess of interacting with art. Identifying the public with "material" in the "anti-happening" *Taint Pubes* (a pun on "paint tubes"), made it – to quote Jerzy Ludwiński – "not only the main element of the artwork, but also its sole recipient and arbiter."

The challenges with which Borowski confronts recipients are complementary to the process of the critical re-evaluation against the figure of the author. His methodical "preying on his role of a demiurge" from early 1960s – when he created his quasi-organic objects – translates in his later practise into the gradual reduction of artistic means which serve to reveal the artistic process. In *Syncretic Shows IV, VII, and VIII*, he replaced or linked environment structure with performances, thereby ironizing on the topic of the traditional concept of the creative act as a projection of the author's intention, and announces the possibility to activate the recipient's full perceptive capacity through art. This problematic was emphasized by the *Coda to Syncretic Show VIII*, arranged in the Współczesna Gallery, the central part of which was occupied by

a rhomboid structure associated with a multiplied eye lens.

The narrative created using the archive materials is counterpointed using four of Borowski's documentary works, in which the artist accentuates the process of questioning his identity as the artist: *Facts I* (1970), *Facts II* (1971), *Exposition of One Work* (together with Jan Świdziński and Jan Krzysztof Wodiczko, 1972), and *Aest-Ethics* (1976) – Włodzimierz Borowski's theoretical autobiography.