



## **SEMINARIUM NA MIEJSCU**

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### **Letter to Katy Bentall**

London, 8<sup>th</sup> October 2013

Dearest Katy,

Letters, as we both know, were crucial as a medium of expression and dialogue for your husband, Mariusz. I would say that they were equally as important as the essays and conference papers, which he contributed to art theory. This is why I feel quite exceptional in sending this one to you, paradoxically from London, where you were born. Amongst all the narrative forms which Mariusz used, the letter was the most intimate one. It was the intimacy of an encounter between him and the recipient of a letter that was so crucial. Encounters were the subject of Mariusz's study for years. He wrote about this, in his own words, a 'fundamentally affective' phenomenon, both in the context of art, as well as counseling.

For many years letters were the main means of communication connecting him with his friends, whom he met in the 1960s at the Foksal Gallery, so close to your studio on Smolna street. Amongst regular recipients of his letters were Anka Ptazkowska, Henryk Stażewski and Edward Narkiewicz. Correspondence for him became a platform of ongoing reflection on the theory and practice of encounters, including the

one with Ptaszkowska leading to the conception of the *An Introduction to a General Theory of PLACE*. Those letters, alongside notebooks and photographs created the conditions of my encounter with Mariusz. It was an indirect dialogue, mediated through these complex documents and you, Katy. Your presence brought them back to life, putting them in order, helping me find my way around them.

There are two elements of his writing, which in particular became the subject of my study towards my PhD thesis titled: *More than Documentation: Photography in the People's Republic of Poland between 1965 and 1975*. I think I never told you the title before. The first one is the power play behind image production and writing. The second one is the creativity resulting from an encounter.

Mariusz depicts the process of writing and taking photographs as experiences distant from each other yet both driven by the same desire for power. First of all, when it comes to writing, he identifies himself with the position of the author, where as in the case of the latter, he speaks from the perspective of a beholder. In his opinion writing embodies the 'verbalizing power'. He argues, 'when you use words, you are better off than when you don't. When you speak, you are better off than when you keep silent. You are better still, if you write and best of all if you write in English'.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to the empowering situation of writing, he sees the situation of being photographed, for instance when he analyses a photograph of Władysław Strzemiński, in *A Body on the Stretcher, or the (In)Tangible Given of Unism*. I quote:

To begin with, we come upon his face on a photograph, a decisive glare, a piercing gaze endowed with "single light". But wait. Have we actually been empowered to keep our stare fixed upon his face, have we obtained the authority to dwell in the countenance of the one who with such Jupiter-like vehemence would combat "individualism" in himself and others? Should we peep through this gap made possible by a photograph?<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> M. Tchorek, Power, pages not paginated.

<sup>2</sup> M. Tchorek, *A Body on the Stretcher, or the (In)Tangible Given of Unism*, Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, 1994.

In Mariusz's eyes, the situation of a photograph is a situation of vulnerability. By asking about the moral justification of looking at one's face, he touches one of the soft spots of taking photographs, namely its proneness to manipulation. However, he does not respond to an important question - who a photograph empowers?

My attempt to respond to this issue involves speaking about PLACES. Mariusz understood the PLACE, as a platform of encounter, rather than an actual physical space. He describes it as such for instance in his essay about Władysław Strzemiński. His research on the dynamic of encounter was founded on the writings of Martin Buber and Carl Rogers. In his diploma essay, titled *Therapy as Place, a Place as Therapy*, he described an encounter as a confrontation, I quote 'being an exercise in control, competition and power struggle.'<sup>3</sup> Above all, however, he focused on the healing potential of an encounter, which can work thanks to the energy of congruence, empathy and unconditional acceptance. He maps these emotions and their lack in a retrospective analysis of his relationship with the other critics of the Foksal Gallery. Using the theory of encounter, he also rethinks the gallery as the PLACE, as encounter. He writes: '... it is not enough to claim, as we did back at the Nitrogen Works, that 'in place one is.' At the time, it was at best the outline of a project, at worst a seductive, but deluded claim.'

He argues that in place one is 'counter to, opposite', and only through an encounter with 'another' a place becomes the PLACE. Foksal was supposed to function as a PLACE where artists representing conceptual thinking could gather and work. However, from my perspective it did not work as the PLACE of creative encounters for all the contributors to the gallery, for instance for the documentary photo reporter collaborating with Foksal – Eustachy Kossakowski.

The function of the medium of photography in the gallery was defined in purely utilitarian terms. It was perceived as a tool for recording other artists' initiatives and as such it was exhibited there. Anka Ptaszkowska points out in her book *I believe in Freedom, but my*

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<sup>3</sup> He received a diploma in Counselling at the Hatfield Polytechnic in December 1985.

*name is not Beethoven* (2010) raises the issue of prejudice that fixed the function of the photographers as documentarians which made them unable to exhibit at Foksal as artists. Firstly she confirms that in the second half of the 1960s, the gallery did not present photography as art. On the contrary, there was a distinct line between hiring these photographers as reporters of the gallery initiatives and exhibiting their works. She concludes, 'Generally speaking, in the circle of Foksal Gallery and theatre Cricot 2 at the end of the 1960s the artistic value of photography was not considered, and photography was treated in an utilitarian way.'<sup>4</sup>

The power struggle behind the politics of publication, in other words, the power of verbalization, was the main trigger, behind the underestimation of the artistic value of Tadeusz Rolke and Eustachy Kossakowski's photography realized in the Foksal gallery and at the Osieki plain-air, in which Foksal gallery importantly featured in 1967. This aspect is evident in the case of Kossakowski's photographs from the "Panoramic Sea Happening". The most iconic from this series is the one showing a glimpse of the section "Sea Concert". The image captured Edward Krasiński standing on a podium in the sea, a few meters away from the beach. He faces the horizon, with the public of the event and the photographer behind him. His arms are spread in a gesture that recalls that of a conductor, as if he is orchestrating the sea waves. In the foreground of the image, the first row of the sun loungers is visible, occupied by the viewers of this spectacle. They are also in the water<sup>5</sup>.

This image was reproduced for the first time on the cover of the post-happening brochure published by Foksal. The publication was illustrated with thirty-six black and white photographs, all taken by Kossakowski. The publication was a significant step towards the preservation of a very specific image of Kantor's event amongst the art-oriented public in Poland and abroad, as it was translated into English. (That's so important in the context of Mariusz's words!) The gallery's

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<sup>4</sup> A. Ptaszkowska, pp. 181.

<sup>5</sup> Photography on Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw webpage:  
<http://artmuseum.pl/pl/archiwum/archiwum-eustachego-kossakowskiego/27/20034>  
(Date of access: 17.12.13).

effort to popularize the photographs was a crucial step towards their widespread recognition today.

The photograph of the “sea concert” taken by Kossakowski was also exhibited in the gallery in September 1970 at the show *Happening and Happening-like Activities 1963-1970*.<sup>6</sup> The invitation defines the photographs as ‘documents clarified by the author’.<sup>7</sup> It was Kantor, who was listed as their sole author. At the show, he hung detailed descriptions of the happenings next to the pictures. Significantly, the structure and the chronology of the happening were represented in words and not in images. An unbalanced relationship between the display of both mediums can easily be seen by examining the example of the image taken by Kossakowski. The single photograph from the “sea concert” functions here as a sign, redirecting the viewer towards the complex verbal narration by Kantor, visible beside it. The photographer is refused the act of speech. His function is reduced here to the operator of the recording device. His name does not appear in the invitation for the show and it would appear that he did not have any influence on the mode in which the photographs were represented. Ptaszkowska comments on the motivation behind the significant reduction of the function of the photographer by Kantor: ‘The bigger the importance of photographic documentation for (Kantor’s) spectacles and happenings became, the more he was reducing its meaning. As a result, the photographers at Foksal were fulfilling a serviceable function.’<sup>8</sup> This case highlights the paradox of the position of the photographers at the Foksal gallery very clearly. On one hand, the promotion of the gallery’s artists depended on the images provided by Kossakowski and Rolke; on the other hand, their contribution was consciously reduced by the format of the images’ exhibition and publication. Anka Ptaszkowska’s and Tadeusz Rolke’s statements suggest that the utilitarian thinking about documentary

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<sup>6</sup> 23<sup>rd</sup> September – 5<sup>th</sup> October 1970.

<sup>7</sup> Tadeusz Kantor: *Happening i działalność typu happeningowego 1963 – 1970*. Wystawa dokumentów z objaśnieniami autora od dnia 23 września do 5 października 1970 r.

<sup>8</sup> Anka Ptaszkowska, *Wierzę w wolność, ale nie nazywam się Beethoven*”, pp. 181.

photography from the side of the Warsaw gallery did not correspond with the ambitions and intentions of the photographers.

This example shows where the idea of the Foksal gallery as a place of mutually-respected encounter, as the PLACE, could have failed. However, there are photographic depictions, significantly taken outside the actual space of the gallery, which radiate with the dynamics of encounter. Importantly, the subjectivity of the photographer behind the camera brings to visibility an image, which features Mariusz. This shot taken during the same performance “Panoramic Sea Happening” captures him looking straight into the camera, or into the photographer’s eye<sup>9</sup>.

The picture shows the preparations for sinking a case containing documents from the Foksal gallery. Several signs on the box inform that the content is fragile. Dramatic commentary describes this event as an attempt to “make any access to the content of the case impossible.” The photograph shows excited crowds of youngsters. They are gathered behind three figures touching the box. Zbigniew Gostomski, Mariusz Tchorek and Wiesław Borowski stand just behind the case. Mariusz smiles towards the photographer. He seems to be amused by the situation, unlike his two companions; apparently enchanted by the object which they are about to sink. The eye contact Mariusz Tchorek established with Eustachy Kossakowski includes the photographer in the action and confirms his physical presence behind the camera. What the photograph captures is the event of encounter between Mariusz Tchorek and Eustachy Kossakowski, mediated by the camera’s lens. The exceptional and direct character of meeting between them seems to put the hierarchy imposed by the gallery on hold. There is also something so emancipating and confronting in Mariusz's direct gaze that I treat this image as more than a documentation of an artistic action. I see it as a depiction of a dialogue between the photographer and the person photographed. Importantly it radiates with the same strength as the

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<sup>9</sup>Photography on Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw webpage:  
<http://artmuseum.pl/pl/archiwum/archiwum-eustachego-kossakowskiego/27/20055>  
(Date of Access: 17.12.13).

photograph of Władysław Strzemiński described by Mariusz. As such, it works as a glimpse of this fundamentally affective power of the encounter, Mariusz was writing about.

Sylwia