



BRÓDNO. JENS HAANING IN CONVERSATION WITH SEBASTIAN CICHOCKI

Danish artist, Jens Haaning, addresses the issues of national identity, immigration, racism, assimilation, and the relationship between language and politics. His projects are created in the context of a place, they result from research on the specifics of a given city, town or district.

Sebastian Cichocki: What did you feel like when you first visited Bródno?

Jens Haaning: It was amazing, like coming home. I grew up in Denmark in the 70s, I am familiar with the landscape of housing developments, social housing. Now once again, I live in a block of flats, in a rather poor district of Copenhagen. 85% of the population are Muslims, and Arabic is the language that I most frequently hear in the streets.

During your visits to Bródno, you had a few ideas, all of which were strongly related to the specifics of the place. For various reasons, these ideas did not come through.

Yes, I was especially fond of Żubrówka Avenue, a type of “alcohol monument”. It would involve a slight modification of the lighting in the avenue which runs along the park. I was going to create a sculpture, quite poetic in its character, not too overwhelming to the viewer, almost invisible. I wanted to fill the lamp shades with vodka, as a result, they would give off a yellowish, dim light after dark. For ages, alcohol has been used as a tool enabling escape from reality...

Do you believe that a particular place can actually affect the work of an artist, and then, the characteristics of that place are “transmitted” through the work of art?

This is not a question of faith. Generally speaking, I am a man devoid of any faith. At the same time, I am not very much convinced of the idea of universal work of art, which has the same meaning all the time, regardless of the place where it is presented. Each artistic intention is geographically rooted. The project I am developing in Bródno, makes sense only here and now. This was not a spontaneous idea, but an effect of my numerous earlier trips to Poland. This is already my tenth visit to Poland.

I would like to ask you about objects appearing in your projects. There were chairs, passports, fluorescent lights, banknotes, clocks, etc. Now you are using pre-manufactured bricks.

Using a found pre-existing object is, in my opinion, synonymous with manufacturing it. It usually involves moving the object, from one place to another, a change of context in which the object is presented. None of my projects started from fascination with an object. These are merely tools to me. I demonstrate relationships between objects, I focus on our perception of objects, on the meanings we give to them. That is why, the fact that the sculpture in Bródno is created from bricks is so crucial to me. It comes from my, perhaps naive, social-democratic perception of Poland, a reference to the celebration of collective work and effort, which were the basis for the creation of “paradise” in Bródno.

You once said that your artistic practice often arose as an result of frustration and disappointment. How would you place your work against the practice of the initiator of the Bródno Sculpture Park, Paweł Althamer, whose actions are often interpreted as a type of “social service”.

I probably first met Paweł in 1994, we both took part in an exhibition in the Netherlands, which was shown in Poland later on. Although we do not get to see each other too often, I have been following his work very closely. I am not entirely sure if his work could be defined as social service, in a sense that you can refer to the practice of many creators, e.g. from Los Angeles. It is evidenced, for instance, by the role played in his art by psychoactive substances, which I think are rather antisocial. It is even more complicated to me as I have had some political past. I started acting as a politician quite early, already as a teenager I appeared on the radio and television in this particular role. My art is therefore quite politically-oriented, but it does not aim at changing the world for the better. It is a reflection of reality, which to a large extent, is modelled by political choices.

Reflecting today on the future of art, once again we ask ourselves very basic questions: what is a work of art?, what function does it serve?, what makes an artist? In discussions between artists and critics, the subject of art effects, art impact on reality returns very frequently. Do you believe in the effectiveness of your actions as an artist?

Yes, but at the same time it is associated with the belief in the survival of our Western civilisation. It is discriminatory against other scenarios. My art takes a critical stand towards the current status quo.

The work performed by you in Warsaw has its weight and capacity, it becomes part of the park landscape in quite a radical way. This is fairly unusual given the fact that your previous projects were much more ephemeral, process-like in their character. Some of them were not tangible or available to the public. Is this a return to your early strategies, even from your student days?

Yes, it is a kind of return, also as a result of personal motivation. It requires a different state of mind. After a lot of turmoil accompanying me for the last 15 years, I feel like myself once again. This does not mean, however, that I am now going to turn into a mindless sculptor who will be experimenting with various materials, etc. But I suppose that my art will actually take on a more tangible character. The sculpture in Bródno is important to me for a lot of reasons. This is my first real monument. Although in the past I received various public orders from Europe and North America, nobody has ever had the courage to invite me to a real sculpture park!

Do you have any expectations in terms of reception of the “Bródno” sculpture by the locals, regular park users, who are not an art audience on a daily basis? Do you think the sculpture will be accepted as an element of “visual identification” of the district?

I think this project has a few different meanings which will be discovered gradually. Some people will identify with the sculpture, they will grow fond of it, while others will demand that it should be removed at once. Everybody has their expectations, assumptions. Of course, I am trying to create an element of reference, a kind of logotype for the district, but at the same time, to surprise the passerby, make him think: what does it mean?, why bricks?, why here?

Do you remember your first visit to Poland?

This was my first or second trip abroad, somewhere in the mid 70s. I was travelling with my parents. Back in those days, they did not have any money at all – I remember from my childhood a trip in the Norwegian mountains and a bicycle tour across Poland they organised for us. I prepared a performance about the experience for the Art Museum in Lodz – my father took about 100 slides in Poland which I used many years later. This was a significant trip; people usually took their children to Spain for vacation, while my parents probably decided to teach us something important by showing us the Polish reality. I remembered this trip as quite an exotic one.