

RESTRAINT WHILE TRAVELLING

PAWEŁ ALTHAMER IN CONVERSATION WITH SEBASTIAN CICHOCKI

Sebastian Cichocki: I am interested in the attitude of artists playing the role of explorers, guides, cartographers, who examine ordinary places, while abstaining from any action, suppressing the need to produce additional objects. I am interested how you build your relationship with the place where you live. Tell me about Bródno, what kind of place is it?

Paweł Althamer: Let me refer to the fictional character of Matołek the Billy-Goat. Perhaps, this is a key figure here. When you start your journey, your tour around the world, it seems to offer an endless number of attractions. I am particularly fond of Matołek the Billy-Goat as this character has accompanied me mentally since childhood, when my journeys were restrained to one-kilometre or two-kilometre walks. They did not lack in intensity though, they even surpassed my current journeys across continents in this respect.

The longer the journey, the closer you are to its starting point?

Yes, this is exactly the paradox of Matołek the Billy-Goat! Also there, at the beginning of the journey, after turning a full circle, you find the key to understanding everything, the whole Universe. From this perspective, each journey seems to be so full of impressions, there is such a depth of experience that we are at last able to discern similarities and recognise differences. Real journeys are not marked with such novelty any more, everything is tamed, because the process has already taken place several times.

What things are helpful while travelling? What should you equip yourself with?

Restraint is quite helpful. It can be defined as a sort of quietness. In my case, it resulted in delight while making walks in Bródno. The quietness enabled me to communicate with the place. First of all, I am referring to literal communication, that is the people living here, my neighbours. But I also allowed the projections of their lives to speak to me, that is the thing created as a result of the collective dream about city life – streets, cars, objects. I took the greatest interest in abandoned objects, which could be viewed by some residents of the district as “companions in misery”. Abandoned, moved, destroyed, marked by the indigenous people with their different stories. These objects gave me a sense of unity – I thought I resembled these objects, an object which could not be ultimately explained, comprehended. I think artists are a kind of abandoned, inexplicable objects. They occupy a place in space, they are there, they exist, but few people are able to explain where these things came from and for what purpose.

These abandoned objects from Bródno were really important to you, so important that you decided to exhibit them. The exhibition, symptomatically entitled “Bródno” in the Tęcza (Rainbow) Cinema Theatre in 1998, consisted solely of such found objects – the effects of amateur activities of your neighbours: a stone painted like a toadstool, entrance doors decorated with a drawing, a birch stump for a pot plant, and so on. Where did they come from?

They came to me by themselves. They answered their own calling. I remember one of those objects. I do not even know what to call it. It was a remnant of some resin, perhaps used to cover the surface of the car body, yacht or something similar. This substance, after the vessel holding it cracked, took on a shape of oversized, artificial amber. It stayed in the bushes for many years, somewhere next to the administration buildings, at the edge of visibility. I passed the objects on many occasions, walking my children to kindergarten. It intrigued me because it was inexplicable. Just like in various fairy tales, there are some objects which lead you to a certain path, move you to a different place. These magic objects turn your head around, make you see reality in a different way.

Speaking of tools, and journeys at the same time – what other objects help us travel? Are there any tools to speed it up, help us to come closer to the centre? Do various types of experience, in the form of sensory deprivation, psychoactive substances, hunger, fever, make your journey more intense, richer, or simply more bearable?

It is all about communication here. Whatever happens inside of you can be communicated to other members of the tribe. This is a very strong need to announce my own discoveries, internal experiences, to the rest of the tribe. Just like a prairie dog telling the whole pack that it has seen a predator. Or a tree, apparently communicating in a way with other plants and warning them during a forest fire.

Residents of Bródno have always been an integral part of this place, and thus a potential medium for your art, just like the magic, found objects mentioned by you earlier on...

A particular moment of transition in Bródno, which is quite easy to recall, was my drug experience. It was marked by acceleration. My experience with LSD was a sort of initiation. I saw myself lost. I saw myself as if I returned to my childhood room and recognised and recalled my long forgotten childhood, the bonds connecting me to that time, as well as awareness of consequences of my choices that brought me to where I was now. It was the awareness of the place, the place I found myself in. Then I stopped looking somewhere far and saw the whole potential of things here, things around me.

Often, in order to communicate something well to the others, the other participants in the experience, you have to repeat certain actions. Thus, the activities in the Sculpture Park, inviting successive artists to participate in projects in Bródno, taking the residents on a trip to Africa, the upcoming journey to the Dogon sculptor Youssuf Dara, who is to build a bus shelter for the residents of Bródno.

Let us talk for a moment about the Sculpture Park and the place you call “Paradise”, created in cooperation with your neighbours, children, a horticulture company, officials and the museum. This place seems quite ordinary, it does not differ much from the other parts of the park...

It seems that apart from the general project which involves placing various works by known artists in the park, artistic events, we are touching on a totally different programme here. It is a religious programme. I was intensively subjected to it in my childhood, so intensively that later on, when I became an adult, it was difficult for me to discern its specific proposal. One of the bits of information stored in the package was the promise of paradise, the place man was thrown out of for misbehaviour. I began, quite early on, to associate this story with some disturbing manipulation, it defied common sense. Why should man be thrown out of paradise? This is how far you can get lost in a lie. This was a lie which gave rise to a whole series of additional lies. However, there must be something quite true about the source of the story.

This truth can be discovered in this particular spot in Bródno. If there is any paradise here, among the blocks of flats, then it is just here, in me. This is the only place where it really exists. My state of awakening and the paradise manifesting itself through the trees, but also through all the imperfections. Not only were apples taken from the paradise, but benches were torn out and lanterns were broken! I thought this discovery called for an immediate announcement.

So, it is enough to put the paradise on the map. It has been here before but we could not see it?

Yes. You know, the most attractive thing is not to postpone things but to experience them immediately.

What makes a real journey?

Wherever we are, there is no need to panic. Indeed, we are strangers but at the same time, we have never left our own home. The final conclusion is that the only trip you have to take is the journey inside of you. To make it more precise – it is a renunciation of any trip whatsoever. The most important discovery to make is that you are exactly where you need to be.

Passages from the talk, which was published in full in the book called “Positionen V: Polen” (Steidl-Verlag, 2011).