

ACT IV: I COULD LIVE IN AFRICA

EXHIBITION
20 Feb - 25 Apr 2010

Featured artists: Mirosław Bałka, Krzysztof Bednarski, Mirosław Filonik, Wiktor Gutt & Waldemar Raniszewski, Jacques de Koning, Zbigniew Libera, *Luxus*, Włodzimierz Pawlak, Józef Robakowski, Darek Skubiel & Zdzisław Ziniczuk, Marek Sobczyk, Jerzy Truszkowski and many more, represented through archival matter.

ACT IV: I Could Live in Africa Exhibition

I Could Live in Africa is the fourth act in the year long project *Morality*, organized by Witte de With.

This is the only exhibition of *Morality* that casts a retrospective glance, highlighting the attitudes of artists in Poland who were active, often collectively. It is difficult to say there was a common aim, even a “movement,” but it is possible to say there was a general motivation to resist the hermetic and authoritarian social-political system that prevailed at the time, to open spaces from which to resist the moral and aesthetic standards brought about under martial law.

Martial law was imposed in Poland on 13 December 1981 by the Military Council for National Salvation, led by then prime minister Gen. Wojciech Jaruzelski. It was imposed to “defend socialism” against the threat of the Solidarity movement, the first such (counter)revolutionary concession in the Soviet bloc. This state of martial law brought about a large number of arrests, along with a highly controlled environment: the borders were sealed, telephone lines disconnected, curfews imposed. Most importantly, radio and television networks were controlled and managed by the communist state, and only official newspapers were published. This reality was exceptionally painful. For young people it seemed clear that under such regime there was no future. There was active and even widespread resistance to martial law, mainly by strikes and street marches, but nearly all forms of resistance were brutally crushed. The fate of the ruling Communist Party was sealed in 1989 when the Solidarity won by a land-slide in the first free election after World War II.

Borrowing its title from Dutch filmmaker Jacques de Koning’s documentary on the Polish post punk and reggae band Izrael, the exhibition *I Could Live in Africa* explores the mood shared by the “new wild” artists and the music subcultures (punk, new wave, reggae) in 1980s communist Poland. Determined by a gloomy political and economic context, this mood translated into an eruption of subcultures that managed to circumvent both the limited means of production and the monopoly that the ruling regime had over publishing and recording.

These subcultures thrived against a background of police brutality, closed borders, empty shops, and frequent power shortages. Their aesthetic weapons included anti regime stencils and graffiti, safety pins, wildly expressive and “primitive” forms, assemblages of waste and detritus, collages, concerts that turned into ecstatic group rituals, opening receptions that morphed into improvised happenings, zines and samizdat. Though the times were hardly “funny”, these cultural manifestations were infused with humor, openly sneering at the system, contemptuous of communist propaganda, of the absence of democratic rights, of the hypocrisy of the mass media and the Church.

While the punk movement of the West was brandishing its slogan “no future”, the Polish artists from the 80s were deeply engaged in shaking reality, fighting against the system and dreaming of a better future. Far from consuming a trend or criticizing from within the premises of capitalism, these artists created not only a resistance to what existed, but made room to exist differently.

Throughout the exhibition one can sense a desire of the youth to “flee” from Babylon, to warm countries. The aesthetic resulting from this state of mind was driven by an ironic, sometimes naïve approach to the Rastafarian ideology to see the rise of Zion (which for Rastafarians meant Ethiopia) and fall of Babylon (i.e. the Communist regime). Actions and art works would take form under an intuitive impulse, a *pensée sauvage* removed from pre-established codes and rules.

Curated by Michał Wolinski in collaboration with Nicolaus Schafhausen and Anne-Claire Schmitz.

Participating Artists

Mirosław Bałka

(1958, born in Warsaw, Poland; lives and works in Warsaw)

The Music which tattooed my brain,
(1980s)
(cfr. vitrine with archive)

«In the eighties almost nobody had an original record or tape with music from the other side of the [iron] curtain. But most of us had a two-pocket tape recorder and we shared music. Nobody knew where the music came from. The CIA? That time was about sharing, and not just tapes. Now after 20 years the ink is a little bit faded, but that was the music that tattooed my brain.» (Mirosław Bałka, 13 Feb 2009)

In the exhibition is a selection of cassette covers made by Mirosław Bałka in the 1980s. These covers were collages, made from various found material, like invitations, postcards or photos cut from newspapers. Photos of bands were largely unavailable in Poland at that time. The cassette covers were therefore meant to make up for the absent images of bands and artists from outside of Poland.

These covers are significant signs of the tape-swapping phenomenon that took place in Poland and elsewhere. As the circulation of “unofficial” music was virtually nonexistent, tape-swapping was tolerated by performers as the only effective means of distribution.

Neue Bieremiennost (Mirosław Bałka, Mirosław Filonik, Marek Kijewski) + Warchoł (Andrzej Łopiński)

Jean Bedel Bokassa’s installation presented at Witte de With is a reconstruction based on an *active opening* originally held at the Stodoła student club in Warsaw in 1987 by the artist group *Neue Bieremiennost* + *Warchoł*.

Neue Bieremiennost was a collective (a ‘consciousness’ in their terminology) founded by three graduates of the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts. The group was active in the years 1986-1987 (then, as *Keine Neue Bieremiennost*, until spring 1989). The way its name was written (in German and Russian, using Gothic and Cyrillic script) alluded to two countries neighbouring with Poland and, at the same time, places where the largest totalitarian regimes of

the 20th century were born. A sense of ‘new pregnancy’ was an effect of that ironic dialectics.

Neue Bieremiennost’s exhibition titles usually alluded to anniversaries, holidays or other occasions, or to famous personalities. The openings usually transformed into what they called *active openings*, during which music played, texts were read aloud (usually in order to confuse the audience), activities with installation elements were carried out, fire burned, people danced, drank and various unexpected situations took place provoked by the atmosphere and the artists’ activities. The main element of the Stodoła event was an oversized figure of a black man, made of papier-mâché and painted with stinking bitumen paint. The figure sat on a throne made of wooden planks, had no head, but instead had a 16 meter-long phallus. The installation was made complete with ritual music from central Africa, pot plants (brought from the Stodoła office spaces), soil, wallpaper glue (left over from the sculpting of the figure), and a water bucket. The brochure accompanying the show was a photocopy collage of the cover of the menu of Troika, a Russian restaurant located in the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw, which the artists frequented, and a drawing of a black man’s face made by Bałka.

During the opening, before the public was let in, the director of the Stodoła gallery stood in front of the door and read out the text *The Metaphysical Shift* (written by Anda Rottenberg). A text about magical rituals and cannibalism (inspired by Bałka, who had told her about the planned installation). From behind the closed door, African music could be heard. While the audience waited to be let in, listening to the lecture, the artists drank wine and, using ropes attached to the ceiling, hoisted the phallus roughly to the eye level of the people entering the room. The phallus, whose tip was initially dipped in the bucket with wallpaper glue, dripped large drops of the thick white liquid on the floor, forming a puddle.

After the exhibition at the Stodoła closed, *Bokassa* was moved to the Remont gallery, affiliated with another student club, where it was to be stored. Before that, however, at the organisers’ request, it was used as part of stage design for the concert of the rock group T-Love and the punk rock band TZN Xenna. During the concert, the piece

was destroyed by the musicians and the audience.

The installation presents an absurd and ironic glorification of the leader of all excesses, dictator Jean Bedel Bokassa, who declared himself president of the Central African Republic in 1966 through one of the most megalomaniac of ceremonies. Along with a list of other excesses, this lavish celebration bankrupted his already impoverished country. The installation offers an ironic reinterpretation of this outrageous investiture ceremony, putting together a poorer decorum made of soil, plastic bags, plants and fake ferns. Celebrating Bokassa, who was accused of cannibalism, it also derides the Polish situation in which one had to queue in order to get a piece of meat.

Krzysztof Bednarski

(1953, born in Krakow, Poland; lives and works in Rome)

Sphinx is a miniature representation of the Egyptian Sphinx made of matchboxes. Seemingly naïve, the sculpture actually speaks to the double theme of animality and power that runs through the entire exhibition. The Sphinx’s enigmatical stare seems analogous to a mysterious power that, in the context of 1980s Poland, might well be an allegory for a severe and volatile political system. *Sphinx* also stands in for the mysterious quality that the “future” was taking on for this generation of the ‘80s.

Mirosław Filonik

(1958, born in Białystok; lives and works in Warsaw)

Filonik's "revolving" sculpture was originally shown on 9 May 1986 at Galeria Wieża in Warsaw, at the exhibition *K.C. Noje Bieriemnost for peace* (curated by J. Kiliszek) and later in Sopot in *Expression of the 80s* (curated by R. Ziarkiewicz), the most important exhibition about the new wild art in Poland.

Filonik's work expresses the general feeling Polish citizens had about the communist regime in their country as a kind of Banana Republic (an absurd, corrupted system ruled by tyrants) and as an annex to the Soviet Union, as Hawaii was to the USA.

Wiktor Gutt & Waldemar Raniszewski

Wiktor Gutt (1949, born in Warsaw), Waldemar Raniszewski (1947–2005, born in Warsaw)

Expressions on a Face is an action that happened in November 1981 during the Rockowisko '81 rock festival in Łódź, as part of *Koncert*, a documentary directed by Michał Tarkowski.

At the end of November 1981, a crowd of young people met for a several days long collective 'trip', fleeing from an offensive reality. The festival became an opportunity for expressing and manifesting their generation's separation from earlier ones.

The idea behind this body painting session was to help participants to manifest themselves just as performers could do on stage. The suggested scenery was simple: large mirrors and an announcement panel saying 'Body Painting - Expression on a Face'. For the three days of the festival, about a dozen persons simultaneously painted faces, sometimes torsos, backs or arms. In extreme congestion, to the deafening sound of the music, a surprisingly intimate contact occurred between the painters and the painted. Some of the participants, adorned at their request with symbols or inscriptions expressing their critical attitude towards politics, were taken by police officers to the bathroom and forced to wash off the scandalous make-up. After which they returned and asked for a repeat. Sometimes the washing-off and repainting took place several times. Some wanted to pay as if for a commercial service. Others brought their

friends and acquaintances. That is how whole groups marked themselves as armies - gangs of rascals, engaged couples... Some closed their eyes during the session and remained in a state of quasi-coma, while others watched the whole process in the mirror, controlling it and assuming full responsibility for the final result.

Those were intimate events transferring the participants into an area of creation and self-creation. A person we called the Mad Mathematician wore his 'make-up' for several days until the paint fell apart. Those days, it was an act of civil courage. (By Wiktor Gutt, 1993)

Jacques de Koning

(1958, born in Amsterdam; lives and works in Amsterdam)

I Could Live in Africa is a documentary about the band Izrael made by the Dutch filmmaker Jacques de Koning. The film is a conscious tongue-in-cheek over-identification with roles, confronting a student from the 'affluent West' making his first film, with the members of a post-punk and reggae band from communist Poland.

The film features a conversation in which Izrael's band members come up with the statement "I could live in Africa" when speaking about their needs and expectations for the future. This ironic but, deeply honest, response is symptomatic of the exaggerated, cliché but perceptive tone and attitude of Izrael that can be perceived throughout the whole documentary.

Zbigniew Libera

(1959, born in Pabianice; lives and works in Warsaw and Prague)

At the beginning of martial law, Zbigniew Libera was imprisoned because of his activity against the communist regime. While in prison he managed with other political prisoners to transform the external courtyard into a beach for sunbathing. The photographs shown in the exhibition are significant selections of Libera's "punk" attitude in his practice.

For Art, 1982 (2006)

"A prophetic work, in a way. A week after taking this picture - on 26 August 1982 - I was arrested for printing illegal leaflets. Those days, a bald-shaven man was explicitly thought to be a former inmate. The secret police officers interrogating me were very impressed, unable to understand that I had shaven my head of my own free will - for art. This picture, under precisely such title, I published later in one of the issues of *Tango*, the leading art zine on the 1980s Łódź scene." (Z. Libera, 2009)

Home Performance, ca. 1984 (2004)

"I carried out the performance at my own apartment. Its addressees and participants, and at the same time its sole audience, was my mother, Jadwiga, and my then-best friend, Romek. I asked them to take pictures during the action, which consisted in feigning suicide attempts." (Z. Libera, 2009)

Teofilów (excerpts), 1987

These are excerpts from a film documenting an artist gathering in the village of Teofilów. The gathering was organized by Kultura Zrzuty (an artist group that had an attitude comparable to the punk subculture scene) and turned out as a kind of 'festival of artistic impotence'. As part of this event, Zbigniew Libera gave an unbearable 'concert for the heater' a performance in which he is joined, among others, by the art critic Jolanta Ciesielska. Moskwa's gig, though not very successful either, nonetheless stands out above the rest of the event. In the film one can see artists and critics, amongst them Jan Swidzinski, Andrzej Rzepecki, Marek Janiak, Zbigniew Libera, Jacek Kryszkowski, jiggling around to the beat of music. Guma, the Moskwa leader, and his band mates, lost in the space of art, eventually decide to stop the embarrassment and leave during one of the artistic appearances (by Przemysław Kwiek)

Luxus artzine (1980-1986)

Luxus artzine first appeared in the early 80's. It was founded by Paweł Jarodzki with Ewa Ciepiewska, Bożena Grzyb, Artur Gołacki and Andrzej Jarodzki, all colleagues from the Academy of Fine Arts in Wrocław. Subsequent issues of the magazine were authored collectively and produced in only a few copies, later expanded to runs of twenty, with the use of hand-made drawings, stencils, collages and simple graphic techniques (possession of duplicators and publishing without censorship was forbidden). The magazine's title was, on the one hand, an ironic reference to the country's economical, social, and political context, and on the other hand to the neo-avant-garde associated with Fluxus. The second issue featured a satire on women's issues, sex, pseudo-punks and pseudo-junkies, while the fourth issue included radical anti-regime lyrics by the reggae band Miki Mauzoleum.

Włodzimierz Pawlak

(1957, born in Korytów; lives and works in Korytów and Warsaw)

Pawlak's painting shows a peaceful Hitler taking a nap amidst luxurious tropical vegetation. The landscape was representative of the (mythical) place to which many Polish youth wished to escape. Like a political fiction, the work expresses the frustration of an isolated society dreaming of an alternative future.

Józef Robakowski

(1939, born in Poznań; lives and works in Łódź)

More Air is a two-and-half-minute-long film montage of pogo dancing at the Jarocin festival. Robakowski shoot it by himself standing with a camera in the center of the crowd - immersed in a frantic ritual. It is a unique recording of a live show, and at the same time a fulfillment of Robakowski's artistic strategy, under which he explored issues such as art as a field of energy transmissions, of biological-mechanical processes - focusing on celebrating qualities poorly represented in the field of art, such as intensity, vitality.

Darek Skubiel & Zdzisław Ziniczuk

(AWA Amateur Filmmakers' Club, Poznań)

The film's aim was to present the Jarocin festival as an ecstatic, virtually delirious manifestation of the state of anarchy, the kind of 'life in suspension', that reigned in Poland between the signing of the August Agreements in 1980 and the introduction of martial law in December 1981. *Touching the Sound's* incredible atmosphere is built by a rigorous formal structure - the growing ecstasy of the ritual's participants is accompanied by ever louder, trance music that, at the climax, unable to keep up with the image, suddenly stops. Getting closer to nature turns out to be the best way to escape the paranoia of reality.

Marek Sobczyk

(1955, born in Warsaw; lives and works in Warsaw)

Made just one day after the imposition of martial law, *Ganja* pictures General Jaruzelski in the same way Polish citizens could watch him on TV while announcing the establishment of new regulations. Through this work, Sobczyk expressed his first reaction to the imposition of martial law. Less than a solution, martial law only served to freeze a situation that was already beyond the grasp of the regime.

Jerzy Truszkowski

(1961, born in Warsaw; lives and works in Warsaw)

Farewell Europe is a performance by Truszkowski (filmed by Libera) that he made just before he was sent to do military service. Symbolizing the impact of the system on individuality, he seems to sing an ode to the alienation emerging from the ruling morals and power figures, provoking a disarticulated body.

Works

Mirosław Bałka

The Music, which tattooed my brain (1980s)

Collection of audio tapes, self made cassette covers
From the collection of the artist

Neue Bieriemiennost (Mirosław Bałka, Mirosław Filonik, Marek Kijewski) + Warcho! (Andrzej Łopiński)

Neue Bieriemiennost for Jean Bedel Bokassa (1987 / 2010)
installation (mixed media)
Courtesy of the artists

Krzysztof Bednarski

Sphinx (1982)
Sculpture made of matchboxes
100 x 200 x 70 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Centre of Polish Sculpture, Orońsko

Mirosław Filonik

Honoloulou Baboon (1986)
Installation / papier maché, wallpaper, taperecorder, audio tape, sand
Variable dimensions
Courtesy of the artist & J. Kiliszek Collection

Wiktor Gutt & Waldemar Raniszewski

Expressions on a Face (1981)
Slideshow transferred on DVD
Courtesy of Wiktor Gutt

Jacques de Koning

I Could Live in Africa (1983)
16 mm film transferred on DVD, 20'18"
Courtesy of the artist

Zbigniew Libera

For Art, 1982 (2006)
Black and white photograph
Silver-gelatin print on baryta paper
38,5 x 48,5 cm
Courtesy Raster Gallery, Warsaw

Home Performance, ca. 1984 (2004)
6 black-and-white photographs, silver-gelatin print on baryta paper
total dimensions: 80 x 100 cm.
Courtesy of Raster Gallery, Warsaw

Untitled

(Hommage à Gawron) - (ca 1985)
black and white photographs
Courtesy Raster Gallery, Warsaw

Libera-Furniture Piece, ca 1985 (2006)
3 black and white photographs, silver-gelatin print on baryta paper
48 x 38,5 each
Courtesy Raster Gallery, Warsaw

Teofilów, (excerpts), (1987)
video transferred on DVD
Courtesy of the artist

Luxus artzine, (1980-1986)
Courtesy of Paweł Jarodzki

Włodzimierz Pawlak

Adolf Hitler (1986)
Oil on canvas
130 x 180 cm
Courtesy of Richard Egit Collection, deposit: Egit Foundation and Zachęta National Art Gallery

Józef Robakowski

More Air! (1986)
16 mm film transferred on DVD, 2'30"
(music video, performed by Moskwa)
Courtesy of the artist

Darek Skubiel & Zdzisław Zynczuk

(AWA Amateur Filmmakers' Club, Poznań)
Touching the Sound (1981)
16 mm film transferred on DVD, 6' 9"

Marek Sobczyk

Ganja (1981)
Oil on canvas
90 x 90 cm
Courtesy of Archiv der Forschungsstelle Osteuropa an der Universität Bremen

Jerzy Truszkowski

Farewell Europe (1987)
Video transferred on DVD, 12'36"
Courtesy of the artist

EXHIBITION

20 Feb - 25 Apr 2010

Opening on Friday 19 Feb 2010, 6-9 p.m.
6.30 p.m.: public conversation with Paweł Jarodzki, Jacques de Koning and Piotr Rypson.

7.30 p.m.: restaging of the *active opening* 'Neue Bieriemiennost for Jean Bedel Bokassa' held at Galeria Stodola and Galerie Rzezby (Warsaw) in 1987, in the presence of the artists Mirosław Bałka and Mirosław Filonik.

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

Opening hours: Tues - Sun, 11 a.m. - 6 p.m., (closed on Mondays)

Guided Tours: (NB: not for groups)
Every Wednesday at 3 p.m. by a staff member, EN/NL, free (excl. entry price); every Sunday at 3 p.m., EN/NL, free (excl. entry price)

Other Guided Tours for:

- groups (10+ persons)
 - other days/times
 - available languages: Arabic, Dutch, English, French, German, Polish, Spanish
- upon request and payment (60€ per group). Contact via reservations@wdw.nl or 0104110144.

Detailed program and further information available on www.wdw.nl

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