

INTRODUCTION TO “COMMON SPACE AND INDIVIDUAL SPACE: COMMENTS ON A GROUP TASK FROM THE FIRST HALF OF 1993,” ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS, WARSAW

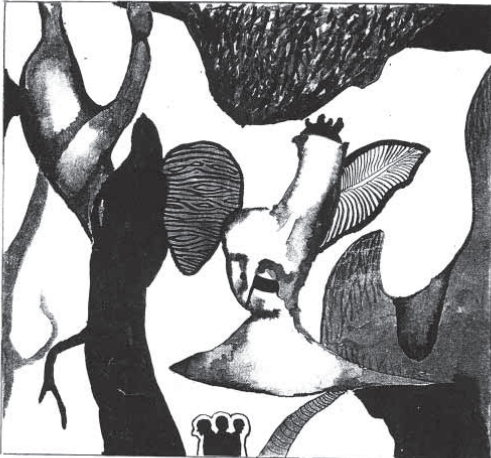
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“Common Space and Individual Space” was published in the fourth issue of *Czereja*, a magazine created by the students of Kowalnia, a studio for fine art students run by Grzegorz Kowalski in the Department of Sculpture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. The Document compiles the accounts by Monika Zielińska, Jane Stoykow, and Artur Żmijewski of a performative group activity entitled *Pierozek drewniany, zimnym mięsem nadziewany* (*The Wooden Dumpling, Filled with Cold Meat*) from the 1992–93 academic year.¹ *The Wooden Dumpling* was the eighth in a series of such activities (which Kowalski called “tasks”) that had begun in 1981–82, cumulatively called *Common Space and Individual Space*. The students described *The Wooden Dumpling* from their separate perspectives, focusing on their individual experiences rather than providing an exact ordered reconstruction and coherent report of the facts.

The text published here should therefore not be read simply as an inert art document, but as a part of the creative process within *The Wooden Dumpling*. Even though the commentary was written after the activity was completed, it does not offer rationalized and ordered

¹ The participants in the activity were Grzegorz Kowalski (referred to in the text as G.K.), Roman Woźniak (R.W.), Monika Dzik (M.D.), Jan Kubicki (Mitaś), Monika Leczew, Mariusz Maciejewski (M.), Grzegorz Matusiak (G.M.), Anna Mioduszevska, Jędrzej Niestrój, Jane Stoykow, Monika Zielińska, and Artur Żmijewski.

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Ilya Kabakov. "Czereja" issue 4, 1993. Scanned magazine cover. Image courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw.

conclusions, as we might expect from a post-factum account. Rather, the reader is provided with three parallel streams of thought, which reveal different takes on the same situation and which, with their juxtapositions, enter into dialogue with one another. In its emphasis on open, unrestrained (even chaotic) thinking and on the role of images and experience in attempting to transcend the limitations of the linguistic domain, the text can also be treated as an artwork itself in which the reader can take part. The text provides access to the character of Kowalnia's practices—a pedagogical experiment anomalous within the fairly traditional art education systems of Central and Eastern Europe of this time. The importance of Kowalski's practices extends beyond artistic discourse. Even though Kowalski's methods did not find followers in other Polish art academies, Kowalnia produced a generation of artists focused on challenging the status quo of post-communist Polish society and exposing its hypocrisies. Their practices became widely discussed beyond art circles and had a meaningful presence in the broad social discourse of 1990s Poland.

The discussion around *The Wooden Dumpling* provides a valuable account of Kowalnia from the perspective of its own graduates, just prior to their entrance onto the Polish art scene. Zielińska's, Stoykow's, and Żmijewski's accounts reveal the tensions between the students and their professor, their dissatisfaction with aspects of Kowalski's pedagogy, and their skepticism regarding the possibilities of the nonverbal artistic communication he promoted. At the same time, the document's importance goes beyond detailing the work of Kowalski and his students, by providing insight into the condition of Polish art and society post-1989 and by raising broader theoretical questions about the possibilities and limitations of artistic communication.

The first issue of *Czereja* was published in 1992 in Warsaw. The issue was made up of six black-and-white photocopied, A4-sized sheets of paper stapled together. The editorial board, publishers, and printing house comprised three people—Monika Dzik, Monika Zielińska,² and Artur Żmijewski—all of whom studied at Kowalnia. Żmijewski, who had already produced art zines prior to his education at the Academy, was the principal force behind the magazine. Already before *Czereja*, he had expressed the urgent need for critical discussions about art practice and pedagogy, and for the creation of a space for the exchange of ideas within the rather traditional and conservative Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts.³ *Czereja* continued this spirit of conducting critical discussions on art in the form of spontaneous, informal, and often emotional commentary rather than academic reflection subject to the rules of scholarly coherence and logic. In the words of its editors, *Czereja* was a “reaction to the lethargic atmosphere within academic circles” and an attempt to “create a possibility of expressing ourselves” against the dominant “mode of education based on a passive absorption of the definitions and ways of artistic actions and thinking . . . [which are] not helpful for forming individual modes of expression.”⁴ *Czereja* gathered theoretical essays and critiques of particular works that emerged within

2 Zielińska's father ran a law firm and let the editors of *Czereja* use its resources to print the magazine.

3 He was known, for instance, for sticking short comments and quotes related to students' projects on the Kowalnia studio's wall. All facts concerning the emergence of *Czereja* are drawn from Karol Sienkiewicz, “Konflikt i porozumienie: ‘Czereja’ w pracowni Grzegorza Kowalskiego,” *Ikonotheka* 20 (2007): 183–200.

4 Quote taken from an application for the Pro Helvetia Foundation Grant, written in 1995 by the editors of *Czereja*, as cited originally in Karol Sienkiewicz, “Konflikt i porozumienie,” 186.

Kowalnia, as well as commentaries on artistic tasks carried out collectively within the studio. In most cases, though, the editors hardly provided any clear documentation of the actions and projects described. *Czereja* was, instead, especially in its first issues, a platform for exchanging views and enabling the circulation of ideas, even if they were still not fully formed. The importance of *Czereja* thus lies in its immediacy and in its perspective based on the participants' experiences. Its accounts are often chaotic and challenging for the reader, but they also offer direct, unmediated access to the art practices discussed in its pages.

Czereja only released six issues, between 1992 and 1998. The first four were produced using a DIY technique (the texts and illustrations were assembled together and reproduced on a copy machine) and were freely distributed mainly among students and friends within the Academy and nearby circles, such as the Institute of Art History at the University of Warsaw. The fifth and sixth issues were professionally offset publications with improved layouts and higher-quality illustrations and were printed on higher-quality paper, owing to financial aid received from Poland's Culture Foundation (*Fundacja Kultury*). Beginning with the fifth issue, the magazine was made available in Polish bookstores for purchase.

With its rather strict divisions into departments such as media, painting, or sculpture, art education in Poland during the 1990s was pedagogically traditional (and it continues to be today). Within each department, students would choose studios run by different professors, who mentored them until they graduated. This structure reinforced the traditional dynamic between master and apprentice, and with it the hierarchical nature of artistic education within Polish art schools. Grzegorz Kowalski's teaching philosophy sought to break with this tradition. He defined his method as "partnership didactics" (*dydaktyka partnerska*), continuing a style of artistic pedagogy based on dialogue that Kowalski drew from his education in the workshops of Oskar Hansen and Jerzy Jarnuszkiewicz. After he replaced Jarnuszkiewicz as the head of the diploma studio in the Sculpture Department in 1985, Kowalski began looking for ways to further develop this dialogical model of education. As he explained in his teaching statement *To Teach Art or to Educate the Artists?*, the students rather than the professor should play the decisive role in the studio. Repeating after Jarnuszkiewicz that "the studio is created by the students and the

pedagogues” (and adding: “in this exact order”), Kowalski described his teaching approach as “a mutual flux of impulses,”⁵ a creative dialogue in which the professor should not be the dominant party. Since openness and freedom of expression were Kowalski’s priorities, the students were not limited to traditional sculptural materials like clay, wood, or marble, in spite of the fact that the workshop operated within the Department of Sculpture; they instead used a much wider variety of media, including performance and video, to produce their works.

One of the strongest examples of Kowalski’s “partnership didactics” was *Common Space and Individual Space*, practiced in the studio starting in the 1981–82 academic year. Its aim was to test the possibilities and boundaries of artistic communication and to examine the tension between the individual (artistic expression) and the common (social context). Most of the tasks lasted several weeks, during which the students returned to the workshop with their artistic responses to the actions of other members. The key principle of *Common Space* was that its members used only nonverbal means of communication—“the language of gestures, signs, forms, and colors—the entire repertoire of visual arts as well as sounds.”⁶ Verbal commentary was incorporated only after the task was over. Each task began with a specific situation, usually involving a combination of objects and students’ bodies as set up by Kowalski. For example, in the 1989–90 academic year, the situation opening *Common Space* involved a wooden table with large holes carved into the surface. The students placed their heads through the openings so that their ability to move was limited and their bodies were not visible to other participants from the chin down.

The *Wooden Dumpling* task discussed in the Document translated here, staged in the 1992–93 academic year, similarly started with the presentation of a wooden chest, with one of the students—Mariusz Maciejewski—lying inside.

The participants responded to this initial situation with various actions, mainly focused on Maciejewski’s body.⁷ For instance,

5 Grzegorz Kowalski, “Uczyć sztuki czy kształcić artystów? (Kilka spostrzeżeń szarlatana),” proceedings from the conference *Polskie Szkolnictwo Artystyczne: Dzieje, Teoria, Praktyka. Materiały LIII Ogólnopolskiej Sesji Naukowej Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki*, Warszawa (October 14–16, 2004), 22.

6 Kowalski, “Uczyć,” 24–25.

7 What follows is not a description of the task in its entirety, which is too lengthy and complex to detail here, but instead only a description of the parts of the exercise that are related by the participants in the Document.



Common Space
Individual Space 1992/93,
photograph.

Żmijewski filled the bottom of the coffin with melting snow. Dzik placed gold-painted casts of human feces (later drowned by Kowalski in jars filled with water) next to each participant. Using a black crayon, Matusiak drew lines on Maciejewski's body, dividing it into parts. Zielińska planted watercress around his genitals; the watercress was then cut by Zielińska and served on a baguette to the participants. Kubicki shaved Maciejewski's face and later drove nails in the coffin's sides. Leczew stepped inside the coffin, drinking beer and smoking cigarettes with Maciejewski. Jędrzej Niestrój lined the inside of the coffin with a tarp and filled it with water; the participants then pierced the tarp, causing the water to leak and squirt out.

In the task's later stages, the students worked with the empty coffin and transformed the space surrounding it. Żmijewski placed Maciejewski on a metal bed frame suspended over the empty coffin and rotated the structure; Stoykow turned the coffin upside down, creating a table; Kubicki placed inflated balloons in the coffin; and Mioduszewska poured loose dough over openings in the bed frame's lattice and later cut twelve openings into the coffin. Mioduszewska joined Maciejewski (now dressed in a tailcoat) in the coffin, and the two danced together to joyous music. Niestrój put a large lattice cage over the chest and the participants. He placed tram handles on the top, which the participants held while Leczew stuck green leaves to the cage's outer walls. The chest and the cage were then connected with paper stashes adorned with pictures of Maciejewski, which Kowalski in turn burnt. Kowalski concluded the task by asking the participants to dress in either black or white and to paint their faces accordingly.

For Kowalski, the significance of *Common Space* was that it did not “assume any specific, final effect in the form of some kind of art work.” Rather, he argued:

we initiate the process, which can lead us to unknown destinations. . . . We are suspending the usual hierarchy: professor-students, we are facing the challenges as equal participants. . . . At the beginning everyone has a precisely defined “individual space” within the “common space.” . . . The individual space is a private ground, the common space a kind of agora. . . . The need for communication is the driving and constructive force of the process. Moreover—it is an ethical measure of our behaviors and the ability to be in the community. Every kind of destructive behavior can destroy the communication.⁸

Difficulties with communication proved to be an important concern within *Czereja*, as well. As Karol Sienkiewicz has noted in his study of the magazine, the texts published in *Czereja* were addressed mainly to readers familiar with the context of the studio; as such, they rarely offer coherent descriptions that would explain, for example, the chronological sequence of events taking place within each task.⁹ Moreover, the tense used in the accounts often changes freely between past and present, and the punctuation remains incorrect and often confusing. Therefore, for any reader outside the workshop’s circle, the accounts of *The Wooden Dumpling* stand out as somewhat opaque and difficult to follow. Visceral, often vulgar, language, poetic metaphors, and neologisms (“human repeated but cold”; “a necrophiliac flower bed”) invite the reader to understand the text through images, feelings, and evoked experiences (“the cadaver soaked in putrid juice”; “this smells like lunch, like a nap after lunch”). The authors freely jump between loose associations and digressions, often referring to events and people important to the Kowalnia students—for example, the death of Jerzy Stajuda, a charismatic professor of drawing at the Academy whom Żmijewski mentions—without further explanation. Through unhampered flows of thoughts filled with neologisms and allusive poetic phrases, the texts published in *Czereja* offer a metaphorical and viscerally charged form of signification. At the same time, they

8 Kowalski, “Uczyć,” 24–25.

9 Karol Sienkiewicz, “Konflikt i porozumienie,” 195–96.

* * *

Co to jest - pierożek drewniany zimnym mięsem nadziewany ?

Sytuacja jest trupia , niestychanie , niemożliwie trupia , żarliwie . 10 osób skupionych wokół drewnianej skrzynki z leżącym wewnątrz nagim chłopakiem Przeciagające się milczenie , bezruch . Wtedy jeszcze nic , jakieś rozstargnienie , odrobina zdziwienia . Później dopiero trup wylazł , wypetłł , rozlał się po umyśle i zaczął gnć . Oczywiście zdalnie , w wyobraźni . Gnicie samo i smród gnicia były zastępcze , przez co niepozorne , mało obecne , a równocześnie dosadne . Pierwsze skojarzenia (nie moje - zasłyszane) z trupieniem Stajudy , z jego powolnym wykańczaniem się , zapowiedzianą śmiercią .

Pierwszy impuls i potrzeba - zaprzeczyć sytuacji , zlikwidować trupa (utylizacja padliny) . Stąd grzejne żarówki , jako próba wysuszenia na proszek , pergaminową mumię . Wyobrażeniem wysuszenia trupa było rozpuszczenie śniegu w skrzynce . Ta próba uwolnienia się od zwłok - kompletnie nieudana .



fol . archiwum pracowni

Monika Zielińska sady na genitaliach chłopca rzeźuchę . Czy jest to z jej strony chęć sprzeciwienia się martwocie , sugestia przemiany na poziomie biologicznym , wręcz robaczym ? Ujawnienie obiegu materii , żywe , martwe , itd . Wszelkie to na nic , trup bowiem został wspomózony , rzec można iż Grzegorz Kowalski przeprowadził areanimację , wpełchnął trupa silniej w trupiość . Kontur stóp , jak osobliwy portret trumienny zawisał na deskach skrzyni . Kontemplacja . Uwieszenie stóp w gipsowej zaprawie . Demonstracyjne otwarcie ostatniej fazy cyklu . To niczym oczekiwanie pojawienia się płam wątrobowych na grzbietach dłoni . Kto wie może i gmeranie językiem w ustach , dotykание dziąseł , bardziej miękkich niż kiedyś , szukanie śladów starszej parodontozy , pierwszych zwiroteżeń w porach języka , usznego miększu .

Prywatna skrzynka Romana Woźniaka . Prywatna trumienka ? Może , gdyby nie filuterne wyglądanie dołem , wysuwanie i wsuwanie głowy , jakaś gimnastyka kręgosłupa , kokietowanie może . Trupa ?

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are more than personal accounts. Read together, they help map Kowalnia in the nineties from an insider's perspective, free from the conventions and restraints of mainstream art criticism.

The accounts of *The Wooden Dumpling*, especially Stoykow's and Żmijewski's, also allow us to experience some of the tensions present within the workshop. As Stoykow claims, "everything ended before it really started and gained speed," because the conventions of courtesy and social norms precluded the transgressive potential of the task. "I felt tired," writes Stoykow, "from the self-control," and describes the experience (rather enigmatically) as "something like a birthday party

Czereja issue 4,
1993. Scanned
page 10 of the
magazine.

Image courtesy
of the Museum
of Modern Art,
Warsaw.

organized by the family, [I had wanted] more than that, a meeting of friends after which I wake up, I don't know when or why, on a park bench, full of weird images, full of the will to return, to explain [and] build something new. . . . This is what I am still looking for—rebellion and speed.”¹⁰ *The Wooden Dumpling* reveals the students' dissatisfactions with the discrepancies between Kowalski's philosophy and his practice, accusing him of falling into the pitfalls of traditional preconceptions about pedagogy, art, and communication. Thus Żmijewski criticizes Kowalski's allegiance to language, impeding the process of nonverbal communication, which should form the ground for a common space. Despite his declared intentions, according to Żmijewski, Kowalski imposed rules of reason (by “arranging [the events] in sequences of logical successions”) and language (by “creating a vocabulary, searching for an alphabet, consecutive actions assigned to letters, signs”). For Żmijewski, Kowalski “favors language, sequences of interrelated forms, he looks for a coherent, metalogic transformation, result from a result”; Żmijewski, on the other hand, had been looking for a “sequence in the content, in the meaning of shapes, interpretations of the actions.” *The Wooden Dumpling*, Żmijewski writes, ended with a triumph of reason—it was a “pedagogical product, an amputation of an unfolding chain of reality in creation, a kind of consensual inside-the-brain abortion.”¹¹ For him, the potential of artistic action, instead of disrupting social order and establishing new channels of communication beyond verbal constraints, turned out to be tamed by societal norms and presented as a rationalized artifact.

The comments in the accompanying Document not only provide perspectives onto the studio practices within Kowalnia, but they also speak to the broader context of Polish art and society after 1989. The massive political, social, and economic changes brought by the systemic transformation of 1989 shaped the world the Kowalnia students would face after leaving the studio. As Poland established itself as a democratic state and the centrally planned economy was replaced by the free market system, years of official censorship were replaced by liberal ideals of free speech. However, the post-transition reality quickly began to disappoint, and the 1990s revealed deep inequalities rooted in

10 Jane Stoykow, “Obszar wspólny i obszar własny: Komentarze do zadania grupowego z pierwszej połowy 1993 roku,” *Czereja* 4 (1993): 9.

11 Artur Żmijewski, “Obszar wspólny i obszar własny: Komentarze do zadania grupowego z pierwszej połowy 1993 roku,” *Czereja* 4 (1993): 14.

economic differences, as well as exclusions based on sexual orientation, gender, and disabilities. The source of oppression changed from one that was clearly defined—the Communist state—to the dispersed but equally strong powers of societal norms within a rather conservative society. Developed before Stoykow and Żmijewski graduated from Kowalnia, *The Wooden Dumpling* foreshadowed some of the failed aspirations of Poland in the 1990s that they would soon encounter and critically engage. Although designed to experiment with artistic communication and its limits, to negotiate the borders between the individual and the social sphere (or “agora,” in Kowalski’s words), and to test the “ability to be in the community,” *The Wooden Dumpling* proved, at least partly, a disappointment in the dual projects of constructing a “common space” and of generating “nonverbal communication” through art.¹²

Soon after graduation, artists such as Paweł Althamer, Katarzyna Górna, Katarzyna Kozyra, Jacek Markiewicz, Monika Zielińska, and Artur Żmijewski instigated intense social protests through their Critical Art¹³ and would become icons of the ongoing discussion on the limits of artistic freedom and free speech. Żmijewski further pursued his exploration of the tension between individual artistic expression and the social sphere as a member of Krytyka Polityczna (Political Critique), a network of leftist activism established in 2002. For Krytyka Polityczna, visual and performative art is crucial for fostering a progressive social and political agenda. Since 2004, Żmijewski has also served as the artistic editor of the journal published by Krytyka Polityczna, and he regularly contributes texts exploring the role of art in society. His theoretical reflections within Krytyka Polityczna often elaborate on issues explored in *Czereja*. That continuity is perhaps best seen in “Applied Social Arts,” a text published fourteen years after *The Wooden Dumpling*, in which Żmijewski develops questions he and the

12 Kowalski, “Uczyć,” 24–25.

13 Although this term lacks clear definition, it is used in Polish art history to name the socially engaged art that emerged in post-’89 Poland. “Critical” artists employed strategies of body art, abject art, and performance in works that aimed to instigate public debate and raise awareness of issues repressed by society. Instigating social dissent and provoking discussion were considered integral parts of an artwork, understood as a process rather than an object, an approach crucial to the idea of *Common Space*. See also Ryszard W. Kluszczyński, “Artyści pod pręgierz, krytycy sztuki do kliniki psychiatrycznej, czyli najnowsze dyskusje wokół sztuki krytycznej w Polsce,” *EXIT: Nowa sztuka w Polsce* 4, no. 40 (1999): 2074–81; Izabela Kowalczyk, *Ciało i władza: Polska sztuka krytyczna lat 90* (Warszawa: Sic, 2002).

other students had first asked in the *Czereja* Document into a broader diagnosis of the place of art within society: “Does contemporary art have any visible social effect? Can we measure and verify the effects of art practices? Does art have political meaning apart from being a scapegoat for populists? Can we converse with art, and is it still worth it?”¹⁴

As developed in *The Wooden Dumpling* and later elaborated by Żmijewski, the question of “common space” versus “individual space” is not only relevant to our understanding of Polish art in the 1990s but can provoke broader questions about the feasibility and efficacy of socially engaged art practices, as well as about the communicative strategies employed within them. “Common space”—a democratic agora where the individual expressions of each member are considered and respected—is a figure both for the ideal pursued within Kowalnia and for the hopes that Polish society placed on the return of democracy after 1989. As Poland’s recent sharp turn toward nationalism suggests, the “ability to be in the community,”¹⁵ which *The Wooden Dumpling* was intended to test, remains an unfulfilled ideal.

14 Artur Żmijewski, “Stosowane sztuki społeczne,” *Krytyka Polityczna*, no. 11–12 (Winter 2007): 15, <http://krytykapolityczna.pl/kultura/sztuki-wizualne/stosowane-sztuki-spoleczne/>.

15 Kowalski, “Uczyć,” 24–25.