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POLISH FILES IN THE LOMHOLT ARCHIVE OF MAIL ART

Abstract: This text is devoted to the archives of mail art compiled by the artists and the participants of the mail art network. Mail art was one the most representative artistic phenomena of the 1970s along with feminist art, performance, video art and land art. Today, all those phenomena find their place in the official art world except for mail art, which still remains outside the official institutions of the art world, in private collections. In recent years, most of those collections have been systematized and presented to the public. We should therefore attempt to establish the artistic significance and value of those private archives. This text seeks to contribute to this project, describing in details the Polish section of the archive compiled by the Danish artist Niels Lomholt.

Keywords: mail art – net – network – archive – art documentation – post-conceptual understanding of art – alternative scene – databases – computer culture – narratives.

In 2010, the Danish artist Niels Lomholt published a book in which he presented the documentation of his archive, compiled between 1971 and 1985.¹ Several years earlier, the Belgian artist Jan van Geluwe² donated part of his archive to the Osthaus-Museum in Hagen. Lomholt and Geluwe represent the second wave of artists creating mail art, which appeared in the early 1970s and developed a mail art network on the fringes of the art world. The art scene was not as globalized then as it is today. It was mail art that seemed to announce a transnational, planetary community of artists who would be able to communicate with each other without the mediation of

¹ *Lomholt Mail Art Archive, Fotowerke and Video Works* (eds, N. Lomholt, L. Aagaard Denhart), Denmark 2010.

² *Das Archive des Museum of Museums* (eds. J. van Geluwe, M. Fehr), Hagen 1999.

official artistic institutions, to undertake and implement joint projects, to organize exhibitions, to publish art magazines and books. The mail network created by artists was not subject to anyone's control. It resisted centralization and hierarchy. It was to remain open, ready to accept anyone who wanted to join in. It was transnational and except for a few conditions on mail art exhibitions (no jury, no fees, each received item should be exhibited, and each participant should get a catalogue) it was not subject to any restrictions. These rules were not new; they were rooted in the principles established by Ray Johnson (1927-1995) at the New York Correspondence School in the 1960s.

More than forty years have passed since then, and today we are faced with the question of what to do with the archives assembled over the years. Practically every mail artist has his own archive. These represent individual views on art, and personal histories of art inspired by home mailboxes. What do they contribute to our thinking about art and what is their importance? Matt Ferranto wanted to find the answers to these questions and he sent a letter with the list of questions to 150 owners of mail art archives. He received 31 responses. They show that the vast majority of the archive owners are artists or active participants in the art mail network. The archives were mostly started in the 1970s and 1980s; only a few are older and come from the 1960. They contain between five and twenty thousand objects (memorabilia, as they are called by Klaus Groh), though there are some which have sixty thousand (Vittore Barroni) or more items. The number of objects is growing rapidly, at a rate of 200-800 per year. Some archives are profiled as collections of art magazines, visual and sound poetry, collages, drawings, conceptual art of the 1960s, minimalist Fluxus art, but usually they contain everything from catalogues to posters. Many archives are only basically structured, based on the alphabetic order of the artists' names, or geographical and chronological order. The archives are stored in attics or cellars, in boxes or on shelves. They are usually not available for viewing, though sometimes one can get permission to see them following an appointment with the archive's owner. Many archive owners dream of selling or donating their archives to museums.³

Let us now move to the more important issue – the content of the archives. We have an excellent opportunity to explore it by looking at the documents gathered in the Polish section of Niels Lomholt's archive.

³ M. Ferranto, *International Mail Art. Archives*, The Museum in Mailbox, 2000.

KOSTOŁOWSKI AND THE NET

Niels Lomholt established contact with Polish artists in 1972. In the same year he received two small parcels from Poland, both from Łódź, from Adres Gallery founded and run by Ewa Partum. The first one contained a thin, Polish-English book by Andrzej Kostołowski "Theses on Art 1 – 17", and the other one a catalogue of the work performed by three artists – Włodzimierz Borowski, Jan Świdziński and Krzysztof Wodiczka.

The author of the theses on art, Andrzej Kostołowski, was a respected critic of the middle-aged generation who had supported modern art in Poland. In the early 1970s, he was fascinated with conceptual art and published several articles on it. In 1970, he began to write down his thoughts on art in the form of theses for discussion. In this way he crossed the thin line separating art from art criticism and came closer to the extreme pole of conceptual art, as it was understood at that time in Poland, to art as reflection on art. In one of his theses, (thesis XI), Kostołowski wonders whether it is possible to practise the art of art theory. He wonders whether his work, growing out of so much enthusiasm, can be considered art? Over the next few years Kostołowski added subsequent theses on art, ending up with 33 of them.

In 1971, Kostołowski teamed up with Jarosław Kozłowski to publish *The Net Manifesto*, laying down the principles of artists' cooperation. The Net, as the authors of the manifesto defined it, is "a) extra-institutional, b) it consists of private homes, artists' studios and other places where art proposals emerge, c) the proposals are intended for those interested, d) they are accompanied by publications of any form (manuscripts, typescripts, prints, tapes, films, slides, photographs, leaflets, etc), e) the Net has no central point and is not coordinated, f) the Net has nodes in various towns and countries, g) the nodes are in contact with one another through exchange of correspondence, projects, notations and other forms of expression, whose exchange enables their parallel presentation at all the nodes, h) the idea of the Net is not copyrighted; when the Net comes into being, the idea no longer has an author, i) the Net may be used and duplicated at will."⁴ The *Net Manifesto* was sent to 300 recipients from all over the world as an invitation to participate in the new network.

The manifesto laid the foundations for the functioning of all the independent galleries in Poland in the 1970s; all of them, including Adres gallery and Akumulatory 2 gallery, established in Poznań by Jarosław Kozłowski, inspired by the idea of the Net, wanted to function as active nodes of the international Net.

⁴ Typescript (1971). Quoted after: *Conceptual Reflection*, in: *Polish Art Experience of Discourse: 1965-1975* (eds. P. Polit, P. Woźniakiewicz), Warsaw 2000, p. 123.

The work of the three artists, Borowski, Świdziński, Wodiczko is a record of their common performance staged in Łódź in April 1972. It is one of the most interesting works of Polish conceptual art, in the style of Dan Graham, but rarely remembered – its documentation not even included in the exhibitions “Conceptual Reflection in the Polish Art (Warsaw 2000) and “Conceptualism. The photographic medium” (Łódź 2010). The work is untitled – it is a kind of rehearsal, as it comes from the period when many artists, not only in Poland, believed that there should be no artworks in conceptual art. The artists formed an equilateral triangle, each representing one of its vertices, and then photographed one another: Borowski took a photo of Wodiczko, Wodiczko of Świdziński and Świdziński of Borowski. Then they formed a slightly larger equilateral triangle and again took photos of one another. They repeated this seven times, each time increasing the distance between the vertices of the triangle until the photographed figures disappeared from the view of the cameras.

GAJEWSKI AND THE REMONT GALLERY

After that, Niels Lomholt received more mail from Poland, including a charming book by Henryk Gajewski entitled “Eliza Gajewski” and a publication from the Workshop of Film Form. Gajewski became father of Eliza in 1974, and on this occasion he published a book with marked spaces for the photos to be taken on the successive birthdays of his daughter until her adulthood, i.e. until 1992. The spaces designated for the photos were already captioned, all that needed to be done was to take the pictures at the right time and place, and send them to the holders of the book, asking them to paste the photos into the appropriate spaces. The book was to develop with the artist’s daughter growing up. Unfortunately, Gajewski’s family situation became unexpectedly complicated and the artist sent out only the first two photographs of his daughter. Gajewski was very active in the second half of the 1970s. He ran the Remont Gallery at the student club Riviera-Remont. He organized large international conferences on contextual art (*Art as Activity in the Context of Reality*, 1977), performance art (International Artists Meeting – *I am*, 1978), art books (*Another Book for Your Child*, 1979), alternative education (*Child as an Author*, 1981). Gajewski also organized concerts, produced cassettes with punk music and the fanzine “PostRemont” (1980) addressed to young audiences. Later, after he left Poland, he was active in networking, i.e. connecting people through disinterested exchange with the use of the mail art network.

The publication of the Workshop of Film Form contained information about the Polish independent cinema, i.e. the films by Wojciech Bruszewski, Józef Robakowski or Ryszard Waśko.

SOSNOWSKI AND THE WSPÓŁCZESNA GALLERY

In 1975, Zdzisław Sosnowski from the Współczesna gallery (Contemporary Art Gallery) based in Warsaw established contact with Lomholt. Sosnowski had been a co-founder of the Gallery of Current Art (Wrocław, 1972-1974), before he moved to Warsaw where he ran the Współczesna Gallery (1974-1977), and later the Studio Gallery (1978-1981). He was interested in exchanging information with Lomholt, as his gallery published a newspaper on contemporary art. Sosnowski and slightly younger Gajewski were fascinated with Klaus Groh, who in 1972 had initiated the IAC-Info – a cheap, photocopied information leaflet on artistic events edited by the International Artists' Cooperation, i.e. by artists themselves. Gajewski published Art Texts, a series of books on contemporary art and culture by well-known artists and critics: Jan Świdziński, Zbigniew Dłubak (in 1977), Jan S. Wojciechowski, Joseph Kosuth (in 1978), while Sosnowski published a magazine modeled on the early "Flash Art" of Giancarlo Politi.

The Współczesna Gallery promoted post-conceptual art making use of the means of mechanical recording, i.e. photography and film. In September 1975, the gallery organized the exhibition entitled "Aspects of Contemporary Polish Art", featuring the works of the artists collaborating with it: Jan Berdyszak, Wojciech Bruszewski, Zbigniew Dłubak, Janusz Haka, Andrzej Lachowicz, Natalia LL, Roman Opałka, Andrzej Partum, Józef Robakowski, Kajetan Sosnowski, Zdzisław Sosnowski, Ryszard Waśko, Ryszard Winiarski, and Jan S. Wojciechowski. It was a fairly extensive representation of Polish neo-avantgarde art. At this exhibition Sosnowski showed his first works from the "Goalkeeper" cycle (1975-1977). It was designed as a photo-film story about an idol of mass culture, combining the features of a football player, singer and actor. Sosnowski, as the goalkeeper, always wearing a white suit, dark hat, tinted glasses and with a cigar in his mouth, was shown defending a goal or desperately fighting for the ball with a young woman attacking him. The juxtaposition of the shots of the football pitch with the shots of the goalkeeper, women's legs, high heels ramming into the body of the man, made for a somewhat absurdly sexualized image of the football idol – absurd if we remember that Sosnowski's inspiration stemmed from the cult

surrounding the Polish national football team which won the third place in the world championship in Germany in 1974.

The “Goalkeeper” became the best-known work by Sosnowski. The artist returned to his hero some years later and the Poznań gallery Piekary published a beautiful book “Goalkeeper Forever” (2009). The artist once again played the role of the goalkeeper, fighting in the field and in his private life. This time, the photographs were accompanied by a quite complex and more personal story of a goalkeeper who left Poland in his thirties, like Sosnowski, to play in West European clubs.⁵

Anna Kuttera, Romuald Kuttera and Lech Mrożek, the young artists forming the Wrocław-based Gallery of Recent Art sent their catalogues to Lomholt in 1975. They also wanted to be a node of the international artistic exchange network.

PETASZ AND “COMMONPRESS”

The latter part of the 1970s saw intensive correspondence between Andrzej Partum, Andrzej Wielgosz, Paweł Petasz and Lomholt. Partum sent up his manifestos: “Criticosystem of Art”, “Art Pro/la”, “Animal Manifesto”, “Manifesto of Insolent Art”. These texts required contextualization, as e.g. “Animal Manifesto” was printed on the poster of the 18th Meeting of Artists, Scientists and Art Theorists held in Osieki in 1980. Another example of incisive contextualization was the banner hung over Krakowskie Przedmieście in Warsaw, between the University and the Academy of Fine Arts, with the words “Milczenie awangardowe” (Vanguard Silence, 1974). Wielgosz promoted the idea of drawing activity, while Petasz specialized in rubber stamp art. In 1978, using rubber stamps and a toy printing press, he published the book “Ten Theses. Art Theory Series”. Petasz’s publication was the opposite of Kostoliowski’s book featuring modern print design; it was a coarse, hand-made *samizdat* in 50 copies. The publications differed not only visually but also substantively – the time of meta-artistic reflection was slowly becoming a thing of the past. Petasz wrote in a similar tone, but with greater distance and irony: “If art is a crown of the intellect, any theory or reflection is only possible to formulate in the language of art” (thesis 0), and a few pages later: “An ideal situation: everyone is an artist, everyone is

⁵ In the 1970s, Polish football players were permitted to join West European clubs only in their thirties.

a receiver" (thesis 9). And finally: "The general purpose of art is the development of the human being" (thesis 10).

Petasz was viewed as one of the creators of the new genre – rubberstamp art.⁶ He showed his stamp works at the Stempelplaats gallery in Amsterdam in 1978, but undoubtedly his greatest achievement was "Commonpress" – a magazine on mail art. Petasz was the initiator and editor of the first (untitled) issue published in December 1977, containing the works of 17 contributors. The second issue ("Open & Closed", March 1978) featured 34 artists⁷, and the fourth one ("From Poetry to Poesy", April 1978) – 39. By the end of 1984, "Commonpress" had ca. 50 issues, each one edited in a different place and by a different author.⁸

PIOTROWSKI (UKIYO) AND BLACK MARKET

In 1981, Lomholt received a set of old Łódź Kaliska catalogues and in 1982 the first self-published books by Zygmunt Piotrowski, who also signs his works as Ukiyo: *Dialectics Project* and *Art as Cognition*. The activities of Łódź Kaliska were directed against the pomposity of analytical art, against the endless analysis of the photographic medium. Instead of the analysis, the group proposed fun, pranks, jokes, a return to the crazy spirit of the Dada. Łódź Kaliska heralded the artistic climate of the 1980s. Piotrowski-Ukiyo referred to the tradition of theater, the spiritual and bodily exercises of Jerzy Grotowski and the wisdom of the Far East – on "How to Touch Nothing". Art should be a tool for cognition, searching for some deeper world order. "All our philosophy has its origin in poetry," claimed Piotrowski and this means that philosophy is another version of poetry and, therefore, there is no essential difference between art and theory. "To guard the self-identity of the human being; isn't it the hidden matter of art? "In 1986, Piotrowski formed an international group of performers Black Market, which traveled around Europe, performing in different cities.

⁶ G. Perneczky, *The New Genre: Rubber Stamp Art*, in: *The Magazine Network. The Trends of Alternative Art in the Light of Their Periodicals 1968-1988*, Köln 1993.

⁷ The most funny piece of the second issue of "Commonpress" was work by Giulia Niccolai: "Marcel Duchamp has proven that there is no difference between open and closed."

⁸ In 1984, Guy Bleus prepared a retrospective exhibition of Commonpress (1977-1984) – C.P. 56, Museum het Toreke, Tienen 1984.

WRAP-UP

Niels Lomholt's archives contain three types of documents:

- a) private correspondence from Polish artists, critics and art theorists, usually concerning artistic issues, the planned exhibition of Polish artists in Aarhus, Lomholt's visit to Poland, thanks and requests for books, catalogues, borrowing films for exhibitions, etc.
- b) invitations, catalogues, books, information leaflets and other prints published by galleries,
- c) art pieces.

This division appears obvious; the categories are art (point c), documentation of art (point b), and the non-artistic activities supporting art (point a). In many cases, however, it is not sustainable. The envelopes themselves are often artistic; the postage stamps, stickers, rubber stamps are combined with the rubber stamps and stickers made by the artists, their drawings, play on language, slogans, thus creating more or less interesting collages. The visual attractiveness of an envelope is enhanced if the artist reuses the envelope used previously by someone else, as was practised by Paweł Petasz and Tomasz Schulz. They would cross out the name of the previous addressee, write a new one and add new stamps, drawings and slogans to the envelope. Schulz called this “a round trip” – the same envelope travels from a sender to an addressee and after some time, it returns to the sender.

Visual attractiveness, however, is not an absolute indicator of art. An envelope can attract attention, it can be artsy, but it does not have to be art. Conceptualism made us sensitive to this difference, and mail art deepened it even further. Lomholt observes that mail art is easy: “You produce something, post it, and get a response.”⁹ For him, mail art was never a new artistic movement, new “-ism”, nor a new form of art, like happening, but a relatively cheap and convenient mode of communication and thus in extreme cases (a phone call) could do without any material objects. Objects only document the communication process, and therefore they are less important than the process itself, says Guy Bleus.¹⁰ Hence, we can say that in a way, all mail art objects are documentation of someone’s communicative activity.

“For those who devote themselves to the production of art documentation rather than of artworks, art is identical to life, because life is essentially a pure activity that does not lead to any end result.”, writes Boris Groys, going on to state that “Art becomes a life form, whereas the artwork becomes

⁹ N. Lomholt, *Gravity Takes the Last Man*, in: *Lomholt Mail Art Archive, Fotowerke and Video Works* (eds. N. Lomholt, L. Aagaard Denhart), Denmark 2010, p. 5.

¹⁰ G. Bleus, *Exploring Mail Art*, in: *C.P. 56, op. cit.*, p. 41.

non-art, a mere documentation of this life form.”¹¹ As in the case of Waclaw Ropiecki, “Through art to life.” Seen from this perspective, all the items collected in the Lomholt’s archive can be regarded as the documentation of one’s activity, one’s life form.

Lev Manovich compiles databases, i.e. contemporary archives of narratives and asks about the place and the role of these two opposing ways of organizing data and assigning meanings to them in today’s computer culture.¹² Do databases replace the old, respected narratives and become an inexhaustible source of new narratives? What narratives can be built based on Lomholt’s archive? Lomholt organized his mail art archive using the national, or actually state, key (this brings to mind Ko de Jonge’s question: what is the key to your art?). The exception is the United States, where he applied the media criterion, and the division into books, magazines, postcards, envelopes.¹³ Thus, he encouraged us to build national narratives. One of them could be the story of the Polish alternative scene, which developed its own information network, tried to join in the international debate on art, and to work out a new post-conceptual understanding of art.

Translated by Maria Śpik-Dziamska

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¹¹ B. Groys, *Art in the Age of Biopolitics. From Artwork to Art Documentation*, in: *Documenta 11* (ed. O. Enwezor), Kassel 2002, p. 108.

¹² L. Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, Cambridge Mass. 2001, p. 225 and next.

¹³ Lomholt delimited European countries – Austria, Belgium, Denmark, England, France, East Germany, West Germany, Holland, Italy, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Yugoslavia – from non-European countries – USA, Canada, Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, Uruguay, Venezuela, Japan. The lack of Czechoslovakia and Hungary is a surprise.

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POLSKIE DOKUMENTY W ARCHIWUM NIELSA LOMHOLTA (streszczenie)

Tekst dotyczy archiwów gromadzonych przez artystów mail artu i uczestników mail artowskiej sieci w latach 70. Mail art był zjawiskiem charakterystycznym dla sztuki lat 70., obok sztuki feministycznej, performance, sztuki video czy sztuki ziemi. O ile jednak wszystkie te zjawiska znalazły dzisiaj swoje miejsce w świecie sztuki, to mail art pozostał poza instytucjami świata sztuki, w rozlicznych archiwach, które są dzisiaj porządkowane i opracowywane. Jakie jest znaczenie i artystyczna wartość tych archiwów? Na to pytanie stara się odpowiedzieć ten tekst, przyglądając się polskiej części archiwum duńskiego artysty Nielsa Lomholta.

Słowa kluczowe: mail art – sieć – archiwum – dokumentacja – pokonceptualne dzieło sztuki – scena alternatywna – bazy danych – kultura komputera – narracje.