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The Private Hidden Art of Janusz Kaczorowski

*Janusz Kaczorowski says his bike always stops five metres before
the finish line*

Julian Kornhauser (1973: 48)

Janusz Kaczorowski (1941–1987), a Krakow artist and poet, survived in the memory of members of the local artistic community as an extraordinary figure. In his concept of hidden art, expressed in the so-called *The Private Manifesto of Hidden Art (Manifest prywatny sztuki ukrytej)*, which he embodied in his life and art practice, Kaczorowski proclaimed the need to abandon art presentation practices altogether. He claimed that the need for presentation stems from the sense of weakness of the work and artist who are seeking legitimation. In this way, he undermined the institutional structure of the art world, and the format of exhibition. His gestures of withdrawal gained additional power of expression. The concept was created in the 1970s, in the times of the Polish People's Republic. Dominated by the images and symbols of totalitarian rule, the public sphere inspired him, and Lenin became a peculiar leitmotiv of Kaczorowski's work. He used it in graphics and spatial objects, including the unpreserved work entitled *Mausoleum*. These images are saturated with non-propaganda content and can be read as a subversive allegory of everyday life in Poland at that time. Kaczorowski's artistic achievements and theoretical thought, preserved to this day only in several existing works and written fragments, display affinities with conceptual art from the mature period, when artists researched messages generated by mass media. Janusz Kaczorowski, transforming the language of the surrounding pop culture, developed the idea of absent and hidden art, which is nevertheless important in the life of a person and society.

Krakow *szopka* maker, dental technician, circus performer, assistant

The collection of photographs of the Historical Museum of the City of Krakow contains a black and white photograph of a Krakow *szopka* [nativity scene] bearing

the reference number 2580 / F / IX¹. Based on the photograph, it is difficult to determine the dimensions of the cardboard structure [fig. 1]. Most probably, it was not large – as for a Krakow *szopka*, of course. Five towers inspired by those of St. Mary's Church at the Main Square, shiny domes on drums, inspired by the Sigismund Chapel. The whole is dotted with ornaments, flags, and balconies, with staffage in addition: figures of small people dressed in Krakow traditional style. In a word, everything that a Krakow *szopka* should be and what a conditioned avant-garde artist despises as a standard. The photo documents the *szopka*, which received the second prize at the 25th Jubilee Krakow Szopka Competition, which took place on December 8, 1967. The author is Janusz Kaczorowski, 26, a student of ASP [Academy of Fine Arts].

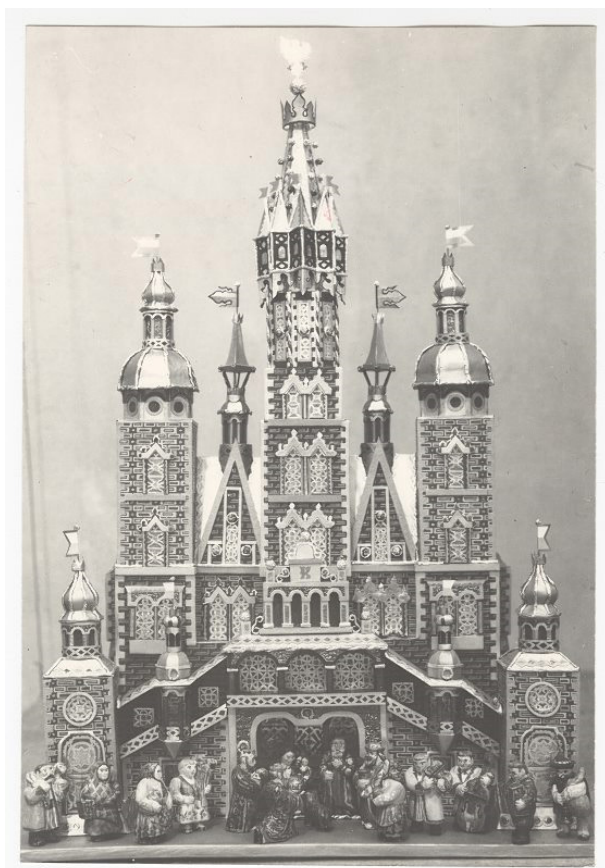


Fig. 1. The 25th Jubilee Nativity Scene Competition, 6 December 1967, szopka no. 79, 2nd prize, author: Kaczorowski Janusz, 26, Academy of Arts student. Collection of the Historical Museum of the City of Krakow

¹ Photo by Józef Korzeniowski, the collections of the Historical Museum of the City of Kraków, sign. 2580/F/IX.

I am looking for solid reasons to treat this work by Kaczorowski as something more than a curious hobby that enriches the life story of a conceptual artist. On the basis of the reconstruction of his life and work, I assume that he was searching reality – also its non-artistic part – for creative actions that have not yet been incorporated into the art reserve. John Roberts' reflections might shed some light on this attitude. Roberts, author of a study on the concept of *de-skilling*, investigated the history of the 20th-century avant-garde from the perspective of the development of the artist's workshop as well as adaptation of new, sometimes mechanical technologies into the artistic and sometimes the amateur, and followed the definition of authorship from the time of the *ready-made* to the *outsourcing* of the production of artistic objects, and concluded that even examples of non-materialised art, or art functioning on the basis of innovative forms of production, did not give up the traditional artistic sensibility, whose formulas are still developing along with the sensibility of viewers (Roberts, 2007). According to this fairly universal statement, Kaczorowski reached for media related to everyday life exploration, such as flag and band – associated with manifestations, rallies or police bullying. There is no doubt that the construction of a traditional nativity scene requires craft skills, but they are not typical for artists and the final object was as alien to the art field in the 1960s as it is today. The *szopka* creates additional methodological problems, which are defined by several negative facts: it does not exist – only photographic documentation has survived, it is also unknown in the artworld – there are no known comments from the period about it, and it is unknown whether it was intended as a work of art. The *szopka* is and is not there. The *szopka* is in the field of art and beyond. *Unknown* and *not preserved* are the most common adjectives defining the history of Kaczorowski, an artist who made an attempt to play with the artworld, with strategies of mass media and propaganda, to finally *give up* artistic work altogether.

At the turn of the 1960s and '70s Kaczorowski was an active poet and ideological communist. His involvement in the students' strike in 1968 ended with a few days in detention. In 1976, he returned his PZPR [Polish United Workers' Party] identification card on the wave of indignation with the brutal suppression of the workers' strike in Radom. On his initiative, a poetic group 848 was formed, the name of which referred to the year of publication of the Manifesto of the Communist Party (1848) (Kaczorowski et al., 1970). He was a graduate of the Faculty of Graphic Arts of the Krakow Academy of Fine Arts. For one academic year, 1973/1974, he was an assistant at the Department of Woodcut, headed by prof. Franciszek Bunsch. At the Academy, he dominated the department group intellectually. He taught critical deliberation and spread doubts.

Kaczorowski was known as a talented designer and constructor. During his studies he participated in international exchange in Hungary, and for reasons difficult to explain today, instead of an analogous art academy, he studied there at a circus school. He supposedly treated this fact as a sign of good fortune. Before his artistic studies, he had graduated from a dental prosthetics study, where he acquired, as the family had desired, a profession to earn a living.

The life and work of Kaczorowski (1941–1987) remains largely a mystery, and what emerges in the course of guessing may cause astonishment due to his originality and the way he functioned in the field of art. In his life, in his undertakings, and in his intentionally intimate practice, he redefined the artist's work. He rejected the conditions set by the environment, the academy, and society, and left behind a memory of the life of a radical artist who erased his own traces. In 1987, he committed suicide by jumping out of the window of the studio at the Widok estate in Krakow's Bronowice district. Apparently, he was fascinated by the work of Yves Klein, particularly by his well-known photomontage depicting the artist jumping out of a window (*Jump into a Void*, 1960). Only a few of Kaczorowski's works survived: random graphics and posters in the library of the Academy of Fine Arts, *Flags (Sztandary)* and *The Tie (Krawat)* in the Stu Theatre, several graphics, diaries and books kept by his friends, to whom he donated elements of his small estate and the memory of a rebel. He is remembered as a well read, magnetising personality, an erudite, and a good friend.

Subversive translations of official propaganda messages, or *For a Bolshevik, Nothing Is Impossible*

Kaczorowski created graphic compositions of logotypes (16 small linocuts, 1969) – abstract, elegant, and legible. Equipped with poetic titles (*In Something Hard, Black Ponds, Over the City, Bialka Roars [W czymś twardym, Czarne stawy, Nad miastem, Białka huczy]*), together they create beautiful works of visual literature. Similar forms, sometimes colourful ones, bear titles from yet a different reality, such as *The Electoral Card of Millions of Illiterates* from the *Lenin* cycle (*Karta wyborcza milionów analfabetów z cyklu Lenin*, 1970). The artist used visual motifs found in propaganda messages and mass media, such as star, clenched fist or images of political leaders. A similar attitude is evident in the works of artists of the mature phase of the development of conceptual art, which results from the need to polemicize with the image of the world created by the media and mass media (Dziamski, 2010: 170). A print preserved in the collection of the Library of the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow presents a profile of a leader against the background of a colourful, a bit New Age style composition of floral motifs. The title of this work – *He Lived for the Working Class (Żył dla klasy robotniczej)*, 1970) – was as if borrowed from a newspeak dictionary, it could be a real slogan or motto of the PRL. The visual structure of the work from today's perspective seems to explore the clash between two public codes: projects of official propaganda and a colourful substance straight from the other political bloc.

The phenomenon of Lenin's image in Kaczorowski's work arose from cultural and political circumstances. Clearly, his presence results from experienced excess of his imagery and subsequent defensive reaction (Zosschenko, 1984). *The Mausoleum (Mauzoleum)*, not preserved and uncertainly dating to the beginning of

the 1970s, Kaczorowski's masterpiece, is an object consisting of blocks, papered with linocut prints and fancy images of Lenin. Images of fictitious situations are juxtapositions of Lenin's well-known physiognomy with subsequent anecdotes. Other cubes depict Lenin as Ho Chi Minh on the bridge, Lenin as a Chinese revolutionary with a red book, Lenin as an aviator, Lenin as a king from the Piast dynasty, Lenin as an Indian on an elephant, Lenin as a boxer – Black Panther fighter, Lenin as a cosmonaut, Superlenin, Lenin as Saint Christopher, etc. This work was inspired by comic books and the ethos of opposing blocs: the West and the East, etc. The system of visual forms and signs used here does not refer to traditionally assigned meanings or ideologies, but is subversive, mocking, and critical towards them. These are early examples of the use of visual language, whose content has been replaced (Ronduda, 2006). They are also examples of a sophisticated visual persiflage – a playful reference to other styles. The criticism contained in this work concerns the bizarre and permanent use of the image on a daily basis. I think that it is also a mockery of the mass of gig graphic designers, propaganda organs whose "works" flooded the Polish iconosphere.

Kaczorowski – a committed leftist, proclaiming the avant-garde methods of expressing content in poetry and visual arts – proposed in his work a kind of model of a commemorative burial structure dedicated to the commander of the Revolution, his own model of private real allegory. Referring to images of historical nature, he also referred to the figure of the superhero and ridiculed the ubiquitous subservient attitudes. The above-mentioned allegories can be interpreted along the lines proposed by Benjamin H.D. Buchloh. According to his view, an artistic use of borrowed image, assemblage, and collage are ways of speaking in public, but with hidden meanings. Such an allegory, as a method of artistic expression, uses the language of "ideology of everyday life" (Buchloh, 1982).

Janusz Kaczorowski's allegory of the everyday in the Polish People's Republic requires further clarification. The method of choosing the languages of expression is accompanied by a pragmatic need to arouse consternation. The insertion of the image of Lenin in various and bizarre circumstances is objectifying. Stories in which it occurs are treated non-chronologically, non-historically, and non-logically. With its narrative timeframe, *The Mausoleum* of the mythical substance of Lenin's body creates a tangled structure, in which many myths generated by mankind from the beginning of time have found their fulfilment.

However, *The Mausoleum* by Kaczorowski is not so strange if we look at it in the perspective of the history and function of the real Mausoleum for the lives and collective imagination of the Soviet people. According to Boris Groys (1992), the Lenin Mausoleum in the Red Square, in which the body of the leader and the main ideologist was laid, is not an ordinary commemorative building. Throughout history, from antiquity to the modern times, monumental tombs enclosed the dead inside their structures and protected them from being seen. Lenin is exposed to the public as a work of art, and before the entrance to the mausoleum, there is a crowd of people waiting in the same way as outside a museum. Lenin was simultaneously

buried and exposed, his body, in contrast to standard mummies, such as bandaged Egyptian ones, is preserved and reconstructed. This way, Lenin instantly became more important than Leninism, and his relics inspired the Soviet citizens to heroic deeds. Vladimir Mayakovsky was to say that “There’s no one more alive than Lenin in the world” (Mayakovsky, 1967).

The expressive means of Kaczorowski’s work are strengthened by paradoxes, messages that do not match one another, internally contradictory theses, disturbances in the space-time order. Lenin is omnipotent in life and after death, because “for a Bolshevik nothing is impossible,” as professed by one of the popular slogans of those times. Being paradoxical in a paradoxical world is a union with the present. This is also an act of identification with the subject of critique. In Marshall Berman’s perspective, it is about living a life full of contradictions and staying in the authorities of large organisations that have a permanent impact on the community. It is also a desire to face these forces. To be modern is to be open to adventure and its inherent threats. In the end, to be modern is to be a contradictory human creation that is both a conservative and a revolutionary (Berman, 1988).

Examples of forgotten creativity are symptoms of broadening of the *avant-garde* idiom and shifting the interests of artists towards reflection on the surrounding reality, its visibility and intrusiveness, and the search for a method that manipulates this reality, its history and representation. Eventually, the commemorative building by Janusz Kaczorowski was lost, but I hope that it survived somewhere, waiting to be discovered.

The Private Manifesto of Hidden Art

Kaczorowski rarely participated in exhibitions. In 1972, three of his works (*Gloves* [Rękawice], *The Tie*, *The Mausoleum*) have qualified for the main exhibition of the International Print Biennale in the BWA [Bureau of Artistic Exhibitions] Pavilion IV (exhibition catalogue, 1972). He never presented his prints at this festival, even though he was associated with it from the very beginning, when as a student he helped organise its first editions. He also inspired a group of regular Biennale participants. As time went by, this peculiar vanity fair started to tire him, and it was still in times when the Biennale could boast of a high quality of artistic and theoretical reflection that was difficult to undermine. Kaczorowski expressed his views in the following statement: “the biennale found itself on a side-track. Captured and explored by individuals who disrespect the drama of art and notoriously avoid discussing it” (Janusz Kaczorowski, 1988).

The expressiveness of Kaczorowski’s reflection is emphasised by an extraordinary and enigmatic documentary that explains many other events in his life as well. *The Private Manifesto of Hidden Art* was not published before the author’s death. It was created in the early 1970s, but an exact date remains unknown. It was known to the closest circle of friends and artists. It was published for the first time in the

catalogue of Kaczorowski's posthumous exhibition, organised in 1988 (*Janusz Kaczorowski*, *ibid.*). There it seems to be incomplete, as if somewhat sloppily written down. It never had any wider impact, but, in my view, it remains the best known key to discover the artist's intimate journey to oblivion.

According to Kaczorowski, "hidden art is the most radical form of breaking with everything that was accompanied by art except for itself" (*Janusz Kaczorowski*, *ibid.*). It holds a special and important place in the spiritual development of a person who is aware of this activity and the benefits resulting from it. Art reveals itself from the need for authentication, and this has its basis in overestimating its social role or impact. This revealing is a result of vanity and a desire for profit. Hidden art has no aesthetics. Nor is it ephemeral, "as the artistic attitude inherent in it is constant and disciplined" (*Janusz Kaczorowski*, *ibid.*). The artist refers here to examples of Western art, (although he does not mention them), which take place outside the artistic field; this way, he admits and proclaims a strictly non-institutional art circuit of friends and colleagues.

The Manifesto ends with a series of revolutionary expectations concerning the reduction of virtually every form of functioning of art sanctioned by the system. The author dreams of increasing its autonomy, eliminating its linguistic character, giving up exhibitions as forms of art presentation, and he counts on the disappearance of artistic life and criticism. This, in the eyes of the author, would help derive the knowledge from the experience of art where it manifests itself, not from the source. In institutionally-sanctioned environment, he claims, critics have access only to fragments of the artist's work rather than to the work itself. The goal of hidden art is to "deepen this crisis until the fall of criticism and the birth of the philosophy of art are effected" (exhibition catalogue: 1988) An open question can be asked: is the kitschy *szopka*, whose representation is hidden in the museum's archives, a contributing factor to such a crisis? In my opinion, definitely!

I think that *The Manifesto* is a declaration of faith in the good that happens to a person who creates art; Kaczorowski's consistent following of the path he projected in this text effectively condemned the artist to oblivion and did not allow his work to have any impact. Kaczorowski's *modus vivendi* and *operandi* are simply the implementation of the statements found in *The Manifesto*. They are characterised by limited participation, withdrawal, yet not resignation, passivity in some art fields like the formula of the exhibition or festival. Kaczorowski did not believe in the power of the social impact of art, which he expressed in his text. It seems that he focused on individual, intimate examples of his work, friendships, discussions and his work as a teacher, first at the Academy, and then at a theatre in the museum in Zubrzyca Górna, which he used to run in the 1980s. There is no record of any works produced by Kaczorowski after mid-70s.

Kaczorowski, as can be seen in his ironic statements and reluctantly revealed works, did not seem to have lost his faith in art. His doubts concerned exclusively the processes of its distribution: the need for presentation, participation in the life of institutions and organisations, competition and criticism. Kaczorowski's

anarchism is not a literal game with art that defined the attitudes of Marcel Duchamp or Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz. The artist consistently reduced the form of his art, then its presentation, and finally withdrew from the life of the artistic *milieu* and ultimately dissipated his works and his assets. It is tempting to compare this attitude with other, much better researched examples of artists who consciously, in a significant gesture, made an act of abandoning art. The works of Bas Jan Ader, Lee Lozano and Charlotte Posenenske are various forms of artistic dissidence, which sought to expose the structure of the field of art and criticise its *status quo* (Koch, 2011).

Translated by Agnieszka Tyman



Fig. 2. Janusz Kaczorowski, *Pajac* [Clown], Collection of Woodcutting Studio, Faculty of Graphic Arts, Academy of Fine Arts, Krakow, photo: Kuba Pierzchała



Fig. 3. Janusz Kaczorowski, *List do Zjednoczonej Polskiej Partii Robotniczej* [Letter to the United Polish Workers' Party], 1971, Collection of Woodcutting Studio, Faculty of Graphic Arts, Academy of Fine Arts, Krakow, photo: Kuba Pierzchała

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The Private Hidden Art of Janusz Kaczorowski

Abstract

Artistic practice of Janusz Kaczorowski, of which only a few traces remain in the collections of institutions and in private hands, is characterised by surprisingly high quality of intellectual reflection. With his attitude and works, the artist affected several young artists and he is still remembered as an extraordinary personality. He created an original hidden art concept that avoids public presentation. I submit the idea expressed in *The Private Manifesto of Hidden Art* in a detailed analysis in the second part of the text. I locate the source of this idea in the examples of the artist's reflection and works dedicated to the permanent presence of images and symbols of a totalitarian state in the iconosphere, which display the characteristics of a subversive artistic approach. Kaczorowski, a leftist and a socially engaged person, consistently embodied artistic ideas in life, and the several works that he left behind should be seen in terms of the power that generates acts of cessation, concealment and withdrawal.

Keywords: Janusz Kaczorowski, hidden art, subversive art, neo-avant-garde

Słowa kluczowe: Janusz Kaczorowski, sztuka ukryta, sztuka subwersywna, neoawangarda

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