

TIME, SPACE AND POPULARITY

by MONIKA WARAXA



Oskar Dawicki, *Portrait of the Man Who Sold His Father's Kidney Stone*, 2010, photograph, pigment ink on cotton paper, 60 x 60 cm © the artist, Raster Gallery

**REMEMBER MY NAME
I'M GONNA LIVE FOREVER.
I'M GONNA LEARN HOW TO FLY.
PEOPLE WILL SEE ME AND CRY.**

'Fame', lyrics by Irene Cara

When thinking of art, one must consider its ambiguity, which has at least two sides. The positive indicates how art can fuel curiosity and creativity, enabling people to pose questions and not only give obvious answers. The other side, on the other hand, is a doppelganger, who shifts values and mixes ideas with selling strategies.

Reading the front pages of online art magazines, glancing over Facebook fan pages, or Instagram feeds, it is easy to forget that other art worlds exist outside the mainstream, where new ideas are forged, and there are dedicated and hard working artists. But is this really the case? Since we began accepting the digital world as our real one, and started believing its avatars are real people, maybe we should ask ourselves again: Do we really exist?

What popularity means to one artist can mean something entirely different to another. This is because, firstly, we are all different, and secondly, we live in different spheres. In case of art this realm would be the art world. Some artists belong to the mainstream, and others exist on its margins.

This article is about two artists in relation to time and space, as well as their popularity, which, according to recent events within the art world, is becoming an increasingly important part of an artist's career. These artists appear here in relation to their film ventures. Although they are both main characters within their work, they bring an alternative perspective to the creative usage of their artistic selves. Thinking of the art world in binaries of the mainstream and the margin, time

can be thought of as the mainstream, and popularity its margin.

The first character I shall explore is Marina Abramović in the documentary *The Artist Is Present* (2012). Abramović is a Serbian artist and performer who lives and works in the US. We can say that she is far more than an established artist. In her youth, she created very radical and risky performances investigating boundaries between culture and nature in close proximity to her audience. She was a true idealist. Now, an accomplished, successful artist, she is even known to fans of Lady Gaga. Part of the Western art world, she is aware of the power of large cultural institutions and the art market. She knows art collectors, film stars, and pop stars.

The other character is Oskar Dawicki in the feature film *The Performer* (2015). He is a Polish performance artist, living and working in Poland. His popularity is not on the same scale as that of Marina Abramović. Instead, we could say that he is a 'well-known' artist to informed audiences in Poland. He has developed his meta-reflection on the creative process by establishing 'next performance'; a process by which he is trying to prove his existence by seeing

himself through other people's eyes. His art can be considered as belonging to the margin art worlds, with no Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA), Pinault, or Lady Gaga behind him.

Going back to Abramović, *The Artist Is Present* is a documentary film. It was filmed during the installation of Marina's retrospective at MoMA, New York in 2010, documenting her oeuvre, plus a new piece under the same title. The film delves into the past to showcase all of Abramović's historical performances, including very strong references to her personal life and relationship with her former partner, Ulay.

The viewer is presented with information on production, targets, strategies, planning, and logistics. Here, the artist appears as a cog in a piece of large production machinery. All is in place, fitted like bespoke kitchen furniture. Nothing is random, everything is efficient. The film records Marina training a group of young performers in her house in Hudson Valley, and traces her various roles and tasks including re-performing her historical pieces at MoMA, participating in endless photo shoots for marketing purposes, transporting objects, or assembling vast shows, including preparations for her

new performance. It all recalls a big Hollywood film production; very pricy and nerve wracking.

The Performer (2015), prizewinner of the *Think: Film Award* at this year's Berlinale, is a cross-genre film directed by Maciej Sobieszczanski and curator Łukasz Ronduda. The film is an autobiographical portrayal of Oskar Dawicki, and links film with the visual arts to give an insight into the contemporary art world. More importantly, it allows the re-telling of the story of the artist and his art through travelling in time and space.

Berlinale's programme states: 'The Performer' is the first-ever art exhibition in the form of a feature film.' This unique genre is revealed to us when we see Oskar Dawicki playing the Oskar Dawicki impersonator, followed by other characters who are echos of figures in the art world; including Anda Rotenberg, curator and former director of Zachęta - National Gallery of Art, or Zbigniew Warpechowski, performer and Oskar Dawicki's role model, as well as fictional characters played by actors Agata Buzek and Andrzej Chyra. All of them, including Oskar Dawicki, re-create the artist's work through telling their part in the story. The mixture of reality and fiction fosters a sense of ambiguity, thus leaving behind objectivity and rationality to make room for new interpretations. It coincides with what Nicolas Bourriaud said in his *Altermodern* manifesto: 'The last continent to be discovered is time and space. So the best that an artist can do is to accept his origins as an already existing ready made and feel free to reconsider his story.'

Abramović in *The Artist Is Present* appears as an artist who could be described in numbers. She traversed 2,000 kilometres when performing the 'Great Wall Walk', spent 512 Hours at the Serpentine Gallery in London animating the audience, and 15,000 people sat with her during *The Artist Is Present*, an epic performance prepared especially for the MoMA show. She is fascinated by long-lasting art works (Wagner, Satie, Cage) but her idea is to confront time by using



Oskar Dawicki, *Desecrator's Gymnastics*, 2013, pigment ink on canvas, 130 x 200 cm

© the artist, Raster Gallery

her stamina. Does she compete with it, try to defeat it, or maybe even kill it?

It is hard to say but she is certainly setting an ultimatum when she claims: 'I am an artist in my 60s, I want my success now'. The MoMA show presented itself as an ideal opportunity to accomplish her wish. MoMA's curator, Klaus Biesenbach, managed to turn Marina into a celebrity. Since her showbiz outbreak, she has become friends with Kim Kardashian, Lady Gaga, and Björk. She promotes herself by taking part in all kinds of openings, dinner parties, and fashion events to fully express her admiration for high fashion. So when Kim Kardashian changes her hairstyle her fans know that this is Marina's influence.

Since Polish-ness is not such a popular part of the mainstream art world, a few other examples of Polish artists and their approach to the aspect of time need to be mentioned.

Monika Sosnowska's art involves producing site-specific art pieces lasting for very brief moments of time, and very often includes reusing existing objects or architectural installations, such as 'Little

Alice' (2001), 'Irregular Room' (2004) or 'A Dirty Fountain' (2006). Her work also strongly refers to Modernism, understood as a utopian ideal.

This notion is also a very important aspect of the work of Goshka Macuga, who derives her ideas from the historical events, objects and materials. She uses random objects, as in 'When Was Modernism?' (2008), or quotes other artists' work, as seen in 'Library Table' (2005), and 'The Bloomberg Commission' (2009-2010).

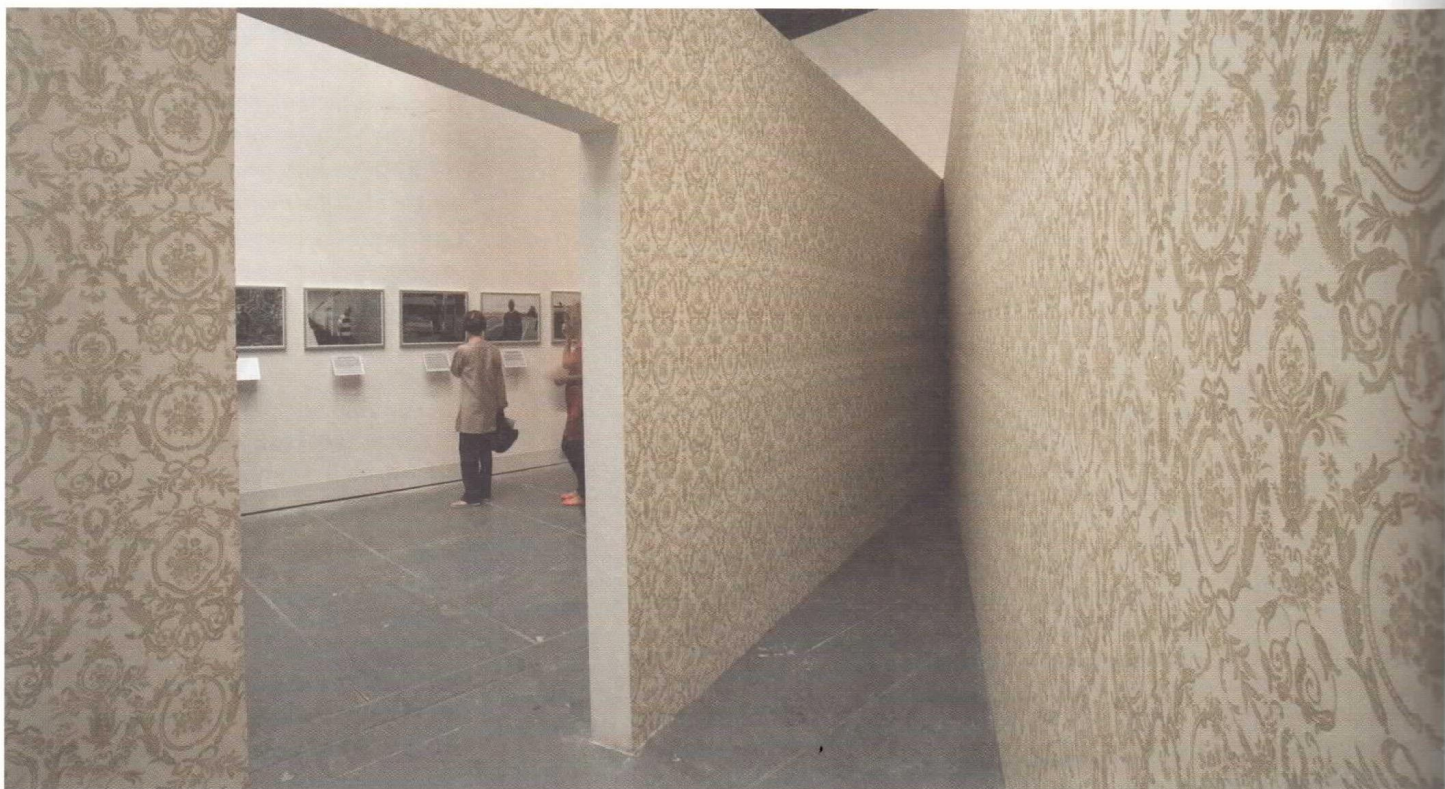
Like Macuga, Mirosław Bałka looks to the past, but also digs out its personal aspects, through using his private memories. His art is strongly autobiographical, as evident in his degree show piece, 'First Communion' (1985). In later works, such as 'Soap Corridor' (1993), 'Bambi' (2003), or '190 x 90 x 4973' (2008), Bałka refers to the Holocaust and its traumas. His personal approach to the subject turns what can be conceived as drama on a global scale, into a one-man experience. Hence, his work is very blunt and powerful.

All the artists mentioned above subsume themselves in time through utilising

history and its props. These Polish leitmotifs play an important role in the emancipation process from our collective history, including wars, partitions and uprisings. However, these subjects are not as handy in terms of mainstream appeal, and it is difficult to sell them as a catchy idea.

The margin might be considered an inevitable criterion. The majority of Polish artists can only dream of entering the mainstream Western art world. Does Oskar Dawicki dream about it, too? We cannot be certain. However, what we do know is that Dawicki lives and works in its margins, which influences his art in the same manner as pop culture influences Abramović's.

Dawicki's 'The Performer' encourages subjective perception and allows multiple interpretations of contemporary art and performance itself. According to the film creators, art can be re-told and reinterpreted. This approach offers endless opportunities to develop its 'nahlaben' (afterlife). It also fulfils Bourriaud's wish to explore history as a *terra incognita*, as if it were a *jungle* or *desert*. It means that the artist, curator or audience can equally



Monika Sosnowska, *para-pavilion Antechamber*, 2011© the artist, Raster Gallery



Mirosław Bałka, 186x10x10, 2000, soap and stainless steel, 186 cm, unique (detail) © the artist, Dvir Gallery

bring about his or her own interpretation.

As long as they apply critical thinking they are no longer consumers but active participants in the creative process. Somehow, I cannot imagine this kind of 'quality time' involving a deep reflection over art as a mass event. Marina Abramović stresses the level of importance the quality of the relationship with the beholder has - which in the case of 'The Artists Is Present' were 15,000 people.

MoMA's audience responded to Abramović's charisma. Can the fact that hundreds of people queued outside the gallery to sit in front of her, people who sat more than once and tattooed a related number on their forearm, or cried after attempting to get undressed in front of the artist and other people, be considered as a one-on-one profound relation or group reaction similar to euphoria or mania? Similar displays of group ecstasy were notably evident during The Beatles' concerts or Anatolij Kaszpirowski's healing sessions.

Looking even further into the past, the collective mania surrounding Abramović's show recalls events such as the 'Dancing Plague' in the 1518, when Frau Troffea stepped into a narrow street in Strasbourg, France and began to dance. Within a month the crowd of dancing individuals had swelled to 400, many of whom died from emaciation.

THE EPILOGUE

The list of top 20 Art World Women of 2014 features names such as Marina Abramović at no 1 - for being Marina Abramović, Patricia Barbizet, the CEO of Christie's, Amal Alamuddin for advising the Greek government on the reclamation of the Elgin Marbles, but also Beyoncé, for taking selfies together with her husband Jay Z at the Louvre, Miley Cyrus for her erotic sculptures, and, the cherry on the cake - Kim Kardashian - for pretty much everything. All these women have enormous popularity and are

present both in art and popular culture. This ranking shows that the distinction between art and pop-culture is vanishing. Singers or actors use the support of an in-house team to become more desirable to a market of galleries and curators. With great popularity come great expectations. Furthermore, this can influence the artists involved profoundly, despite the fact that ventures in art are new to them.

As JJ Charlesworth highlighted accurately in a recent article for *The Art New News*, popularity might drive the artist's ego to madness. He names Abramović and Jeff Koons as those suffering from this syndrome. Indeed, when watching Sir Norman Rosenthal's short interview, in which Marina wears a gold mask whilst describing her latest project of building the Art Institute in Hudson Valley, I observed a huge ego.

Marina Abramović states in her manifesto that the artist should not fall in love with other artists. But how about falling in love with themselves? ■