

The Second Congress of the Free / Slow University of Warsaw was accompanied by the following additional events.

On 7 December, Janek Simon's exhibition "Four Pataeconomic Undertakings", presenting the findings of the search for an alternative economy, was held at the seat of the Bęc Zmiana Foundation. The artist's exhibited works included "Zollskulptur" – a sculpture made of smuggled cigarettes, part of the project "A Short Review of Knowledge" regarding lottery systems, and the work "Lagos Transfer" from the exhibition at the Museum of Art in Łódź.

On 8 December, club SOLEC 44 hosted the premiere of another publication by Bęc Zmiana – *Deschooling Society* by Ivan Illich - a new translation of the controversial book, debated worldwide by progressive educators and artistic groups, demanding radical changes in culture and cultural education.

Interview with Janek Simon:

"PATAECONOMICS IN PRACTICE"

Pataeconomics is the (ab)use of various economic practices by employing them contrary to their intended purpose. Joanna Turek talks to expert Janek Simon about the most effective ways of (ab)using economics in the field of art.

Pataphysics makes use of the methods and the language of modern science in an attempt to hold it up to ridicule through its absurd use. What are the principles of pataeconomics as an art form?

First of all, I don't think pataphysics set out to ridicule science. It wasn't directed 'against' science but was meant to run 'alongside' it; it was not an explicit criticism. The movement has manifested itself mainly in literature, beginning with the Dada tradition, continued by the Situationists, or rather in parallel to them, and ending with, say, Baudrillard, who also made reference to it. I can relate, in particular, to Raymond Queneau. He compared science to playing with children's building blocks, in the sense of its open-ended nature. At a time when economics is used to describe ever-wider aspects of reality, a similar set of tactics can be applied here. Pataeconomics is the (ab)use of various kinds of economic practices, by applying them contrary to their intended purpose. Obviously, such strategy has a long history, from Marcel Duchamp's and Man Ray's "Monte Carlo Bond", through Clido Meireles, or more recently Superflex, with their shop allowing one to "buy" for free. This is pure pataeconomics. To elaborate on the famous quotation from Donald Rumsfeld about "unknown unknowns", it can be said that pataeconomics is concerned with "unknown knowns", things that we know about without knowing how they operate or what the associated conditions and assumptions are. It seems to me that through such activities verging on the absurd, we can try to reveal the hidden mechanisms that govern a given field.

Your work concerning lottery systems, presented as part of the "Expectative" project, focuses on the interplay of forces devoted to accumulating economic capital that can be transformed into a different kind of capital: social, cultural, educational... How do you understand and describe these mechanisms?

The work about the lottery functions on two basic levels, the first being my research on systems of play, which constitutes, let's say, the existential face of the project. I see the systems I refer to as a metaphor for the attempt to understand or explain the world. Even though from one perspective, it would seem impossible to create a perfect mechanism, people keep trying anyway, believing they will manage to win. It is a bit like religion, but also magic or science. These attempts reflect various systems of knowledge created by man. The second level of the project concerns its institutional implications. What I find considerably problematic is instrumentalization; the fact that such investments always entail the expectation that money can be spent solely on the thing described in the assumptions to the project, and not anything else. We also use art for external purposes, for instance to promote the city. From this perspective, my project consists in transforming the budget. The money is invested in lottery tickets and the prize will be donated to Goldex Poldex, a clubroom that I co-run in Kraków. The budget is laundered, shifted beyond the institutional frames from which it originated. That money can be spent on anything.

That's a very interesting concept of funding culture. Maybe it could be pursued on a wider scale. Do you have any broader ambitions?

Certainly, it would be great if we managed to create such a pataeconomic dysfunctional corporation, operating under its own principles. I think about it often. The key problem here, however, is the issue of the status of such activity in the field of culture – now, I can, for instance, sell second-hand discmans in the street, which can easily pass as an artistic project. But what is the difference between selling discmans as

part of an artistic project and just selling them? The question becomes relevant as soon as such activity develops and starts earning profit. But all this pataeconomic activity is mainly about unlocking the imagination, showing that it is possible to establish a cultural institution based on a model other than that of an NGO or a commercial gallery. We have to invent our own local models.

Your activity is said to represent an anarcho-pragmatic stance towards contemporary reality, which is marked by the excessive production of knowledge. Tapping various domains of knowledge, you describe the economic and social conditions of our lives, you mention the subject of destruction and imminent catastrophe – this is the anarchic factor. But how does your artistic pragmatism manifest itself?

I have been concerned with destruction and catastrophe from the very beginning of my activity. It culminated with the exhibition “Gradient” at the gallery Bunkier Sztuki (*Art Bunker*) in Kraków (2007). The exhibition was all about failure. On the one hand, the failure of large civilisational projects, cybernetics, some branches of modernism, and on the other, failure at the personal level, failed relationships or legal conflicts. There is much beauty in various catastrophes, breakdowns and crunches. Maybe this is where my nihilistic side comes to the fore. It is not entirely related to anarchism, whose essence for me is an inherent hatred of any forms of power. Naturally, I can say that I’m not a huge fan of the world we live in, especially of the direction it is currently going in, so it’s nice for me to fantasise once in a while about how it would be if everything collapsed. When a market crash sets in, a complete reevaluation of individual utility takes place and it turns out that someone who can repair shoes is much more useful than an army of desk jockeys examining Excel sheets all day. I find this situation very interesting and for some time I tried to acquire some useful skills through my artistic activity. I did projects on edible plants, I learnt chemistry, electronics and built an electronic watch from scratch.

You refer to the DIY movement, the ideals of self-organisation, but you work alone, earning a name for yourself as an artist – how do you see the relationship between individual authorship and network activity based on collaborations, the exchange of ideas, concepts that enhance creativity and criticism? Do such conditions favour the rise of the individual artist – due to the ever-increasing faith in a single author – or do they devalue his position?

I don’t see any contradiction between the DIY strategy, being self-sufficient or working alone. Network activities and collaboration are certainly marvellous ideas. But in my experience, however, they don’t always work in culture, or at least, they are very difficult to implement. Most often, the final effect is diluted, or one person takes responsibility for everything leaving a clear trace of a strong personality. Certainly, it is not a fashionable view nowadays, but I think that the majority of eminent works of culture emanate from single, strong personalities. Obviously, nobody exists in a void, the key is communication, the area of activity, the people whom we talk to and exchange ideas and concepts with. But eventually, we are left alone with our work: either someone takes responsibility for something, or the entire thing is blurred. I don’t think much of all these projects that deem the process so valuable as to render the result immaterial. I don’t know if the notion of cognitive capitalism is a good framework for discussing the position of the artist. For me, it is more about the collapse of strictly modernist narratives such as artist-preacher – which position, of course, cannot be maintained. So we need to look for new models.

One such model is collective, network or interdisciplinary activity. Speaking of such way of working, you refer to the issue of responsibility. Is it, in your opinion, this responsibility that requires an individual artist, the “founding father”, to be singled out?

I haven’t worked it out on a theoretical level, but this is definitely what my practical experience tells me. But I’m not sure if it can be generalised by using a simple division of the creative process where someone either accepts responsibility or it all goes adrift. The question of authorship is often blurred; one person may conceive something while another carries it out. This may also be the reason for the low impact of all types of anarchic movements.

In your works, you pursue the strategy of aesthetic recycling, using objects that can be processed into an art form. At the exhibition “Workers Leaving the Workplace” at the Museum of Art in Łódź, you raised the issue of local economies and their links with supranational capital flows, you presented the reality of places around the world that constitute the weakest link in the global circulation of goods. This situation is described by the producers-consumers-reducers metaphor. The economics of art is located at the very top of the pyramid...

Exactly, some oil paintings are the most expensive objects on the market. For US \$ 140 million you can buy an F16 jetfighter, build a power plant or a skyscraper. This is also the price of a Jackson Pollock, Andy Warhol or Mark Rothko painting. On the other hand, there are places like the beach in Alang, India, where thousands of workers tear apart discarded ships with manual welders, or Alaba in Lagos, the biggest second-hand electronic market in Africa. A city within a city, where tons of old computers or TV sets from Europe are processed in primitive conditions. This is the very bottom of the pyramid – the reducers. I went

to Nigeria to check what would happen if you took something from the bottom of the pyramid and introduced it into economic circulation in another place. I brought home discmans, something that has no value here, that is already out of date and hasn't yet made a comeback as a trendy "retro" object. I bought some and brought them to Poland in a suitcase. I sold some in the district of Bałuty in Łódź, others on Allegro [Polish e-bay], while yet others gained the status of works of art. They can be purchased through Raster Gallery.

So another method of processing capital. How did it go selling the discmans in Łódź? What did you spend the money on? Have the discmans at Raster fetched high prices?

In Bałuty I sold several pairs of Chinese briefs with the inscription "Barack Obama", which earned me about 30 PLN. Some discmans were also sold, just like that, as a pure commodity, with no added symbolic value. As for the sale of objects on the art market, the case was made complicated by the fact that the Museum of Art in Łódź decided to buy the entire project for its collection. So everything had to be put in brackets once again, which obviously generated a series of interesting practical problems. What was the museum actually buying? What was the status of particular elements of the project - my journey, the museum installation, the goods sold on Allegro, in Bałuty, the video documentation of the project and so on?

In your works you refer to cultural colonialism, the concept, taken from Paul Virilio, of the shrinking world through the development of technology, communication and trade relations. You refer to the compression of space in the geographical sense – such compression could be translated into the changing sphere of culture and art resulting from the mechanisms of bureaucratisation and commercialisation. And do you think this field is expanding as a result of the possibilities of networking, or is it shrinking, limited by the mechanisms of exploitation and the need for creativity? Does it generate any new value?

Certainly, there has been increased state involvement, but I don't think it creates any new quality, although it benefits various types of art-grant opportunists. Notions such as cognitive capitalism don't entirely grasp the totality of phenomena in the field of professionalized culture. Such notions accurately describe the Internet and associated cultural change, or the transformation of the nature of labour, but the situation in art remains the same. There is an artist, someone pays him for what he does, and this creates a relation of dependence. Certainly, the division of resources in this system is extremely unfair, and this in turn leads to various innovations like the Artist Pension Trust, for example, a pension system for artists whereby they deposit their works for 20 years, and then receive pensions when the works are sold. This somewhat minimizes the life-risk because out of 400 young artists, perhaps only five will become truly famous.

Janek Simon (1977) studied sociology and psychology at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków.

His artistic debut was in 2001. He collaborated as VJ Jansi with the group Commo, producing music visualizations in clubs. He currently draws on a wide range of artistic expression, from objects and installations through films to actions in economic and social space. He combines inspirations from diverse fields, such as mathematics, history of science, travel, anarchic thought and practice, anthropology and clubbing culture. He co-founded (alongside Kuba Barbaro and Janek Sowa) and runs the Goldex Poldex Cooperative. He lives and works in Kraków.