

Zbigniew Libera

Zacheta National Gallery of Art

Polish artist Zbigniew Libera's first major survey exhibition in his home country, of work made between 1982 and 2008, proved him to be an exceptional and consistent producer and experimenter. Curator Dorota Monkiewicz and the Zacheta National Gallery of Art gave space to the full range of Libera's output, a breadth of inclusion more generous than anything I would expect from a Western curator or museum, given the narrow purview that haunts the crop of 'post-1989' exhibitions currently crowding European institutions. A number of early works, listed in the accompanying catalogue under the heading 'The Body and 1980s Art', deliver on their 'Eastern promise', fulfilling the Western idea of a naked and excremental performance tradition. Indeed, the penis, pudenda and auto-erotic self-portraiture imbued with a stiff dose of abjection – captured on grainy early video and in black and white photography – largely define this passage in Libera's practice. The videos, several of which are shocking to watch (I saw many fellow audience members averting their eyes or walking away in a matter of seconds), encapsulate Polish dramaturge Jerzy Grotowski's theories of performance as a 'theatre of cruelty'. Shot in domestic and familial situations, they prove that public gestures were always circumscribed by the regime, making the personal political.

In diary excerpts that were shown alongside the work (both on didactic wall labels and in the catalogue), Libera, who was released from a one-and-a-half-year prison stint for art/student activism in 1984, describes his discovery of home video as an art-making tool and the intimacy of home as a subject. *Intimate Rites* (1984), for example, depicts Libera nursing his grandmother, and includes graphic footage of him spoon-feeding her and washing her genitals. Equally unsettling are the four large black and white photographs, *Regina G* (1984), which show his grandmother voiding and cleaning herself. That year proved to be Regina's last: just metres away were three photographs entitled *Grandma's Corpse* (1984), in which we see her laid out before her funeral. Counterbalancing this morbid focus was a group of works about children. Libera used to leave a video camera in his living room for the children of visitors to play with. The 24 stills in *Hermaphrodite* (1986) record a dance by a naked youngster possessed with alarmingly ambiguous genitalia – possible inspiration for Libera's self-portraits, *Someone Else*, in which he appears in drag, and *Pretty Boy* (both 1986), in which he is depilated and wearing nappies.

Libera's norm-testing fantasies were a constant in the exhibition (many will know his 'penis expander' and gym equipment works from 1994–8), but – synchronous with Poland's re-democratization – were less dominant from the 1990s. Libera became a cataloguer and critic of public and media culture as they developed in step with 'democracy'. Two principal targets are nationalism and Catholicism. The most potent single object on this score is a sculpture, made for an exhibition at the Museum Kunst Palast, Düsseldorf, in 1990, modelled on the infamous – and recently stolen – sign

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reading ‘Arbeit Macht Frei’ (Work Makes You Free) that hangs at the entrance to Auschwitz; Libera’s is emblazoned ‘Christus ist mein Leben’ (Christ is My Life, a reference to the coeval of religion and capitalism). The concentration camp recurred several times. Libera, like many Polish artists who turned their back on post-communist themes, prefers delving into the traumas of the 1940s.

The other major institution Libera pillories is the print media, using large-scale photo-collages or simulations of important Polish newspapers and magazines, parodying their negative coverage of art and culture as well as guerrilla or resistance movements. This editorial turn is ironic, as the most influential Polish news outlets, including the country’s largest-circulation daily *Gazeta Wyborcza* (Democratic Press), began life as clandestine circulars affiliated with the Solidarity Movement – and whose radical volunteer staff were principally drawn from art and academia. Libera’s most recent photographic work, *La Vue* (The View, 2004–6), signals the fate of political art in Poland’s maturing late-capitalist system – the beautiful colour abstractions are actually extreme close-ups of the gutters of magazine pages. Pushed once again to the margins, Libera asserts that art still has a role in criticizing the centre.

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