

The Role of Art in the 21st Century: Polish Contemporary Art

KASUYA Akiko

Kyoto City University of Arts, Kyoto

1. Introduction - the conditions and role of art in the 21st century

In this essay, I would like to explore the relationship between art, society, and politics. I would especially like to focus on Mirosław Bałka, Artur Żmijewski and Zbigniew Libera who have consistently produced work with a close connection to the social conditions in Poland from the thawing of the Cold War to the present-day post-revolutionary period. What role does art play in society, and what role is it expected to play? Here are a few suggestions regarding the conditions and role of art in the 21st century.

2. The socialist resume in Poland after the end of World War II until 80s

The socialist resume that assumed power in Poland at the end of World War II can be broken down into four periods: the Stalinist era (1948-55; Secretary General Bolesław Bierut), the Reform and Reorganization era (1956-1970; First Secretary Władysław Gomułka), the Opening to the Outside World era (1970-80, Edward Gierek), and the Solidarity and Martial Law era (1980-89; First Secretary Wojciech Jaruzelski). During the Stalinist era in particular, ideology exerted a strong influence on Polish society. In 1947 and 1948, socialist realism became compulsory in art and culture. In January of 1949, the Polish Writers' Union resolved to "make socialist realism the sole creative form," and in June of that year, socialist realism was also officially adopted in the art world in an effort to further artistic research and develop in the "correct" manner. Art academies and schools were also expected to provide education based on this policy[1].

Deeply dissatisfied with socialist realism, young Polish artists, who were educated in color schemes that first became prominent before the war, struggled to find their own method of expression. They organized independent study groups and devoted themselves to the works and theories of Władysław Strzemiński (1893-1952), an avant-garde artist who was active internationally between the two world wars. Along with Strzemiński's book *Unism in Painting*, published in 1928, his *Theory of Vision*, a collection of his lectures that was posthumously assembled by his students in 1958, was hugely influential.

Following Stalin's death, Khrushchev assumed power of the Soviet Union in 1955, and the following year, his criticism of Stalin led to a loosening of censorship laws, which allowed a certain amount of news from the West to enter Poland. In public places, realism was still the only permissible form of expression, but toward the end of the 1960s, geometric abstractions grew popular.

Exhibitions in private spaces, such as small galleries, people's apartments, and universities became widespread, and anti-government events were also frequently held in these places. Friends and acquaintances would gather for an opening through word of mouth, and often a guerilla-like approach was used to remove the works before the police arrived. And as the Catholic Church was anti-communist, it provided a shelter for underground culture.

In the 70s and 80s, happenings and performances became more common. While the imposition of martial law in 1981 led to strict censorship, the Solidarity movement gained momentum, and the push for freedom and liberalization grew stronger. While some artists continued working in Poland, others left the country and settled (sought asylum) in the West. Wojciech Fangor defected to the U.S. in 1966 (he returned to Poland in 1999 and continues to work in the suburbs of Warsaw), Roman Opalka is based in France, and the U.S.-based media artist Krzysztof Wodiczko relocated to the West after graduating from the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. Wodiczko is widely remembered as the Polish representative at the 2009 Venice Biennale. He focuses on minorities and attempts to give them a voice through his work. In addition to works in which he projects images of the socially disadvantaged on public monuments, Wodiczko has recently created a series of dynamic indoor video installations.

3. Post-revolutionary period; Mirosław Bałka

Though somewhat restricted, in June 1989, the first free election to be held in the Eastern Bloc took place in Poland. The Lech Wałęsa-led Solidarity Party won a landslide victory. This in turn led to the formation of a coalition government between the Labor and other parties, the



Fig.1 Mirosław Bałka, *Remembrance of the First Holy Communion*, 1985, coll. Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, Poland

revision of the constitution, a change in the official name of the country (from the People's Republic of Poland to the Republic of Poland), and the introduction of a direct presidential election system. The following year, the first president, Wałęsa, was chosen by the people and the government was completely transformed. This was an epoch-making event and the socio-economic structure of the country underwent a dramatic change. As Poland entered this tumultuous period, artists were also directly affected and had no choice but to react. A few years ago I examined this situation in a special exhibition titled "Positioning – In the New Reality of Europe: Art from Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary"[2]. In that event, I focused on the extent to which each artist had accepted and reacted to this 180-degree shift, and further, the changes that occurred in the country's politico-economic status after Poland joined the EU in 2004. Faced with the arrival of sudden freedom and a

multitude of choices, some artists reacted with cynicism, while others resisted the notion of dog-eat-dog economics and focused on the weaker elements of society by reexamining the rights of minorities. Still others created work that dealt with the theme of memory and the scars of World War II, and the cycle of conflicts that arose throughout the world in its wake. Mirosław Bałka (b. 1958), who began making figurative, three-dimensional work at the end of the 80s, displayed a significant change in style in the 90s. Bałka, who made his debut with a plaster figure of a young boy receiving holy communion titled *Remembrance of the First Holy Communion* [Fig.1] in 1985, had turned his hand to austere sculptural works using familiar materials such as steel, cement, ash, soap and wood by the end of the decade, but in recent years, a large percentage of his work involves video.

As with Bałka's three-dimensional pieces, these later works make use of a simple expression rooted in the ordinary and familiar which is loaded with ambiguous meaning and inspires the viewer to imagine another form.

Many of Bałka's video works are extremely simple and repeat over a short cycle of time, giving this detached instant a symbolic quality. Perhaps due to their simplicity, the works are imbued with strong symbolism and have the effect of clearly stating the artist's intention. A notable example of this is *Primitive* (2008) [Fig.2], shown on a small monitor placed just in front of the entrance to his solo exhibition, "Jetzt," in Wrocław in 2008. This work, consisting only of a few-second-long, continuously repeating video, was taken from Claude the film



Fig.2 Mirosław Bałka, *Primitive*, 2008

documents Lanzmann's asks a variety of people directly involved or connected with these events about their memories. These include the following exchange between the director and Franz Suchomel, a former SS officer who worked at the Treblinka concentration camp, in Germany in 1970:

Suchomel: I'll give you my definition. Keep this in mind! Treblinka was a primitive but effective production line of death. Understand?

Lanzmann: Yes. But primitive?

Suchomel: Primitive, yes. But it worked well, that production line of death.

The scene was shot with a hidden camera and the quality of the film is rough. Suchomel's face looks unclear and it's difficult to interpret his expression. The poor quality of the image and the occasional interruptions of noise somehow remind the viewer of early video art works and add emphasis to the horrible and vivid content of the conversation. Bałka has only taken a single scene from the interview, and moreover, the segment was videotaped from Polish TV. This has caused a further deterioration in quality, giving Suchomel's face an even rougher

appearance and creating the impression of an indistinct apparition. What remains audible in the rough, horrible image are Suchomel words, “Primitive, yes.” – this single phrase is repeated endlessly. Although the meaning of this alone, detached as it is from the original context, is unclear, there is a foreboding sense of something threatening, a terrible sensation of something unspeakably sinister. It’s as if the abstract concept of evil is being presented in a concrete form, and as this exhibition’s organizer Piotr Krajewski writes, “...a glint of evil is captured, digitalized, and looped into infinity(Krajewski 2008).”

On a monitor outside the exhibition is *Audi HBE F114* (2008) [Fig.3]. This is Bałka’s first work to make use of a slideshow of still images. The format is one we’re familiar with from computers. Pope Benedict XVI ‘s (the German-born head of the Catholic church who was elected on April 19, 2005 pope as the successor to the Polish-born John Paul II) visit to the site of the Auschwitz concentration camp was widely covered on Polish TV. Bałka photographed these reports and created a slideshow out of 20 such still images. The Pope rides in a solemn black car, and is surrounded by a group of guards dressed in black suits. The scene is a overwrought spectacle. As the car approaches, it is shown in close-up and the logo on the front

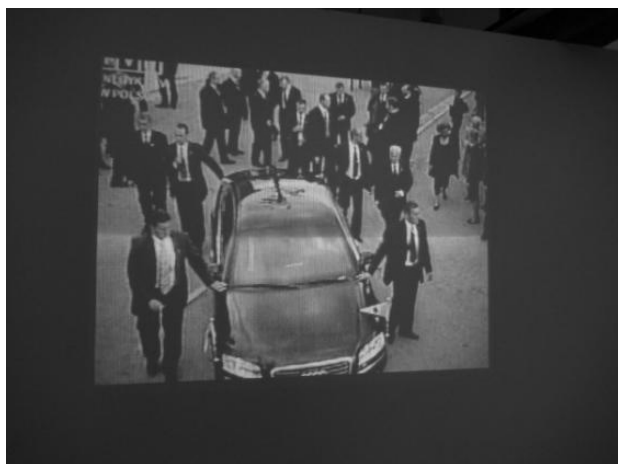
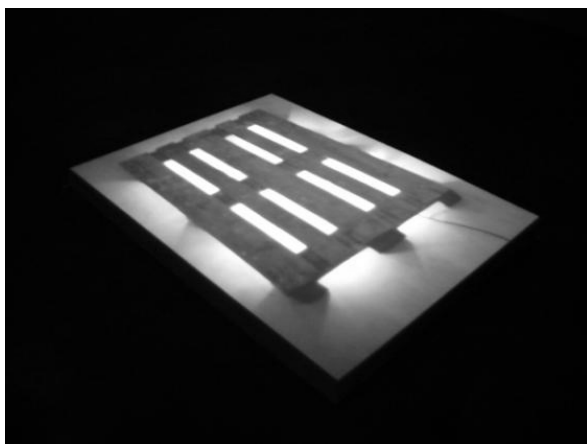
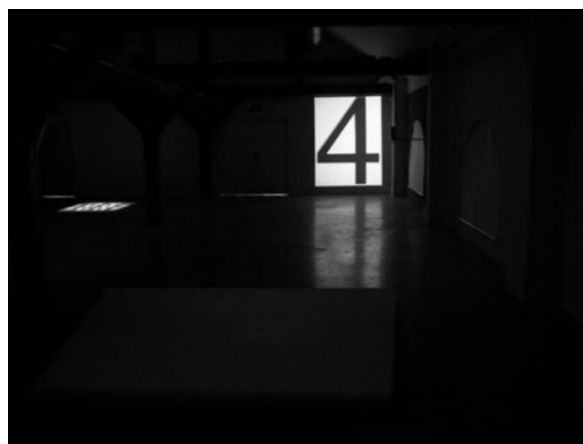


Fig.3 Mirosław Bałka, *Audi HBE F114*, 2008

becomes clearly visible: It’s an Audi. The “HBE” on the license plate signifies that this is a police vehicle and also reminds the viewer of the Latin phrase, “Habemus Papum!” (“We have a Pope!” – the declaration used to announce that a new pope has been selected.) Audi is a German automobile manufacturer, but August Horch founded the Horch company in 1901, changing the name of the firm and the car to Audi in 1910, and with the exception of a brief interruption during World War II, the company has continued to manufacture

cars ever since. In the 21st century, this same company transported the German pope through the barracks at a German Nazi camp on the Polish land. There’s no sign of people anywhere – just a group of rugged-looking guards surrounding the car. Although the site was once populated with large groups of prisoners, it now looks empty and cloaked in silence. So what is the Pope being protected from? The ghosts of the prisoners perhaps? The excess of security and ostentatious spectacle are coupled with the heart-wrenching silence of Auschwitz to create a peculiar sensation or cynical impression in this repeating cycle of straight-forward still images.

After entering the exhibition, the viewer finds five works using projections scattered around the space that seem to be part of a single installation. The first one, *DB* (2008) [Fig.4], consists of a projection on a white sponge placed on the floor. The sponge is a substitute for a screen, giving the video image a sense of materiality and presence. The image is of a Euro-sized pallet, but a light is also blinking underneath it. Shot in the artist’s atelier, the logo of the German railroad, “DB” (Deutsche Bahn) is branded on the surface of the pallet (though it’s

Fig.4 Mirosław Bałka, *DB*, 2008Fig.5 Mirosław Bałka, *I Knew It Had 4 in It*, 2008

difficult to clearly detect this in the video). The viewer's eyes are dazzled by the bright, blinking light and the blurred image seems like a vague memory (that you can't forget even if you tried!).

On the wall next to this is *I Knew It Had 4 in It* (2008) [Fig.5]. With Sun Ra's "All of Everything" playing in the background, the video goes in and out of focus as the number four grows bigger and smaller, and nearer and farther in a work that is once again derived from Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*. In the film, Lanzmann interviews the wife of a former teacher at a German school in Chel̓mno who, when asked about the number of Jewish people who were victims of the Holocaust, says, "Well, how many were there? I'm sure it had a four in it. 400,000? 40,000?" Lanzmann repeats "400,000," and the woman replies, "Yes, I knew it was a number that started with a four." The viewer's sense of fear is strengthened by the divergence between the woman's memory and the sobering number of victims, and her breezy manner of speaking as she tries to recall the exact figure – her initially innocent-seeming guise gives way to a sense of clear brutality.

In the rear of the exhibition room, *Sundays kill more* (2008) is projected from a high position near the ceiling. Amid the images of a violent storm, intense wind and rain, occasional bolts of lightning, and terrible din, one hears the voice of Charles Bukowski reciting his poem "Sundays kill more men than bombs." Bukowski, born in 1920 to a German father and Polish-German mother, moved with his family to the U.S. in 1923. (He died in 1994.) The tone of the poet's low, robust voice and poem coupled with the sound and images of the storm fill the entire venue with a sense of disquiet. Like a somber ceremony, the repetition of his simple words gradually takes on a magical air, and the work seems like a eulogy, with all of the sorrow and pain that go along with it.

Each of the works is related to the others and the entire display contains a loose coherence of meaning. As the sound that accompanies the various works is combined (music, recitation, noise of the storm and machines) with the flashing light in the dusky venue and general tumult, one has the sense that intense stimulation has been carefully avoided and restrained, and one is lingering in a state of twilight. Along with the rough sense of the materials in the sound and images, a strong physical presence is created, and while a variety of poetic and imagistic quotations are used, memories of historical crimes are evoked and by locating these in a

contemporary context, both true “evil” and common vulgarity are manifested. This seems to be a kind of omen for our chaotic age – and also corresponds to the Paul Celan poem. The title and motto for the exhibition are based on Paul Celan’s poem, “Jetzt,” published in his final book, *Lichtzwang* (1970). Bałka never makes direct reference to tragedy or sets out to produce bitter silence. Rather, his work is an extension of daily life that uses familiar imagery and often involves the repetition of a simple scene. Freud defined “the uncanny” as “something which is secretly familiar which has undergone repression and then returned from it,” and related it to the “fear of being returned to things that were once familiar and ‘homely’(Freud, 1919/2005, p.259)“. In Bałka’s works, this is exactly what the viewer experiences – the sudden transformation of something deeply familiar and of everyday experience. As personal memory is linked to collective memory, the mourning rite proceeds. To Bałka, the past is “something that can be touched with the hand,” and is conveyed to the present by means of this physicality.

Prior to this solo exhibition, two of Bałka’s video works were included in the “Still/Motion” exhibition[4], which considered the relationship between video and painting, and was held at three locations in Japan. These works were *BlueGasEyes* (2004) and *The Wall* (2006) [Fig.6]. In

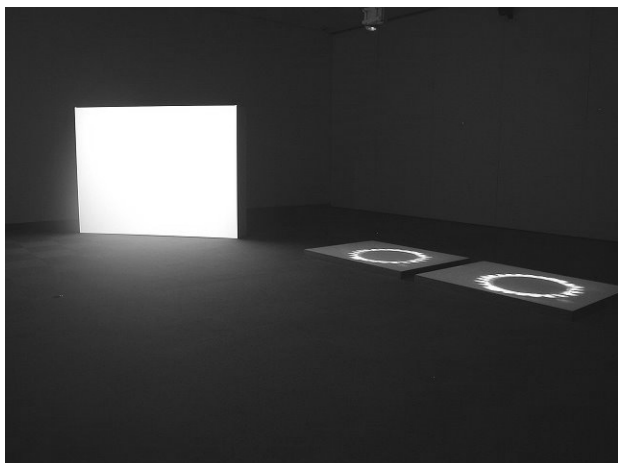


Fig.6 Mirosław Bałka, *BlueGasEyes*, 2004/
Mirosław Bałka, *The Wall*, 2006

the former, a steel frame filled with salt is arranged on the floor and used like a screen for the video, which is projected downward from the ceiling. The projected images are blue gas flames which, because they are lined up in a pair, look like blue eyes. The video, which seems to have been shot with a handheld, home video camera, shakes slightly and by being projected on the crystals of white salt, evokes a strange quality that couldn’t have been realized with a regular screen. The quiet sound of the gas burning reverberates through the venue and occasionally the viewer can hear

the click-click of the burner being turned on, and from outside, the sounds of wind whispering through the trees and small birds chirping. At first glance, it seems to be a tranquil, “aesthetic” installation. Along with its literal meaning, the title suggests the “blue eyes” that along with blonde hair are one of the standard physical characteristics of the Aryan race, and are frequently regarded as a symbol of beauty. But inserting the word “gas” in the middle of the phrase calls up the gruesome history of the Nazis’ mass execution of Jews in gas chambers during World War II. Salt, a common material in Bałka’s work, represents physical traces such as sweat, tears, and other bodily fluids, and a large quantity of salt suggests an ominous event. In the light of the projector, the salt crystals sparkle, eliciting a beauty that tempts the viewer into inadvertently trying to touch them. (In fact, regardless of appeals from the staff to refrain from touching the work, viewers frequently insert their fingers or feet, making it necessary to constantly “restore the screen.”) On the other hand, there is a truly eerie sensation that appears out of nowhere and the presence of something evil threatening to leap out. *The Wall* is a

temporary wall, on which a video image of a wall is projected. This also seems to have been shot with a handheld, home video camera using only natural light, and due to the slow shaking of the wall and the weather outside, the contrast in the image gradually changes. As the viewer gazes at the work, the image slips out of focus, inviting us into a state of silence and meditation.

While projecting a moving image on the surface of a three-dimensional object and incorporating the element of time, this video work, which is perhaps closer to a liquid-crystal sculpture rather than a liquid-crystal painting, undermines the qualifications of “here and now” and spirits the viewer off to another place. Like a dream that one sees for a fleeting moment, time expands and contracts, making it unclear whether an expanse of time has passed or merely an instant. As a quiet witness to this peculiar experience, the blue eyes continue to waver, and the video image of the “wall,” which demarcates a border that blocks the way to another dimension, continues to shimmer.

4. Some attempts to influence society through art; Artur Żmijewski and Zbigniew Libera

By contrast, the works of Artur Żmijewski (b. 1966), who was a student at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw at the time Poland underwent democratization, take an unflinching look at social problems and attempt to participate in the political debate. In his early photographic work *An Eye for an Eye* (1998) [Fig.7] people burdened with some kind of physical disability are transformed into magnificent photographic subjects, gazing out directly at the viewer. As with the video work *The Singing Lesson 1* (2001) [Fig.8], which depicts a group of deaf students singing the Kyrie in a church, Żmijewski’s powerful, humorous works set out to overturn prejudiced and stereotypical views of disabled people.

Them (2007) [Fig.9], is a significant and highly-acclaimed work that was first shown at Documenta 12 in Kassel in 2007. To create it, Żmijewski conducted a workshop for a variety, or more precisely, a number of completely different groups with diametrically opposed viewpoints, including conservatives, Catholics, nationalists, members of the Polish Jewish Youth Organization, and socialists. The results were captured on video and turned into this work. The



Fig.7 Artur Żmijewski, *An Eye for an Eye*, 1998



Fig.8 Artur Żmijewski, *The Singing Lesson 1*, 2001



Fig. 9 Artur Żmijewski, *Them*, 2007



Fig.10 Artur Żmijewski, *Democracies*, 2009

In the past, Żmijewski has focused on minorities, and created photographic and video works that demolish the viewer's fixed notions. In recent years, however, he has become increasingly active in society, and while joining the Krytyka Polityczna (Political Critique) organization, which is involved in politics and publishing, engages in direct intervention. The work *Democracies* (2009) [Fig.10], consisting of images of various political demonstrations, documents the participants assembling in public spaces and making statements. Through the use of people with completely different beliefs and backgrounds, the work reexamines the concept of democracy.

Finally, I'd like to touch on the work of Zbigniew Libera (b. 1959). Also involved in photography and video, as well as installations which make use of a variety of objects, Libera is particularly notable for the inclusion of political intent in his work, and controversial attempts to make incisive statements against stereotypes in contemporary culture. For example, his *Lego Concentration Camp* (1996) [Fig.11] series, created with Lego blocks, reproduces scenes

session proceeds in a pleasant and polite fashion at the outset, but gradually the participants lose their control, and become enraged, as the discussion erupts into a quarrel and the calm gives way to threats and intimations of violence. The process is comical and at the same time, one is struck by the idea that they are watching an archetype of the conflicts that are currently underway all over the world. In the final segment, in which the picture catches fire and burns up as it overlaps with images of riots and conflict, laughter changes to fear and silence overtakes the scene.

In his creative activities, Żmijewski attempts to form a link with the real world and bring about actual results. He says, "If I can't really influence society through art, why make it?" Żmijewski also sees the widespread view that "art provides questions not answers" as a way of avoiding the issue through "camouflage[5]." Even if autonomy is a desirous quality for art, artists have an obligation to remain active according to the same criteria as the wider society.



Fig.11 Zbigniew Libera,
Lego Concentration Camp, 1996

from a concentration camp with a kit that is designed as a child's toy. In addition, the work is displayed to make it seem as if it is for sale as a packed product. While actually facing various problems, including legal action by the Lego Corporation, Libera has refused to alter his approach, and if anything has become even more radical.

In recent years, Libera has made many works with news photographs which he alters to represent contemporary situations. These include the noted cameraman Nick Ut's Pulitzer

Prize-winning photograph of a young Vietnamese girl running from the scene of a napalm attack by the U.S. army as she screams with pain and fear (an image which helped the anti-war movement gain momentum in the 1970s). Libera, however, has changed this into a "positive" image, and replaced the Vietnamese girl with a smiling, nude European woman in a work that calls up memories of the earlier image but also functions to question the current state of the world [Fig.12]. Other examples include altering a photo of a group of Jewish people facing the camera just after being released from a World War II concentration camp to give them happy expressions, an image of Che Guevara, and a copy of a picture foreign troops in Iraq (Poland assented to the American request to provide military aid in that conflict).

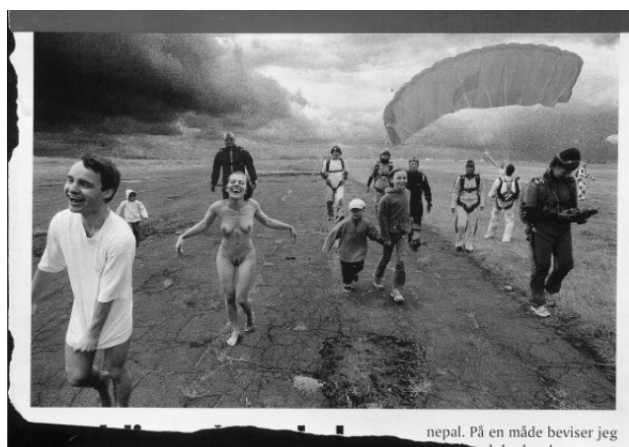


Fig.12 Zbigniew Libera, *Nepal*, 2003,
from the series *Positives*

5. In Conclusion - Art can help us share the pain of being

All of these works attempt to consciously deal with the socio-political structure, but in doing so, seem to transcend regular global standards (and contradictions). For example, Źmijewski describes himself as a "manipulator" and a "con man," and while disturbing people at times in his role as a trickster and destabilizing reality, views his expressive activities as a kind of political diplomacy[6]. In our chaotic society, which is prone to a variety of moral hazards, these works have been highly acclaimed for its invaluable contributions. Art has the power to capture our fundamental tendency toward introspection, and even in today's society, helps us discover what is truly important and continue to make an effort to convey these things to others in the future. And moreover, as Bałka told, art can help us share the pain of being.

Notes

[1] cf. Keipińska, 1981

[2] "Positioning – In the New Reality of Europe: Art from Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary". The National Museum of Art, Osaka/Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art/

Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, 2005-2006

- [3] *Shoah*, a French Documentary film 565 min. directed by Claude Lanzmann, 1985
- [4] "Still/Motion: Liquid Crystal Painting", Mie Prefectural Art Museum/ The National Museum of Art, Osaka/ Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, Tokyo, 2008
- [5] 'Interview by Sebastian Cichocki' *Art Forum* April 2009, p.158
- [6] "Wagarując," Artur Żmijewski, from the meeting with Artur Żmijewski, organized by Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej Zamek Ujazdowski in the series of „Moja historia sztuki“. 2 April, 2008: <http://www.obieg.pl/teksty/4404>

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