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Games on Morel's Hill and Kievy Gorki

On the Social Formattings of the Individual in the Work of KwieKulik and the Collective Actions Group

Abstract: The present essay addresses the relationship between the collective and the individual in artistic performances in Poland and the Soviet Union in the 1970s and 1980s. This relation is crucial for the analysis of Socialist societies. The comparative analysis describes similarities and differences between these two cultural contexts. The two artistic actions described in the essay – the 1971 *Gra na Wzgórzu Morela / Game on Morel's Hill* initiated by Przemysław Kwiek at Elbląg (Poland) and the 1981 *Desiat' poiavlenii / Ten Appearances* by the Collective Actions group in the region surrounding Moscow (USSR) – both feature a number of formal similarities: historical aesthetic manifestations of the avant-garde such as Suprematism are evoked on the outskirts of cities in snow-covered landscapes and on the fields. But the two actions are furthermore characterized by an intense dealing with the significance and effect of society and the collective on the individual. Both conduct a kind of societal analysis, which they employ to formulate alternatives to the then existing socialist society. While in KwieKulik's case the weakening of the moment of subjectivity and artistic individuality has somewhat positive connotations, namely to serve the creation of an open form that is ultimately intended to promote the idea of a non-authoritarian society of free autonomously acting individual and consequently represents an alternative to the existing order, the dealings with the theme collective versus individual on the part of the Collective Actions group are positioned differently. The subjugation of the individual under a more expansive collective has a negative connotation, namely the mundane feeling of reality. Even before possible alternatives could be considered, the (by all means self-critical) question posed by the Collective Actions group was always: how does the individual deal with the pressure that the collective (society, ideology) exerts on him? How does he react to this collectivity and what tactics enable him to adapt within the framework of collectivity?

Keywords: KwieKulik; Zofia Kulik; Przemysław Kwiek; Oskar Hansen; Kollektivnye deistviia; Andrei Monastyrskii; Vsevolod Nekrasov; Anatolii Zhigalov; Poland; Soviet Union; Elbląg; Moscow; performance; socialism; Polish neo-avant-garde; Moscow Conceptualism

The time is the 1970s. 1971 to be exact. The place is socialist Poland, near Elbląg (to the southeast of Gdańsk). Landscape: grey sky, snow-covered fields, hilly landscape. Several groups of peoples are making their way over Morel's Hill. They seem to be executing plays. The action carried out by one of the groups, the White Team, triggers a tactical reaction from the Black Team, which in turn sets a tactical response on the part of the Black Team with an action that again results in a counteraction from the White Team etc. The White Team[1] seemingly represents the rational approach, the Black Team[2] the emotional one. A third group later spontaneously arrives on the scene (the Red Team[3] – i.e. the Realists) that acts as a kind of disruptive factor. A total of 14 moves are carried within three hours with the help of 1.5 metre rods, a white canvas measuring circa 1.5 metres in length and a red canvas.

Fig. 1: Paweł Kwiek (slides), Jacek Łomnicki (b/w photographs), Marian Rumin (text), *Gra na Wzgórzu Morela*, 2006. Courtesy of KwieKulik Archive.

In 2006, KwieKulik (Zofia Kulik, Przemysław Kwiek) presented the 1971 action *Gra na Wzgórzu Morela / Game on Morel's Hill* initiated by Przemysław Kwiek in an audio-visual format – a digitalised and commented slide show (15:23 minutes).[4]

The starting point of the action was a discussion among the young creative members of the Elbląg workshop that led to a rift between the participants. Kwiek suggested in this situation that they put off the discussion until the next day and continue it outdoors. This open-air meeting, however, was not to be carried out by means of rhetorical communications, but visually instead – ultimately resulting in the (partly ironic) game of visual tactics described above.

The Polish architect Oskar Hansen (1922–2005), who taught from 1950 to 1983 at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw played a central role in the development of this specific form of artistic activity.[5] His students included artists who would later be among the most important protagonists of experimental art in Poland:

> What began in the circle of the post-war Team 10 group in a climate of disappointment in the aftermath of technocratic-authoritarian or genius-based planning ideologies of modern architecture with a focus on everyday life and the social life of the constructed environment can be traced out in the artistic neo-avant-garde of Poland of the 1970s in the development of processual and interdisciplinary modes of working (Lukasz Ronduda, Michal Wolinski and Axel John Wieder 2007: 88).

Based on Hansen's theories and teaching methods – particularly the theory of open form he evolved in the late 1950s and early 1960s[6] – the artists

1 The White Team: Oskar Hansen, Przemysław (Pawel) Kwiek, Zofia Kulik, Waldemar Dziekański, Jacek Byczewski, Czesław Tumielewicz, and Jacek Niedbał.

2 The Black Team: Grzegorz Kowalski, Jan Stanisław Wojciechowski, Barbara Falender, Wiktor Gutt, and Zbigniew Mrozek.

3 The Red Team: Józef Robakowski, Andrzej Różycki, Edward Wasilewski, Wacław Antczak, Wojciech Bruszewski, Anastazy B. Wiśniewski, W. Leszczyński, and Roksana Sokołowska.

4 Documentation: Paweł Kwiek (slides), Jacek Łomnicki (b/w photographs), Marian Rumin (text). Seehttp://artmuseum.pl/en/filmoteka/praca/kwiekulik-gra-na-wzgorzu-morela-akcja-grupowa.

5 Seehttp://www.team10online.org/team10/members/hansen.htm.

6 Hansen presented his theory of Open Form at the 11thCongrès International d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM) 1959 in Otterlo. For English translation by Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius see http://open-form.blogspot.de/2009/01/original-1959-open-form-manifesto.html. See also Murawska-Muthesius (2002).

developed "actionistic forms of expression, games and interactions and intensive mutual interactions among architecture, performance, and film" (ibid.). The foundation of Hansen's theory of open form is "that no artistic expression is complete until it has been appropriated by its users or beholders" (ibid.: 91). But the birth of the receiver as a co-author in turn also meant the death of the author or a weakening of the artist's superior position. The author in Oskar Hansen's sense no longer possesses a paramount position (as is necessary for the production of a closed form, i.e. a traditional work of art), but very deliberately diminishes the influence that his own subjectivity has on the work. According to Oskar Hansen, the artist solely creates a certain framework within which the viewers participate as equal characters in the creative process. The work – the open form – results from the complex communicational processes between the participants and is consequently a joint project between cooperating individuals who are simultaneously senders and recipients (ibid.: 92, 99).

Games served as one of the most important artistic procedures in the production of an open form. In the process, three aspects were of the utmost significance: 1) the referencing of existing things, 2) the formulation of one's own statement, and 3) not forgetting that one's own move in turn creates the context for the next player's move: "The game required its participants to learn the responsibility involved in acting in the public sphere" (ibid.: 96). Hansen's concept of the open form was not only targeted at a subversion of the art world, but also served as a means of actively influencing the socio-political reality to the extent that the idea of a "non-authoritarian society of free, responsible individuals" (ibid.: 98) had ultimately been developed here.

Change of scene. Exactly ten years later, in the early 1980s, in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), in the vicinity of Moscow. A snow-covered field on which a group of people who, like in the Northern Polish city of Elbląg ten years earlier, seems to be deeply involved in a curious game. In

Fig. 2: Collective Actions, *Desiat' poiavlenii*, 1981. Photo by Andrei Monastyrskii, Igor Makarevich. Image courtesy of Collective Actions Group.

the action *Desiat' poiavlenii* (Moscow region, Kievy gorki, 1 February 1981) by the Kollektivnye deistviia (Collective Actions) group around the artist Andrei Monastyrskii, ten invited participants were led to the middle of a snowy field.[7] A wooden board was lying there onto which ten small reels of thread had been attached.

Each participant was given one of the ten white threads measuring between 200 and 300 metres in length and then, prompted with the words "Have a good trip, comrades! Process the space" (Gruppe Kollektive Aktionen 1993: 62) they were instructed

7 On the Collective Actions group see: Felix Philipp Ingold (1980), Günter Hirt and Sascha Wonders (1984), Gruppe Kollektive Aktionen (1993), Andrei Monastyrskii (1994), Sabine Hänsgen (1995), Andrei Monastyrskii et al. (1998), Sylvia Sasse (1999, 2001), and Georg Witte (2001).

to spread out radially from this central point towards the edge of the woods.[8]

Fig. 3: Collective Actions, *Desiat' poiavlenii*, 1981. Photo by Andrei Monastyrskii, Igor Makarevich. Image courtesy of Collective Actions Group.

Fig. 4: Collective Actions, *Desiat' poiavlenii*, 1981. Photo by Andrei Monastyrskii, Igor Makarevich. Image courtesy of Collective Actions Group.

After reaching it, they were supposed go on for another 50 to 100 metres into the forest until they lost sight of the field. Each participant covered a distance of about 300 to 400 metres, whereby the movement "demanded much physical effort, as the depth of the snow measured between 50 and 100 centimetres" (ibid.: 55). The participants, all of whom had been unwinding the thread behind them the entire time, now had to rewind the string, pulling the other end towards themselves. A small piece of paper was attached to the end containing a factographic text (names of the organisers, time and place of the action). There were no further instructions. The participants themselves had to decide whether they wanted to return to the organisers or leave the scene of the action. The participants who came back were handed a photograph taken at the centre of the white field depicting a human silhouette emerging from out of the woods.[9] Each photograph was labelled with a note about the appearance of the respective participant on that date (for example "Emergence of I. Chuikov on 1 February 1981").

Two of the participants did not return to the organisers at the centre of the field: Vsevolod Nekrasov and Anatolii Zhigalov. In his story dealing with this action, Nekrasov states that he considered the end of the string and the piece of paper (that he characterised as "torn off … like an umbilical cord") to mean the end of the action and therefore immediately started to leave for home. On the way through the forest, to the road, to the bus and finally to the train to Moscow, he regarded, as he stated, everything (skiers, promenaders, figures carved into tree barks and the fact that nobody was waiting and cared for him) as signs belonging to the action. Sylvia Sasse described this process as a sort of "internalisation" of the concept that consequentially underwent a radical expansion:

> With his decision not to return and have the conclusion of the action confirmed, namely by those who thought up the concept, Nekrasov internalised and continued the action himself. He did not see any limitations in the undescribed space, in leaving the centre of the action that could have temporally or spatially marked a terminal point. On the contrary, he brought everything that was outside the borders of the collective entity inside the collective entity, interpreted it and oriented his walking on it. It was only when, as he wrote, he was sitting in his bathtub at home that he was entirely sure that action was in fact really over. One could say that he took the action thread with him there,

8 An English translation of the full text appears in Yelena Kalinsky (2012).

9 These photographs were naturally staged: they had already been taken by the organisers a week earlier.

> expanding the collective body that connected him with the others to this point (Sasse 1999).

In the second part of his account, Nekrasov characterised "dependency" as the action's "basic material." "Literally spoken, or prompted by the organisers and the props: *Connection, connecting string*. Dependency and simultaneous *not* dependency. How one leads into the other, just *how*, with what other, new characteristics" (Gruppe Kollektive Aktionen 1993: 64). Nekrasov experienced the action in three stages: the command given at the first step and the moving towards the forest as the second step, dependent moving. This dependency is called into question in the third step: "The clearing and the chiefs are no longer visible; likewise the reel … the thread has run out, in the pocket, one is finished with the thread; it no longer connects anything. The dependency has been concluded" (ibid.). The string no longer seems an "umbilical cord now" but rather like a "wagging tail behind a movement, a final flick, a slight blow with the whip – hello, see to it that you fly away" (ibid.: 63). But it soon becomes evident that the "processing of the space" is by no means at an end and that the action has indeed not yet been finished for Nekrasov. "… I myself am now the material," he concludes. For him, "being *released*" is the "is the strongest aspect of the concept: the vectorial. The concept leads outdoors; it very naturally intends to be *everything*, to divest itself of the final remnants of artistic attributes" (ibid.: 64).[10] It processes every space it can get its hands on equally:

> …one very quickly no longer knows when the whole enterprise will come to an end, perhaps first when the entire space has been processed, all the ends of this world. … The act was in fact already long over, and one increasingly gets the suspicion that it will never end (ibid.: 65).[11]

Fig. 5: Collective Actions, *Desiat' poiavlenii*, 1981. Photo by Andrei Monastyrskii, Igor Makarevich. Image courtesy of Collective Actions Group.

Completely different than Nekrasov's literally breathtaking experience of the total and totalitarian (nearly paranoid) expansion of a concept was the take that Il'ia Kabakov had on it. Together with seven others participants, he returned to the organisers on the field after rewinding his thread.

There was no question for him that he wanted to return to the organisers as quickly as possible in order to thank them for the "magic" and "uncommonness" of the experience and also to share it with the others. "My sole fear was that they would perhaps not be able to understand my wish to return and had already left" (ibid.: 59). Standing at the edge of the forest, however, he was glad to see the "little crowd of our people standing there off in the distance. With a feeling of unbelievable joy – I almost jumped from hole to hole – I hurried back. And this state of elation and happiness continued while following my own tracks back in the opposite direction" (ibid.).

10 Nikolai Evreinov (1879–1953) already noted the fact that such collective acts can on occasion lead to a real dictatorial usurpation of life (and thought). Ingold assumes that there is a close tie between the actions of the Collective Actions group and Evreinov's concept of a "theatre for oneself." Evreinov demanded a "theatre for oneself" in the 1920s that was to "be employed as a corrective and de-automatisation armature against state or church-sanctioned rituals" (quoted in Ingold (1980: 69)). See Evreinov (1927).

11 Witte (2001: 219) characterised Nekrasov's account as "genuinely deconstructive" as opposed to conceptualistic dogmatic: "It repeats the gesture of subversive affirmation that conceptualism practiced in opposition to official Soviet culture, in opposition to conceptualistic dogmatic itself. To the extent that its realisation radicalises the 'plan'," to the extent that it – in the narration of continuation –*continues*, it exposes the underlying speculative concept at the same time ('expectation,' 'empty action') in its latent ideologicity."

Fig. 6: Collective Actions, *Desiat' poiavlenii*, 1981. Photo by Andrei Monastyrskii, Igor Makarevich. Image courtesy of Collective Actions Group.

Kabakov experienced "gratefulness" and the "return to the bosom of the group" as something "pleasant." For him, the action realised

> one of the most pleasant and practically unknown sides of the socius. … Here the social is not antagonistic to you, but instead goodwilled, reliable, and extremely welcoming. This feeling is so unusual, so not experienced before, that it not only recovers you, but also becomes an amazing gift compared to everyday reality (ibid.).

The Kollektivnye deistviia group has been carrying out actions since 1976 that take place either on the outskirts of Moscow (in the forest, at the edge of the forest, on fields) or in private apartments. The participants were invited by the organisers from their circle of friends and acquaintances. During the actions, they had to follow the "strict …, ceremonial …, nearly bureaucratic orders and instructions" (Sabine Hänsgen 1995: 242) that had been determined in advance by the organisers. The Collective Actions group has for example carried out so-called slogan actions since 1977 in which the texts and signs brought from the city were subjected to an ideological reduction process by being installed on the edge of a (usually snow-covered) field in the rural surroundings of Moscow. The goal was to make the (ideological) text disappear in an empty snow-covered and consequently white Suprematist environment.[12] But like the *Desiat' poiavlenii* action described above in particular, these actions focused less on the physical implementation of the instructions and more on the individual's psychological experiences. The concept itself was not the primary concern, but rather, as Sasse (1999) writes, "the experience of what it is like to become a concept." Its goal was similarly not to examine the psyche of the masses, but rather to investigate the reactions of the individual to collectivity:

> Examining the collective body in the collective body; one could roughly describe the intentions of the artists in this way who have asked in the unofficial Soviet art scene since the 1960s about their own conceptualisation in the collective. Without the possibility of a detached self-examination in sight, they developed in the process an action art that turned the question concerning the interior and exterior of bodies and the processes of interaction themselves into the subject matter (ibid.).

The two artistic actions described in the present essay – the 1971 *Gra na Wzgórzu Morela* initiated by Przemysław Kwiek at Elbląg as well as the 1981 *Desiat' poiavlenii* by the Collective Actions group in the region surrounding Moscow – feature a number of formal similarities: for example, historical aesthetic manifestations of the avant-garde like Suprematism (red shapes/flags, white fields/black shapes) are evoked on the outskirts of cities in snow-covered landscapes and on fields. But the two actions are also characterised by an intense dealing with the significance and effect of society and the collective on the individual. Both conduct a kind of societal analysis, which they employ to formulate alternatives to the then existing socialist society. KwieKulik and the Collective Actions group play serious games.

But while in KwieKulik's case the weakening of the moment of subjectivity and artistic individuality has somewhat positive connotations, namely to

12 On Collective Actions' slogan actions see Arns (2004).

serve the creation of an open form that is ultimately intended to promote the idea of a non-authoritarian society of free autonomously acting individuals and consequently represents an alternative to the existing order, the dealings with the theme collective versus individual on the part of the Collective Actions group were positioned differently. The subjugation of the individual under a more expansive collective has a negative connotation, namely the mundane feeling of reality. Even before possible alternatives could be considered, the (by all means self-critical) question posed by the Collective Actions group was always: how does the individual deal with the pressure that the collective (society, ideology) exerts on him? How does he react to this collectivity and what tactics enable him to adapt within the framework of collectivity? The motivation behind the withdrawal of the individual into the background is thus different in the case of KwieKulik than it is with the Collective Actions group.

This divergent motivation is surely also dependent of the degree of (perceived) freedom in a society. To be sure, at the time of the *Desiat' poiavlenii* action, the Soviet Union was still being ruled by Leonid Brezhnev, who was also known as the "general secretary of stagnation." The Glasnost (Russian for openness) and Perestroika (restructuring) of a Mikhail Gorbachëv were then still far off in the future (after 1985). It would have been considered progress and almost emancipatory in such a situation if one was even allowed to ponder about the mechanisms of the collective. While the Polish artists in the circle around KwieKulik believed that a different type of society was possible and actively worked at establishing it, a positive concept of society seems to have been only visible on a distant horizon for the Collective Actions group: For Kabakov, the *Desiat' poiavlenii* action realised "one of the most pleasant … sides of the socius. … This feeling is so unusual [that it] also becomes an amazing gift compared to everyday reality" (Gruppe Kollektive Aktionen 1993: 59).

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