



DEHISTORICISATION

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RAFAŁ JAKUBOWICZ

In 2002, Rafał Jakubowicz (born 1974) photographed the Volkswagen plant in Antoninek near Poznań from behind its barbed-wire fence and signed the picture *Arbeitsdisziplin*. The company's hysterical reaction and its successful demands for the municipal gallery to censor the exhibition and withdraw the controversial photograph moved the work beyond the purely artistic context. The seemingly innocent combination of the image with the German phrase "work discipline" violated taboo. With his subsequent works, Jakubowicz proved he was interested in exploring the sphere of emotional tensions and situations of enslavement.

The painting series *The Cabinet* (2006) is comprised by almost identical close-ups of the faces of the post-1989 Poland's fourteen ministers of culture. Jakubowicz repainted photographs found in the press with white paint on white background. Placed beneath the paintings are plaques with the dates of the beginning and end of the given minister's tenure. Though some of the ministers were colourful figures from the world of culture and art, the fourteen portraits are like a single portrait of a pale-faced minister. The *Cabinet* speaks of contemporary history but its form produces the effect of old, faded images. The two presents: that of the artist and that of the patron-official, are so incompatible as if they were ages apart. The golden plaques are traditionally placed under paintings in museums, stating the birth and death dates of the author or the person portrayed. "German word *museum* has an unpleasant ring to it," Theodore Adorno wrote. "It speaks of objects with which the viewer has lost a living connection and which are dying. The fact that they have been preserved stems from respect for history rather than any present need."

In the painting series *Zugzwang*, Jakubowicz refers to the memories of concentration camp inmates. The representations themselves are enigmatic: vague outlines of human figures, a red cross, the top of a church spire, a dark-grey image with misty shadows. What is crucial here are the titles, quotations from books such as Miklos Nyiszli's *Auschwitz: A Doctor's Eyewitness Account* or Gitta Sereny's *Into That Darkness. An Examination of Conscience*. The German word *zugzwang* means a situation when you have to make a move, but any move you make will worsen your situation. Jakubowicz does not portray the victims in *Zugzwang*, their

figures do not appear here directly – instead, they emerge from the shadows of the narratives referred to, existing but in supposition. An analysis of the situation of being trapped is an important strand in Jakubowicz's practice, and not only in the works referring to history and evoking the memory of the catastrophe.

The characteristic austere gesture, the chalky colour range, the drawing from photographic sources, the special relationship with history,¹ and the significance of the titles, usually in German, situate Jakubowicz's work close to the art of Luc Tuymans. Jordan Kantor notes that the most accurate interpretations of Tuymans's art have come from younger artists, conducted in their own art. In Jakubowicz's case, his vigilant analysis of language has resulted in projects based on disturbing and thought-provoking words-suggestions. Displayed on billboards across Cracow, the lone word *Seuchensperregebiet* (Pestilence Closed Area, 2002), devoid of any visual commentary, represented a radical way of confronting the viewer with history. The letters are uneven, blurry, typed on an old typewriter they resemble an official document. The word is unintelligible for the majority of viewers but still it subconsciously evokes disturbing connotations. "In Kant's language, even *Good morning*, suitably pronounced, can take the shape of a metaphysical thesis," writes Kundera. "German is a language of heavy words."² Jakubowicz's formal discipline and his calm, composed style make him similar to Miroslaw Balka. In a subtle way he alludes in his works to things that, as Adorno feared, art has been unable to express. In *ברנת-שחייה* (*Swimming Pool*, 2003), the Hebrew word for 'swimming pool' was projected onto the front wall of an old Poznań prayer house, converted by the Germans into a public pool during the war. The Hebrew letters shining on the dark wall triggered a chain of associations evoking the memory of the tragedy.

Jakubowicz explores difficult, "inexpressible" issues in his works, but he has also gained recognition as a brilliant conceptual artist translating conceptualism into his own, paradoxical, style of thinking. This is also the style of the Wunderteam (a group Jakubowicz forms with Wojciech Duda and Maciej Kurak, formerly with Włodzimierz Filipek and Paweł Kaszczyński). In this incarnation, Jakubowicz's praxis is immersed in art history but also maintains the distance of an abstract sense of humour

towards it. These are projects such as the geometric, painterly *Form*, then *Art Kills* (2005), a series of stickers resembling the warning labels on cigarette packs, the paradoxical trap in *Onehundredeighty and Something*, and the minimalistic *Mittel Weiss* (2005). But even in these projects there is a vague sense of helplessness or enslavement. The abstract series *Form*, comprised by small pictures whose form imitates drug packagings, refers to disease. *Art Kills* draws an ironic analogy between art and addiction. In *Mittel Weiss*, Jakubowicz surprised the viewers in the Foksal gallery with an empty room, its walls decorated with wallpaper of the colour *Mittel Weiss*, or the popular "middle white." The work was a reference to classic conceptualism and minimalism. An essence of the "middle-white cube" was a small painting hanging in the hall, representing the wallpaper itself. Jakubowicz recreated with oil on canvas the wallpaper's texture and colour and, symbolically, the gallery itself. He confronts us with a "packaged" void and then materialises it in the very concrete form of a painting. *Mittel Weiss* evokes the traditions of conceptualism, minimalism, suprematism and unism, and the gesture of exhibiting an empty gallery space acquires new meanings in the context of the Foksal Gallery and the "theory of place" connected with it. The exhibition *Mittel Weiss* was created for that space and that history. But Jakubowicz plays a perverse teleological game that punctures the inflated balloon of conceptualism. Another German-language title invites historical connotations. From this perspective, the work highlights the motif of the void, a crucial element of art "after Auschwitz."

¹ J. Kantor, *The Tuymans Effect*, „Artforum” 11/2004

² M. Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. M.H. Heim, New York, 1984, p. 138.

Arbeitsdisziplin



1. **Arbeitsdisziplin**
light box, video installation, 2002



1. **Henryk Mania**
oil on canvas, 83 x 110 cm, 2003



בריכת־שחייה

