Spaces of generativity.
Introduction to the art of Wojciech Bruszewski.

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Introduction

The art of Wojciech Bruszewski, developed within a broadly understood field of media art and new media, lies among the most precious achievements in this area of artistic practices in Poland. The artist, who died in 2009, was artistically active mostly in the area of photography, experimental film, video and transmedia art created with the use of computer technologies (or without using them, but still in dialogue with their algorithmic logic). In Poland, in those two latter domains, he was one of their main originators. He was also one of the forerunners of interactive installation art in Poland, as well as generative art. In this text, due to its modest capacity, I cannot even be tempted to analyse Bruszewski's art in detail. By focusing on film, video, installations and computer art, I will attempt to point out to their most characteristic features. Therefore, I am analysing not individual works but holistically recognized creation and artistic approach (due to lack of space, I am not referring here to photographic achievements, which I consider slightly less significant in Bruszewski's works, although full analysis of his works obviously must not leave this field of his artistic life out). Reflections taken here should allow to outline the vision of Wojciech Bruszewski's art and emphasise its position in the context of the latest trends in artistic world.

Searching for sense of the cinema

If the beginnings of Wojciech Bruszewski's artistic activities belong to the 60s of the last century (by the end of that decade the artist joined Zero 61 – the Toruń photographic group), his activity in the area of experimental film were begun in the 70s as part of his work in the avant-garde group "Workshop of Film Form" started in 1970. Members of the Workshop, aiming at full recognition and broadening the expression possibilities of audio-visual arts, proclaimed the need to research the properties of film as medium. The medium analysis carried out by them, placed "Workshop of Film Form" within the current of conceptual art in its broad sense. In the avant-garde cinema, this current was referred to by P. Adams Sitney as structural film[1].

Established in the period of particular stress placed on conceptual tendencies in art and development of the structural avant-garde film current, "Workshop of Film Form", in a natural way, became part of artistic environment of artists who rejected the natural aesthetic approach in favour of the cognitive one and – following the positivists' school of philosophy – acknowledged their own communication possibilities as the only ones worth being interested in.

Members of "Workshop" discovered their own way within conceptual movement in art in its broad sense, reaching into the constructivist Polish and Russian artistic avant-garde tradition of the 20s and 30s of the last century. Thus, ideology and practice of constructivism became for them a very important source of artistic and theoretical inspirations. This heritage of constructivism can be seen particularly clearly in the works of Józef Robakowski, Ryszard Waśko and Wojciech Bruszewski precisely.

In the context of conceptual film current, and more precisely its variation referred to in Poland as analytical film, Bruszewski particularly carefully considered the issue of relation between reality and its audio-visual representation, and between the viewer and reality and its representation (transferring these analyses later into the domain of video art). He emphasized particularly the dualism of the concept of reality, distinguishing its material aspect (what is beyond us) and mental one (what it means

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[1] P. Adams Sitney, *Structural Film*, „Film Culture" 1969, Nr 47.

for us). This other meaning was treated by him as a culture product – a collection of conventions leading to further conclusion that our contact with reality is not of direct character, but is indirect through our language. Bruszewski also pointed out that mechanical and electronic media (photography, film, video, etc.) work partly independently of the regulations ruling our minds, that the image of the world communicated by them is not identical to our own vision, clearly subordinate to the existing cultural cognitive conventions.

In this situation, according to the artist, a perceptive mind is inclined to make use only of that part of experience provided by media, which does not breech those conventions. Bruszewski's films, which are an insightful analysis of relations between reality and its presentations in various forms, led to a confrontation between the human mind and representations of reality that it would create against images of the world created by the media technologies.

Not otherwise did Bruszewski refer to the issue of connections between sound and image that he frequently brought up in his films. In his audiovisual experiments, e.g. *Teaspoon* (1974) or *Matchbox* (*audio-visual experiment*, 1975), he attempted to show that the connection between visual and acoustic perception is rather an impression created by human mind than a long-lasting, independent fact.

A conceptual film (structural, structural-materialistic, analytical), by taking the viewers' attention off formal shapes and subjective aspect, eventually encouraged them to undertake a reflection over media nature of the film. It is worth noting, however, that totally depersonalised character of conceptual cinema is more (if not most of all) of a theoretical programme than a real attribute of films of such kind. One could even risk a hypothesis that the most interesting conceptual films do not follow that at all. This observation allows us to treat films made by individual artists representing structural cinema, not solely as cognitive instruments and sources of knowledge about film medium, but also as a more detailed, individualized representations of original concepts and approaches[2].

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[2] See Ryszard W. Kluszczyński, *Analysis and Expression. Meta-reflection in (Multi)media Art*, in: Analytical Tendencies in Modern Art, ed. Grzegorz Sztabiński, Lodz 1996, p. 57-72.

Things are no different in case of Polish analytical cinema, and Wojciech Bruszewski's art within it. This artist, by exploiting areas between reality and its audio-visual representation, expressed, as if *en passant*, total reflective distrust towards any message, any form of communication, any value given a priori. He questioned any unambiguous assignment in communication space of works of art towards their authors' personality and expressive potential of art as well. He unveiled the common and fundamental relativism that is usually camouflaged and neutralised by providing conventions with autonomic value. Media art was to unveil the conventionalism that rules perception of reality, according to Bruszewski. This approach and consequent anti-expressionism that its inevitable part, eventually led him to generative art and the concept of self-generating text as a source of endlessly proliferating forms and meanings that do not in fact communicate anything (it traditional sense of the word), because they represent nothing and no-one.

Works realising the programme of generative art appeared in Bruszewski's creations very early indeed, although in many cases the context of applied medium provided a more symbolic touch to it that the one that was actually realised. This was precisely the case with the cinema where artworks take on a form of audio-visual artefacts and not processes, due to their media characteristic. Yet films like *Apnoea* (1972) on the one hand, and *YYAA* (1973), *Test – door* (1974) or *Teaspoon* (1975) on the other, due to their construction, seem more as structures generated by film systems than forms of representation or expression. Such films question and reject narrative functions that are imposed on them, suggesting structures that are less or more close to permutation forms instead. On the other hand, an object *New words*, created in parallel, clearly appears to be a form of permutation art and generative *sui generis*. Films themselves, however, in their not obvious form, place themselves in hybrid space outlined by the tension between (self)cognitive and generative-permuted perspective.

Videotraps

Wojciech Bruszewski together with a few other artists from "Workshop of Film Form" initiated the history of video art in Poland. Apart from participating in the first video presentation at the museum in Poland – a collective "Action

Workshop" (Museum of Art, Łódź 1973), he was also, in co-operation with Piotr Biernacki, the author of the first work created on magnetic videotape. *Pictures Language* – a realisation made in 1973 was an attempt to transfer abstract language symbols into actual pictures of objects (e.g. A-sand, B- rock, C-road, etc.). In 1974 Bruszewski realised another of his works – *Space transmission*, concentrating this time on the issue of space articulation. This work emerged from his reflections over narration, register and transmission which led all together to constituting "an inscrutable situation"[3].

I mentioned earlier, while characterising Bruszewski's films, that issues undertaken there are also present (in a form slightly modified by the parameters of the new medium) in his video activities. They were analysed best by him in a series of tapes under a mutual title of *Video touch*, created between 1975 – 1977. Bruszewski analysed there problems from the area of relation between reality and its audio-visual representation, referring to concepts connected with the conflict between the idea of direct experience and a real experience mediatized by conventions ruling our cognition and organizing our knowledge into systems of mental, culturally conditioned representation of reality. Paradoxically, directness of perception is in his vision possible solely thanks to media (mechanical and electronic means of communication). Tapes from the *Video touch* series were then, as intended by Bruszewski, forms of traps set for what exists in the outer and inner world, which were in that way discovering conventionality of our perception and the knowledge grounded in it.

His video installations functioned in a similar way, for instance *Outside* (1976), or *Installation for Mr Muybridge* (1977). All these video works, just as films discussed earlier, grew out of conflict tension between cognitive aspirations and those *sui generis* generative ones.

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[3] Tomasz Samosionek, *Rozmowa z Wojciechem Bruszewskim* [Conversation with Wojciech Bruszewski], „Zeszyty Artystyczne" nr 7, PWSSP, Poznań 1994.

Image/object as sound interface

By the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, Bruszewski created a series of works focused greatly on sound that remained in autonomous relationship with the image – for example installations *Television music* and *Television hen*, both from 1979 – where sensors, which were attached to the screen of the monitor, reacting to changes of visual information steered the sound generator, or became partly independent – for instance installation *Sternmusik*, 1979 – where sound camera reacted to turning the pages of „Stern" magazine placed within its proximity, or finally, gained total autonomy, as was the case with some installations-performances that made the series *Some music* (1982). All these works may be described as multimedia phenomena, as a connection of sound *art*, installation and performative arts within video art environment, or – more broadly speaking – within the environment of electronic media art. These projects, in connection with the theory developed by Bruszewski and concerning artistic communication, later on laid foundations to his generative radio installation *The Infinite Talk* (1988), realized in „Ruine der Künste Berlin", where synthetized voices of a pair of virtual interlocutors carried on endless discussions on air, material to which was based on randomly chosen by a computer fragments of classical philosophical works.

All these installations, due to their hybrid, multimedia and conceptual-interactive character, take the role of pioneers towards currents of interactive arts developed in the decades to come. Therefore, I wish to take a closer look at them. I also would like to pay attention to manners through which Bruszewski realized his generative ideas almost since the very beginning of his artistic work.

In installations such as *Sternmusik*, *Television music* and *Television hen,* Bruszewski dealt with the possibilities of generating sounds using images. At the same time, in the space of issues undertaken there, issues of perception analysed before come back, connected with the area of relation between the experiencing subject, reality and its media representation as outlined by the film and video works. In parallel, in this space, there appear also references to stochastic processes in art and cognitive processes. In this way, in the recalled installation works of Bruszewski, three fields of artistic tendencies cross, developed within

neo-avant- garde formations and possessing crucial meaning for the character of works done by this artist: conceptual, generative and interactive art.

Interactive installation *Sternmusik* fits interestingly into the domain of interactive art. As Bruszewski himself put it, *Sternmusik* is „[i]nstallation – acoustic object with the use of a specially prepared camera. The camera transforms image into stereophonic sound. Aimed at "Der Stern" magazine while turning the pages, it synchronously transforms the visual information of further pages into music."[4].

Sternmusik becomes a type of an instrument in a way, on which the audience may perform audio-visual compositions, thus expanding or completing the work of art in their performances. Three layers of the interactive work of art[5], extracted by Annick Bureaud, in the case of Bruszewski's art outline the architecture of connections between the spheres of artistic practises shown above and present in his creations. The layer of perception is mainly connected with generative art, the conceptual layer with conceptual art, and the layer of performance with interactive art. It is also worth noting that *Sternmusik* and artistic concepts of Bruszewski play a pioneering role as opposed to the experiments of David Rokeby from the 1980s, particularly his interactive installation *Very Nervous System* that Rokeby was working on between 1986-1990. In the systematic of interactive art strategy[6] that I suggested, both *Sternmusik* and *Very Nervous System* became part of works realising strategy of instrument created around the interface, the accentuated aspect of interactive experience[7].

Two other works of Bruszewski – *Television music* and *Television hen*, find their place in the context of the system strategy that I described[8]. In these works, the

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[4] *Wojciech Bruszewski: Phenomena of perception*, catalogue of the exhibition in the City Art Gallery in Łódź, eds. Elżbieta Fuchs, Janusz Zagrodzki, Łódź 2010, p. 150.

[5] Annick Bureaud, *Les Basiques: Art „multimédia"*, www.olats.org/livresetudes/basiques/basiques.php [2004].

[6] Ryszard W. Kluszczyński, Strategies of interactive art, "Journal of Aesthetics & Culture" (Stockholm), Vol. 2, 2010, www.aestheticsandculture.net/index.php/jac/article/view/5525

[7] Ibidem.

[8] Ibidem.

audience have no possibility to directly interfere with the event structure of the work, as it is each time outlined by a current TV programme that plays the role of a score for the sound performance both installations give. Thanks to *Television music* and *Television hen*, installations that have such clearly generative character, Bruszewski took the position of a pioneer towards numerous works representing in interactive art systematics I suggested a system strategy, e.g. towards the reward-winning *Listening Post* (2001), installation of Mark Hansen and Ben Rubin.

Audio-visual object A *four-spoke turntable* (1981) is placed, among the discussed works of Bruszewski, somewhere between the above-mentioned positions, not fitting into any of the extremes designated by them. Similarly as *Television music* and *Television hen* – it can function as an object belonging to generative art, only perceived by the audience, representing the artist's unequivocal choices – "Best results: Pablo Casals >>Cello quartet <<"[9]. Yet it takes a more interesting position when offered to the public "for service". Its logic encourages to such interactive presentation. Then it becomes a generative-interactive form. A similar status is held by another one of Bruszewski's works – *Music of behaviour* (1982) – which used to take on a form of an original performance done in the space of installation, performance of which could be also suggested to the audience.

Conclusion

Creations of Wojciech Bruszewski – as I was arguing elsewhere[10] – are examples of a process within which conceptual perspective in art, by entering the space of the culture of participation that is being shaped in parallel, is transformed into an interactive perspective. Yet the basic role at that time was played by another tendency in this author's works: generative strategy usually acting on the basis of randomness.   It is precisely generative art or its related forms (e.g. permutation structures) which is most broadly present in Bruszewski's works. It

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[9] *Wojciech Bruszewski: Phenomena of perception*, *op. cit.*, p. 166.
[10] Ryszard W. Kluszczyński, *Konceptualizm i sztuka interaktywna. Analiza polskich przykładów* [Conceptual Art and Interactive Art. Analyses of Polish Examples], in: „Art and Documentation" Spring 2012, nr 6, p. 73-78.

can be found in films, video works, objects, sound installations or computer art. It is also a significant factor of his interactive works of art. Coming to that conclusion forces me to put forward a thesis that it is a complex created through co-operation of three connected tendencies: generative, permutation and stochastic one that outline the character of Wojciech Bruszewski's art.

All of the above mentioned tendencies that shape Bruszewski's art – conceptual, generative, permutation, stochastic, interactive – appeared in his works in not chronological way; at times they did appear subsequently, sometimes in parallel, entangling in each case in relations with various media contexts. Configuration of reflection that I imposed here over the works of the author of *Video touch*, determining the order of the text and the analyses undertaken here: from film, through multimedia activities, does not determine, in any significant way, the direction of development or transformation of Bruszewski's art, but it only outlines its range, signalises the spectre of applied media, artistic disciplines that are entangled and structures that are created. Generative ideas and randomness are to be found both in the beginnings of his creations and in their final phase, in all creative periods. Consequently then, all works of the author of *Sonnets* becomes a dialogue space, the area of endless conversation developing between the tendencies constituting it. However, the omnipresence of permutation-generative concepts is what makes these features particularly far-reaching for the character of Bruszewski's art.

In 1972, in the early phase of his artistic activities, apart from the permutational film *Apnoea* (linear combination of various systems of the same elements), Bruszewski also created a generative and at the same time permutational object *New words*, which allowed to generate 256 different combinations of ingredients-letters, most of which had no status in Polish language, they did have potential of words, though.

By entering the synchronic relation of structural relationship with *Apnoea*, the device – as Bruszewski himself called *New words* – referred also, this time in diachronic system, to his later projects, to *Poetic machine* (1982) then existing only in the form of a concept/project apparatus generating texts in a randomly

conditioned continuous way and to Sonnets (1992), a generator of poems founded on a digital platform (Atari computer). These three moments, appearing at a decade intervals, reflect the basic system of tendencies appearing in Bruszewski's works and at the same time show how decisive a role the generative stream of art played in it. Its co-existence with another current – also significant for Bruszewski's approach – interactive art – outlines the basic vector of his art, ranging from human performativity to performativity of machines.