

A conversation between Filip Berendt, Karolina Kolenda and Jakub Śwircz [excerpt]

Jakub Śwircz: Let's talk about *Visit* that is about the pictures taken in the homes you were invited to.

Filip Berendt: Let me start with the basis of this project. In the media as well as in the materials distributed by lokal_30, where the premiere presentation of the project took place, there appeared an announcement of simple content: "Invite an artist to pay you a visit in your home. The artist visits the willing ones in their private flats or houses, which become the subject matter of his photographic works". The interest was very big, but the strictly defined rules eliminated a lot of volunteers. To carry out the announced actions in a particular flat, I had to have it at my full disposal for ten hours maximum. Not everyone wanted to run such a risk. Acceptance of my presence was connected with handing over the keys to me. I could basically do everything, making use of the elements which were inside. In the strangers' flats there appeared installations, based on the things which were to be found there – everything happened in front of the camera, during the proprietor's absence. The elements which I made use of afterwards returned to their original places. Through the juxtaposition of the elements which belonged to the dwellers, I made a kind of portrait in which the presence of the characters was contained in the objects.

JŚ: Was it the photograph that was supposed to be the result of your actions every time you took them up?

FB: Yes, it was. Using the photograph in *Visit* resulted from the strategy I adopted. I assumed that my time for the project realisation in each of the flats wouldn't be longer than an ordinary day of work. Within those eight or ten hours I had to make up the installation, the only outcome of which was supposed to be the photograph. While designing the rules, there existed a huge risk of a failure.

JŚ: Is the photograph, according to your strategy, the only outcome of your interventions?

FB: The first thing I did after entering each of the flats was to choose the appropriate place for the camera. It was just that decision that determined my further work, that is the very process of making up the installation. In that sense the whole object was created with the reference "to the camera", that is with the thought of creating the photograph. In the assumptions that I took there was no space for looking for the other takes once the installation was created.

Karolina Kolenda: *Visit* is a good example of marking an important theme which characterises your works. The actions that you're describing take on the nature of a performance, they are the events. However, the stress that you put in them on creating the picture indicates a tremendous difference in your approach to the performance in its original sense, in which photographic recording or video appear. In the case of Marina Abramović's action the photographs are transparent, they document the actions for the subsequent viewers. As far as you are concerned, the photograph is the aim, the final. We stopped at the picture and by means of it, we can start the conversation about the event. In other words, in *Visit* it's the picture which is the reason for the performance.

FB: Surely, I don't treat the photograph as documentation, which means that I don't want it to be transparent. And, as you said, for me, it is the final part of building an installation. The photograph finishes the process. I think that you're right to distinguish between my approach to performance and that which is the classic one. On the top of it, there is my attitude to the very idea of documentation. For me it "doesn't think" about where the camera is; thus, it becomes impossible in its case to build reality for the camera.

JŚ: Karolina points out that the thought of a photographic image to become the result of our actions is something constantly present in our efforts.

FB: I always incorporate a sort of performative action into my projects. Usually, my works are created in a rented studio or, as in the case of *Visit*, in the flats which are made available to me. Every time, I assume certain rules which I have to follow as I work. In most of cases, they are connected with the selection of means which I can make use of in the location or with the time constraints.

KK: Time surely plays a tremendous role in the series *Pandemia*.

FB: Indeed, it does. In *Pandemia* I made up display racks of organic mass, on which I grew mould, thus creating organic sculptures. Mould is an interesting substance – it's both living and dead. Due to this duality and dynamism of the organic tissue changes, it can itself be called a process, in which the passing time can be easily observed. A photographic camera allows me to freeze a particular phase of the mould's growth. In the process of preparation for the project, I became skilled in using this material. The knowledge of how quickly mould changes makes it possible to construct the object on the basis of this dynamic process. Thanks to this, I could add a new layer and decide what colour it would assume. Most important of all, the objects in the making were photographed at 1:1 scale.

JŚ: When you're talking about *Pandemia*, you mean the sculptures, three-dimensional objects, but we can only see them in the two-dimensional space of a picture; it's only in this way that we have access to them.

FB: It's because there is no possibility to stop the process. For instance, pouring some resin over an object would damage its delicate structure. The only medium that can strengthen this process without a loss, retaining the size and the quality of the tissue, is the photograph.

JŚ: With your photographs, you were admitted to the department of sculpture in the Royal College of Art. How were your works looked on by this department?

FB: Mostly, as the sculptural objects. They were never looked on as documentation. According to the lecturers' assessment, the important thing was finding a common denominator for the photograph and sculpture. Thanks to the use of photograph in the context of sculpture, I could take up the subject of the very sculptural material. Thanks to the camera, I'm able to limit the access to it, affect its clarity.

JŚ: Do you want to make the material harder to recognise, make it lose its specificity?

FB: Yes, I do. Through the photograph I distance myself and the viewers from the very material. Thanks to it, at the particular stages of realisation, the situation occurs when the chance for a simple definition for the material disappears, which is considerably important in the classic treatment of sculpture. After all, it's the material that evokes the associations. On the other hand, these associations limit the interpretation, they push it in a particular direction. Losing the recognisability of the material, effacing the boundaries between particular elements constitutes a kind of transcendence of the established ways of perceiving the sculpture. Through the decision of photographing the objects I deal with, and thus through the decision of limiting the access to them, I lose the specificity of the material

and force the use of the sensations which are much less precise than those used in the perception of touch, smell or weight.

KK: When analysing your works, it's impossible not to mention the motif of *vanitas*. It's already hidden in the names of the series, say in *Pandemia*, or in the series we haven't talked about yet – *Still Life*. The motif of death can be seen in the very compositions and the elements you reach for. Black background, stitched together or scooped fruit – it's an obvious reference to the classic Spanish painting.

FB: As in the dealing with the sculptural material so in the realisation of *Still Life*, I was interested in reduction. In the former case, I was concerned with the inability of the recognition of the material so that I could free the viewer from the associations derived from the contact with the material. In the latter case, by creating still lives, I was trying to reduce strong connotations resulting from the very subject and the symbolism of the particular artefacts which my compositions were made up of. It was my aim to lose the great burden of the symbolism of the particular elements, which was worked out through the centuries, for instance birds or fruit. What mattered to me was an attempt to assume nothing but the visual sensation. I tried to achieve the assumed reduction by new juxtapositions, seeking subsequent arrangements that would lead me to achieving the condensed visual surface.

KK: What is the key to the selection of objects? When I look at these photographs, what I see in them is not only the photograph itself, but rather the performative effect of the action of an artist who chooses the objects. What is your idea behind choosing a particular object and was its original symbolic meaning important for you?

FB: When selecting the objects, I'm not governed by their meaning. With my first works, I made use of the old Dadaist strategy of putting down every day the name of one object which I became interested in, which means the object which impressed me. I introduced it into the set of the objects randomly chosen for each photograph. Afterwards, I gave it up. I had the impression that this mechanicalness was not important as, after all, they were still the objects I had chosen before. The objects which I collect in my studio don't possess any role which is ascribed to them beforehand. They deserve it only as the result of these performative actions in the studio.

KK: How about the situation in which you introduce a human being on the set? In one of the works there appear the character whose sex is impossible to define. Do you also deprive such a difficult character of the cultural background?

FB: The characters are more objects than human beings. They are surrounded by the objects and treated as such. They are androgynous, difficult to define in terms of their sex, thus deprived of a particular function. In the previous projects, I never dealt with humans, but only with the objects belonging to them. In the series *Badland*, they appear for the first time and are treated with a similar attitude. They are the objects blocked by the other objects.

KK: When I look at the photographs from *Badland*, I think about them as if they were film frames. I see them and think: What has actually happened, what is going to happen in a moment? You apply close-ups and camera zooms, and these are actually the cinematographer's rudiments. Do you draw on the achievements of the film narrative?

FB: Narrative during a performance just happens and is an element of this process. Obviously, I "collect" all this in the final photograph, which might result in this film-like effect. I didn't expect such an interpretation, but I like it a lot. After all, it's just my aim to build, of all these different, contrasting subjects, the whole that can be read. The reading might be wide, as if the whole film were to be read from one frame.

KK: Just so! As we look through the book concerning the video art and we can see a frame from Matthew Barney's film, we instantly think about the whole film. Looking at these photographs, I think about the video art, the film and only in the third place about the photograph. But, we're talking about the photograph, aren't we?

FB: It might be that the whole power underlies the fact that from one photograph one can derive the film concept, the whole story? That means that this only photograph can build the whole world. I use it as a tool clipping all these themes together. I'm very happy about the fact that on the basis of one frame, we can describe or create a film. That means that this photograph contains a lot of information, it condenses the whole project into one point.

KK: At the end, let me ask you if it is your aim to efface the borderline between the process and the effect?

FB: I think that this final effect-photo is tremendously important. The process itself is available to the viewer. At every stage, I get rid of the word "documentation" because, as I said before, it would be difficult to define my actions through it. Besides, I don't look on myself as a photographer. I rather make certain performative, sculptural actions, for which a photographic camera turns out to be an ideal tool.
