

In spite of the troubles in Poland prior to martial law, Polish people still had time to consider art. Norman Dilworth, Anthony Hill and Peter Lowe visited Poland to take part in the exhibition and congress Konstrukcja w Procesie/Construction in Process which took place in Lodz in October and November, 1981. This was one of the most ambitious modern art exhibitions ever held in Poland. More than fifty artists from a dozen countries showed work, and there were lectures, films and performances throughout the first week of the show.

The aim was to show a type of art which could be understood as process occurring between:

- a) the subject and the object
- b) within the object
- c) outside the object
- d) between objects

The title, Construction in Process, was intended to underline a new quality in the art of the seventies, i.e. a shift from the construction of the object to operations aimed at structuring the object. Emphasis was placed on activities which reveal themselves, rather than on construction. The organisers considered the following to be in keeping with these assumptions: organising and constructing material, constructing an object, organising space, projects, diagrams, diagrams and program recordings, system recordings, structural analyses and progressive actions. Artists were more or less free to decide their own contribution but were responsible for getting it to Poland. Several artists sent drawings and specifications for work to be made and installed in the gallery. These works were meticulously carried out by Ryszard Wasko and his assistants in spite of the shortage of basic materials.

Ryszard Wasko, a 32 year old video artist and graduate of Lodz Film School chose the artists and the theme for Construction in Process which was inspired by his own participation in the controversial Pier and Ocean exhibition held at the Hayward and Kroller Muller in 1980. Although Construction in Process put more emphasis on performance the content was similar to Pier and Ocean and a third of the artists in that exhibition also took part in Construction in Process. The main difference was that Construction in Process, being unofficial, had a miniscule budget. Also, Construction in Process took place under the auspices of Solidarity with a great deal of help from the workers of Lodz and the students of the film school.

Of course, art trade exists in Poland but there is no equivalent to our private commercial galleries. Until the 'independent galleries' began to flourish in the sixties and seventies, artists wanting to show their work without state censorship and interference, arranged private studio exhibitions for a small circle of friends. The independent galleries grew out of this activity and many of them are now semi-official.

It was originally planned that the exhibition should tour the main independent galleries but its eventual size and complexity made this impracticable. It was instead decided to house the show in the "Budrem" factory and use the local independent galleries for performance. At a live televised interview during the opening it was announced that the factory would henceforth be permanently used by artists.

As a casual observer I found that in spite of strikes, food shortages, hunger marches and Russian troop movements, people were relaxed and friendly. They were proud of Solidarity and optimistic about the future. A young Solidarity official who was present at most of the exhibition events told me that he did not believe that the Russians would invade Poland. If they did, the Poles would occupy the factories and use passive resistance. They would not take to the streets where they could easily be crushed like the unfortunate Hungarians in '56 and the Czechs in '68. He believed that Solidarity was inextricably rooted in the economy. To eradicate Solidarity would mean the destruction of the economy. Such an invasion would be counterproductive for Russia. He was sure that the Polish conscript army would never fire on its own people and he was convinced that the alliance of Solidarity and the Church would ultimately triumph.

We were invited to witness the one hour general strike on the 28th of October from inside a textile factory. Just before noon we were led by

Solidarity officials wearing red and white armbands into a reception area. As sirens sounded we were joined by workers. They sat impassively with arms folded while our presence in the factory was explained to them. The strike proclamation was read out by a union official who said that because of misunderstandings due to distortions in the mass media, he would ask one of the workers to say why she was striking. She stood up and said that because work prevented her joining the food queues she could not get anything to eat. She wanted worker control of the distribution centres. We were then shown a short film "Notebooks" by Josef Robakowsky which was compiled from actual live footage and television news about the build-up of the crisis. Finally we were led into the mill itself and allowed to wander among the silent workers and machines until the sirens sounded the end of the strike. As we left, the daughter of a Czechoslovak abstract artist told me that although they had adequate food supplies they had far less freedom than the Poles. Since 1968 her father was forbidden to show his work or teach in Czechoslovakia.

On the 30th of October we attended a recital by the tuba player Piernik during which a young man left the audience, took an apple from his pocket, and deliberately dropped it into the bell of the instrument, promptly silencing it. Ten minutes later he was the centre of a scuffle and was sent crashing into a television camera. At breakfast the next day we learned that he was a provocation artist. Perhaps the people who found themselves padlocked inside the exhibition "Falachron" were also unwilling performers in yet another piece by the provocation artist.

Lodz, which translated means "rowing boat", is the Manchester of Poland. It is also Poland's second largest city and is reputed to be the most heavily polluted by carbon monoxide in Europe. Undoubtedly its major distinctions are its film school and its collection of modern art.

Roman Polanski and Andre Wadja are both former students of this famous film school. In the early 1970's students set up an experimental group called "Warstat"/Workshop, and made a series of films. Robakowsky directed a film called "Gallery Alive"/"Zywa Galeria" in 1975 for the Educational Film Studio. The result was a close collaboration between a dozen of Poland's visual artists, each of whom was given 1½ minutes of film. As a continuation of this idea artists present at "Construction in Process" were also invited to take part in a similar project. Several films were being made about the exhibition including one for Polish state television and one under directorship of Robakowsky involving important experimental film makers such as Czekala, Krolikieicz and Wojcieccki. These films will be distributed through Film Polski, Warsaw, Mazowiecka 6/8.

The group "A R" (Artysci Rewolucyjni/Revolutionary Artists) founded the Lodz Collection of Modern Art in 1931 from examples of Cubism, Futurism, Surrealism, Constructivism, and de Stijl, donated by Arp, Teuber Arp, Bau-meister, Ernst, Leger, Mondrian, Picasso, Schwitters, Van Doesburg, Vanton-gerloo and others.

Henryk Staszewski a survivor of "A R" was honorary member of the "Construction in Process" committee. The other distinguished artists of "A R" were Kobro who died in Lodz in 1951 and her husband Strzminsky who died in 1952. Facts about the Polish avant-garde of the twenties and thirties are still coming to light long after the dark days of the German occupation and Stalinist repression. For example f-ve rediscovered works by Wacław Spakowsky (1888-1973) were recently added to the collection. They consist of systematic labyrinthine drawings done with a single line.

In some ways "Construction in Process" was reminiscent of the "Nowa Tendencja" exhibitions held in Zagreb in the sixties. Both "Construction in Process" and "Nowa Tendencja" were held in communist states at a time of political and social renewal and were in opposition to Stalinist socialist realism. Both were oriented towards international post-constructivism. Harmut Bohm, Gerhardt von Graevenitz, Kenneth Martin and Francois Morellet exhibited in "Nowa Tendencja" and "Construction in Process". The former focused on "op" and Kinetic art whereas "Construction in Process" covered a wider spectrum of the so called rational art of the seventies.

The photocopied replies to Wasko's letter of invitation to participants were stapled together in the order they were received and published as

information. These documents give an unusual glimpse into the making of an exhibition as well as into the personalities of the writers. Like the works themselves this collection of correspondence records a process and a structuring of something. Sadly military dictatorship has halted further plans for a book about the exhibition in Poland, so I welcome the initiative of Richard Nonas, Peter Downsborough and Fred Sandback to publish the material we have.

For Wasko to have gone ahead with such an ambitious project regardless of the worsening crisis was a brave gesture in the best Polish tradition. He and his colleagues inspired such good will that when it became known that he proposed to start a new collection of contemporary art in Lodz many artists responded by offering their work to the Polish people through Solidarity. This new collection would be permanently installed in the Budrem factory.

Peter Lowe      November/December 1981