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## **A JOURNEY TO AREAS OF NON-OBVIOUSNESS. JERZY BEREŚ, ZBIGNIEW WARPECHOWSKI AND THE BEGINNINGS OF ACTION ART IN POLAND**

**Abstract:** There is no doubt that the transitional period of the 1960s and 1970s is now considered to be a time of radical changes in the visual arts. The transformation of that period aimed to clarify the role of the art form within artistic creations and it gradually became of pivotal importance to understand the meaning behind the artist's creative endeavour. It also impacted the presence of artworks in society, shifting the focus to conceptualizing the artistic situation, blurring the boundary between the artist and their work, and making the audience receptive. Jerzy Bereś and Zbigniew Warpechowski were among the most prominent representatives of the Polish neo-avant-garde movement who represented this distinctive artistic ethos. The paper presents the beginnings of their work and the ramifications of their public appearances, thereby expanding the concept of art.

**Keywords:** neo-avant-garde, happening, performance art, art and body, visual manifestation

Thinking uses images, and images contain thoughts. Many difficulties and ambiguities are associated with this seemingly obvious reflection in everyday practice. How do images become images in our minds? Are thoughts evoked by perceptual or intellectual images? What is their conscious impact? How does art that deliberately and consistently uses created images or their sequences fit into this? These and similar questions are reinforced by constantly changing artistic formulas, styles and orientations producing an extraordinary wealth of forms. Throughout all epochs, artists have shown creative attitudes enabling them to create static images located in specific places and spaces, expressing

their emotional status, and ideas, embodying the aesthetic assumptions of their time and client expectations, etc. This approach began to change and be modified along with the processes of social emancipation of art, a growing sense of its ideological autonomy and independence from the social common sense initiated in the times of modernism. The neo-avant-garde art movement, which often challenged modernist research and experimentation, and reached its peak in the 1960s and 1970s, started questioning all existing artistic primacies and paradigms that had emphasized the dominant role of the image before. It was a turning point in the history of contemporary culture, as processes that questioned the established understanding of truth and meaning emerged within the field of the humanities, particularly in the dimension pertaining to the determination of relationships occurring between the world and its representation. The changes that took place related to the determination of the language form and the creation of illusions and visualization in the context of determining the identity of the "I" of the subject and its relation to mechanisms governing human life.<sup>1</sup> One area undergoing redefinition and metamorphosis was understanding the aesthetic importance of a work of art and its social context. The artistic value of an image based on form ceased to matter, while the ability to describe a specific cultural situation with gestures, words and behaviours came to the fore. The aesthetic dimension of a work of art was no longer an indisputable priority.

This article explores the impact of extra-pictorial thinking on the type of artistic activity that deviates from conventional imagery, which tends to be fixed within its own medium (such as paintings, sculptures, or film). Instead, neo-avant-garde activity delves into the realm of speculation, symbolic synthesis, and interpretation of ambiguous signs, which inherently carry the potential for error or misunderstanding. Throughout history, the creative process has always been intertwined with some carelessness and potential for misinterpretation by recipients. This risk often injects vitality into artistic endeavours, uncovering hidden dynamics that run counter to existing conventions or practices. It can also lead to compromises in art. After the Second World War, along with the progressive process of separating art from the prevailing material paradigm of the artwork, the state of ambiguity and openness to new artistic solutions clearly intensified. This trend has varied in scope and intensity, but with the following decades of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it gained more and more importance in the art world. An analogous orientation can be seen in the art arena of the communist period, although, of course, its scale, degree of popularity and power of social influence were much more limited.

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<sup>1</sup> L. Nader, *Konceptualizm w PRL*, Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warszawa 2009, p. 13.

Among creators striving to define their work intellectually, authors who pursue a strategy of close contact, carrying out actions and artistic events directed right at the audience, deserve special attention. Entering the path of increased professional risk forces the artist to deepen their self-reflection. In Poland, this type of activity was initiated by Kazimierz Głaz and Michał Jędrzejewski,<sup>2</sup> and later continued by Tadeusz Kantor, Włodzimierz Borowski, Jan Świdziński and others, who have been increasing in number since the beginning of 1970s. On the background of these achievements, Jerzy Bereś and Zbigniew Warpechowski contributed the most expressive proposals. They were precursors even to what was happening in the art of Western liberal democracies at that time. Their strategies, which gradually crystallize because of constant confrontation with socio-political reality, seem to touch and describe a specific *Zeitgeist* of the era of changing artistic practices and interests of the audience. It should be borne in mind that although the activities of both artists crossed and intertwined on many occasions, the authors took different directions and had diverse artistic intentions. Individualizing community manifestations by Bereś, enhanced by the presence of his own spatial objects, stood in clear opposition to Warpechowski's introverted, ecstatic and morally uncompromising performances.<sup>3</sup>

Jerzy Bereś was one of those artists of the generation entering the arena of the 1960s, who gradually and completely rejected the formulas of artistic activity that had been in force until then. Being a graduate of the Academy of Visual Arts<sup>4</sup> in Cracow in the discipline of sculpture, he was looking for a suitable creative strategy for himself for quite a long time. At the Academy of Visual Arts, he studied in the studio of Xawery Dunikowski, an artist of Modernist descent, most appreciated for his youthful works from the early 20<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <https://mnwr.pl/sensibilizm-1956-2006-kazimierz-glaz-i-michal-jedrzejewski-malarstwo-grafika-rysunek-fotogramy-dokumentacja-archiwalna/>, [accessed: 13.12.2022].

<sup>3</sup> Both authors have many public appearances, not always sufficiently catalogued or documented, to their credit. In Zbigniew Warpechowski's monograph published in 2022, catalogue entry No. 315 entitled *Styl dorycki, joiński i koryncki (The Doric, Ionian and Corinthian Order)* (2018), the protagonist of the publication states: „Everything points to the fact that this will be the last performance of my life. Number 324 is the number of all my speeches”. It turns out that some of them escaped the memory and documentation of the author and critics. Nevertheless, their number is impressive. Z. Warpechowski, *Zasobnik. Autorski opis drogi życia poprzez sztukę performance*, Centrum Sztuki Zamek Ujazdowski, Warszawa 2022, p. 269.

<sup>4</sup> In September 1950, the authorities changed the names of the Cracow and Warsaw academies. Each academy of fine arts became an academy of visual arts. In the aesthetic vocabulary of social realism there was no place for the category of beauty associated with art for the bourgeoisie. The change became a convenient pretext for modifying educational syllabuses and removing politically uncertain professors. W. Włodarczyk, *Socrealizm*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1991, p. 80.

century, when he used simplified and geometric object forms. Dunikowski, a talented sculptor and prisoner of the Auschwitz camp, after the war was accepted by the communist authorities, who, in exchange for political loyalty, honoured him with numerous privileges and broad opportunities in the sculptural sphere. During the communist period, in accordance with his concept of a sculptor as an executor of public contracts, Dunikowski carried out many commissions received from the communist party authorities, who tried to fill the public space with their own iconography heroizing the communist movement. He showed his submission to the regime by taking part in a competition for a colossal monument of Stalin, which was planned to be placed in front of the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw, and named Generallissimo.<sup>5</sup> Although the period of Jerzy Bereś studies (1950-1955) was the time of the most intense communist propaganda, unconditionally implemented at universities, some commentators stress that Dunikowski, appreciated by communists, tried to protect his students from excessive political indoctrination.<sup>6</sup> However, he was willing to accept government commissions, which was in line with his legendary saying: "I am standing with a razor blade in my hand and waiting for the right moment to capture what is most important in a sculpture with a single cut."<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the disgust with his master's conformism<sup>8</sup> (a similar attitude was represented by many other luminaries of that time), or personal life difficulties, made Bereś rarely exhibit his works for several years after graduation in 1955. In his memoirs, he argued this as a personal aversion to fashionable activities of the post-October "thaw" type of informalism and very widespread stylistics *à la* Henry Moore<sup>9</sup> which then gained great popularity. It is possible that his intentional absence was influenced by a low rating of skills acquired during his studies.

The attitude of withdrawing from public participation in artistic life did not mean giving up creative activities at all. From the late 1950s, Bereś created sculptural objects which he initially did not show outside his studio.<sup>10</sup> They

<sup>5</sup> Jerzy Bereś. *Kalendarium*, <https://beresfoundation.pl/kalendarium-jerzy/>, [accessed: 14.12.2022].

<sup>6</sup> J. Hanusek, *Krótką biografią Jerzego Beresia*, [in:] *Jerzy Bereś. Sztuka zgina życie / Art Bends Life*, Galeria Współczesna Bunkier Sztuki, Kraków 2007, p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> J. Bereś, *Wstyd. Między przedmiotem a podmiotem*, Otwarta Pracownia, Kraków 2002, p. 165.

<sup>8</sup> His attitude to the professor is represented by a portrait of Dunikowski, exhibited during the memorable National Exhibition of Young Art in Warsaw's „Arsenal” in 1955, and then shown in the great exhibition „Xawery Dunikowski and students”, organized on the occasion of the master's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. *Jerzy Bereś. Kalendarium*, <https://beresfoundation.pl/kalendarium-jerzy/>, [accessed: 14.12.2022].

<sup>9</sup> J. Bereś, *Wstyd. Między przedmiotem a podmiotem*, op. cit., p. 17.

<sup>10</sup> Jerzy Bereś shared his studio with his wife, Maria Pinińska-Bereś, who was also a sculptor. His spatial compositions, not shown in galleries, were sometimes photographed in the natural rural view, which added the value of authenticity to them and inscribed them into the folk cultural landscape.

were abstract wooden constructions, economically worked, avoiding the desire to aestheticize the form. At that time, Poland began to feel increasingly clear symptoms of transformations taking place in artistic life in the West, becoming perceptible during the time of Gomułka's illusory stabilization. Jerzy Bereś expressed his first reactions to the changing artistic reality in objects that differed in form from conventionally understood sculpture, but exhibited measurable material concreteness. Beginning in the early 1960s, he assembled and manufactured amazing constructions made of raw wood, animal skins, jute sheets, ropes, field stones, chains, etc. Their often monumental scale corresponded to the name – *Zwidy* (*Phantoms*).<sup>11</sup> As it turned out, they were a prelude to the creation of objects which accompanied the artist and were used during performances carried out with the participation of the audience. *Zwidy* were followed by other series of works, such as: *Wyrocznie* (*Oracles*), *Ołtarze* (*Altars*) and *Wyzwania* (*Challenges*), which were products of demonstrably anti-aesthetic form. Most of these constructions were freestanding artistic objects, containing specific layers of meaning and visuals associated with the world of politics, violence and ideology, such as: *Kasownik gazetowy* (*Newspaper Validator*) (1968), *Klaskacz* (*Clapper Man*) (1970), *Szmata* (*Tatter*) (1971), *Stół okrągły* (*Round Table*) (1972), *Wózek romantyczny* (*Romantic Cart*) (1975), *Półzak* (*Crawler*) (1986) and many others. These realizations took the form of objects, sometimes stage props, which the artist used during his shows, which he called manifestations. *Zwidy* had such a peculiar form that their construction seemed to contradict everything that the young sculptor had been taught at the academy. Made of roughly machined wooden trunks, blocks and branches, joined together by wedges, straps, belts and ropes without the use of metal screws, rivets or nails, they featured surprising ingenuity, simplicity and associations with folk carpentry. In 1964, in Krzysztofory, the seat of the Grupa Krakowska Artistic Association established in 1957, the first individual exhibition of Bereś works took place, greatly resonating in the artistic community. It also caused the artist to link his later activities with the group, which he joined as a member.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> According to dictionary definitions, the word *zwid* (*phantom*) can have two meanings. On the one hand, it is an elusive beacon, a phantom, a dreamy spectator; on the other hand – a ghost, or a spectre materializing in the real world. It seems that Bereś included both these meanings in his objects. *Zwidy* are both products of the author's imagination and real objects that remind us of ethical problems of the modern world. <https://sjp.pl/zwid>, [accessed: 15.12.2022].

<sup>12</sup> Jerzy Bereś, quickly accepted by the groupmembers, was admitted in 1966 as the only sculptor. Zbigniew Warpechowski joined Grupa Krakowska much later, in 1985. Artists belonging to the group would hold (often very stormy) discussions about the artist's relationship with the authorities, his or her duties towards society, the role of art in life, etc.

Contacts with artists associated with Grupa Krakowska resulted in cooperation with Tadeusz Kantor, its restless *spiritus movens*. At that time, Kantor was really interested in activating his artistic activity in a performative spirit, which led him to organize several spectacular happenings. The influence of Kantor's frenetic personality on the initiation of Bereś performance activity cannot be overestimated, as Bereś took part in several shows conducted by the creator of the Cricot 2 Theatre.<sup>13</sup> Quite quickly, however, he realized that their goals were divergent, as evidenced by the action accompanying Kantor's *Panoramic Maritime Happening*, during which he walked round with a rope looped around his neck and its other end tied to a long stake driven into beach sand. As he recalled years later, the constant circular movement around this stake was a metaphor for the sterility of some happening artists' activities, as well as the situation of avant-garde art in Poland.<sup>14</sup>

Bereś' spectacular debut as an action creator coincided with the political solstice that Władysław Gomułka's team and the Moscow-dependent bloc of countries were going through at the end of the 1960s. In January 1968, his manifestation *Prophecy I* took place at the Foksal Gallery. Thanks to the way it was carried out, it immediately became a hallmark of the artist's later repertoire, introducing into his shows numerous signs and symbols, not free from political connotations, or metaphorical associations. The author used elements of nature to express his intentions. Placed in the middle of a gallery, a pile of fragments of a tree broken by a storm was transformed into an ordered spatial object by Bereś dressed in red and white fabric, with the help of the audience. The pile was crowned with a bow made of branches, with a white-red string drawn from canvases covering the artist. The bow at the point had a tarp attached with the inscription *PROPHECY*. Bereś signed wooden planks covering his body with green paint squeezed out of a tube. During the whole course of the event, the text of *Creative Manifesto* was read many times, declaring the ideological attitude of the author towards the action carried out.<sup>15</sup> This

<sup>13</sup> Among others, he participated in the happening *Linia podziału (DivisionLine)* organized by Kantor in 1966 and in *Panoramiczny happening morski (Panoramic Maritime Happening)* organized the following year in the coastal village of Łazy. <https://culture.pl/pl/dzielo/tadeusz-kantor-panoramiczny-happening-morski>, [accessed: 16.12.2022].

<sup>14</sup> Tadeusz Kantor had a strong institutional connection with the government, which provided him with funds for exhibitions and theatre activities. The two artists parted at the beginning of the next decade when, under the influence of political pressure, Kantor banned a group of hippies sponsored by Bereś from visiting the Krzysztofory Gallery. Jerzy Hanusek believes that the activity of the security service, carefully infiltrating the Polish artistic avant-garde, was behind the scenes of this conflict. *Jerzy Bereś. Kalendarium* <https://beresfoundation.pl/kalendarium-jerzy/>, [accessed: 16.12.2022].

<sup>15</sup> J. Bereś, *Wstyd. Między przedmiotem podmiotem*, op. cit., p. 18.

performance provoked a wave of comments, the most negative of which was written by Hamilton, a regular columnist for the opinion-forming Warsaw magazine "Kultura". Hamilton very aggressively criticized Bereś's action, accusing him of creative nihilism and banality of ideas.

During the next show, *Prophecy II*, which took place at the Krzysztofory Gallery in early March of the same year, copies of "Kultura" with Hamilton's printed text were lit along the wall, fuelled with sticks collected from a chopped tree placed on a cart in the middle of the gallery.<sup>16</sup> During this demonstration, Bereś performed almost naked in front of the audience, wearing only two covers on his hips. He engaged the audience to build a pile of wooden blocks placed under his feet, which grew almost to the ceiling of the gallery. During the event, Zbigniew Warpechowski and Anka Ptaszkowska alternately read the text of the *Creative Act I* manifesto, while the participating audience helped the artist paint the empty car blue. The show climaxed with Bereś standing at the top of the log. He bent a long branch until it took the form of a bow, and he shot an arrow made of white and red string towards the audience, with an attached piece of canvas bearing the inscription *PROPHECY II*.<sup>17</sup> *Bread Painted on Black*, an event also realized in Krzysztofory on 11 November 1968 (only a few weeks after the intervention of Warsaw Pact troops in Czechoslovakia), complemented this twofold prophetic Manifestation. This time, just like two years earlier in Łazy by the Baltic Sea, Bereś performed with a noose, symbol of bondage, around his neck. With the other end of the rope tied to a hook in the wall, he sat at a coffee table, painting slices of bread, placed in a semicircle on the counter, black on both sides. At one point, having abandoned the activity and shouting "Enough!", he wrapped the knot from his neck in a daily newspaper and pierced it with a knife to which he attached a red rose, given to him by a casual observer of the event, with a rope removed from the hook. This happened in the presence of several people from Czechoslovakia who were in Krakow at the time.<sup>18</sup>

In his subsequent works, Bereś moved towards a more panoramic and reflective character of his performances. Panoramic events meant a wider space used (e.g., outdoors, urban areas), while reflectivity involved using symbolism and activating the audience. Since 1971, in a performance entitled *Transfiguration* realised in Konsthalle in Södertälje, Sweden, the artist appeared almost exclusively in the nude, which became an inseparable element of meaning in his performances.<sup>19</sup> The naked body provided a basis for signs, words and

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 19.

<sup>19</sup> Jerzy Bereś. *Kalendarium*, <https://beresfoundation.pl/kalendarium-jerzy/>, [accessed: 19.12.2022].

expressions painted on the skin, which he often alternated with performance involving actions and gestures. Thanks to this, he built a semantic relationship between himself (his body, personality, and face) and the objects he created. He used meanings created in this way during artistic events, and then performed symbolic operations on them, as a result of which they gained artistic autonomy. Anna Markowska believes that Bereś used the tension created between "nudity, bareness and defencelessness, and the act itself, while nudity gradually became certain" - i.e., completely attuned to performance.<sup>20</sup> The importance of political themes grew in subsequent shows, and at the same time the mysterious nature of the manifestations intensified. Bereś also created the *Ołtarze (Altars)* series, including *Ołtarz Prawdy (Altar of Truth)*, *Ołtarz Twarzy (Altar of Face)*, *Ołtarz Nadziei (Altar of Hope)*, *Ołtarz Romantyczny (Romantic Altar)*, etc., at which Bereś performed rituals: applied paint onto his body, broke bread, and served the audience with vodka or wine. One of the most spectacular manifestations of that time was *Msza refleksyjna (The Reflection Mass)*, performed with employees of Szadkowski Metal Works in Cracow, during which the naked artist performed his ceremonies at a table with the inscription "Beautiful Altar" - he cut bread, painted the slices blue and arranged them in a circle. At the end, he imprinted blue marks of his hands on the table. At the "Clean Altar" he alternately poured vodka into glasses and painted his body with horizontal black lines to finally invite the gathered to refreshments.<sup>21</sup> This attitude expressed hope in the messenger nature of art, its redemptive role. Grzegorz Dziański noted that Bereś "preserved his romantic belief in the power of creative act which should purify and transform" and opposed the objectification of the artist and their work.<sup>22</sup>

A metaphysical dimension of communal experiences evoked during Bereś manifestations became apparent much later. During the action *Romantic Manifestation*, carried out on 18 November 1981 (i.e., less than a month before martial law was declared in Poland), the author walked through the Main Square in Cracow with a toil, dragging his *Romantic Cart* with him. This act was a symbol of the difficult plight of a human struggling with adversity. Surrounded by a large crowd of spectators in various places of the square, he lit flames successively, calling them "Fire of Hope", "Fire of Dignity", "Fire of Freedom", "Fire of Love" and, finally, "Fire of Truth". With each flame, the artist tied another bell to the *Romantic Cart*, shaking it solemnly. This perfor-

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<sup>20</sup> A. Markowska, *Definiowanie sztuki - objaśnianie świata. O pojmowaniu sztuki w PRL-u*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, Katowice 2003, p. 144.

<sup>21</sup> Jerzy Bereś. *Kalendarium*, <https://beresfoundation.pl/kalendarium-jerzy/>, [accessed: 19.12.2022].

<sup>22</sup> G. Dziański, *Sztuka u progu XXI wieku*, Wydawnictwo Fundacji Humaniora, Poznań 2002, p. 117.

mance led to great social response, reinforced by the feverish political atmosphere of the time, making the authorities, who had already limited the freedom of Bereś creative activities, even more hostile towards him.

The beginnings of Zbigniew Warpechowski's involvement in action art looked a little different. Several years younger than Bereś, he started his studies during the Polish thaw, which set his life and artistic priorities differently. He initially studied at various faculties and universities, but was not so clearly focused on determining his future when he joined the Krzysztofory Gallery in Cracow in 1966. The atmosphere of this place had a stimulating influence on him. Like Bereś, he was influenced by the personality of Tadeusz Kantor for some time.<sup>23</sup> A multitude of ideas and areas of inspiration (such as Indian philosophy, Taoism and Buddhism) led him to try his hand using different media. He practiced poetry, music and painting, which determined the multimedia nature of his activities and made him open up to diverse forms from the beginning.

Among Warpechowski's first public appearances were two concerts, performed together with the jazz trumpeter Tomasz Stańko in Cracovian Rynek 13 club. During the second one, *Kwadrans poetycki z fortepianem (A Poetic Quartet with the Piano)*, he first performed an accompaniment by hitting the keys of the instrument, then improvised words in Norwid's spirit, set his shirt on fire and spoke the names of tragically deceased poets, scribbling something on the board. Finally, he shouted: "poets have no strength" and pierced the snare drum with his stick.<sup>24</sup> Even then, he wanted artistic honesty and intense experience of the situation to be the source of his unadulterated activity. Years later, he admitted that at the time he was directly inspired by meetings held by *Promieniści (Radiant Ones)* – a group of students in 1820 in Vilnius, organised by Tomasz Zan. During these meetings, young people read their literary works, sang, danced, organized games and ate simple meals, all in the spirit of moral improvement and collective perception of the idea of radiance which they cocreated: truth, beauty and goodness. Influenced by their accomplishments, Warpechowski wanted to be "a poetic instrument with its whole body, not a poetic poem-making one."<sup>25</sup> True art should not involve pretending or stylization, but must evoke pure feelings and emotions, creating spiritual states capable of feeling the deepest secret of existence. "He was interested in the ethical dimension of directly unveiling the truth about oneself in front of others, one's 'naked' psychological and physical condition, one's weaknesses,

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<sup>23</sup> Z. Warpechowski, *Wolność*, Mazowieckie Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej „Elektrownia” in Radom, Radom 2009, p. 79.

<sup>24</sup> <https://warpechowski.com.performances/improvizacje> [accessed: 21.12.2022].

<sup>25</sup> Z. Warpechowski, *Zasobnik, Słowo/obraz terytoria*, Gdańsk 1998, p. 15.

but strengths as well. He was fascinated by the danger of error and disgrace, which was also a chance for something extraordinary to come about, bound with mysterious intimacy, an encounter, interpersonal contact.<sup>26</sup> For this reason, he undertook projects which, while giving him a sense of fully experienced life, led him towards violent actions, exposing physical suffering and existential anxieties.

At the turn of the 1960s, Warpechowski lived in a milieu similar to Bereś, except that his projects were more rebellious and confrontational. They had no intention of becoming mysteries, but instead assumed a more provocative form. Among the many activities and events created at that time, the ones in which he faced the problem of existential emptiness and sterility of the social sense of existence, trying to give them a truly metaphysical character, deserve more attention. One of his significant achievements of this period was the action of drawing lines in the corner of Foksal gallery, *Drawing in the corner*. The artist, sitting at the back in the corner of the gallery on a piece of paper with the inscription "mandatory place", waved a pen in his hand and applied thick lines on the walls and floor surrounding his figure. The result was a specific anti-mandorla, a shadow of the presence of the human in architectural space, limited in his actions by his anatomical and physical capabilities. This performance initiated a whole series of further undertakings, in which Warpechowski tried to deepen the meaning and transform Parmenides' existence into nothingness.<sup>27</sup>

Over the next few years, emptiness, absence and nothingness became his main motifs. In *Modlitwa o NIC (Prayer for Nothing)* from 1974, he was captured in a blurred photograph during a jump. His figure, depicted far away on the top of a city hill, resembles the figure of an insignificant shaman making prayers to some unspecified god who may have forgotten him. However, the hill was not a temple hill, but a mountain of rubbish, ribs and trucks left by builders, covered with weeds and thick bushes. His installation *Talerzowanie (Plating)* was first presented at Krzysztofory and then repeated at the Richard Demarco Gallery in Edinburgh. On the floor, divided into one hundred squares, there were plates, some of them with inscriptions such as: *Pokora (Humility)*, *Na zamówienie (On request)*, *Bez przyszłości (Without a future)*, *Apetyt (Appetite)*, *Talerz wiedzy (Plate of knowledge)*, *Czekaj (Wait)*, or *Talerz autorski (Author's plate)*. The plates were auctioned at the end of the show. Those that were not sold became the subject of the artist's following activities, one of which

<sup>26</sup> Ł. Ronduda, *Polish Art of the 70s*, Polski Western Jelenia Góra, Center of Contemporary Art - Ujazdowski Castle, Warszawa 2009, p. 118.

<sup>27</sup> Z. Warpechowski, *Zasobnik. Autorski opis drogi życia poprzez sztukę performance*, Centrum Sztuki Zamek Ujazdowski, Warszawa 2022, p. 29.

involved using a plate with the inscription *Nic (Nothing)*.<sup>28</sup> Experiencing nothing, understood as defining emptiness, was realized by Warpechowski during Lublin's Theatre Spring, during which he considered Kant's category of *noumenon*, and allowed Małgorzata Dłużniewska, who collaborated with him during the performance, to cut his hair.<sup>29</sup>

Fascination with nothingness leads to death or annihilation. In 1971, Warpechowski began a series of performances and actions in which he used live fish. A fish is an animal treated by humans as food, but can also be considered a symbol of Christianity or Christ.<sup>30</sup> In Chinese culture, the fish motif is associated with successful human fate, symbolising happiness and abundance.<sup>31</sup> As if despite this, in *Dialog z rybą (Dialogue with a Fish)* he clashes tenderness and positive feelings shown to the fish with the intensification of its physical suffering. He whispered tender words and "love confessions" to the animal taken out of water during the event – the more strength the fish lost, the sweeter his voice would become. Another performance using a fish was *Autopsja (Autopsy)* in 1974. The artist immersed his head in an aquarium with water and kept it inside until he was unable to breathe. At the same time, there was a fish on the table next to it. Viewers could observe the simultaneous choking of the fish and the human loss of breath. The climax of fish extermination was *Dialog ze śmiercią (Dialogue with Death)* carried out in Galeria Labirynt in Lublin two years later. Then, the author drank a glass of water in which a small fish was swimming. The death of the fish was associated with its disappearance, but at the same time it meant strengthening of the artist, his liberation from bodily weakness and improvement of life power. However, this change was accompanied by the expansion of nothingness, its inevitable progress.<sup>32</sup>

We can notice recurring themes and motifs in the works of both artists. One of them is the issue of artistic sincerity and honesty. A performer draws the power of communication from the authenticity of his or her experience and the intensity of the audience's experiences caused by the content of the show. He rejects a ludic attitude, so characteristic for happening, in favour of a participatory context. Spectators are not merely passive observers. They can participate in artistic events to some extent. Despite their anonymity, their silent unity creates a powerful force that can help or weaken the author's potential. Jerzy Bereś treated his viewers with sympathy and gave them positive feelings. He often asked them if they liked the performance or provoked

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<sup>28</sup> <https://warpechowski.com.performances/improvizacje> [accessed: 21.12.2022].

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> H. Biedermann, *Słownik symboli*, Muza SA, Warszawa 2005, pp. 313-315.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ł. Ronduda, op. cit., p. 119.

a discussion.<sup>33</sup> During his events, he encouraged them to perform some activities, persuaded them to enjoy a slice of bread, a glass of vodka or wine. Such interaction gave them a sense of community, removing the obstacle of emotional dryness, anonymity and artistic alienation. It triggered optimistic reactions, although generally marked by distance and caution, weakening barriers between the artist and the audience. In Warpechowski's activities, the audience formed a circle of separate individuals, reacting in a variety of ways to the exposed content and activities. Addressing profound existentialist issues of life and death, emptiness and existence, the artist often experienced reluctance or even hostility of the audience – a woman trying to save a fish, or a provocateur or frustrated person threatening to kill him. This stretched the intensity of emotional sensations accompanying these shows to the limit.<sup>34</sup> By vivisectioning his feelings, Warpechowski "wanted to experience and discover his authenticity, reach non-manipulated ways of his physical and mental response", especially since "a situation properly managed by the artist can also trigger sensations related to elementary existential problems: death, fear, values, meaning of existence. Their foundation is our body; through it, they become available to us."<sup>35</sup>

The activities of Bereś and Warpechowski performed in the 1960s and 1970s continued in the following decades. Although new themes and motifs emerged, they were largely a continuation of attitudes and strategies developed earlier. They often had a dramatic course or a controversial political context (Warpechowski – *The March from* 1984, Bereś – *The European Manifestation* from 2007 and others). They also forced their participants, observers, and critics to reevaluate their thoughts, introduced disturbing content and provoked discussion about its meaning. As a result, actions, performance and socially engaged artistic activities have significantly influenced the development of Polish art.

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<sup>33</sup> J. Bereś, *Wstyd. Między przedmiotem podmiotem*, op. cit., p. 84.

<sup>34</sup> Z. Warpechowski, *Zasobnik. Autorski opis drogi życia poprzez sztukę performance*, op. cit., p. 80.

<sup>35</sup> T. Pawłowski, *Wartości estetyczne awangardy*, [in:] *Item, Wybór pism estetycznych*, ed. by G. Sztański, TAIWPN Universitas, Kraków 2010, p. 281.

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## **PODRÓŻ DO OBSZARÓW NIEOCZYWISTOŚCI. JERZY BERES, ZBIGNIEW WARPECHOWSKI I POCZĄTKI SZTUKI AKCJI W POLSCE (streszczenie)**

Nie ulega wątpliwości, że z dzisiejszej perspektywy przełom lat 60-tych i 70-tych XX wieku jawi się jako czas radykalnych przemian zachodzących w sztukach wizualnych. Odnosiły się one do problemu rozumienia roli formy plastycznej w dziele, która stopniowo przestawała być jego wartością nadrzędną, stając się jednym z wielu elementów dookreślających sens działania artysty. Dotyczyły również sposobu obecności dzieła w społeczeństwie. Na pierwszy plan wysunęło się konceptualizowanie sytuacji artystycznej, unieczynianie granicy pomiędzy twórcą a jego dziełem, mobilizowanie do aktywności publiczności. Do najwybitniejszych przedstawicieli polskiej neoawangardy reprezentujących tę postawę należeli Jerzy Beres i Zbigniew Warpechowski. W tekście przedstawione zostały początki ich twórczości oraz konsekwencje ich publicznych wystąpień rozszerzające pojęcie sztuki.

**Słowa kluczowe:** neoawangarda, happening, performance, sztuka ciała, manifestacje wizualne.

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