

## **Paweł Kowalewski (born 1958, Warsaw)**

He studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw from 1978 to 1983, when he received a diploma with distinction from the studio of **Stefan Gierowski**. Since 1985 he has been a **lecturer** at the Department of Design of the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts. Currently he holds the academic title Doctor with "habilitation". He was a founder member of **Gruppa**, the most famous artistic grouping in Poland in the 1980s, together with Ryszard Grzyb, Jarosław Modzelewski, Włodzimierz Pawlak, Marek Sobczyk and Ryszard Woźniak. Gruppa's works can be summarised as being a **rebellion against an overly academic approach** to art and a taking of a post avantgarde position, as well as being a **protest against the censorship** and repression meted out by the communist state during the time of martial law which had been introduced in 1981 throughout Poland.

The reality of this difficult period in the history of the People's Republic of Poland (PRL) was felt by Kowalewski primarily in terms of the **absurd and grotesque**. From 1984 to 1989, in Gruppa's short-lived journal "**Oj dobrze już** (Oh, it's good now)" amongst verses, commentaries, sketches and drawings, Kowalewski wrote humorous texts using the pseudonym of an imaginary American journalist Sharm Yarn. He wanted in this way to show up the lack of confidence in traditional Polish art criticism, comment on the lack of engagement with the unique phenomena which were happening in Poland during this time as well as make fun of attempts to set forced directions for culture based on political paradigms set from above.

### **Creative Output**

Kowalewski's work comes from the **post conceptual tradition**, where the idea of the artist mixes with his work using the form of written commentaries and the poetic often complex titles of the works which are placed on sashes made of material. Together with the other members of Gruppa, he organised radical **happenings** with joint painting and recitals, based on poetic absurdity, in, amongst other places the cult studio "Dziekanka" at the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts (e.g. recital in 1987, "A cold deer in jam" about Lenin in Poronin). Kowalewski's art can be described as being expressionist, autobiographical, **inspired by personal experience** and literary context. As an artist he created his own communicative language. More important than form or medium for him was the **message**. Remembering this time, he says that "Without words we didn't exist".

In Poland during the 1980s there was a characteristic meeting of social and artistic paths, which were taken by artists who were researching that reality while examining moral and ideological values. The work of Kowalewski and Gruppa was created in parallel with and perhaps even earlier than some of the trends which were then happening in German art, such as *Neue Wilde*. Rebellion and a search for identity determined the approach of artists then in both countries.

### **Concept of personal art**

From the first years of his artistic career Paweł Kowalewski developed the concept of "personal art, that is private". Artistic inspiration therefore was closely connected to the artist's own life, while also at the same time it also referred to problems which were of a more universal nature. This basic **oscillation between the individual experience and universality** has accompanied Kowalewski's work up till today and reflects a consistent theme.

Around 1986 the first of Kowalewski's **sculptures** came into being. Small objects, which the artist closed in glass cases, as if they were relicts from the past. "Prawe ucho sługi najwyższego Kapłan/The right ear serves the high priest" and "Kamień, który stał się chlebem/The stone which became bread" were critical commentaries on the hostile everyday aesthetic of the time. In a similarly brutal, expressive and nonchalant tone Kowalewski created his paintings which were even the subject of censorship interventions from the Catholic Church. The artist's work in the 1980s was treated by the authorities of what was then a totalitarian state as art which must stay

outside official circulation. The series "Psalmy/Psalms" which was inspired by the Psalm of David as translated by Czesław Miłosz, was subjectively accused of **blasphemy**. Each of these works by Kowalewski referred to specific quotations from this book of psalms and reflected the dilemmas of a young artist: Should I leave or stay in my country? What is right? Is there justice...?

The crowning moment of this period was the artist's participation in Documenta 8. in **Kassel** in 1987, where works by amongst others Barbara Kruger and Joseph Beuys were exhibited. Kowalewski together with Gruppa organised a joint painting happening on a large size canvas called "Kuda Gierman".

After many exhibitions both nationally and abroad some of Kowalewski's works became in later times **icons of 1980s art**, e.g. "**Mon cheri Bolscheviq**" (a painting exhibited in amongst other places the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow), the sculpture "Tragiczna nieprzezroczyść konieczności/A tragic opaque necessity"(a hermetically sealed aquarium with a piece of beef kidney submerged in water) or "Do widzenia moi kochani/Goodbye my beloved ones" (a painting which is part of the private collection of the well-regarded art critic Anda Rottenberg).

### **Breakthrough time**

A key transformative moment in Kowalewski's work came in 1989, when the artist together with other members of Gruppa initiated a joint painting happening in front of the capital city's Solidarity polling station. This happening, called „ Głos przyrody na Solidarność/Voice of nature on Solidarity" was a symbolic closing moment of the group's career. The artists had started in the 1980s as novices, and they now finished the decade as classics. Thanks to their many artistic successes, in 1992 in the Zachęta, National Art Gallery there was a large retrospective exhibition which showed a significant cross-section of Gruppa's work.

The country's systemic transformation and also the end of the Gruppa's existence, affected Kowalewski's work by changing its means of communication. At the **beginning of the 90s** he started to create analytical and structural canvasses. In his paintings from this period the artist's work portrayed a clash of nineteenth century wall paper patterns with black and white stripes – a sarcastic vision of the future. After exhibiting his latest series called „**Fin de siècle**" in the Warsaw gallery Appendix in 1992, Paweł Kowalewski was taken on by the **gallery of Isy Brachot**, as the only Pole apart from Roman Opałka. His work was then shown in the Brachot gallery in Brussels, together with a retrospective of one of Belgium's most famous artists, the surrealist Paul Delvaux.

Kowalewski concluded his artistic work in the medium of painting with the „Fin de siècle" series. From this moment he concentrated on **inter-disciplinary and performance art**. During this period the artist created his most characteristically socially engaged work as an artist.

The sign "Europeans only", seen in the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg in 2010 initiated the series "Forbidden/NIE WOLNO" which took the form of a documentation of all the bans and orders which the artist registered during his travels all over the world. Reproductions of the "NIE WOLNO" series in the form of postcards appeared during Kowalewski's artistic performances during the Biennale in Venice in 2011. The artist visited souvenir stands and added his cards with the regulatory orders of both democratic and totalitarian systems to the standard tourist ones which were normally displayed. "NIE WOLNO" also functioned as a series of light boxes which accompanied the installation "Totalitarianism Simulator" in Propaganda Gallery in 2012. In this technical machine built by the artist, the world of oppression and drastic images of the crimes committed during totalitarian times, were presented next to scenes from a normal everyday life (e.g. barman competition in Italy, a family out for a walk in Milan, a classical music concert). The viewer on entering the simulator became a participant in the tragic events, because his photo which was registered on entry to the cabin, was randomly placed on the projected filmed frames of horror. The materials used to produce the "Totalitarianism simulator", the smell of rubber, smelly tar, the darkness and isolation, brought the viewer closer to a situation associated with oppression, so that each individual could become aware of his reactions and behaviour during

the simulation of a moment of danger. As the artist explained: "Art must hurt, it can't calm, it should talk about what is unsolvable".

### **New beginning**

The 2000s for Kowalewski brought a turn towards the ethos of memory or the personal process of forgetting and erasing. In 2015 in Tel Aviv the artist presented the series „**Strength and Beauty**” in which he concentrated on issues connected to subjective memory in the context of group experience.

The concept was inspired by a very personal history of the artist and became a pretext to tell the stories of an extraordinary generation of women. A series of large format portraits which disappeared, presented so called "Polish Mothers" who had been affected by the trauma of war and totalitarianism. Thanks to a special printing technique, the women's portraits after some time were barely visible, just as their images fade in our memories. Kowalewski while working on the series "Strength and Beauty" conducted an artistic dialogue with the well-known Israeli artist Dan Reisinger.

In 2017 Paweł Kowalewski had his own solo exhibition in the prestigious Jerke Museum, the first foreign institution in Germany which is mainly dedicated to Polish avant-garde art. The "**Zeitgeist**" project was made up of sculptures and the best-known paintings from the 1980s, amongst others "Ja zastrzelony przez Indian/Me, shot by the Indians". As a part of the exhibition, at the same time in St Peter's church in Recklinghausen, Kowalewski's large format works were exhibited, so the Psalms of David, which even today have retained their universal character, as they deal with issues related to how to shape individual autonomy when faced with higher powers.

### **Collections and Exhibitions**

Paweł Kowalewski's works are to be found in the biggest Polish museums, but also in the Paris Centre Pompidou, as well as many Polish and foreign private collections. His work has been bought for the National Museum of Warsaw collection, the National Museum of Kraków, Zachęta – National Art Gallery, Museum Jerke, the Regional Museum in Bydgoszcz, the Museum of Upper Silesia in Bytom, the collection of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, and also the ING Polish Art Foundation, the Benetton Foundation and the Egit Foundation. They are also to be found in the private collections of Andrzej Bonarski, Donald Pirie, Cartier, Jan Zylber and the Paszkowski Estate Norblin.

Paweł Kowalewski's work has also been exhibited in amongst other places the Jerke Museum in Germany, Artist's House in Tel Aviv, the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, the Isy Brachot gallery in Brussels, in Dorotheum in Vienna, Sotheby's in London, the Zachęta – National Art Gallery in Warsaw, the Museum of the History of Photography in Kraków, MOCAK, the Warsaw Gallery Propaganda (formerly Appendix) as well as at art fairs in Vienna, Brussels and Stockholm.

The artist has also taken part in important retrospective exhibitions summarising the time of the Polish transformation and political relations in Poland up to and after 1989, e.g. "Banana Revolution", "Moscow – Warsaw", "Irregalia" and "the Fatherland in Art".

In 1991 he set up his own advertising agency "Communication Unlimited".

## **EXHIBITIONS**

### **INDIVIDUAL**

#### **2019**

*II World War – drama, symbol, trauma*, Museum of Modern Art , Cracow, Poland

*Tropical Craze*, Propaganda, Warsaw Gallery Weekend, Warsaw, Poland

*My name is red*, Państwowa Galeria Sztuki, Sopot, Poland

*New Figuration- New expression*, DESA Unicum , Warsaw, Poland

*Time*, Gdańska Galeria Miejska, Gdańsk, Poland

*Magmatism Pic-Nic*, Chiesa dei Santi Cosma e Damiano, Venice, Italy

*Collections*, Zachęta – National Art Gallery and Centre of Polish Sculpture in Orońsko, National Forum of Music in Wrocław, Poland

#### **2018**

*Place of the artist*, Kordegarda Gallery, Warsaw, Poland

*Homeland in art*, Museum of Modern Art , Cracow, Poland

#### **2017**

*Dziekanka*, Salon Akademii Gallery, Warsaw, Poland

#### **2016**

*Collections*, Zachęta – National Art Gallery, Warsaw, Poland

*À la Flamande*, Propaganda, Warsaw, Poland

*Viennacontemporary*, Propaganda Gallery, Marx-Halle, Vienna, Austria

#### **2014**

*In Between Seasons*, Propaganda, Warsaw, Poland

#### **2013**

*Small is Big*, Propaganda, Warsaw, Poland

*Blue, the Most Beautiful Colour in the World*, Propaganda, Warsaw, Poland

#### **2012**

*Generation '80 – Political Protest? Artistic Rebellion. Exhibition of Independent art Debuting 1980-1989*, Regional Museum, Rzeszów, Poland

## **2011**

*Preview*, Galeria Propaganda, Warsaw, Poland

*Special Exhibition*, Propaganda, Warsaw, BWA Art Gallery, Olsztyn, Poland

*Thymos. Art of Anger 1900-2011*, Centre for Contemporary Art "Sign of the Times", Toruń, Poland

*Big Boys Games*, Galeria Appendix 2, Warsaw, Poland

## **2010**

*Generation of 1980s. Independent Young Art of the Years 1980-1989*, National Museum, Krakow, Poland

*18. The Battle That Changed the Fate of the World*, Plac Defilad, Warsaw, Poland

## **2009**

*Like a Rolling Stone 2*, Galeria Appendix 2, Warsaw, Poland

*Like a Rolling Stone*, Centre for Polish sculpture, Orońsko, Poland

## **2008-2009**

*Banana Republic, Expression of the 80s*, Łaźnia, Centre for Contemporary Art, Gdańsk, Wozownia Art Gallery, Toruń, Museum of Contemporary Art, Szczecin, City Gallery, Arsenal, Poznań, Art Gallery BWA, Książ Castle, Wałbrzych, Modern Art Gallery, Opole, Poland, MODEM, Centre of Modern and Contemporary Art, Debrecen, Hungary

## **2007**

*Poisoned Source. Polish Contemporary Art in a Post-Romantic Landscape*, National Museum, Szczecin, Poland, Latvian National Museum of Art, Riga, Latvia

*Image of Life*, Museum of the Beginnings of the Polish State, Gniezno, Poland

*Jokes and the Power of Planting (Asteizm in Poland)*, CSW "Łaźnia", Gdańsk, Centre for Contemporary Art, Ujazdowski Palace, Warsaw, Poland

## **2006**

*In Poland, That is Where?*, Centre for Contemporary Art, Ujazdowski Palace, Warsaw, Poland

## **2004**

*Duty and Rebellion. Academy of Fine Art in Warsaw 1994-2004*, Zachęta – National Art Gallery, Warsaw, Poland

*Warsaw – Moscow / Moscow – Warsaw 1900-2000*, Zachęta – National Art Gallery, Warsaw, Poland, Tretyakov State Gallery, Moscow, Russia

## **2002-2003**

*Children, Artists, Harlots and Businessmen*, Program Gallery, Warsaw, Poland

**2002**

*Irreligia*, Atelier 340 Museum, Brussels, Belgium

**2001**

*Run of the Red People*, Zderzak Gallery, Cracow, Poland

**2000**

*Polonia Polonia*, Zachęta – National Art Gallery, Warsaw, Poland

**GROUP**

**2019**

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