

‘The fact that *I am* is held in Poland is not meaningless’; about the manifestation *I am*  
says Henryk Gajewski\*.

In the end of March, 1978, in Remont Gallery in Warsaw, a five-day international performance manifestation took place. This manifestation, called *I am*, was the result of a Polish initiative. Henryk Gajewski of Remont Gallery was the driving force behind this ambitious event. In the Netherlands, De Appel in Amsterdam and Agora in Maastricht were involved. Similar attempts to organize exchange programmes by art institutes from the West had been difficult, especially because they lacked clear insight into the East-European art scene. *I am* was one of the first successful large-scale manifestations that gathered artists from both sides of the Iron Curtain.

The manifestation was set up to share experiences and ideas about individual artist’s contributions, especially in the field of performances. Underlying most of the presentations was a distinct existentialist attitude. On the whole, the tenor was serious, subdued and somewhat emotional. During the presentations the participating artists came to share the belief that, despite their different historical, ideological, social and geographical backgrounds, they were in a sense kindred spirits. Thus, the manifestation tied in fully with the ontological implication of the title, ‘I am’.

Many contacts between participating artists had already been established through Mail Art correspondences. In general, Mail Art was quite popular in Eastern Europe since artists were trying to weaken government control. Mail Art was used to build international contacts, therefore it was possible to cross national boundaries. The common disapproval of government interference boosted the sense of camaraderie among the artists. Despite frequent Mail Art correspondence, most artists met in Warsaw for the first time. Only Gajewski had previously met the participating artist Ulises Carrión, since his artist’s books had been consigned by Carrión’s gallery cum bookshop *Other Books and So*. Thus Carrión had introduced Gajewski to the alternative art circuit when he was in the Netherlands. Via Carrión, Gajewski came into contact with De Appel in Amsterdam and Agora in Maastricht.

The Dutch artists delegation was by far the largest foreign group at the Warsaw manifestation. On 27<sup>th</sup> March a set of artists, critics and organizers left from Amsterdam to Warsaw in a Volkswagen and Ford Transit bus. De Appel was represented by Aggie Smeets and Agora by Theo van de Aa and Ger van Dijck. They

were responsible for the presence of Foundation Mad Enterprise and foundation Videoheads, who recorded the five-day event on video. Apart from them, also individual artists joined the set – Servie Janssen, Harrie de Kroon, Albert van der Weide, Hans Eykelboom, Marten Hendriks, Raul Marroquin, Klaas Gubbels, Jan Brand and art critic Marga van Mechelen.

There were artists present from other European countries: Joël Maréchal from France, Henrik Have from Denmark, Gérald Minkoff from Switzerland, Franco Vaccari from Italy, Alison Knowles from the United States, Paul Woodrow and Brian Dyson from Canada. The Eastern bloc was represented by Petr Bartoš and Petr Štembera from Czechoslovakia, Tibor Hajas from Hungary, Krystof Zaberski and group Laboratorium TP from Poland, as well as artists from the Polish academy Ruchu. This gathering of some fifty performance artists, video artists, filmmakers, musicians and critics from East and West was in those days a feat in itself. The event's associative title, *I am*, in fact constituted the first letters of the full name – International Artists' Meeting.

In those days Poland applied a fairly liberal visa policy for Western tourists, which enabled Gajewski to invite Western artists via Remont Gallery. The gallery was affiliated with the SZSP, the Socialist Union of Polish Students of the Technical University in Warsaw. The gallery's cultural activities were financially and technically supported by the university's official government-established authorities. The Western artists received an official invitation from the gallery to take part in *I am*, as well as a visa to attend the manifestation, without encountering any problems.

The official opening address was delivered on 30<sup>th</sup> March, by the president of the SZSP and the head of the technical university. Next, Gajewski took the floor: "The fact that *I am* is held in Poland is not meaningless. Poland is a country where there are great traditions of art functioning in an ideological context and not as a commercial product." After these approving words about the Polish art climate Gajewski set the goals of the manifestation with respect to the content: "It's possible that by learning of other people's problems we come to understand our own better. We do not want to get acquainted with these problems only by the impersonal means of mass media. We want to analyze them through direct contacts with the artists and this is why *I am* does not only stand for 'International Artists' Meeting', but as a personal statement by each artist."

Gajewski's position at the SZSP made it natural for him to take a diplomatic stance towards the authorities. Consequently, in his opening speech he did not mention that only a few days before the manifestation it has been announced that it could not be public. Contrary to what was originally intended, the manifestation unfolded in a closed circle. In a later report about *I am* Gajewski summed up the advantages of this enforced restriction. It was not his objective to increase the level of spectacle in the performances. He wanted the participants to learn from each other by sharing the experience. He believed it was possible to break cultural conventions by means of personal experiments. He was concerned that the artist's originality would be confounded under the influence of a popular mass spectacle. Gajewski approached artists from different countries, fully convinced that everyone is in fact confronted with the same problems, that is, the growing control of the official institutions and the rise of mass culture. It was feared by the Polish artists that the ideas expressed at this event would be abused by the government's official policy. Therefore, Gajewski was sceptical about what he called "recording of ideas". In his view, artists should exchange experiences before they could start thinking of spreading ideas on a large scale.

Some of the Dutch participants, including Marga van Mechelen, did not share his opinion. Van Mechelen regretted the fact that the event was private, which largely blocked any confrontation between artists and their audience. To her, it was of utmost importance that the performances would trigger interaction. According to Van Mechelen *I am* completely failed to achieve its central objective: the interaction between the performers and the audience of 'laymen'. This brought to light a fundamental difference between East and West. In the West the tradition of American conceptual art was prominent, a tradition that saw the dissemination of ideas beneficial for the artist. In opposition to that, the countries of the Eastern bloc were truly suspicious of any form of publicity and interaction with masses.

In this event it became obvious that most East-European artists had a predilection for dark existentialism. The performances by the Czechoslovakian artist Petr Štembera and Hungarian artist Tibor Hajas were the two most moving ones. In their performances they stretched the limits of physical endurance. At the start of his performance, Štembera, lying on the ground, took the end of a rope in his mouth. The other end of the rope was tied in a loop and hung above a lit candle. Slowly, the rope

took fire. As the fire stirred up, Štembera started eating the rope. The performance ended the moment the rope was burned up.

Similar to Štembera, Tibor Hajas also experimented with subjection of his body to extreme condition. His performance *Dark Flash* took place in a silent, darkened room in which only his voice was heard:

You needn't become an image  
I have extinguished your image  
I have a grid of your site  
you may feel relieved too  
you needn't trouble  
with defining who you really are  
this is my task  
now you are only what you are  
mere environment  
you are simply material  
you can not be humiliated  
you can not be glorified  
one can be drowned in you.

After this poetic statement a bright light flashed two or three times, revealing that the artist was suspended by his hands and nearly unconscious. These dramatic performances give an idea of the distressed climate East European artists were dealing with. The intimate setting of the private meeting intensified the emotional impact.

Only some performances were held outside of Remont Gallery. Two of these were the acts of the Czechoslovakian artist Petr Bartoš and Dutch artist Hans Eykelboom. Petr Bartoš' performance *Pigeons, what are you for?* included Czechoslovakian homing pigeons that were kept in a special box. The box was decorated with a scheme in the colours of the national flag. The birds were then released in front of Remont Gallery. In his performance Hans Eykelboom referred to the dilemma typical of the Western artist: to be or not to be at the mercy market. About 25 men with sandwich boards, bearing the portrait of Eykelboom, walked in the streets around the gallery. These performances, do not only illustrate the

fundamental difference of the Eastern and Western approach, but also addressed the sense of being controlled.

Every day a programme was improvised, depending on the announcements of the artists involved. Besides live performances, De Appel, Videoheads and Agora showed recordings of performances from their archives, including those by Marina Abramovic, Ulay and Ben d'Armagnac. The event resulted in a varied programme of video screenings, performances, presentations and discussions. Marga van Mechelen gave a formal lecture about American Concept Art and Ulises Carrión recited his poetic text about Mail Art. Theo van de Aa and Ger van Dijck gave a talk on Agora's programme.

For five days the Polish national television made recordings that afterwards would be presented to De Appel and Agora. Despite frequent requests, these recordings were never handed to the Dutch art institutes. What happened to the recordings remains unknown. Even Gajewski himself never saw parts of the footage. Very likely, the material was destroyed by the Polish national intelligence. The fact that the material disappeared could indicate that the international event and the performances were considered a threat to the official establishment. This rigid attitude by the authorities shows that Gajewski's gathering of international artists for a five-day period in Remont Gallery was quite a unique achievement.

In those days, together with Foksal Gallery and Teatr Studio, Remont Gallery was the most important institute for contemporary art in Warsaw. Compared to other Eastern European countries, galleries in Poland in the 1970s were relatively free to establish a neo-avant-garde programme, while remaining under formal supervision of the authorities. On 13<sup>th</sup> December 1981 this came to an abrupt end. The activities of the socialist trade unions and student unions were curbed under pressure of the Soviet Union. Remont Gallery, which was affiliated with the Socialist Union of Polish Students, lost the support for further activities. What was even more shocking – Gajewski was expelled from the country a few months later. He travelled to the Netherlands, destination Maastricht, to take part in the International Media Meeting organised by Agora and the Studium Generale of Maastricht University. He stayed in the Netherlands ever since, and continued his carrier as an independent filmmaker.

From a present point of view, *I am* was one of the rare events in the art history of the 1970s where East European artists were directly confronted with their

colleagues from the West and vice versa – the beliefs and views of artists in the West were challenged. The *I am* documentation shows a strong awareness of the conditions to survive in a controlled society by East-European performances compared with their Western counterparts, who were far less conscious of the limitations of Western society. The significance of the manifestation *I am* was less an exposure of individual performances, but more an exchange of experiences.

Leen Bedaux

*\* An earlier version of this text was delivered as a speech at “Agora: the archive – exhibited” on 24 May 2010 at Jan van Eyck Academie in Maastricht.*