

The history of *Works and Words*, an international art event that took place in Amsterdam in 1979, is the history of a semi-failure, but an interesting failure nonetheless. *Works and Words* was meant to be a continuation of another international show, called *I AM*, held in Warsaw in 1978, and other smaller events in “East-Central” Europe around the same time.¹ *I AM*, with music, performances and lectures, had been a big success, and *Works and Words* was intended to be equally productive if not more so—but it was not. The source of the difference can be traced back to the political situation of Europe at that time, and to the suspicions amongst artists from “East-Central” Europe about Western presentations of artists.

The concept of *I AM* was formulated by the artist Henryk Gajewski, head of the Remont Gallery, affiliated with the Socialist Union of Polish students of the Technical University of Warsaw. His idea was quite simple: “I”—artist or critic—want to introduce myself to you, artist, critic or student (note: the general public was not admitted). Most of the artists and critics invited—50 from abroad and 30 from Poland—were known for their involvement in performance art. The artists represented several generations, with Krzysztof Zarebski, Alison Knowles and Peter Bartos the eldest, while Tibor Hajas, Petr Stembera and most of the Western European artists represented the next, younger generation, starting with performances in the early- to mid-1970s. The lecturers paid a lot of attention to the generations or what they called “performance models”, making reference to other performance artists like Miklos Erdely, Milan Knizak, Julius Koller, KwieKulik and Stano Filko.

International meetings of artists such as the *I AM* were common in Poland, though in the early years more emphasis was placed on photography, conceptual art and contextual art. One could, in 1978, still detect traces of its heritage in the polarized discussions, but the contrast with earlier events—such as *Think Communism* by Zygmunt Piotrowski and his Proagit Group or the performances of Zofia Kulik and Przemyslaw Kwiek in

¹ I attended both the *I AM* and *Works and Words* events and reviewed both for several Dutch magazines and newspapers. My text is based on those publications and my book *de Appel 1975–1983. performances, installations, projects*, De Appel, Amsterdam 2006. For this publication I consulted several publications by Piotr Piotrowski (*In the Shadow of Yalta. Art and Avant-garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989*) and Lukasz Ronduda (*1, 2, 3...Avant-Gardes. Film/Art between Experiment and Archive and Sztuka Polska Lat 70. Awangarda*). Piotrowski uses the expression “East-Central” Europe, the territory located between the Iron Curtain and the Soviet Union.

1972 commemorating the massacre in Gdansk in 1970—was, however, enormous.

Nevertheless, the discussions were strongly politically charged and motivated, and the theoretical reflection, even in performance art circles, was remarkable compared to what was going on in Western Europe. Poland's situation was distinctive, where ties with the regime were apparent—despite the artists' (perhaps equally apparent) criticism of the communist authorities. Poland was the only country (in the bloc) where artists were able, on occasion, to forget the Iron Curtain existed. The regime tolerated opposition to a certain extent and respected freedom of speech, which led to Poland's becoming a destination for Western artists—in order to meet artists from Hungary and Czechoslovakia. To make connections with the West, one sometimes had to travel to the East. Poland was the only country in the Soviet bloc that could perform this role, paradoxically owing to the fact that it was safely hidden behind the Iron Curtain and still communist. However, the pressure on the communist regime from the *Solidarnosc* (Solidarity) movement at the time of the *I AM* meeting appeared somehow favorable.



Kwiekulik (Przemyslaw Kwiek b. 1945 and Zofia Kulik b. 1947), *The Light of the Dead Star*, Performance and installation comprising a sculpture and several hundred documentary photographs, Works and Words, Former House of Detention Amsterdam, 1979

The *I AM* enjoyed the support of the Polish officials in a number of ways. Artists like KwieKulik, who proclaimed their left-wing dissident credentials under the banner of Soc Art and New Red Art, were often commissioned by the state. It was a case of running the gauntlet with the risk of refusal of an exit visa as a consequence—as KwieKulik experienced in 1977. During the *I AM*, public political protest was no longer so popular; even some resistance was seen directed at artists who still wanted to be associated with these public happenings. Criticism appeared in print, in theoretical reflections on the role and position of art, as happened around Jan Swidzinski, who was influential among young artists in Warsaw and Wrocław. His conception of contextual art was similar to the highly engaged position of Joseph Kosuth in his *The Artist as Anthropologist* (1975).

Meetings like the *I AM* were also possible in Yugoslavia, but only for artists from the Eastern bloc who could afford it and were allowed to travel. Artists from the GDR, Bulgaria, Rumania, Albania and the USSR rarely, if ever, participated in such meetings.

When the Amsterdam-based art centre de Appel began its orientation trips to Eastern Europe to prepare for *Works and Words*, it had no idea which artists from which countries would take part. Soon after the trips began, however, it was decided that they had to concentrate on Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, as the case had been at the *I AM* and other meetings. During their trips the de Appel staff discerned a palpable sensitivity arising from the political situation, in particular over the bad experiences of the 1977 Venice Biennale, where artists were presented as being dissidents, and over the irresponsibility of the Venice organizers that caused artists from Czechoslovakia to be sent to prison. De Appel noticed the resistance was greatest in Hungary and Yugoslavia, which was in turn later evident during the event itself. Most of the invited artists were eager to come to a Western European country for an international meeting, though some were apparently disappointed when they discovered that in this case “the West” meant “only” the Netherlands.

During the event it became clear, yet again, how big the differences were amongst Eastern bloc countries, even between cities within the same country, as with Belgrade and Zagreb or Bratislava and Prague. More than ten years before the breakup

of Czechoslovakia and the wars in the Balkans tensions were already palpable. The artists, however, wanted to be judged on (the merit of) their work and not on their geographical origin. “Eastern Europe” was a tainted word for them—they preferred “Middle” or “Central Europe”. And it should be noted that some of them felt a greater affinity with Western European and American artists and their work than with the work of their own countrymen.

Similarly, organizers of exhibitions and events in the West were reproached for disregarding the work of (individual) artists from the East. Artists complained that whenever attention was devoted to them and their work it was always couched in terms of nationality or groupings, and never as individuals worthy of the same attention enjoyed somehow automatically or by default by Western artists. That perceived tendency would leave its mark on *Works and Words*, with both organizers and participants ultimately failing to dispel all such criticism and distrust.

Under the heading *Works and Words*, the aim was to focus attention on a common principle, in this case the relationship between action and reflection, which had also been a feature and focus of the *I AM* event. It was a way of pointing to the existence of a cross-border international avant-garde, in which the only differences lay in the fact that it had developed on either side of the political and social divide. Besides those involved in the *I AM*—amongst them Tomas Straus and Lóránd Hegyi—advisors such as Jaroslav Anděl from Czechoslovakia, László Beke from Hungary, Jesa Denegri and Marijan Susovski from Yugoslavia, and Józef Robakowski, Andrzej Kostolowski and Zofia Kulik from Poland were all approached by the organizers. *Works and Words* transformed into a ten-day event with lectures, discussions, performances, installations, videos, films (nearly one hundred by sixty artists), historical documentation, and an exhibition of conceptual photography featuring work by some forty artists. The gathering of artists took place between September 20 and 30, 1979, at several locations. The Holland Experimental Film Foundation, an initiative of Peter Rubin, took care of organizing film screenings in both the Stedelijk Museum and the Nederlands Filmmuseum in Amsterdam. The Fundatie Kunsthuis hosted the photography exhibition and Galerie A

organized the exhibition *Gladness Drawings* by the Hungarian artist Endre Tót. A book about the event appeared a year later with photographic documentation and essays by authors from the four “East-Central” European countries, together with extensive chronologies detailing art-related developments and activities in those countries since the early 1960s.² Information was an important tool for understanding and exchange, but every effort was made to ensure personal contact was as vibrant and dynamic as possible—just as it had been during the *I AM*, by organizing communal dinners at de Appel in the evenings and by putting up the guests from abroad in the homes of people from the Dutch art world.

² Josine van Droffelaar and Piotr Olszanski, *Works and Words. International Art Manifestation Amsterdam, De Appel, Amsterdam 1980.*



Tibor Hajas (Hajas Tibor 1946-1980), *Dark Flash*, performance *I AM*, Galerie Remont Warsaw, 1978

Works and Words screened a great diversity of films by Hungarian artists like Dora Maurer, Agnes Hay, Zoltán Jeney, Gabor Body, Miklós Erdély, János Tóth, Peter Timar and Tibor Hajas. Hajas, a protégé of the Hungarian art historian László Beke and considered by Hegyi as a representative of a new type of heroic individualism (Miklós Erdély even made a tribute to him), like many others, could not be present. None of the Czechoslovak artists were granted permission to travel to Amsterdam. Only one, Jirí Kovanda, solved that problem by instructing others to make an installation for him. Photographs by him and other Czechoslovakian artists, including Michal Kern, Vladimír Havrilla, Jaroslav Anděl, Július Koller, Karel Miler, Sandor Pinczehelyi, Jaroslav Richt

and Jirí Valoch, were shown in the conceptual photography exhibition. Their works, collectively, conveyed the impression that conceptual art and installation or performance art (usually known at the time as actionism) did not, as the Dutch seemed to understand, hail from nor arise from separate territories but rather were indeed often extensions of each other. For that reason, it seems, photographs documenting performances by Petr Štembera were shown in de Appel.

In the lead-up to the Prague Spring, artistic life in Czechoslovakia had been blossoming exceptionally, but the situation deteriorated markedly after the Soviet invasion of 1968 and well into the 1970s, particularly in Prague. Come 1979, Czech artists were living under highly repressive restrictions. Compared to their Slovakian colleagues, many Prague artists were less socially engaged and more focused on existential issues. Art historian Jaroslav Anděl refers to this development in his essay in the *Works and Words* publication, where artists often simply gave up making art owing to their dire financial/economic situation. The younger generation in particular no longer maintained fixed addresses and lived underground—and in fear.

The position of artists in Yugoslavia was quite different. They were strongly opposed to the concept of *Works and Words* and the way in which it was formulated and carried out. Under no circumstances would they deign to exhibit with artists from other Eastern European countries, because that would lead, or so they said, to political problems. Goran Đorđević was particularly critical of the aim of the event and described it as a ghetto. That such utterances came from a Yugoslav was perhaps remarkable in the first instance. Yugoslavia, after all, was a socialist country without a totalitarian regime, and its artists enjoyed relative freedom. However, artists in Belgrade were totally dependent on state institutions and student centers for getting their work shown, a situation some (of them) found particularly disturbing. Art critic Jesa Denegri made it clear in the *Works and Words* publication that he and the artists in his circle did not favor the Western commercial gallery scheme either; what they did want was to find ways of making contact with the Western art world and certainly, with like-minded Western artists.

The Yugoslav contribution to *Works and Words* consisted mostly of performances, films and lectures; with performances by Sanja Iveković, Dalibor Martinis, Mladen Stilinović and, particularly impressive, one by Raša Todosijević and Marinela Kozelj (*Vive la France/Vive la tyrannie*), alongside lectures by Goran Đorđević and films by Tomislav Gotovac.



Jerzy Bereś (b. 1930),
Tractatus Philosophicus
Performance, Works and
Words, Former House of
Detention Amsterdam, 1979

The Polish artists, who were not subject to any travel restrictions, attended in large numbers. Highlights of the Polish contribution included a performance by Jerzy Bereś, a lecture by Andrzej Kostolowski and the films of Ryszard Wasko and Józef Robakowski. Bereś, already known in the Netherlands for work shown in the Stedelijk Museum, performed in the nude as a sort of philosopher, with the title of his performance taken from Wittgenstein's first major work, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, and dealing specifically with the relationship between "word" and "work". Zofia Kulik and Przemysław Kwiek commented on the social function of art by juxtaposing the development of their autonomous practice with their commissioned work for the state. The contributions by the three performance artists clearly demonstrated that the distinction between artists on the one hand, and historians and critics on the other, was not so marked in Poland at that time. Some presented slide shows of work by like-minded artists (in relation to their own artistic activity), a method or procedure that followed naturally from the system of authors' galleries in Poland—centers led by one or more

artists (and) with a very personal stamp. The publication *Works and Words* included an essay by Grzegorz Dziamski entitled “Art in Poland in the Seventies”.

But a serious problem did arise out of the tension between the conceptual artists and the performance artists—this despite the fact that this discrepancy over the course of *I AM* did not seem so substantial. The filmmakers formed a separate category from among those present; Józef Robakowski and his colleague Ryszard Wasko also taught at the flourishing film academy in Lodz, and had attained a prominent place in Poland’s cultural life.

Despite the many conflicts among the visiting artists, however, all made a strong impression on the Dutch participants, indirectly pointing out substantial weaknesses in the way art functioned in the Netherlands, in particular the attendant bureaucracy. While this was never voiced outright, one got the clear impression, between the lines, that the Netherlands still had a lot to learn from these countries. Plainly, debate over the content and form in which art should operate commonly was and went a lot further in the four Eastern European countries represented. Despite all of the controversies and, for various reasons, the limited number of artist-participants, many felt that a great deal was achieved with *Works and Words*—if nothing else, it certainly served to encourage mutual communication between the artists of a greater Europe.