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Four Chapters from the History of the
Polish Avant-garde Film

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The purpose of the project was to select, collect and disseminate texts on contemporary art practices in the Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, around Soros Centers for Contemporary Art, written in and about art of the 1990s. The coordination of the project was carried out by Janka Vukmir, SCCA – Zagreb, today the Institute for Contemporary Art, Zagreb.

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All of the texts we have collected at the time have been later published on the website of the I_CAN, International Contemporary Art Network, the short-lived successor of the SCCAN.

On the occasion of the exhibition **90s: Scars**, revisiting the art practices and social and political context of the 1990s in the postcommunist countries, the Institute for Contemporary Art is now reoffering a collection of **89 texts and a comprehensive list of then proposed further readings**, on the website of the Institute for Contemporary Art, www.institute.hr.

The exhibition 90s: Scars is curated by Janka Vukmir and organized by the Institute for Contemporary Art and the MMSU – Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rijeka, on the occasion of the **European Cultural Capital Rijeka 2020**. Originally planned to open May 14, 2020, at the MMSU in Rijeka, due to COVID-19 crisis, is postponed until further notice.

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Four Chapters from the History of the Polish Avant-garde Film

The history of the avant-garde cinema in Poland began in 1930. Since then numerous interesting films have been made, many filmmakers have developed their unique film styles and poetics. Among them there are few phenomena of extreme importance. The films of Franciszka and Stefan Themersons, animation of Jan Lenica, Walerian Borowczyk, and of other artists from the late fifties and early sixties, films made by the members of "Film Form Workshop", and works by Zbigniew Rybczyński, formed together the main and the most influential stream in the avant-garde filmmaking in Poland. They all composed also a line of continuation, since the artists of "Film Form Workshop" and Rybczyński, extended the Themersons' interests, ideas, and experiments. In the mid-eighties the history of the experimental cinema in Poland seemed to be over. The unfavourable conditions, the lack of facilities, and the increasing access to video equipment, were the major reasons to transform the Polish film avant-garde into the video avant-garde. The coming time will show whether this end was ultimate or temporary.

1.

Films by Franciszka and Stefan Themersons constitute the most interesting part of the history of independent, experimental, pre-war cinema in Poland. Between 1930 when they made film *Apteka* (Pharmacy), and 1945 when they completed *The Eye and the Ear*, the Themersons created seven films (the last two when already residing in Great Britain). Their significance for the development of the avant-garde film in Poland is enormous. The Themersons were the founders of many organisations and events held to promote the film avant-garde in Poland (as, e.g., the "Film Authors Co-op.", film magazine "f.a", screenings of experimental films from England, France, etc.). They are regarded as the precursors of structuralist film, the

pioneers of expanded cinema, initiators of main tendencies in Polish experimental filmmaking. The Themersons' film strategy was characterised by the exceptional concern with the substance of image. Their inventiveness was not confined to formal experiments only, which brought new dimensions to the iconic sphere of the cinema and were frequently inspired by photography, but they were also interested in more fundamental issues such as the ontology of the film image, and the nature of creative processes in filmmaking. These interests are evident both in the films and in the writings of Stefan Themerson, among which the essay *The Urge to Create Visions* is of particular importance. In the essay the cinema is discussed in the context of the history of man's visual experience, with its origins discovered in a Bushman tale, when "a girl from long ago took a handful of embers and threw them up into the air; and the sparks became stars". Themerson's persistent "praise of slovenliness" can be regarded not only as the apologia of chance, outlining the aleatory method in filmmaking, but also as a sketch in the history of visual arts, for which the film has always been a hidden archetypal model. The Themersons' idea of the "urge to create visions", as the only valid stimulus for filmmaking, accounted for the unique character of their oeuvre in which a diversity of poetic devices used in particular films is compatible with consistently uniform artistic expression. This trait of the Themersons' films - a combination of pure "filminess" with intermedialism (relationship to other arts) - was later to become one of the main characteristics of the Polish avant-garde cinema.

2.

The first post-war decade in Poland, for political reasons, was a most discouraging period for any autonomous artistic practice, including independent cinema, which lost its significance at that time. The end of the fifties only brought a revival of experimental film. The shift of interests towards broadly understood animated film was essential for that period. The films of Walerian Borowczyk and Jan Lenica - *Był sobie raz* (Once Upon a Time, 1957), *Szkola* (School, 1957), *Dom* (House, 1958) - were recognised as initiating the experimental trend in Polish animation. Collage structure, pixilation, combination of live action and animation were the most distinctive features of their style. A separate position in this context was occupied by two films of Mieczysław Waskowski: *Somnambulicy* (Somnambulists) and *Uwaga, malarstwo* (Attention, Painting), both realised in 1957. The pictures, made on the glass plate with paint applied to its surface, were a unique attempt at achieving tachiste/action painting effects in film. Another significant contribution was made by Andrzej Pawłowski. His *Kineformy* (Cineforms) consisted in the projecting of a

moving, spatial and abstract models onto a screen, through a special image-distorting lens. Pawlowski was using two crank-like handles to move the models and the lenses. The light, passing through the lenses, distorted the forms, resulting in a very complex images. In 1957 Pawlowski made a film version of his light show, also entitled *Kineformy*. The next steps in film experiment in Poland were made by the artists of "Film Form Workshop".

3.

Workshop began in 1970 from the initiative of a group of students and graduates of Lodz Film, TV and Theatre School. Together with the filmmakers there are in the Workshop painters, musicians, cameramen, poets, technicians... Workshop realises films, recordings and TV transmissions, sound programmes, art exhibitions, different kind of events and interventions... Workshop also follows the theoretical and critical activity. Workshop does not represent any commercial activity and their makers work totally gratuitously. (The Manifesto of the Film Form Workshop, 1970) "The Film Form Workshop" was founded by Jozef Robakowski, Ryszard Wasko, Wojciech Bruszewski, Pawel Kwiek. In their effort to examine and develop the means of expression of audio-visual arts, the members of the FFW emphasised the need for systematic research on the medial properties of film. The preoccupation with medialism situated the activity of the FFW in the context of the broadly understood conceptual trend in art, manifested in the cinema in the rise of so-called structural film. Drawing upon the traditions of Polish, and Russian avant-garde of the 1920s and 1930s, the participants of the Workshop developed their own way within the conceptual movement, with their artistic and theoretical approach being particularly indebted to the ideology and practice of constructivism. The first period of the activities of the FFW was marked by the attempts to eliminate from the cinema the elements borrowed from literature and the theatre. Such endeavours are particularly noticeable in the early films of Robakowski, which are characterised by a markedly test-like quality. In later years Robakowski focused his attention on the relationships between the mechanical character of the equipment used in film-making and the psychophysiological nature of the cameraman. In Robakowski's interpretation these relationships are based on mutual influences. The mechanical-biological records led to another stage in Robakowski's film-making, that of the personalist, "individual" cinema, characterised by a considerable degree of subjectivity, an evident link with the personality of the artist. The artistic transgressions, game playing and energetic values of works, there were characteristics of the cinema of Robakowski and, to some extent, works of the other members the FFW as well. The participants of the FFW were particularly preoccupied with the relationships between the

reality and its audio-visual representation, and between the reality, its reflection and the spectator. In his analysis of reality Wojciech Bruszewski emphasised the existence of the dichotomy between the material (external) and the spiritual (subject to individual perception) dimensions of reality, both inherent in the concept of reality itself. He put forward a thesis that our contact with reality is not of direct nature, but is mediated by language instead.

4.

Zbigniew Rybczynski started his film career in the early 1970', as a member of the "Film Form Workshop". But he occupied there a very separate position. Rybczynski's interests were focused on the formal arrangement of an image, its orchestration and atonement to music. Yet, the visualisation of musical structures was not an ultimate objective of his experiments, providing only a framework of reference for a more comprehensive analysis. Using a wide range of devices, such as an optical printer, colour filters, zoom, a frame by frame camera, and combining them with live action footage, Rybczynski arrived at a unique, idiosyncratic style of his own. One can find in such a style the desire of creating a world independent on reality and more perfect, the virtual world. In many films this virtual world of art is produced through Rybczynski's inclination to create a closed composition, to introduce order into the many-level, many-motif film structure, varied in its substance, by reducing it to the form of circle. Circle - the perfect figure, each point of whose circumference is of the same distance from the centre, whose each point is both the beginning and end, circle in which the motion once started goes eternally and acquires a static quality. In these films we can find the same structure: the end is a return to the starting point. This type of composition makes more distinct the autonomy of the film world, it makes more intensive the inner closeness of the work and makes us reluctant to refer anything from its area to the outer world. Each element of the film refers us only to its other components and the film as a whole fulfils the Kantian postulate of beauty in itself. Zbigniew Rybczynski's work is a very consistent phenomenon, that the ideas used in one film in the state of their inception will flourish, will become in later films dominant and basic features. Rybczynski returns to past ideas not only because they have in the meantime assumed a new shape but also in order to find out how they will behave in the new circumstances. At the same time the techniques he applies frequently do not let him contemplate the results of his work before it has been finished, as only then the concepts can be confronted with their final effects. Indeed in the case of this artist the word "experiment" sounds very true. Those spectators who do not know Rybczynski's output and are looking now his films may be convinced that they have to do with video

realisations. The style of this artist seems to have anticipated the possibilities offered by the video technique. He used to do at the same time one and the other, video in film, as he was striving to achieve his aims and in doing so was rejecting all that stood in his way. Cinema, with all its possibilities, was only a substitute for the tools he actually needed. A substitute for video. So he used cinema in such a way as to achieve the results that could be produced only by video. A dozen of years later he would say: "Film is dying away. Only video is alive". No wonder therefore that his films did anticipate it sometimes. In the film *Take five* (1972) the characters were appearing simultaneously owing to the overlapping shots. In the *New Book* (1975) the simultaneousness of the numerous motives was achieved owing to the partition of the screen into sections and the parallel showing of them. In the *Tango* (1980) the characters appeared again in the same time-space and the same picture, but being in fact separated, deprived of any contact between one another. The distance between these films demonstrates not only the evolution of Rybczynski's poetics going from the well-known techniques, and arrives eventually at dazzling innovations. It also shows the process of leaving the cinema and reaching the video. The image in the *Tango* seems no longer to look like the image in film with the latter's texture, light values, reference to the world of matter. Instead it is getting increasingly closer to the world of video, formed by the blue box and the techniques of the overlapping, multi-layer composition of the image. "There is nothing more to be discovered in the cinema".

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