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Artistic gesture: expression, communication, participation

Along as art makes without treatment of its products as objects, gesture comes to the forefront. Transforming his/her work into a vehicle for gesture, or its embodiment even, the artist resigns from any other inspirations. Then the gesture takes on a radical, particularly individualized form. Work of art treated solely as its author's gesture, minimalizes the meaning of all other dimensions of artistic situations, puts aside inter-subjective sense, disregards its social aspects and historical references. It does not await consideration. It invites no participation. It does not see anybody and addresses nobody in particular. General, unparticular and scattered addressing happens here. No one should perceive oneself the real addressee. Though anyone may. Work, as a gesture becomes pure expression here. Pure expression of emotional or mental situation of the artist. Jackson Pollock's painting, or more generally *action painting* is a perfect example of such an attitude. Also Roman Opalka's counted paintings are. And the whole of Tadeusz Kantor's art. It is sometimes said that a work of art has objective expression of its own, of its form and substance, but this is not the case of our discussion as then the expression has another source than gesture (or we would have to perceive form just as an objectified materialized gesture of expression).

Artist's gesture is, or rather may be, directed into the Other. Then it transforms into a message, into an invitation to be read, becomes an inspiration and initiates a dialogue. Expression, in the above case non-directed, Narcissist in a sense, as the artist himself watches her/himself like in a mirror, now is directed into a given, definite recipient. Her/his

place of living, social status, gender, type of sensibility, intellectual horizons, defines the recipient. Expression becomes communication. This happens in the art of Joseph Beuys, Bertold Brecht, or Jean-Luc Godard. And in Piotr Uklanski's, Katarzyna Kozyra's, and Artur Zmijewski's. Work of art becomes then a frame for meaning. When it is awarded a status similar to that of expression, it has to be decoded by the recipient. Meaning is then comprehended as a semantic gesture of the artist, a sort of semantic expression. From this perspective it is attributed to the artist as his/her product, or even an extension. Umberto Eco would define that form of meaning as a domination of author's intention. When the relationship between the artist and the work's meaning is relaxed, it becomes to a greater extent a product of an active reception. It becomes a product of interference. The recipient in a way characteristic for her/him, in the context of her/his previous experience, knowledge gained and preferences process a communicative gesture of an artist. If the above transformation takes place in the scope of the very piece, according to its frames, we can – still along with Eco – perceive the reception as subordinate to the intention of the piece. When the frame is transgressed in the interpretation of the piece, the primary role is given to the recipient's intention. Then the communicative gesture on the part of the artist is closest to the third form of gesture under discussion – to the participative gesture of the viewer.

When the artist transforms its own gesture into spatial-temporal gesture structure, when s/he creates an environment where s/he virtualizes a project of interactive recipients' behaviors, then the gesture becomes a creative behavior on the part of the recipients. This is what happens in case of Agnes Hegedus', Christa Sommerer & Laurent Mignonneau's, or Grahame Weinbren's art. It is also the case of recent works by Polish artist Piotr Wyrzykowski. The interactive, creative gesture transforms the recipient into the interacting factor. It ushers him/her into the space of creation. Through his/her creative action – the gesture of participation – the recipient/interacting person activates artist's virtual project. Interactive art, appearing in such a way, builds a new context of experience and reflection, the context where the above-mentioned communicative gesture is perceived differently; it is here where the participatory character is revealed, and emphasized or attributed. The model of communication understood as a transmission of meaning (semantic gesture) is

rejected, in favor of a vision of communication recognized as interaction or negotiation of meanings.

Eliminating and clearly separating of three mentioned types of artistic gesture I have done above is subordinate to the analytic needs. In reality, gestures in their pure form appear quite rarely. More often they happen to be intermingled in the scope of one work. Then we can mention their co-operation and point to the dominating one. Typology of gestures is more practical when we describe a more general art phenomena. It might help to present one of possible interpretations of contemporary art in transformation. It is visible that tendencies defining the face of art in subsequent periods form configurations that make one type of gesture prevalent. I will return to this later in this essay.

Referring to a gesture as a work of art I consider both cases when one can talk about a real identification of the work with the gesture and those when the above relationship is rather metaphoric than literal. The rise of significance of performative elements in contemporary art related to its de-materialization and de-objectification as well as de-formalization is visible not only through the development of art disciplines replacing the artifact with action or gesture but in less radical works also leads to liberation of expression (to various extents) from the domination of material aspects of the piece (liberation of expression from the artifact) and is continued in communicative and participative aspects of contemporary art.

As I mentioned before, extrapolating three dimensions of artistic gesture helps – in my opinion – defining one of the most important transformative tendencies in art. The change affects the relationship between the artist and the recipient. The latter starts to play the more and more important role – the final shape of the work depends all too frequently on him or her, and it is more and more individualized, it is different in each case. It is the recipient who decides if the piece remains in the virtual sphere or it becomes actualized in the creative receptive experience. Talking gesture, one should state that the gesture of expression is supplanted or deprived of decisive significance in art by the gesture of communicative intention, which finds necessary complement and source of energy in

participatory gesture of the recipient, who transforms in this way into a co-creator of the artistic event. The above changes are not related to the value of the works created at least as long as we treat the value as an extra-temporal quality of art products with no relation to progressing transformations of the environment and of our mentality. If we agree, on the other hand, that the value we attribute to the work of art is not of universal nature, but it is related to the here and now of its environment, if we assent that it rises when the work of art broadens its scale and horizons and makes its experience deeper, when it reveals hidden foundations of the social organization or denounces ideological demands, that it rises when it defends the individual's rights and dignity, and it decreases when makes us forget about the world we live in, then we should admit that art's transformation from gesture of expression to the gesture of participation enlivens it and intensifies its value. Especially that the transformation is by no means a total rejection or deterioration of the former qualities. Gesture of communication transforming into participation is still a type of expression, however devoid of Narcissism, the expression aware of its context, addressed to potential partners.

Interactive art in this perspective turns out to be the possibility of unification of the gesture of expression with the gesture of communication and gesture of participation. Individual expression merges here with social dialogue, romanticism and pragmatism unite. The artist's gesture is continued in the gesture of the interacting recipient, and a result of that process becomes a common work of both. It is a work-process, which allows for reflection on the universe and one's own identity. It is a work-experience. This is certainly the case with Mirosław Rogala work.

Mirosław Rogala's art is in the above context an extremely interesting example as it converges the whole transformation described here with all its primary aspects. "Gestures of Freedom" exhibition (Center for Contemporary Art, Warsaw, and Gallery of Contemporary Art – Bunkier Sztuki, Cracow, 2001) leaves no doubt about that. One may even prove that Rogala's art in its historical development parallels the transformations of contemporary art. Paintings of the late seventies, pen and ink drawings of the beginning of the next decade, ensuing computer drawings – all aptly present the gesture of expression. Videotapes of the eighties, performative actions, laser and digital photography in their turn

point towards communicating. Gestures behind them turn towards the recipients and await cognitive reaction. And finally, the interactive multimedia works of the nineties, which complete the transformation, process by building the open space for active participation of the audience.

This is by no means a unilateral movement. To define the status of the audience of his interactive works, Rogala found a term *v-user* (*viewer-user*), to point out to the double character of the perfect recipient: the observer and user at the same time. In such a way, he revealed by the way that he by no means got rid of the need of expression, or even less with the desire to communicate. He mentioned here merely that he united them and with their help and on their behalf he creates today dynamic *environments*, where every viewer may undertake a dialogue both with him/herself and with other users and transform into a creative participant of the art event. The above dialogue concerns Rogala's art itself and it structures its internal relationships: the gesture of participation is an expression of the need of communication, and both together should guarantee the unlimited freedom of expression. This is clearly visible in *Electronic Garden/NatuRealization*.

This is not the only dialogue-like internal character of Mirosław Rogala's art. *Pulso-funktory*, presented in the exhibition – the earliest (1975-79) of all the works presented at the exhibition – proves that the idea of participation is by no means a final result of the artist's creative evolution but that it lies at its basis. Computer drawings in their turn, besides the revealed gesture of expression, are manifestation of the need of communication, but here not inter-personal one; there are dialogues with a machine, a discussion with technology. This is another aspect of Rogala's art interactive nature. Not the last one, most probably.

All the aspects are united by one, general, superior and most important need - the need of freedom. Gestures of freedom - this is the most accurate description of Mirosław Rogala's art.

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