

Witkacy – Robakowski



Witkacy (photographed by Józef Głogowski), Zakopane, 1931, vintage print, 11,2x16,5 cm

front cover: Witkacy, *Improvised Scenes*, (photographed by Władysław Jan Grabski), Zakopane, January 1932, vintage print, 13,6x8,7cm

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Con dence Men (exhibition: 07/02/09 - 17/03/09)

brings two the most important personalities in Polish art to meet face-to-face for the first time. Both con dence (con) men, tricksters, swindlers and eternal practical jokers, Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (called "Witkacy", 1885-1939), painter, writer and dramaturge, philosopher, photographer, and enfant terrible of the inter-war polish art scenes, and Józef Robakowski (born 1939), an artist of the polish neo-avant-garde of the 60's and 70's.

Mysti cation, parody, self-referential irony, and plays with shifting identities are some of today's most prominent artistic phenomena. Only few know that Witkacy was already working with these ideas at the beginning of Twentieth Century. Witkacy's photos are experiments with changing identity and purposeful, conscious humiliation of oneself that mock the perceived "Myth of the Artist." He produced such photographs throughout his entire life, most of which were titled so absurdly as, *Unknown Photo of Unknown Movie Star, Carfaldo Ricci*. In *My Video Masochisms*, Robakowski, making contorted faces at the camera, simulates piercing his cheeks with wire, drilling through his ears, and taking an immersion heater into his mouth. Deadpan, the artist plays as though he is suffering through his art and in its name. His contrast with his contemporary movements (e.g. Viennese Actionism) and ironic disembowelment of them is a glimpse partially into his nihilism and partially into his absurd sense of humour. He began the series of hypothetical *Astral Photography* in 1971.

Both artists composed a Manifesto (Witkacy 1921, Robakowski 1988) that challenged the myths of artist and art.

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Manifesto (festo – mani)

1. Frankness became impossibility. (...) Con rolls all directions, unconscious makers, it is lost.

(...)

3. But we, pure confidence men, like impossibility. Hereafter (11 am 13. September 1921). Neither, nor – END, CON nous conuons, wir conieren, noi conami, we are coning.

(...)

5. The horrible boredom of "all the time being oneself" is gone. "I am so that I have to be so to the end", they call themselves, unhappy slaves of their own consequence. Untruth – I can pretend everything and that way I can unleash myself from the cursed identity of personality. Complete living and artistic levity.

(...)

7. Everyone can create anything and has the right to be satisfied with it, but only in the case that he is not frank in his work and has found someone who is the same and will falsely admire it.

(...)

10. Does con's influence demoralise us? No – a few times NO. Open confidence es. It is generally known, that the most honest people are prestidigitators. (...) Programmatically aware of itself, free con is higher than all those unconscious small lies. Do you understand, unlucky people, who at first didn't grasp the concept? How you will envy us!

(...)

Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, 1921

Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz - „Witkacy” (1885 – 1939) was one of the most outstanding artistic personalities in Polish culture during the first half of the 20th century. He is the author of about 30 plays and several novels in which he sought to challenge existing literary and ethical norms. He was also the creator of the so-called theory of "Pure Form" and owner of the "Portrait Company" in which he created drawings under the influence of drugs. The human face was an object of obsessive interest for Witkacy, and some of his most unusual images are his extreme close-ups of faces, made using a camera with a special tube attached to its lens. He also explored varying forms of self-portraiture. The artist arranged scenes, played out alone or in the company of friends, which were then photographed by others. The artist committed suicide on September 18th, 1939, the day after Soviet troops invaded eastern Poland, but his exhumation found only the body of an unknown young girl in his grave.



Witkacy, The scoundrel, who has not existed so far, and it is doubtful if he ever will, from the series: Improvised Scenes (photo session photographed by Władysław Jan Grabski), Zakopane January 1932, vintage print pasted on cardboard, 8,9x11,4 cm



Witkacy (photographed by Józef Gtowski), Zakopane, 1931, vintage print, 8,7x12 cm; 8,8x11,9 cm; *A Madman's Dismay*, 1931, Zakopane, 9,2x12,2 cm



Józef Robakowski, *My Video Masochisms*, 1989, video 4:30 min



Józef Robakowski, *Portrait of the Favorite Daughter*, Astral Photography 1972, vintage print, 14x20,3 cm

Manipulate!

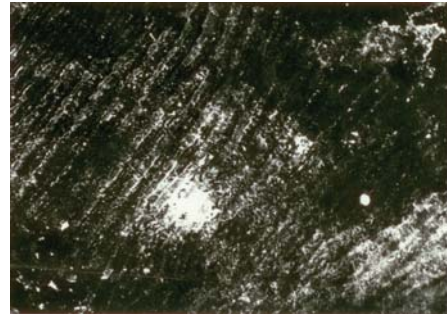
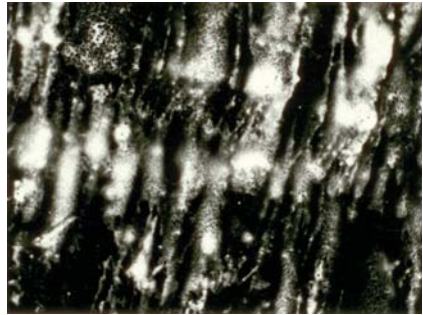
In art, the espousal of "a game of manipulation" is an unworthy subject and exceptionally embarrassing. On the whole, it is acceptable to judge that a true artist is a frank man who deeply struggles with his own being, as he is born from suffering and the passion of his own experiences. It is separate, specifically predisposed, and immersed into its own mysterious gesture: **curiosity**.

In the meantime, I am very curious if I am in fact an artist because I uncontrovertibly ascertain that for the whole of my life in art I have been feeding myself with manipulation, which has served to efface the clarity of my self.

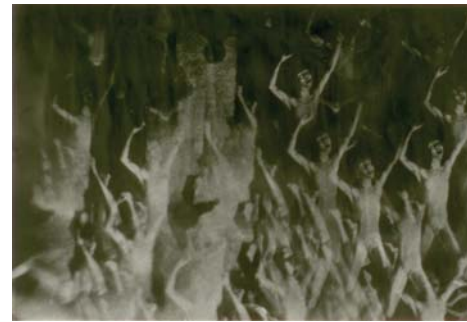
I am convinced that an artist is a sort of peridious swindler, a social ulcer, whose vitality is an exact manipulation of his own account as an expression of self-defense before annihilation, which could be defined here as public acceptance and recognition.

Józef Robakowski, 1988

Józef Robakowski was born 1939. He is an artist, art historian, chief representative of Polish video art, as well as the author of drawings, objects, installations, conceptual designs, and the initiator of numerous significant events and multimedia artistic actions. He founded the Film Form Workshop in 1970 in Lodz, which made structuralist films and subsequently experimental videos, as well as the TV Artistic Group - Ł Station (1991-92). Since 1978, the artist has run a private gallery called the Exchange Gallery. Some of his most prominent exhibitions include: 1973 Sao Paulo Biennale; 1977 Documenta 6, Kassel; 2003 *A Short History of Polish Avant-Garde and Experimental Film*, MoMa, NY; 2006 *Pioneering Artists, Video from Poland*, Tate Modern, London; 2008 *1,2,3. Avant-Gardes*, Sala Rekalde, Bilbao and Tate Modern, London.



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Józef Robakowski
Image from Astral Projection fixed during the conversation with Hans Memling, Astral Photography, 1971, vintage print, 11,7x8,2 cm

Astral Image of my mother Irena's foot, Astral Photography, 1971, vintage print, 7,2x11,5 cm

back cover: Józef Robakowski, *My Video Masochisms*, 1989

Józef Robakowski, *Illuminated Body, Astral Photography, 1971, vintage print, 10,8x8 cm*; *Portrait of Stephan, Astral Photography, 1972, vintage print, 15,7x11,3 cm*;
Leak of the Fluidal Power (Feb. 20, 1973), Astral Photography, 1973, vintage print, 9,6x6,7 cm

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