

Cichosz's Textures

Krzysztof Cichosz, a photographic artist, initiator of numerous photographic exhibitions, like *The Changing of the Guards* (1991) and *Constellation 1 and 2* (1993, 1995), manager of one of the most important Polish galleries of photography – the FF Gallery in Łódź – embarked on his artistic career at the end of the 1970s as an utterly traditional photographer. Sociological registrations and portraits of his friends and relatives in interiors made up the bulk of his artistic output until the middle of the 1980s. The last phase of his interest in such topics the author himself called “post-reportage photography”. In order to understand his later artistic decisions we should examine Cichosz's pictures from this period and have a closer look at how he treated them – pure whiteness of outlined signs introduced suggestive metanarration into those works. However, Cichosz soon revealed his new attitude as a daring experimenter, keen commentator of historical events and philosopher of culture. This transformation took place during a celebrated exhibition called *Intermedia Photography* (Poznań 1988). It was then that the artist presented works he had been producing since 1986, in which he intentionally paraphrased works of long-dead classics of photography, like Feininger, Weston or Witkacy. However, his installations were neither simple quotations, nor collages. The audience was especially astonished by the way in which the artist used these well-known icons: there were a few layers of translucent foil hanging down against the wall of the gallery. The foil was covered by camouflaged puzzles of abstract signs, apparently at random and in a non-figurative way. Only when the viewer concentrated hard and focused on them, could he find a trace of the original image in this spectral, seemingly totally chaotic structure, and reach the source of its surprising, mysterious transformations. This was a great success of the previously rather unknown, modest photographer, who more or less at this time invented a wholly original, personal artistic language which he has been using successfully up to this day.

His next realizations that appeared shortly after that, such as *Strike* (1989), *The Great Threesome* (1989) and *Rhythm* (1991), confirmed Cichosz's desire to redefine history, find a place of his own in it and distance himself from the feelings and emotions of the time preceding this turning point. It was not a kind of confrontation that would shock the viewer by using *forbidden* historical accounts (which many photographers made use of at the time) – on the contrary, Cichosz referred to images from history handbooks and encyclopedias, to outdated, obsolete, neutral icons, posing a series of questions and apparently asking the viewers to change their attitude towards those pictures. Actually, most works by Krzysztof Cichosz are discursive, let me just mention here *On Unity*, *On Freedom*, *Crib* or another work frequently exhibited work that has become something of his trademark, called *Dedicated to Humanology* (1993). Along with those further realizations he perfected his technique and enriched the newly discovered language, using new, riskier and more surprising motifs of the screen. New significant topics appeared in his art, too. A hand-made template was replaced by a structural net designed by a computer programme, the installations grew in size to become monumental compositions, measuring a few metres, and in certain cases

a luxurious trace of colour was introduced. Also, Cichosz's dialogue with the history of art became more and more penetrating. In the 1990s he undertook topics connected with anthropology and metaphysics (*Rhythm, Dedicated to Humanology, Genesis, Circle*), as well as with war (*Crib*). He was especially interested in the nature/culture opposition and continued a series of hommages that bore the mark of his personal interpretations. He dedicated them, among others, to Muybridge, Niepce, Warhol, Marilyn Monroe and Charlie Chaplin. By referring to those icons, culturally petrified by means of their constant reproduction, the artist marked his presence in the broad simulacrum of culture, subtly raising the level of discourse with the viewer. Focused, attentive and careful in his choices, he was a living denial of the common opinion of devoted modernists who have always suspected postmodern artists of cynicism, of shallow and irresponsible formal games, lack of intellectual reflection and breaking the continuity of our cultural legacy¹.

However, let us look at what I believe is the most interesting and revealing aspect of Cichosz's art, namely his language of representation. Krzysztof Cichosz's photo-installations usually consist of several (sometimes a few dozen) light-sensitive plates, hanging in a pre-set order in the gallery like negatives waiting to be developed. Planes fractured by screens of unique design, full of symbolic meanings (let us call them *graphemes*), thoroughly hide the superior, original icon that organizes the whole of the composition. Some time must pass before the viewer gets used to the peculiar thought that these apparently disorderly hurled, piled up and overlapping *textures* recall some concrete plate in our memory. The spectral, clear and at the same time unclear structure of these textures inclines the viewer not only to make the effort of reconstructing the visual information decomposed by the artist, but also of encoding it once more in order to fill it with meaning constructed anew – if the viewer is ready to make such an effort, of course. The author gives us complete freedom in this respect. He does not explain anything, give us any clues, impose or resolve anything, as he himself does not assume that any concrete, final verdict or meaning will emerge as the result of the ultimate reading of the work. The image that escapes our control possesses the same features as the truth hidden in it: it is difficult to grasp, concealed from “the unwanted eye” and constantly changing its shape. In the light of this brief introduction I think can risk saying now that Cichosz's textures correspond to Derrida's idea of writing, as Cichosz's screen is analogous to Derrida's *gramma* or *différance*. Derrida says that reading a piece of writing depends on quick disconnection and reconnection of the elements of *différance*, that decoding and decomposing is a pre-determined process, that it precedes each construction and allows us to read, while the finding of meaning that lies somewhere between *différences* depends on the skill and precision with which this act is carried out². Otherwise the text will turn out to be transparent or completely impossible to read. In Cichosz's works the elements of which the image is built – graphemes (or grammes, as Derrida would call them) – appear in transparent, unlit, opposing fields. They are meandering lines, overlapping triangles or squares, sometimes runic signs or dollar symbols – elements of a representational code created especially

for each composition, for each screen pattern. Each grapheme carries with it a particle of meaning, but individual neighbouring particles, devoid of context, mean something completely different, refer to something different, open the viewer to different associations and lead us onto different levels of one and the same text. The effort of putting them together and combining into a meaningful whole involves the question of our desire to participate in this kind of game. Another similar universal question that arises in this instance concerns our desire to participate in contemporary culture on a slightly higher level than leafing through magazines and watching television series. Entering such a game, the viewer struggles with his own passivity, speeds up his reactions and develops his perceptiveness, breaks commercialized stereotypes and refuses easy and irresponsible contact with millions of icons that fill the world of contemporary culture, communicating – perhaps in a different way than before – also with the images that fill our minds. These, of course, would include images produced over the course of centuries by other artists – images that exist more in our consciousness as reproductive spectres than in our memory of the originals.

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References:

¹ The sincerity of his attitude is confirmed by *The Confession of My-ism*, a text by K. Cichosz from 1989.

² More information on this problem may be found for example in: Jacques Derrida, *Pozycje*, transl. by A. Dziadek, FAART 1997.

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