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Barbara Kozłowska. The Great Journey¹

“i was born in poland i exhibited a lot and always where i did not want to exhibit where i wanted to exhibit I did not exhibit i travelled i performed i went where i wanted to go for important artistic reasons i travelled with all available means of transport as far as possible i appeared on beaches in galleries and on video i built i moved i repeated things i built theoretical models of concepts i moved the borderline to the moon and everywhere i always repeated the same banal sentences about art and reality or the same banal truth about art i wrote obvious things about things i took part in exhibitions in poland romania great britain italy yugoslavia i travelled to siberia to great britain to malta to italy yugoslavia france”

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These are the words of Barbara Kozłowska (1940–2008) about herself. This form of autobiography, without punctuation and capital letters, akin to a text-object, often accompanied her exhibitions. Seemingly laconic, it touches upon some of the matters that she found most important: movement, travel, exploration of space and the study of “ordinary” reality that invariably occupies it. There is a tinge of provocative ambivalence in it, the same as in the phrase “You can see it all anywhere,” which she used to describe her artistic practice. It was her sentence-work, sentence-manifesto, a key sentence that unlocked her art built upon constant observation of everyday phenomena and of herself vis-à-vis them.

Another interesting aspect of the autobiography is how the subject manifests itself in it. Such a personal approach, writing in the first person in a simple way that was understandable to a wide audience, was a rare occurrence in Polish art in the 1970s or 1980s. Artists’ texts at the time were typically dominated by a para-scientific language, so that an essentially simple message was often made deliberately obscure. Kozłowska’s writing about her own art was clearly focused on authentic communication with the audience. The artist wrote a lot about her work, but only a small part of these texts was published. “Known and unknown” – this is how Kozłowska was described in 2016 by Zbigniew Makarewicz², who was her husband and co-creator of some of her works from the 1960s and

¹ The title refers to a fragment of one of Barbara Kozłowska’s biographies, written by her probably in 1976, in which she stated: “Barbara Maria Kozłowska is an artist who is well-known everywhere, because of her great journey across time and space.” Zbigniew Makarewicz’s archive.

² <https://magazynszum.pl/znana-i-nieznana-rozmowa-o-barbarze-kozlowskiej/>.

early 1970s. Prompted by this exhibition, which is the first comprehensive, monographic presentation of Kozłowska oeuvre, I would like to delve deeper into the actual meaning of Makarewicz's words. Before I do so, let me recall some basic facts from the artist's life.

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Barbara Kozłowska was born in Tarnobrzeg. This simple statement is underlain by personal drama: before her birth, Zygmunt Kozłowski, the artist's father, was arrested by the Nazis for refusing to sign the Volksliste and taken to a concentration camp (first to Sachsenhausen, then to Dachau, where he died in November 1942). Before the outbreak of the war, the Kozłowski family lived near Bydgoszcz. In 1940, after Zygmunt's arrest, Emilia Kozłowska, who already had four children and was expecting the birth of her fifth one (Barbara), was displaced to Tarnobrzeg. The wartime trauma and the acute lack of her father's presence were later reflected in Kozłowska's art in a very special and characteristic way, to which I will come back again.

After the war, Barbara and her mother settled down in Wrocław. Although their financial situation was extremely difficult, in 1959 she began studying at the State Higher School of Fine Arts, which was costly and did not guarantee a "respectable job", but it was a fulfilment of her dream. Given the circumstances, this decision testifies to the future artist's determination and certainty about the chosen life path. Unfortunately, the school disappointed her – she had bad memories of it, apparently because she was not able to find herself in the bureaucratic rigour imposed by the education system in the People's Republic of Poland in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Kozłowska wrote that for her, art was a space of freedom³. Despite this, in 1965 she graduated with honours from professor Stanisław Dawski's studio. Later⁴ the artist in her writings would frequently refer to Black Mountain College, the legendary interdisciplinary college founded by former Bauhaus lecturers in North Carolina, USA, in 1933. The BMC educational offer was characterised by almost total openness of the curriculum, focus on the creative process rather than its result and on developing students' individuality and cooperation between them. All these aspects were clearly present in Kozłowska's practice by the time she made what she considered her first mature works, i.e. around 1962. At that time, she was a member of "Brzeg", an informal group of Wrocław-based artists who had not yet systematically developed their practice, but whose actions can be considered precursory in the field of Polish performance art (e.g. *Abduction*, an action which took place at Lake Wolsztyn in 1965)⁵. From then

³ Barbara Kozłowska's manuscript, Zbigniew Makarewicz's archive.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Z. Makarewicz, *Wrocławska tradycja artystyczna – Przedstawienia i inne praktyki parateatralne* [Wrocław artistic tradition – performances and other para-theatre practices], in *Sztuka otwarta. Parateatr II* [The open art. Para-theatre II], edited by E. Dawidejt, O.T.O. Kalambur, Wrocław, 1982.

on, Barbara Kozłowska created and exhibited works as an active participant in the progressive environment of the Wrocław avant-garde for five decades.

In 1967, Kozłowska began making one of her most important works – *Borderline*. The idea of drawing a line across the entire globe, from east to west, had probably appeared at least a year earlier, but it materialised in the summer of 1967, during Kozłowska's trip to Lake Baikal in Siberia. Importantly, the action was not a "by-product" of the journey, but the very reason for it. The artist manifested her presence on the shore of the lake by arranging small stones into cones, marking in this way a point on the *Borderline*. She repeated the action many times, in different places – in Osieki, Malta, Edinburgh or California. Wherever possible, Kozłowska made sand cones. She would sometimes colour them with Newton's primary colours, stressing that the dyes were non-toxic and harmless to the natural environment. It testifies to Kozłowska's sensitivity to environmentalism, understood as making very restrained interventions in the existing landscape and nature. At the same time, she experienced space in a very deep way. Space was one of the main mediums of Kozłowska's work, if not the main one.

All this and much more permeates the subsequent instalments of the *Borderline*. Since its first "unveiling" on Lake Baikal, Kozłowska participated in exhibitions, symposia and open-air meetings that became part of the history of Polish art of the 1970s, such as the Wrocław '70 Visual Arts Symposium (1970), the 8th Meeting of Artists and Art Theorists in Osieki (1970), the Convention of Dreamers in Elbląg (1971), Atelier 72 at the Richard Demarco Gallery (Kozłowska and Makarewicz could not go to Edinburgh because their passports had not been issued in time, although they did receive invitations)⁶. They eventually went to Scotland the following year and took part in the next edition of Edinburgh Arts organised by Demarco – it enabled Barbara to carry out the *Sea Action and Five Coloured Cones*, i.e. the next stage of drawing the *Borderline*.

The following years brought more exhibitions and her own place of art – from 1972, Kozłowska ran the Babel Gallery in her and Makarewicz's studio in Malarska Street in Wrocław. The Babel Gallery was an independent space for art that functioned beyond the censors' reach. It was open to visual artists, but also to representatives of various other disciplines. Although many artists declared that they were interested in artistic and intellectual exchange of thoughts, situations in which ideas could be exchanged horizontally, disciplines and media would mix, were extremely rare. Being the undisputed founder of the Babel Gallery, Kozłowska not so much invited others to her space as created it for them.

⁶ Author's conversation with Zbigniew Makarewicz, February 2020.

She did all this despite a chronic illness that she had been struggling with since childhood – she had a heart condition and her life was threatened many times. It also caused frequent hospitalisations, which obviously limited her activeness, but never (in hindsight) resulted in prolonged periods of inactivity. Kozłowska continued her work – the *Borderline* was her journey, as she put it, whose subsequent manifestations were more and more radical in terms of limiting the means of artistic expression. Gradually, Kozłowska gave up colouring the cones, then stopped forming them from sand (or piles of stones), reducing the action to arriving in a given place at a certain time and **being** there.

Even this brief overview of Barbara Kozłowska's activity, without going into details about her works, is sufficient to show that it was an extremely original attitude against the background of what was happening in Polish art, not only in the 1960s and 1970s, but also in the decades to come. Yet very few art critics or historians have reflected on it. Considering the current state of research, we quickly come to the conclusion that Kozłowska actually is “unknown”, as Makarewicz put it. Not only are there no monographs devoted to her work, but even shorter texts just about her art are also scarce. Andrzej Kostołowski⁷ and Jerzy Ludwiński mentioned her. Makarewicz also wrote about Kozłowska, mainly in studies devoted to the Wrocław avant-garde⁸. Although she has appeared in several collective studies in recent years, there have been no attempts to systematically analyse her art.

Given the absence of studies on Kozłowska's art, it is her private archive that proves to be the most valuable source of information. This exhibition is based on research of this archive, which I conducted with the permission of Zbigniew Makarewicz. Working with an artist's archive is always an excellent source of information about their work, but in the case of Barbara Kozłowska, it is particularly important – not only because it constitutes the main source material, but also because its structure perfectly reflects the uniqueness of her method of work and her way of thinking. It is a reflection of the creative process. By preserving the archive in its entirety, Makarewicz acted in accordance with his wife's intentions, understanding that her work was a process. This decision was far from obvious: important notes, thoughts or observations can be easily overlooked, because she wrote them on inconspicuous paper cuttings, napkins or tickets. The archive consists of short notes, manuscripts, typescripts, old invitations to exhibitions adorned with handwritten comments, correspondence, shopping lists on which I also found ideas for work titles, notes about her own health, exhibition

⁷ E.g. A. Kostołowski in a leaflet accompanying the exhibition *Barbara Kozłowska 1940–2008: A Retrospective*, Galeria EL Art Centre, 02.12–09.12.2010, Elbląg, Zbigniew Makarewicz's archive, or “Micro-Macro”, *Kultura*, no. 37, 1978.

⁸ L. Nader, *Konceptualizm w PRL* [Conceptualism in the People's Republic of Poland], Warsaw, 2008, or *The Wild West. A History of Wrocław's Avant-garde*, exh. cat., Wrocław Contemporary Museum, 19.06–13.09.2015, edited by D. Monkiewicz, Wrocław, 2015.

designs, future plans for the Babel Gallery (both very prosaic, such as the need to repair heating, and highly abstract, such as the purchase of a palace to house the gallery), excerpts from philosophical texts or physical theories, and numerous autobiographies in various versions. As I mentioned, Zbigniew Makarewicz did not dispose of any materials from this vast collection – he arranged all the documents in several dozen ring binders, without any subjective attempts to determine their importance, and stores them in their former studio in Malarska Street in Wrocław, in the attic of a tenement house in the Old Town where in the 1970s his wife initiated the functioning of the Babel Gallery. The “founding act” was Kozłowska’s action of moving all materials from the studio to the BWA gallery in Wrocław, and presenting them publically in 1972. After a police intervention, caused by the fact that Kozłowska allowed viewers to carry out independent actions in the exhibition space, beyond the control of censorship, the exhibition was closed, which made her aware of the need to have a place of her own – a creative platform beyond the reach of the censorship apparatus. Treating the archive as artistic material, opening it to the creativity of others, was an unprecedented gesture at that time which today, nearly five decades later, makes us approach its structure and the materials contained in it with utmost care. Kozłowska considered the archive – this inhomogeneous collection of clues, thoughts and ideas, arising from each other and mixed together – extremely important. This is why I suggest approaching these materials not only as sources needed to determine dates or other historical facts, but also as a form of artistic and creative expression.

“Art ought to be treated as a living thing,” the artist wrote on a piece of paper preserved in the archive. In fact, Kozłowska’s art and her method of working resemble an organism that develops to a certain degree by itself; sometimes its fragment manifests itself to us when favourable circumstances arise, but the lack of manifestation does not mean that the process of creation has stopped. It is clearly seen in the structure of Kozłowska’s archive. It has no clear centre, it mushrooms, grows in all directions, as demonstrated by the notes and writings to which the artist returned, changed them, corrected, created subsequent versions of texts, including her biographies. Of course, the archive does contain works. But apart from elements that are clearly connected with works there are also those seemingly unimportant, which does not mean that they will not actually turn out to be the opposite – the subsequent words, drawings, charts and sentences add to the sense of the works (performances or “events”, as she called them, drawings, sometimes paintings), which in Kozłowska’s case were not the **culmination** of the creative process, but its **manifestation**. Theoretically, this can be said of many artists, but in the case of Barbara Kozłowska it was particularly important. After the emergence of a work – usually in an ephemeral form, although not always – the artist would return to it, having enriched her knowledge by reading, writing and conducting a kind of dialogue with herself, in order to **manifest** the next stage of her creative process after some time. This is how she described the *Borderline*: “The *Borderline* is a work in process. What follows from this is that it will never be a work that could be unambiguously described as a finished whole. It does not matter which part of the

work we present to the viewer, it will still result in a lack of clarity rather than full contact with the work. Documents, fragments of actions, photos or slides can only hint at this journey of the work in time. Some barely perceptible pieces, unpredictable points at which these pieces become works of art. What is left is documentation from 1966 to 1999, which will wait for the presentation or implementation of the next events at some point in time, somewhere. The presentation of the documentation should be as objective as possible (...). So the *Borderline* continues to exist. Its duration is ensured by the artist and artists who are to participate in the work.”⁹

I have already mentioned that in order to reveal her ideas, Kozłowska typically used highly reduced means of expression – gestures that were not so much intended to create a new entity (a work of art), but rather to draw attention to certain phenomena existing in nature, to highlight a feature of the universe or reality. She retrospectively described some of her works as “events” – their structure was constituted on “presence with minimal intervention.” At the same time, these small gestures were clearly connected with Kozłowska’s need to exist as a subject in relation to time and space. At this point I shall return to the artist’s biography presented at the beginning of the text, which aptly characterises this aspect of her attitude that was based on constant examination of her dynamic situation or position in the world. Most of Kozłowska’s works could be described in terms of mapping the universe, in both conceptual and literal sense, using the measure of her own physicality, psyche, memory and perception.

This need to reveal herself through other people and phenomena permeates most of Kozłowska’s works, including the *Borderline*. The subsequent points on the line marked the places that she had physically visited. As the work continued to exist, this became increasingly apparent. In the early photographs and slides, we see not only the artist, but also other people engaged in the construction of sand cones. Those who documented these actions did not try to capture the artist in the centre of the frame – in all likelihood, this was not her intention, at least until the very last instalment of the *Borderline* that took place in San Francisco. In one of the photographs taken there, the artist is in the middle of the composition, with her arms stretched out to the sides, standing on one leg in the spot where the beach and the ocean meet, probably at the time of the tide. Kozłowska’s silhouette is dominant against the gray surface of water and sky. There is not a trace of the sand cones in the picture, as if her presence alone was finally enough for the artistic gesture to occur. I mentioned that space was the medium of Kozłowska’s art, but to put it more precisely – her art was about exploring it, determining her position in relation to space, time and other people. This translates directly into the form of her works – they develop at the level of cognition, mapping space and experiencing it.

⁹ Barbara Kozłowska’s typescript, Zbigniew Makarewicz’s archive.

Her own subjectivity was a source of constant reflection. However, it was not egocentric in character, but based on the realisation of various complex relationships. After all, we cannot know the world beyond ourselves, beyond our own perception. Just as we cannot get to know one thing by learning about something else. “Only the same can be comprehended through the same,” to quote the artist’s words again. This sentence could be treated as a tautological conceptual figure or as a lapidary truth, very practical and real. The need to determine the position of the self in relation to the world is an important feature of Kozłowska’s art. “In non-European languages, there are gradations of pronouns indicating the determination of the relative distance from ‘I.’” This is another of hundreds of small notes made and kept by Barbara Kozłowska. It was accompanied by three sketched circles. In the smallest one, the one in the middle, there was an inscription “I / here.” In the next one, surrounding the central circle – “you: there.” Inside the outermost were the words “he – they: somewhere,” and further deliberations on the gradation of pronouns in different languages to describe one’s position in relation to other things, people and phenomena, especially since they also create us. What I see in this is Kozłowska’s need to create collective works – with other people serving as points of reference that supplement the meaning of the work, just as the work supplements them.

The desire to see oneself, in a biographical sense, in various contexts, or simply in a broader context, is also manifested in the work *Negatives of Fiction* (1976). I mentioned earlier that Kozłowska in her art reflected the experience of wartime trauma and loss of father, in a way that was simultaneously reserved and poignant. *Negatives of Fiction* is an installation consisting of 365 cards, corresponding to the days of the year, whose part is covered with black ink proportionately to the length of day on a given date. Only one card does not follow this system, the one corresponding to the date when Kozłowska’s father died in November 1942. In this way, the artist repeatedly introduced aspects of her biography into the context of universal phenomena, emphasising the randomness of our existence as well as its uniqueness and importance. This is why the motif of the number of days that had passed since her birth often appeared in the artist’s later works, always in the context of time that had elapsed in a global sense, measured, for example, by sunrise and sunset.

What invariably attracts attention in Kozłowska’s archive is the number of autobiographies. The short version quoted at the beginning of this text is just one of many variants of her life story. I suggest approaching them as something more than just collections of pure facts. Of course, biographies sometimes play this role, but at the same time they could be performative texts or texts-performances that express the need to define **oneself**, describe **oneself** in relation to the world, the physicality of

reality, to time, space, the great history and the microhistory of one's own biography. "It is indeed a strange thing with this repeated 'I' of mine," Kozłowska wrote in another notebook stored in the archive.

This phrase echoes in the video performance *Point of View* (1978). A circle appears in it, drawn around the artist's body lying on the floor, with her arms and legs outstretched. This time it is she who occupies the central place in the performance, it seems as if she plotted out a place of her own whose image she then transmitted to other rooms using video cameras set up at different points. The viewers could therefore see many images of the same person from different angles, giving an idea of her actual appearance. Kozłowska was fully aware of the incoherence of human subjectivity; this fact interested her and she tried to visualise it, so that the subsequent images of "I" complemented each other even when they were contradictory, for example when one was the mirror image of another. For this type of activities, video seems to be the best medium – Kozłowska regretted that she did not own a portable camera. Due to its transmission potential and the possibility of generating one's image that could be simultaneously perceived as a mirror and autonomous being, video was used by artists wanting to reflect on their own identity and subjectivity. An interesting analogy emerges between Kozłowska's work and the practice of the American artist Joan Jonas, a performer and precursor of video art, who considered discovering space and complementing it with a gesture or her own presence as a very important aspect of her art. Jonas's *Wind* (1968) and Kozłowska's *Borderline* (interestingly, both works were collective in character, the artists invited others to co-create them) are works about space – about traversing it, crossing, exploring, defining and consciously **being** in it. To this end, Jonas used a video camera. In addition, both projects have this elusive but palpable quality of a ritual or rite, although neither refers to specific gestures or attributes. Both artists were driven by travel, movement and experiencing other places through the self, scale, physicality, memory and perception.

Kozłowska's archive in its entirety is also a record of the artist's peculiar, long-lasting dialogue with herself. There is something poignant about the multiple versions of her biography, texts, self-commentaries, elaborations of works, especially in the face of researchers' silence about her art. It seems to be an attempt to overcome her loneliness as an artist, which she must have experienced despite living in a relationship with another artist. Kozłowska shared the fate of many female artists who have never become part of the canon, of which she was well aware. In her case, however, it can be rectified – with the archive as a source of works, but also, equally importantly, as a source of the narrative.