

The Painter in the Karaoke Culture

The case of Paweł Książek

We are observing today a parody of the event that was the transformation of the collection in the Louvre into national property during the French Revolution. The idea of the ‘democratisation of culture’,¹ which became one of the fundamental vectors of the political transformation in France towards the end of the 18th century, has reached its culmination in the contemporary era as ‘karaoke culture’² – to use Dubravka Ugrešić’s term. It is not a matter of the Louvre itself becoming ‘karaoke-like’ as it clones and pastiches itself in its branches, such as the most famous one which has opened off the coast of Abu Dhabi. The term coined by the Croatian writer simply conveys perfectly well the prevailing atmosphere in today’s field of cultural production – the atmosphere of a medially mediated cheerful game of repetition that blurs the borders between professionals and amateurs.

The increasing affordability of digital technologies and the possibility of easy publication of content online led to a transformation of cultural software – the perception of the role of the author and authorship, position of the viewer, evaluation criteria of artistic work – and hardware – distribution channels. An interesting starting point from which to investigate this question is offered by the report by Lev Manovich and his team concerning the functioning of the Instagram app between 2012 and 2015. As for the number of photographs, the document states that around 150,000 images were posted on the platform during a single weekend in September 2015 in London alone; and the number shared throughout five months in 2014 in New York reached 10,500,000³. Analysing photographs posted by residents of global metropolises (Saint Petersburg, Moscow, Bangkok and Berlin, aside from the two already mentioned cities), Manovich identified three overriding styles: ‘casual photos’ (‘ordinary’ images commemorating important events in the lives of their makers), as well as ‘professional photos’ and ‘designed photos’, which are the most interesting in this context. Professional’ images are mostly created by professional photographers and replicate schemas developed in painting and photography within such genres as landscape, portrait and still life. ‘Designed photos’ are based on visual codes that – according to Manovich – emerged in the field of broadly understood avantgarde graphic design, fashion and advertising photography in popular press between the 1920s and the 1950s.⁴ What matters, however – and here we face the question of qualitative criteria – is the ease with which Instagram users, whose number reached 300,000,000 in 2014 and one billion

¹ See: Kate Booth, ‘Democratization of Art: A Contextual Approach’, *Visitor Studies*, no. 2 (2014), pp. 207-221; Jean-Marc Léry, ‘Le Louvre du palais royal au musée national’ in *Patrimoine parisien 1789-1799. Destructures, créations, mutations*, ed. by Alfred Fierro (Paris: Délégation à l’Action Artistique de la Ville de Paris, 1989), pp. 96-101.

² Dubravka Ugrešić, *Karaoke Culture*, trans. by David Williams (Rochester: Open Letter, 2011).

³ Lev Manovich, *Instagram and Contemporary Image* [online], 2017, p. 7, <http://manovich.net/index.php/projects/instagramand-contemporary-image> [accessed 21 August 2022].

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 96-113.

in 2019,⁵ mastered the rules of using these codes and how deftly they apply them on such a mass scale. It does not obviously mean that everybody creates content that can automatically be deemed outstanding (although this likewise does not apply to the work of professionals), but that the codes have been mastered entirely outside the sphere of official art education. Moreover, a vast part of the content shared nowadays on various online platforms involves experimentation with visual codes no worse than the past experiments of the avant-garde.⁶

The general availability of production tools and distribution channels of various kinds of ‘creative content’ – akin to a caricature – exaggerates certain characteristics of artistic work, but not necessarily those that lend seriousness to the several-centuries-old project called art. We are therefore experiencing democratisation, and everyone who wants to be an artist becomes one, but a kind of artist who reproduces visual codes on a copy-paste basis and thus trivialises them to an increasing extent, demonstrating their artificiality. This game of karaoke is significant insofar as it has become a mass process that generates a myriad of images. So-called professional art is a mere drop in this ocean. In turn, the sheer number of ‘amateur’ images translates into quality and begins to diminish the value of those created by professionals. Their meaning was completely different when they were rare – when it took more than a few seconds to create them and when the skills of the maker were consecrated by the artistic milieu.⁷ All of this compels the question about the role that the artist should currently play. Should they follow the path of ballet or opera, genres whose glory days are long gone, and fall into mannerisms while adopting subsequent poses, whose meaning can be grasped only by a narrow circle of connoisseurs? Or perhaps they should rise to the challenge and show that painting – a medium whose death has already been proclaimed a number of times – is still thriving, and, if it has survived the onset of photography, film and television, then it will also survive the onset of the Internet? In other words, what role can the painter adopt in order to retain the culture-forming quality of their activity – against the pressure of other media – and avoid limiting it to the narrow elitist circle of those who seek contact with art primarily to assert their social status?

The Spam of the Earth

Paweł Książek’s artistic practice offers a rather perverse answer to this question. This results perhaps from his generational lineage. I do not mean to resort here to the reductive classification proposed in the past by William Strauss and Neil Howe of the ‘generational

⁵ See: J. Clement, ‘Most popular social networks worldwide as of July 2019, ranked by number of active users (in millions)’ , *Statista* [online], 22 July 2019, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-socialnetworks-ranked-by-numberof-users> [accessed 21 August 2022].

⁶ To the extent that, it seems, for the first time since the early 20th century avant-garde, it is this spontaneous, ‘non-normative’ - in the light of institutionalised art - artistic production that today sets the rhythm of visual culture and becomes copied by ‘professional art’, from visual formulas developed in online pornography, computer games, to inspiration drawn from YouTubers.

⁷ The problem can also be grasped through the prism of the relation between the value of an image and the time required to create it. Contemporary visual culture is not only a parody of the democratisation of art, but also a parody of the process that occurred in the field of visual arts throughout the 20th century and whose goal was to reverse the proportions between the economic value of a painting as a market commodity and the time needed for its execution. Marxist analyses reveal the importance of the correlation between the price of a commodity and the time necessary to produce it. Gold is valuable because it takes time to find and extract it; a shoe, for example, acquires a far smaller value as it is produced using easily available materials and simple machines. Art, which was valued through the prism of the quality of craftsmanship, prior to the avant-garde revolutions, perfectly matched this perspective. The time required to create an artwork, alongside the time and resources indispensable to master the profession, generated its considerable value. The shift that occurred in art in the 20th century completely changed that status quo. When craftsmanship became completely superfluous, it ceased to determine the value of an artwork, while instant objects (it is not a matter of coincidence that this word resonated in the name of the Instagram app), objects created here and now, often merely as a record of a concept began to gain a greater significance. Contemporary visual culture eagerly tapped into this production model, practically offering consumption of an image simultaneous to its production.

theory’,⁸ according to which Książek (born 1973) would belong to Generation X, disappointed by consumerism and critical of capitalism, and not to Generation Y, bogged down in hedonism and new media. What matters is that he belongs to a generation that can perfectly remember the era before the invasion of the Internet. His is the last generation that gained its knowledge about the world by means of the written word or television, without computers, smartphones and social media. The perversity of Książek’s – let us not fear this word – post-medium⁹ painting does not result from the fact that during a certain period it brimmed with references to online culture, but from the fact that his work brings him closer to an attitude described simply but convincingly by Hito Steyerl in her essay *The Spam of the Earth*. According to the German artist’s perspective, the images that nowadays bombard the media space – from television, to advertisements, to, above all, the billions of photos posted by private users on their social media profiles – are deliberately produced spam.¹⁰ Their task is not to reveal anything, certainly not the private life of each Instagram, Facebook or Tinder user, but to surround them with a layer of impenetrable white noise, of information overload. The point is therefore to disappear, and not to become more visible. The well-known understanding of painting as an attempt to lend visibility to the imperceptible thus acquires a completely new articulation, and the stake of painterly representations turns out to consist in concealment, rather than presentation.



Paweł Książek, *Frieda and Sylvia*, 2019, oil on linen, 100 x 90 cm © Paweł Książek

‘A certain vacillation is a forte of the art of painting, as well as an automatic entry into an unobvious space and further into mystery, so it is... concealment. That is why I mainly employ painting,’¹¹ as Książek once remarked. It might therefore not be a matter of chance that in 2005 one of the protagonists of the Krakow artist’s work became Richey Edwards – member of the music group Manic Street Preachers, who disappeared in 1995 after checking

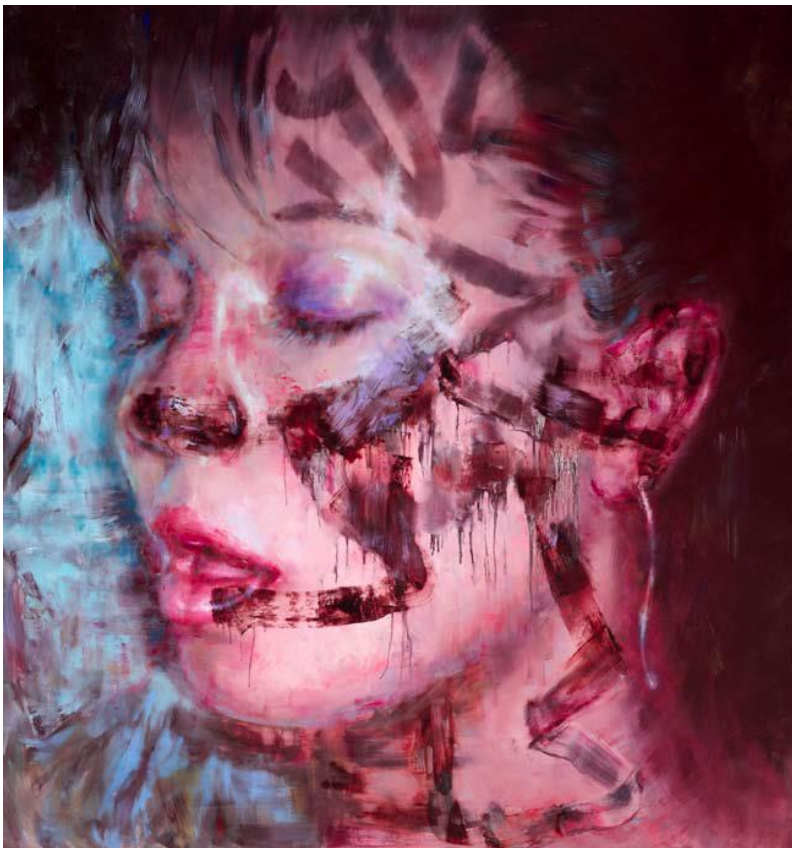
⁸ William Strauss, Neil Howe, *The Fourth Turning: An American Prophecy – What the Cycles of History Tell Us About America’s Next Rendezvous with Destiny* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1997).

⁹ In the meaning given to the term by Rosalind Krauss, see: Rosalind E. Krauss, *Under Blue Cup* (Cambridge, Mass., London: MIT Press, 2011).

¹⁰ Hito Steyerl, ‘The Spam of the Earth: Withdrawal from Representation’, *e-flux Journal*, no. 32 (February 2012), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/32/68260/thespam-of-the-earth-withdrawalfrom-representation/> [accessed 21 August 2022].

¹¹ ‘Painting as a Tool of Investigation (Paweł Książek talks to Masza Potocka)’, in *Paweł Książek zbiory_sets*, ed. by Beata Nowacka-Kardzis, catalogue of the exhibition *Zbiory | Sets* (Krakow: Bunkier Sztuki, 2008), p. 73.

out of a hotel. Książek, who could not yet be aware at the time that in 2008 Edwards would become officially ‘presumed dead’, constructed his exhibition *R.E. (1967–1995?)* at Poznań’s Pies Gallery as something of an artistic investigation. Its components included collages and visual materials loosely referring to Edwards’ disappearance. However, police investigators could consider them as obstruction, rather than efforts towards clarifying the musician’s fate. And this accusation would not be groundless because – as the artist himself stated – he was interested rather in ‘the spectral image of a man’, who, although missing, was “”seen” by fans on occasions’.¹² The realism of the representations was purely ‘speculative’, as Książek described it. The goal was to add another layer to the conjectures about the musician’s disappearance, a layer that was to feed on media fiction, instead of clarifying anything. Książek actually employed a similar strategy in his series of works inspired by the American poet Sylvia Plath. His paintings, originating from more or less the same period as the pieces devoted to Edwards, were supposed to evoke the ‘stuffy aura that accompanied the poet until her death’.¹³ Suggesting that the ‘truth’ about herself revealed by Plath in her poems was an image that was procured, a word that perhaps best matches this context, Książek added subsequent details to that image. The search for ‘authenticity’ served as a pretext to formulate subsequent interpretations and question the credibility of statements by the poet, seen as part of the confessional poetry current, which would seem the most intimate of intimate, and the most honest of honest poetic tendencies. From Steyerl’s perspective, in both cases Książek offered the protagonists of his paintings a helping hand, as if he wanted to tell them: ‘yes, I’ll help you hide even better under the cocoon built around you by the media or which you built around yourselves.’



Paweł Książek, *N.N. 72*, 2019, oil on linen, 160 x 150 cm © Paweł Książek

¹² Paweł Książek, *Autoreferat*, p. 7, https://asp.katowice.pl/files/articles/54/autoreferat_ksiazek.pdf [accessed 17 August 2019].

¹³ *Ibid.*

The motif of ‘visual investigation’ also became a major element of the well-known cycle of Książek’s works *N.N. vs Artists from the years 2007–2011*, which features images of anonymous people found online and painted on canvas.¹⁴ Unknown authors shared photographs of their equally unknown friends who had fallen asleep intoxicated in compromising poses. The vulnerability of the sleeping people encouraged their conscious acquaintances to ‘decorate’ their bodies with objects found at hand, or bizarre patterns. These objects frequently veil the whole body and the drawings mostly concentrate on the face. Both the items placed on the sleeping persons and the abstract patterns, usually created with a marker pen, play an ambivalent role. On the one hand, they are meant to discredit the victims and embarrass them when they wake up, but on the other hand, paradoxically, the layer of objects and drawings covers the bodies and faces to such a degree that they become unrecognisable. Moreover, during his ‘investigation’, Książek renders them even more anonymous and profits from the opportunity for obstruction. In some cases, dissatisfied with the composition of lines and patches on the bodies, he adds something to the ‘decoration’ as he transfers the images onto canvas. He intervenes in the traces left on site by the revellers and their victims, hindering the identification of their identities.

Research method as style

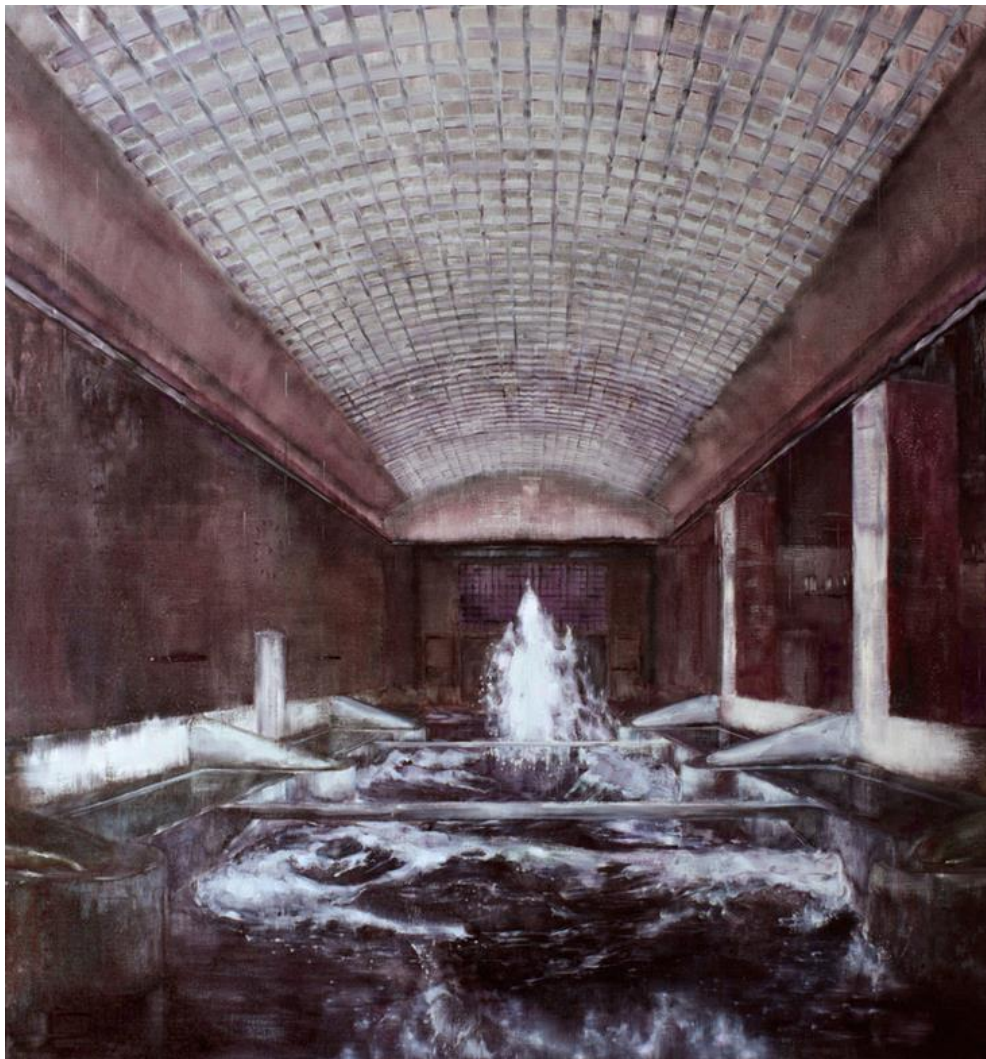
The series of works discussed so far directly concern hiding or invisibility. Still, Książek’s output also features certain aspects that inscribe him somewhat structurally, as the artist, in the perspective of disappearing. One of them consist in his use of parallels. If we examine such projects as *De Stijl vs. Kiss*, *De Stijl vs. Black Metal*, *Poelzig vs. Poelzig*, *Silent Utopia*, the already mentioned cycle *N.N. vs Artists*, and many others, we immediately notice that thinking

in the categories of comparisons and juxtapositions is one of the fundamental creative modes employed by the Krakow artist. In *De Stijl vs. Kiss*, Książek hints at similarities found between Neoplasticism and the visual identification of the band Kiss. A similar rule governs the juxtaposition of De Stijl motifs and black metal iconography in *De Stijl vs. Black Metal*. In *Poelzig vs. Poelzig* Książek not only shows that a protagonist of Edgar Ulmer’s horror movie *The Black Cat* was purposely given the same name as the famous architect (Hans Poelzig and the film director knew each other and collaborated), but goes even further and seeks parallels between spaces depicted in the movie and designs by the German architect. The same structure served as the foundation of the earlier project *Silent Utopia*, in which the Modernist architecture of Eastern Europe became juxtaposed – in collages – with the utopian vision of the future depicted in Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*. *N.N. vs. Artists* features the already mentioned party photographs alongside still frames from the Jackass series (an MTV broadcast from the years 2000–2002, in which a group of twenty-somethings carried out self-inflicted injuries). Książek asks about similarities between such actions and the performative – often very brutal – field of contemporary art and the cultural logic according to which the former kind of activity is deemed unproductive and vulgar, whereas the latter is reverently showcased in museums and galleries. In each of the enumerated cases, the projects are constructed in such a way that they juxtapose seemingly independent fields, demonstrating their mutual similarities and overlaps.

Tapping into the vocabulary used by the artist himself, examples of such projects by Paweł Książek might, on the spur of the moment, be called ‘tracking’ the migration of forms. A description, in the spirit of Aby Warburg, of how a motif from one field travels into another

¹⁴ ‘Painting as a Tool of Investigation (Paweł Książek talks to Masza Potocka)’, in *Paweł Książek_ zbiory_sets*, p. 69.

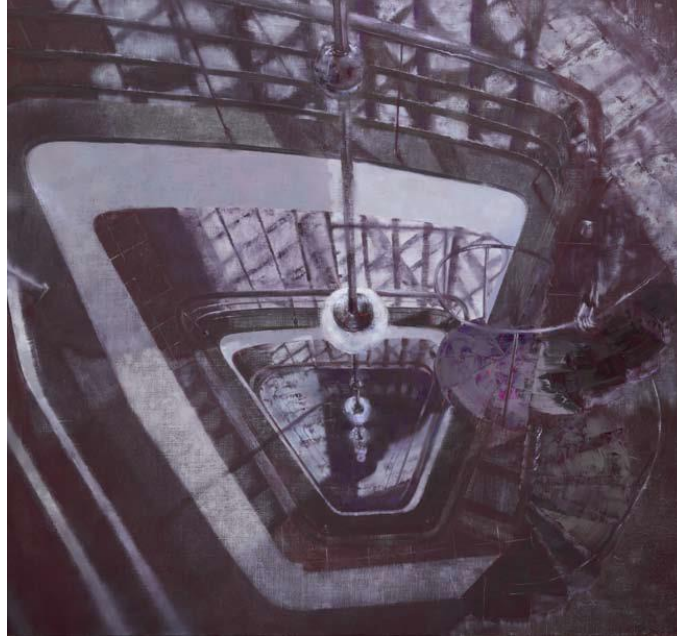
field. However, it seems that Książek's work results from a structuralist approach rather than a



Paweł Książek, *Silent Utopia 04 (Metropolis / Gyula Kaesz, Interior, National Savings Bank, Budapest, 1940)*, 2009, oil on canvas, 160 x 150 cm © Paweł Książek

manifold historical-cultural contexts. The artist extracts not only motifs, but entire compositional forms, colour configurations, relations between particular motifs, atmospheres and attitudes of artists. In other words, he superimposes entire structures on each other, demonstrating not only isolated threads, but also broad contexts. He methodically puts together the elements of a jigsaw puzzle, and the structures he builds are as cold as a laboratory cold store. Książek behaves rather like a pathologist in dissecting room, who works with corpses, and matches remains with each other. Emotionless and with distance, he shows what can be deduced from the collected traces. In this sense – to translate this metaphor into the language of art – Książek is definitely not an Expressionist: in his case, priority is not given to the artistic 'self', but to the content of the conducted deduction. And this content may reveal itself only through systematic adherence to methodology and its related procedures. This is obviously farremoved from the model associated, for instance, with generative art, in which authorship becomes virtually blurred, but in Książek's artistic strategy the proportion between artistic invention and the external elements indispensable for constructing an artwork (data archive and methodology of its use) is carefully balanced. If we employ the investigation metaphor once again – keeping in mind that the scholarly method is said to owe

a lot to investigative techniques developed during the period of the Grand Inquisition¹⁵ – then the goal of each inquisitor/investigator/researcher is not to describe himself or herself, but the subject-matter of the investigation that is external to themselves. Making use of the parallel, understood as methodically relating different structures to each other, offers a way for the author to withdraw, if only in part.



Paweł Książek, *Poelzig vs. Poelzig 05*, 2010, oil on linen,
150 x 160 cm © Paweł Książek

This disquisition could be treated as empty verbal acrobatics if it was not for the fact that Paweł Książek believes that his creative work does not have a style, as he stated in a private conversation with the author of this text. This is not in the least a matter of modesty or helplessness, but a consequence of an ambivalent understanding of the term style and an expression of a profound consciousness of the employed working method. We have a tendency to focus on the individualistic aspect of this notion, highlighting its role in allowing an artist to distinguish themselves from others (in this sense, the word ‘style’ emphasises individuality, but also the maturity of an artist who was able to master their craft to such a degree that, being fully aware of its properties, they are able to shape material into any chosen form). Yet, we often forget that style is above all a certain technique, and in this sense it becomes a set of rules that can be used by everybody. This situates the term far from an individualistic perspective, if not as its polar opposite. Understood as a possibility of individual expression, style therefore turns out to be only something of an illusion. A myth, which in fact consists in an endless repetition and trivialisation of an arbitrarily chosen visual code.¹⁶ What appeared to the avant-garde as a crowning achievement of artistic investigations became nothing but a restraining outfit, one of many.

The style of Paweł Książek’s works consists rather in a certain methodology of research on visual culture. In a conversation with the author of this text, Książek mentioned an observation made by a certain American gallerist who stated with a certain unease that his works were very ‘tight’ – definite, closed, without room for adding or removing anything at the formal level. And it seems that he managed to hit the nail on the head. The working

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish. The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), p. 225.

¹⁶ Krauss, ‘The Originality of the Avant-Garde’, in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass., London: MIT Press, 1985).

method of the Krakow artist bears a slight resemblance to the approach of the members of the French group OULIPO, whose activity consisted in executing literary tasks following pre-imposed constraints. A perfect example is Georges Perec's *A Void* – a book about the very act of disappearing – which follows the rule of writing without the use of the letter 'e'. The novel, several hundred pages long, was created using a variety of formal gimmicks that allowed the author to avoid the most frequently occurring letter in the French alphabet, drawing on an arbitrarily adopted, purely formal principle, while offering an extraordinary opportunity to explore the French language. Książek, again speaking in a private conversation with the author of this text, remarked that imposing constraints on himself paradoxically gives him the freedom to act at the purely formal level. In many cases, we can easily trace examples of such principles that offer the basis for his works to 'become a finite whole'. Commenting on the series *Rodchenko's Spatial Constructions* from 2010, the artist states: 'I chose to create models by strictly following Rodchenko's instructions with the use of simple and cheap objects, such as CD cases, razorblades, paper-cutting scissors, disposable lighters,'¹⁷ and with reference to the cycle *Silent Utopia*: 'I was using nothing but black and white photographs as the initial material for painterly compositions.' Concerning *Constructions* from 2016, which referred to Modernist architecture in Latin America, he commented: 'I decided that the series would be based on the intensity and vibration of colour,'¹⁸ and with regard to *Parallels* from 2017, inspired by Lygia Clark's sculptures – 'I made an attempt at a speculative, imaginative simulation of the movement of elements that generate a mirror effect.'¹⁹ These and many other of Książek's works rely on a pre-determined principle that gives agency to the mechanics of the matter on which the artist concentrates.



Paweł Książek, *No. 2 (Rodchenko's Spatial Construction No. 25)*,

¹⁷ Książek, *Autoreferat*, p. 10.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

To avoid capture

In this light, true mastery consists in managing not to slide into style. Książek therefore invests efforts not to be caught 'relying on style'. He examines various stylistic modes, and as he moves from one to another, he makes multifarious use of them²⁰ – as we might say, referring to the terminology of one of the most interesting theorists who investigates the cultural and artistic meaning of disappearing, Stephen Wright. On the one hand, he juxtaposes them with each other, as I have just mentioned, but he also breaks them down into basic components (such as individual film frames) and extracts the most important elements (for example by focussing on details using close-ups). We might be tempted to say that he is a visual DJ, although a much better metaphor would perhaps be that of a museologist, who lays out isolated artefacts in front of the viewer in a cool manner: in his work, each film becomes a series of frames, shots of the same space become separate paintings, and each of them occupies a clearly indicated place that it does not share with other artefacts, although they fill the canvas together and many paintings are diligently numbered within a given series. Everything finds its precisely chosen place in the whole constructed by Książek. The reason for this is perhaps that, on the other hand, the primary work that Książek does is to portray his own role and the role of every contemporary individual who makes art, which is to depict the shaky and ambivalent way in which every creative work is stretched between one's own and someone else's – in other words, his work consists in portraying us as users of paintings. Everything will become juxtaposed with everything else at some point in the future, or at least there is a chance that it will if we try hard enough, because – from the perspective of the meaning given by Książek to the category of style – it is not only he as an artist who has not developed his own style, but nobody else has either. All we do is repeat in different configurations motifs and themes that we sign with our own name.

We thus reach the starting point. The culture of repetition, which has been called karaoke culture here: repeating someone else's words, melodies, lifestyles, dreams, professional careers, attires and basically everything that we are forced to make in the cultural ritual of repetition. Images are one of many spaces of contemporary social life that are not only mass produced, but reproduced – technologically and mentally. Not only have they lost their aura, but also generating them has become a universal practice, which is frequently even indispensable in daily life. The diminishing value of the image comes as a natural consequence of this process. Dubravka Ugrešić argues that karaoke culture is a miserable time, during which we become clones of other people at our own request, and joyfully pilfer someone else's melodies and lyrics in order to shine in the crowd for a brief while. 'The very foundation of karaoke culture lies in the parading of the anonymous ego with the help of simulation games. Today people are more interested in flight from themselves than discovering their authentic *self*. The self has become boring, and belongs to a different culture. The possibilities of transformation, teleportation, and metamorphosis hold far more promises than digging in the dirt of the self. The culture of narcissism has mutated into karaoke culture – or the latter is simply a consequence of the former.'²¹ It is also possible, however, that karaoke culture is a culture of 'the spam of the earth' – a culture of mimicry. It may indeed be based on copying, impersonation, drawing from someone else's authority, but it may not result from narcissism, but from the ascertainment of the fact that reality is more subtle than the simple division between the authentic 'self' on the one hand and flight from the self on the other hand. Perhaps this is why karaoke offers the most amazing opportunity not to drown in the pulp of images that sprawls around us, and to wade through it with dignity

²⁰ See: Stephen Wright, *Towards a Lexicon of Usership* (Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum, 2013).

²¹ Ugrešić, *Karaoke Culture*, p. 10.

– whenever needed, one may ironically hide behind the adopted formula, and whenever possible, one may perform a masterful rendition of a piece, remembering at the same time that just as there are no ‘karaoke’ artists, there are also no artists who create images that begin from scratch.

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