

THE INDEPENDENT

Kuba Szreder talks to Martin Kaltwasser

Folke Koeberling and Martin Kaltwasser live and work according to their beliefs. They build alternative strategies on a micro-scale, on the most personal, simple level. Kuba Szreder talks to Martin Kaltwasser about work, stress, life, money and laziness.

Kuba Szreder: Martin, let's talk about your Polish adventures. Together with Folke Koeberling, you have just finished your three-month stay in Warsaw within the frame of the a-i-r lab in the Center for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle (CCA). What have you been doing there?

Together with Folke, with whom I live and work, we started drafting various projects even before we came here. From the beginning, we wanted to work on the public space since it's very important for our artistic activity. We are recuperating and reactivating it, giving it new functions. For a long time, we were living in Berlin where the care of, or even struggle for, the quality of the public space is something normal. We've collaborated many times with other artists and groups of activists who were against its privatization. We have always been interested in the potential of space, which is not limited and remains open for many different people. In a way, anything can happen there, due to its freedom of experiments - sometimes even unwanted things. Such liberty is the basis of democracy and of our way of living.

You have built a holiday resort in Warsaw...

When we noticed the park next to the Ujazdowski Castle, we realized that it remains completely unused. People are interested merely in the parking area where they leave their big cars - it's typical of the middle class. They completely ignore the richness of greenery and the resources of the park. They shut themselves in the boxes of their cars, drive up to the building and then go to the gallery to see some art. It may be critical art or not. Most often it's a kind of consumerism. Instead of visiting the gallery, they prefer to go to the restaurant or to the Łazienki Park.

In fact, the Łazienki Park is a kind of museum.

Indeed, when I went there, I was struck by the fact that people act in a very contractual way. They don't do anything surprising. They don't shout, don't play, don't leave the paths. The park by the castle, although it's open, remains unused. The CCA itself is full of experiments, artistic activities that sometimes relate to real life, explore some of its fields. Why couldn't this artistic experiment be moved outside, to the park? Last year, within the "Passengers" festival, together with Heath Bunting, we made a performance in the park concerning the closed estate developments that are springing up in Warsaw. Some of their residents probably also visit the art centre. We wanted to show that it's possible to do something open, and that such a public space without borders has an extraordinary potential. It is a value impossible to achieve in the guarded and guarded worlds of enclosed estates.

Then you decided that you will build platforms where one will be able to... take up laziness both in its passive and active form.

We thought that the park offers a potential to be both active and passive. The platforms could be used in various ways, also in a passive way, to relax. Active laziness is already a kind of challenge. Through our constructions we show that it's possible to create something without money. The materials can just be found - they are simply scattered throughout the town. We found them in the close surroundings of the Castle, so gathering the building material did not demand a lot of effort. Actually what we needed to buy was only nuts. We wanted to show that, with a little bit of imagination and the DIY ability, the most frenzy structures can be put up. And we can also have fun throughout the building process. In this way we show that from the perspective of our platforms - from the height of 150 cm above the ground - life looks much different than from the perspective of the car cabin.

It turns out that with a little effort, with only a few emails and press release, we can completely change the neighborhood. We can add life to it, give people a pretext to meet, have fun, exchange information and knowledge. This is what happened during the "Balans" picnic that closed your stay in Warsaw.

Indeed. The park became a completely different place - suddenly it started to be funny and nice. When I was looking at people, I thought that everybody felt happy there. A vast meadow, trees, a swing hung on them, people playing badminton and volleyball, laying down on blankets. I notice the same thing in Berlin, where people actively make use of parks. They feel that they are allowed to do whatever they want. It then has no borders, apart from other people who use the same space. Unfortunately, it doesn't happen in Warsaw

as often as in other European cities. I found the view of this great parking in front of the Ujazdowski Castle really annoying. It was saddening that people lost both contact with themselves and the conscience of possibilities offered by the neighborhood.

It is linked to the control over the public space. When you spread your blanket in a park, some security guards or police officers usually come and start to admonish you, saying: "You are not allowed to do this and that." In such conditions, people are learning very slowly how to make use of the public space. Let's talk about your and Folke's artistic method. You said something about your interest in the public space and your utilization of used materials. You also mentioned a specific construction method that you apply. To begin with, could you say something more about recycling?

It is an appropriate moment to talk about Folke's project. Right next to the part of the Lab which is under renovation now, she built three small greenhouses. To build it, she used the windows that were taken out from the building which is being renovated. In the greenhouses she planted plants, ordinary weeds that overgrew the area around. It is clear that when the renovations are finished and that space gets open, they will be removed and replaced by a lawn. Thus, she wanted to emphasize the richness of natural resources, which are simply just around us, which we usually don't notice and don't respect.

Your motto is: „One man's trash is another man's treasure.” You are working on found, easily accessible materials. In such a way you create a completely different economical circle, which does not entail using money. You completely evade the whole relation of the buying-selling process, as well as the creation of the exchange value of goods. You just take other people's trash and make new things out of it.

It is tightly linked to all the aspects of everyday life. We inquire ourselves very often about the use of energy. It is a crucial issue for humanity. We, both as human beings and artists, strive to experiment on our everyday life, so as to limit its most excessive use and wastage. We start with looking around at the closest surroundings. We are looking for the things that are usually thrown away as garbage - for us, they may constitute precious material. In this activity we seek simplicity. Everybody can follow - we do not care about exclusiveness. On the contrary, we rather give an example of a way of acting which is accessible for everybody. It's aim is to reduce the wastage of energy and to implement the most economical production. Similar logic works also for other resources, such as air. In our works we often criticize the excessive use of cars, which pollute it. We are against the neoliberal approach to these problems. We build alternative strategies on a micro-scale, on the most personal, simple level.

At the same time, you developed your unique construction method, which is probably not simple to copy. It requires a little bit of experience. You told me that in the Wysing Arts Centre near Cambridge you constructed a two-storey building with the help of unqualified people: pupils, teachers, students. It was possible without referring to the drawing board and the specialist knowledge of engineers.

Nowadays this building serves as a site for performance activities. It was an amazing process. We were trying to convey our knowledge to the volunteers and to see what we are able to build with the minimal use of energy. We had very few electric devices. We found all the building materials near Cambridge. Eventually, we were very surprised how many materials and how much people's energy we managed to accumulate. It required very intensive and deepened communication. In the work with volunteers we had to move the whole process of designing from the offices directly to the building site. Most often buildings are being designed in front of the computer monitors, with the use of the specialist knowledge...

... and in a very specific hierarchy. There is a great difference between people who design buildings and manage the process, and unqualified workers.

Most often the executors are at the bottom of the hierarchy - they just carry out the orders of the designers. In our case, both designing and building take place at the same time. We then make decisions together with all the participants of the process. On the other hand, it is us who are responsible for the entirety. We care for the construction's progress and we indicate its general direction. The main difference lies in the intensification of the communication processes. We want the implementation team to identify with the building at the end. So that they could say that it's theirs. In case of the regular workers, their final work remain very far. Participation in the decision-making process opens a new perspective for identification. If we

apply it to the construction of big buildings, or even the whole cities, such a model assumes another type of citizenship, nationality and democratic consciousness.

What is curious is that it's also visible in the example of the construction solutions. Instead of great ferroconcrete load-bearing elements, you make use of micro-systems of support, on which the tension spreads, supporting even big buildings. Instead of massive superstructures - a network of small corbels which grow organically.

It's only two of us, me and my assistant, Przemek, who built the Warsaw platforms. It was a kind of a growing statue. We started with sketches. The initial elements were very small, and we were hanging them across the trees. Then we would support it with bigger ones. The construction was proliferating like in the world of nature. As usual, we would act through trial and error. We build and then we test; we jump on the structures, we check the tensions, resistance; then we add something up, and thus the construction work goes on. Obviously, these experiments repeat the decades of experience of the entire generations of engineers. It is the knowledge that we are taught at the universities, which works for the buildings on a bigger scale. This technique turns out to be very useful when you work within deadlines and you are under the pressure of the client's schedule. Then a simulation is performed in order to check if the solution is going to work out, if the building won't collapse. Though a digital simulation of a project like the one we carried out here would have no end. It is very complicated - we use too many small elements that would react to changing conditions. It's too chaotic. It is there where the value of our experiment lies: it always takes place in a particular moment. Sometimes it depends on the atmosphere of the place, weather, or people. It could never be done in an office. You have to be at the site. The same thing could be said about the people we work with. Our constructions are always the result of an exchange between us. It cannot be planned.

In fact, you are moving somewhere between the communication process and the engineering of chaos. However, at the end, at least in my opinion, you manage to build quite beautiful objects. Do you think about your projects in their sculptural aspects? Your former constructions seem to be more functional.

What we construct seems to be chaotic only at first sight. In fact, it is really pragmatic. Every construction is divided into smaller parts. The bigger element is supported in the middle by a smaller one, the latter by two successive elements. We use particular elements only when they are absolutely needed. It is not a non-committal creative act, like in painting. There is always a need behind every decision. Certainly, I also make aesthetical decisions. I try to avoid right angles and to give the construction a particular dynamics. If you look at Folke's greenhouses, they can seem quite romantic; however, in fact, they are full of pragmatism. The windows were already there, so Folke had to take them down so that they fit the pallet. These greenhouses are easy to move, in case it's needed. They are compact and filled with plants, selected with the help of a botanist, in order to create a self-contained microcosmos. Their form is adjusted to the accessible material, to the indications of science and functionality. Their appearance is the result of practical tips. Our works produce the effect of the intersection of pragmatism and sculptural work.

It is fascinating in your works that they are very linked to your style of life, with the values you believe in.

There is a German saying "Liberty makes poor." We try to create art works which are critical and through which we can influence the world. At the same time, they are independent of the art market. Our roots are in political activism. Our works are the expression of our convictions, which certainly doesn't make us rich. The art market requires a very specific type of art, in which our works don't fit. The only way out is the reduction of life costs and taking on such methods of organizing life that we would simply be able to afford. We don't consume a lot - we limit our needs. When we started working as conceptual artists, we faced the challenge of the choice of the material. Then we realized that it is completely obvious for us that we would use used materials. In Berlin, at the beginning of the 1990s, it was very easy to get what we needed - both materials and space were for free. There were lots of empty factories, apartments, but also building sites. Those were the golden years of Berlin. A lot of people were going there, because it was cheap, and making art was easy there. The rents were cheap; the prices of ateliers were low. Though this story with used materials had already started in my childhood, it was then when I discovered that I'm more free playing with what has already been used. When I was growing up, the city was actually a one, great building site. That's why, I'm tempted by unaccomplished situations that require efforts and creativity. Currently, we have made a working method out of it

The experience of Berlin of the 1990s, particularly its artistic scene and the developed arena of self-organizing initiatives, the idea of squatting and do-it-yourself, have obviously influenced your choices, not only the artistic ones.

The breakthrough in our art took place during the exhibition Learning from... in 2002. Then, together with a group of theoreticians, researchers studying city, activists, art historians, artists and other experts, in Berlin we made an exhibition on the great metropolises of the Third World. In particular, we took up the problem of informal self-organization, informal housing, informal economy. It became the centre of our interests since we asked ourselves the question about how our life would end in the 21st century. In the 20th century the development of towns was steered by the American model of a business town. There is a book entitled Learning from Las Vegas. When I'm walking in Warsaw, I can still see some traces of this ideology. This model still shapes our thinking about the city, with its shopping malls, closed estates and highways. On the other hand, the European urbanism tries to protect itself from the American urbanism, creating a phantasmagoria of a European town. The 1990s in Berlin were the era of the constant struggle for the new shape of the town, and the conservative phantasm of a traditional European city won. In such a city there is no place for freedom, informality and self-organization. Everything is being strictly controlled.

As far as I remember, Learning from... had the opposite aim. You went to places like Istanbul where development and ordinary life in large measure lie on the self-organization strategies, where people actively influence their surroundings, without counting on the government's help or the planners' decisions.

We are living in the post-colonial era. We should carefully examine what is going on beyond our Eurocentric view. We should introduce into our way of perceiving towns the strategies drawn from megapolises, such as Mexico City or Lagos in Nigeria. In order to do that, we carried out a meticulous research and constructed an exhibition. It's aim was to present the alternative ways of living, which we, Europeans, could learn from the inhabitants of the so-called Third World. We have to learn that there are interesting ways of living and constructing towns beyond Europe, especially regarding informal management of space.

In his Planet of slums, Mike Davis strongly criticizes this naive faith in self-organization in the Third World as a dangerous phantasm, hiding drastic relations of power, micro-exploitation and the fate of people deprived of any kind of protection. Slums organize themselves, and then they are swept up by the developers who want to make money on selling or renting, etc. In Poland, from the Third World we rather adopted the closed estates, the climate of common fear and the lack of trust.

My stay in Warsaw made me realize even more - that in our work we strongly refer to the realities of Western Europe. In countries like Germany, Austria or England, there is a very restrictive construction law. What and how you build is subjected to strict regulations. Learning from...was intended to increase the margin of freedom. We wanted the town spaces to be more open for coincidence and creativity of their residents. In spite of appearances, it is not an idealized image of the exotic "other" whom we were looking for. We rather wanted to check in practice if we couldn't find any pragmatic hints for the future in the cities of the Third World. Yet, there persists the question what is so interesting in the European model. In Warsaw you still have an informal market, such as the Europe Fair (Jarmark Europa), which works efficiently, but, as a result of modernization of the Stadium, it will be wiped off from the surface of the earth.

The Europe Fair is not as informal as it seems. It is also subordinated to strict rules. Let's go back to Berlin though and to the problem of its self-organization. Yesterday during your lecture you mentioned the costs of such a lifestyle. 80% of artists in Germany live below the subsistence level.

Looking towards the informal strategies of self-organization has got a lot to do with our own situation. As an artist, you are particularly dependent on the support of the richest. The rules of the art market are designed by those who have enough money to buy also art. It covers the walls of the barrister's chambers, the offices of bankers and investment experts. This dramatic division into the very rich and the poor is also apparent in the artistic arena. As you said - the majority of artists is poor. Only few can bask in luxury whereas all the others go down. There are also more critical artists who don't want to have anything to do with the art market, but they also want to survive. They have to associate with lots of other disciplines and institutions which let them earn a living. It is also our case. We hardly earn anything from the art works we sell - we earn our living giving lectures and participating in workshops, projects and residences.

Yes, but in how many exhibitions did you have to take part during your residence in the Ujazdowski Castle to earn your and your family's living?

I'm not sure, but it was around 5-6 exhibitions in only 3 months. For each exhibition we had prepared a new production. Perhaps this is our destiny... It is a very important question - almost the crucial moment of this interview. It was a very slow process for me, a kind of a long march through my biography in order to realize that art is the thing I want to do in life. At the beginning I was studying architecture, and I wanted to work "normally." Then I discovered that work in the office would kill me. At a certain point I got seriously ill. Listening to my own body, I realized that to live I have to make art. The work of an artist is very exhausting, but it's another type of exhaustion than the one that is caused by the office work. When you make art, you get energy in return.

The office only sucks it out. Working there, you obviously need holidays on the Canary Islands to take a rest. It costs a lot: you consume energy, you pollute earth and eventually it doesn't bring any satisfaction. It's a vicious circle. You get back to work, and you are more frustrated, and - again - you have to fly to the Canary Islands. Millions of people live like this. I'm not saying that our way of living should be copied by everybody - probably it's not possible. However, me, personally, I don't want to be dependent on airlines. The work with Folke is a source of energy and creativity, but also a source of tension and stress. It enables a very direct contact with the reality and people. Public art is intensifying all that. People come, talk, ask about our activities. Despite the fact that, like in Berlin, you are sometimes stopped by people who are frustrated with their life and call you a parasite. They shout: "Who gave you the money?" However, it is still a very interesting and intensive experience. I realized that, acting in this way, I don't need so much money. The positive feedback results in your not needing to consume so much. The real sense of life is being active, creating.

During your lecture on the upset balance between life and work, stress and fun, that you gave during the picnic, you mentioned the danger of using the artist as an example for the whole society. Politicians or businessmen claim that the majority of society should live like artists: individualists, constantly on the move, responsible for themselves, self-organized, always creative and ready to take up new challenges. Perhaps such a pattern works in the field of art, but for a cleaner it becomes a caricature. Such freelancing without art is not cool.

In fact, it's a huge abuse. Promoting such a model of self-employment on a broader scale gives rather the opportunity for the rich to repress the poor. The society of freelancers was a model introduced by Margaret Thatcher. At that time, the idea of freelancing was employed to destruct the power of trade unions. In fact, it was being copied in different places in the world. However, in every society we can find artists. They were functioning as "free people." Making a model for everybody out of their lives makes no sense. Perhaps it should be exactly quite the opposite. It is artists who should search for models outside the art world and try to copy them. In many societies people organize themselves in molecular networks of mutual support. We - as politically-oriented artists - were also creating a kind of networks.

In this case the fact that we are a family was very important. From the very beginning, the network support has enabled us to survive. For instance, we didn't have to buy clothes for our children until they were 8 years old. In Kreuzberg young parents were just exchanging them. We were not forced to waste money for that. The same was for the children's care. We were setting up informal kindergartens where we employed carers. We were receiving symbolic funds from the government for that, but we still had the full control over the educational programme. Certainly, it's time consuming and requires management, but at the end it's the best solution. There are lots of networks of support like this. They let us focus on the non-commercial art, and to participate in it, you don't have to earn a lot. The artistic model consists in this - creating a network of micro-structures, not a figure of a workaholic artist.

...who doesn't have time for laziness...

Being lazy is very important, also within the so-called creative class. I remarked that the division in society still goes in such a way: those who create and those who consume, creative/not creative, passive/active. Creators and consumers of culture. Today I met a group of people at the platforms. They looked like middle class. They were very nice, and we had an interesting conversation. They said it's great that such places are being created and that they would like them to be more numerous in Warsaw. They asked where they can get information about such projects. They don't have time to follow the information on cultural events, because during the week they work very hard and on the weekend they need a little bit of entertainment. It's

rather typical. The majority of people who slog away during the week want to consume on the weekend. They don't have time to give lectures on their parents' hobbies, as I did yesterday [laughs], even if it was more enriching for them than going shopping to the shopping centres. There are different types of laziness. As for me, I'm also being lazy sometimes. Folke is mad when I watch football matches, but I'm a football fan. I'm into it because everything is simple there - 22 guys work, running after a ball.

So even in the life of a very busy art-maker, Martin Kaltwasser, there is a place for laziness? (laughs)

Yes, yes [enthusiastically]. Taking care of children is often hard work, but it can be combined in an interesting way with active laziness. You show how to make various things, you educate. But the greatest fun you have when you give yourself over to laziness. I made a list of the things I am doing when I'm being lazy: reading, playing and watching football, short breaks. Exactly - breaks at work. As a freelancer, you have the right to make breaks whenever you want. There is no boss who might shout at you then. It is also a cool experience. You can visit neighbors or friends. For example, you told me that your passion is cooking for friends.

The whole social life is very important. As well as talking about unimportant things. All together it makes active laziness! The last topic is children. It's not easy to have kids while being an artist. Artists with kids are perceived as eccentrics since not many artists have kids. It is related to social changes. What is important - it's crucial to change and fight with the stereotypical gender roles. Father should take part in children's education - formerly, it were mothers who used to do it, though both perspectives are needed. Sharing tasks also opens new perspectives concerning work.

What motto would you come up with at the end?

Reduce costs, meet your friends, play with your children, never go to the shopping centres, do the shopping at your friends', not in big companies, create networks and have children! [laughs]