

JOURNAL OF CURATORIAL STUDIES



JOURNAL OF CURATORIAL STUDIES

Volume 1 Number 2

Articles

- 139–156 Exhibiting the Frontier: American Borders as
Museological Projects
LEE RODNEY
- 159–177 Archival Remembering Exhibitions
REESA GREENBERG
- 179–192 Curatorial Acts
MIEKE BAL
- 195–214 Politics, Potentials and *Construction in Process*
JOANNA SZUPINSKA
- 217–231 The Artist as Curator: Edgar Degas' *Maison-Musée*
ROBERTA CRISCI-RICHARDSON

Exhibition Reviews

- 233–236 *STUCK UP: A Selected History of Alternative & Pop
Culture Told Through Stickers*

STICKERS: From Punk Rock to Contemporary Art,
DB Burkeman, with Monica LoCascio
CATHERINE TEDFORD
- 237–240 *Sanja Iveković: Sweet Violence*
JILL GLESSING
- 241–244 *Recollections, Part I: Bewogen Bewegung (1961)
and Dylaby (1962)*
EVA FOTIADI

Website Review

- 245–248 The Jealous Curator

Art Fag City
HILARY ROUNTHWAITE

Book Reviews

- 249–251 *The Future of Tradition – The Tradition of Future:
100 Years after the Exhibition Masterpieces of
Muhammadan Art in Munich*, Chris Dercon, León
Krempel and Avinoam Shalem (eds)
NEGIN ZEBARJAD
- 251–253 *Rethinking Curating: Art after New Media*, Beryl
Graham and Sarah Cook
CAROLINE SECK LANGILL
- 253–256 *Curating Architecture and the City*, Sarah Chaplin
and Alexandra Stara (eds)
CYNTHIA ROBERTS

Conference Reviews

- 257–260 Exhibitionism: A Symposium on Queer Curatorial
Practices
NICOLA ASHMORE
- 260–263 Beyond the White Cube? *Ausstellungsarchitektur,
Raumgestaltung und Inszenierung heute*
FRIEDERIKE SCHÄFER

ISSN 2045-5836



intellect | www.intellectbooks.com



Construction in Process (1981), opening reception. Photo: courtesy Archives of Contemporary Thought.

JOANNA SZUPINSKA

Politics, Potentials and *Construction in Process*

Abstract

Konstrukcja w Procesie/Construction in Process featured work by 54 international artists in an abandoned nineteenth-century textile factory in Łódź, Poland in 1981. It was a curious, multi-layered exhibition that brought together unresolved politics, a curatorial method of 'sorting out' or 'arranging for', and a bohemian approach to life and art that looked back to the European avant-gardes of the 1930s. This article aims to reveal that, via the organizers' collaboration with Solidarity, the exhibition not only rejected the political bodies in power, but strove to articulate a proposal for an altogether new socio-political reality.

On the evening of 26 October 1981, New York-based artist Fred Sandback, Polish avant-gardist Henryk Stażewski, and local labour union organizer Andrzej Słowik, along with hundreds of other viewers, crowded into a defunct nineteenth-century textile factory on PKWN Street in Łódź. Intellectuals, artists, students and workers, some travelling by bus from neighbouring cities, all came to see *Konstrukcja w Procesie/Construction in Process*, an exhibition that promised to open their eyes to the West. Organized collaboratively under the direction of artist Ryszard Waśko, the exhibition drew crowds interested in art as well as those who opposed the Communist government. What they encountered was a new kind of art show in a radical venue: the old building's stained gridded floors and paint-peeling walls supported pristine Minimal art objects. Predating the trend of repurposing industrial buildings into slick art venues – for instance the Tate Modern (2000) and Dia: Beacon (2003) – *Construction in Process* simply used a venue that was available, bearing all its deterioration and specificity.

Keywords

Construction in Process
history of exhibitions
artist-curated
exhibitions
art and politics
Poland
Solidarity

1. See, for instance, protests of Katarzyna Kozyra's recent retrospective at the National Museum in Kraków (2011–2012), or the vandalism of Maurizio Cattelan's sculpture *The Ninth Hour* (1999) by two conservative Representatives of the House during Harald Szeemann's exhibition *Beware of Exiting Your Dreams: You May Find Yourself in Somebody Else's* at Zachęta National Gallery in Warsaw (2000–2001).

Inside, visitors encountered artworks by 54 artists. Many of the works were made of industrial materials. Among them were new site-specific installations (all 1981) including *Untitled (Lines for Maria and Mariella)*, a sculpture made of steel rods by Richard Nonas, placed to traverse the spaces of the exhibition halls; Fred Sandback's *Untitled, Two-Part Construction*, a subtle installation consisting of two lengths of dark blue acrylic yarn; and *Locator (For Poland)*, a work sent by Nancy Holt, complete with both a metal 'viewfinder' and its corresponding circular 'artwork' on the wall. An interactive work by Ryszard Winiarski, *Gry Winiarskiego* ('Winiarski's Games'), was accompanied by instructive photographs, encouraging viewers to play, and *Pavilion Sculpture* by Dan Graham reflected viewers in a large disorienting structure of aluminum frames, glass and mirrors. Traditionally framed works by Jan Dibbets, Ad Dekkers, Richard Long and Robert Smithson hung on the walls.

The stories of *Construction in Process* – viewers and participants, experiences and exchanges, daytime strikes, long bread lines, and foggy alcohol-laden nights – are well-rehearsed in Poland (Strąkowski 2005). Looking back now 30 years later, the exhibition offers much more than an opportunity for romantic reminiscing. The events surrounding the exhibition provide a glimpse into that pre-democratic moment in Poland when various futures were still imaginable. The concatenation of efforts and forces that brought those artists and the anti-government movement together was dissolved abruptly by martial law, which was instated throughout the country just two and a half weeks after the end of the exhibition. But in the weeks and months prior to the crackdown, denizens had a chance to begin inventing what shape society might take without a Communist regime, and these efforts were particularly visible here in the production and form of *Construction in Process*. As I will show, the exhibition did not simply reject the political bodies in power, but by mobilizing an open-ended contestation, tried to pose an alternative.

One cannot consider *Construction in Process* without a basic understanding of the beginnings of *Solidarność*, the Solidarity movement. Solidarity was founded in Gdańsk in 1980 by shipyard workers led by then-electrician Lech Wałęsa. The trade union constituted the first workers' union not controlled by the state in any Soviet bloc country, and it quickly gained popularity throughout Poland. Rather than promoting practical legislative change, the group was contestational in nature. Solidarity used non-violent methods to protest the bureaucracy of the government and the widespread poor quality of life. These general complaints immediately resonated with a much broader population, including a spectrum of citizens from various social and educational backgrounds (Davies 2005: 482).

However, the movement's most visible descendants – politicians and activists quick to call up participation in Solidarity – are the radical, right-wing opponents of contemporary art today, picketing the national galleries and vandalizing artworks.¹ Bogdan Borusewicz, Speaker in the Polish Senate, summed up the disparity between what Solidarity was in the 1980s and how it is understood today:

Most of those who organized strikes in the 1980s and contributed to the building of the first independent trade union want nothing

to do with today's Solidarity. Our Solidarity united nine million people. It was a union open to everyone – including members of the [Communist] Party. Today's Solidarity, which unites 600,000, is associated with extreme right-wing parties and the Catholic Church.

(*Wprost* 2010)

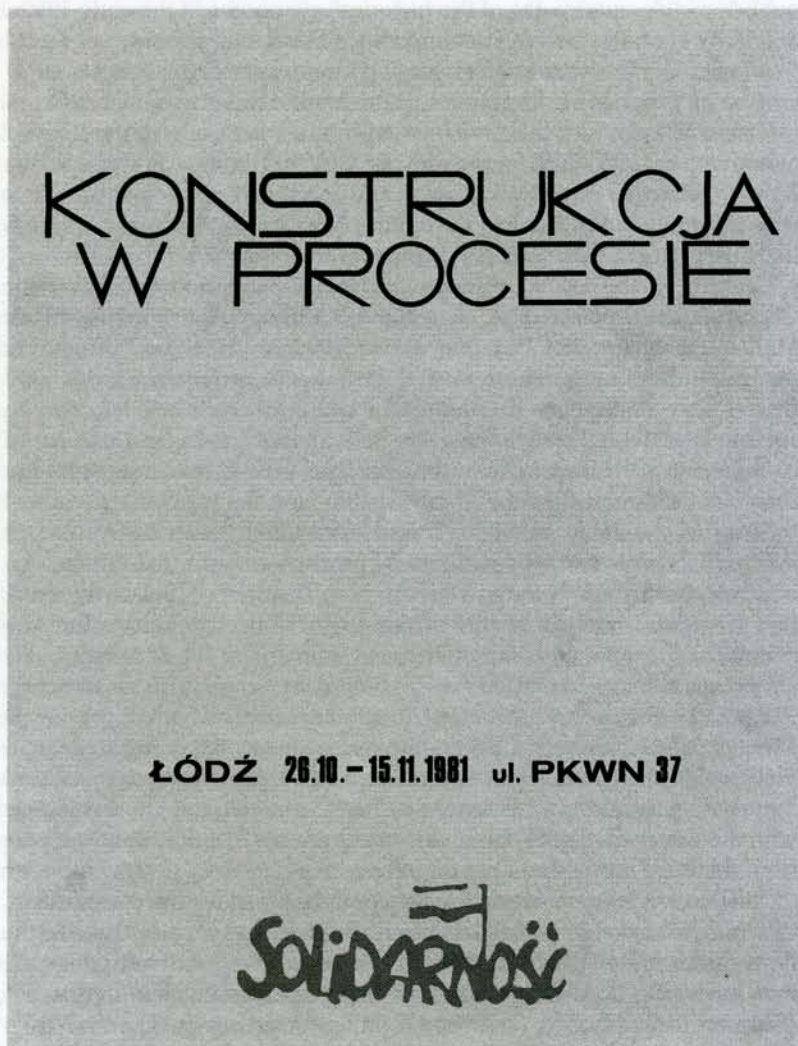
2. Spanish Communist leader Santiago Carrillo – betrayed by the Polish Communist Party's undermining of a Spanish miners' strike in January 1979 when coal shipments were sent from Poland – began to openly contest Eastern European Communist parties, who themselves retaliated by extending support to Spanish factions opposing Carrillo's leadership.

Among the loudest advocates for the fallacy that Solidarity was a purely conservative initiative are politicians such as Jarosław Kaczyński, former Prime Minister and later presidential hopeful; and Antoni Macierewicz, anti-communist activist and member of Sejm (lower house of the Polish parliament); as well as hard right-leaning historians and sociologists Jan Żaryn and Stanisław Michalkiewicz (Frybes 2012). Thanks to these most publicly visible outgrowths of the historical movement of the early 1980s, Solidarity is understood in contemporary Poland as a strongly conservative force. Curiously, the leftist participation in early Solidarity is similarly being expunged from history by the Left itself, perhaps in an attempt to distance itself from the fundamentalist tendencies of today's populist conservatives. 'Solidarity was from its very beginnings a conservative formation', writes Krzysztof Mróz in the *Socialist Review*, 'involved as it was in a political and ideological conflict of two opposing camps ... It was in its very nature, therefore, a shallow movement' (2007).

Indeed, in the 1980s Solidarity enjoyed the support of the Catholic Church, the American CIA, and the governments of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and President Ronald Reagan. However, the movement also found support from western liberals, communists and socialists.² By the early 1980s, even the influential author, theorist and left-leaning American activist Susan Sontag (at first to much criticism) compared communism with fascism, admitting she had grossly misunderstood the nature of Communist regimes in the eastern bloc. Sontag had approached the subject, she stated, through a biased lens and the 'desire by [American] intellectuals to disassociate themselves from the virulent anti-Communism of the McCarthy era' (cited in *The New York Times* 1982). Solidarity, then, had galvanized not only people of various social backgrounds within the country and expatriate communities, but animated a set of nervous alliances that accommodated otherwise discordant figures such as Thatcher, Reagan, the Vatican and American liberals and artists who had previously aligned themselves with Communist movements. According to Marcin Frybes (2010), a sociologist specializing in Polish alternative political movements, speaking with former activists who still affiliate themselves with the values of the Solidarity movement reveals that the liberal support from the West has been all but forgotten.

Just as Solidarity has been falsely remembered as wholly conservative, so too *Construction in Process* has been historicized as an early manifestation of pure Americanism by Ryszard Waśko, who retroactively presented it as having 'to do with the question of politics (the freedom of art!) ...' going on to emphasize, 'We were fighting for artistic freedom' (Waśko 2009a) – declarations strongly upholding the idea of freedom of speech in art. According to Waśko, Solidarity looked longingly to the expressive opportunities enjoyed by western artists, and ultimately contributed to achieving such freedom for Poland (Komitet Wykonawczy Muzeum

Artystów 1996). However, by examining the exhibition, it becomes clear that it brought together a more complicated set of aspirations. It involved what I will describe as the curatorial mode of *Zalatwiać*, which translates loosely as 'arranging' in English and carries the meaning that under Communist rule, arranging pertained to often-conspiratorial tactics required to successfully acquire goods. This mode was employed by Waško during the opportune period of relaxed totalitarian control in late 1981. What becomes evident is that a new socio-political formation was imminent, if not realized, and that the young Solidarity movement – through its politics of contestation – comprised an ideological open-endedness. I will outline below how the exhibition came together via a curatorial method



Peter Downsborough, Richard Nonas and Fred Sandback (eds), Konstrukcja w Procesie (1982), catalogue cover. Photo: courtesy Archives of Contemporary Thought.

of arranging and Solidarity's politics of protest, as well as the deep local roots of internationalism that offered a valuable model for the artists who staged *Construction in Process*; examining the exhibition through a logic of arranging, contestation, and local history reveals the displayed artworks anew, prying them from their established readings in the West and offering up space for different interpretations.

Załatwiać

The Communist-era mentality of *Załatwiać*, or 'arranging', enabled Waško and his peers to conceive and execute *Construction in Process*. In 1980 Waško's work had been included in the exhibition *Pier+Ocean: Construction in the Art of the Seventies* at the Hayward Gallery in London. *Pier+Ocean* was organized by the German artist Gerhard von Graevenitz with the assistance of British artist Norman Dilworth. Compelled to bring such a show to Poland, Waško set about organizing his own version of the exhibition, called *Construction in Process*, initially also subtitled 'Art of the 70s'. *Construction in Process* intended to bring together a multiplicity of aesthetic and political voices in the name of creative freedom, progress and education for the Polish population: 'to present a number of outstanding artists from all over the world, whose accomplishments have had a great impact on the development of modern art' (Waško 1982: 9). Modelling the exhibition on *Pier+Ocean*, Waško adopted the survey exhibition genre together with aspects of the artist-curated technique to present an international (largely western), nearly all-white, all-male roster of invited artists.³ Both shows focused on construction in art of the previous decade. In this way, Waško placed his own work, as well as that of his colleagues, within a contemporary (yet self-consciously historicized) western discourse, however problematic.

Criticisms aside, it is indeed remarkable that they succeeded in staging such a large-scale, independently organized, international show during those last lean years of the already failing regime. Yet, while inspired by *Pier+Ocean*, Waško's show was not merely a direct import from the West. Whereas Graevenitz's show benefited from the institutional organization and audience of the Hayward Gallery, Waško enjoyed no such support. Given the political and social climate of Poland, organizing *Construction in Process* necessarily involved both official and alternative strategies in the way that resourceful citizens had become accustomed to operating. *Załatwiać*, (to arrange), is an expression that evolved in the decades of Communist rule to denote the accomplishment of otherwise basic errands or the acquisition of goods, whether legitimately or through other means (and most often through a combination of both).⁴ *Construction in Process*, which was executed through an aggregation of personal favours, unusual alliances, and creative making-do, is an exemplary case of the social phenomenon embodied in that term. Contestatory on the one hand, the process of putting together the show was intertwined with an atmosphere of possibility and attempts on the part of its organizers to work out a new social reality, into which they would incorporate the best of all to which they had access: the 1930s European avant-garde, 1970s Polish underground, western liberalism, and certain aspects of

3. While trying to bridge the divide between East and West, Waško imported exhibition strategies that reproduced inequities existing in the so-called democratically free world. Rather than amending Graevenitz's approach in *Pier+Ocean*, the show's themes were transparently appropriated, with all their gender and geographical biases, for *Construction in Process*.

4. For more on the colloquial language that revealed the psychology of securing goods and services, see Dzięgieł (1998: 17–61).

5. The organizing committee, directed by Ryszard Waško and vice-directed by Tomasz Snopkiewicz, also consisted of Lechosław Czołnowski, Piotr Gawęda, Jacek Józwiak, Andrzej Kamrowski, Viola Krajewska, Mariella Nitosławska, Józef Robakowski, Maria Waško, Piotr Weychert and Piotr Zarębski. According to Robakowski (2009), the logistical work was accomplished with the considerable engagement of Mariella Nitosławska, who spoke French and English; among other coordinating work, she penned all of the correspondence.
6. Of the 54 artists included in *Construction in Process*, fifteen – a significant majority – were American, whereas seven, the next largest national representation, were Polish. Artists by nationality: fifteen American, seven Polish, six British, six German, five Dutch, four Japanese, two French, two Hungarian, and one each from Australia, Canada, Czechoslovakia, (Czech) Italy and Yugoslavia (Croatia).

capitalism. According to artist Józef Robakowski, a co-organizer of *Construction in Process*, he and his peers were under no false impressions that a full-blown capitalist system would be any more virtuous an alternative to Communism (2009). This complicated relationship to Communism on the one hand and Capitalism on the other echoes the true complexity of political views that made up the early Solidarity movement. The quandary for the conscious artist became, then, pursuing western freedom without subscribing to another (capitalist) oppressive system (Ronduda 2007: 40–57). After all, as I will describe below, Poles – and Lodzians in particular – had already experienced the extreme cruelties enabled by such a system.

Those that Waško engaged to help him accomplish his goals included fellow professors at the prestigious National Film, Television and Theatre School of Łódź, their students, and key members in the local Solidarity chapter. Waško's artistic peers, connected to the international artistic circuit as he was, shared a feeling of oppression by the Party, which included having to pander to win valuable travel visas and submitting their work to scrutiny and, often, censorship. Planning the exhibition, they proceeded under the auspices of the invented 'Archives of Contemporary Thought' via forged letterhead.⁵ The name of their fictitious organization itself evoked a strange temporality: archiving the contemporary, historicizing the present as the future's past. In another example of creative making-do, they engaged film students to prepare the exhibition hall by emptying the factory of literally tons of abandoned spare parts and scrap metals, then sweeping and mopping the floors. Finding inconspicuous means to dispose of the material they hauled out comprised part of the challenge, Waško recalled. Sol LeWitt sent instructions for large geometrical wall drawings, but at that time even chalk could not be obtained in the quantities required for the work. Everyone with children was asked to donate chalk, and the small contributions of many added up to enough material to execute LeWitt's circle, triangle, square and trapezoid. Resourcefulness was key at every point in the creation of *Construction in Process*. Materials were scarce and nothing could be accomplished without the personal favours of friends and acquaintances. Thinking back, Waško characterized the process as nearly absurd, as if he were undertaking the organization of an art exhibition 'on the moon' (2009b).

As representatives of the Archives of Contemporary Thought, the organizers solicited the participation of many artists, a significant majority of whom were American: Dan Graham, Les Levine, Sol LeWitt, Dennis Oppenheim, Ed Ruscha and Richard Serra, among others.⁶ Several foreign artists chose to travel to Poland for the installation and exhibition, and many of them were visiting this (or any) eastern bloc country for the first time. Norman Dilworth, Peter Downsbrough, Ivan Galeta, Tibor Gáyor, Dóra Maurer, Taka Imura, Servie Janssen, Stanislav Kolibal, Kazuo Katase, Attila Kovács, Peter Lowe, Rune Miels, Richard Nonas, David Rabinowitch, Fred Sandback, Paul Sharits, Yoshio Shirakawa and Ken Unsworth were among the visitors. The artists arrived with their own mixed notions of what it meant to live in Eastern Europe, and some revelled in the romantic – safely temporary – adventure of communal living and equalizing poverty (Robakowski 2009). The oral histories wax

poetic about artists spending their days installing and nights around communal tables of vodka, tea and conversations.

At least one work's inclusion was sacrificed to the slowing effect of complex governmental and mail system bureaucracy. The copper tiles sent by Carl Andre for a floor grid arrangement were never received. Shipped by his gallery from Düsseldorf in neighbouring Germany, the four copper plates arrived in Warsaw two whole months later, at which point a letter was sent from the customs bureau to Waško at the (falsified) Archives of Contemporary Thought. It took a whole month for the correspondence to reach nearby Łódź, only about 100 km from the capital. Upon notification that the shipment had come, Waško travelled to Warsaw to retrieve the mysterious package of copper just days before the imposition of martial law, at which point he was sent back to Łódź to retrieve some documents – as there were no officially sanctioned Archives of Contemporary Thought, and the shipment could not be released. Caught in Łódź by martial law, Waško never succeeded in receiving the work, and after another six months of lying in customs, the package was sent back to Düsseldorf (2009b). Andre's name nevertheless appears on the poster for *Construction in Process*, and his participation in the show is confirmed in publications on the subject to this day, revealing just how little the actual installation within the exhibition has mattered in the



Ryszard Waško with posters announcing the exhibition (1981). Photo: courtesy Archives of Contemporary Thought.

7. Speaking with several historians who have studied *Construction in Process*, no one was able to describe what of Andre's was included in the show until Waško revealed the story of the copper plates and his frustrated chase of the package.
8. Their suspicions were not as absurd as they may now seem. At least one active organizer in Łódź was later revealed as reporting on the artists' actions to the secret police (Waško 2009b).

scholarship about the event.⁷ What has been emphasized instead is the willing participation of all the listed artists; whether the work arrived or was installed was secondary to the sign value afforded by these western names – names that stood for independence of thought and expression. Organized in the spirit of exchange, the exhibition used the work of an international group of artists at least partially because for the Poles, well-known American artists such as Andre, Graham, Smithson and Serra equated with internationalism and the freedom of expression. It would be too simplistic to collapse *Construction in Process* with the political end that resulted soon after, namely democratic western-style capitalism. As mentioned above, this kind of teleological thinking ultimately flattened the Solidarity movement into its present-day conservative legacy. While the political goals behind the exhibition were as unresolved as the political movement that supported it, *Construction in Process* clearly promoted freedom of speech contingent to a loosely avant-gardist internationalism.

Politics of Contestation

A conspiratorial tone bound together the efforts of these artists and their students. According to Nancy Holt, young people came to her home at night to collect her work, *Locator (For Poland)* (1981), in secretive tones as if they were being followed (2011).⁸ Her contribution was seen both by the artist and the recipients as a vote of solidarity against the Polish government, and the very act of organizing the exhibition was a decidedly political statement of protest. As art historian Łukasz Ronduda points out, all forms of activity in Poland were understood 'in national and ideological terms', and therefore 'activism or social engagement of any kind was an act of criticism' (2007: 56). Every quotidian gesture both carried potential power and was subject to a high level of scrutiny.

Artists and art students may have been easily persuaded of the exhibition's importance, but Waško also successfully engaged the participation of Solidarity, convincing the members of the union that by supporting international art, they were furthering their own cause. Posters for the exhibition featured the word '*Konstrukcja*' in a design that mimicked the Solidarity logo. Solidarity effectively sponsored the exhibition, and by the time of the opening, the two were indistinguishably fused; the exhibition took on the identity of the union, and neo-avant-garde sensibilities curiously became synonymous with the political movement. *Construction in Process* was conceived during that particular moment in the early months of Solidarity, before the government reacted so harshly against it. The year 1981 was tense throughout the country, as meat rations had been cut by twenty per cent and generally all supplies were scarce. Summer brought Solidarity-organized hunger strikes across the country. The largest demonstration took place in Łódź on 30 July with tens of thousands protestors marching through Piotrkowska Street. *The New York Times* attested to the growing energy behind Solidarity, as James Markham (1981) notes, 'Such a demonstration against the Government would have been virtually unthinkable only a year ago'. This massive event was coordinated by the same union leaders who would figure prominently in

the production and promotion of *Construction in Process* only a couple of months later.⁹ They took up the execution of *Construction in Process* with as much conviction as they had when organizing the strikes; staging the art show was but one more event in their ongoing efforts.

With mass demonstrations and the growing movement, people felt the potential of their collective power for the first time in decades, and the atmosphere was electric with possibility. 'After all those depressing years,

9. Primary organizers of the hunger strike included Chairman of Łódź Solidarity Andrzej Słowik, who spoke at the opening of the exhibition, and Vice-Chairman Jerzy Kropiwnicki (mayor of



'Budrem' factory at ul. PKWN 37, where *Construction in Process* was held (1981), interior and exterior views. Photos: courtesy Archives of Contemporary Thought.



Artists join workers during a general strike (1981). Photo: courtesy Archives of Contemporary Thought.

Łódź, 2002–2010), who was also instrumental in facilitating the exhibition.

it was an incredible moment for Poland', recalled Leonard Myszyński, then a first-year film student who helped install the show. 'Everything felt free: let's make art, let's do something!' (Myszyński 2009). That mood came to an abrupt halt when, on 13 December 1981, martial law was instituted throughout Poland, precisely to annihilate the briefly legalized union. A bleak period that included Soviet tanks patrolling the streets and strict curfews lasted until 22 July 1983. Solidarity headquarters were raided, many opposition activists were injured or killed by militia, and thousands of people were imprisoned. Militia raided the factory and destroyed Sol LeWitt's monumental white chalk wall drawings, confirming that for the authorities contemporary art was as threatening as the artists had hoped. In response to these events and in support of Solidarity's cause a catalogue was published by Fred Sandback, Peter Downsbrough and Richard Nonas in the United States in 1982, its cover emblazoned with the red Solidarity logo.

An Exhibition in Process

It was during the charged atmosphere of late 1981, before the instatement of martial law, that Waśko and his colleagues succeeded in organizing *Construction in Process*. The local Solidarity group arranged access to the abandoned factory. Such large spaces were readily available in



David Rabinowitch, *Holed-pipe IV* (1967); Richard Nonas, *Untitled (Lines for Maria and Mariella)* (1981); Bernar Venet, *Position of Two Major Arcs of 293.5° Each* (1976/1981); Gerhard von Graevenitz (right wall, unidentified work), installation view. Photo: courtesy Archives of Contemporary Thought.

this city that had once enjoyed a booming textile industry.¹⁰ The factories that had defined Łódź during the industrial revolution were repurposed for modern use. Empty and in disrepair, they evoked the country's infrastructural losses of the World Wars. Considering these histories, the buildings were equally symbolic of the evils of capitalism, the oppression of wartime invaders, and the failed Communist ideals of labour. In 1981, the factories of Łódź were also sites of protest, and many of the visiting artists participated in workplace sit-ins during their stay in Poland. The nineteenth-century building, like a palimpsest – updated over the decades to accommodate control boxes, pipes, electrical wires, radiators and other functional elements – was repurposed yet again for the display of artwork. Flat works shared the walls with rows of electrical wire, and were hung from exposed horizontal pipes. Additional lighting was created by a row of lamps hung from the same central armature that supported larger, defunct factory lamps.

One photograph depicts a large factory-turned-exhibition hall. In the foreground is David Rabinowitch's *Holed-pipe IV* (1967), which, in his words, is never static: 'For any observer all of the construction in the sculpture will be felt (immediately and not through interpretation) to be "receding" or to be

10. Rather appropriately, the address of the factory was at PKWN Street, a politically charged appellation for the street which has since been renamed. Existing from 1944–1945, PKWN, or Polski Komitet Wyzwolenia Narodowego ('Polish Committee of National Liberation'), was the provisional government fully sponsored and controlled by Stalinist USSR in opposition to the Polish government in exile. In the years before World War I, Łódź (at the time part of the Kingdom of Prussia) was one of the most densely populated industrial cities in the world. The factories

were plundered of machinery and raw materials during both World Wars by Russian, Prussian and German forces.

"approaching" (n.d.). Here he makes a distinction between the time delay of cognition and the immediacy of embodied knowing. To a western eye, this positivist theme prevails throughout the exhibition. The work of many of these artists has been historicized as dealing with phenomenological experience and perception. The value of looking again at this exhibition, with all its particularities, is to reconsider the political impact of these works.

Beyond Rabinowitch's pipe was another steel work, Richard Nonas' *Untitled (Lines for Maria and Mariella)* (1981), an L-shaped structure that disappeared through a door on the right. Running through much of the exhibition, the work was named for Maria Waśko and Mariella Nitosławska, two of the organizers, in a gesture of solidarity against the Polish government; the artists' participation in producing this exhibition of protest was indeed as important to the foreign visitors as it was to the local Poles. On the far back wall hung Bernar Venet's *Position of Two Major Arcs of 293.5° Each* (1976/1981), a form consisting of two concentric plywood arcs, which like Nonas' work, was manufactured on site. Originally conceived five years earlier, Venet sent instructions for the Łódź exhibition and a new version of the work was created with materials, tools and skills donated by Solidarity.

The work of Dan Graham, Fred Sandback, Reiner Ruthenbeck, Ken Unsworth and Ryszard Winiarski was displayed in another of the exhibition spaces. Sandback installed his delicate piece in the space between two structural columns, stretching one length of yarn perpendicularly from the floor straight up to the ceiling. The other, a proportionate distance away, mirrored this single line twice, travelling across the floor at a right angle a length twice that of the first, before extending up to terminate at the ceiling once again, making a quadrilateral shape with one open side. Like a drawing in space, the one horizontal and three vertical lines were clearly derived from the architectural symmetry of the factory. Creating additional flat planes in the exhibition hall, the forms explicitly engaged the architectural space.

Overall, the factory was imbued with a compounded history of capitalist greed and cruelty, foreign domination and plundering, socialist utopian dreams, and the mismanaged and failing ideals of production and plenty. Aligned with the square floor panels and between two structural columns, Sandback's *Untitled, Two-Part Construction* (1981) was installed in a central location so that visitors could engage with it from all sides. Sandback's volume-less shapes had the power to create subtly complex perceptual effects; hovering between absence and presence, they evoked a heightened sensitivity to the experience of being and moving about in architecture. As a frame, his installations functioned to point or direct attention – but to what? The perception of a form, a vertical wall that had the power to separate, was in reality a void, just empty space. But did not *Construction in Process* attempt to bring artists together, dispelling some imagined boundary? As common as it was ephemeral, the definitive line was composed of mere yarn, the homeliest of materials, and would give way as soon as one point of the construction was detached. The precarious nature of the Communist Party and its undoing are underscored in the installation and dismantling of Sandback's work. But in that crucial moment of late 1981, the future of the Berlin Wall's collapse and the reunification of Europe, which would play out by the end of the decade, was as yet unfathomable.

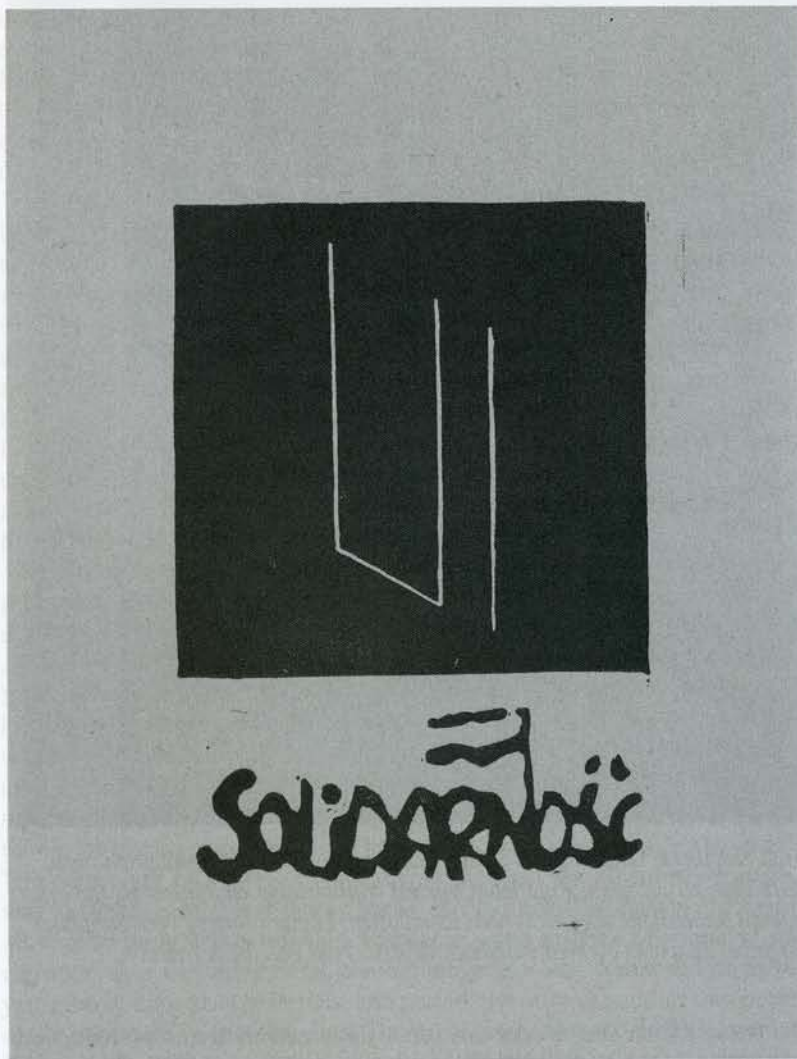


Fred Sandback, Untitled, Two-Part Construction (1981), installation view, dark blue acrylic yarn; situational: spatial relationships established by the artist; overall dimensions vary with each installation. Photo: courtesy Fred Sandback Archive, all works by Fred Sandback © 2012 Fred Sandback Archive.

These Minimalist works are often discussed in terms of reduction, geometric abstraction and phenomenology (Meyer 2000). The art of Sandback, Rabinowitch and Nonas sought to strip work down to essential forms and concepts. Seen as part of *Construction in Process*, however, these works accrued additional meanings, even for the artists themselves.

Sandback tellingly created a linocut print, *Untitled Solidarnosc* (1981), which featured his *Untitled, Two-Part Construction* reduced to a simple line drawing. Beneath it he printed the Solidarity logo, explicitly linking his yarn installation to the political movement. Similarly, through Nonas's titular dedication to the organizer-activist women, and LeWitt's wall drawings using schoolchildren's chalk, the production and reception of Minimalism became an explicitly political construction for both artists and viewers.

Indeed, the title *Construction in Process* emphasized not only the influence of Constructivism and Process Art, but also the very idea of something incomplete and still in flux. This became evident in film-maker



Fred Sandback, Untitled Solidarnosc (1981), linocut in red on proofing paper with cut and torn edge, 23×15.5 cm, edition of approximately 25 unsigned examples. Photo: courtesy of and © 2012 Fred Sandback Archive.

Józef Robakowski's feature on the exhibition itself, *Konstrukcja w Procesie* (1981–1982), a 16mm colour film that encapsulated the main ideas behind the exhibition. For the film, Robakowski engaged the participation of several of the artists to create short vignettes. They either used their own work as props, conceiving short performances, or created completely new scenarios. In one humorous segment, Jan Dibbets performed a sequence of contorted faces, followed by the words 'Poland keep smiling'. Other vignettes apparently were staged by Robakowski. He trained his camera on Nancy Holt's *Locator*, moved outside into the street, to record passersby inspecting it and the view it created. These scenes were interspersed with careening views of the city, as if shot from the back of a tram, with the horizon vertiginously swaying. The film ventures from the daily life of Łódź – where buildings, streets and pedestrians were captured – to the exhibition hall, where Robakowski's camera continued to speed through the factory space. He zipped past Maurizio Nannucci's red neon sign *This Side Is Red* (1981), and followed Nonas's *Untitled (Lines for Maria and Mariella)* with a sense of urgency as other works were blurred. Circling Dan Graham's *Pavilion Sculpture*, the film captured an image of the filmmaker himself, camera in hand, as other works were reflected in the disorienting sculpture. A narrator recited facts about Łódź, industrialization, and *grupa a.r.* and their avant-garde activities in a declamatory tone. Through a combination of text and image, the film succinctly brought together the values that spurred the exhibition, including economics, art, shared authorship and Łódź-specific history, the relevant markers of which I discuss below.

11. This understanding of the installation is based on sketches by Fred Sandback and Richard Nonas accessed in the archives of Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź in December 2009.

Local Internationalism

Meanwhile, in an adjacent building, on just the other side of the wall near which Sandback installed his work, another exhibition was taking place.¹¹ This show – also large in scale, and employing a group survey model – celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of *Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi* (the Museum of Art in Łódź) and its founding collection of 1931. For the organizers and participants of *Construction in Process*, this bicentennial held the potential to legitimate Łódź as a hub of European cosmopolitanism, and offered a historical lineage for new strategies in construction. The artists Katarzyna Kobro and Władysław Strzemiński were pictured in the catalogue for *Construction in Process* on a carefully designed double-page spread attributed to Sandback. Henryk Stażewski served on the honorary committee of *Construction in Process*. Together, Kobro, Strzemiński and Stażewski – all members of the Polish Constructivist circle *grupa a.r.* (*artyści rewolucyjni*, or 'revolutionary artists') – symbolized the values of internationalism and political idealism for the artists of the 1970s and 1980s, who considered themselves the inheritors of that avant-garde legacy. Significantly, emphasis was placed on personality rather than artistic style: in the catalogue, photos of Stażewski, Strzemiński and Kobro appear – not images of their work. Because these three artists were invoked so explicitly, a brief detour into history is warranted here to better understand the nomination of these modernist artists as the proper progenitors of *Construction in Process*.

12. Once home to great numbers of Jewish, Russian, German and Polish inhabitants, the city was rendered largely homogeneous by the Holocaust and its aftermath. From a population of over 600,000 inhabitants, according to the 1931 Polish census, it dropped to fewer than 300,000 after 1945.
13. The year 1795 saw the last of three military partitions among Russia, Prussia and Habsburg Austria, which effectively erased the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth from the European map. Łódź fell into Prussian control in the second partition, 1793, when it was renamed Lodsch.
14. The collection reflected the interests of the a.r. group, as well as those of additional collaborators in the collecting project, including poets Jan Brzękowski and Julian Przyboś, and artists Hans Arp and Michel Seuphor (see Muzeum Sztuki 2012).
15. At 111 pieces, the International Collection of Modern Art in Łódź was second in Europe only to El Lissitzky's Abstract Cabinet at the Landes Museum in Hanover, Germany, and third in the world when taking into consideration the Museum of Modern Art in New York.
16. There was a political imperative to justify to citizens as well as to the international community that Poland enjoyed a normal democracy in the western sense. 'People's Democracy' and 'Socialist Democracy' were terms used for countries falling into USSR's and China's

Once a thriving, multi-cultural city, Łódź suffered a drastic 60 per cent population loss during World War II.¹² The artists coordinating *Construction in Process* embodied complex layers of identity: they were the children of people who had lived in a vibrant (if troubled) and diverse Poland and their class differences, only nominally erased by the Communist Party, would have been discernible amongst themselves. Furthermore, in addition to the at times tedious, at times severe, realities of life in the eastern bloc, they lived with daily reminders of the industrial capitalist centre that Łódź had once been. Waśko and his collaborators thought they recognized a viable example in earlier European artistic movements, and particularly romanticized that artistic and political spirit of these artists. The inter-war period had seen in Łódź the dynamic flourishing of multiple avant-garde theatrical, literary and artistic groups. In the aftermath of World War I, the Treaty of Versailles established the Second Polish Republic, defining national Polish borders for the first time since 1795.¹³ The three reconstituted parts (Russian, Prussian and Austrian) had developed unevenly over the previous century, and with the devastations of the war and the global economic depression of the 1930s, the country struggled to establish its political, educational and financial systems. Nevertheless, after decades of official linguistic and cultural constraints, the revival of a self-governing nation was wholly embraced by its citizenry. This spirit of freedom and appreciation for nationhood permeated the consciousness of later generations of Poles, who were faced again with a Russian force, only this time Soviet.

The a.r. group embodied many of the contemporaneous European attitudes – political and social idealism, secularism and internationalism – and set about producing a collection of modernist art to promote these values in Łódź. Motivated primarily by Strzeмиński (along with the considerable engagement of Kopro and Stażewski), the group amassed a collection of 1920s and 1930s work by Polish and other European artists, including pieces representing Cubism, Dadaism, Futurism, Constructivism and Surrealism.¹⁴ The considerable collection, which included Kurt Schwitters, Alexander Calder, Fernand Léger and Hans Arp, has largely defined the character of Muzeum Sztuki to the present. It was among the first in the world to permanently exhibit a collection of artwork by international avant-gardes.¹⁵ Furthermore, during the 1960s and 1970s, the collection was expanded to include works by Joseph Albert, Mirosław Bałka, Max Bill, Marc Chagall, Tadeusz Kantor, Paul Klee, Andre Masson, Roman Opalka, Ryszard Winiarski and Krzysztof Wodiczko. The Communist government had a nuanced relationship with, and variable policies towards, the wide variety of national and international modernist work contained in the Muzeum Sztuki collection. In contrast to authorities in the Soviet Union – where a distinct underground movement developed in opposition to the state-sanctioned Socialist Realist style still omnipresent in the 1970s – Polish censors turned a blind eye to independent art endeavours, allowing them the little visibility they could garner rather than producing any kind of notoriety. After 1956, Stalinism – and with it, Socialist Realism – was rejected, and abstraction, for which, at first, restrictive quotas were introduced, was officially sanctioned and harnessed for propaganda, whereby politically instrumentalized avant-gardism became proof of national liberalism (Grylewicz 1999: 8).¹⁶

In the 1960s and 1970s, independent exhibitions organized in private apartments began to make up an alternative Polish art scene that overlapped with the official one: Conceptual artists such as Robakowski and Waśko acted in the independent sphere, but were also collected by the state galleries, given teaching jobs at the state art schools, and granted passports to travel abroad for exhibitions. Given the cultural tendencies described above, they arranged for themselves the most fulfilling artistic lives they could manage under the circumstances. They pushed the system to its limits. With the closing of *Construction in Process* and the instatement of martial law, they would find that they had crossed the line. Their jobs at the Łódź Film School were terminated and their passports revoked. But in autumn 1981, they were still willing to test those boundaries. As Paul Sharits wrote upon his return to the United States in November, 'there is a split in Polish academia ... the avant-garde group [of the Łódź Film School], with their limited power, are the social radicals'. Radical though Waśko and Robakowski may have been, Sharits is careful to note that, 'in all fairness, one must also realize that socialism, if only in Poland, has allowed avant-garde art to grow and exist' (Sharits 1982: 99). Although the international exchange that *Construction in Process* enabled has been memorialized as unprecedented, it is important to realize that the artists in Łódź were not wholly cut off from the greater artistic world. After all, the broad collection at Muzeum Sztuki was a window for the artists of Łódź to the modern western world. What was remarkable was that such an exhibition with a broad international roster could take place at that time in Poland (Rottenberg et al. 2009: 96–107).

The International Collection of Modern Art in Łódź, as the a.r. group's accumulation came to be known, was assembled exclusively by donation. In the name of Solidarity, many of the works produced for *Construction in Process* would similarly be donated to Muzeum Sztuki. In an outpouring of support for the independence movement, international artists donated works to the Polish people via the Solidarity union. But the artists of *Construction in Process* borrowed more than the collecting model from the a.r. group; they considered themselves the inheritors of the avant-garde legacy of the first half of the century. As was evident in Sandback's enthusiasm for Kobro and Strzemiński, this interest in the 1920s and 1930s avant-garde was held too by the visiting Americans. In his essay 'The Crux of Minimalism', Hal Foster argues that minimalism is a break with late modernism, a return to the avant-garde, and the first stage of a new postmodernism. He claims that 1960s artists such as Smithson (or Sandback) embraced – with a significant delay – the earlier European transgressive avant-gardes. Foster writes that the American 'formalist avant-garde [of the 60s] sought to preserve what the transgressive avant-garde [such as Dada and Russian Constructivism] sought to transform: the institutional autonomy of art. Faced with this account', he continues, 'the minimalists looked to the transgressive avant-garde for alternative models of practice' (Foster 1996: 56). Here Waśko and others strove to engage that independence of art, hard-won by their avant-garde predecessors and preserved by the 1970s independent art scene, to work out an alternative politics. Meanwhile, Sandback and other visitors could engage bohemian fantasies in a city to which the legacies of Kobro, Arp and Schwitters were tangibly tied. They looked to history and

spheres of influence, whose Communist Party dictatorships maintained a façade of formal parliamentary democracy.

perpetuated bygone models, embracing ritual and spectacle to perform bohemia in an attempt to imagine new transformative methods.

Contextualized as part of the early Solidarity movement, *Construction in Process* takes on the importance of an experiment. The exhibition was held in the midst of a turbulent political moment as an overt attempt to protest the contemporaneous system, advocate for a broad internationalism, and articulate a new possibility for the future of the nation. The Solidarity movement, suppressed through the 1980s, ultimately rose again to bring the downfall of the Communist regime. The artists of *Construction in Process* believed that the organization of the exhibition and the accompanying catalogue, and the donation of their works to the Polish people would contribute to the cause. In taking a stand against the oppressive government and publicizing the social realities of Communist Poland, they were effective, but in constructing a realistic alternative, their efforts fell short. *Construction in Process* brought together western liberalism, the Polish alternative art scene, and a shared general, idealized tendency towards the Euro-international avant-garde. Rather than offering any concrete solutions for future politics, these internationalist and avant-gardist tendencies – manifesting in the multinational roster of artists who came together to execute the exhibition – offered a negation of both the capitalist systems of the West and the failing Communist experiment of the eastern bloc. The title of the exhibition, which refers to the Polish Constructivists on the one hand and Process Art on the other, succinctly points to a political *construction*, incomplete and as yet undefined, ongoing and *in process* of being built.

Augmented by a utopian sensibility that broadly encompassed collaboration, individuality, and freedom of expression and thought, *Construction in Process* operated in the definitively protopolitical realm of general imaginings. As an exhibition organized through *Zalawic* aspects of sorting out, making do and improvising, it remains as a compelling study of myriad political potentials. The part-official, part-alternative arranging of the exhibition enacted the ethos of a potential new social order. Furthermore, Solidarity generated new readings of Minimalist works, specifically those of Sandback, Holt and Graham. In the context of Communist Poland, the artworld gambits of presence, absence and site-specificity gained a praxical political meaning.

Epilogue

At the corner of a busy street in Łódź stands a French-owned chain supermarket. Just a brief walk to the centrally located Piotrkowska Street, the avenue bustles with pedestrians, several lanes of traffic, and the trams that periodically jingle through, stopping at an island in the middle of the road. The interior of the complex, a two-story affair, is dressed in tasteful winter decorations, and an aproned woman polishes the tile floors of the entrance with an automated machine. The shopping center is defined by its largest tenant Alma, the upscale market, but comfortably shares the building with a sporting goods store, pharmacy, florist, bank and small postal office. There is ample parking in the front lot.

In December 2009 this shopping center, although surrounded by crumbling, graffiti-sprayed brick buildings, is the picture of capitalist

prosperity. It took a moment to reckon with the site's recent history; only three decades ago the exhibition *Construction in Process* was staged in this location in what has come to be remembered as a political campaign for democracy. At some point following the communist system's dismantling in 1989, the century-old factory that had housed this show was demolished to make way for foreign investors. The alternative systems of life and art conceived by *Construction in Process* all too abruptly gave way to the new structures of international commerce.

Acknowledgement

I owe my deepest gratitude to Julian Myers for his patience, endless encouragement and our many conversations on the topic of this exhibition.

References

- Davies, Norman (2005), 'Solidarność: The Solidarity Decade', *God's Playground: 1795 to the Present*, New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 482–508.
- Dzięgiel, Leszek (1998), 'A Culture of Shortage: Citizens' Living Standards as an Instrument of Political Manipulation', *Paradise in a Concrete Cage: Daily Life in Communist Poland, An Ethnologist's View*, Kraków: Arcana and Jagiellonian University, pp. 17–61.
- Foster, Hal (1996), *The Return of the Real*, Cambridge and London: MIT Press.
- Frybes, Marcin (2010), interview with the author, Los Angeles, 4 April.
- (2012), correspondence with the author, 6 April.
- Gryglewicz, Tomasz (1999), 'Co zawdzięcza sztuka polska PRL-owi?' ('What does Polish Art owe the People's Republic?'), in Tomasz Gryglewicz and Andrzej Szczerski (eds), *Sztuka w okresie PRL-u*, Kraków: Instytut Historii Sztuki Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, pp. 5–12.
- Holt, Nancy (2011), interview with the author, Chicago, 7 October.
- Komitet Wykonawczy Muzeum Artystów ('The Executive Committee of the Artists' Museum') (1996), *The Artists' Museum: International Provisional Artists' Community*, Łódź: The Artists' Museum.
- Markham, James (1981), 'Anger Over Food Spreads in Poland', *The New York Times*, 30 July.
- Meyer, James (ed.) (2000), *Minimalism*, London: Phaidon.
- Mróz, Krzysztof (2007), 'Solidarność – upad mitu' ('Solidarity: Collapse of the Myth', *przegląd socjalistyczny* ('Socialist Review'), February.
- Muzeum Sztuki (2012), 'kolekcja sztuki XX/XXI w.' ('collection of twentieth and twenty-first century art'), <http://msl.org.pl/en/sztuka>. Accessed 1 March 2012.
- Myszyński, Leonard (2009), interview with the author, 20 September.
- The New York Times* (1982), 'Susan Sontag Provokes Debate on Communism', 27 February.
- Rabinowitch, David (n.d.), 'Remarks on the *Holed-pipe IV 1967*'. Archives of Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź. Accessed December 2009.
- Robakowski, Józef (2009), interview with the author, Łódź, 30 December.

- Ronduda, Łukasz (2007), 'Soc Art, or the Attempt at Revitalising Avant-Garde Strategies in the Polish Art of the 1970s', in Łukasz Ronduda and Florian Zeyfang (eds), *1,2,3 ... Avant-Gardes: Film/Art Between Experiment and Archive*, Warsaw and Berlin: CCA Ujazdowski Castle and Sternberg Press, pp. 40–57.
- Rottenberg, Anda et al. (2009), 'The Real Exchange Between East and West', *Tate Etc*, 16, Summer, pp. 76–107.
- Sharits, Paul (1982), 'Excerpts From a Letter to the U.S.I.C.A. Concerning Trip to Poland', in Peter Downsborough, Richard Nonas and Fred Sandback (eds), *Konstrukcja w Procesie*, New York: Thousand Secretaries Press, pp. 98–100.
- Strąkowski, Marek (2005), 'Sztuka trudności codziennego życia' ('The Art of the Difficulty of Daily Life'), *Kronika miasta Łodzi*, 4, pp. 116–25.
- Waśko, Ryszard (1982), 'Before the Exhibition: Interview with Ryszard Waśko, Exhibition's General Curator', in Peter Downsborough, Richard Nonas and Fred Sandback (eds), *Konstrukcja w Procesie*, New York: Thousand Secretaries Press, pp. 9–10.
- (2009a), e-mail correspondence (translated from Polish), 12 September.
- (2009b), interview with the author, Berlin, 19 December.
- Wprost* (2010), 'Borusewicz: Solidarność jest skrajnie prawicowa i katolicka' ('Borusewicz: Solidarity is extremely right-wing and Catholic'), 30 August.

Suggested Citation

Szupinska, Joanna (2012), 'Politics, Potentials and *Construction in Process*', *Journal of Curatorial Studies* 1: 2, pp. 195–214, doi: 10.1386/jcs.1.2.195_1

Contributor Details

Joanna Szupinska is the 2011–2012 Marjorie Susman Curatorial Fellow at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, where she is curating three exhibitions: *Skyscraper: Art and Architecture Against Gravity*, a large-scale group show co-curated with Chief Curator Michael Darling; *First Fifty*, a transparent presentation of the first 50 objects that entered the museum's permanent collection; and *MCA DNA: Gordon Matta-Clark*, a show centring on Matta-Clark's final building cut project *Circus or The Caribbean Orange* (1978).

E-mail: j.szupinska@gmail.com

Joanna Szupinska has asserted her right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the author of this work in the format that was submitted to Intellect Ltd.