

1, 2, 3 ... Avant-gardes
Film / Art between Experiment and Archive

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Games, Actions and Interactions: Film and the Tradition of Oskar Hansen's Open Form

The following text will focus on theoretical considerations having to do with the relationship of the individual to society, thoughts, that were originally linked to the international late modernist architectural debates of the 1950s. After 1970, these considerations were among those picked up in the context of Polish film art experiments and developed further. Mediating between the two contexts of architecture and art was the Polish architect Oskar Hansen, due in part to his teaching at the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts. The students of the time included Zofia Kulik, Przemysław Kwiek, Jan S. Wojciechowski, Waldemar Raniżewski, Wiktor Gutt, and Grzegorz Kowalski, who later became some of the most important figures of experimental art in Poland. What began in the circle of the post-war Team 10 group in a climate of disappointment in the aftermath of technocratic-authoritarian or genius-based planning ideologies of modern architecture with a focus on everyday life and the social life of the constructed environment can be traced out in the artistic neo-avant-garde of Poland of the 1970s in the development of processual and interdisciplinary modes of working.¹ Rooted in Hansen's theories and pedagogical methods, themselves based on the debates of late modernism, these later artists developed actionistic forms of expression, games and interactions and intensive mutual interactions among architecture, performance, and film. In so doing, the engagement with social relations was transformed: this engagement, initially bound to a language of the spatial, now moved towards a realm of time and movement. Films and slide shows with commentary became an important artistic medium, sometimes in the sense of recording the genuine actions, sometimes as an independent work form that sought to transfer a changed understanding of physical space to the visual space. For many works of this period, there is no clear separation between documentation and autonomous art; instead, they open a tense field in which the visual space and the space of action stand in relation to one another.

1. Oskar Hansen

In 1959, Oskar Hansen participated in the last CIAM (Congrès international d'architecture moderne) in Otterlo. He was among the few participants from

Eastern Bloc countries to take part in this meeting, together with Jerzy Soltan (Poland), Karoly Polónyi (Hungary), and Radovan Nikšić (Yugoslavia). This final CIAM followed CIAM X (1956) in Dubrovnik, for which a group of young and rebellious architects, later on called Team 10, was given responsibility in preparation. The goal of the young architects was reorganising the congress – considered the most influential institution of modernist architecture – as well as the theoretical redefinition of modernist architecture in general. The functionalist urban planning and the rigid separation of functions like dwelling, working, leisure, and traffic, as formulated in the Charta of Athens at the fourth CIAM meeting in 1933, no longer seemed able to respond to the now recognised multiplicity and complexity of life. The new concepts were unique form, particular place, particular time, community, change and growth. The English architects Allison and Peter Smithson in their 1956 draft for the Doorn Manifesto spoke of “human association which is the very basis of all built form.”² Although Team 10 did emphasise the oppressive character of modernist architecture and urban planning's welfare-oriented self-conception, this did not entail a general departure from modernism's social ideal. The debates of Team 10 instead represent an attempt to bring about a fundamental transformation within the modernist tradition and its institutions. This transformation included a stronger consideration of subjective needs and spontaneous, unpredictable developments as well as turning to society and culture in place of technological rationalism. What remained a shared continuity was the belief that architecture can play a key role in the shaping of society, and that this role entails a moral duty.³

The proposals Hansen presented at CIAM 1959 included a proposed design for an Auschwitz monument, done together with his wife Zofia, and his project for an extension of the Zachęta National Gallery of Art in Warsaw. The latter was a light steel space frame construction next to the historic exhibition building, of a similar size as the existing building, but consisting of one single space. Flexible floor elements and moveable stairs were to allow for a variable spatial configuration. The project is an excellent example of Team 10's transformed notion of social space. The building has no finally determined spatial program, but instead in its expansiveness and openness can enable various social and spatial conglomerations. But Hansen's most important contribution to the Team 10 discussions was a theoretical concept he called “Open Form.” It was the centre of his presentation in Otterlo and later on also at the first Team 10 meeting in Bagnols-sur-Cèze in 1960. The journal *Le carré bleu*, which published many debates of the Team 10, dedicated an issue to the theory of Open Form in 1961.⁴



Oskar Hansen

Oskar Hansen's Studio

What is Open Form? Hansen combined in his theory principles of historical materialism with contemporary ideas, like those of Henri Lefebvre or the Situationists. The principle at the foundation of Open Form is that no artistic expression is complete until it has been appropriated by its users or beholders. In Hansen's view, "open form" stood opposite to "closed form," which is marked by a reductionist approach towards the human being. Closed form (characteristic of virtually all types of traditional art and architecture) subordinated subjectivity, reducing it to the level of a passive element in a larger structure, dominant and hierarchical in nature. In terms of architecture, concretely using the example of Berlin's Hansaviertel (Interbau Berlin 1957), Hansen criticized the blindness of closed form to the residents' individual needs. Modern architecture, he argued, is not in a position to meet fluctuating needs. The principle of Open Form, in contrast, would allow life itself to develop within the designed world.

The intensity with which the concept of Open Form was discussed during the international congress makes clear its importance in the world of late modernist architectural debate. Hansen's ideas are deeply rooted in the conflicts that were particular to post-war modernism. Like the other architects of Team 10, like Alison and Peter Smithson or Aldo van Eyck, he strove to create instruments that could respond more effectively to the multiplicity and indeterminacy of everyday life. Starting points for this were seen in the study of forms of construction and life that until now were only rarely considered by modernist architecture, but which therefore could be seen all the more closely in linkage to actual needs, like street parties (Smithson) or children's games (Van Eyck). Modernist architects, like the group ATBAT Afrique, had already explored informal forms of urban planning and architecture, in this case primarily in the French colonies of North Africa. They all shared the conviction that modern architecture, precisely because it understood itself as fulfilling the needs of many, could not exclude the experience of the individual.

Like the other approaches of Team 10, Hansen's theory on the one hand moved the question of social use to the centre of architectural attention. On the other hand, a new understanding of subjectivity came to expression here. At issue for Hansen is a subjectivity perceived in the whole richness of its "immersion" in reality, and in the complete complexity of its relations to the world. Processual Open Form was intended as an adequate response to the new concept of subjectivity – a subjectivity that remained in a

constant process of evolution and interaction with the surrounding world. Instead of being based on the concept of the unity (identicalness) of all people, Hansen's theory stipulated their radical diversity. It served to emphasise difference, and offered techniques and methods guaranteeing tolerant coexistence and mutual interest in a society composed of individual others. Accordingly, planning is not longer understood as an unconditional placement, but as an intervention in a complex structure with various layers. "As a composition of the spatial subtext, [the principle of open form] will become a multi-layered, constantly changing phenomenon. Compared to closed form, based chiefly on the masterly execution of the object, the concentration of open composition will be based on 'passe-partout' action, displaying the changes occurring in space. It will be the art of events."³

When implemented to the field of the visual arts, Hansen's theory revolutionised the traditional components of artistic communication. Above all, it deconstructed the artist's – author's – superior position towards the recipient, attempting instead to replace it with a symmetrical (or actually dialogical) model of communication. The process of lecturing and instructing was to be replaced by a process of collective learning. Fulfilling the postulates of Open Form, the Hansenian engineer-artist designs contexts and backgrounds to facilitate the expansion not of himself but of the former recipient, now partner in the creative process. The Hansenian author-artist wants to weaken the impact of his own subjectivity or self on the work's structure. The result is a kind of "death of the author", giving rise to the simultaneous birth of the recipient-co-author. The whole process is supported by the "intellectualisation" (greater emphasis on meta-artistic analyses than on the purely artistic element) and "objectivisation" (scientific approach) of artistic praxis. In teaching practice, Open Form was formalised in a series of concepts, valuating methods, techniques or behavioural strategies. The Hansenian techniques or methodologies were marked by "scalability" – any given set of procedures or techniques could be applied equally well to a piece of paper or to a fragment of the public space of a large city. For Hansen's students, Open Form represented an effective language opening the way towards experimentation and highly complex (trans-individual) collective projects (such as, for instance, the film *Open Form*).

The interconnected components of the theory and practice of Open Form – processuality, interactivity, objectivism (scientism), emphasis on the emancipation of subjectivity (desire to guarantee its right to self-determination

and self-development), communicativeness, relationality, interdisciplinarity, revision of hierarchy in the recipient-author relation, determination to move experimentation from the field of art to the socio-political sphere, fascination with the attitude of the scientist-artist participating, on par with the contemporary science, in the transformation of reality – make it, on the one hand, a continuation of the tradition of avant-garde (dadaist-constructivist) anti-art. On the other, they preconfigure the strategies of neo-avant-garde art. This anticipating role of the theory meant that Hansen's students were well prepared to meet the emerging neo-avantgarde trends and gave their projects and strategies an often pioneering position.⁴

2. Zofia Kulik, Przemysław Kwiek, Jan S. Wojciechowski, Waldemar Raniszewski, Wiktor Gutt, Grzegorz Kowalski

The artistic theory and practice of Przemysław Kwiek – a student of Hansen's – show (at the end of the 1960s) the artist going beyond the traditional as well as modernistic concept of sculpture and focusing consistently on the problem of the creative process. From 1967, Kwiek, "sculpting" a nude study, after creating a given sculpted representation of the model (initially in clay) and producing its photographic documentation, destroyed it to then proceed to create a new "material-spatial" configuration on the basis of the previous one. Upon obtaining another sculpted representation of the model, Kwiek again documented it photographically and again transformed it. He repeated the procedure many times, calling it a "game with himself." In the period between 1967 and 1970, Kwiek gradually moves from a series of several (5–6) photographs – documenting the consecutive stages of the given study – to several hundred ones for the purposes of his graduation project. He also moves from the "classic" sculptural material of clay to highly complex material configurations.

Kwiek transformed the work (replacing the traditional sculpture with a set of complex processual material and spatial relations) depending on the variable relationships and vectors connecting the model (nude) with space, time and the "contexts" or "situations" related directly to the sculptor's (personal) life and thus affecting his practice.

Kwiek tried at all cost to objectivise and rationalise his artistic practice by adopting the attitude of an artist/engineer – a skilful operator of material-spatial forms or the creator of novel combinations and configurations of the

colours, shapes, forms etc. of the material world. This attitude will be amplified later, in the KwieKulik duo with Zofia Kulik, thanks to the artists' interest in mathematics and logics (and later also concretism). The creative process analysis conducted by Kwiek from 1967 was unique in its combination of scientism with an openness to improvisation and experimentation. The radically processual attitude by definition required contesting finite "artistic objects" or any other form of process finalisation. Kwiek understood the artistic process as a continuum of "difference," novelty and innovation aimed at opening ever-new possibilities of "navigation" in the material-spatial sphere (Open Form).

Kwiek's process-based methodology of creating a processual sculpted anti-form can be represented in the form of consecutive "moves" or "steps", e.g. the creation of a sculpture = first step, its transformation = second step, another transformation resulting in another sculpture = third step, and so on. The effects of each "move" were documented on photographic film. This approach to Kwiek's methodology shows that it preconfigured the later "visual games" from the period of the making of the film *Open Form* (e.g. the "playing on the artist's face" exercise).

The making of the film in February 1971 (the title was a kind of tribute to Hansen) was a joint project between the students of the cinematography (Paweł Kwiek, Tatiana Dębska) and acting (Ewa Lemańska) departments of the Łódź Film School and the students and graduates of the sculpture department of the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts (Zofia Kulik, Jan S. Wojciechowski, Przemysław Kwiek, Bartłomiej Zdrojewski). They wrote:

"Many of the exercises and experiments conducted at the sculpture department feature the element of time and process. This forces us to search for new methods of documentation. Until now, we had used photography. However, the nature of the exercises means this method is incomplete, and, we believe, its weaknesses are overcome by film. The students of the cinematographic department told us in turn, that their curriculum included many exercises from the field of the visual arts, such as plane composition (framing), spatial composition, the issues of scale, colour, light, visual equivalents for various notions, and so on."⁷

The main objectives of the planned collaboration included: integrating different artistic disciplines (intermediality), developing a platform of collaboration for artists of different specialisations (interdisciplinarity, collectivism), and



Przemysław Kwiek, Graduation project, 1970

focusing on the analysis and initiation of processual works of art (processuality). Moreover, by fulfilling those postulates the artists from the two academies wanted to develop specific proposals for reforming the teaching process at art schools in Poland.

The structure of *Open Form* is defined by a series of "with-camera activities" (which is how the artists prefer to call the work rather than referring to it as a "film") divided into seven contrasted "episodes": *Hansen's Studio* (a.k.a. *Concurrent Movements*), *Jarnuszkiewicz's Studio* (with the scene *Playing on the Actress' Face*), *TV Studio*, *Moses, Library, School*, and *Open Air (Excursion)*. As part of those episodes, the artists, while applying a certain model – Open Form – decided only on the strategy or technique that was to be used in the given context. Techniques and methods such as visual games, interactions, "revealing of complex form" or camera provocation were to initiate and organise the course of (improvised) processual artistic realisations.

The methodology of camera provocation consisted in fulfilling the following, multi-stage Hansenian pattern: observation of an existing situation – provocation – observation of the provocation and its effects – a new situation. On the one hand, it was to help artists achieve certain cognitive purposes (gaining

knowledge about reality via the inductive method, deconstructing the given situation, revealing its determinants, and so on). In this aspect, it was the element of a larger and more complex strategy called the "revealing of complex form." On the other hand, the methodology constituted an important element initiating or stimulating actions and interactions.

A camera provocation usually consisted in invading a situation and starting to film people (usually by zooming in on their faces). The technique took advantage of the fact that the presence of a running camera and the awareness of being filmed significantly changes human behaviour, rousing people from routine, triggering various spontaneous reactions, provoking self-analysis, and so on. On this level, the camera was the perfect provocation tool.

During the making of *Open Form* the artists applied the method to high school students in the episode *The School*. Using the camera to provoke students gathered (at the headmaster's approval) in the gym resulted within a short time in an unexpected sequence of events that almost got out of control: the students staged a mini-revolt as part of which they painted the nicknames of particularly disliked teachers on a piece of cardboard which they then burned in a fire spontaneously started in the middle of the room.

The artists turned the category of the game – characteristic hitherto for the domain of pop culture (entertainment) – into one of the main methods of their strategy. The scene from *Open Form* called *Playing on the Actress' Face* is a model example of a processual visual game in which every consecutive shot demonstrates the "move" ("step") made in turn by each actor. The players (artists) have gathered (out of the frame) around the actress' face and are playing with visual forms. Every "move" made it necessary to integrate three important aspects. Firstly, relate to the existing facts (the predecessor's move), secondly, to formulate one's own "statement," and thirdly, to remember that one's move creates a context for the next person's move. The artists communicated (played) using visual forms as well as various kinds of activities.

The experience of the game involved a permanent awareness of the fact that, in making their "moves," the participants were determined by the context created by their predecessors "statements" and that their own "statements" influenced the others. The game required its participants to learn the responsibility involved in acting in the public sphere (or its model – an "intersubjective" communication sphere spread between them).

Przemysław Kwiek, Paweł Kwiek,
Zofia Kułik, Jan S. Wojciechowski
Gra na twarzy aktorki
(Playing on the Actress' Face)
A scene from the film *Open Form*
1971



The visual game method was also applied in open space, with the artists dividing into groups and assigning a separate group charged with the task of producing the event's photographic documentation. The best example of this is the *Game on Morel's Hill* (Elbląg, 1971) featuring Oskar Hansen, Grzegorz Kowalski, Wiktor Gutt and others.

As part of the film *Open Form*, the artists performed interactions in which, as in the visual games, a transition is made from the traditional notion of the work of art as an object towards the work as an effect of complex communication activities performed by artists remaining in a permanent (synchronous) interaction (the concept of the work of art as artistic communication).

Like with the visual games, also with interactions the element of subjectivity or artistic individualism is cooled down. By neutralising those qualities, the artists wanted to "objectivise" their actions (as part of interactions or their "moves" in the games) to adapt them better to the "intersubjective" communication sphere. Such an attitude, "open" towards the other author, made possible not only more effective and efficient communication but also its analysis.

The visual game and interaction techniques developed by the artists served not only to subvert the "art world" but also to actively influence the socio-political reality. Zofia Kulik and Przemysław Kwiek, the chief representatives of Soc Art, tried to employ the interaction technique in the organisation of "space-time propaganda shows." The strategy was a kind of reconnaissance, an attempt to find out whether an "alliance" with the government in order to propagate the innovative achievements of the avant-garde (techniques, methodologies or apparatuses) was possible on a broader social scale. However, the interactions were only able to propagate and distribute the ideas and models of a non-authoritarian society of free, responsible individuals, remaining in open, efficient communication relationships, a society enjoying freedom of religion, freedom of speech and tolerance towards alternative visions of reality or lifestyles. They were structurally unable to promote the "only correct," dominant ideology. The attempt to stage propaganda shows using the method of improvised multimedia interactions proved subversive towards the propaganda means and models dominant in socialistic Poland.

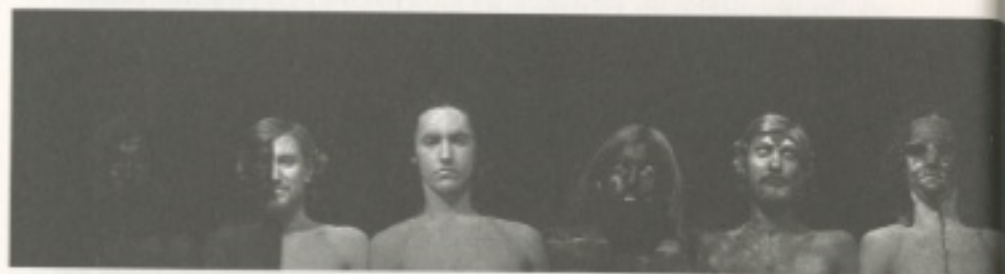
With the games and interactions, the artist no longer creates a work that he then presents to the viewer. He only creates a certain framework, a "context" into which the viewer is invited (interactions, visual games) or "forced"

(camera provocation), so that, as part of his own creative activity or participative power, he can take part in the creative process. In the communication model proposed by the artists, the work emerges at the very end as a product of collaborating individuals (senders and recipients at the same time).

The collective activities of Kwiek, Kulik and Jan S. Wojciechowski culminated in the film *Actions* made in September 1972.⁸ Like with *Open Form*, the title defined the ideological premises and work methodology. Besides the "sculptors" mentioned above, *Actions*, which aimed at integrating the arts, was co-created by musicians, filmmakers, performers and poets. There was no script whatsoever, only elements, or props, that could be used. The main objective of the collaboration process was to direct one's own action towards another participant, in a reference (comment) to his action, gesture or move. The point was an action requiring its author to be aware of the others' actions and to comment on them creatively, while being prepared for his actions to be commented upon creatively by the others. The purpose of *Actions* was to teach creative collaboration to artists of various disciplines; it was a laboratory of the methods and practical procedures of such collaboration.

Zofia Kulik remembers *Actions* in the following way: "Me and Przemek tried, like Hansen had taught us, to keep organising ever new situations, to precisely create backgrounds and environments in which others would behave in some way or do something, or to 'amplify' their constructions or themselves and their actions. During one day we prepared the stands for the actions: word/expression – sound – prop/object. Everyone had to go through all of those."⁹ Arriving at the given stand, each artist, irrespective of the discipline they practiced, had to create their own artistic statement using the medium belonging to the given stand.

Wiktor Gutt and Waldemar Raniszewski occupied a unique position compared with the other students and graduates of Oskar Hansen's and Jerzy Jarnuszkiewicz's studios. They opposed the rational tendencies of quasi-scientific reflection on visual communication (represented by Przemysław Kwiek, Zofia Kulik or Jan S. Wojciechowski), and were aversive towards the use of mathematics, logics, semiotics, or linguistics in the field of art. Instead, they preferred to turn towards methods and aesthetics of communication characteristic for "savage," primitive tribal cultures. They were interested in non-verbal rather than rational and logocentric communication. They explored, and tried to simulate in the field of art, the most primitive and archaic (ritualistic)



Wiktor Gutt, Waldemar Raniżewski
Wielka Rozmowa (Grand Conversation)
1971-2005

Wiktor Gutt, Waldemar Raniżewski
Synkretyczne malowanie (Syncretic painting)
1973

ways of building social bonds, based on collaboration and the logic of gift and exchange. What fascinated Gutt and Raniżewski in "primitive" cultures was the close, virtually integral, connection between art and everyday life, the ritual, and physical expression. The texts of anthropologists, ethnologists and ethnographers, especially those who proposed a different, non-patronising attitude towards the "savages" (such as Marcel Mauss, Emile Durkheim, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Robert Jaulin, Bronisław Malinowski), which they studied, opened them, according to Gutt, to a new praxis and made them aware of the important and universal traditions reflected in body-painting rituals practiced by primitive cultures.

Wiktor Gutt pursued his study of non-verbal forms of communication by initiating a series of interactions with the patients of the mental facility at Nowowiejska Street in Warsaw (where he got a job), and, together with Raniżewski, with children (for the artists, these two groups were the "savages" of our civilisation). Gutt and Raniżewski thus radically abandoned the field of art, in an attempt to root art back in the living communication relations characteristic for the "Others" ignored by our rational culture. By collaborating with children and mentally disabled patients, the two artists tried to discover new, visual process-based ways of communication, of describing the world, otherwise marginalised by our logocentric civilisation.

A separate position in their study of alternative, towards those learned in the process of socialisation, means of communication occupies the so-called Grand Conversation, carried out by the artists from 1972 to Raniżewski's death in 2005. It started when, in a gesture of respect for his friend, Gutt painted on Raniżewski's face colourful patterns and forms imitating "primitive" art. Raniżewski responded by making a wooden mask that was a precise copy of his face painting. The consecutive statements made by the "interlocutors" caused the form to evolve into a large three-dimensional object resembling the modernistic sculptures of the first avant-garde (e.g. Kobra's sculptures) to eventually change into a large (2 x 2 m) cube (tent) which the artists turned inside out (so that the colours were on the inner surface), creating a space of action to which they invited other people. Then they transported the tent/cube from the Jarnuszkiewicz studio, where it originally stood, into the mountains, where they placed it in a natural setting and continued to make their consecutive "statements."

They wrote, "In its first phase, a conversation is usually a reaction to what your partner does, a strongly emotional reaction. The second phase is the result

