

The Crowd Man

Marcin Dudek in conversation with Piotr Lisowski. Published on the occasion of the exhibition 'Marcin Dudek',
MWW Wrocław Contemporary Museum, Wrocław, 2019

Piotr Lisowski: At the beginning of our conversation, let us go back to Cracow in the 1990s, where you grew up. This is an important moment filled with personal experiences that left a mark on your artistic choices. This is also where the source of *The Crowd Man* project is located.

Marcin Dudek: Yes, I could draw from this source indefinitely – first a decade behind the falling curtain, and then another one in the full glare of the floodlights. In the early years of post-communist Poland there was a clash between dying communism and the nascent, merciless free market. And the stadium. I don't know if there is any other place that could show a complete picture of the transformation, perhaps only the parliament. Symbolically, the first match that I went to was the derby of Cracow in 1990. It's worth quoting here how the event was covered by the local press. This is a very colourful and dramatic description entitled *Little Heysel is in Cracow!* [Tempo, no. 13 of 29 January 1990, author: Krzysztof Mrówka]

It started on Sunday morning. The group heading for the match between Cracovia and Wisła demolished the Tarnów–Cracow train. Dozens of windows were smashed. The train only reached the Płaszów station instead of the central one. Small groups of fans wandered around the city, attacking casual passers-by or sometimes supporters of the "enemy". Disorderly behaviour took place near the central post office and the "Jubilat" department store.

The match for the Cup of the Mayor of Cracow, with proceeds going to the National Donations Fun, has started. Twenty-five minutes in, small groups of ... Jagiellonia fans are appearing, ushered in by befriended Wisła supporters. Hooligans waving the banners of Cracovia launch fights, the police intervene. Before the break, the police are chasing aggressive "supporters". Benches are torn out and thrown at the police (sic!). They respond with several charges against the aggressors. In one of the clashes, a police baton breaks a teenage girl's nose. Casual viewers, often children, are hit with stones and pieces of benches! Horror...

The break does not change the situation, which is still explosive in the sector of Cracovia "fans". The police fail to break up the group, there are melee fights with the officers. Hundreds of people are running around the pens, batons are in constant motion. After a temporary absence, the police come back – clad in helmets with visors, wielding shields. Amazingly, the supporters of Cracovia and Wisła, who have been in conflict for years, come to what resembles a non-aggression pact against a common enemy. Despite the demonstration of force by the police, the militant group of spectators has no intention of backing down. Now they have the support of their eternal rivals... As the match draws to an end, these groups clearly begin to arrange a meeting in Błonie...

Wisła fans are coming, Cracovia is coming. The ratio of the groups is 5 to 1 in favour of Wisła. Several thousand people in total! A "march" is being formed. As usual in such cases, they go along ul. Manifestu Lipcowego. Demolition of a lottery kiosk, broken windows. A few dozen metres on, a window of "Polmozbyt" gets shattered, then of a confectionery and of the optician's shop. The human wave moves to Planty. The trail is marked with systematically overturned litter bins and broken benches. Their remains can be found far away from this place... In ul. Jagiellońska, in the buildings of the Jagiellonian University, all windows on the ground floor are smashed. The hooligans turn in ul. Św. Anny. All windows on the ground floor of the "Centrum" department store are shattered, there are traces of robberies. Now to the Market Square. No litter basket is left unturned, flower pots are broken.

From the Market Square to Mały Rynek, then into ul. Mikołajska. Glass is cracking under the boots, an iron store in ul. Mikołajska is burgled. "We are going to the Soviet consulate!" – the chant is heard in ul. Westerplatte. From the front side, the building loses all (except for two) windows, and there were several dozen of them! The aggressors demolish a police booth and beat up the policeman. The riots move to the railway station. Stones are thrown at the Institute of Forensic Analyses. A police car loses its windshield. The presence of considerable police forces calms down some of the hooligans, who are spreading around the city, going to the trains. One of the trains, bound for Muszyna, cannot leave – an emergency brake was used. The police and railroad guards are combing the train in search of the perpetrators. It is full of young people, but scarves are nowhere to be seen. The match ended at 1.45pm, now it is 3.15pm. The situation is slowly calming down. Some officers are now protecting shops without windows...

... and so The Crowd Man was born.

In 1990, you were eleven years old. I understand that you didn't participate in the riots, but you must have seen what was going on at the stadium. Did it intrigue you?

I actually took part in the march after the match and I remember that I was present until the end. Today, it's hard to imagine an eleven-year-old in the midst of such an event, but at that time there was nothing extraordinary about it. I clearly recall the final moments of these riots, when the crowd began to disperse under the mounting pressure of the police and small groups started to return to their districts. I remember that this moment caused a conflict within the group. Then the leaders of the crowd directed their aggression against the groups leaving the main stream of the crowd. Elias Canetti analysed it very skillfully in his book *Crowds and Power*. In one of the chapters, he describes a crowd in a state of panic – the more the crowd has been involved in the spectacle, the more violent it becomes in the state of disintegration.

The same Canetti, while analysing the mechanisms of the crowd, also indicates that the fear of alienation is something that can force you to surrender to the crowd and lead to the emergence of collective violence. How was it in your case? How did peer pressure influence your behaviour?

It is very difficult to define the limits of such pressure. Canetti correctly analyses the behaviour of the crowd, his descriptions are both detailed and universal. It seems to me that it's extremely difficult to describe the behaviour of the crowd from an observer's position. My experiences connected with being in a crowd are very personal and I feel that they go beyond rational analysis. I'm not afraid to say that I was fascinated by the crowd rather than pressured. All you need to do is yield to the human wave. Marching in a thousand-people-strong crowd stirs you in a primeval way. I

EDEL ASSANTI

18 Little Titchfield Street, London W1W 7BU
+44 (0) 207 637 8537

remember being in a few marches passing through the historical centre of Cracow, our chants echoed loudly on the facades of old tenement houses. Gustave Le Bon would probably describe it as the voice of the dead.

The narrative of the exhibition begins before entering the museum itself. On the facade of the building, which once served as a German air-raid shelter, there hangs a twenty-eight metre flag, which you called *Punch the Sky*. As a kind of magnet, it attracts with its colour and symbolism. What is this banner?

A partially burnt flag is one of the stadium rituals of destroying trophies of feuding clubs during derby matches. Sewing the flags of many clubs together along one line and partially burning them is an attempt to destroy identity, ideological erasure. The half-burnt fabric is caught in a trap of ideologies that are trying to burn it up or fly it, a bit like my generation. Analogously, each public building manifests its belonging to a given structure by means of a flag or emblem. We currently see a number of nice flags fluttering in front of the main entrance to the museum, but it looked different in the past. The history of the destruction of symbols is as rich as their creation, e.g. countless fragments of Soviet propaganda films showing the destruction of Nazi symbols. The scale of victory is determined by the number of trampled symbols.

To reach the proper space of the exhibition, we have to go through a turnstile. Squeezing through the *Recovery and Control* installation is intended to not only allow physical access to the display, but above all it forces the visitors to enter individually. Are we supposed to feel like a crowd waiting to be let in to watch the show?

I've always been fascinated with the transformation of the crowd after crossing the turnstile. Isolating and meticulously frisking individuals before entering the stadium was an attempt to institutionalise the crowd. Of course, this was a temporary change. Immediately after entering the sector and uniting with the group, the individual was cleansed. The crowd would again become unpredictable; the lack of numbered seats additionally contributed to uniting the human mass. The current system of sector segregation and seat numbering has destroyed the specificity of stadiums from the 1990s and created a visible socio-economic hierarchy.

Moving on, we come across the main element of the exhibition – the installation called *Breaks Into Song*, whose shape refers to the stadium stand. By focusing on this architectural form, you emphasise several different aspects. The stadium symbolises a spectacle, emotions, competition, crowd, opposition, violence, aggression, death, capital or power. In your own way, you deconstruct the concept of the stadium by showing its “skeleton” and very complex mechanisms that may exist within it. How does this structure work?

In principle, this is the anatomy of spectacle. I wanted to do an “X-ray” of the entire stand. The steel skeleton looks like a burned, broken bone. The digested layer of the sector’s “body” is an attempt to present the destructive waves released during such an event. Escalation of violence in the sector is to some extent self-destructive – isolated sectors are laboratories of violence. At the same time, this is where the stadium hierarchy is established. While exploring the architecture of the spectacle, I had the opportunity to visit the amphitheatre in Pompeii. This is one of the first arenas where riots in the stands were recorded. They took place in the year AD 59. The escalation of violence between the Nuceriaans and the Pompeians caused the Senate to prohibit the latter to organise similar events in the future (*eius modi coetus*). In Cracow, it would simply be called a holy war. Twice a year, the two teams from the city compete not only on the pitch. Outside the stadium, there are fierce clashes in the surrounding neighbourhoods. Looking at the map of Cracow, you can compare the suburbs to the stadium stands – it is actually there that the warring groups fight throughout the year. The skeletons of the sectors that I prepared for *The Crowd Man* exhibition could also be perceived as two feuding housing estates separated by a street.

In thinking about the concept behind the *Breaks Into Song* installation, the aspect of the architecture of the museum, built on a circular plan, was also important. In a sense, we could refer to the architecture of the spectacle both in the context of the stadium and the museum building, bearing in mind that the original purpose of the latter was military.

The motif of an arena converted into fortifications has appeared throughout the history of the architecture of spectacle. For example, the amphitheatre in Nîmes after the fall of the Roman Empire served for a long time as protection against the invasion of Muslims, and today it is a venue for heavy metal concerts. Returning to *Crowds and Power*, Canetti presents an interesting concept of the crowd as a ring. The enclosed arena becomes a place where the spectators turn their backs to the reality of the city and levitate in the ecstasy of the spectacle, consuming the mass euphoria of the entire arena and of themselves.

While conducting your research on stadium history, you also referred to disasters, as in the case of the work *The Stone Steps of East Sector*, which alludes to the tragedy at the Luzhniki stadium in Moscow in 1982. Your object is a peculiar, highly abstract collage. What did you want to say about that event?

In *The Stone Steps*... I tried to render the multi-layered nature of the mass event, where the combination of weather conditions, stadium architecture, the behaviour of stewards and the events on the pitch led to the tragic finale of this meeting. When I start work on a new collage, I often analyse the situation as if I was sitting in front of multiple monitors; I use archival materials, participants' accounts, press clippings, architecture, statistics, etc. I began exploring the subject of stadium disasters when I moved to Brussels in 2012. Currently, my studio is located in the vicinity of the Heysel stadium – the arena of the tragic events before the 1985 final match of the European Cup between Juventus and Liverpool, which took the lives of thirty-nine people. This is one of the most tragic stadium disasters. The one at the Luzhniki stadium is less known, because the Soviet apparatus tried to conceal the scale of the disaster. The number of victims was not officially announced, and their bodies were buried in a mass grave. It's hard to imagine a situation when hundreds of people are trampled to death on icy stairs while the rest of the stadium celebrates a scored goal.

The theme of aggression and stadium violence is directly raised by the works *Too Close For Comfort [Poland - Romania 1995]* and *Control Room*. Both installations are based on source materials found by you that show the events that actually took place. What are these stories?

The first series of works, called *Too Close For Comfort*, consists of a collection of photographs taken by one of the fans during the national team match against Romania in Zabrze in 1995. The photographer-fan documented the full picture of the day, from the fans' journey to the match to the final whistle. The entire photographic series very accurately presents the events of that day. Finding the photographic material and confronting

it with my own experiences was crucial. I was present at the match on this day; interestingly, I was part of the same group and I remember a guy running around with a small camera. There are very few photos from that period, because only analogue cameras were available, and they were rarely brought to the stadium.

Control Room addresses another interesting problem related to the role of the media in influencing the behaviour of hooligans.

In fact, the only cameras that registered match riots belonged to the media or the police. The publication of any press information with photographs of disturbances at the stadium was a real triumph for the hooligans. The media served the role of a riot-meter – the more spectacular it got, the more publicity it attracted. These correlations are accurately described by Jean Baudrillard in his book *The Transparency of Evil*, in the chapter entitled *The Mirror of Terrorism*, where he presents a television broadcast of the Heysel disaster as a real act of violence. For several years I have been collecting film materials related to the phenomenon of the crowd, and *Control Room* features their selection prepared specifically for this exhibition, in which the viewer becomes an officer supervising a mass event. Displaying the video materials on the individual monitors gives an illusion of control. One of the screens shows riots at the stadium in Bydgoszcz, which reveals the unpredictability of the aggressive crowd. It is accompanied by comments of the policemen recording the riots from behind a one-way mirror, which made it possible to register the whole event from within the hooligan group.

It is impossible to pinpoint the causes of aggressive behaviour. It is a process influenced by numerous social, economic and political factors. Your participation in the radical fan community was connected with the environment and the time in which you found yourself as a teenager. You address this period especially in the works *Wara* and *Demiboss*, which you call “anti-readymades.” A balaclava and a flyers jacket, popular in the 1990s. At that time, the orange colour of the jacket signalled potential problems.

Stereotypically, the local backyard was a signpost to the stadium. The street prepared the subsequent generations of fans to enter the sector. It did not matter whether you came from a good family or not, the idea of being part of the group was very attractive to everyone. In my case, the environment definitely influenced my decision to become a fan. I was heavily involved in the fan movement until 1998. Countless trips around the country meant that I was in the centre of fan life. I cannot compare this period to any other experiences in my later life: hundreds of faces flashing in memory, being a tormentor and a victim, pain and violence, a vicious circle that has left a deep mark in my memory. The flyers jacket was a kind of protective vest and it became one of the first objects that I used in my artistic practice, for the first time during a performance at Harlan Levey Projects in Brussels. I dipped it in orange paint, and the lining of the jacket reacted like a sponge, absorbing enough paint to let me cross the entire space of the newly opened gallery. A trajectory of my walk remained visible in the form of imprints of my torso and arms, somewhat resembling the horizon line in a stadium filled with a crowd of people wearing orange jackets. In the 1990s, it was common in the stadiums to turn the jackets on the orange side out in a state of euphoria or escalation of violence. The orange jackets probably made their debut during the Poland vs. England match in Chorzów in 1993. I remember the turbulent mass of orange jackets moving very quickly through the sectors of the Silesian Stadium. It looked a bit like the interior of an active volcano, with lava spewing in every direction. The so-called chimneys appeared a few years later. In 1997, at the Tri-City derby, a masked group invaded the stadium. In response, anti-terrorists opened fire from smoothbore weapons. For the first time in the history of riot prevention in Poland, the police opened fire at the crowd from this type of weapon. It was the last away match that I attended. The balaclava, which is a reminder of this trip, was later used as a model for the cast of *Wara*, which was the pseudonym of one of the participants in the riots.

Offal is another work belonging to the “autobiographical” series. The form of the object resembles a dangling torso or a punching bag, which triggers a clear association with struggle or training.

Offal is autobiographical archaeology. The object is made of paper pulp produced from my collection of fan zines and dozens of issues of the magazine *Wielcy Malarze* [Great Painters], which accompanied me during my transformation into an artist. The combination of the two different worlds resulted in the creation of something resembling an ancient sculpture and a boxing bag. You are right to identify it with struggle or training. The transformation required many years of struggling with the matter of memory, and what remained was just this chewed offal.

The video *Provision of Cover* combines all the threads raised by the exhibition. It is a peculiar lens focusing autobiographical references and your research on the phenomena of sport and performance, crowd psychology and violence. You situate all of it in a socio-political context. The film shows a collage based on the images of specific people. Who are they? They don't have much in common at first glance.

Yes, it's my football team. What connects them is different experiences of the crowd. Starting with Gustav Le Bon, the founding father of crowd psychology, and ending with Dzhabrail Kadiev and Zaur Sadajew, two Chechen footballers associated for a short time with Beitar Jerusalem, who fell victim to harassment from the radical part of Beitar fans. Each of the featured characters is confronted with video material oozing in through the cut-outs in the portraits and blending everything together. Another interesting example is Mauricio Alonso “Pipo” Rodriguez Lindo, a Salvadorian football player who scored the winning goal against Honduras in the memorable match in 1969. This match provoked the escalation of the conflict between the two countries. In this case, the video material surfacing from underneath the player's photo is snapshots from the so-called hundred-hour war which then broke out. The entire incident was described by Ryszard Kapuściński in the book *The Soccer War*. Looking at the falling figures of animated characters, we also discover the portrait of Hassan al-Thawadi, the person responsible for the preparations for the next World Cup in Qatar in 2022. At the expense of the lives of thousands of workers, many of them from India and Nepal, stadiums are being built for fans craving emotions. There is an infinite number of controversies surrounding football. On numerous occasions, the people appointed by state authorities to secure such events failed to fulfil their duties. This was the case with the disaster at the Hillsborough stadium in Great Britain, which is still being investigated by prosecutors. David Duckenfield, who was then responsible for security at the stadium, decided to open the gate leading to the central pens, which were already overcrowded, and as a result of his decision nearly a hundred people died crushed by the pressing crowd. Another, more personal thread was the inclusion of a photograph of my father, who between 1967 and 1970 served as an active officer of the Citizens' Militia. The blue strip passing through the bottom part of the photo refers to the characteristic line running around the militia car. The material documenting the riots on the coast in 1970 served as the background here. A bit further down the list, I included my own photo from 1997 accompanied by a heavily collaged footage from the police camera, shot during the Tri-City derby in Gdynia in the same year. While juxtaposing the photographs of father and son, I was thinking about the deep division and differences in biographies, resulting in literally being on both sides of the barricade.