

Marcin Dudek in conversation with Jeremy Epstein

December 2019

Akumulator replicates a real space, examples of which are documented in your 2013 artist book *Akumulatory*. These are communal sites of male bonding through physical activity, as implied by the translation of the title (“Battery”), but ones that are deeply personal to you. Can you describe your experience of and relationship to the basement gym?

I measured the actual basement where in the nineties, among others activities, physical training took place. I then reconstructed the space within a steel frame. The steel structure holds together a multitude of objects alongside some authentic elements that I extracted from the original basement – for example, the wooden door was part of the original room. It is totally covered with layers of posters and packaging materials, including the cardboard box from our first black and white TV set. During that period, I remember that nothing went to waste. Even packaging was reused as an insulation material, and in the end the door was so heavily overloaded with materials added over the years that we weren't able to access the basement room anymore. In this sense, *Akumulator* is not only a gym, but also a space of accumulating leftover materials from above ground.

In that period, communal underground spaces were a vital part of our daily reality. There weren't any alternatives for young people living in the housing projects at that time, so many ideas were born out of basic survival instincts, and the gym was one of those. I miss that creative clarity – now we live in the world of the “hyper-readymade”, and those instincts have been corrupted. But fortunately, life below ground still continues in the present day. In the early days of the free market in Poland, my sister opened a hairdressing salon next door to our gym, which still operates to this day from the same location. Sometimes I feel as though we belong to a past world, like *Blacky* from Emir Kusturica's film “Underground”; no matter how crazy the world above ground is, what matters most is the reality below.

I like the link to Underground - especially as *Blacky* ends up a prisoner of the past to the extent that he cannot escape his safe haven beneath the ground. You seem to share this sense of a complex relationship to your past, which in my opinion *Akumulator* expresses perfectly: on one hand this is a dark, menacing space where the equipment feels precariously overused, rusty and dangerous. On the other, it is punctuated by painstakingly recreated autobiographical references that verge on sentimental.

But for a moment *Blacky* escapes his inferno underground paradise just in the time for another crisis – the Yugoslavian civil war. I think *Akumulator* also expresses a crisis: it manifests the way people organize themselves in a moment of political or economic instability. From reinventing objects to the human ability to adapt to new circumstances, the environment elicits a response, and the individual impulse is to act to find a solution. The economic situation of the 80s and 90s dramatically impacted me, my family and many people from working class backgrounds in Poland. At the end of the communist era, there was an absolute lack of basic products or money needed to kick-start the capitalist system. This situation created a total paradox. These memories are deeply embedded and resurface in my work very frequently. *Akumulator* is an autobiographical space, but it isn't sentimental. I see it more as a manual for an unforeseen crisis yet to come, which, one day or another, will certainly cease to be hypothetical. The gym is not used as an empty exercise machine for repetitive bodybuilding movements; rather, it is a manifestation of resistance and a laboratory for solution finding, either as an alternative pathway for crime-driven youths, or a model for survival in economically deprived areas.

When I used the word “sentimental”, I was trying to point to the duality that I have always felt in your autobiographical work. In an intellectual sense you explore your own experience of the situation in Poland at that moment (and the hooligan subculture that emerged from it) from a distance, using it as a vehicle to discuss group identity, crowd psychology and the specific events of that place and time; but you go to great lengths to portray your experiences, the people and spaces involved with sensitivity to how and who they really were. In *Akumulator*, the viewer comes to realise that the dimensions of the room, the door, the design of the carpet, and the punch bag, for instance, all make precise, personal references. Could you describe the origin of the materials and objects in *Akumulator*, and the decisions that led to your using them?

I believe personal experience should always guide our choices, or at least form a skeleton to be dressed by the reality of the present moment. I often think of *Akumulator* as a solitary cell in a biological sense. When combined with the right equilibrium of forces and substances, it creates the conditions to become an organism. The materials, objects and experiences are the perfect formula for the work to take shape. *Akumulator* continues to evolve by absorbing new elements.

I went back to my hometown and measured the exact dimensions to recreate the physical scale of the room. The architectural space then formed a foundation for the other elements to take shape. During my visit, an avalanche of details started to emerge – for example, I came across an old cheap imitation Persian rug. Back in the 90s, these rugs became very popular in Poland and for me, they marked one of my few encounters with oriental culture at that time. They were often used to insulate the cold floor of the basement gym. For *Akumulator*, I made my own version of those carpets using collaged cloth tape. I created a new ornament influenced by the Soviet style of geometric architecture.

I connected the space/room with some of my previous work by incorporating other sculptures – for instance, *Cage Branding is Less Exciting* was a punching bag made out of the leather jacket I wore throughout my youth. The object was first made for my 2013 exhibition at Harlan Levey Projects, entitled *Too Close For Comfort*, where it was displayed as an almost human-scale punching bag. Two years later, I filled it with papier maché paste made from old hooligan zines and art history magazines that I had collected in my teenage years. It was then sliced open at Leto Gallery, in my 2015 exhibition *Head in the Sand*.

The contents spilled out on the floor like the entrails of a beaten body. I like to use the sculpting process to create a new biography for the object – it helps to connect all the elements to each other. The autobiographical transition from my hooligan/criminal youth to an autodidact painter/artist took time, so to portray this transition properly, it is important to allow sufficient passage of time in the making of my work. In 2018, the punching bag (*Cage Branding is Less Exciting*) was annexed by the *Akumulator* installation, but not before it had given birth to another sculpture: *Offal*, 2017, was a sculpture I made from the entrails of *Cage Branding is Less Exciting*, successfully maturing to the point of its own solitary existence.

Another element within the installation is the large hanging collage, which in this context reminds me of your early collages that referenced networks of tunnels or plans of underground buildings. You mentioned to me that the collage in *Akumulator* was inspired by Piranesi's *Imaginary Prisons (Capricci, 1745-50)*. On a technical level I find this a fascinating touchstone, as one of the most consistent features of your work is the geometry that defines your sculptures, installations and collages; like Piranesi, we might refer to your compositions as spatial paradoxes, or "impossible geometry" of competing perspectives that activate the viewer's imagination. But the other side to the Piranesi reference is the subject matter - underground imprisonment, mysterious mechanical torture devices, spiralling paths leading nowhere - are these also connections you recognise in the work?

Before I came across Piranesi's etchings, I was very attracted to the work of another Italian peninsula painter, Giovanni Battista Tiepolo. I was fascinated by the energy and apparent violence of late Baroque painting. The art of *Vedute*, or imaginary architecture, combines fascination with the ruins of the past with the visions and tremors of the socially changing world of the second half of the 18th century. It all seems like a distant past, but it always felt accessible and relevant to me.

The rich and spectacular geometry of Tiepolo's work was my first guide to understanding the complexity of composition. Later came Piranesi, with his imaginary prison series, where his perspectives reach towards total freedom. I found Piranesi's works very inspiring, in contemplating his solitary struggle with impossible geometry. When creating many of my collage works, I have often felt like an inmate of the imaginary prison, diving into detail, twisting in different directions, operating mighty machines, questioning gravity, and somehow trying to connect contradictory elements into an organized chaos across the limited space of the panel.

I believe Piranesi chose to situate his prison series underground in order to set his imagination free. The invisible world below us always provided fertile ground for constructing utopias: from post-apocalyptic visions of society living in harmony, like in *The Underground Man* by Gabriel Tarde, to the bitter reality of the Fritzl story, the underground embraces the best and the worst of humanity. In the case of the basement gyms, the underground location meant that the gyms were hidden, preparatory spaces, DIY laboratories for the body before it emerges ready for confrontation above ground.

These confrontations have been staged in your performances, when the limited space of a static collage gives way to something unpredictable, and the latent violence of pieces like *Akumulator* becomes real and at times threatening. You recently spoke to Piotr Lisowski (Curator at MWW Wroclaw Contemporary Museum) about being "stirred in a primeval way" by your personal experience of football riots in the nineties. You've spoken to me in the past about wanting to create an "adrenaline response" to your work - do your performances aim to stir us in the same way?

As in many scenarios, theory must give way to praxis. My work often swings between two states - the static medium of collage, where the process of making and research function as a sort of visual essay on crowd psychology and individual identity, versus the real interactions of performance and crowd confrontation. The experience of being part of the crowd was imprinted deeply into my subconscious - I exercise performance as an impulse to evoke the memories of my youth and the feeling of participation in the violent crowd.

The presence of a crowd during an event is a key factor in reconstructing real situations from the past. When setting up the landscape of my performances, I often create architectural obstacles or use existing ones to simulate the experience of control. Fencing or walls are frequently vandalized during my performances; there is an endless struggle between security and anarchy, order versus chaos, offensive behaviour versus civilized.

I feel trapped inside the cycle of contradictory realities of the individual versus the crowd, and I use the performative gesture as an equalising measure. On one hand, the educated, liberal individual guided by consciousness and knowledge; on the other, the savage, uneducated mass, conducted by fear of the unknown. In my performances, I try to merge the two margins into one organism. In this way, my 2017 exhibition *Steps and Marches* depicted the struggle between the individual and the masses, posing the question as to whether the crowd is guided by the leader, or whether the leader is directed by the power of the crowd? Or maybe every individual possesses the suppressed impulse of the crowd within themselves - a primeval voice guiding each of us through decisive moments.