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Okrutny teatr samospaleń

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samospaleń

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Protesty samobójcze w ogniu
i ich echa w kulturze współczesnej



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Summary

1.

The book *Okrutny teatr samospaleń. Protesty samobójcze w ogniu i ich echa w kulturze współczesnej* (A Cruel theatre of self-immolations. Suicide protests by fire and their resonances in contemporary culture) examines the phenomenon of protest self-immolations from a performative perspective and analyses selected related art works.

Protest self-immolations are voluntary, demonstrative and radical performances of persuasion that are undertaken to defend the values recognized by a person who decides to employ this form of protest as a worthy sacrifice of their own life. They are watched (both live and mediated) and are meant to be watched, because it consists of them setting out to express disagreement and demand change through the language of pain, the body, and fire. They can, therefore, be studied as other performances, by scrutinizing the performer, his/her actions, the protest's motives and circumstances, its historical and socio-political contexts, its time and place, the course of action, those who witness it as well as the reception of the act and its aftermath.

In the second half of the twentieth century, after the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thích Quảng Đức's self-immolation in 1963, protest self-immolations entered the global repertoire of peaceful protest activities associated with non-violent struggle. The core of the publication (part 3) consists of six detailed case studies of self-immolations performed for various reasons by the following people:

- Thích Quảng Đức (1963)
- Norman Morrison (1965)
- Ryszard Siwiec (1968)
- Jan Palach (1969)
- Chun Tae-il (1970)
- Mohamed Bouazizi (2010).

These case studies are preceded by general considerations (part 1) which form the theoretical basis for the later detailed analyses. Between these (part 2) is inserted a calendar. This takes the form of microstudies in chronological order enriched with information about artworks devoted to the given case (if there were any). The chronology allows the reader to grasp the global dimension of the phenomenon of self-immolations, its scale and the spectrum of issues raised by the protesters. In order to underline the fact that the theme of suicide protests by fire does not function in art only in relation to specific cases but also at a more general level, an essay on Andrei Tarkovsky's penultimate film *Nostalgia* (1983), which shows a fire protest by an outcast who rejects the cynical and secularised world, is included.

The book – unlike earlier studies of self-immolation in psychology, sociology, religious studies and political science – examines the phenomenon from a performative perspective and tries to shed light on protest self-immolations by also focusing on artistic responses to them. In the publication, numerous works which refer to protest self-immolations are considered. The following are studied in greater detail:

- the so-called shockumentary film *Mondo cane 2 (Dog's world 2)* directed by Gualtiero Jacopetti and Franco Prosperi (1963)
- photographs of Thích Quảng Đức in flames by Malcolm Browne (1963)
- the painting *Special forces (After Banksy)* by Van Thanh Rudd (2008)
- the documentary film essay *Loin du Vietnam (Far from Vietnam)* directed by the artistic collective coordinated by Chris Marker (1967)
- the performance *US* and the film *Tell me lies* directed by Peter Brook (1966, 1968)
- the documentary film *Usłyszcie mój krzyk (Hear my cry)* and the radio drama *Testament* directed by Maciej Drygas (1991, 1992)
- the architecture-sculpture work *The house of the suicide* and *The house of the mother of the suicide* designed by John Hejduk (produced in: 1990, 1991, 2016, 2017)
- the TV miniseries *The Burning bush* directed by Agnieszka Holland (2013)
- the feature film *Areumdaun cheongnyeon Jeon Tae-il (Beautiful youth Chun Tae-il)* directed by Park Kwang-su (1995)
- the novella *Par le feu. Récit (By fire. A story)* written by Tahar Ben Jelloun (2011)
- the film *Nostalghia (Nostalgia)* directed by Andrei Tarkovsky (1983).

2.

Self-immolation is cruel in a twofold way. It is literally cruel, merciless and ruthless on both a physical and a psychological level. Above all it is cruel to the person who performs it, but also – to a degree – to the witnesses or observers of his/her actions, who might be shocked and experience complete stupefaction. The act often leads to the death of a protester, at other times to the very serious detriment of his/her health. The consequence of self-immolation is usually a burnt body – *abjection* which can awaken aversion and, which, at the very least, some of us would hate to touch. The act leaves behind ash and smoke, and the smell of burnt skin and melting fat. But it is also cruel in an Artaudian sense. For the person performing it, it is the result of the ultimate self-examination and the iron-will consequence of expressing one's own beliefs. It is performed to stir those who watch, wake them up from emotional lethargy and deprive them of their tepid morality. It is to push them towards self-analysis and examining their consciences and to ask themselves funda-

mental questions – whether it is worth giving up one's life for a cause, and if so, what this cause might be. But is this act a performance? Is it right to talk about the *theatre* of self-immolations, even cruel theatre, like Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty? Or is it simply cynical to perceive of this act as a theatrical event or spectacle?

As Dobrochna Ratajczakowa, eminent Polish drama and theatre researcher, has noted, “performances should not be associated with art only,” and “the boundary separating them from life is indeterminate and shaky.” Ratajczakowa is convinced that reality can become a performance if it “gets framed as an appearance or a presentation of a certain cultural behaviour, removed from so-called life and put under the pressure of the spectator's gaze” (2015: 14). She refers to the French theatre theorist, Patrice Pavis, who linked performance to the category of *ostension*, that is “communication by showing or revealing something” (1998: 336). Pavis called spectacle “everything that is meant to be seen” (1998: 585), also reality “as long as its ostensible nature is put into it, thus making it an objectified object of perception” (1998: 586). I believe that the intention of those who perform in order to make their actions visible and perceptible to others is key to recognizing whether or not a situation or an action is a performance. In other words, excerpts of reality framed as a spectacle by observers without the knowledge of those being observed have, in my view, another ontology, but – of course – they can be treated like performances and analysed as such.

To decide whether, in the light of the above considerations, self-immolations are performances is simpler, because they entail standing out (from a row or the crowd) and in essence they are intentional acts of communication undertaken for persuasive purposes. Their main vehicles of argument are self-inflicted bodily suffering and the element of fire. In short, they are directed towards others. The basic motive for auto-destruction by self-immolation is not taking one's own life as a consequence of stress, depression, frustration or other disorders, but reaching out to an audience, both on the spot and to those who learn about the event from the media. Self-immolations focus the community's attention and tear at the fabric of social life. They are performed in public (most often in symbolic places or places associated with authority), intentionally and voluntarily, in defense of values that the individual acknowledges as worthy. They are one of the most drastic ways of drawing attention to the social crisis and tensions related to it, yet they are also an uncompromising attempt to dispel this crisis by the sacrifice of one's own life. They are therefore an element of social drama, as understood by the British anthropologist Victor Turner (1920–1983), and may lead to the emergence of anti-structural communities where a feeling of *communitas* arises. And, as such, they appear to be ‘acts-performances,’ because – on the one hand – they are acts of sacrifice and communication, and on the other – they are demonstrative and performative, and they exploit the spectacular and symbolic potential of fire. Moreover, self-immolations are often orchestrated with care regarding every detail of the event, which places them alongside other types of social, political and cultural performances.

In self-immolations, a tension between individual and collective dimensions manifests itself. The person who protests by auto-annihilation is alone in the face of death (in essence, death is always individual and solitary), but often performs the act for a collective cause. This is related – as I have mentioned – with the intention of manifesting one's beliefs, which are often considered to be as important for others too. It is precisely this demonstration that is the essence of the event – the sacrifice of one's life serves as an amplification of the signal and becomes a message itself. Its content often reveals its meaning in others' consciences, sometimes breaking through the armor of their indifference and encouraging them to act in defense of a case. It should be noted that although these acts are voluntary, individual and (most often) one-off, they are often inspired by deeds of the same type performed before. It is also worth noting that self-immolations contrast with religious systems which (more or less strictly) forbid suicide and – therefore – require extra resolve from the individual to carry out his/her decision to the end.

Undoubtedly, acts of self-immolation are spectacular and this links them to suicide attacks. Unlike them, however, protest self-burnings almost always annihilate or damage only those who decide to express disagreement in a most radical and drastic way. And while the common denominator of suicide bombings and self-immolations is spectacular terror, it is easy to draw a line between them. The former awaken terror in people by determination of a suicide, the unexpected annihilation of others, and (often) the scale of destruction. In the case of the latter, the danger and dread appear as a consequence of the confrontation with the voluntary exposure of the individual to a suffering which often leads to death in an extremely painful way. The specific nature of self-immolations is linked to their physical dimension – they gain their strength as drastic and borderline somatic events.

As can be seen from the above comments, I do not use the term 'theatre' in the title of this book solely in a metaphorical sense. The theatre, associated in social and political life mainly with the field of unreality and illusion, sometimes linked with pretending, a lack of seriousness and even tomfoolery, is here understood differently – as a synonym for an earnest performance and address in the public sphere directed primarily to others' consciences. I understand conscience to be the individual's moral sense, rooted in empathy, which allows him or her to properly evaluate his/her own conduct.

3.

Protest self-burnings ignite artists' imaginations: not surprisingly, since they prove the uncompromising nature of human beings who are capable of sacrificing their lives to amplify the expression of their disagreements and objections. Art – as an exemplary space of searching for new solutions, as a space for transformations and rejection of the status quo, and sometimes as a space for radicalism and rebellion – willingly confronts examples of bor-

derline actions. After all, it also tests, pushes and renegotiates the limits, edges and extremes. And yet most of the works that respond to cases of real self-immolation constitute their commemorations in a rather conservative form, as if putting themselves in the service of a far greater cause. Works that raise doubts and question clichés are rare in this field. In the artistic domain, those people who decide to protest by self-immolation are most often glorified while the heroic dimension of their acts is underlined and cherished. Provocative or iconoclastic works are almost nonexistent, as if the artists were intimidated by the drastic nature of such events and their radicalism; as if they were afraid to trivialize or desecrate them. After all, as Polish teatrologist Grzegorz Niziołek has emphatically remarked, “no shock induced by a work of art can be treated as equivalent to someone’s traumatic experience” (2016: 15). But there are exceptions, as exemplified in the work of Polish performer and media artist, Piotr Wyrzykowski (born 1968), who in 2014 created a set for virtual self-immolation. His witty and controversial work consisted of an app for mobile phones and a portable podium which enabled a person to protest anything and anywhere (but only once a day) and inform others about it via social media.

This does not mean, of course, that self-immolation in modern culture, and especially in its current predominant form of pop culture, functions exclusively as an untouchable holiness protected by a rule of unwritten political correctness. On the contrary. There are hundreds of humorous drawings and graffiti in real and virtual spaces that exploit the theme of self-immolation and treat it mainly as an allegory of opposition to various issues. This motif was even used in campaigns for promoting goods, as in one Pepsi campaign in 2008 (but it caused such a controversy that the promotional posters had to be withdrawn). The unintentional effect of trivializing protest by self-immolation was also triggered by Polish rapper and music producer Andrzej Żuromski (born 1977), who in 2013 in the Polsat TV studio soaked his shirt with a small amount of a flammable liquid and set fire to himself in order to show off. He quickly removed his clothes and the program manager extinguished the fire almost immediately. Such actions prove that self-immolation is strongly present in the collective imagination where it functions as an equivalent of and synonym for intransigent protest. As acknowledged by other artworks which are examined in this volume, self-immolation is seen as a gesture of an ultimate and solemn protest, which one cannot pass by indifferently.

Translated by the author with Paul Allain

