

The Attractive Banality of Natalia LL's "Consumer Art" (1972–1975) *Agata Jakubowska*

In October 2006 the young Polish artist Karol Radziszewski organised a happening entitled "Try This".¹ The visitors of the gallery were encouraged to participate in a competition for the most erotic banana consumption. Very soon, as the participants claim, initial intimidation turned into good fun. A poster announcing Radziszewski's action clearly referred to Natalia LL's *Consumer Art*. Originating in 1972 the work is a series of photographs and films presenting female protagonists eating (individually or in pairs) bananas, sausages and pudding. I shall return to Radziszewski's happening at the end of my text. I decided to begin with its recollection in order to stress that *Consumer Art* is vividly present in the Polish art history. My text shall be, to a significant degree, concentrated on the forms of this presence.

Consumer Art emerged in the neo-avant-garde circle, within which Natalia LL functioned. Together with her male friends,² (male and not female, as women were absent from this circle) she established PERMAFO Gallery (PERMAFO meaning permanent formalisation). In their manifesto the artists claimed:

Knowledge of the present can only be approached by accumulating signals received from reality. Multiplying their registration is a guarantee of diminishing deformations and mistakes caused by selection based on habits, conventions, traditions.³

At the beginning of the 1970s, Natalia LL made several sequences of photographs depicting banal activities ("ordinary and banal events", as she wrote herself at that time), such as uttering words, resting, eating, making love. These works were perceived by her circle as rationalised, objectified and subjected to discipline, when it comes to the way of their realisation and their formal order.

¹ Karol Radziszewski, *Try This*, Galeria Pies (Dog Gallery), Poznań, October 13–14, 2006.

² Andrzej Lachowicz, Zbigniew Dłubak, Antoni Dzieduszycki.

³ Quoted in: *Natalia LL. Sztuka i energia* (Natalia LL. Art and Energy), ex. cat. Wrocław: National Museum, 1994, p. 10.



Illustration: Natalia LL, *Consumer Art*, 1974, 90x70 cm.

From the very beginning, however, the presence (in these “permanent registrations”) of various elements related to sexuality has introduced confusion into such a perception of Natalia LL’s works. The artist’s husband and partner in work wrote with some obstinacy that *Consumer Art* was “a morphological research on the abilities of a sign and capacity of a medium”.⁴ Editing board of *Sztuka* (Art) periodical, in which he published his text, answered in a polemical manner that this work was “explicitly erotic” as it was not a representation of a

⁴ Andrzej Lachowicz, “Natalia LL”, *Sztuka* (Art) 4 1975, p. 42.

girl eating a banana, which “unexpectedly transforms” into an erotic image, but “a series of photographs of a chick who played with a banana near her mouth and inside it, so that her representation provoked erotic associations”.⁵

The tensions present in the reception of *Consumer Art* have for a long time oscillated between being described as “a research on the abilities of the sign” and “an explicitly erotic work”. It was often claimed to be trivial or banal, which can only be seen from today’s perspective as a way “male” critics deal with this uneasy message. Feminist interpretations did not follow at all. At that time, no one – not even the artist herself – was able to propose such an interpretation. The reason for this was the lack of an appropriate critical vocabulary, mostly because neither feminism nor women’s art existed in Poland at the beginning of the 70s. Natalia LL aimed (without success) at propagating feminism and feminist art in Poland.⁶ This was, however, after *Consumer Art* had been created, and after its potential for feminist interpretation had been discovered by Western women art critics. After these critics got in touch with Natalia LL, *Consumer Art* was included in exhibitions of women’s art,⁷ and in various publications devoted to it. It was, for example, published on the cover of *Heute Kunst*,⁸ and, reproduced on the invitation and poster of a big international exhibition entitled *Frauen Kunst – Neue Tendenzen*, organised in 1975 in Innsbruck.

Some later statements of Natalia LL and the form of her participation in the women’s movement (or rather the lack of any participation at all) prove that her relation to feminism was, to a certain degree, accidental and superficial. At some point, the artist distanced herself from feminism to the extent that she published a text, in which she wrote: “in a way I got close to the feminist movement, although I am aware of the fact that feminist xenophobia is not that much a liberation of women as it is their imprisonment in the claws of vagina and uterus (1991)”.⁹ Her later statements, related to the fact that she was being invited to exhibitions of women’s art and reminded of her feminist ‘episode’ from the 70s, were softened and point to some strategic advantages of feminism:

Women as well as men have good art and they have simply been ignored.
[...] It was also the reason to gather in groups and exhibit in well-known

⁵ *Op.cit.*, p.43.

⁶ She organised the first feminist exhibition in Poland: *Women’s Art*, Jatki Gallery PSP, Warsaw (featuring the following artists: Carolee Schneemann, Noemi Midan, Suzy Lake).

⁷ Where she was exhibited next to Valie Export, Annette Messager, Gina Pane, Carolee Schneemann and Marina Abramovic.

⁸ *Heute Kunst* 9 1975. See also: *Flash Art* 48–49 1974, *Flash Art* 52–53, 58–59 1975.

⁹ Natalia LL, “Teoria głowy” (Theory of Head), *Exit* 6 1991, p. 224.

places, in order to come into being, to show what we were making in our studios.¹⁰

For her, this strategic aspect of the gathering of women was of greater importance, because it was joining the movement of women's art that had granted her the possibility to become recognized, if only for a short while, in the international (or at least European) art world.

It is important to stress that Natalia LL is not an exception among Polish women artists – in Poland there has never developed a circle of artists and critics working theoretically and practically for women's or feminist art. Any isolated initiatives of this type met with lack of understanding and support.¹¹ Only in the 1990s when some changes within art criticism and history had occurred, such as a sort of opening towards the problems of identity, corporality and sexuality, enabled a new look at the works and activities of Natalia LL; not completely new, but to some extent, returning to what had been proposed by Western feminist critics in the 70s. At that time, it was not accepted by Polish critics, the reason being difficulties related to adopting Western critical discourse in the Polish context.¹²

The problem of the inadequacy of this discourse to East-European art has been elaborated upon thoroughly by Piotr Piotrowski.¹³ According to him, in Poland the neo-avant-garde does not imply a critique of the modernist system of values. On the contrary, works created within this circle (*Consumer Art* among them) were accompanied by modernist, or even formalist discourse, concentrating on the morphology of the photographic image (I have already

¹⁰ From a press conference accompanying the opening of the artist's exhibition *Ogrody personalizmu (Gardens of Personalism)*, CCA Ujazdowski Castle, 1998. <<http://fototapeta.art.pl/fti-nllpress.html>>.

¹¹ An exception is a series of exhibitions organised by Izabella Gustowska entitled *Obecność (Presence)*, first in 1981. It is important to notice that while organising women's art exhibitions, the curator and artist herself distanced herself from feminism and had no connections whatsoever with the women's movement.

¹² The artist stresses that Gisela Kaplan's feminist manifesto, sent to her by Lucy Lippard with a proposal to become a kind of representative of feminism in Poland or even in Central Europe, was inadequate in relation to the Polish situation, mainly because it treated socialism as a model of supposed equality of men and women. "Wywiad Krzysztofa Jareckiego z Natalia LL" (Krzysztof Jarecki's Interview with Natalia LL), in: *Natalia LL. Teksty* (Natalia LL. Texts), Agata Smalcerz (ed.), Bielsko-Biała: Bielska Gallery, 2004, p. 241.

¹³ Piotr Piotrowski, *Awangarda w cieniu Jałty. Sztuka w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej w latach 1945–1989* (Avant-Garde in the Shadow of Yalta. Art in East-Central Europe, 1945–1989), Poznań: Rebis, 2005.

quoted fragments of neo-avant-garde artists' statements).¹⁴ In the West feminist art emerged at the time of the dominance of conceptual tendencies and it stressed the importance of recurring to private, individual experience, as if opposing the de-subjectifying conceptual attitude. *Consumer Art* was absolutely out of this context. Not only the critics, but the artist herself chose a universal discourse to describe the work.

Piotr Piotrowski's interpretations of the work in question are interesting examples of the changing way of analytical framing. In his book devoted to the art of the 1970s, published almost fifteen years ago, he discusses the work of Natalia LL (including *Consumer Art*) in the chapter entitled "On Neo-Avant-Garde and 'Pseudo-Avant-Garde'". The works of the artist are, in his opinion, an example of the latter. Piotrowski analyses them solely in the context of conceptual art, which he deprives completely of elements which might be linked to the politics of identity. The issues of eroticism were treated rather as a certain kind of aberration which eliminated this work from avant-garde art and pulled it towards the obscene (which can be valued in different ways, of course, in this case it turns *Consumer Art* into a non-serious work of art).

Piotrowski changed his mind in a rather radical way several years later, when he situated *Consumer Art* in a totally different interpretative framework – that of body art. Seen from this perspective, it was no longer "trivial" and "rather superficial", but "revolutionist." In his book, published in 1999, entitled "Znaczenie modernizmu" ("Meanings of Modernism"), the author wrote that "feminist issues were essential [for Natalia LL's work] and, from this perspective, the artist's proposal should be considered groundbreaking in Polish art history".¹⁵ As a consequence, some (both female and male) authors began to pay attention to the critical message of this work. According to them, the artist introduced critique of phallocentrism by transforming a woman from a passive object of gaze into an active subject of pleasure; by a kind of revenge, based on elimination of a man, who is impersonated in the form of bananas. It is not my intention to offer elaborate polemics with such interpretations (interpretations stressing deconstruction rather than construction of female pleasure, might be one suggestion). Instead, I would like to point to the fact that to a large extent it repeats the work's reception in the 70s by Western feminists. For them, *Consumer Art* was an exquisite example of a deceitful fight with the image of a "vamp murdering men – a theme which was invented by men for a woman".¹⁶

¹⁴ *Op.cit.*, pp. 402–403.

¹⁵ *Op.cit.*, p. 191.

¹⁶ Grislin Nobakowski, "Dwa mity z przyjemnością odrzucone" (Two Myths Dismissed With

It is worth paying attention to one aspect of the critics' concentration on a banana, which, because of the differences of the social and political, or rather economic situation, could not occur in Western discourse. At the time when this work was being made, that is at the beginning of the 70s, bananas were a deficient commodity in Poland. They were appearing only at certain moments (usually before Christmas) and only in some places (in shops and on markets selling exclusive commodities from the West). A friend of mine, who is older than me, still remembers the first banana his mother bought him. One fruit costed 20 zlotys, with monthly wages of about 1000 zlotys. Nevertheless, it took place in the 60s, while the first years of the 70s marked the beginning of a special period of the history of the People's Republic of Poland (PRL): the decade which witnessed the emergence of consumerism. A pitiable consumerism it was though, as it mainly implied "a possibility to be finally able to buy something",¹⁷ that is – a small Fiat, a washing machine, a fridge (however, only on credit for young married couples), legally a few dozen of US dollars. Banana remained an exclusive commodity. The same applies to sausages used in other photographs, with the exception that they were not associated with the West.

I decided to discuss the above for several reasons. First of all, it is because following the title of the work – *Consumer Art* – and the critical dimension ascribed to it nowadays, it is sometimes perceived in the context of the critique of consumerist culture. This is surely being made in order to justify the avant-garde character of Natalia LL's work – in order to prove that it rather is neo-than pseudo-avant-garde (one of the characteristics of the avant-garde being the critique of capitalism). The way of thinking in relation to *Consumer Art* is as follows: a woman consumed in the popular culture she consumes. However, if one attempts to interpret consumption in *Consumer Art* in this way, one could have some objections, such as those formulated by one of the authors: "Was therefore the art of Natalia LL ahead of its time, or, did it create something alike to feminist art, based on Western patterns but without any particular references to Polish reality?"¹⁸ Neither bananas nor porno-magazines were common, though.

On the one hand the use of bananas (and sausages) by the artist proves that artists were, to some extent, a privileged social group. But on the other hand the

Pleasure), after: *Natalia LL. Teksty*, 2004, p. 26.

¹⁷ Jacek Kuroń, Jacek Żakowski, *PRL dla początkujących* (People's Republic of Poland for Beginners), Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie, 1995, p. 139.

¹⁸ Izabela Kowalczyk, "Wątki feministyczne w sztuce polskiej" (Feminist Motives in Polish Art), *Artium Questiones* 8 1998, p. 138.

way Natalia LL's treatment of these bananas, in comparison with the happening of the young Polish artist mentioned at the beginning of my text, shows how limited this privilege was. In Radziszewski's work, the viewers saw a table with heaps of these fruits. In one of reviews on the happening, the authors claim that it was a re-make of Natalia LL's happening. But she did not organise a happening. She did not have this many bananas to waste.

The way Radziszewski alluded to *Consumer Art* is symptomatic of how the young generation of Polish artists treats cultural legacy of the former political system. They refer to it in an a-historic way. The period of the People's Republic is "rarely invoked as a negative point of reference, more frequently however, as an axiologically neutral repository of cultural and entertainment goods".¹⁹ What is attractive for a young viewer is an aesthetic and qualitative difference, often transformed into anecdote, omitting the political context of this period. The past in Radziszewski's work emerged as a sphere of aesthetic experience, which was stressed by a black and white poster and a film and the artist's garment. In this sense, paradoxically, he may be closer than many critics to the original meaning of the work, as I see it today: concentrating not on the play with consumerist culture but on the provocation. It is this aspect of moral provocation connected with pleasure (as if originating in pleasure) that has been invoked by Radziszewski.

In his remake, or rather a kind of pastiche (as described by Frederic Jameson), the artist ignored the historical context of Natalia LL's work. In her work, on the other hand, she ignored the social context of women's condition. In a sense, this deprives Natalia LL and Radziszewski of political significance. Nevertheless, at least in the case of *Consumer Art*, its banality does not provoke art historians to ignore it. Quite the contrary, it seems intriguing. It attracts attention and induces new interpretations. This work is a very interesting example of an art work which, in a way, has become canonical, but has not seen its canonical interpretation yet. It has remained attractive for critics, who can inscribe it in various frameworks. And it is still troubling, as it actually does not fit any of them.

Translation: Katarzyna Bojarska

¹⁹ Marek Krajewski, "Kultura czwarta: kultura repetycji (PRL w kulturze popularnej)" [Fourth Culture: the Culture of Repetition (PRP in Popular Culture)], in: his, *Kultury kultury popularnej (Cultures of Popular Culture)*, Poznań: Adam Mickiewicz University Press, 2003, p. 224.

References

Flash Art 48–49 1974.

Flash Art 52–53, 58–59 1975.

Heute Kunst 9 1975.

Kowalczyk, Izabela, "Wątki feministyczne w sztuce polskiej" (Feminist Motives in Polish Art), *Artium Questiones* 8 1998.

Krajewski, Marek, "Kultura czwarta: kultura repetycji (PRL w kulturze popularnej)" [Fourth Culture: the Culture of Repetition (PRP in Popular Culture)], in: his, *Kultury kultury popularnej (Cultures of Popular Culture)*, Poznań: Adam Mickiewicz University Press, 2003.

Kuroń, Jacek, Jacek Żakowski, *PRL dla początkujących* (People's Republic of Poland for Beginners), Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie, 1995.

Lachowicz, Andrzej, "Natalia LL", *Sztuka* (Art) 4 1975.

Natalia LL, "Teoria głowy" (Theory of Head), *Exit* 6 1991.

Natalia LL. Sztuka i energia (Natalia LL. Art and Energy), ex. cat. Wrocław: National Museum, 1994.

Natalia LL. Teksty (Natalia LL. Texts), Agata Smalcerz (ed.), Bielsko-Biała: Bielska Gallery, 2004.

Nobakowski, Grislin, "Dwa mity z przyjemnością odrzucone" (Two Myths Dismissed With Pleasure), after: *Natalia LL. Teksty*, 2004.

Piotrowski, Piotr, *Awangarda w cieniu Jałty. Sztuka w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej w latach 1945–1989* (Avant-Garde in the Shadow of Yalta. Art in East-Central Europe, 1945–1989), Poznań: Rebis, 2005.