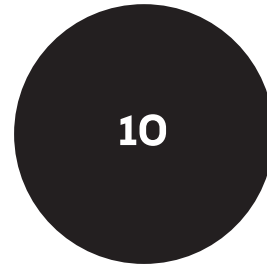




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In Search of (Re)Creation

Translated by Patrick Trompiz

The brine is first pumped to the top of the graduation tower. From there it trickles down the blackthorn branches, which are fixed precisely inside the wooden constructions. The drops of water produced then bounce off the hard material and sprinkle around. Some of the water evaporates leaving the thicker precipitate to flow off at the bottom. This operation is repeated until the requisite concentration of brine is achieved, at which point it is gathered for transport to the salt works. The weather plays crucial role in this whole process: though the sun and warmth aid evaporation, *too much* light causes excessive deposits of salt on the blackthorn branches. Rain is in general undesirable, yet increased humidity levels causes the crystals stuck to the branches to flow down.

This relatively simple means of obtaining salt was developed in Germany in the 16th and 17th centuries. Graduation towers first appeared on Polish soil in the partition period – in the second decade of the 19th century. After the loss of the Wieliczka to the Austrian Empire, graduation towers started appearing by the salt springs in Ciechocinek. Stanisław Staszic initiated the process together with Jakub Graff, an engineer from Kielce who prepared the designs. Two graduation towers were commissioned in 1833, a third was added 6 years later in 1859. Each tower was almost 16m high and their combined length amounted to almost two kilometres.¹

In 2014 on the Plac Artystów (*Artists' Square*) in Kielce a much smaller construction was erected, whose shape was reminiscent of the construction from Ciechocinek. It is a new work by Robert Kuśmirowski. The artist chose Kielce for the premiere to recognise the fact that the designer of the most famous graduation towers came from there. The construction is six metres high and twelve metres long with a width of twelve metres: between the two wings of the tower there is a clearance making it possible to pass freely through the centre. In November 2014, the construction was shifted from Kielce to the Labyrinth Gallery in Lublin. With the arrival of Spring

Kuśmirowski's installation was taken inside – ironically precisely when real Graduation Towers attract visitors to their resorts. From March to May 2015 the installation was exhibited in the hanger of the Arsenal Gallery in Białystok from where it went on to Tbilisi and Lvov to finally settle in Warsaw. It was installed at the entrance to the Centre for Contemporary Arts at Ujazdowski Castle, where it will remain till the first thaws of spring 2016.

The interior of the construction, which made of pine, is not filled with blackthorn. Instead of those bunches, there are objects from the private store of the artist at each level of the tower, and at the top are the storage boxes from which the objects had been previously taken out. Among the objects collected are broken dolls, work overalls, notice boards, cables, dusty books and obsolete electronic equipment. The objects are patinated showing signs of long storage but also of use. They are visually of a piece with objects Kuśmirowski had used (or recreated) in other projects – so their repeated presence in his works could lead to routine. Making the Graduation Tower from them served also to remove the sense of this large collection of objects being elements in a 'production line' for each and every exhibition. What is particularly important for an artist as prolific as Kuśmirowski: in 2013, prior to the *Graduation Tower*, he had already held 35 other exhibitions.²

The project inaugurated in Kielce has been developed across several stages; as with a real graduation tower, in Kuśmirowski's construction there were processes of participation, rinsing and crystallization. Under the influence of the sun, rain and wind, the objects on the shelves were supposed to change. Indeed, the artist at first considered pouring brine over the objects to speed up the process of destruction, increasing the overall effect.³ That would have also meant that the *Graduation Tower* would have imitated its subject matter not only in appearance, but also in terms of its functioning.

A real graduation tower generates a microclimate and lower temperature. Salty water which drops onto the blackthorn branches evaporates and forms an aerosol mist, rich in iodine. Initially, when the first graduation towers served mainly to extract salt, this phenomenon was undesirable since it meant the loss of a valuable chemical from the salt. The later practice of inhalations, sought by patients who visited the towers, are made possible by the formation of excess air which is damp

and rich in minerals and which has healing properties for body and mind. To get the most of these beneficial effects, one should stay as long as possible in the vicinity of the source. Which is why paths and parks appeared around graduation towers, where sit on benches and chat – breathing deeply all the while.

Kuśmirowski encourages his viewers to visit this installation regularly. Like the salt solution infiltrating the branches, his work of art is supposed to slowly crystallize and increase in value. The careful observer, taking in the work's atmosphere sufficiently frequently will be able to appreciate the subsequent changes and participate in the performance of the material. This spectacle is worth seeing at various times of the day and in various weather conditions. Thanks to the semi-open construction of the work's edges, the surroundings enter its interior – so the 'exterior' becomes both a part of as well as a background to the work, ever changing in its influence on the work. *Graduation Tower* is a space to be passed through slowly, accessible also after dusk. Though you can walk round the installation and view it from every angle, the best views are to be had by following the corridor through the centre. The faces of the dolls, book covers and dashboards are turned towards the viewer on the path. Despite the apparent chaos, the collection is governed by some kind of order. The objects are segregated by topic as well as by size. This allows the visitor to view the installation in segments, choosing when to glance at a more interesting item. *The Graduation Tower* – unlike 'real' graduation towers with the sound of drops and the coastal fragrance of the air – stimulates the eye above all, rather than several senses at once. The over-inquisitive visitor is kept away from the content of the exhibition by wire netting and the alertness of the security guards.

Health resorts which included graduation towers were perceived in the 19th century as places of recuperation for modern man, tired of the excessive stimuli of the age. The diet of the resort, its repetitive and regimented lifestyle, the fresh air, walks and pleasant company – all this was to mentally and physically rejuvenate.⁴ The beneficial effects of the waters, although attested by tradition and used for long before the 19th century, came in that century to be properly appreciated and acquired scientific backing. The classification of illnesses came to be correlated with the topography of the corresponding treatment: the specific kind of climate and the

mineral properties of the sources come to be prescribed to particular ailments: to Karlsbad came those suffering from kidney stones, to Druskiennik came those with rheumatic ailments⁵, and Ciechocinek relived skin, nervous and breathing disorders.⁶ So Europe came to be covered by a network of sanatoria connected by rail lines. The wealthy entrusted their health and their money to doctors, who in turn recommended patients the appropriate health resorts. Besides doctors' orders, many came because of the recommendations of relatives or just to keep up with the Joneses.⁷ At the high season, it was the done thing to be seen at the spa, where visits included a rich social calendar: playing cards, matchmaking, finding a lover. Today the glory days of the spa are gone. A stay in a sanatorium is the province of the older generation, younger people at most 'pop off' for a weekend break to a spa.

Kuśmirowski's installation is also full of the melancholy of lost meaning. The remains of the actually rather recent past document the speed with technology, fashion and information become obsolete. When we recognise a favourite keyboard or some old filled out form we may be filled with nostalgia, the current state of the objects and the manner of their preservation rather presents us with *memento mori*. By collecting these bits and bobs, Kuśmirowski has created a personal archive of changes, but also a collection of souvenirs with which he holds an emotional bond.⁸ In presenting the contents of his warehouse in *Graduation Tower*, he has given it the appearance of grandeur, but at the same time he benefits from the protective cloak of art.

The collections of our childhood – from which everyone begins their adventure with gathering things – were stored in tins or boxes. Those containers keep things tidy and preserve their content from destruction, but they also limit the sizes of our collections. The collector is forced to throw out some of their things or to find a new container. In the building of Warsaw's Centre for Contemporary Arts, Lawrence Weiner once placed a description: "*Far too many things to fit into so small a box,*"⁹ pointing to the limitations placed on institutions aiming to house the growing output of artists, as well as to the exclusive and normative character of the world of art. To this inadequate box, the gallery, Kuśmirowski adds his own container, his store of bric-à-brac made art by means of skilled packaging. By placing his work in the

margins of an institution, he finds a safe location: far away enough to comment, but close enough to remain safe.

Finding one's place is, however, only the first step towards presenting collections. Even the most beautiful of boxes does not make a collection if there is only chaos inside. The passage from the suspect, fetishistic practices of the mere hoarder to the respected attitude of the collector demands that we respect the proper principles. Selecting and combining objects is a metaphor for the shaping of a coherent identity, whereas presenting them to the public's gaze guarantees that hidden desires will be put in their place. Even the strangest of collections may serve a didactic purpose and it is precisely usefulness that becomes the excuse for dangerous passions and hobbies.¹⁰ There is a reason why Kuśmirowski compares his work to various models for the visual presentation of knowledge.

The Graduation Tower was intended to recall a library or a museum. The artist planned to create an 'inventory' of all the exhibits, to emphasize this hierarchical and transparent character. In the end, however, this inventory was not published which may bear witness to a merely apparent subordination to reason. The size of the collection and the principle governing it is known only to Kuśmirowski. The character of *The Graduation Tower* remains semi-private, closer to a cabinet of curiosities than the museum evolving out of it. Besides reading the collection as a static bearer of knowledge that has been crystallised, Kuśmirowski also offers us a dynamic interpretation of his *Graduation Tower* as a laboratory.¹¹ Within the framework of the project *The Ornaments of Anatomy* (2005) he had already created a similar environment, with himself taking on the role of the diabolic Doctor Vernier.¹² Whereas the earlier case gave the impression that an eccentric researcher was about to return, the graduation tower-laboratory appeared to have been deserted by its demiurge.

The abandoned workshop turned into a tomb, the way every collection excludes objects from everyday life and thereby guarantees them an isolated immortality. The old and damaged objects, instead of ending up straight in the rubbish, find their way into the installation's cages, where they await a slow disintegration. The problem is that this destruction has thus far not happened. Although the *Graduation Tower*, currently installed in front of the Centre for Contemporary Arts

in Warsaw, has already appeared in several exhibitions, the objects found inside the installation bear only mild signs of further damage. This is particularly evident in the case of the pieces of paper and the books which have not aged at all in the past year. The perception of changes in the objects is made all the harder by the fact that we do not know the state they arrived in Kuśmirowski's collection. Yet it is difficult to resist the suspicion that the artist has not been fully honest and has replaced or filled out the set of objects in *The Graduation Tower*. In that way he would postpone the death of the objects he is attached to.

The artist, who is known for his playing with time, here imitates Doctor Gotard who runs Schulz's *Sanatorium under the Sign of the Hourglass*. The patients, although they have died in 'real life', continue to live in the Doctor's institution, although only "within the limits imposed by the situation."¹³ By turning the clock back by an indeterminate interval of time, Gotard makes their continued existence possible. This was an ad hoc solution, "a pitiful substitute for life, depending on the indulgence of others, on a *consensus omnium* from which he drew his faint strength."¹⁴

The objects collected by Kuśmirowski are as vulnerable to criticism as Gotard's patients. The old electronic equipment, forms and dashboards which belong to a by-gone system, the books which contain out-of-date knowledge – all these for the visitors are nothing but "a pile of rubbish," "junk," "bric-a-brac." All these things gathered in one place can be sustained a little longer thanks to the conserving properties of juices of the world of art. The illusion is not the construction itself, but the principle by which it operates: the stay of execution and the apparent damage, which in reality the artist stands over.

Footnotes

1 Danuta Iwanowska-Jeske, *Z kart przeszłości* [From the cards of the past], in: *Uzdrowisko Ciechocinek* [Ciechocinek Spa], ed. D. Iwanowska-Jeske, (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Sport i Turystyka, 1983), 62nn.

2 Robert Kuśmirowski, "*Tężnia i Traumgutstrasse*" [Graduation Tower and Traumgutsreasse], a conversation of the artist with Z. M. Cielętkowska,"

Magazynsum.pl, September 5, 2014, <http://magazynsum.pl/rozmowy/teznia-i-traumgutstrasse-rozmowa-z-robertem-kusmirowskim> accessed 14 December, 2015.

3 Ibidem.

4 Heikki Lempa, *The Spa: Emotional Economy and Social Classes in Nineteenth-Century Pyrmont*, vol. 35, 2002, no. 1, , p. 42nn.

5 Krzysztof Paweł Woźniak, *Wyjazdy polskiego ziemiaństwa i burżuazji „do wód” w świetle pamiętników i wspomnień XIX wieku* [Trips of Polish landed gentry and bourgeois to spas. On the basis of diaries and memoirs of the XIX century], in: *Kultura uzdrowiskowa na Dolnym Śląsku w kontekście europejskim* [Health-Spa Culture in Lower Silesia in a European Context], ed. B. Płonka-Syroka, A. Kaźmierczak, vol. 1, (Wrocław: Quaestio 2013), 246, 250.

6 Waław Iwanowski, *Ciechocinek w okresie międzywojennym. Rozwój wskazań leczniczych od roku 1836 do roku 1939* [Ciechocinek in the Interwar Period. Development of Recommended Treatments from 1836 to 1939], in: *Uzdrowisko Ciechocinek* [Ciechocinek Spa], 79-80.

7 Krzysztof Paweł Woźniak, *Wyjazdy polskiego ziemiaństwa i burżuazji „do wód”* [Trips of Polish landed gentry and bourgeois to spas], 242, 253.

8 Robert Kuśmirowski, "Tężnia i Traumgutstrasse" [Graduation Tower and Traumgustrasse].

9 Lawrence Weiner, *O wiele rzeczy za dużo by zmieścić w tak małym pudełku/Far too many things to fit into so small a box*, Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej Zamek Ujazdowski, work exhibited from 4 June 1996 to August 2012.

10 James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture. Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 215 and following.

11 Robert Kuśmirowski, "Tężnia i Traumgutstrasse" [Graduation Tower and Traumgustrasse].

12 Work exhibited for the first time in Kunstverein in Hamburg, subsequently exhibited in a different version in Warsaw in Zachęta National Gallery of Art and in the centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle.

13 Bruno Schultz, *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*, trans. C. Wieniewska, (Boston-New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1985), 289-290.

14 Ibidem, 303-304.