



Monika Patuszyńska's *Operation Książ*

Article by Jeroen Bechtold

IMAGINE. . . THE CAMERA PANS FROM LEFT-TO-RIGHT through the interior of an abandoned factory: huge concrete spaces, square, 'modern', empty and a leaking roof. Water on the floor mirroring the broken windowpanes, the light that pours in from outside. . . Rubbish in piles galore. . . Cold and damp. . .

You see the heaps of rubbish: leftovers from an industrial past. Forgotten moulds, white, green and brown with the fungus that grows on wet plaster. This was a ceramics factory once. Not even that long ago. The place is abandoned and dilapidated. Now you hear click-clacking of high heels echoing in that space, camera out of focus. You see a dark figure, slowly coming into focus. Now you understand the dark figure is a woman in black walking through this desolation. As the image gets clearer, you see the eyes scan the space, scan the heaps of rubbish. She squats at one of the heaps and examines the moulds, picks one up and throws it back. Then she takes another and puts it aside. The camera sees a half-eaten-away mould of a cup and then another piece of rubbish is added and yet another.

The above is my imagination running away with me, when I heard about a film being made on Monika Patuszyńska's new project *Operation Książ*. In my opinion it is one of the more exciting projects that came to my attention lately.

For the sake of it, let's go back to that fantasy of mine, the film where the woman in high heels picks rubbish from piles of garbage, or better, see what actually happened. No high heels, no click-clack, no fashionable black dress, but the empty rundown space and the woman are real. Was it rubbish she picked up? Moulds she chooses with care, with love and attention. Not the few that are still usable, she picks the ones that are damaged by the water that has been leaking from the roof for all those years onto the delicate plaster. She chooses the ones that show the traces of lost-interest, of neglect and abandonment. She makes casts of these 'journals of time', thus making a record of that time. By making these casts and firing them to high temperature, similar to what the factory used to do, she comments strongly on what has happened to



Facing page: *Vases, Tokada*. Left: 21 x 8 x 8 cm. Right: 19 x 8 x 8 cm.
Left: *Sugar Pot, Imperial*. 14 x 14 x 10 cm.
Right: *Sugar Pot, Allegro*. 16 x 15 x 10 cm.

that great industry and, with that, our society itself.

I myself walked through that building, saw the rubbish, but failed to see what Patuszyńska saw. She saw the beauty of decay in the items on the floor. Can an item get more humble than that? And yet, because of the unpretentiousness of the object, it tells about real life. Our life and times, the constant changing of society. These are the plaster moulds that once were used to make the fine porcelain dinnerware that made the tables of the 'well-to-do'. The cups, plates and saucepans that made mother proud. I too saw the leftovers and did not see the meaning. Patuszyńska did and she makes a statement that is so strong and complicated.

LEVELS OF UNDERSTANDING

So, these objects are recordings of time. On a purely physical level that is what they are: you witness the result of leaking water onto delicate plaster over a period of time. Nearly all material washes away, corrodes and changes with time. Chemically, elements interact and react to circumstances and time. Results can be spectacular, such as in caves underground or a ship slowly rusting and breaking into pieces on a beach. Concrete constructions fall apart when not maintained on a

regular basis as, indeed, this abandoned factory itself. Comparable to the plaster mould that is partly devoured by leaking water, the results here too, are spectacular, though on an intimate scale. Of course you can be satisfied with that concept but, by making a cast in the same precious material that these moulds originally were made for, the artist did so much more.

INDUSTRY, CRAFT, ART

For me, this new work is all about the change in society in one humble object: jobs, pride, money, knowledge, history, environment, it all comes to mind when considering one unassuming fragile piece of this 'cancerous' cast from a disregarded mould. Moulds play an important role in both Patuszyńska's and my own work. Maybe that is why I am so excited about this totally new and fresh approach where borders between industry, craft and art are diffused yet one step further. Moulds usually mean: industry, repetition, mass-production, commerciality, sales-reps and shops. Industrial objects are for the masses and nearly always carry a function that is well defined. Now,



*Operation Książ. October 2012.
Photo by Grzegorz Stadnik.*



Operation Książ. October 2012. Photo by Grzegorz Stadnik.

when an artist uses a mould and makes a single object with that mould, the intention changes dramatically. Now suddenly the product is individual, intimate and non-commercial. The meaning in this case changes from usability to one of contemplation. These invigorating objects are beyond ceramics, way beyond craft and yet they are made of the same stunning porcelain the originals were made of. This is where craft becomes art. Art rooted in craft is the most valuable, as it is rooted in us humans and how we behave, who we are. Craft is 'in our hand', where art may be important to some, it is of non-value to many. Patuszyńska says she is an investigator and as such explores what is there. But what she finds is being used to create something new, something intelligent and exciting, albeit not always pleasing to the eye. *Operation Książ* presents us with work we can 'read'. A book – an entire dissertation in one object.

TAKING THE OBVIOUS

Taking the obvious and turning it into something confusing or perplexing is incredibly important: it makes us see, explore for ourselves and redefine the obvious. Most of the time we take things for granted and forget to pay attention. Sometimes, it takes an artist to pick one humble item and show us what it can mean by

re-defining it. Or, as in this case, 'simply' show. A simple showing and a simple object does not mean, however, that the message is simple. To grasp the complexity requires some energy of the beholder and he/she must be willing to open up to the multifaceted meaning. The casts from this devastation are artworks in their own right, meaning that we now can reconsider things about ourselves, or the world in which we live.

Here they are: the teapots, cups and plates with a cancer growing on them. The teapots, cups and plates that in bygone times were the must-haves and pride of any bourgeois family, now not en-vogue anymore and thus marginalised.

THE FACTORY

The factory is (was) called Książ. It was a porcelain industry, set up in Poland by the communist government in a time when similar factories across Europe were struggling, going down and closing. In 1980 the factory was considered to be 'state-of-the-art': efficient and modern. There were 200+ workers. From the beginning it was planned as a government statement of potency, as the biggest and the most modern porcelain factory in Europe, only to last for 20 years or so. In 2000, communism had faded and Poland embraced capitalism similar to the rest of the former Eastern Bloc. Nowadays there is no place anymore for increasingly better paid workers in a labour-intensive industry

such as porcelain. At the same time, there is no place anymore for factory products that were rooted in the past.

As the economy changed and the tastes changed, the factory was abandoned and fell into disrepair. It is bizarre to see how fast deterioration takes over, when buildings, that at first glance look eternal, are left to the elements.

THE ARTIST AND THE FACTORY

In 2012 Patuszyńska revisited the place she had worked at as a young ceramist. After finishing school she was allowed to come and make her own products there. She was invited to take advantage of all the possibilities that the factory had to offer. What a treat for a beginning designer/ceramics artist. She recalls the workers, the heat of the kilns, the trolleys going up and down in this now cold and empty space she now walks and her footsteps echo along the barren walls. Now there is nothing. They say you can even see deer coming in looking for shelter from the rain.

Patuszyńska tells me she comes here every year to take photographs and soak up the energy. I can see why. Abandoned places reverberate the life they once had. Unlike humans that are buried and out-of-sight, buildings slowly fall apart as a witness to time-passing, now no other activity than to crumble. In the end nothing remains, as Patuszyńska says. "It fascinates me to observe when human efforts

to conquer nature in the end are being conquered by nature itself. Nature taking over the Palaces of Human Vanity fascinates me. There are Mayan cities absorbed into the jungle, desert cities absorbed back into the desert, lands taken back by the oceans."

In 2012 she walked into the factory to start casting from the rubbish heaps, the tons of once clean and polished moulds that, once again, produced clean, neat products. Now, after having been exposed to the elements for nearly a decade, 'eaten away', decrepit, broken. Patuszyńska would not be Patuszyńska if she would not have seen the opportunities in this despair: perfect record-holders of time and of days-past, of an industry that no longer is.

At the time of this writing, the concrete shell of what once was, is being torn down. So, by the time you read this, nothing remains of the former dreams of the great workforce.

BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER

Monika Patuszyńska: "I decided to cast the abandoned moulds in the abandoned factory. One motive, I was curious to find out what is hidden 'on the other side' of the mould hollowed by the water dripping from the ceilings. The other motive was to record nature, decomposing human designs. The casts, 'the specimens' are actually trophies of the processes that have been happening since people left



Facing page, top: *Sugar Pots, Allegro*. 15-16 x 11-15 x 10 cm.
 Facing page, centre and inset: *Oval Dish, Margarita*. 11 x 28 x 20 cm.
 Facing page, below: *Cups, Gallery*. 7-8 x 8-10 x 8 cm.
 Above: *Handles for the Cruet Set, Allegro*. 22 x 16 x 6 cm.
 Left: *Cup, Sara*. 9 x 8 x 8 cm.

the place.”
 Finally, you can see the project as a document that contains several layers of identity of this industry as a whole and this factory in particular. This project and, indeed, the layers can be looped once it is completed. “I see the layers as a whole: before, during and after as all the layers are needed to fulfil the circle. I do not remember the time ‘before’. I grew up in Warsaw, 400 km away from Wałbrzych more or less in the same time when the factory was built. I know the ‘during’ as I was working there in 2000, straight after finishing school while the factory was still operating and agreed to host me. I know the ‘after’, as I return every year to choose moulds to work with or just to take some photographs and soak up the energy of the abandoned factory or maybe simply to see a deer myself.”

Jeroen Bechtold is a ceramist, as well as an occasional gallery holder, based in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. He only shows works of colleagues when he feels he must. Bechtold has given workshops and exhibited his works throughout the world. All photos by Monika Patuszyńska unless noted.