

MASK

The title of a project given by Jarosław Kozłowski to his students in 1995, Mask became the stimulus for a series of performances by Anna Klimczak that, over time and with her creative attitude, have evolved and altered their context. The title object, both prop and artefact in one via its shape and the symbolic layer inherently coupled with it, is deeply rooted in culture. With all the activities woven around the mask, it would be easiest just to go with what first comes to mind and replicate recognisable theatrical and ceremonial *clichés* associated with the object. Klimczak, however, played it differently, creating a personal performance centred on an intense process of transformation which ran in an unspecified direction.

With the use of a few props – a table, a bag of whiting powder, cotton wool pads and a glass of water (the liquid as it drops times the performance) – the artist set in motion a whole system of surprising activities, arranged in loops of synchronised actions. The cyclicity of the performance brings to mind Jarosław Kozłowski's *Continuum* cycle, begun in the 1970s, where he completely covers a school blackboard with chalk drawings, then wipes the whole surface clean and waits for it to dry. He then smashes a previously wound-up clock, thereby symbolically stopping the time taken up performing/watching the action. The whole process is based on the robotic drawing and wiping, which requires considerable physical effort. In Anna Klimczak's work the process is similar, although it is an act which focuses on the artist herself. As a result of alternately applying successive layers of chalk, which are then rinsed off with water and wiped away with cotton pads, the artist's face becomes covered with an irregular skin – a mask. The initially calm transition from one end of the table, where the artist has placed a cut-open bag of white powder, to the other, where a glass of water sits, turns with time into a frenzied act which, as the artist tires, is accompanied by animal-like sounds as the artist fights with the material and her all-consuming desire to start the process anew. What puzzles is the growing compulsion of the acts which, in the minds of the intrigued audience, is motivated by an elusive goal – the real meaning of the whole endeavour. What is our heroine, playing out the action before us, seeking? By superimposing mask after mask is it about finding the perfect image or interrupting the process of infinite transformation – during the incarnations that follow?

Anna Klimczak's work, for viewers of the three performances a single unit but also a video (most recently shown by Fundacja Profile at the *Net – art of dialogue* exhibition), may be understood as a contemporary ritual. This interpretation elicits a comparison with the anthropological analysis of masks as a prop used in tribal ceremonies. They are "ongoing cosmogonies, regenerating time and space, drawing man and his values away from the temporal decay that attacks all aspects of life. But these are also truly cathartic spectacles during

which man becomes aware of his place in the universe and sees his life and his death given meaning by being inscribed in the collective drama”¹.

The masks used in similar rites usually have a specific, complete shape, nature and function, and represent the dead, animals and a set of features related to shamanic ceremony. In Anna Klimczak’s idiosyncratic solo ritual, however, the mask also undergoes a process of change, not representing a rigid set of properties but symbolising the desire for transformation, blurring the boundaries between what is external and the internal world of the person wearing it.

In anthropology, the mask, defined by Carl Einstein as ‘immobile ecstasy’, can be possessed by the person who puts it on for a magic ritual. The boundary between the subject who seeks a remedy for personal unhappiness in the ceremony and the object which holds their desires becomes blurred. The process of identification is associated with an eruption of inexhaustible energy, with the above-mentioned ecstasy leading to inner purification. Set in the contemporary, Anna Klimczak’s minimalistic performance, while deliberately stripped of ethnic associations, is also driven by the energy of transformation which, however, finds no outlet and leads to the thought that it really is concerned with the very fact of existence, of illustrating the process itself.

One feature that may give interpretative clues is the image projected onto the ‘masked’ face of the artist precisely as she wipes successive layers away. On the white, impersonal surface, the portrait of a woman is revealed, which resembles the artist prior to her metamorphosis, but we cannot be sure if it actually is a photograph of her. The strength of the transformation is geared towards establishing her own image, facing herself and the battle we face every day anew.

The minimalism of the act and the neutral stage – white dominating (the chalk, the artist’s clothing, the walls) – facilitate the formulation of subsequent connotations and highlight the ambiguity of the mask and its relationship with the strangely incongruent image. All this exposes the process of dissimulation. “The phenomenology of a person who is pretending, even someone who would like to find total safety behind a mask, may be determined in its various shades only through masks which are in some way partial, unfinished, elusive, continually and repeatedly tried on, and always imperfect”². This incomplete mask which, as a result, is richer in potential meanings, is precisely what Anna Klimczak’s Mask is. By donning it, the artist paradoxically stops pretending, and confirms the continuous incompatibility of the exterior shell. She does not permit herself to accept the fossilised image of indifference imposed by the mask and shows us the battle she is desperately fighting with herself for a certain “determinacy”, against family ties (the slide actually shows the artist’s aunt) and external and personal expectations with regards to herself. With the spontaneous smashing of the empty glass on the floor, the artist explicitly marks

¹ J. Laude, *Les arts de l’Afrique Noire*, Paris 1966, pp. 196, 201-203, 250-251, cited in: *Maski*, vol.2: *Fragmenty antropologiczne*, ed. M. Janion, S. Rosiek, Gdańsk, 1986, p. 10.

² *Ibid*, p. 16

the end of her mental battle. She does not allow any of the layers to set on her face. She avoids the well-known mythological fatum – the transformation of the real face into a demonic, seductive skin.

The mask simply becomes a pretext for the start of a discussion on the interior, on the state of the owner. The mere gesture of reaching for the mask, its acceptance or its rejection³, says more to us than the usual forced smile embossed onto it. Anna Klimczak, like Bachelard, “dismisses the temptation of simple descriptiveness and the temptation of exoticism”, and what becomes most relevant for her is the “moment when the mask is formed, which is difficult to capture, since it has not yet taken on any material form; it can not therefore be the subject of the description”⁴. Stanisław Rosiek calls this creation “a hidden mask, a potential mask”. Admittedly, the chalky white shell may be the subject of the description; like the phenomenological mask described by Bachelard, however, its is symbolically like a pure, white, primed canvas which only gains a some meaning with the application of the artist’s paint. Due to the hypnotic processuality in the performance, the audience’s attention is not focussed on superficiality, but on the “power of transfiguration”.

The process on which Klimczak has placed great emphasis allows us to question the status of the mask in contemporary culture, where the desire to blend into the social background (both conscious and unconscious) has become particularly clear. Based on paradoxes (uncovering vs masking, stability vs transformation, individuality vs the many) the artist’s work proves that even if the mask in its stock form is already a relic of the past, during the game with its assigned meanings it, paradoxically, may become a symbol of uncompromising openness and rejection of the duty of mimicry enforced on us daily.

Anna Klimczak returned several times to her art school project, subjecting it to further transformations. In *Between You and Me* (2004), the unsuspecting audience became living screens for a portrait projected into the gallery space which shone onto their faces. In *Between Reality and Unreality* (2005), the distance from the bag of chalk to the glass lengthened considerably, thereby changing the dynamics of the whole process. In *New Construction*, shown at the ON Gallery in Poznan, Klimczak presented the remnants of her performance: a table covered with chalk, dirty cotton pads scattered here and there, a broken glass – the ruins of the war, paid for by effort, against our own masks.

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³ Ibid, p. 158

⁴ Ibid.