

Radosław Nowakowski - Interview with Tom Sowden and Sarah Bodman: 24/06/08

R = Radosław Nowakowski

S = Sarah Bodman

T = Tom Sowden

The writer and artist *Radosław Nowakowski* has been creating and publishing his own books and artists' books "non-describing the world" since the 70s. The interview took place in Nowakowski's home in the hamlet of Dabrowa Dolna near Kielce, where many of his books are based, and we discussed both his own works and the development of artists' books over the last 20 years in Poland.



On the history of publishing books in Poland:

S – Can you tell us something about the history of how your work has developed?

R – In the case of Polish book art the recent history of this country is very important – it explains a lot. You must remember that after the war when we had here the communist regime, it was forbidden for us to print. The private printing business simply vanished. Before WWII we had a very good avant-garde poetry, experimenting with typography, almost like the Russian constructivists. People printed very interesting things. But to make things like that you need to co-operate with the printer, and the printer has to have a freedom of printing, not limited by censorship. That's very important. After the war you could print only in big printing studios belonging to the state, and everything had to be censored. So that's the reason why we have a bit of difference in the interpretation of the artist's book.

S – Because you cannot print an edition, it is better to make a one-off book at home.

R – Yes, you're an artist, and you make a crazy object, so you can avoid censoring. No words, no meaning, and even if not politically correct, with no doubt not dangerous for the regime.

T – It can't be mass-produced.

R – Yes, of course. It won't have an impact on society because it's too abstract. Crowds will come to the gallery, just a few people. So OK, let them do it. We can even make the most of it and show it to the West. "We have such a crazy avant-garde artist – it is allowed, we can be proud. Look – we are a fantastic socialistic or communistic country, no one is suppressed here; we have such a fantastic artist who is doing crazy things". The story of the Tryzno's small press is a very good example. Pawel [Janusz Pawel Tryzno] is a graphic artist. Jadwiga, his wife, studied sociology at the University and was working at the Uni but due to political problems she had to give it up. They decided to found their small press basing on a very interesting gap in the regulations – it was all right to print things without censorship, if they were in editions of less than one hundred. As a graphic artist Pawel was allowed to have a press, so they began to work cooperating with a group of local poets. They printed a few dozens of copies not even knowing it was fine press or artist's book. That was the beginning. Later they got in touch with different foreign artists, and they spread into Europe so they began to be quite famous. And what is quite interesting is when we met in the 90s, we found that we had both started to make books at the same time, knowing nothing about each other. I was working in Kielce. I had no chance for my books to be published, not only because of the stories that were in my books, the way I thought about the world, but also because of the form - I had started to put drawings into my books, I wanted to use colours, pictograms,

various typefaces, and was thinking about different bindings, other book constructions than codex etc. In the end of the 70s in Poland it was absolutely impossible. So I thought, well, I have a typewriter, carbon paper, so I can produce at least five legible copies if I just type strongly enough... but then we had a total economic crisis, and there was no paper in Poland.

Luckily I played concerts abroad in a band, so I could bring paper from West Germany. People thought I was crazy spending money on paper, carbon paper and typewriter ribbons. Necessity is the mother of invention. Like in the case of the Tryznos. They found a way to make fine press and artists' books, realising the trick with the regulations, and how to avoid censorship. As I found I had so little paper, I thought; if I type with less space between the lines and use both sides, I can spare my paper. And suddenly it was like an illumination! Now it looks almost like a book. So maybe if I make it smaller, not A4 but almost A5, it's almost the size of a book. And if I go to a bookbinder and they make a binding for me then I have a book. And five copies is definitely more than one copy. And then the next illumination was: wow! I can now be responsible for the whole book, I can design the whole book, I can think in the terms of a book not just in the terms of the text. That was a great discovery for me - it was like opening a door to a vast unexplored territory. But it was quite funny that at exactly the same time the Tryznos were thinking the same in Łódź, and we knew nothing about each other.

T- can you tell us more about the Tryznos?

R – They collect old machines, they make paper by themselves, they cooperate with different artists, with poets, writers, and they print brilliant, fantastic things. But themselves they are not writers – they don't write. I think their works can be classified as fine press books, although lately they make book objects and book installations, and probably the fair in Oxford [Fine Press Book Association Fair] would be a perfect place for them. And if we move on to Warsaw and the whole idea of a Polish book art exhibition, and all the projects organised by Alicja Slowikowska, it is another kind of artist's book... There is a certain confusion... Well, once I was talking with someone from France, and he was a publisher of artists' books, and people in Poland were quite astonished – how was it possible for someone to 'publish' artists' books? An artist's book is understood here as a book, or an object referring to the idea of a book, made by the artist, so this means almost always a unique one-off book, like a painting or sculpture is.

S / T – Well, this really is making a lot of sense to us now, as we were wondering why all the books we have seen have been unique or sculptural, none of them in editions.

R – Yes, it's not for publishing. It must be a piece of art. Just take a look at a catalogue of the exhibitions organised by Alicja Slowikowska and read the CVs, 90% of those included are painters, graphic artists, sculptors, no writers – I'm the only one. Sometimes it might happen that the artist is also the author of a poem, but it's very typical that either they use no text at all, or they take someone's poem or piece of prose, or take a few words or two or three sentences but no more, so let's say to write a novel in such an artistic way, is beyond their interest. But that's Warsaw – which is the one extreme. However, if you go to Poznan you will see another extreme. AT Gallery focuses on concrete poetry, book performance, and experimentation; they try to penetrate the concept of a book, of a text, so they sometimes make very abstract things, which at first sight seem to have nothing to do with a book.

Alicja is a very important person – when she launched the Polish Book Arts project in the beginning of the 90s, she began with a small exhibition of book illustrations by Warsaw artists only. The next year she added artists' books from all over Poland and somehow she succeeded to unite the book people in Poland giving us an opportunity to learn about each other.

T – So before her efforts, people were very separate in different areas, and they were not communicating at all?

R – That's right

T – And is that why then you've got these big regional differences? Like Poznan

R – Yes.

S – But were you not communicating with each other simply because nobody knew what each other was doing? There was no awareness of what was going on in different places.

R – Yeah.

S – So was that because of generally bad communication?

R – Yeah, calling Warsaw or Poznan in the 1980s was quite a big trouble. I know it's hard to imagine (even for myself when I think of the old times) how we could work and survive. But somehow we could do a lot of different and very nice things here. In 1989 everything turned upside down, and suddenly we could print, we could telephone, we could communicate, we could travel, so it was really great. As for myself, I had a lot of ideas in the 70s and 80s but I simply had to keep them in my mind, because I had no possibility to make them. In 1985 I made a crazy trip to Africa; I wanted to cross the whole of Africa but I succeeded to get a visa only to Algeria and I stopped in the middle of the Sahara. But that's not the point – the point is that when I was in Paris, someone told me: there is a fantastic shop you have to go to which has lots of coloured paper.

S – In Africa?

R – No, in Paris. So I went there, and now imagine: it's 1985, I'm coming from Poland where there is no paper at all, and I'm in a shop and I see piles of paper of any colour, everything I could only imagine. What a headache! And I'm thinking maybe I should buy something? But what can I do? Can I buy let's say ten sheets of red and ten sheets of green and ten of purple, and I'll bring these things to Poland and start to write a book, and suddenly there are no more red pages, so what can I do then? So I decided: let's forget about it, and I found another solution for my book – for a story of my travel to Africa, which I will show to you later. So generally speaking, the point is, we had so many obstacles that it's hard to imagine right now, and of course every stick has two ends, as we used to say, so when you have a lot of obstacles, and if you have a passion, it means you can and must find a lot of energy inside – you start to be very inventive, you're looking for different solutions because you're so crazy about your ideas.

S – You find a means to do it one way or the other.

R – That's right. But on the other hand, sometimes I got so tired because I knew very well that I used so much energy for stupid simple things, that finally when I could do anything, I was too tired to start it. As I used to say we felt that playing a concert was like taking a rest after very hard work to arrange the concert and come to the venue, to travel. It was also like that in the case of books and writing – you have to use your friends to smuggle you some paper. (S – it's unbelievable) And finally you had it – one hundred sheets of white paper. (S – you'd be too scared to use it) and if I make a mistake, aah!

S – So what happened in Africa?

R – Well, I began my journey in May and I wanted to stop in Germany and France to earn some money, and I wanted to go to Africa in September or October, just to avoid the heat. But I only worked for one month in Germany, then I went to France, unfortunately I couldn't find any work, I had some money so I decided: let's go. I could only arrange a visa for Algeria, so I went there but it was July, so you can imagine: middle of July and almost middle of the Sahara. Extreme conditions. And when you enter it from the north of Algeria, there is no sand, but hundreds of kilometres of gravel, stones and rocks. When I finally reached sand dunes I stopped in an oasis and went for a walk out of it to see the sand - it was like standing in front of a wall of extreme light; the yellow dune and sun, extreme light. I had an impression that if I took one more step it would suck me in and I would never come back, so I found maybe it was not the right time to do that, and I said to myself: let's come back home. I had a book ready in my head so I came back home and made it. Of course it ended with the extremely yellow page.

On publishing and self-sufficiency in books:

T- as it has been so hard to produce books, when they are finally made, is it easy to sell them?

R – Our recent history resulted also in a lack of book markets - it's not like in Oxford for example. I went to Oxford [Fine Press Book Association Fair] and saw small presses from all over England, and that's not all of them, I know you have many more, and lots of customers buying, selling, collecting, discussing. Critics. Bibliophiles. Book-lovers. I would like to organise the same kind of fair in Poland, but we would have probably only two stands – the Tryznos and myself.

T – There's nobody else producing books?

R – Nobody else.

T – See, I would have thought from what you were saying about all the exhibition projects in Warsaw that there would be a lot of people making artists' books.

R – But an exhibition composed of mainly unique book-like objects and art pieces is something really different than a regular book fair.

T – Could you organise one that perhaps brought in artists from more countries, maybe invite people from all over Europe?

R – We could probably try, but the audience is also the problem. I think now it's much better than it was ten or fifteen years ago. The exhibitions curated by Alicja Slowikowska travelled a lot around Poland, and quite a lot of people saw it. They know now, at least, standard codex book is not the only kind of book that exists. However, in their mentalities an artist's book is a piece of art that belongs to the domain of art gallery, it's not for reading - it's only for looking. And what's more, because it's a piece of art, and because it's a one-off, it must be very expensive. My books are not unique pieces of art and they are not very expensive, but they are more expensive than regular books in a bookstore because I print them by myself. So if you want to buy one of my books you have to pay 100 or 150 pounds. For an ordinary reader here it's too much, very often even 15-20 pounds for a standard book is too much. So called middle-class in Poland, I mean intelligentsia, is still poor, or not rich enough. It's also the heritage of the previous regime, when workers were the driving force, the avant-garde of our society. Intellectuals had to be kept down. So that's why somebody sweeping floors in the hospital earned almost the same money as a surgeon. This way of thinking was imprinted in the mentality of my generation and it's really difficult to get rid of it. I'm afraid for a lot of

people of my age it's still hard to understand that if you are a surgeon your responsibility is incomparable with the responsibility of someone sweeping floors.

S – So that's still the same? You'd still get paid the same?

R – No, now they are paid better. But it's still the mentality that matters. The most important thing about the transfer from socialism to democracy is not economy but mentality. People who spent 40 or 50 years in previous regime find it really difficult to just switch to a new system.

S – So if you showed people your books now, they would still say “why would I pay that price, because it should be the same as a normal book”?

R – Yes, and like I said, the so-called middle-class here is still not very rich. And there is a gap: no collectors, almost no bibliophiles – bibliophiles in Poland collect only ‘antique’ books. They go to second-hand bookstores to buy books from before the war, or are looking for some rarities, but they are not interested in modern things. It's not like it is in Great Britain.

S – I think in Great Britain it's the same for bibliophiles; they're only vaguely interested in artists' books.

R – Myself, I have met in Britain, at least several collectors who buy new things. And if someone likes your book, it's not a big problem for them to spend more than usual - their budget is big enough. There is a kind of a need; they like to have something that is untypical, unconventional, unusual, and not a mass product; so they are quite aware of these kinds of values. There are quite a lot of people here who would like to have my books, but they simply can't afford to buy them, and I can't afford myself to sell them for almost nothing, so maybe 70% of my books I just simply gave away to friends as gifts.

S – Yes, we do that too.

T – Do you think it's changing though? Is it becoming cheaper to produce books and therefore your books become cheaper?

R – Yeah, I'd like it very much. The street book is a very good example of that [*Sienkiewiczza Street* Radoslaw Nowakowski (2003), offset litho print from original drawings and hand written text, edition of 500, published by BWA Kielce, Poland]. And I must say it was a big success because we could produce 500 copies of a really complex book and it's sold out.

S – But they weren't expensive though.

R – They weren't. About 5 years ago someone called me from the town authorities' promotions office, and said “Can you do something for our town, can we meet?” We talked about different ideas, finally I said, maybe I could do a book for you. And the guy said: “That's a nice idea if it's going to be a really unique book - in the sense that only Kielce will have it and no other town in the world, then OK, we can do it.” I came back home, made a quick mock up of the street book and a short description, brought it back and he presented it to the town council and they, to my utmost surprise, said “yes, let's do it”, and we signed a contract that I was to make just a few copies. I told him, it was very difficult for me to say exactly how the book would finally look, so when it was ready we would decide whether we were going to make an edition or I would produce single copies, as a gift for VIPs etc.

I spent one year producing the book and was due to finish it in December, but in October, with almost everything ready, we had an election (I had signed a contract with the authorities

who were left-leaning, and they lost the election), and the new authorities were right-leaning. And there is a very good tradition here that new authorities almost at once say that everything that the former authorities did was bad, nasty and awful. I was very worried, because I learned that the new mayor had decided to close the town promotion office as the guy who was working as the boss of this office was rather left-wing, so he was not acceptable to the right-wing mayor. But luckily, because the contract was signed, I completed the book and I was paid. That was OK, but the future of my street book looked very unclear. Luckily the local newspaper wrote about the book and I got a phone call from the city art gallery. They wanted to make an exhibition showing the whole process of creating my street book.

I displayed all the drawings I made; well, I was doing everything in a very traditional way, just sitting in the street with a sheet of paper and a pencil and drawing every building. I spent there whole summer. Then I scanned everything, made a mock up of the whole street, then I wrote the text, then I redraw-rewrite everything on a tracing paper to integrate drawings and writings as much as possible, then scanned everything again, put colours, printed everything. I was to show all those stages in the gallery. But there was another big problem – are we going to make a catalogue for this exhibition? It would be nice, but what could we do? Maybe reproduce a few drawings? I was discussing it with a friend of mine working at the gallery, and suddenly the boss came to the room and he said: “It’s a nonsense, we should print the whole book”. And she shouted: “You’re right, we will do this!” The boss was horrified and would be happy to give this idea up, but luckily my friend was brave and stubborn enough to arrange everything. The deal was very tricky; somehow we convinced the town that they should buy 100 copies to have them for gifts, and they were to pay just the normal retail price. In this way we got enough money to buy the paper for the printing. The printer said: “OK, I like the project, I like our home town. We have money for paper, so I can start printing now. I will be paid later, somehow.” So instead of money he got 100 copies. Myself, I got 100 copies and 200 copies went to the gallery. In such a tricky way we managed everything. The book became quite famous here, because it was very unusual. Although it was not available in normal bookstores, and the promotion was rather a whispered one, the edition is sold out. So that’s a very good indication that probably it is possible to sell really very unusual books, and not necessarily they must be very expensive. No. Of course this book is a bit more than regular books (£ – but not wildly so) but anyway you bought it in Oxford for 60 pounds. If you had the handmade copy you would have to pay five or six times more, because it takes me one week to assemble one copy. For the printer, one week was enough to produce 500 copies. That’s why the price was much lower. But the other problem is that you have to convince the publisher that it’s worth taking a risk. That a serious book for grown-up readers does not necessarily need to be a codex with black letters on white pages. They are very afraid of that. They are afraid of anything that is beyond conventions.

S – Yes, at home we probably couldn’t get a publisher to do that either.

T – Book Works maybe.

S – But then they’re different, they are already for artists’ books. The only person I know of is the artist Liz Workman, who made the series of books called “great men’s houses”, going to famous writers and politicians’ homes, and photographing certain aspects: doorknobs, chairs, fireplaces and windows. She made simple, inkjet printed books for about 10 pounds each. The series was noticed by Rizzoli publishers who decided they wanted to publish them, and they made a beautiful hardback, slipcased book in an edition of 5000 so you could buy the books online for £14, but how could you ever afford to do a book that beautiful for £14, you’d never be able to do that yourself. The simple inkjet versions were £10 each and the book they produced was an edition of all the books. That’s the only time I’ve ever heard of a publisher paying to make an artist book.

R – There’s another problem that is very typical for Poland, which is the lack of critics. It’s also very funny because when an exhibition is presented in an art gallery, only art critics

come – they don't read, they only look. They used to say: "We know only something about art, we know nothing about literature". Well, just try to bring literature critics, and they will write a review about your texts, but not about your books since they only read, they do not look. The big problem is that in the case of these books you have to do everything simultaneously. That's the problem. It's absolutely beyond their imagination.

S – I find that really surprising, in a country which has a reputation around the world as being both very literary and artistic, that there isn't someone who'll come along and write a review like that.

R – There was a time when I tried to find a publisher for my books, before I started quite seriously with my own computers and printers. Now I don't bother so much about publishers because I can do everything at home by myself. The normal procedure was that you gave them a copy and then you had to wait for the reviews (I still have some of these reviews somewhere. Maybe at some time I will use them). It's written very clearly that they didn't feel ready to write anything about my drawings or other graphic elements of the book they understood a book as nothing but text. "I can only say that these are very nice things so maybe you could try to make a book for kids". Another interesting thing is that the only point of reference that he could find was Apollinaire, Dada, maybe some Russian experimental works...

S – But that's a long time ago.

R... and it was quite surprising for me that somebody who was supposed to be well educated, a specialist in literature, behaved like he knew nothing about the big tradition of illuminated books and hieroglyphic scripts.

S – Even if they were not aware of artists' books you'd think they'd know something about how text and image must work together even in a 'normal' book – you'd think he'd have had some kind of idea.

R – Of course. The funny thing is that we are not proposing something entirely new and unknown; it's just maybe one step further. I feel very strongly that behind me there is a big tradition of this kind of thinking. It is not like that I am a unique person. I don't know if you know of it but there is such a book written by William Faulkner as a combination of two stories. *The White Palms* and *The Old Man*. I am a great fan of his writing. These two stories were published in one volume and at the end there was the translator's note. And she wrote that originally the book was published in a very special way. Faulkner mixed two stories, there was one chapter of *The Wild Palms* and one chapter of *The Old Man*, then the next chapter of *The Wild Palms* and the next chapter of *The Old Man* and so on. The point is these are two parallel stories taking place in the same space in the same time. The characters know nothing about each other, they never met, but thanks to the special construction of the book a reader can really feel the simultaneity of the stories. But he could do that only in the very first edition of the book – then the publisher said: "no, it's too complicated". The novels were separated and in following editions they were kept like that, although in one volume.

S – So really you never know, there might be many writers who were trying to be really experimental with their books but the publishers were saying 'no'.

R – The problem was that they were somehow helpless, because they were dependent on the printers. Now with computers I'm independent. That's fantastic. Of course there is another problem that a writer should know quite a lot about the book in general, about typography, design, editing etc. That makes the process of writing a book much more complicated. But it's possible.

T – That’s right, it’s a lot of work.

S – It is a lot of work though. You think you do it as a writer and artist because you enjoy every aspect of writing and making it. But if you were a writer thinking “I need to publish my own book” there are many other elements to learn that might not come naturally to you, you might think I’d love to do that but might be terrible at design or not know which typeface to use.

On the design and production of books:

S – I know you use your computer to design your books, have you considered using any of the Internet publishers, that you can upload your book and pay for them to produce it? Because a lot of artists are using those now, sites that started for people to publish a photograph book or about their favourite recipes, so ‘normal’ books. But artists are using that facility to publish their books now. Is this something you might consider using in the future?

R – Well I don’t know.

S – I don’t know how that would relate to the costs of printing here because for us at home to actually physically print through a printer is still very expensive. And then you get printers who can print with digital print to a much better quality than we can, cheaper than traditional four-colour litho print. But with the Internet facility where you upload it and they print it...

T – One uses Xerox

S – Yeah, Lulu use Xerox for text.

R – Right now in Kielce there are one or two digital printers you can send the file by email and they print your book. But still it is more expensive than to print using offset.

T – Well I suppose for us it’s cheaper to use offset if you’re producing five hundred or a thousand but if you want to produce ten or twenty...

R – It’s almost the same as I can do at home. But the problem is that it’s OK if there is nothing special going on with the book, if it is more or less regular. But if there is something strange going on inside the book then it’s almost impossible.

R – When the book is for example a triangle [*HASA RAPASA description of an impossible performance*].

S/T – Yes, of course.

On technology:

R – I am trying also to do some hypertext now. But you know that’s a different thing altogether because you can’t print them.

S – And you can’t sell them.

R – Yes, you can’t sell them, that’s right. But they are on the Internet so they are available everywhere.

S – But with the things you've done as hypertext would you say those are artists' books or are they text. Are they still art to you?

R – It's not a typical hypertext.

S – So it's still different.

T – Can you see yourself working more with the Internet? Purely digital?

R – Right now I'm working on a new project and it's only for the Internet. But I'm going to also make a paper version of it in the future [<http://liberlandia.net>].

R - A few years ago I made a hypertext novel and we decided to publish it with Ha!art on a CD, but it turned out to be a 'worst seller'. But probably the problem was that the time we were thinking about publishing the CD, a few years ago, only a very small part of society had broadband Internet. Now it is getting more and more popular so there is almost no sense to publish hypertext on a CD because you can download everything very easily. And the other problem was that, as usual, in the case of my books, it was something in between. Let's say for my generation, for the people who are used to normal books, navigating hypertext is like black magic, it's too complicated. For the youngsters who can navigate perfectly there's too much reading in it, I'm afraid. So that's one of the problems that once again when we try to open the door to a new territory or to sneak in between two standards – either paper or Internet navigation, and it's something in between combining these two things, it's too much for a lot of people. But for some people it was quite a significant event, they liked the book very much and it was worth something to them.

S – But it's still a very forward way of publishing.

R –And you need to have a gold mine at the end of your garden.

S – That's the thing. For all the reference material we publish we try and do it online so it's free, but then if you're making books and you publish everything online, how do you make a living? I suppose you can pay per download but it's not quite the same is it.

T – No, and it seems that's not quite in the spirit of the Internet. People try and make money elsewhere, so for the person downloading it it's always free, but they're making money with advertising or, sponsored links. But I think people are more reluctant to pay for things on the Internet to download them.

R – There is another thing, which is more important for me than the problem of earning money or not earning money, and that is there are certain aspects of the paper book that simply can't be exported on the Internet – the physicality of the book, and vice versa. There are things you can do on the Internet that can't be exported to print. Once a friend of mine, when the first part of my hypertext novel was on the Internet, decided to print everything, and he was very proud of it – he showed me a pile of paper and said: "Look". The problem was that to read some of the parts you had to scroll the screen, sometimes both vertically and horizontally. And this scrolling is very important; it's a part of the story. Sometimes the text area is bigger than the screen, so the problem is that you never see the text entirely. You have to move it, either to the left or to the right, or up or down. And that's a part of the story, too. So when he tried to make a print screen, it was impossible for him to print the whole story. And it's a very nice example of how different media Internet and paper are. So it's not just that you cannot sell hypertext, in my opinion it should be for free.

S – Do you use the Internet to sell your work through your website?

R – Theoretically yes but so far I have sold only one book, of course the cheapest. My website is my own, and this is very important because it's clean, you know, no ads, nothing like that, no banners, nothing is flickering. It's really cheap and I have two addresses at the moment, one is for my website and one is for the new hypertext project. I have 200 megabytes on a server for each site, the domains, and of course emails, which is maybe not so much but it's absolutely enough for my project – any time I can buy some additional space. And I decided it's much better because I can do everything I want to myself.

S – And with the hypertext - not just yours say - do you think people will have the same interest in collecting this in the future as they do works that are paper based?

R – That's a good question.

T – Or does that matter?

S – I don't know if it does matter.

T – Does it matter to you if people are collecting it or not?

R – I don't know. But - collecting hypertext, here is a funny story - just a few years ago I was in New York and some of my books were bought by the Public Library in New York. They have a department for Slavic literature and there was a guy from Poland working there. About a year later he came to visit his family in Poland and he called me and asked "Could I come here and visit you?" I said OK. It was very funny, he came here by car with his sons, one was fifteen and the other was probably fourteen, and you know what was the very first question? "Where's the Internet?" He apologised: "You know, my sons are wild youngsters from the New York jungle." But at that time I had no broadband Internet I had only a modem that was very slow, and when they started to load the game they at once gave up. But whilst they were there, I told him I had just started to work on a hypertext, and the first two parts were already on the Internet. Well he took a look, and we were talking, eating, and then they went away, back to New York, and a couple of months later I got an email from him and it said "Here is a record from the New York Public Library for your hypertext novel".

S – Ah, nice.

R – I was really astonished that they were already prepared for this kind of thing. At that time, my hypertext was published on a website for cultural events in Kielce because I didn't have my own one. But it's so easy just to close down a website, I can simply stop to pay and then it's gone forever. And the other question is that now I am using html technology, but I'm not so very sure that in the next ten years it will be used. Maybe it won't. Right now you have problems with some works you did ten or fifteen years ago,

S/T – Yes. We went to a seminar at the V&A a couple of months ago and they were talking about (not just artist's books but any books) publishing via the Internet or publishing on CD or DVD, and how things have to become future proof if we're going to collect them and store them for the nation. That you could have, potentially, all these archives that can't be played in fifteen years time, so they were saying "where do you stop?" If you have something that is on CD now and in ten years time you had the technology that took it off that CD and then put it on something else to allow it to still play, have you ruined the original format of how it should be viewed or heard?

R – You know, I had the same problem with my own music for example. I found that my audio cassettes got really old and there are some troubles to play them, so finally I decided to digitise them. I have the same problem with video – I have some of my concerts from fifteen-twenty years ago on VHS cassettes, and a big problem thinking of what to do with them.

T – So you have to reformat everything or keep an old machine to play them.

R – But the same could happen with DVD. Because now we think DVD will last for ever, but no – it will only last for some years. My first computer had a big floppy disk drive, and a small floppy disk drive. The relatively new one I bought two years ago, I forgot to say that I needed a floppy drive, and of course I brought it home and it only had a DVD drive. Well of course that's standard – there's no more floppy drive.

S – Or zips, we used to use zip drives all the time for transferring data, and you were using something that now in an equivalent physical size takes something like 500 times the amount of information.

T – USB, and memory sticks.

R – And there are quite a lot of interesting things on the Internet concerning design and art now, so it is a problem of how to keep it.

T- Are you worried about that? Is it something that concerns you or is this a problem for someone who wants to collect?

R – It would be nice to store them somewhere, just to be able to see them, to take a look at them in 50 or 100 years. So I imagined, in the case of hypertexts in the New York Public Library, a room with old computers, and for a hypertext novel written in 1995 there is a machine from 1995 with the software from 1995.

S – And you just switch it on and it pops up.

R – Well why not?

S – Well maybe somewhere there is.

T – Do you do that? Keep old machines to view the older work on, or do you reformat it?

S – Just like they discussed at the V&A, if you keep the machine you've kept the integrity of the original piece, haven't you.

R – But, imagine the machine is broken.

S – Then it's lost forever. Maybe have the backup B version that you've also put onto DVD and then you have to change again.

R – Well, I have a big problem already then, because in the loft I have two old monitors, two old printers, old tape recorders, old TV sets and everything. We don't know what to do with this stuff – make a museum maybe! But you know new things are waiting, maybe in the next 2 or 3 years I will have to bring them downstairs to the cellar, or maybe dig a big hole to keep them in and make space for more old machines.

On marketing books:

S - If you're saying there's not much of an audience here for your books, do you sell most of your books outside of Poland?

R – Yes, but I have a feeling that I could sell more books if I could go there more often.

S – So that's important that you have to be there?

R – It's very important. I think that the best place for my books is definitely Great Britain – because of the language, I think that's quite obvious. But it was not like I started to sell my things all at once – no. I had to come two or three times without selling anything, then I started to sell my things. And it's quite clear that people need to get to know you first.

T – Yes, I think they do. We find that you can show a book three times before someone buys it.

R – If they see you there a few times they think 'oh that's a reliable guy'.

S – And then they will buy that book.

R – And it's exactly the same in Belgium or Germany, it's not enough to go there once – if you go only once they say OK, yeah – beautiful books, but we must think for a while.

S – I think that's quite universal.

R – The same happened in the case of Scandinavia, almost everywhere. So one time is not enough, two – also not enough. You need to go three or four times. But the problem is that I simply can't afford travelling like that.

S – It's a big investment.

R – To travel, to stay there. And the other problem is for me purely technical – it means that I simply have too many books right now, because so far I have produced twenty titles. So if I would like to take maybe two or three copies of each, some of them are quite big, then I need to go there by car.

S – Is it very expensive to freight things from here?

R – Yes, very expensive. And the other thing is that I'm getting older and I'm not very fond of carrying all those things. And another problem is that having so many books (if I want now to make an exhibition of all my books) it takes a lot of preparation. If I want to have a set of new books, just to print twenty titles is a lot of work. It wasn't like that years ago when I had two or three books.

S – So when you say that you have to print them all, does that mean for each title, for every book you print them one at a time.

R – These are open editions.

S – So you say I will make twenty more. Print on demand.

R – Yes.

T – Do you think you should use the Internet more to sell your work if it is hard to go to other places?

R – I don't know, I really don't know.

S – You just don't think it translates well enough?

T – Do you think that people will buy artists' books from the Internet in general?

R – I don't know, some people do - we have a very good Internet shop called Allegro and it's mainly for people to sell whatever you can imagine. It's a kind of an Internet auction.

[Allegro is a Polish online auction website, similar to EBay, www.allegro.pl]

So some people try to convince me that maybe I can try to sell my books through it, maybe it will work, maybe it won't - I risk nothing. But it still takes time to organise it.

S - Yes, and to check.

R – Just to check. So then I think I prefer to practice my drums.

S – I guess some people have been trying to sell their books through EBay.

T – I don't know how successful that's been though.

S – I don't. Some people have sold well through Internet publishers like Blurb, they let you list your book if you print it through them, so that you go under a category and people can order your book from them, but then they deal with the whole selling side and give you the amount of money that you want. That's one way of doing it, so you don't have to get involved with the actual sales, so it takes the responsibility off of you to actually deal with the public.

T – But then again, the print on demand websites still need to make an artist's books section. Because at the moment there isn't one - you have to try and fit yourself in – art, or photography or writing.

S – If enough people do it they will give in and do it, if every time you listed, you emailed them to say that should have been under artists' books, not under art book.

R – In my case, it should be under writers' books.

S – Or books by writers that aren't normal books.

On Literature, Liberateure, and classifying artists' books:

R – And now to our friends in Krakow [Katarzyna Bazarnik and Zenon Fajfer]. Their idea is to show the big tradition of this kind of thinking. They convinced Ha!art publishing house to launch a 'liberateure' series. They want to present books that were written (classics) by very famous writers, to show the audience that it's really something well-rooted. It's not a frenzied stupid idea of some guys, there were some really serious writers who were struggling with the fundamental problems and relations of writing, speaking, thinking, the outer world and the inner world. The relation between the book and the world: maybe it is only the mirror or maybe a book creates its own universe or maybe it is a mock-up of the universe. So that's why they decided to start with the famous dice throwing by Mallarmé. It was the first full edition of this book in Poland with the original version and translations, printed exactly in the way Mallarmé imagined everything. And their next book was *The Unfortunates* by B.S Johnson. B.S Johnson is almost unknown in Poland. This book is not bound, it's just a bunch of loose pages in a box. The point of the project is to show people that these funny looking books are in fact very serious, often more serious than many a seriously looking book. It's a lovely idea of theirs and it's something very important that they are trying to attain.

S – I really hope we can talk more with them later, because what they're doing just fits into that whole understanding how artists' books move in and out of other fields as well.

R – Years ago I wrote a short essay ‘six directions of the book’ It’s on my website [<http://liberatorium.com/teksty/6pages.html>]. I tried first to imagine that we have South North East West Zenith and Nadir of the book world and then I tried to answer the question: where are all these more and less crazy books? Very often we feel like being on opposite sides of a barricade and we are ready to kill each other because we can’t accept each other’s books. But in fact we are in one homogeneous space.

S – That’s what we’re trying to do with this whole project. Make everyone realise that there aren’t any better or worse ways of thinking about artists’ books.

R – And what’s interesting is that it’s very easy to indicate the extreme points: that’s a book object, that’s concrete poetry, this is fine press, that’s liberature. The problem is that you make such classifications and suddenly you find hundreds of books that are precisely in between.

T – Yes, and that’s what we want to show – how things overlap and how it could be classed as either or both.

S – Or nothing, or maybe there’s just one word for everything for them.

R – That’s the thing, the point of the whole business is that in our civilisation, in Western culture, there is a very clear and very strict distinction between form and content. And what I said about the critics - in the opinion of the average critic here in Poland, but I guess it’s the same in France and in the UK - the content is the text, while typography, illustration, drawings, paper, that’s the form. And the street book [*Sienkiewicza Street*] for example tells you something totally different. You can’t separate the text from the pictures.

S – No, and you can’t say I’m just going to read that.

R – If you take away the pictures - the text is just mumbling, it’s nonsense. If you push away the text, the drawings are also nothing, they are just standard drawings; any student of architecture can do drawings even better than that. It works only together. So I can say that the drawings are the text and the text is the drawings. There are no illustrations really, because the drawings don’t illustrate the text, it’s not like that. But it’s very difficult to convince people and explain to them that it is just like that. I can understand that for a scientist it’s much easier to make an assumption that the content of the utterance doesn’t depend on the way you speak. If I say to you ‘I love you’ it means always the same, which is total bullshit. Because I can say to you ‘I love you’ in such a way that you are perfectly sure that I hate you. It can be a real fun to watch politicians arguing.

S – Yeah, especially with a politician.

R – Especially. And then they usually say ‘I didn’t mean that, I was simply misunderstood’. But they forget about such simple things as the context, voice, body language, everything. There was a very interesting experiment made by Jacobson, a Russian linguist, years ago in the USSR, he asked a very famous Russian theatre director to get his actors say one very simple phrase, for example ‘good evening how are you’ and there was the audience sitting and listening to the actors, and the actors said it in different ways, trying to put into these words different meanings. The audience deciphered more than forty different meanings. Absolutely nothing was changed in the text, only the form was changed which is supposed to have no meaning...

There is a second-hand bookstore in Kielce, where once a month a group of friends stay for the whole night to read books aloud. Each month they choose a new topic, for example on

women's day in March, they read books written by women or about women. A couple of months ago they decided to read my books. I agreed although I expected they might face some really big problems, for example: how can the green letters be read? and how about the blue ones? and what can they do when the font suddenly changes?

S – So, how would you read that aloud?

R – Well, I can write 'he changed his voice and now it sounded soft and tender', but instead of writing this I can change the font, choose a more round one. And you can use a lot of things like that, especially now in the age of computers. The false form-content distinction so deeply imprinted in us is really something very difficult to be overcome.

S – But it's not even just an art thing, it's the whole psychological thing in everybody, that they're not related. It's quite a lot to change.

R – Well, think of James Joyce...

T- Just like Katarzyna and Zenon

R – They are writers, and they also make theatre. For them a book is the extension of text. They follow James Joyce, for whom the structure of the whole book was very important, since it is also a conveyor for messages, too.

S – So every element of/ within the book is part of the whole message, not only the text.

R – The difference between literature and liberature is that in literature only letter/ text is meaningful, so you can print the text with any font, on any kind of paper, and the meaning will not change, the message will remain exactly the same. This is what people usually think. But in fact this is a wishful thinking, because if you printed the Polish anthem on toilet paper with Russian letters you would provoke the biggest possible scandal here. And this is the territory they have begun to penetrate and exploit. The book is composed of many elements and the text is only one of them – how can all those elements be used to tell a story thus making it more powerful and complete? So that's how they work. I must say the way I think about the book is almost the same.

T – Would you call yourself as a book artist, part of liberature?

R – Like Katarzyna and Zenon I also started with writing, and all the other elements were just an extension of the text, and my idea was that the whole book could be involved in telling the story. But I studied architecture and I'm also a musician, so it was quite natural for me to combine all these elements. Writing or drawing is almost the same for me, especially for my hand. From my hand's point of view, drawing and writing are the same actions. Of course this is so in the case of handwriting and hand-drawing, while printing is something different. Luckily we have computers, so I can design fonts, use tablets, I can quite easily combine drawing with writing etc. Nevertheless, the most important thing for me is to tell a story. All these technical things must help me to tell a story. When I came to Oxford I could see lots of people talking frantically about letterpress, inks, quality of paper - but they were never talking about literature, about the stories they are going to tell using their fantastic skills. I found it doesn't matter for them whether they print a fancy restaurant menu or a Shakespeare sonnet, the quality of print does matter.

S – Is paramount.

R – That's it. I must say I do appreciate also this attitude - because it's not that easy to print something well, it's also the art - but, what is most important for me is the question "how can

I use those achievements to make my story better?" I love beauty, too. However sometimes the story I'm telling needs ugly fonts. Then I must print it ugly. With no doubt my approach to the book is more semantic than aesthetic.

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www.liberatorium.com