

Adam Szymczyk

PIOTR JAROS **The Caviar Lady**

The current exhibition of works by Piotr Jaros at Tony Wuethrich's Kabinett in Basel, Switzerland, is the artist's first substantial gallery show outside of his native Poland in a considerable time.

Born in 1965, Jaros made a strong appearance in the nineties, when he quickly established himself as one of the most important figures in Polish contemporary art. The early nineties were an era of turbo-capitalism in Poland: the country's transition to a free-market system produced new patterns of social behavior, poverty for many, and excessive lifestyles for some of those who were able to quickly adapt. Previously unknown career opportunities became available after the great transformation, which was initiated by the so-called "roundtable negotiations" between Poland's last Communist government and representatives of the political opposition. In the summer of 1989, these negotiations resulted in the first free election, which was clearly won by opposition candidates. During this period, the fields of advertising, business, television, and other creative industries were held in high esteem among the younger generation at the beginning of their professional careers. But it was also a formative time for an entire generation of artists, who constituted the lively art scenes in larger Polish cities, including Warsaw, Cracow, Gdansk, and Wroclaw.

In Warsaw, Mirosław Balka created sculptures that, on the one hand, stemmed from his critical reading of Polish Catholicism, and on the other, examined the human body in its universal, existential, nearly religious dimension. Also in Warsaw, Zbigniew Libera developed his own brand of video and installation art, focusing on the body repressed by social conventions and state apparatus. Since then, a more performative mode of working with the body while elaborating on its productive deficiencies has become a trademark of a group of slightly younger artists who all graduated from the Warsaw Academy of Art's Faculty of Sculpture, headed by the sculptor and performance artist Grzegorz Kowalski; this younger generation includes Paweł Althamer, Katarzyna Kozyra, and Artur Zmijewski. Compared to Balka, Libera, Althamer, Kozyra and Zmijewski, all of who made their names in the nineties, and all of whom are more or less internationally recognized at present, Piotr Jaros occupies a unique and independent position.

Unlike many other artists of his generation, most of whom have long been based in Warsaw, the very buzzing and metropolitan centre of Poland, Jaros has always lived in Cracow, in the south of the country. Compared to the modernity and speed of Warsaw, Cracow is a beautiful old town, where relatively conservative attitudes prevail and a contemplative, somewhat escapist way of life is the favored choice of the local artists. Intellectual life is conducted in the cellars of mediaeval houses—clubs and cafes that know little difference between night and day. Cracow dwells in the past, longing for the grandeur it once held as the capital of Poland, a position it lost to Warsaw long ago, and which remains the reason for a certain antagonism between the two cities.

In the nineties, Jaros participated regularly in international group exhibitions, including Manifesta 1, in Rotterdam in 1996, and "After the Wall," at the Moderna Museet, in Stockholm in 1999, sometimes alongside other leading young Polish artists, such as in "New P's for New Years," at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien, in Berlin in 1995. His work was also the subject of a number of solo shows, including those mounted at the Centre for Contemporary Art, Warsaw, in 1995, and the Ludwig Museum, in Budapest, in 1996. Like many artists in Poland who made their debut in the early nineties, he continued to work against the scarcity of institutional and private support for contemporary art in that decade and after 2000, when the new generation of artists – mostly painters – claimed the stage, leaving hardly any space for more refined, less spectacular work. But Jaros endured and continued making work in more domestic and handy media: video, drawing, collage, and small, model-like sculptures—all of which are present in the current show in Basel. In 2007, Jaros had a survey show titled "House and Work" at Galeria Kronika in Bytom, Silesia, which was recently followed by the acquisition of his works by the Muzeum Sztuki in Lodz, which holds Poland's oldest and most important collection of modern and contemporary art. However, it was the year 2008 that saw the artist's real comeback, in a series of presentations under the common title "Eurogum" organized by Barbara Steiner, the director of the renowned Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst in Leipzig.

In his body of work, Jaros has exhibited a keen interest in the fast-changing notion of labor: the growing importance of creative and intellectual activity, accompanied by the demise of manual work's value. Some of Jaros's characters

are workers, but the nature of their occupation is not clearly defined, as if their labor could exist in a pure state, beyond the results it is meant to produce. Another part of the artist's cast of characters seems to belong to the sphere of business in its cheesiest, most lackluster version: the apathetic hostesses, the tacky developing world executives aspiring to first world status, the wannabe-famous of all kinds, practicing erudite idleness. In Jaros's videos, typical protagonists are mysterious individuals who speak on behalf of shady organizations, syndicates, and make-believe corporations. A conspiracy theorist assumes forces that are beyond our control, or even perception, exert their influence on all areas of our life and, in effect, rule us. Such conspiracy theories are the flipside of the capitalist organization of life—controlling both work and leisure time—that is similarly omnipresent today but mostly taken for granted, as we grow up believing that this is simply how things are.

Jaros's Basel exhibition features objects, drawings, and collages that might be best understood as studies or diary entries made in parallel to the film narratives that remain the core of the artist's recent work. Accordingly, the centerpiece of the show is *Caviar Lady* (2010), a new 16-minute digital video that displays all the characteristics of Jaros's style and his typical preoccupation with unusual, socially dysfunctional subjects, ritualized behaviors, and esoteric knowledge. The artist introduces four characters, two women and two men, who deliver monologues to the camera in three languages—a middle-aged man of experience who is not an English native speaker but perhaps Eastern European; a young, blonde Russian woman; an older woman speaking German, and a young businessman-type speaking American English without a foreign accent. This cast of multilingual characters is filmed against the backdrop of what seems to be a nouveau-riche residence or perhaps a hotel interior. The protagonists may be connected, but the exact nature of their relationship remains enigmatic. They speak and assume heavily stylized poses in various configurations, sometimes individually and sometimes in duos, staging the consecutive scenes as small rituals. The subject matter varies from person to person but the fantasy of greatness and corresponding fear of power seem to be the leitmotifs of the statements. The young Russian unveils her dream to establish a corporation "in major cities" (an advertisement of sorts, handwritten on a bed sheet spread on the floor, lists "Skidan Corporation—Moscow, Dubai, Tokio, London, New York, Milano"); the middle-aged man curses the obscure "lawyers" who will bring doom to everyone. There is no resolution and no culmination. Instead, the film unravels as a series of isolated tableaux and ends with an image of a smoking candle blown out, as if a strange ceremony had just come to an end.

Basel, 2010