



Grzegorz Stefański, *spill*
2018, trzykanałowa instalacja, widok wystawy
[three-channel installation, exhibition view]

26/04—03/06/2018

Grzegorz Stefański

spill



Grzegorz Stefański, *spill*
2018, kadry filmu [film stills]

Grzegorz Stefański

(born 1983) lives and works in Warsaw and London where he is currently an artist in residence at Sarabande Foundation. A graduate of The Slade School of Fine Art in London and Mirosław Bałka's Studio of Spatial Activities in Warsaw. He also earned his master's degree in philosophy at the Jagiellonian University in Cracow and photography at the University of Arts in Poznań. In 2017, he won the Ivan Juritz Prize in London and the Grand Prix at the Biennale of Young Art in Ustka. He made his debut in 2010 with a solo exhibition at the Goldex Poldex Cooperative in Cracow. Since then, he has exhibited his works at the NY Art Book Fair at MoMa PS1 in New York (2010), Pastificio Cerere Foundation in Rome (2014), Manifesta 11 in Zurich (2016), Nowy Teatr in Warsaw (2016), Whitechapel Gallery in London (2018), Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw (2018).

Curator

Szymon Żydek

Exhibition coordinator

Maria Sapeta

Film producer

Konstancja Liszewska

Director of photography

Tomasz Ziółkowski

Film editor

Wioleta Wnorowska

Costumes

Robert Kielb

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Spill by Grzegorz Stefański is a multi-channel video installation focusing on the fractions-of-a-second short inertia that the human body experiences during a fall. The installation oscillates between photography and film, inspiring a reflection on the meaning of collapse in contemporary culture.

In his art, Stefański explores the possibilities and limitations of film. The themes he has investigated include the legacy of European cinematography, private history recorded in one's body, cultural determinants of masculinity, and micro-choreographies of violence.

In the work presented at the {Project Room}, Stefański develops motifs present in his previous output. The materiality of the performer's body remains the main theme. The artist focuses on the course of inert flight just before falling to the ground. Fractions of a second are stretched into a sequence that takes

dozens of seconds and becomes the basis for a monumental video installation. The body presented in this way becomes a metaphor of the moment of relaxation during a total loss of control. On the other hand, the installation emanates the tension produced by the consciousness of a delayed-but-inevitable collapse.

The installation by Grzegorz Stefański can be interpreted not only as a reflection of the performer's private history, but also as a commentary on the condition of the contemporary world in the times of falling governments, banks, buildings or entire legal systems.

Szymon Żydek

Szymon Żydek interviews
Grzegorz Stefański

Balance disorders

Szymon Żydek
What's up?

Grzegorz Stefański

I'm staying in Luxembourg, on a residency. For the first three days it was pretty idyllic: lying on the grass, reading books, staying in a castle... It used to be a prison, but today it's a multi-star hotel. And I've been walking around the city, everybody looks the same, and you can see that everyone is doing ok. I met a few homeless people here, but they look just like some of my friends from Warsaw. There aren't many of them, anyway – there is a drug addicts' ghetto near the railway station, they lie on the green grass in the sunshine and they shoot dope. It is civilized and totally tolerated here. It's their area, their ghetto, so they won't spread around the city. So Luxembourg also has its "suicide bridges" underneath all this wealth, under these algorithms that everyone follows.

Szymon Żydek
But how? Isn't it a perfect city?

Grzegorz Stefański

Well, it is, but just like in Ionesco's *The Killer*: a pathological utopia. Yesterday we went to check out the site for the exhibition summarizing my residency, to the bank's headquarters. New building, glass-only, a huge high atrium, a colorful and cheerful work by Martin Creed on the floor. After a short conversation,

it turned out that a few years ago an intern jumped from here and killed herself. The bank had a program to employ people not only from strong countries but also poorer representatives from the weaker part of Europe. The girl was from Romania, supposedly she didn't go anywhere too often, nobody saw her outside the company. And one day she threw herself straight into the colorful stripes, right after a conversation with a corporate psychologist who advised her to "go on holiday". All the office windows overlook this atrium, so the people sitting at their computers suddenly see a falling body that lands in the middle of the courtyard. It must have been a traumatic event for them, something disrupting their corporate world.

Szymon Żydek

This sounds like another story that continues the theme of your last work, *spill*. Today, however, I would like to talk not only about your work, but also about your artistic path. How did you become an artist – this is the question with which I came to you. Because it wasn't a straight road from secondary art school to the Ujazdowski Castle.

Grzegorz Stefański

It was rather through literature to philosophy, through philosophy to photography, and through photography to art – that's what my path looked like in a nutshell. First, I graduated in philosophy from Jagiellonian University – I dealt mainly with phenomenology and existentialism in various forms. The turning point for me was reading Emil Cioran, a Romanian philosopher, who made me aware of the limitations of the intellect. From that I realized that I had to act more practically and not only intellectually. Fortunately, during my philosophical studies I could actually set the curriculum myself, so I went to the Psychology and Theatre Studies departments, took directing classes, took a trip to Paris, and worked on the radio. Finally, I got in to Agata Pankiewicz's photography

studio at the Academy of Fine Arts in Cracow, where I started to take my first pictures and talk about photography.

Szymon Żydek

And if you were asked to indicate your first work, one that would open your portfolio?

Grzegorz Stefański

It's *emptybottles*, my debut exhibition from 2010, curated by Karol Radziszewski. It didn't start as a formal art project – rather, it started intuitively, one winter when I began to keep an intimate diary with my plastic camera. Free spontaneous gestures, the whole thing deeply rooted in my everyday life. Actually in ours, because I was with Ella at that time and that diary turned out to be a report of our short-lived relationship. And it was a very good experience – to do something that is intimate, coming from the gut rather than the intellect. So *emptybottles* from loose photographic notes became, thanks to Karol, a project shown at the Goldex Poldex Cooperative at the Kraków Photomonth Festival. I remember that I was as happy as a clam when Dorota Jarecka



Grzegorz Stefański, *emptybottles*
2010, series of photographs

mentioned me in the same sentence as Martin Parr in her review for *Gazeta Wyborcza*, and my handmade zine with these photos was shipped to the MoMa PS1 in New York for an art book fair. That was really something for someone who had recently spent most of his time writing about Husserl and Shestov and had no artistic education. So I became an artist before I even started studying art. Then I studied photography in Poznań, where I made my first video works. I learned a lot during my conversations with Piotr Kurka and Krzysztof Baranowski. In my mind, I started to leave the photographic ghetto. After Poznań I had a short break, I got to know the students and graduates of Mirosław Bałka's studio in Warsaw, and since his "black hole" from Tate had been an object of fascination for me for quite some time, I decided to go to his Studio of Spatial Activities. My time there completely opened my mind and was very important for me, artistically and personally. And in fact, I became an artist with an official Master of Arts certificate in the autumn of 2016, after my graduate show at Nowy Teatr. Even before I completed my studies at the Studio I received a scholarship to The Slade School of Fine Art in London, so I actually went there a few days after dismantling my diploma exhibition. I needed a change.

Szymon Żydek

The narrative layer is an important element of contemporary art. There are artists who produce narratives for contemporary theories. But I don't think your works are like this, you don't try to illustrate something.

Grzegorz Stefański

I hope not! Although I did use to read a lot about art theories and I still do, albeit with a greater distance. And I'm happy to find confirmation of my intuition in theory – this was the case, for example, with *blow out*, my diploma installation from 2016. I could not clearly theorize about this work until I came across the third memory concept by Bernard Stiegler. It fitted well, as it turned

out that his theory is a good context for my gesture of manipulating the Antonioni's film. That confirmation of my intuitions by an interesting theory was satisfying, of course, but I try to avoid making art in response to current intellectual trends.

Szymon Żydek

And why so much fascination with technology in all this?

I understand you started to deal with photography at some point, but then the very technical side of this medium became important to you. Things like how much can one extend a moment in time, or how can technology change perception. When did it start?

Grzegorz Stefański

I wouldn't call this a fascination with technology, as in my mind that would be some kind of fetishism. Technology as such does not interest me at all, I am only interested in it as a tool to implement an idea. The slow motion technique I used in *spill* appeared for the first time in my previous film, *choke*, from 2017. But the source was a fascination not with technology, but with time. In the summer of 2017, I tore the ligaments in my knee and hobbled around on crutches for six weeks. My life suddenly slowed down many times, and things like going out to throw away my garbage became an expedition that took ten or fifteen minutes. Imagine that it takes you ten minutes to take out the garbage, six hundred seconds! In addition, this requires all your attention, because every step is a complicated choreographic operation: crutches, stairs, legs, bags with rubbish, maintaining balance; slowness imposes a completely different way of perception, it boosts your attention. So my slowdown became an observation vehicle, and the slow motion film technique was just what I needed to make them visible. *Spill* is a continuation of this mode of thinking, only now it's more about film as a medium and whose flesh is time. And I was wondering: how does time affect me? What does it allow me to do and what does it obscure?



produced by cinematography – pushed me to create *blow out*. Antonioni’s film with the almost identical title is a hugely influential classic of the European cinema. Because, at the same time, it was a great commercial success, it made its mark on the mass memory of the audience. It imprinted itself on my work for several reasons – first of all because it addressed the basic problem of objective interpretation of reality in the context of photography. Moreover, the final scenes in the park are so suggestive, especially the sound of the leaves, that after watching them, every city park with a bit of dark atmosphere was Antonioni-esque for me. So my manipulation – removing the main character from these scenes and breaking the linearity of film time into an installation in space – was a gesture of emancipation, making these park memories my own, regaining control over them.

Szymon Żydek

But your works also tell us about the manipulation of reality. Let’s take your diploma work in Warsaw – *blow out* talks about how you can manipulate images and memory.

Grzegorz Stefański

Of course, manipulation for me is equal to emancipation. If you know how to consciously use and change something, you are just a step away from emancipating yourself from the role of a consumer in the world. Such an unconscious need – to emancipate my experience of the world from the archive of memories

Grzegorz Stefański,
blow out
2016, six-channel
installation

Szymon Żydek

What if you were asked to define the subject of what you do?

Grzegorz Stefański

Do I have to respond?

Szymon Żydek

You do!

Grzegorz Stefański

Currently there is no artistic statement in my artistic statement, but I understand the need to define things. Wait! I had some biographical notes about me somewhere here, maybe I will look

them up (laughs). Oh, I found it, for example, a quite relevant one: “His artistic practice is located at the nexus of psychology, performance and film; primarily concerned with power, identity and the politics of embodiment.” Or this one will also do: “In his art, Stefański explores the possibilities and limitations of film. The themes he has investigated include the legacy of European cinematography, private history recorded in one’s body, cultural determinants of masculinity, and micro-choreographies of violence.” To put it simply, I would say that when I work with people, I deal with different aspects of building identity, and the presence and experience of specific bodies are the axis around which I move; their political strength and physical weakness fascinate me. I often work with simple gestures that are transferred to relationships, memory, social narratives, architecture – that is, everything that relates to the body. I pay a lot of attention to the formal side of my work, and my language draws from film, choreography and photography. Anyway, you should be the one to define it, you are the curator.

Szymon Żydek

But I understand the job of the curator as someone who somewhat extracts what you want to say, and does not describe and explain what the artist is currently doing. And how do you see what we did in *U-jazdowski*? What is this work about? Is it about time? About masculinity? About abandoning control?

Grzegorz Stefański

It’s about all those things... Descriptions of my works are similar to my works themselves; they change over time, age well or age badly. My thinking about them is changing, I discover that now they mean something different to me than at the beginning. And this is very satisfying for me as an artist; the fact that some of my works escape my intentions and somehow force me to mature together with them. So in the case of *spill* it is too early for me



Grzegorz Stefański, *spill*
2018, three-channel installation, exhibition view



to decide what this work is about. Right now for me it is about the affirmation of weakness, about letting go as a method of development and about the fact that intimacy is monumental. It is also about time, about the confrontation of different types of temporality, the pace of the installation itself and the viewer's perceptual expectations. So it is also a work on the artificiality of art. And – I hope – about something that I don't know yet.

Szymon Żydek

I am very interested in this theme of masculinity. Because where did we have a man there? After all, there was no stereotypical man among your collaborators in the creation of this work.

Grzegorz Stefański

No, there wasn't. Acceptance to participate in the work involved consent to fall, to leave one's established position, to renounce control. Although it was a performance in front of a camera, it was impossible to simulate it; at the level of body and psyche it meant to fall hard on the ground. And few strong people, especially stereotypical men, can afford it. We also had the opportunity to observe how difficult this seemingly simple gesture was for the participants. So this piece is about a different masculinity, without its typical tensivity associated with power and patriarchy. It is about sensitivity that can let go and be weak. Reading this work through the theme of masculinity is perfectly justified, but it affirms the expanded image of masculinity. Now I can see that this theme is also present in *blow out*, in which I removed Thomas, the main protagonist of the original film,



Grzegorz Stefański, *spill*
2018, three-channel installation, exhibition view

Grzegorz Stefański, *choke*
2017, video

which after all represents a very stereotypical version of masculinity. It's similar in *choke*, in which I propose an intimate look at the situation usually associated with male heterosexual aggression. Masculinity begins where its stereotype ends.

Szymon Żydek

How did the preparation of this installation look? How do you perceive the importance of each stage – concept, recording, and the arrangement of the exhibition itself? What was most crucial?

Grzegorz Stefański

This exhibition was created in about two months and in terms of teamwork was my biggest undertaking so far. We worked like in a proper film production. First, as you remember, we talked a lot and it was very important for me to have a curator, someone with whom I can “brainstorm” and allow myself to express even unwise ideas in order to check them in the conversation. The conceptual stage was the most difficult for me – I had to reject references and push myself out of the rational comfort zone, be alert; check what resonates with me. At some point, due to the upcoming opening date of the exhibition – and with your curatorial help – I narrowed down the project. I decided that it would be a video installation with falling down as its subject matter. The next step was to discuss the visual concept with the operators; then decisions were made about the atmosphere of the image, the number of screens, the type of lighting and space. First, I talked to Mikołaj Syguda, then Tomasz Ziółkowski replaced him and became my cinematographer. I also consulted with Maria Stokłosa, a choreographer, and the costumes were taken care of by Robert Kiełb. Then we started production, supervised by Maria Sapeta and Konstancja Liszewska, a film producer. Completing the team, searching for participants, locations, arranging film lights and equipment: Maria and Konstancja took care of all this logistics, which I wouldn't have been able to cope with myself – I would have lost

my mind. It was my first professionally produced project and it made me feel comfortable at work. A few days before the photos we organized a rehearsal and a conversation with potential participants. Then we had one full photo shoot day at Dom Słowa Polskiego, which was tiring for everyone, but very satisfying. Then, together with Wioleta Wnorowska, we started to edit the material, at the same time doing projection rehearsals in the exhibition space, literally jumping from the editing room to the gallery and back. It is difficult to say which of these stages was of the greatest importance. At first, I wanted to say that of course the idea is the most important, as is usually said, but I realized that this is not quite the case with a multi-stage production involving ten or so people. Each stage contributes to the final quality of the work and each stage must be done as well as possible.

Szymon Żydek

Did the process itself contain any threads and observations that were not included in the final work?

Grzegorz Stefański

Yes, it is usually the case that some “waste” remains. I have a lot of it, because I make decisions by reducing and rejecting what is unnecessary. But, first of all, I have to activate my imagination and visualize a lot, so there are a lot of threads. Do you remember how we talked about repetitive camera movements, *tableaux vivants*, modernist interiors and disappearing? It was the initial fishery; it was bubbling away in my head until the final work was at least theoretically quite minimalistic, showing a few people falling on the floor. But what was not included in the work will come back to me. Finished works are the tip of the iceberg, there is much more beneath them.

Szymon Żydek

Do you consider yourself an artist or a filmmaker? What is your attitude to teamwork and the creative act itself? To what extent are the real people who play roles in your works important to you?

Grzegorz Stefański

I am an artist and will remain one no matter what, which makes the possibility of changing the field of action quite open and does not impose limitations typical for films. It also results in a dynamic working method, from solitary work in the studio to working with a team, and I need both solitude and the crowd. Some elements of film language and working methods from this field have already been included in my repertoire, and I can easily imagine my practice as being situated between film and art. I have already worked with cinematographers several times, with the aforementioned Mikołaj Syguda and Tomasz Ziółkowski. This requires negotiating a percentage of the authorship of the work, which is unthinkable in the field of art, where the work always has one author – the artist. Another important issue is the participants in my work, which filmmakers would call protagonists. I've always worked with people, photographed them, organized situations with them, and I draw a lot from the confrontation of my intuitions with others. That is why I prefer to call them participants. I'm still looking for new ways to work with people, I'm still wondering what I need it for. My work from 2016, *do-over*, started with an accidental meeting with a young conductor, I found volunteers to *choke* during training sessions in Brazilian jiu-jitsu, we invited our friends with suitable energy to *spill*, and I also invited members of historical re-enactment groups to take part in *restraint*, my another work from 2016. Somewhere in the roots of a project a "portrait thinking" appears, some willingness to get closer to another human being – this can be seen especially in my earlier works. But over time I have become more and more interested in people in the



context in which they function and in which they have to define themselves. I am concerned about this centre of gravity – whether to focus more on a particular person, or their function or place in some system.

Grzegorz Stefański,
restraint
2016, photograph

Szymon Żydek

Where is the borderline between the registration of the existing reality and its creation? I'm referring to the documentary and biographical themes in your works, with a personal story of the protagonist as a starting point.

Grzegorz Stefański

I don't have a ready answer to this question. I just know that this border is unclear and that it's one of the topics that propels me. The search for authenticity pushed me first into philosophy, where everyone searches for some kind of truth at first, and then



art, where there are an infinite number of these truths. For example, I once naively believed that the body can't lie, and the camera represents direct reality, because it is mechanical. It was only when I started to lose these illusions that I began to mature as an artist. Now I know that the body is the result of many influences, and the camera always has a viewfinder through which someone looks; that we do not have direct access to reality. I know that this lack of illusions provides more creative possibilities, yet the

desire for authenticity is alive in me and I will cultivate it as some kind of primary source. Probably thanks to this I draw inspiration from the documentary sphere. At the same time, I am aware that there is already something behind this documentalism that is no longer authentic – that it has a story and that somewhere sooner or deeper this difference between the real and fiction does not exist, or at least does not matter at all. I will develop this intuition in my next work, *the third pier*, together with Tomasz Ziółkowski,

during my residency in Ustka. I wrote about how a documentary language is present in contemporary art in my essay *restraint*, published at the beginning of 2018 in the *Textual Practice Journal*. In my work *Paul*, which I made during my residency in Strasbourg in 2015, the personal and thus theoretically documentary and authentic memories of the main participant are mixed with the memories of other participants. Eventually, a partially fictional patchwork story is created, but because it is a story about a father who is passing away, it has a universal character. Everyone knows this story either from an inherited cultural reservoir or from their own experience (sooner or later every father dies; in this story the father probably commits suicide and this is something that the main participant wants to check by sharing his memories). In *Paul*, it was unimportant what was documentary and what was created, to whom individual memories belonged; that work reversed us to a place where these divisions don't exist, and there was something tribal in that action. That is why I am fascinated by working with people who literally embody more or less my personal experiences and intuitions. It's quite amazing for me, it's a partial surrender of myself into the hands of others, as if I wanted to go beyond my own boundaries.