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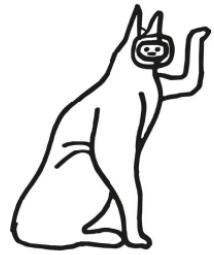
interview



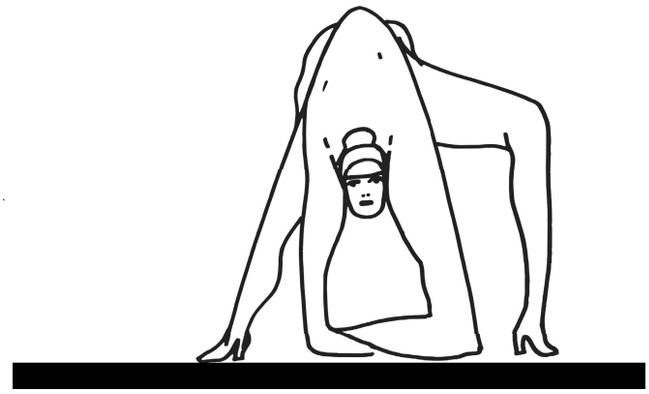
Tokyo Story

Studio 2's Beata Kotnowska
and Dariusz Vasina

in conversation

with

Agnieszka Jankowska-Marzec
kuratorka



A.J.M.: Do you remember the moment when you first told me this story?

B.K.: Yes. I also remember your reaction. You thought we were mad!
D.V.: I was pleased you didn't try to explain it from the start. You rather delved into our chaotic 'archive,' asked, 'What else have you got?,' and wanted to turn it into an exhibition right away.
B.K.: Exactly. We were still investigating and not thinking of it in terms of an exhibition.

A.J.M.: The story you told me had so much suspense. On the one hand, it sounded like an adventure in art, but on the other hand like an investigation or a ready-made script for a fascinating film. But let's start from the beginning – your trip to Japan in 2017. What kind of mindset did you have going there? Oscar Wilde wrote that 'In fact the whole of Japan

is a pure invention. There is no such country, there are no such people.' So does Tokyo exist in the imagination of the visiting artist?

D.V.: It would be hard to go to Japan if there were no Japan to be imagined first. I had an image of it as well. But, thankfully, I wasn't going there to confirm it.

A.J.M.: Yet your stay in Japan also had a practical aspect.

D.V.: Certainly. I went to Tokyo as an art competition juror with my friend Artur B. It was an ordinary business trip. Of course, I took my camera along. I wanted to photograph the city. Back then, Beti and I focused on situating our projects within urban spaces. We thought about murals, about how our works could function in various spaces. Tokyo seemed the perfect backdrop. Dense, intense, visually stunning.

A.J.M.: What did your Tokyo reality check look like? You were only meant to bring back research materials from your Japanese trip?

D.V.: Yes. Photographs of streets, façades, passageways, blank walls. Spaces where we could 'install' our works. And during the first days of my stay in Tokyo, I did walk around the city taking photographs. But then I saw something that completely threw me.

A.J.M.: What was that?

D.V.: A drawing on a wall. It looked... I don't want to say, 'like mine,' that sounds too simple. I was completely stunned.
B.K.: Darek sent me a photograph of that wall. I remember my first thought was, 'When did he manage to do that?,' even though I knew it was not his work.

A.J.M.: It must have been a peculiar moment. Fascinating, but I guess also disturbing.

D.V.: Yes, artists usually fear imitativeness. The fact that someone did something first. Yet the situation with the work I discovered in Tokyo was more complex. It didn't look like a copy of my work – it was more infused with a similar energy. In theory, things like that do happen, but experiencing it for yourself...
B.K.: ...you begin to wonder whether others see the similarities as well. It raises doubts: Are we discovering something real, or just looking at the world through our own filter?

A.J.M.: What did you do after that first discovery?

D.V.: I went back the next day. I wanted to see if it would still be there. Then I noticed something even more peculiar: a small symbol that looked as if it had been taken straight from my sketchbook. From that moment on, I wandered Tokyo differently. I stopped looking for spaces for our works. I started looking for them.

A.J.M.: 'Them,' meaning whom?

D.V.: Exactly. I didn't know. I didn't know their name. I wasn't sure if it was one person or a group. Perhaps it was someone from the alternative street art scene. Or someone in design or fashion. There were various traces. Sometimes very raw, gritty. Sometimes they looked like parts of a larger exhibition. I got the impression that the works might be part of a marketing campaign, although that did not quite make sense...

A.J.M.: Did you start to ask about them straight away, during that first visit to Tokyo?

D.V.: My first instinct was to forget all about it, but my curiosity got the better of me. At first I felt awkward... I showed photos of their works to various people, asking whether anyone knew who made them. Some people said they had seen something. Someone else recognised a location, or gave me a tip that led nowhere. There were names that could not be verified. Addresses with nothing there.
B.K.: Darek returned from Japan with photographs, but also an

obsession.
D.V.: Kind of. If it were just one work, I would probably think it was a coincidence. But I discovered more. And then it began to get weird. Because after several repetitions, it stops being a coincidence.

A.J.M.: When did you decide that you had to return to Tokyo together?

B.K.: When we realised looking at photos wasn't enough. I knew that story from what Darek told me, but I really wanted to stand where he'd stood and see if I could feel the same excitement looking at those works.

A.J.M.: And did you?

B.K.: Yes and no. It turned out to be much more complicated. We went to Tokyo with a plan – we would follow the clues. We had photographs, notes, addresses, bits of conversations. But Tokyo would not be 'read' like that. Sometimes a thing would disappear, and places did not look as we had expected. Sometimes traces would pop up where we weren't looking for them.
D.V.: I best remember the moments when we thought we were close. Someone would say, 'Yes, it might be this person' or 'I saw something similar in this gallery.' And we would follow that lead. But then the path would diverge, lead to another person, another place, another mystery.

A.J.M.: What did you collect?

B.K.: Everything. Photographs, recordings, conversations, notes, street names, clippings, local newspapers, souvenirs, things found along the way. But we also created our own reconstructions. Because sometimes the works themselves were no longer there, only the descriptions remained. Or badly-taken photographs.
D.V.: We made something between a documentation and a reconstruction. And that's important. Because the more evidence we gathered, the more ambiguous it all became.

A.J.M.: It sounds like a paradox. Evidence is usually meant to clear things up.

B.K.: In this case, evidence only raised more questions. A photograph proved that something was there, but didn't say what it was. A recording showed a fragment, but didn't provide the whole picture. A newspaper confirmed a place name, but not the artist. Each piece of material was both concrete and vague.
D.V.: To me, that's the essence of this exhibition. We want to put the audience in our shoes. To make them question everything. Compare. Hesitate.
B.K.: We want them to feel curious. To be uncertain whether they are looking at documents, reconstructions, original works, souvenirs, or perhaps 'fake' evidence.
D.V.: Just like we were.

A.J.M.: That is why I proposed the Manggha Museum exhibition should include not only the finished objects, but the entire set of 'materials.' I did not want this exhibition to be an illustration of a story, but a place where it continues…

B.K.: And that seemed interesting to us, because Manggha as an institution lends these materials a different status. Things that belonged to our private archive are suddenly exhibited in a museum space and the viewer begins to look at them differently. More closely. Perhaps more unquestioningly.
D.V.: Or perhaps with even greater suspicion?

A.J.M.: So, displaying them here only complicates the story?

B.K.: Yes. Because if something ends up in a museum, we automatically start to believe it is important, verified, proven. Yet we also know that an exhibition is a form of storytelling. Some things were chosen, arranged, lit and labelled. Then our question, 'Who is this artist and do they exist?,' requires a definite answer.

A.J.M.: Do you believe they exist?

D.V.: That depends on the day.
B.K.: And the material we're looking at.
D.V.: There are photographs that make me want to say, 'This could not have been made up. It had to be someone's work, hand and decision.' And then I come across something that looks just too perfect. Like a sign left especially for us. Then I'm not so sure.
B.K.: I feel the same way. Sometimes I think it just isn't a question that needs to be answered. What seems more interesting to me is the fact that, because of this story, we began to approach our own work differently.

A.J.M.: What is truly fascinating about this story is that it begins with documenting the city as a backdrop for your fictional interventions, and ends with a display of actual objects in the Manggha Museum. Fiction, documentation, traces and objects begin to blend.

B.K.: Yes. And that might be one reason why this project captured our imaginations. We began to document and reconstruct works that might have come into existence only because we chose to look for them.
D.V.: What is most peculiar is that at some point you just can't go back to a simple situation. You can't say, 'These are just photographs.' Because there are objects. You can't say, 'It's just a story.' Because there are places, recordings, witnesses.

A.J.M.: It's the kind of archive that cannot be put in order.

D.V.: Exactly. We also have works based on this archive. Sometimes they're attempts at a reconstruction. Sometimes at an answer. Sometimes something in between. We did not just want to be detectives. We are artists, after all.

A.J.M.: So the exhibition is not only about the uni-

dentified artist?

B.K.: No. It's also about us. And how much we long to recognise something in the world, how much an image can persuade us.

A.J.M.: And if, upon leaving the exhibition, a viewer asked you outright, 'Does this artist really exist?,' what would you say?

D.V.: I would say: 'We've got the works, we've got the documentation.'
B.K.: The viewer should decide on their own whether they want to see these pieces as proof, suggestion, fiction or a coincidence. What is most interesting to us is that each of these answers reveals something. Not only about this story, but about the viewer, as well.

A.J.M.: But you don't want to leave the audience with an unsolved mystery?

B.K.: No. This is not an escape room. It is more of a situation in which truth does not reside in one place. It is distributed among the images, objects and memories.
D.V.: And among us. I remember Tokyo differently from Beti. She sees different connections. You, as a curator, have uncovered still others. The viewer will add their own.

A.J.M.: Do you feel comfortable with this ambiguity?

B.K.: No. But it is alive. And comfortable projects are seldom truly interesting.
D.V.: What is important to me is that this story is still open-ended.

A.J.M.: Is that why the title of this exhibition is *Tokyo Story*, and not, say, *Tokyo Artist* or *The Tokyo Investigation*?

B.K.: Yes. It is not a report. The word 'story' leaves room for free narrating.

D.V.: And for cinema. Because, as you said at the beginning, there is something cinematic about it. A person wanders through a city, sees a sign, returns, checks, drifts off course, finds their way back on it. Tokyo is not just a backdrop here. It is a machine for producing images, meanings and mistakes.

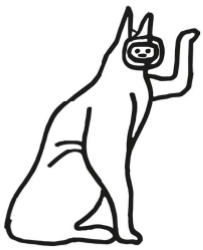
A.J.M.: What moved you the most on this journey?

D.V.: The moment I stopped feeling like I was looking for a stranger. I began to think I was looking for a version of myself that lives elsewhere. That was very peculiar.
B.K.: I was moved by the fact that a city can respond to your own images. That you go somewhere with a set intention, you want to use the city as a backdrop, and suddenly it says, 'No, I will be the one that shows you something.'
D.V.: You are no longer the only one placing works in the city. The city itself begins to place something in you.

A.J.M.: Nicely put.

B.K.: This story began with a photograph Darek sent me. He asked: 'Are you seeing this too?'

A.J.M.: Perhaps that's the best invitation to this exhibition.



** translated by Alicja Kowalczewska