



OLUHI

No one will get you there

—
Michał Gzregorzek

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I will start with a definition. Many artists have trouble with them. Especially if these definitions are formulated by critics. Is it possible to contextualize your work, to label it? What do you think?

O: I do not use definitions. I do not look for descriptions. I leave them to others. My work results primarily in visual effects, so, therefore, it is naturally defined. However, if people comment on my work because they just feel the urge to define it somehow, then go ahead. I have no problem with that.

The *Polish Gothic* exhibition is an attempt to define, among other things, your work. This term is very vague because it references to the medieval style in art, worship of irrational elements, horror novels and films or Japanese deconstruction fashion and techno. How would you place your activity in the context of these phenomena?

O: I do not place myself nowhere at all. The most inspiring elements are those which are usually pushed to the side, those which slide in shadow.

How does the selection of materials look like – what is the major rule of

this process? There is a popular opinion that a significant percentage of Polish designers use the same fabrics, because it is difficult to find anything at all. Is it really a problem?

O: I usually begin with the selection of the materials and I have no problems at this stage. This is exactly this phase of work which I like the most because I feel that I excel in something (laugh). Then, usually, I stumble across the stairs and I fall of them, but it is only later... I always choose fabrics which can be considered as the most friendly to us. I avoid synthetics. Why carry them on yourself if you are already overexposed to dangerous chemicals after all? What is the purpose of initiating the global scandal surrounding Bisphenol A, if we are constantly dealing with many other similar chemicals these days and no one cares about this fact? Well, maybe except for the activists, but they are already considered to be a little bit too sensitive... Some things can not be probably changed in this world, but fortunately some of us were born in the preplastic era... I am so smart because I have recently read *Breasts* by Florence Williams and I have chemists friends who are willing to talk about it. Therefore, the choice of materials is simple for me: linen, cotton, wool, cotton, linen, wool, cotton... They all offer endless possibilities. I do not go for polyesters, polyamides, polycarbonates. The most

I am glad when I can select textiles from the manufacturers themselves – some of them produce even some small orders on request. However, this is just the beginning as there is still a long way down the spiral staircase before the finished garments are ready.

And what about the production? Do you sew your clothes or do you collaborate with professional tailors? Does it actually make any significant difference as per the process itself?

Q: Oh, and here begin my stairs... The formation process is very tedious. During the internship at Srula Recht's studio, I actually saw how many people work on the implementation of the whole collection. This is a collective work. The work gets done thanks to completion of many different stages: brainstorming, production of samples, toils, working patterns and numerous forms in non-stop updated copies as well as the final execution of all garments on the old Juki sewing machine placed at the studio. There are a lot of very different sewing machines there and each one is useful. At work any form sketched on the paper seems beautiful. Just as the daily meetings and research... But of course this is how it looks like if you have money. If you do not have the budget, everything takes on much less spectacular proportions. However, even just one machine and

a passion will do, you can easily handle the rest of it... Sometimes you just need one or two people. And it does not necessarily affect the quality. *Quality comes from passion and discipline.*

And the most important thing is not to despair, no matter what. To remember that you are not the only one going through this process. Even if it is damn hard and you want to give in... I did it once. I do not wish it to anyone. Before that, however, I was lucky to work with talented women and I thank them for being willing to listen to me at all.

As far as the manufacturing process is concerned, how close are the final results to what you had previously designed in 2D? How do your projects usually emerge: do you stick faithfully to graphic or do you act directly on fabrics and experiment until you achieve a satisfactory form?

Q: I love to start on paper, but then set off to 3D – fortunately or unfortunately. The concepts themselves may appear on paper or they can as well arise on the fabric. Everything is smooth and there are no explicit rules. Sometimes you want to hold on to the lifeline, but sometimes you want to let it go. A man would be a machine, if things were otherwise. Emotions are always crucial because they indicate shapes and forms. It is immediately apparent whether someone is guided by emotions. If this

person calculates or is emotional, but premeditated, it is recognized immediately. A drawing symbolizes a separate entity to me: when a dash appears, it gets so inspiring that you can barely stand it. I would always modify some things! This is perhaps a curse, because how much can you change a drawing? Everything gets delayed and all, but that is just me... I struggle with this attitude. I often change so many details that I have to go back to square one. It is good to be able to photograph the process to always revert to the past state as in Photoshop. Sometimes it would be possible to make even a hundred parallel projects on such occasion, because the process does not proceed linearly.

Your experience as an architect is certainly relevant to your work. Does the knowledge gained in this field translate into fashion design? Is interior design, beyond the obvious differences, very different from fashion design? And if so, what is the most important difference to you?

O: Well, these two design disciplines are practically the same – only the scale is different. We use similar tools: rulers, splines, pencils, pens, knives, paper, paints, and other treasures, so basically all that you can bring or carry to the studio in order to reach your goals. There are some deadlines, endings, relations as well. The scale is certainly different, but

it gets covered with dust just as badly as a construction site... In both cases, you need to acquire some technical skills, read a little bit about the history, talk to the right people and necessarily show some admiration. You have to take the delight in it! Or hate it.

Some of the clothes designed by you seem to shift the boundary of *profanum* and everyday use. I remember that the theatrical costumes designed by you could only be touched by one person in gloves: the idea was to not damage the boundary between the dancer's body and the costume. Can such dress intimacy be combined with the mystical values? Do these clothes seem *liturgical* to you?

O: Those costumes, about which you are talking about, were designed for To-En in accordance with her requirements for the maintenance of the costume, and above all, its relationship with the body of the dancer. It has nothing to do with the sacredness. It concerns a characteristic approach of a Butoh dancer to costume as a 'a second skin, which is used body, which is used in the course of the dance. This may sound convoluted, but in fact it is a very nice and practical set of principles. To-En has learned them from her master. They have nothing to do with *sacrum*.

How did your collaboration with To-

En start? What was the most fascinating thing about her work? Did To-En find anything interesting in your projects?

0: To-En returned to Poland after a long stay in Sweden, where she studied Butoh with Su-En. She picked up *Machina* magazine and read about *oluh* there. She wrote to me and sent her first performance entitled *White*. I turned it on and it fascinated me. Actually, there was almost nothing happening there. Beautiful light and a kind of slow softness. Of course I agreed to cooperate. We started to work together, which was a great opportunity to learn a lot from ourselves. We have become good friends. To-En works this way – she creates bonds. I like that.

And what is your system of work? Do you create relationships or do you rather run away from them? You make the impression of a person who likes to escape, isolate and work from a distant place...

0: I have a predilection for solitude, but I love relationships. I start relations immediately whenever it is possible. I want to make friends at once. After all, we all work for other people: you seem to do something because of an internal need, yet it is done for others. When you prepare garments that

are supposed to be used and worn by someone, you start thinking about this person and try to live up to the expectations. Not only my ego is important, but also the thoughts of others. All forms, shapes, colours emerge from them. I have always loved that idea and I have found a sense in it for myself. I examine how people feel in their clothes, what are their thoughts, needs, goals. I wonder how will those clothes look like on them after many years of active living, because those clothes are obviously not made of steel. The garments will surely alter the form and I know that it is possible to predict this change to some extent. The most complicated things must be, above all, comfortable. They must perform their function. All we do is for the people, about the people and by the people.

Michał Niechaj has selected four designers for the Polish Gothic exhibition. Your works have been put on display next to those of Sylwia Rochala, Paulina Plizga and Maldoror. What do you think of such company?

0: It is probably an honour to be among them. Gothic or not, whatever you call it. I know all of them very well (except for Sylwia – we have never met before) and I appreciate them for their talent, passion and hard work. Whether we can be pigeonholed, it is not up to me to judge.

Who would you define as a good designer in relation to design and fashion?

O: I think the rule is the same for each designer, regardless of industry. A good designer is someone who just keeps amazing us. You do not even have to understand design, to intellectualize it. It has to strike you, fulfill something in you. But we have different dreams, different thresholds and we are captivated by different things. In times of universal access to information everything enhances and multiplies... And there are also voices saying that it is now extremely difficult for people to get amazed. I do not agree with this notion. Although I have difficulty with falling in such state, I still remember what it feels like to be excited. In my case it happens mostly when I ask: 'Hey, but how is it done?'. When I look at a seahorse living on corals, I think: 'Wow, how is it done?' When I look at men's clothing like, for instance, a habit à la française from 1770-1780, I think: 'Hey, it seems like a really basic form, but these cuts give a real wow effect – how is it done?'. I love all those secrets.

In the 1960s, Ken Garland wrote that designers should concentrate all design efforts on education and public tasks that promote the betterment of society. Do you agree with this

conception? Is fashion capable of managing such challenges?

O: Gosh, people have really complicated this subject... For me it is simple: Beauty, Durability and Usability. This formula was so often repeated at the Academy of Fine Arts that at some point I had enough of it, but now I know that it is truly essential. A kind of milk that every designer or creator must drink. On the other hand, if a designer drinks this sort of milk, it does not imply that he or she must necessarily become immune to viruses and bacteria of commercialism. The waves will throw him somewhere far away, but as soon as he can stop and think for a moment, look around and become enthused by, for example, an ordinary pencil, he is not going to want to participate in this farce of excess and senselessness any longer. Maybe he will choose to follow this exhausting, miserable, bumpy path with a stick instead of cane. Sooner or later, he will reach the finish line and realize how beautiful his stick is. And then he will tell his children that he did something useful, durable and beautiful. We need things. However, we should just let them be beautiful and wise. We do not need much. Of course, the formula *Beauty, Durability and Usability* is one thing, but there is also the question: how does it relate to the environment? It is very important. We are all responsible for this world where we live and breathe.

We are accountable for what we did and what we will do. Beautiful, durable and useful things have a real educational value. There are some people to whom it is not enough and who want to give humanity the most out of themselves. Well, there is a nice scene in the *Fargo* series: a guy wants to give his whole existence to others because he thinks the world needs it. Yet the world does not need us at all! We only produce litter and poison the environment. Sometimes it happens that we manage to create a nice film. From time to time something nice comes out of our existence...

One gets the impression that you have been absent in the 'world of fashion' for a long time. You do not appear at fashion shows any more. We also have not heard about any new collections so far. I do not want to be an inspector, because maybe it is just me not being aware of some things, but I wanted to ask you about your activity over the last few years – what have you been working on and why have you abandoned the participation in the Polish fashion scene?

O: What have I been dealing with? Well, I taught English. I gave lessons to groups of children, actually hundreds, thousands of them. At some point, I had enough of this whole design thing! I ran out of money and I could not afford

it anymore. The truth is, you can not climb to the mountain top and pick mushrooms all the way up. However, that was my own trodden path, the tree grew, and even the flower finally bloomed. When I destroyed it in anger and said 'enough', an invitation to the first edition of FashionPhilosophy Fashion Week Poland in Łódź arrived. So I went, I did what I had to do and went home. And that is it. I learned a lot from the cooperation with the Dune Agency from Tokyo, but I informed them politely that it is over. You should not do that. You should go on despite adversity and not to get discouraged by anything or anyone.

Where is the brand oluhi today? In terms of its actual presence on the fashion/design market?

O: Today, oluhi is working on a new endeavour. What? How? Where? Soon there will be some more news around that.

You gained your experience in many places, especially abroad. Can you tell us something about the fashion educational process in Poland and abroad? What was it like for you?

O: I do not know much about the education of fashion designers in Poland because I studied Interior Design. I had to discover everything by myself while

working with people, who knew this job. But it was a long way to go. I know for sure that the most important thing in art school education and defining who you are is freedom. You can go wherever you want. No one will get you there.

Your projects are often characterized by quite complicated 'architecture'. Let me quote Machina magazine: 'Every thing designed by her reminds of a cataclysm full of fancy forms and broken structures'. How do you construct your figures? How does the production technology look like?

Q: What do I look for in a structure? I look for the structure itself. I do not know everything right away. I learn by experimenting, working on the project, conceptualizing, pulling different strings... Otherwise I would not do anything new. You can do some standard and uncomplicated things, but I think all those *complication* and *cataclysm* are only word replacements, excuses for the fear of unknown. Because who the hell said that, for example, sleeves are generally comfortable and nice? Bollocks. And here comes the guy that drank this aforementioned bottle of milk and begins to combine: I do not want this sleeve, it is ridiculous to put your hand into a sleeve after all! I will do it the other way around. *Complication* is an excuse for something that you do not really know, because it is scary, or it goes

far beyond your safety zone. Designers are destined to boost ideas rooted in their sensitivity in order to give people things which they, after all, approve.

And from a purely technical side?

Q: These are my secrets.