I Became a Propaganda Photographer
Rafał Milach in conversation
with Leszek Jażdżewski
L.J.: So, how did your Winners begin?
R.M.: I went to Belarus with the notion of my relatives’ history in mind. It was supposed to be an extremely intimate and personal theme, but during my first trip, something else captured my interest. What caught my attention was the sterility of the public space. There was something obsessive about the solicitously maintained cleanness; it went beyond any normal care for the surroundings. And, in the main squares, the cities and the towns, a focal point was what are known as Doska pochyota, ‘Boards of Honour’, in other words, panels featuring the portraits of the most worthy citizens in the local community; the best workers, the best officials, the best activists, etcetera.
L.J.: Like ‘shock workers’ and ‘exemplary citizens’?
R.M.: Yes. They were these local heroes, designated by a range of local authorities, from workplace managers to the commune council and other official bodies. The display structures were most frequently newly built or renovated. Not just any cheap panels, planks of wood or sidings, but small architectural works, specially designed and often quite extravagant in form, laid with tiles or some other material and, naturally, all of them clean, gleaming and extremely stately.
And that fascinated me. I stated that I’d make a list of the best, of what the authorities are promoting as the ideal social model. The best of the best. Officially selected and officially awarded recognition.
L.J.: The ones the system wants to present as its leading lights?
R.M.: Yes. The criterion was that it had to be someone who’s been officially recognised and has a certificate. Some of my central figures had also appeared on the ‘boards of honour’. And that’s how I became a photographer of official Belarusian propaganda, accredited by the Minister of Foreign Affairs.
L.J.: Did you keep control over what you did? Didn’t they happen to push anyone forward?
R.M.: That would’ve been the ideal situation! Because, as an artist, I wanted to retreat as far as I could from the creative process. I wanted to provoke situations where I’d be under as much control and as susceptible to suggestion as was possible. I wanted to surrender all the control I could to outside forces. That was justified, because my intention wasn’t to establish a personal relationship with the people I was photographing. All that interested me was the competitive façade.
L.J.: As you took each successive shot, as you became a propaganda photographer, did you find out something new about the system, something you hadn’t known before?
R.M.: First and foremost, I consciously wanted to become a part of that mechanism. And that was a new experience for me. Another important aspect of the work was laying bare the system’s instrumental approach to the individual. In itself, that’s not especially revelational, but the empirical experience of the process was something that changed my photographic strategy for the next few years. The project is composed of individual stories, but it functions as a whole. To me, it’s a collection.
L.J.: In other words, you can swap one photo or person for another?
R.M.: In the sense of retaining the coherence and cohesiveness of the message, yes, of course. It sounds cynical, but the story of any one person, object or place doesn’t have a greater meaning in the hierarchical context, because my attention was focused on the system and not on individual motifs. The fact that I became a part of that system at my own wish was a gesture of enough importance to remind me of our universal entanglement in the propaganda machine. No matter which side we’re on.
L.J.: I find that very interesting. The title… is your view of it ironic? Do those people seriously consider themselves to be winners?
R.M.: Some of them took it extremely seriously and some of them took it with a pinch of salt. Not all the competitions were treated as earnest affairs. Some of the people didn’t even know they were winners. I’m certain that, with a few exceptions, my central figures competed of their own accord.
L.J.: Not as victims of the system?
R.M.: No. In the main, they’re part of that system, most often a passive part. It’s sometimes connected to small prizes or financial bonuses. I think all of us have a profound need to be appreciated, to be noticed, particularly within the local community. The question is this; who benefits the most from that kind of set-up? But sometimes, a crack occurs. I was supposed to photograph the best plougher.

It was taking place deep in the provinces and it took me several hours to get there by car from Minsk. When I finally made it to the administrative building on the kolkhoz1, the best plougher came up to me, said that he didn’t want to be photographed and walked off. His supervisor was in a state of shock, he had no idea what he should do. At that moment, the system foundered. To start with, I was annoyed by the plougher’s refusal, but then I realised that it was more of an optimistic situation.

By way of consolation, I took some photos of the fern in the room where I’d been supposed to shoot the portraits of the plougher. That turned out to be the sole disruption that ruffled the system during the entire project. I took more than a hundred photographs and only that one situation showed that a different solution does exist. I don’t know what the consequences of the plougher’s attitude were.

L.J.: When you were working on the project, were you thinking of yourself as a ‘system photographer’ or did you leave yourself an autonomous space within that framework?
R.M.: On the whole, I tried to make use of what I was given, but in a great many situations it turned out that, even within the framework of the very space that was made available to me, I could seek out some kind of small crack, some kind of gap. Someone holding some kind of curtain here, some kind of not entirely lovely wall there.

L.J.: Which meant that you shifted from the fairly literal Winners to a more abstract concept…?
R.M.: I consciously became a participant in a propaganda machine for the first time in Belarus and, in a way, that fascinated me. The pattern of the game played between society and the authorities crystallised for me and I was interested in what it’s like in other places, which is why I began searching for similar patterns in Georgia and Azerbaijan and, later on, in Poland.

The legacy left by former president Mikheil Saakashvili, the controversial atmosphere, the financial and political abuses that he ended his rule of the country with became the inspiration for what I worked on in Georgia. I focused primarily on the extravagant modernisation work which he initiated and which came to a stop or would never be accomplished once he had to flee the country after he lost the election. It was following the clues, an attempt to reconstruct a world that, for various reasons, but mainly for political ones, had been left uncompleted. I should point out that, during the reforms which were supported by the Western world, Georgia boasted the highest number of political prisoners in the entire post-Soviet region.

L.J.: What are the abstract figures you’ve photographed?
R.M.: Next door to Georgia, in Azerbaijan, I photographed a number of centres named after Heydar Aliyev, the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan and the country’s first leader after the collapse of the Soviet Union.
I found the objects in one of the chess schools; they were teaching aids related to the puzzle of optical illusion. The fact that they'd been housed in buildings where the cult of the former president is being built made a shift in their meaning possible. To me, they became a metaphor for propaganda mechanisms, which also camouflage reality and disrupt our perception. And suddenly, those innocent objects obtained an entirely new meaning for me.

L.J.: You create lasting images of objects serving to unmask illusions in a propaganda centre designed to build social illusions that are impossible to unmask. An analogy that’s really more accessible only to a few?

R.M.: The only people I met in the Aliyev centres were the employees of those institutions. The sole exception was a group of schoolchildren who were preparing a performance in honour of the Azerbaijani military intervention in Nagorno-Karabakh, which had taken place just a few days before. So those richly finished complexes were practically unused; at any rate, that’s the impression I had. But even if the objects I found there were used, it’s doubtful that anyone would attribute a significance to them other than the one they were created for.

I, as an artist, am the one carrying out that shift in meaning and building the metaphor.

L.J.: How did your experience in the post-Soviet space prepare you to tackle Poland, with a space that’s as evident to you as the very air you breathe? How does one play the unmasker as a part of the system? Is it possible to discern its nature at all from the inside?

R.M.: It’s definitely the most difficult thing I’ve tackled so far. On the one hand, I know the realities and the background, so, in a sense, that authorises me to comment on it. On the other hand, as you say, it’s so everyday and obvious that sometimes it’s hard to find the cracks and sometimes there are so many of them that you don’t know where to start.

L.J.: In Poland, aren’t the people presented as attractive and interesting by the adverts and the media more important than shaking hands with government ministers? As a popular artist, aren’t you actually a hero of the system?

R.M.: On the one hand, I consciously take part in commenting on, or unmasking, various systemic mechanisms from a distance, but I’m certain that the position I take and the opinions I express could make their mark in some kind of propagandist thinking, not necessarily post-Soviet. I’m becoming more and more conscious of my involvement, in various contexts, more political of late, which aren’t at all disconnected from the consequences borne by society. Polarsation, the appropriation of symbols, the creation of new myths and the shifting of meanings are things we’re dealing with on a daily basis.

L.J.: It’s interesting that you feel impelled by that. You haven’t been an artist who’s associated with any kind of collective exultation.

R.M.: Politics as such has never interested me before and it still doesn’t. But we’re living in times when even innocent gestures have a political meaning. That way of thinking began building up in me from the moment I started working in Belarus. The innocent gestures I harness in my artistic projects obtain political meanings through the environment I find myself in, even though the processes I’m addressing are more the consequence of social ideologies than a commentary directly involved in politics.

I’ve recently had the impression that, in Poland, I’ve become part of some kind of horrible comic and in all likelihood that’s my projection of reality, but the caricatural grotesquerie and absurdity of some situations generates a sense of a parallel reality in me. Because of that, I decided to create a comic. The section of the exhibition commenting on Poland is rooted in drawings created on the basis of photographs, either mine or borrowed. I began searching the Polish space for something which contains a large measure of propaganda, some
kind of symbolism or the building of a new myth and which, at the same time, has a political dimension, it’s topical. The most obvious point of reference turned out to be the Smolensk air disaster\(^2\). A Tupolev 154 became a national symbol. An innocent object obtained a new ideological meaning. The matter of the air disaster remains wreathed in mystery to this day, so I found the model situation I’d been looking for.

L.J.: What will the storyline of the Tupolev comic be?
R.M.: It isn’t going to be a fiction-type story. It’s going to connect several different threads. On the one hand, it refers to the photographs I took at one of the monthly Smolensk commemorative gatherings, where there was a small group of people reconstructing the wreck of the aircraft during the proceedings. I juxtaposed that situation with a 1:44-scale model of a Tu-154, the kind anyone can buy and assemble. Another innocent gesture burdened with a political context.

And the next, third level of the comic is going to be selected stills from Antoni Krauze’s film, Smolensk. That’s also a version of a reconstruction of the event. All those elements interweaving together create a certain image of the disaster which the current authorities are thrusting to the fore.

L.J.: And do you feel that, in this case, you’re also performing a gesture of unmasking by juxtaposing the reconstruction with that model.
R.M.: All I’m doing is holding up a mirror. But it’s definitely a critical gesture. On the one hand, I dislike the political dimension of that tragic event and the fact that it’s become one of the tools for polarising society.

L.J.: And here, at the absolute end, do you think that art, that you, as an artist, have any tools to break through to the other side of the wall of the system and unmask it?
R.M.: On the whole, activities in the sphere of art are fairly much niche activities, but that doesn’t change the fact that the artist’s task is to comment and turn people’s attention to essential matters. A coalition of artists who are politically engaged is forming. They’re quite simply withdrawing from art in favour of activism. Artists do have the tools to comment on what’s happening, so they should use them.

L.J.: And is that your path? Don’t you feel that you’re losing a part of yourself by entering into the dispute so unequivocally?
R.M.: I’ve never approached art as I’d approach a purely aesthetic situation. I admire the many artists who create by isolating themselves from reality, but stances of social engagement are definitely closer to my heart. Photography works well in that field, although it’s overly realistic in some cases. Hence the idea for the comic, which is part of the exhibition. Although the form, drawing, is figurative and realistic, it strips away the journalistic dimension of the image that weighed down the photographs I took.

L.J.: You had to transform it?
R.M.: Yes. I had to stick those few layers together so that it didn’t become an overly simple message. I’m not a satirist and I work slowly. I felt that...

L.J.: ...that, somehow, you had to go for a medium that was slightly different from the one you’d been working in recently?
R.M.: Yes. Although, despite the fact that I feel attached to photography, as I see it, the medium definitely has a subordinate function in the face of history.
1 A type of collective farm.
2 The air disaster occurred on 10th April 2010. A Polish Air Force Tupolev Tu-154 crashed while carrying the President of the Republic of Poland, his wife, senior military personnel and clergy-men, significant past and present political figures and other highly placed members of the country’s elite. The passengers were travelling to mark the seventieth anniversary of the Katyn Massacre, which was carried out not far from Smolensk, in Russia. The plane crashed as it was coming in to land. All ninety-six people on board were killed. On the tenth day of every month since then, a commemorative Mass is celebrated in Warsaw. The service is followed by a public assembly outside the presidential palace.