An Open Design Theory for Society: From Oskar Hansen's "Open Form" to Grzegorz Kowalski's "Common Space, Private Space"

Akiko Kasuya

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Akiko Kasuya
Kyoto City University of Arts
kasuya@kcua.ac.jp

Abstract

In this paper I will discuss the "Open Form" theory advocated by the Polish architect, designer, and sculptor Oskar Hansen, and a theory based on Hansen's ideas called "common space, private space," which was developed by Grzegorz Kowalski, a professor at the Academy of Fine Arts, Warsaw. Kowalski's studio, called Kowalnia[1], has produced many students that went on to successful international art careers. I will also discuss the design theory passed down by Kowalnia and other didactics.

Hansen's innovative "Open Form" concept was opposed to much of the architecture that was prevalent at the beginning of 20th century. It was based on predetermined "closed forms," and envisioned imaginary residents occupying a building. Hansen's presented a new, unprecedented model, which focused on the needs and desires of individuals within groups based on "open forms" that incorporated people's opinions and gradually changed according to various events and shifts[2]. Recognizing that there is no such thing as an expert architect versed in all fields, the "Open Form" theory proposed that the essential guiding force behind architecture ought to be the active and organic involvement of its users. This theory was expanded beyond architecture, and applied to all aspects of art theory[3].

Keyword: Design theory, Open Form, Contemporary Art, Poland, Participation, Community

1) The Polish word for a blacksmith is *kowal*, and *kowalnia* means a smithy.

2) After the demise in 1959 of CIAM (the International Congresses of Modern Architecture), the conferences that stood at the forefront of modernist architecture, last actually convened in 1956, Team 10 emerged, consisting of young CIAM alumni. Hansen was one of the Polish members of Team 10, which engaged in mutual exchange and had a wide-ranging influence on young architects of the day. Kurokawa Kisho and Kikutake Kiyonori in Japan were also in line with these trends, presenting the manifesto Metabolism 1960: Proposals for a New Urbanism at the World Design Conference in 1960. "Metabolism" originally refers to an organic process, but at the time, against a backdrop of dramatic economic growth, cities were rapidly developing and there was a need to deal with their expansion, and Metabolism proposed doing so by applying the principles of organic life to large-scale urban planning that would underpin the future of society. Although the plans for a growing, metabolizing megalopolis were too huge to see realization, the significance and importance of the ideas continues to be recognized over half a century later, and are enjoying a reappraisal today. Hansen also proposed a grand urban plan that called for zoning the entirety of Poland, but this also was too radical to be put into practice. However, his thoughts and stances went on to influence many artists afterward, and interest in him and his partner Zofia Hansen is also enjoying a renaissance.

3) cf. Oskar Hansen, Zofia Hansen, "The Open Form in Architecture – The Art of the Great Number," in *Oskar Hansen: Opening Modernism*, Muzeum Sztuki Nowoczesnej w Warszawie Books No8, 2014, pp.7-9.

Introduction

In this paper I will discuss the "Open Form" theory advocated by the Polish architect, designer, and sculptor Oskar Hansen, and a theory based on Hansen's ideas called "common space, private space," which was developed by Grzegorz Kowalski, a professor at the Academy of Fine Arts, Warsaw. Kowalski's studio, called Kowalnia[4], has produced many students that went on to successful international art careers. I will also discuss the design theory passed down by Kowalnia and other didactics.

The Didactics of Oskar Hansen

Oskar Nikolai Hansen was born in 1922 in Helsinki. His father was a Norwegian with Polish roots and his mother was Russian. He settled in Vilnius with his family in 1923. During the Second World War, Hansen was an active member of the underground Polish Home Army (AK). He moved to Poland in 1945 and started studying at Warsaw University's Faculty of Architecture in Lublin. He got scholarship from French government and studied in Paris from 1948 to 1950. During his stay in Paris he worked at the studios of Fernand Leger and Pierre Jeanneret, cousin of Le Corbusier. He also met with outstanding artists, including Pablo Picasso. In 1949 he took part in the International Congress of Modern Architecture in Bergamo, where he criticized Le Corbusier for going commercial by designing textiles instead of cities. Then he received an invitation to the CIAM international summer school in London in the same year, and visited Henry Moor's studio. In 1950 Hansen returned to Warsaw and Jerzy Sołtan, whom he met in Paris, asked him to be an assistant in the Faculty of Interior Design at the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts (ASP). From 1952 he created his own curriculum as part of the Solids and Planes Studio (initially at the Faculty of Interior Design under Sołtan), and from 1955 he did the same at the Faculty of Sculpture. In 1981 he succeeded the Interdepartmental Faculty of Integrated Fine Arts at the Warsaw ASP, and in 1983 he retired.

Hansen's predecessor was Wojciech Jastrzebowski(1884-1963), who taught the Composition of Solids and Planes in the prewar academy. After the war he was the professor in the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts, Faculty of Interior Design, and cofounder of the Institute of Industrial Design. Hansen and Jastrzebowski both taught a visual language which students could use. We can find many similarities in their didactics. For example, Hansen's "Single-Profile-Composition" would have relation to Jastrzebowski's "Single-Silhouette-Composition." In one of Hansen's late 1950's practices, students were required to "compose any profile, for example earthenware, interior, terrain section or abstract[5]." In such way Hansen tried to encourage students to think more abstractly and creatively. For example, in the case of the apparatus for "Rhythms" the students created "see-through clearances," framing the image of surroundings by shifting black-and-white slabs. Hansen wrote that "the keyboard device was easily operated, permitting the

4)————The Polish word for a blacksmith is *kowal*, and *kowalnia* means a smithy.
5)————ibid. p.262.

student to emotionally create uni- and multisequential rhythms and their(photographically) the successive phase, facilitating more detailed problematization[6]."

Hansen wrote his Open Form Manifesto[7]in 1959 and presented "Open Form in Architecture"[8]at the CIAM congress in Otterlo in the same year. According to him, Open Form is "a composition of spatial sub-text - it will become a multi-layered phenomenon, constantly alive" and "the conventions of the open composition will imply the activity defined (as) "passe-partout" to the changes taking place in space[9]". We can say that Open Form is a kind of philosophy and decide our attitude towards reality. In this context we would be able to find the similar idea of Constructivism which was realized by Polish avant-garde artists, Katarzyna Kobro and Władysław Strzemiński. Hansen's Open Form applied their idea to society and tried to form its structure. Hansen always stressed the humanistic elements in the architecture.

Workshop of Grzegorz Kowalski

Among Hansen's students was Grzegorz Kowalski (1942-) at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. Soon after graduating from the Academy in 1965, Kowalski began working there as an assistant to Hansen. He inherited a sculpture studio in the industrial design department from his predecessor, and in the 1980s also took over another sculpture studio in the sculpture department. Kowalski also carried on the legacy of his former professor's "Open Form" concept, which led to his development of his own practices termed "Common Space, Private Space" (known by the acronym OWOW, for the Polish *Obszar Wspólny, Obszar Własny*)[10]. Kowalski implemented these practices at the studio of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw beginning in the mid-1980s. The students and the instructor were seen as having equal rights, and engaged in a communication process using not words but visual signals, gestures, and other nonverbal means. Each of the participants had a defined "private space" of his or her own, and also engaged with the "common space" shared by all. The course of the process was not determined in advance, but depended on the joint creativity of the participants, which all recognized and mutually supported while carrying out a process of alternating actions and reactions. This creative process was not directed towards some final goal, but rather a vibrant process of communication itself was emphasized. Participants also agreed in advance not to engage in destructive activities[11].

"Common Space, Private Space" was carried out for the first time during the semester

6)————ibid. p.266.
7)————Oskar Hansen, "Forma Otwarta", Przeglad Kulturalny, vol 5, no.5, 1959, p.5.
8)————Oskar Hansen, Zofia Hansen, "The Open Form in Architecture – the Art of the Great Number," in *CIAM'59*, Karl Kramer Verlag, 1961, pp.190-191.
9)————Oskar Hansen, "Forma Otwarta".
10)————cf. Grzegorz Kowalski, Obszar wspólny i własny (Common Space, Private Space), *Open Form, Space, interaction, and the Tradition of Oskar Hansen*, Sternberg Press, 2014, pp.114-115, Karol Sienkiewicz, Wszystko, co chcielibyście wiedzieć o "Obszarze Wspólnym, Obszarze Własnym," in *Obszar Wspólny, Obszar Własny*, Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, 2011.
11)————Sienkiewicz, ibid. pp.48-58.

spanning 1981-82, in the industrial design department of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. In 1980, Poland had been swept by surging calls for democratization, sparked by large-scale demonstrations at the Gdańsk shipyards and centered around Lech Wałęsa and the organizing of the independent self-governing trade union Solidarity, but the following year, 1981, Jaruzelski became the prime minister and concurrently First Secretary of the Communist party, and declared martial law throughout Poland on December 13 of that year. Tensions were at a boiling point. As university classes were suspended along with the declaration of martial law, the implementation of "Common Space, Private Space" actually went into practice when classes recommenced in early 1982. The studio functioned as a kind of refuge, isolated from the hostile outside world of political tensions and suppression of free expression, and in Kowalski's words, "We integrated in the atelier against the unpleasant reality of the martial law. Its character was that of a meeting of underground activists, slightly catacombish[12]." In the process of interacting together and ascertaining their positions with respect to one another, the participants learned to keep their egos in check and adopt an attitude of humility. They arrived at the realization that for creativity to work, it must have a receptive audience. An unpredictable creative process is made possible by the presence of the other, who answers actions with reactions, whether these signify acceptance or rejection—the presence of an audience that responds to or transforms these actions.

Artur Żmijewski (1966-) studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw from 1990 through 1995, and participated in the activities at Kowalski's studio (known as Kowalnia) beginning in his second year, while Pawel Althamer (1967) was at the Academy from 1988 to 1993, and began jointly exhibiting works with colleauges from Kowalnia starting in 1991. The "Common Space, Private Space" practice at Kowalnia was highly significant, exerting a major influence on the work of many artists who participated. This was dramatically manifested at the first *W Samym Centrum Uwagi / At the Very Centre of Attention* exhibition, held from November to December 2005 at the Center for Contemporary Art, Warsaw. It was the first in a series of eight exhibitions held from November 2005 through July 2006, focusing attention on the work of artists who debuted from 1989 onward in Poland, and aiming to explore the current state of Polish art. Three artists who were alumni of Kowalnia, in other words who had studied under Kowalski at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, were selected: Żmijewski, Katarzyna Kozyra (born 1963), and Althamer. Kozyra presented a video installation entitled *Punishment and Crime*, while Althamer and Żmijewski served as curators, inviting fellow former Kowalski students who had been at the Academy between 1988 and 1996 to the Center for Contemporary Art, where they replicated the group practice of "Common Space, Private Space" as they had done at Kowalski's studio, in the exhibition *[s]election.pl*. Kowalski himself was also invited to organize the exhibition *Common Space, Private Space: The Kowalski Studio 1989-1994*, which featured extensive photographic, film, and other documentation of the OWOW activities at

12)——Sienkiewicz, ibid. p. 80.

13)——Both *[s]election.pl* and *Common Space, Private Space: The Kowalski Studio 1989-1994* were part of the first exhibition of the series, *At the Very Centre of Attention. W samym centrum uwagi, CZĘŚĆ 1*, Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej na Zamku Ujazdowskim w Warszawie, 3/11 - 18/12/2005.

Kowalnia[13].

Artur Zmijewski and Pawel Althamer

For the *[s]election.pl* exhibition, it was not Kowalski but Althamer and Żmijewski who drew up the framework of activities. These activities, which in the past were carried out in the sealed-off, sheltered, and virtually cocoon-like context of the Academy of Fine Arts studio, were here presented at a public venue and viewable by general audiences, in other words revealed to broader society. The chain of non-verbal communication that unfolded at the Center for Contemporary Art gradually took on a more chaotic air. Each of the artists invited by Althamer and Żmijewski to participate in *[s]election.pl*, all Kowalnia alumni, were in turn free to invite any guests they wanted, and the result was what Żmijewski called "cataclysm" or "the raw ingredients of reality[14]." For example, invitees included kindergarten children, gymnasium students, sex workers from an escort agency hired by Jacek Markiewicz (born 1964), and female students from a beauty school. In particular the kindergarteners were indifferent to the rules of the game, and became purveyors of pure destruction, with the other participants then turning destructive as well. Faced with the destruction of the delicate chain of actions and reactions based on the activities formerly performed in the studio, many of the participants decided to withdraw from *[s]election.pl*, Kowalski himself among them. As described earlier, one of the important, fundamental rules of Kowalski's "Common Space, Private Space" was the prohibition of destructiveness. This was seen as a crucial prerequisite for mindfully maintaining the flow of the communication process. However, Żmijewski believed that if we prohibit destruction, we will be unable to learn about it. He stated that "We repress anger and aggression but obviously they always come back, this time as demons[15]," a point that Kowalski acknowledged to some extent, saying of Żmijewski's endeavor, "You did touch upon the highly important question of taming aggression, the natural urge for destruction and generally on suppressing evil[16]."

At the eleventh "Common Space, Private Space" (2006-2007), all participants had to make film documentation. This made participants into observers and they began to act being aware of the camera. In 2008 the new faculty of media art and stage design had created and Kowalski opened his atelier there.

Conclusion

Influenced by Hansen's "Open Form," the experimental practice of "Common Space, Private Space" that developed at Kowalski's studio in the Academy of Fine Arts was reconnected to society and revitalized as social design theory through the incorporation of elements of the

14)————Sienkiewicz, op. cit., p.114.
15)————Sienkiewicz, loc. cit.
16)————Sienkiewicz, ibid., p.116.

real world based on the new ideas introduced by Żmijewski. This new framework was carried on thereafter. For example, at the "Creating Through Collaboration: Space. Body. Camera" summer master workshops programme for artists[17] held at the Center for Contemporary Art, Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw in summer 2014, in the first half Kowalski conducted a workshop in the studio, during which participants engaged in nonverbal communication in a space being filmed by a camera, making full use of intuition and imagination, using physical improvisation, and carrying on a chain of action and reaction using visual language. Half of the attendees were Polish and the others from abroad, and the program included a theoretical section, in the form of an evening lecture series in which theorists such as art historians and anthropologists discussed and debated primarily in English. The participants stayed communally in a dormitory provided next to the studio, cooking together, dining, talking, and inspiring one another. During the second half, Żmijewski took on the role of leader, and participants were asked to carry out actions similar to those of the first half, but in public places. These included large shopping centers like IKEA, subway stations, underground passageways, theaters, museums, cemeteries and churches, with the meanings and experiential qualities of the actions varying depending on the location. Here, as well, Żmijewski incorporated elements of reality into the workshop, investigating whether the practice of OWOW remained valid when taken out of the sheltered confines of a laboratory-like environment and pursued in the public sphere[18]. Then engage various activities in society using visual communication based on Open Form theory by Oskar Hansen.

Author biography

Akiko Kasuya

Akiko Kasuya is a Professor at Kyoto City University of Arts. She studied aesthetics at Jagiellonian University, with the Faculty of Philosophy, in the Institute of Aesthetics (Krakow, Poland) from 1989 to 1991. She graduated from the Kyoto University Graduate School of Letters Division of Philosophy Doctoral Program in 1991. She has worked as part of the National Museum of Art, Osaka (NMAO) Curatorial Department from 1991. Her major exhibitions include Art and The Environment (Geijutsu to Kankyo, 1998), Miroslaw Balka—Between Meals (2000), A Second Talk (Ima Hanaso, 2002); Positioning-In the New Reality of Europe (Tenkan Ki no Saho, 2005); Still/Motion: Liquid Crystal Painting (Ekisho Kaiga, 2008); Homage to Kantor – Theater of Death (Shi no Gekijo, 2015); Tatsuno Art Project 2011- etc. Her major publications are *Modern Art in Central Europe (Chuo no Modern Art)*, Sairyusha, 2013. *Contemporary Art of Central Europe (Chuo no Gendai Bijutsu)*, Sairyusya (coauthor), 2014. *Polish Avant-garde Art: Applied Fantasy for Survival (Poland no Zenei Bijutsu)*, Sogensha, 2014.

17) ———— *CREATING THROUGH COLLABORATION. Space. Body. Camera. Summer master workshops programme for artists*, Centre for Contemporary Art, Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw, 25 08 - 7 09 2013. cf. http://csw.art.pl/index.php?action=aktualnosci&s2=8&id=960&lang=eng. Last accessed on May 1, 2016.

18) ———— Ibid. Also drawn from the lecture by on the afternoon of February 7, 2016 by Anna Dtak at Kyoto City University of Arts Gallery @KCUA.