

Interview with Tomasz Wilmański and Joanna Adamczewska, Galeria AT, Poznan,
27/06/08

Tomasz Wilmański

Tomasz Wilmański started Galeria AT in 1982 under the auspices of the Academy of Fine Arts in Poznan. Previously housed elsewhere in the city, it moved to its current location in 1999. Wilmański studied sculpture at the Academy of Fine Arts and when he graduated he approached the director of the Academy to ask if he could start a gallery, for which he was given permission. He wanted to show works of his own generation, the 'New Wave', who believed that art was an international language of freedom. When he opened the gallery in 1982 it was still a very difficult time in Poland but his was one of seven or eight similar non-commercial galleries in Poznan. When, as he says, Poland truly became a democratic country in 1999, all the other galleries closed as rents became too high.

Galeria AT is an authors' gallery concentrating on text-based work such as concrete poetry, experimental books, sound books and performance. It is a public gallery for which Wilmański curates every show and has complete control over the programme. As it is not a commercial gallery he doesn't make any money from the artworks shown. This he feels is very important as it doesn't bind him to only show work which is likely to sell and allows him to put in anything that fits with his ethos and suits his programme. Any costs incurred by the gallery are met by the Academy of Fine Arts and the local council.

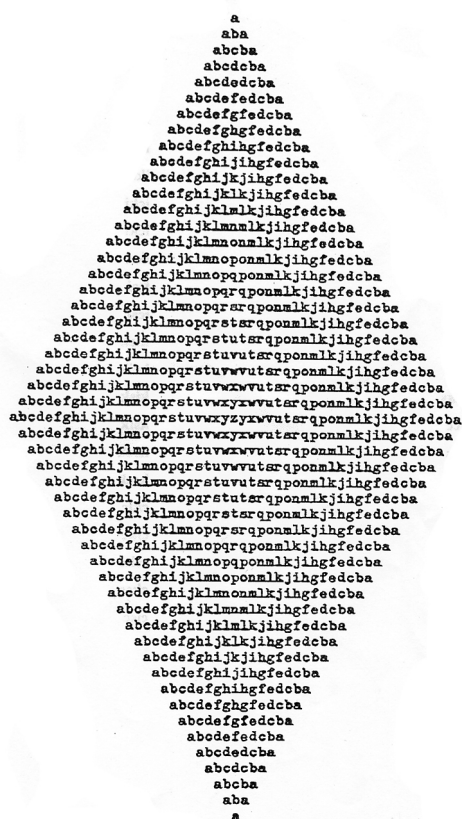


Figure 1. Emmett Williams, *Meditation No. 1*, 1958.

In 1990 Wilmański started a series of exhibitions called 'Book and What Next', containing artists' books, concrete and visual poetry. To date there have been seven of these exhibitions. The 'Book and What Next 5' in October and November 2004 was entitled 'Alphabet'. Wilmański invited artists who were working with text, books and letters to present works

whose starting point were letters building the alphabet notation. The inspiration for the show was the Emmett Williams poetry piece from 1958, 'Meditation no. 1' (see Figure 1).

Emmett Williams performed the poetry piece at the opening, speaking the letters of the alphabet with the German pronunciation (Williams had lived with his partner Ann Noël, also in the show, in Berlin for many years). Other works in the show included Małgorzata Gryglicka's recited medical terms, which, as a sufferer of leukaemia, had a personal resonance for her. A computer and sound piece by the French artist Bernard Heidsieck. Heidsieck's work presented the different letters of the alphabet on a computer screen; clicking on each generated a sound work in French that related to the chosen letter. An understanding of French was not necessary as it was more important to listen to the sounds that were made rather than the French language itself. Wilmański's piece for the show was 'Meditation No. 4', a projected computer work on the gallery wall with letters moving and bouncing off one another, produced in homage to Emmett Williams. The show also included works by Joanna Adamczewska, Joanna Hoffmann, Jarosław Kozłowski, Ann Noël, Jürgen O. Olbrich, Sef Peeters, Robert Szczerbowski and Adam Witkowski.

To launch the show there were public lectures in the gallery from Piotr Rypson (an expert on Polish artists' books), and Professor Alfred Majewicz, a professor of languages who specialises in and speaks Asiatic languages (and consequently knows a lot about different alphabets).

Wilmański holds a different viewpoint from other artists and curators in Poland as to what an artist's book is (it was explained to us, and became quite clear on our travels, that there are distinct regional differences in relation to artists' books within Poland). He is not interested in the beautiful book object, he specialises in experimental works: text, visual poetry, concrete poetry and sound poetry. The housing of the book is not important to him, rather the content. The book is a vehicle which is used to present the work to the audience. As he says it is a system of pages, not a beautiful book.

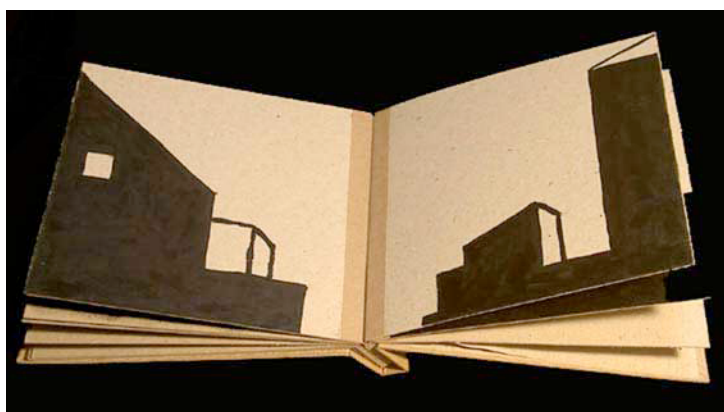


Figure 2. Tomasz Wilmański, *Dżungla I (Jungle I)*, 1989.

An artist and poet himself Wilmański often produces work about the Polish language and the special sounds that the language uses. He first made an artist's book in 1987 and he has for a long time been interested in concrete poetry and sound work. He continues to make books and carry out performances which are often small private affairs, the audience is invited by Wilmański. His books can be made from all manner of materials including corrugated cardboard and tracing paper and often include audio tapes of the sound performances. Some examples of his works include:

- *Dżungla (Jungle)*. A series of four books about the urban jungle, produced between 1989 and 1990 (see Figure 2).

- *W Ogrodzie Bruna* (In Bruno's Garden). A book and a performance about Bruno Schultz, the eminent pre-war Polish writer, produced in 1993. Schultz wrote many observational texts on his own garden, using a passionate sexual language to describe the plants and grasses (see Figure 3).

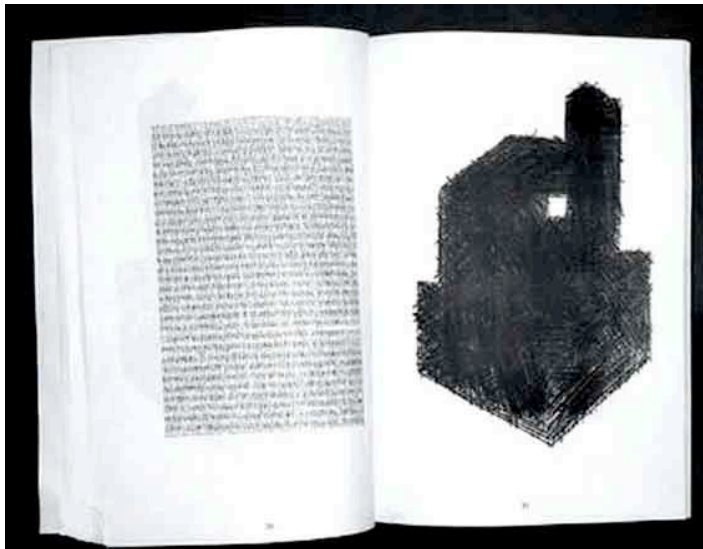


Figure 3. Tomasz Wilmański, *W Ogrodzie Bruna* (In Bruno's Garden), 1993.

- *Bon Ton*. A book containing a series of questions in Polish, produced in 1994. The book starts with questions that are aimed at young girls and ends with questions that are aimed at young boys. Each of the questions for girls starts 'What' and each of the questions for boys starts 'Who'. Accompanying the book is an audio tape that contains fragments of the music from the Nine Inch Nails, music that he considers to be very aggressive. Wilmański intended this to be a very depressing book (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. Tomasz Wilmański, *Bon Ton*, 1994.

- *Nie Zawsze Nie* (No Always No) a performance and book, produced in 1995. This is an example of one of Wilmański's small and very private performances. It was performed in front of only 30 of his invited guests (see Figure 5).



Figure 5. Tomasz Wilmański, *Nie Zawsze Nie* (*No Always No*), 1995.

Joanna Adamczewska

Joanna Adamczewska is an artist who mainly works with experimental books. At middle school she studied both piano and art and both of these disciplines continue to influence her work. She is concerned with how music and sound can come together within the artist's book. She particularly hates it when music is played in a gallery as background noise with no relation to the artwork.

Since the late 1980's Adamczewska has been working on 'Acoustic Books', a series of unique books. These are books that have been produced to create different sounds as they are opened and she presents the opening of the books as a performance in front of an audience. Some, because of their construction and their subsequent destruction when opened, can only ever be presented once. One such work that was shown in the National Museum in Poznan consisted of ten lecterns each holding a different book with a microphone positioned above to catch the sound. Working right to left across the stage Joanna opened each of the books.

The first lectern contained a book that was constructed of glassine pages that crackled when the pages were turned. The second had 'Envelope Book', a book constructed from sealed envelopes, which she would open in turn. These envelopes she had sealed in a slightly different place each time so that she wouldn't know where to open it and consequently make more noise searching. This references both her study of art and music. Adamczewska was trying to find a way to make each as important as the other and the opening of this book required both hands, like playing the piano. The third had a book that had wallpaper pages. This wallpaper had been stripped from walls and in some cases still contained plaster from the walls. It had also been stuck together and therefore ripped as she opened it. The fourth contained 'The First Alphabetic Sound', a book that was constructed from sealed envelopes but this time the envelopes had been filled with various substances, such as sand, salt, sugar, pine needles and pins. As the book's pages were turned it made a different noise. The fifth had 'Little Sound Book' which had with pages of coloured paper (which for her were reminiscent of the song books she had at school) which she ripped in turn. The sixth had 'Repetition', a book of pages that had been glued together with large strips of double sided tape which she then pulled apart. The seventh had 'Paper Song 2', a book of sandpaper pages which she rubbed together. The eighth a book whose pages had been made from tracing paper that had been glued, cut and scrunched together. The ninth a book of newspaper strips (newspaper produced under Communism as it was a much better quality paper). The book was very large and Joanna crushed the pages together as she leafed through the book. The last lectern had a book which she had put nails through from the back. As she worked through the book, pulling the pages apart, she slowly revealed the nails. This was quite a dangerous book to open as there was always the risk of injuring herself as worked through the pages.

This was a book that she had got from a library and she had cut off the dog-eared corners of the pages.

Another significant book that Joanna produced, whilst she was still at college, was a unique book called 'Bible'. The book has been constructed with over a thousand pages of tracing paper. At the back of the book she had written the phrase 'In the beginning was word' and then copied her writing through the next piece of tracing paper. She then copied this copy through the next piece of tracing paper and so on. With each copy it changes ever so slightly so that the last copy (the first page in the book) has been stretched and morphed over the page so that it is no longer text or legible. It was important that she produced all the pages in one sitting with no breaks, consequently this book took many hours to produce.

A similar work to this was produced for an exhibition in Montreal, Canada. She made a book for each of the letters in the Polish alphabet, 35 in total. At the back of each book she wrote one of the Polish letters and then copied it on each piece of tracing paper a total of 400 times. Again the last copy is not legible and becomes a very different and stretched version of the original letter. Each of the 35 books was presented on a small plinth and the audience were able to flick through the pages. This book will be shown as part of the 'Book and What Next' exhibition in 2010, to see the reaction of Polish speakers to the letters. Tomasz Wilmański is currently curating the exhibition of 14 artists to be shown at Szczecin Muzeum, Narodowe in 2010.

Many thanks to Tomasz Wilmański and Joanna Adamczewska for spending time talking to us and showing us their work.

Tomasz Wilmanski / Galeria AT (AT Gallery)

<http://free.art.pl/at/pl/ang/ogalerii.htm>

http://free.art.pl/wilmanski/ksiazki_art/wystaw_ksiazki.htm

http://free.art.pl/at/pl/ang/ksiazka_1_1990.htm

Joanna Adamczewska

http://free.art.pl/at/pl/ang/art_adamczewska.htm