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At the End of Time

Robert Szczerbowski's exhibitions in the Centre of Contemporary Art

Despite all kinds of suspicions and public declarations, the two-part exhibition by Robert Szczerbowski entitled *Retrospective at the End of Time* is not a pure joke or mystification. Visually attractive, his works contain a great deal of essential subject matter. Robert Szczerbowski's exhibition attracts attention even more because it is the first individual show of this artist presenting works created over the last three years. Before he did not create visual art. He was a writer and published experimental prose.

The exhibition is a multi-layered story about the history of civilization in decline which is maintained in the grotesque, postmodern, end of 20th century rather than apocalyptic tone. It refers to art, science, esoteric knowledge and philosophy mixed together so well that getting all the levels of meaning is at times difficult. Despite the multi-layered complications, a very logical thought is the axis of the exhibition. Objects presented tell us about the attempt to discover the mystery of existence and the ways of getting knowledge: the rational and the irrational. "The world is dual", says the author but it seems that he is looking for the third way to get the knowledge. It is revealed already in the first part, called *Three Works Exposed for Public View*.

The second part of the exhibition, called *Hermetica*, is composed of 37 objects. The most evident proof that it is a continuation of the first part is the *Philosopher's Stone*. There are also dada constructions, as for example a kind of "a machine for drawing lots" filled with sugar cubes, which can on one hand be associated with Duchamp, and on the other with systems of cognition based on chance, such as *I-Ching*. There are also ritual objects like the *Sacrificial Table*.

Many works are connected with one another by the motif of coded writing. There are clay tablets covered with hieroglyphs associated with prehistoric times next to a *Disc From Warsaw*, that is a CD covered with pictographic writing (which is undoubtedly a reference to the mysterious disc from Faistos from 1600 BC not deciphered so far). Szczerbowski translates the most important cultural texts (for example the Torah) and symbols (the famous Indian mantra OM) into the computer language which strengthens the impression of their inaccessibility. And after all the objects are not difficult to identify. It seems that according to the author, the symbolic signs do not lose their meaning, what disappears is the communicative function of language.

It may have been easier if the author had broken his own code. While looking for his own way of cognition, he laughs at the naive alchemy (see *Six Ingots of Gold Turned Into Lead*) as well as pure science, he is drawn stronger to the way of a cabalistic and mystical way.