During the 1980s, ZBIGNIEW LIBERA was one of the key figures in the underground, unofficial Polish art scene and has been a leading force in the Polish art scene ever since. Libera’s interest in developmental psychology and the formation of gender identity has been visible in a number of works throughout his career. In a series of works made in the 1990s, Libera subverts toys and other everyday objects, exposing the implicit gender stereotypes and unspoken strategies of social control employed in objects marketed at children. Examples include ‘correcting devices’ such as a set of child-sized body building machines entitled The Body Master – play set for children under 9, 1994-8, and Ken’s Aunt, 1995, a Barbie Doll with the naturalistic full figure of a mature woman. Most well known among this series of toy-based works is Lego Concentration Camp, xxxx. He has said of these works that it is his intention to demonstrate “the potential danger that an innocent child’s play becomes perverted into a construction of evil (Quoted in ‘Zbigniew Libera’, International Biennale of Contemporary Art, exhibition catalogue, National Gallery in Prague 2005, p.92.).”

One of Libera’s seminal early works, How to Train Little Girls, is a single-screen video depicting a four-year old girl being dressed up by older female relatives. The footage, taken during a family get-together, is dramatically slowed down, allowing the viewer to see the interaction of the child with her elders in minute detail. A woman places strings of beads over the girl’s head and helps her put on earrings. The child is seen being handed lipstick and a nail file with which she tentatively practices adult beauty rituals. Periodically she crosses the room to a mirror where she gazes at her transforming appearance. The video charts an early instance of conditioning in which the girl is shown how to enact and perform her gender role. Slowed to a dream-like pace, the imagery deliberately recalls ritualised initiation ceremonies. Libera has said, “For me, it was a phenomenal example of the processes whose obviousness we are aware of, but which we usually don’t notice, don’t acknowledge their presence in our life.” As the camera lingers on the girl’s face, the viewer is invited to confront the unsubtle ways in which her identity is being defined and sexualised by the adults around her.

Łukasz Ronduda, a famed Polish art curator and art critic has commented on Libera’s work that it is the “artist’s intention... to speak about the general conditions of our survival, about how we are sentenced to aestheticise our personalities, to self-create ourselves, to change the external influences into qualities on which our identity is founded” (Łukasz Ronduda, ‘Zbigniew Libera’, 2007 , p.376).” Libera’s early works were an important moment in the ‘critical art’ movement in Poland during a period in which the country was moving towards a more consumer-based culture. Libera’s practice has consistently emphasised the need to critically engage with structures that define the individual. Ronduda has noted, “In attempting to work out and reveal the processes that condition self-creation, Libera is driven by a desire to equip individuals with instruments for more conscious self-formation (Łukasz Ronduda, ‘Zbigniew Libera’, 2007, p.376).”

By Jessica Morgan
The Rockefeller Foundation launched the Bellagio Creative Arts Fellowship in 2008, offering an exciting opportunity for visual artists. This high-profile program, selected by a distinguished international panel, hosts visual artists at the Bellagio Center for extended residencies to develop projects inspired by or related to social or global issues.

The Bellagio Creative Arts Fellows program is a selective award that helps advance the work of some of the most innovative, global, contemporary visual artists and raises their visibility in new arts, policy, and academic circles. The Fellows receive a cash award, undertake a two-month residency at the Center, and are provided with a travel award. They also contribute to and benefit from interactions among a stimulating community of scholars, writers, policymakers, and other artists who share dinners and occasional presentations at the Center. The combination of an extended stay, a generous stipend, private work space, and a unique group of fellow residents makes a Creative Arts Fellowship at the Bellagio Center a remarkable, unparalleled opportunity in the global arts community.

http://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/bellagio-center