Tomasz Szczepanek
Department of Aesthetics
Institute of Philosophy
University of Warsaw
tomasz_szczepanek@o2.pl

TRANSIT MONUMENTAL – THE WAY OF INDEPENDENCE. AESTHETICS IN THE IDENTITY PROJECTS OF LATE MODERNITY

Abstract: The paper presents the performative project by the K.A.U. collective and Małgorzata Wdowik, Transit Monumental – The Way of Independence, as an example of the late modern use of artistic fiction in order to examine existing social relationships and to expand the subject competences of the potential participants/recipients of the project. The author aims to build a philosophical context around this work and establish its connections with the tradition of the modernist avant-garde. In order to accomplish this task, he uses the conceptual tools provided by such thinkers as Anthony Giddens, Nicolas Bourriaud, Jacques Rancière and Paul Ricoeur.

Keywords: independence, monument, aesthetics, politics, identity

Identity is something that one has to perform. Without cultural performances, social performance would not be efficient. One finds its complement in the other. As noted by Richard Schechner, "Social dramas affect aesthetic dramas, aesthetic dramas affect social dramas. The visible actions of a given social drama are informed – shaped, conditioned, guided – by underlying aesthetic principles and specific theatrical/rhetorical techniques".[1] Power needs rituals, ceremonies, artefacts; a different language from the one used in everyday life. Modern politics quickly became aware of the fact that the management of, initially, subjects and later citizens involves more than the constitution of legal-economic regulations or other modes of strong influence on social reality. The range and effectiveness of political impact is strictly connected with the aesthetic preparation of the subject for the particular form of power, which might be understood as the creation of a specific niche in time and space that the subject considers as his own, proper to himself.[2]

---

[1] R. Schechner, *Performance Theory*, p. 181-182.
[2] The concept of correlating politics with aesthetics understood as the distribution of time and space to the subjects of political activity has been described most comprehensively by Jacques Rancière. See J. Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible*, transl. G. Rockhill, Continuum International Publishing Group, New York 2004.

In this way entities become part of the process of constituting a narrative of identity, which confirms their affiliation with a specific social order. The visible presence of concrete signs of defined community identification requires reproducing and maintaining the narrative which constitutes this community. It is precisely in this manner – through aesthetics – that power authorizes its hegemony. As noted by Jon McKenzie,

> performance will be to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries what discipline was to the eighteenth and nineteenth, that is, an onto-historical formation of power and knowledge. This formation is ontological in that it entails a displacement of being that challenges our notion of history; it is nonetheless historical in that this displacement is materially inscribed.[3]

The construction of the communal identity occurs mainly through its members' participation in political performances, a shining example of which are commemorative objects and performances associated with them.

The main purpose of this paper is to sketch the philosophical context of the project *Transit Monumental – The Way of Independence*, which focuses on the aesthetic aspects of identity politics in the period of late modernity. This project seems to be an especially interesting example of a hybrid work in terms of its construction and of the objectives that it sets itself.[4] On the one hand, it diagnoses the universal strategies of engaging in politics through aesthetics, on the other, it is an experiment involving the creation of an alternative community independent of the existing net of political entanglements.

Description of the project

The project *Transit Monumental – The Way of Independence* originated in 2015 at the Spielartfestival in Munich as the result of the cooperation between the K.A.U. collective from Berlin and the Polish theatre director Małgorzata Wdowik.[5] The main objective of the project's authors was to create a quasi-theatrical narrative based on a fictive monument – *The Independent Monument*. In contrast to traditionally understood monuments, the object – a red-and-white, wooden aeroplane wing, 10 metres long and weighing 500 kilograms, which was originally an element of a stage set design – did not commemorate any specific historical fact. According to the authors' assumptions, the main function of the object was

---

3   J. McKenzie, *Perform or Else: from Discipline to Performance*, p. 18.
4   The hybridity of this project manifests itself in its interdisciplinary character and its conscious disruption of the borders between existing reality and artistic fiction. This quality is considered as a distinctive trait for works of art in late modernity, as mentioned e.g. by Gianni Vattimo. See: G. Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, pp. 53-54.
5   See http://www.dinoosmanovic.com/Transit-Monumental [Accessed 15 July. 2017].

to represent the idea of political independence and the transgression of cultural, geographical, national, and institutional borders. The artists took the monument on a journey from Munich to Warsaw. The trip was depicted in seven episodes of a documentary series, which was screened during the Spielartfestival. Each episode presented the visit of the monument and its guards (the project's authors taking this role) to a German or Polish city (Schöneck, Venusberg, Görlitz, Legnica, Kutno, Kałków, Warsaw), whose inhabitants had the chance to co-create the project by engaging in one of two activities. The first one was reading out the declaration provided by the guards. Each declaration contained the project's ideological framework and a commentary on the content of the episode. The second mode of participating was by preparing an artistic event in honour of *The Independent Monument*: local amateur companies stood in front of the monument performing short choral or instrumental works or sequences of folk dances. The journey started on 30th October and ended on 7th November 2015, when the project culminated in a discussion at Teatr Powszechny of Zygmunt Hübner in Warsaw. The main topic of the discussion was the annual March of Independence and the strategies of appropriating national symbols by certain political groups. The invited guests were: Kazimiera Szczuka (co-organizer of the rally Colourful Independence), Seweryn Blumsztajn (journalist), Witold Hebanowski (chairman of The Different Space Foundation) on the stage with the leader of the meeting, Szymon Mailian (press officer of the National Radical Camp of Mazovia Brigade) via telephone connection, and Jan Nałęcz (restorer, archaeologist), whose comments unfortunately fell outside the range of the recording device. In the opinions of the panelists on the stage, national symbols, serving as a basis for the aesthetic identification of a certain community, are never politically indifferent. Their axiological and semantic potential can become a means of achieving particular objectives of certain groups. In the next section of this paper I would like to focus on identifying the objectives of the above-named groups and their location in the structure of identity projects.

Expert systems

Independent Monument met with a warm welcome in each city it visited. The meaning offered to the recipients – and at the same time the co-creators of the project – was accessible through the fictive narrative provided by the guards of the monument, in other words, its authors. This point to the great importance of the function which is fulfilled by the custodians of the meaning of a certain object. Their activity reinforced the utopian aim with their determination and involvement. In this case it was a defence of independence as such which gave life to a fiction sufficiently attractive to the incidental recipients that they united in the process of its maintenance. The guards' story *de facto* became the space ready to involve local communities with their endemic customs into the transnational project.

This mechanism might be compared to the mode of action of the expert systems described by Anthony Giddens in his characterisation of the late modernity.[6] Giddens claims that with the dis-embedding of time and space from the physical *hic et nunc* it became possible to abstract social relationships. As a consequence, a new type of institutions emerged in the social realm. They received a greater range of influence and a degree of structural-functional complexity. Their foundation was based on the projects of political utopias, rather than on tradition as used to be the case in premodern institutions. One example of such a project might be the 19th century nation state. As with other institutions of modernity, the nation state functions using a symbolic code, which requires an expert system responsible for its maintenance: its construction, distribution, and deciphering. However, such a system can function only as long as its potential users place their confidence in it, which, according to Giddens, is an obligatory condition for efficient action in late modern society. As noted by the British sociologist, "For the lay person (...) trust in expert systems depends neither upon a full initiation into these processes nor upon the mastery of the knowledge they yield. Trust is inevitably in part an article of 'faith'".[7] It is worth emphasizing that such faith is different from that of the pre-modern era, when the subjects entrusted their destiny to transcendent deities or omnipotent fate. In late modernity trust is based on the conviction that the world's complexity demands many codes to understand the laws organizing reality. Therefore, knowledge is always fragmentary and embraces only a limited range. Relying on the forms of functioning based only on verification through one's knowledge or experience becomes impossible. For this reason, trust in expert systems is fundamental. A nation state can be considered within such a model. It is easy to notice that K.A.U. and Wdowik's performance points to the existence of expert groups responsible for the production and distribution of the narrative serving as a foundation of the community. This recognition is important, because it highlights the political character of identity narratives. The symbolic codes of late modernity do not result from tradition, but are a consequence of projecting a specific worldview with an assumption of interfering with this world. Even if an institution follows an agenda based on the rules whose ideological and structural foundations are centuries old, as happens in the case of universalist religions, in the global society of late modernity they function as one of the many options that can be chosen by the subject. The decision to trust it may be influenced by the aesthetic attractiveness of the particular option. When intellectual verification becomes less probable (due to the enormous number of processes in which everyone has to participate in everyday life), the irrational forms, such as affects or imagination, become more influential. This claim can be supported by the example of *Transit Monumental* and its warm reception by local com-

---

6   See A. Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, pp. 10-28.
7   Ibid., p. 29.

munities. Social institutions are entangled in the web of complex dependencies, which can be compared to a sphere of power as understood in a Foucauldian way.[8] The stake in this game is of course the accomplishment of one's political agenda and domination over the biggest piece of the game.

Relational Art

The main strategy of *Transit Monumental* was to create the circumstances that would allow the representatives of local communities to participate in the process of the work's creation using their own identity resources. The final result was dependent on the contribution offered by the recipients. This recognition allows the project to be perceived as an example of relational art as it is understood by Nicolas Bourriaud.[9] It is worth pointing out that Bourriaud's concept is rooted in the tradition of the modern avant-garde, manifest mainly in the social vector of the ideological assumptions and the high innovativeness of the formal solutions found in the works discussed by the French art theoretician. The democratization of customs and the technical development of social institutions in the 20th century created tensions which prompted the artists to look for the ways of being in the world different from those understood as default. Their search was not only an attempt to discover new forms of subjectivity, but also raised the question of the coexistence of individuals in modern society. The objective of this search was therefore creating an alternative to the highly formalized and goal-oriented structures shaped by the directives of the global power system. Currently, interest in art focuses not only on the subject tackled by the artist or the effect meant to be generated by the work, but also – or perhaps primarily – on the way in which its message is articulated. According to Bourriaud, this has relevance to philosophical reflection on the essence of the work of art as such. The shift to modernism challenged the classical perception of an artwork as a material carrier of aesthetic values. Instead, art began to be perceived in terms of performativity. "Unlike an object that is closed in on itself by the intervention of a style and a signature, present-day art shows that form only exists in the encounter and in the dynamic relationship enjoyed by an artistic proposition with other formations, artistic or otherwise".[10] The beginning of the 20th century brought a shift of attention from artefacts to the space between the sender, the recipient, and the message. In the case of relational art it is exactly this space which enables an insight into the official structure of social relations and the creation of alternative forms of coexis-tence. Bourriaud names it an 'interstice', referring to Althusser's understanding of Marx. This "interstice" functions as an incubator for the practices "that elude the capitalist economic context by being removed from the law of profit: barter, merchandising,

---

8   See: M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, pp. 92-93.
9   N. Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 2002, pp. 7-10.
10   Ibid., p. 8.

autarkic types of production, etc. (...[and]) suggests other trading possibilities than those in effect within this system".[11] *Transit Monumental*, through its recipients' involvement in the process of creating fiction, indirectly produces new alternative social relationships, temporary communities, which cannot be inscribed into the existing economy of human relations. A Bavarian brass orchestra, bikers from Zgorzelec, a vocal group from Kutno and many more micro-communities in their everyday context, took part in the encounter that transcended the borders of artistic disciplines, geographical locations and economic utility. Through the inclusion of the identities of specific recipients into the process of creation of an artistic narrative, the authors of the project were able to create an ephemeral, transnational community oriented toward maintaining an equally ephemeral idea in the world of political entanglement, which is independence from power structures – even if this remains only at the level of an artistic statement.

The politics of aesthetics

The above distinction will find its continuation in the philosophy of Jacques Rancière, especially the way in which he combines politics and aesthetics. Transit Monumental can be considered as an example of post-utopian art, which is "a way of redisposing the objects and images that comprise the common world as it is already given, or of creating situations apt to modify our gazes and our attitudes with respect to this collective environment".[12] According to Rancière, political indifference in the world of the senses is not possible. Every decision that relates to time and space in the world of social relations brings potential interference. Therefore, solutions offered by art are especially important and valuable, as art might be considered a laboratory of social praxis. Simulations carried out in the sphere of artistic fiction might be transposed to reality, or fiction might performatively influence reality (as in the case e.g. of happenings). K.A.U. and Wdowik's project is at an intersection of two modes of political functioning of post-utopian art: relational aesthetics and the aesthetics of the sublime.[13] On the one hand, *Independent Monument* becomes a pretext to activate local communities, trigger

---

11 Ibid., p. 6.
12 J. Rancière, *Aesthetics as Politics*, 2009, p. 21.
13 Both forms remain in a similar tension as Christianity and Judaism with regard to God and the ways of making Him present or representing Him in the earthly order. In the first case the key is the community of believers bounded by the eucharistic ritual. In the second case, the emphasis is on the distance separating the believers from the transcendent deity, which becomes expressed i.a. through the prohibition of figurativity. Therefore, his presence can be transmitted only in abstract forms. Post-utopian art refers to the transcendental order in the current reality as well. However, the tests for its presence or modes of functioning are not as explicitly defined as in the case of modernist manifestos. This order should be revealed through creative actions without any former anticipation, which may bring to mind a religious discourse rather than a scientific or political one. See: J. Rancière, op.cit., p. 20.

some actions oriented at stifling existing relationships and creating new ones. On the other hand, it is meant to represent the idea of political independence – something that seems to be internally contradictory or even impossible in Rancière's world of close connection between aesthetics and politics. The recipient's perception automatically installs an object in a self-known horizon of cultural codes belonging to pre-existing politic structures. It is hard to resist the presumption that displaying a red-and-white object in Poland called 'a monument' will evoke nationalistic connotations. This paradox relates to Rancière's category of resistant form, which emerged as a response to the manipulative usage of aesthetics by political ideologies; a good example of this is the avant-garde vs. the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century. Independent Monument seems to be taking a stand in this dispute. The monument is not intended as a repository of a single identity, one historical narrative, one project of political utopia. It is rather a frame, ready to enclose grassroots content, brought by its users-recipients; it is an empty space open to different forms of subjectivity. The project's authors strive to create a fictive chance for independence, which might bring some consolation in the age of global control, even if it takes the form of artistic escapism.

In his description of a work from the aesthetic regime, which is the last of the three "regimes" of the distribution of the sensible, Rancière uses Schiller's notion of play, "an activity that has no end other than itself, that does not intend to gain any effective power over things or persons".[14] One might find such an attempt in K.A.U. and Wdowik's offer. A work of art creates the possibility of a temporary escape from power and the dominant distribution of the symbols of identity into the world of the aesthetic suspension of the intellect. The strategy chosen by the authors of *Transit Monumental* is realized within the aesthetic regime, while nonfictional monuments function in the ethical regime, which means that they embody a specific ideal of life recommended by the expert apparatus of a certain community. *Independent Monument* is an aesthetic play on independence, it is the only form in which it can function in today's world of close connection between aesthetics and politics – as artistic fiction, which owes its shape to the individual decisions of its temporary co-creators.

The hermeneutics of identity

According to hermeneutic philosophy, there is no pure pre-cultural "I". The subject is always immersed in the horizon of historic events, therefore it is only possible to reach it indirectly, through the cultural material which surrounds the acting subject. Defining subjectivity is possible only through reference to objectivity. To understand an identity, or as Paul Ricoeur has called it – to gain access to being crucial to oneself – one should perform a narrative analysis, which means

---

14   Ibid., p. 30.

answering the questions "what?", "how?", and "why?"[15] One of the stages of this analysis is the distinction of two types of identity. Identity *idem* – based on the supposed membership in a certain category because of a formal, structural similarity or a totally different contractual criterion – is a distinctive identity for nationalistic projects or, in general, those which rely on ethnic affiliation. Using only this category leaves a limited range of possibilities when it comes to the formulation of the projects of the self. In turn, *Transit Monumental* might be considered as a combination of identity *idem* with identity *ipsem*, which is based on being true to one's word. Being independent or guarding independence was the declaration of each representative of the local communities participating in the project, mainly known from the manifestos read by the narrators in the series depicting the project. The combination of ethnic identities *idem* with the declarative identity *ipsem* yields a dialectic narrative identity that is a model of projecting being-self. As noted by Ricoeur: "Narrative identity makes the two ends of the chain link up with one another: the permanence in time of character and that of self-constancy".[16] *Transit Monumental* reveals the factual variety of the cultural backgrounds of its co-creators, and binds them with one contract-task at the same time. It worth noticing that identity understood as a task has a very ethical connotation.[17] Agreement on the defence of independence is made towards others – the authors, the co-creators, the recipients of the project. They are the witnesses and depositaries of the given word, but the contract will be fulfilled with them in mind: my independence will be maintained as long as I am able to maintain your independence. In this way, artistic fiction can generate some effects in the form of social facts, which may be considered as one of relational art's distinctive qualities.

***

According to Arthur C. Danto, "To imagine an artwork is to imagine a form of life".[18] Therefore, regarding a specific work of art, one can deduce not only how it was made, but also what reality provided the conditions for its creation. The multi-layered structure of K.A.U. and Wdowik's project and the way in which it functions point to the complex and heterogeneous character of late modernity, which seems to be a period of interplay, combining elements which had been previously separated by rigid disciplines. *Transit Monumental* is the result of blending different orders: fiction with fact, politics with aesthetics, diagnosis with inter-

---

15 See: P. Ricoeur, O*neself as Another*, transl. K. Blamey, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1990, pp. 140-168.
16 Ibid., p. 166.
17 See: ibid., pp. 115-125.
18 A.C. Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2014, p. 203.

vention. Eclecticism or hybridism seems to be a distinctive trait of late modernity as a conceptual horizon enabling the comprehension of contemporary social--cultural events in their entire complexity. One of those events is projecting identity through aesthetics. Following this recognition, new ways of individual formation of subjectivity can be found within the realm of the art world. K.A.U. and Wdowik's project shows the importance of combining the praxis of searching for truth, discovering and disseminating values, with making politics. The expert apparatus managing global power structures is well aware of the fact that it is highly ineffective to separate them. Thanks to some undertakings based on participation and acknowledgment of already existing identities, the influence and independence of individuals increases – e.g. through shaping their subjectivity.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bourriaud Nicolas (2002) *Relational Aesthetics*, transl. S. Pleasance, F. Woods, Dijon: Les presse du reel.

Foucault Michel (1990) *The History of Sexuality*, transl. Robert Hurley, London: Penguin Books.

Giddens Anthony (1996) *The Consequences of Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

http://www.dinoosmanovic.com/Transit-Monumental [Access: 18:00:00, 15.07.2017].

McKenzie Jon (2002) *Perform or Else: from Discipline to Performance*, London and New York: Routledge.

Rancière Jacques, A*esthetics as Politics, in: Aesthetics and its Discontents*, transl. Steve Corcoran, Cambridge: Polity 2009.

Rancière Jacques (2004) *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible*, transl. G. Rockhill, New York: Continuum International Publishing Group.

Ricoeur Paul (1990) *Oneself as Another*, transl. K. Blamey, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Schechner Richard (2005) *Performance Theory*, New York and London: Rutledge.

Vattimo Gianni (1988) *The End of Modernity*, transl. J. R. Snyder, Cambridge: Polity Press.

TRANSIT MONUMENTAL – DROGA NIEPODLEGŁOŚCI. ESTETYKA W PROJEKTACH TOŻSAMOŚCIOWYCH PÓŹNEJ NOWOCZESNOŚCI
(streszczenie)

W niniejszym artykule autor stara się przedstawić projekt kolektywu K.A.U. i Małgorzaty Wdowik *Transit Monumental* – Droga niepodległości jako przykłady póznonowoczesnego wykorzystania fikcji artystycznej w celu zbadania istniejących stosunków społecznych, a także dokonania pewnych zmian zorientowanych na zwiększenie kompetencji podmiotowych uczestników-odbiorców projektu. Celem badania jest również nabudowanie kontekstu filozoficznego wokół dzieła oraz wykazanie jego powiązań z tradycjami modernistycznej awangardy. Wykorzystane przy tym zostaną koncepcje Anthony'ego Giddensa, Nicolasa Bourriauda, Jacquesa Rancière'a oraz Paula Ricoeura.

Słowa kluczowe: niepodległość, pomnik, estetyka, polityka, tożsamość.