

Avant-garde and avant-gardes



# ART INQUIRY

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RECHERCHES SUR LES ARTS

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Volume XIX (XXVIII)

## Avant-garde and avant-gardes



Łódź 2017

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*Avant-garde and avant-gardes*

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# INTRODUCTION

## AVANT-GARDE AND AVANT-GARDES

The term “avant-garde” in the singular is usually employed in reference to the Great Avant-garde from the beginning of the twentieth century. The plural form draws attention to other innovatory artistic currents originating later in the twentieth century and still appearing today. This use of the term is sometimes regarded as too broad or even misguided, but it is still encountered so often that it cannot be ignored. In the Year of the Avant-garde we propose to explore this phenomenon and discuss its complexities.

The term “avant-garde” did not actually appear in the manifestos and other theoretical texts from the early twentieth century, where the artists would rather use the phrase „new art”. It became popular and gained positive connotations only in the 1960s and 1970s, with the development of the theory of the avant-garde, and the writings of such classics as Theodor W. Adorno, Renato Poggioli, Peter Bürger, or Stefan Morawski. Looking from the current perspective, do the characteristics of the avant-garde distinguished by those scholars point to the historical character of this phenomenon, or can it be assumed that avant-garde is evolving with time? What is the status of such concepts as neo-avantgarde, arrière-garde etc.? Is post-modernism an opposite of the avant-garde, or is it rather a perverse fulfilment of its postulates?

Authors usually emphasize the temporal aspect of the avant-garde, noting how it has been ahead of its time in its understanding of art. Does that mean that the spatial (geographical) contexts of vanguard undertakings should be viewed as less essential? Does the avant-garde inevitably assume a division into center and peripheries? Did New York steal the idea of the avant-garde? What role is played by the avant-garde in central and eastern Europe or in Latin America? What is the relation between avant-garde universalism and globalization? Does the concept of transculturality put an end to the idea of the avant-garde?

What roles are played by different art disciplines within the avant-garde project? Was the dominance of painting in the period of the first avant-garde only an artistic *signum temporis*? What have been the roles of architecture, industrial design and fashion in the formation of vanguard ideas? Is avant-garde intermedial? What is the nature of the relation between the avant-garde and virtual reality?

We invite you to reflect on the avant-garde in the Year of the Avant-Garde.

Grzegorz Sztabiński  
Paulina Sztabińska

## WSTĘP

### AWANGARDA I AWANGARDY

Słowo „awangarda” w liczbie pojedynczej odnoszone jest zwykle do Wielkiej Awangardy z początków XX wieku. Użycie go w liczbie mnogiej zwraca uwagę na inne nowatorskie zjawiska artystyczne, które pojawiały się w XX wieku i jakie występują obecnie. Czasami stosowanie go w drugi z wymienionych sposobów uważane jest za zbyt szerokie lub nawet błędne, jednak pojawia się na tyle często, że nie można go zlekceważyć. W Roku Awangardy proponujemy przyjrzenie się temu zjawisku i skomentowanie go.

W manifestach i innych tekstach teoretycznych z początków XX wieku słowo „awangarda” nie występowało. Artyści używali raczej określenia „nowa sztuka”. Stało się ono popularne i uzyskało pozytywny sens w latach sześćdziesiątych i siedemdziesiątych XX wieku, gdy zaczęto rozwijać teorię awangardy, co zaowocowało klasycznymi koncepcjami T.W. Adorna, R. Poggiolo, P. Bürgera, S. Morawskiego. Czy z dzisiejszej perspektywy cechy wskazywane w teoriach awangardy podkreślają historyczny charakter tego zjawiska, czy można przyjąć, że awangarda ewoluuje przekraczając granice czasowe? Jaki jest status pojęć takich jak neoawangarda, ariergarda itp.? Czy postmodernizm jest przeciwieństwem awangardy, czy może przewrotnym spełnieniem jej postulatów?

W awangardowym pojmowaniu sztuki akcentowany był zwykle aspekt czasowego wyprzedzenia. Jakie znaczenie mają w związku z tym przestrzenne (geograficzne) konteksty działań awangardowych? Czy można zredukować je do roli wtórnych i mniej istotnych? Czy awangarda nieuchronnie zakłada podział na centrum i peryferia? Czy Nowy Jork ukradł awangardę? Jaką rolę pełni awangarda Europy środkowej i wschodniej lub południowoamerykańska? Jaka relacja zachodzi między awangardowym uniwersalizmem a globalizacją? Czy idea transkulturowości dezaktualizuje ideę awangardy?

Jaką rolę pełnią w ramach awangardy różne dziedziny sztuki? Czy dominacja malarstwa w ramach Wielkiej Awangardy była tylko artystycznym *signum temporis*? Jaką rolę w kształtowaniu się awangardy miały architektura, wzornictwo przemysłowe i moda? Czy awangarda jest intermedialna? Jaka relacja zachodzi między awangardą a rzeczywistością wirtualną?

Zapraszamy Państwa do podjęcia refleksji nad awangardą w Roku Awangardy.

Grzegorz Sztabiński  
Paulina Sztabińska

## FOREWORD

The centenary of the Great Avant-garde of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century has inspired the whole artistic and cultural community in our country to celebrate this unique event.

The Great Avant-garde has become a field for multifaceted analyses of art theoreticians and historians who rescue the names of great artists, theoreticians, poets, and writers from obscurity. It is their unyielding attitude that has opened the eyes of the world to new phenomena. We are all the beneficiaries of the Avant-garde, which has permanently changed the way of thinking about form, function, and the role of art. It was the affirmation of independent thinking, pioneering ideas, and breaking fixed thought patterns. It drew inspiration from the achievements of technology and science and it aimed at changing social awareness. In the past, artists provided positive stimuli, but they also provoked their readers or viewers. Each period in the history of art can have its avant-garde. There may always appear charismatic creators, new social phenomena that will give high status to cultural changes, release new energy.

The Academy of Fine Arts in Łódź is especially indebted to its patron Władysław Strzemiński – one of the founders of our school. He was an art theorist, an artist, an educator, a visionary who, giving unique character to our didactic profile, truly built the substantive foundation of the Academy of Fine Arts in Łódź. It should be remembered that the idea of establishing the academy arose from the need to educate designers, highly sought after on the market at that time. Łódź was a city of dynamically developing textile industry, whose potential was to be enhanced by the specialist education provided at the Academy. It was Władysław Strzemiński who saw the need to combine the functional with the creative; he attached great importance both to the designers' expert skills and to their general art education. We owe the present educational profile of the Academy in Łódź to Strzemiński. Every designer who graduates from it is a thoroughly educated artist. The teaching methods developed by Strzemiński are still valid today.

The artist-painter Władysław Strzemiński was a pioneer of the Constructivist avant-garde of the 1920s and 1930s in Poland. His activity had a huge impact on the Łódź artistic milieu. Let us mention his theory of Unism, which revolutionized the painting of that period, and situated the art of the Polish Great Avant-garde at the forefront of the world avant-garde. At this point we have to mention Katarzyna Kobro, the artist's life partner, but first and foremost one of the most

outstanding sculptors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, whose creative stance is analysed today on par with the work of the most influential artists in the world.

Unfortunately, few of her modern geometric, abstract sculptures shaping their surroundings have been preserved. According to Kobro, "A sculpture should not be a composition of form enclosed in a solid, but rather an open spatial structure in which the inner part of the compositional space correlates with the external space. The energy of the successive shapes in space generates spatio-temporal rhythm." Following this, we can understand her art in the context of urban planning. This urban-planning way of thinking is evidenced, for example, by the project of a functional kindergarten, which we want to realize today, building a kindergarten according to Katarzyna Kobro's specifications. The exhibition *We, the successors*, at which our lecturers showed what their work inherits from the work of the artist, began the celebrations of the centenary of the Great Avant-garde.

The Polish avant-garde dates back to the interwar and early post-war period. Taking into account the situation in our country at the time, when it was building its structures after regaining independence, and later rebuilding itself after the Second World War, reluctantly embracing Socialist Realism, the emergence of this kind of trend was an expression of rebellion and an escape from realism. The avant-garde introduced controversial forms, distancing itself from figuration. It was the time of Strzemiński, Kobro, and the whole movement undersigning all of the new phenomena in art. We should keep in mind that the ideas of those artists were not accepted then. Only time has shown the innovativeness and creativeness of this search for new way of thinking about art and of the shift from the figurative to the abstract approach. It was them who created the concept of the avant-garde and gave it meaning.

This year one of the most important events at our Academy was the ceremony of awarding an honorary doctorate to Józef Robakowski. His oeuvre, including art photography and paintings, films, videos, objects and installations, takes after the artistic stance of his predecessors. He is an avant-garde artist of his time, going his own artistic path, not accepting compromises, challenging stereotypes. Robakowski is our icon in the field of new media, film and performance, and he is an internationally recognised artist.

Another part of the celebration of the centenary of the Great Avant-garde was the exhibition *Inter-Woven*, which presented the work of 12 Canadian professors. It was inspired by the combination of two fields of art – textile and graphic art, for which Łódź is well known in the world. The concept of the exhibition was formulated by Professor Derek Besant, an outstanding Canadian graphic artist and lecturer at the University of Calgary. The presented works are a combination of graphic art and textile design, which is also a strong point of the education at our Academy. The brilliant exhibition presented at the Kobro Gallery highlighted the idea of the convergence of these two fields of art.

One of the main events was also the conference devoted to the relations between the early and the modern avant-garde. It was entitled *The Avant-garde and the avant-gardes*, because one of its aims was to consider whether we can refer to the art of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century using the term “avant-garde”. This issue requires both theoretical and historical reflection.

The conference was accompanied by the exhibition *The Avant-garde and the avant-gardes*, which evidences an interesting dialogue between generations. It can be seen at the Kobro Gallery, the Academy of Fine Arts in Łódź. It is curated by Professor Monika Krygier, Professor Wojciech Leder and Professor Grzegorz Sztabiński.

We have also interested our students in the topic of the avant-garde, organising a student contest entitled *Hommage à l'Avant-garde*. The results of the contest are presented at the Gallery Hol.

Prof. dr hab. Jolanta Rudzka-Habisiak  
Rector of the Strzemiński Academy of Arts in Łódź



## THE DEPARTMENT OF ART HISTORY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ŁÓDŹ AND THE RESEARCH INTO THE AVANT-GARDE MOVEMENT

This year's centenary of the avant-garde is one of those occasions which make us reflect on the history of the institutions related more or less directly to various forms of artistic activity. In Łódź, they are three such institutions concerned with different aspects of art and art education, bound together by common interests, focusing on the efforts of artists, curators, art critics, and art historians. Obviously, for chronological reasons, the first one to be mentioned is the Museum of Art in Łódź. The genesis of this institution springs from the initiative of the members of the a.r. group, particularly Władysław Strzemiński, to assemble a collection of the works of foreign avant-garde artists. We need to emphasize the outstanding quality of this collection, which from the very beginning included the works of the major artists of world renown. The second link is the Academy of Fine Arts, the co-organizer of our meeting. Its establishment in 1945 crowned the long-time efforts of the local artistic community. An important moment for this school was the opening, one year later, of the Faculty of Spatial Arts, headed by Władysław Strzemiński. The third element of the triad is the Department of Art History at the University of Łódź.

Reflection on contemporary art, with particular emphasis on the phenomena connected with the avant-garde, is a natural area of interest in Łódź academic research. The University of Łódź was established in 1945, in the heroic period of post-war enthusiasm, also accompanied by great uncertainty. The uniqueness of the Łódź academic scene consisted in the boldness of creating it from scratch, originally combining very different research attitudes. Similar boldness had been at the base of the creation of Łódź as an industrial metropolis. Experimentation and innovation were an inherent part of the short history of this large urban centre. Academic institutions were born in Łódź in a similar spirit.

In the spring of 1945, the task of organizing the art history department at the University of Łódź was entrusted to Professor Waclaw Husarski and Professor Mieczysław Wallis<sup>1</sup>. They were extraordinary personages, with diverse interests and experience. In the pre-war period, Husarski was an associate professor of the Independent Polish University [Wolna Wszechnica Polska]. His experience included research in art history (he had written his habilitation thesis in this

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<sup>1</sup> W. Nowakowska, *W stronę nowoczesności - historia sztuki na Uniwersytecie Łódzkim*, in: *Dzieje historii sztuki w Polsce. Kształtowanie się instytucji naukowych w XIX i XX wieku*, ed. A.S. Labuda, Poznańskie Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Nauk, Poznań 1996 p. 266.

field), practice as a painter (he was a member of the Rytm group) and as an art critic. Similarly varied passions characterized Professor Wallis, a graduate of the Universities of Warsaw and Heidelberg, who combined the interests of an art historian and a philosopher with the practice of an art critic and theorist. The diverse and complementary experiences of those scholars determined the innovative character of the Łódź department. The team unconstrained by the limitations of earlier academic tradition was fully open to new contemporary phenomena. This seemed natural in the context of the lively artistic tradition of the pre-war avant-garde. The interest in its study was also smuggled into the Department's founding assumptions by Marian Minich, invited to work as a lecturer. This talented art historian, a graduate of Jan Kazimierz University in Lviv, long-time pre-war and post war director of the Art Museum in Łódź, had played an important role in the development of the Museum's collection of avant-garde art, and the promotion of "difficult" modern art<sup>2</sup>. Thus, at the very inception of the Łódź art history department, traditional art history uniquely intermingled with aesthetics, art criticism and art theory, which interestingly coincided in some cases with the faculty's artistic practice. An important complement to this constellation was a course in museology and curatorship. From the contemporary perspective, this combination seems to be natural and obvious. However, we need to remember that in the realities of the second half of the 1940s it seemed truly innovative. Juxtaposition of the historical and the contemporary, as well as the introduction, at the very beginning, of aesthetics and art criticism into the curriculum of the institution focusing on art history, was undoubtedly pioneering and modern<sup>3</sup>. Thanks to Professor Wallis, this curriculum remained an important determinant of the directions of research in the Department of Art History, even after its formal closure after 1952. Interest in modern and contemporary art, including the avant-garde, thus became an essential part of the Łódź model of teaching art history. It was characterised by conflating the interests of art historians, art practitioners, theorists, critics, and curators. An interesting confirmation of the validity and attractiveness of this model was the donation of several hundred of most recent publications devoted to 20<sup>th</sup>-century art to the department by the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which took place in the 1960s. At the time, such an initiative did consolidate the only art history department in Poland that specialized in educating the historians of modern and contemporary art, with particular emphasis on the avant-garde.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> P. Kurc-Maj, „Teoria widzenia” Władysława Strzemińskiego i „O nową organizację muzeów sztuki” Mariana Minicha, czyli jak patrzeć na sztukę in: *Acta Artis. Studia ofiarowane profesor Wandzie Nowakowskiej*, ed. A. Pawłowska, E. Jedlińska, K. Stefański, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź 2016, pp. 125-151.

<sup>3</sup> Cf.: E. Gieysztor-Miłobędzka, *Warszawski Instytut Sztuki* in: *Dzieje historii sztuki w Polsce*, p. 261.

<sup>4</sup> E. Jedlińska, *Profesor Wanda Nowakowska*, [in:] *Profesor Wanda Nowakowska*, “Sylwetki Łódzkich Uczonych”, Zeszyt 118, ed. E. Jedlińska, Łódzkie Towarzystwo Naukowe, Łódź 2015 p. 20.

The combination of interest in art theory and aesthetics with the traditional field of research of art historians was upheld in subsequent years. This duality may also be found in the research of the student and continuator of Mieczysław Wallis, Professor Wanda Nowakowska. In the beginning of her academic career, she was more inclined towards art theory and aesthetics, and it was only later that she decided to pursue research into modern painting<sup>5</sup>. Professor Nowakowska had been a long-time head of the Institute of Art History at the University of Warsaw. Thanks to her energy and unusual organizational skills, the Department regained its formal status at the University of Łódź. Full re-activation of the Department took place in 1992, and one of the most important arguments for its revival and its main goal outlined on this occasion was the research into contemporary art, with special focus on the collections of the Art Museum and the activities of the Łódź artistic community affiliated with the Academy of Fine Arts. Glancing through the list of the faculty members of the revived institution, we can see a continuation of the principles governing art history research in Łódź as early as in 1945. Apart from the researchers engaging in traditionally practiced art history, a number of other present and former lecturers have pursued research into art theory and aesthetics. This is most characteristic of the academic activity of Professor Grzegorz Sztabiński<sup>6</sup>, a long-time lecturer at the revived department, who successfully combines deep aesthetic-theoretical reflection with artistic practice. It is also true of other former lecturers at the department, Professor Ryszard Hunger and Professor Ryszard Kluszczyński. In the 1990s, the academic staff also included the curator Janina Ładnowska, who introduced the students to museology and curatorship. The interdisciplinary profile of the department, which can be regarded as unique to it, is upheld by the younger researchers open to the most recent artistic phenomena, including Professor Eleonora Jedlińska, Professor Aneta Pawłowska, and Dr Paulina Sztabińska.<sup>7</sup> The ideas of the avant-garde and its contemporary manifestations play an important role in those researchers' academic work. Inquiry into modern and contemporary art, with a special focus on the avant-garde movements, remains one of the most important directions of research at the Łódź Department of Art History, and these interests naturally translate into didactic activity.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 41-42.

<sup>6</sup> G. Sztabiński, *Dlaczego geometria? Problemy współczesnej sztuki geometrycznej*, wyd. Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź 2004; Idem, *Inne idee awangardy. Wspólnota, wolność, autorytet*, Neriton, Warszawa 2011.

<sup>7</sup> E. Jedlińska, *Sztuka po Holocauście*, Tygiel Kultury, Łódź 2001; idem, *Polska sztuka współczesna w amerykańskiej krytyce artystycznej w latach 1984-2002*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź 2005; A. Pawłowska, *Pro Arte. Monografia grupy warszawskich artystów 1922-1932*, Wydawnictwo Neriton Warszawa 2006; P. Sztabińska, *Geometria a natura. Polska sztuka abstrakcyjna w drugiej połowie XX wieku*, Neriton, Warszawa 2010; idem, *Sztuka geometryczna a postmodernizm*, Neriton, Warszawa 2011.

As noted above, the development and functioning of the Łódź Art History Department has been related to the exploration of this field of artistic activity from the very beginning. Its uniqueness consists in the coexistence of very different academic interests and attitudes towards artistic creation. This unusual combination is the result of establishing the department from scratch without strictly defined academic traditions, its consequent openness to new solutions, and the local tradition of avant-garde practice from the interwar period. Undoubtedly, the story of art history research in Łódź has been inseparably connected with the analysis of the artistic phenomena known as the avant-garde.

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## **SUBVERSIVE ARTISTIC STRATEGIES OF THE AVANT-GARDE AND THE CRISIS OF MODERN EXPERIENCE**

**Abstract:** The purpose of this essay is to present several important changes in the sphere of modern experience and the strategies of the neo-avant-garde which correspond to them. Subversive practices of the avant-garde, as well as the neo-avant-garde, are inscribed in the new systems of cultural functionalization, which in many of their manifestations, on the one hand, lead to the loss of art's critical potential. On the other hand, however, the potency and the staying power of the avant-garde in its new form – despite numerous declarations of its death – lie in its critical re-immersion in contemporary human experience and in preserving the tension between engagement and critical distance characteristic of the experience of late modernity. This, however, requires the reworking of the old formulas of anti-modernist protest and the fragile alliances with postmodernism.

**Keywords:** neo-avant-garde, crisis of experience, subversion, cultural functionalization, artistic criticality, new materialism, facticity of experience.

### **1. Introduction: The gambit of the avant-garde**

From the perspective of contemporary art, as well as the philosophy of art, the historical avant-garde<sup>1</sup> was a “time bomb” – a phenomenon whose impact became

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<sup>1</sup> In this text, I will be using three terms: historical avant-garde, neo-avant-garde and post-avant-garde. “Historical avant-garde” will have the meaning given to the term by Peret Bürger in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde (Theorie der Avantgarde)*, and it will include Dadaists, early Surrealists, Russian avant-garde after the October Revolution, and – with some reservations – Italian Futurism, German Expressionism, and Cubism. In Bürger's view, the hallmark of the historical avant-garde was reintegrating art into life praxis. Therefore, by adopting this hallmark, Bürger effectively excludes neo-avant-garde movements (since the 1950s). For this reason, in the case of the neo-avant-garde, which I am concerned with, I will adopt the set of meanings assigned to it by Hal Foster in his canonical work *The Return of the Real. The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*. According to his definition, the neo-avant-garde includes movements since the beginning of the 1960s, which used the strategies of the first avant-garde. According to Foster, these were: constructivist analysis of the object, photomontage, and ready-mades. Post-avant-garde – also following Foster as used in his discussion of postmodernism as a belated version of modernism – will mean the movements which employ the artistic strategies of the first avant-garde, but, at the same time, distance themselves from them on a meta-critical level.

apparent only in hindsight. Marc Jimenez dubs this hidden logic a “gambit”. It seemed fitting to begin with this term, not only because it literally means an opening, but also because it reflects the ambivalence and the paradoxes of the history of the avant-garde. In chess, a gambit is used as an opening strategy. It is a maneuver which consists in sacrificing a figure or a pawn in order to quickly move on to attack. According to Jimenez, in the interplay of the aesthetic and the cultural, the gambit was Duchamp’s gesture, which gave rise to the strategy of the avant-garde.

The first revolutionary avant-garde made the opening move on the “great chessboard” in the new play between the artistic (and in the background: aesthetic) and the cultural (and in the background: economic, political). If we are to remain faithful to Jimenez’s comparison, let us ask which of the “chess pieces” have been sacrificed. What was the price that the avant-garde had to pay for the famous (and according to Bürger – defining) collapse of the distance between art and life? Undoubtedly, it came at the cost of the idea of the autonomy of art developed in the course of the history of philosophical aesthetics that found its confirmation in the artistic practices of the preceding periods. It also paid with aesthetic differentiation and its criteria related to philosophical premises, as well as the formula of aesthetic and artistic criticality as an established form of distribution and management of the space of artistic practices. Duchamp’s gambit ushered in a new way of employing these practices, however, at the price of the old formulas of artistic autonomy and aesthetic criticality. Still, it is important to note that these were old formulas.

The gambit of the avant-garde was not only an intentional move on the part of a lone, genius chess player, but, in a sense, a strategy imposed by the collective subject – as much an act of freedom and protest as a gesture symptomatic of the process underlying its emergence; and by this we mean the processes of the aesthetic being absorbed by the cultural. The avant-garde, as well as neo-avant-garde, subversive practices inscribe themselves in the new systems of cultural functionalization, which in many of their manifestations, undeniably, led to the loss of art’s critical potential.

However, there is an intrinsic ambivalence to the delayed effect of the “gambit strategy” – it is both destructive (the dissolution of the principles which served as a foundation of the traditional, autonomous and critical “art world”), and constructive in its nature. The potency and the staying power of the avant-garde in its new form – despite numerous declarations of its death – lie in its critical re-immersion in contemporary human experience and in preserving the tension between engagement and critical distance characteristic of the experience of late modernity. This, however, requires the reworking of the old formulas of anti-modernist protest and fragile alliances with postmodernism. As both neo-avant-garde and post-avant-garde art with their automatism are facing the prospect of their own defeat, and philosophical aesthetics is attempting to examine the

forementioned functionalization, new sources of artistic expression, criticality and influence are found in the very image of their defeat. These new forms of the avant-garde touch the “last line of defence” that art has against cultural and institutional functionalization – its irreducible ontological autonomy and the irreducible basis of human experiences. They demonstrate the power of resistance, which constitutes the line of defence of the facticity of aesthetic experience. In other words, the artists who are known today as the post-avant-garde and the neo-avant-garde give testimony to the contemporary way of experiencing the world by the virtue of their participation in this experience as understanding and self-critical agents.

The nature of the dominant subversive strategies in neo-avant-garde art requires us, by way of introduction, to expand our view to include philosophical analyses concerning the condition of the experience of the late modern subject, albeit briefly. On the one hand, it is pointed out that the concept of experience has a primordial character and belongs to everyday language<sup>2</sup>, and therefore it is impossible to eliminate the word from the register of elementary, colloquial articulations of our contacts with the world. On the other hand, however – following Simmel, Benjamin, or Adorno – the state of the late modern culture has been diagnosed as a nexus of conditions which lead to the waning, decay, or even loss of the meaning of experience. The emphasis is on the rupture between experience and lived-experience (*Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis* in Dilthey’s terminology) as a consequence of economic and social transformations (Simmel). The conception of experience as *Erfahrung* tends to highlight such important aspects of experience as its inherent relationship with sensory perception, and thus – the experiential and sensual level of cognition, its belonging to the sphere of cognition (Kant), the cumulative, often progressive nature of this cognitive process seen as filling out of a whole in time, which allows us to conceptualize this process in terms of learning. Such cognition/learning, however, is not free from the risk of error as new elements are being included in the sphere of the known and the practically tamed. This understanding of the ideal of *Erfahrung* was employed in the descriptions of modern culture by, for example, Dilthey, Husserl (phenomenology in general) or Dewey, and even Gadamer.

At the same time, philosophers such as Dilthey, Buber, and Benjamin write of the opposition between *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*<sup>3</sup>. Experience as lived-experience (*Erlebnis*) loses the character of a cumulatively complemented whole, and thus both its foothold in tradition (epistemic, cultural) and its subordination to the conceptual model of cognition. It pertains to a sphere which precedes conceptual

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. J.W. Scott, *The Evidence of Experience*, “Critical Inquiry” 1991, vol. 17, no 4.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. M. Jay, *Songs of Experience. Modern American and European Variation on a Universal Theme*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 2005, pp. 9-12.

cognitive objectivization, one that is socially communicable and intersubjectively conveyable. It is something direct, personal and pre-reflective. The shift of the modern formula of experience in the direction of insular, conceptually unmediated experience of the world – although indispensable and understandable in view of the cultural and philosophical opposition against the dominance of the epistemic model – remains a concern among philosophers. Is consensual solidarity possible given the state of affairs? Is it possible to preserve continuity of experience, implement the idea of *Bildung* together with its inherent post-Enlightenment project of improvement?

It enables both the lamentation, which we encountered in the introduction, that “experience” (in one of the senses of *Erfahrung*) is no longer possible and the apparently contradictory claim that we now live in a veritable “experience society” (*Erlebnisgesellschaft*)<sup>4</sup>. It allows us both to “appeal” to experience, as if it were always a thing in the past, and to “hunger” for it, as if it were something that one might enjoy in the future.<sup>5</sup>

The above observation aptly captures the ambivalence of modernity’s attitude towards experience and sets up the stage for the discussion of aesthetic experience in relation to the avant-garde. It would seem that the failure of the projects aimed at piecing experience back together (e.g. within communicative understanding, as is the case with Apple or Habermas) serves as a foundation for subversive artistic practices, which may be viewed as an artistic substitute of such projects. They offer a model of experience as oscillation between consensus and dissensus, communication and breaking its rules in favour of the idiomatic and the inarticulable. This model situates the phenomenon of the death of art in an interminable loop, which follows the logic of an “endless ending”. The moment of breaking with the traditional formula of art – the point of dissensus and the disruption of the rules of aesthetic communication is in a certain sense invalidated as it is absorbed by the cultural consensus, which, paradoxically, preserves it and endlessly renews it. As Octavio Paz aptly notes, “the tradition of the break encompasses not only the negation of tradition, but also the negation of that very break”<sup>6</sup>.

The purpose of this essay is to point out several important (in my view) strategies of the neo-avant-garde which led to some shifts in the modes of experiencing the world established by modernity, and which, at the same time, evidence the transformations taking place in the sphere of the late modern experience. I will indicate certain tendencies, not aspiring to present a comprehensive review of neo-avant-garde subversions.

<sup>4</sup> M. Jay, whom I quote here, refers to the statement of Gerhard Schulze from *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft: Kultursoziologie der Gegenwart*, Frankfurt 1992.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>6</sup> O. Paz, *Point de convergence*, Paris, Gallimard, 1976, p. 13.

## 2. Towards new materiality

The uncrossable line of resistance of the experience of facticity<sup>7</sup> in neo-avant-garde art has been described by many authors. There are two possible directions of interpretation – one developed by Lyotard, where the Kantian category of the sublime is reformulated with reference to Newman’s monochromes in his famous essay “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde” and in his book *L’Inhumain* in reference to the fascination of the artists of late modernity with “pure materiality” (*matière immatérielle*), from Symbolism through Futurism. The common denominator that allows Lyotard to construct this analogy is touching the boundary of the visible and the representable or conceptualizable in language. This interpretation (especially in the second text) is interesting as it signals a trend in the philosophical analyses of avant-garde art which involves exploring Kant’s category of the sublime in order to give new meaning to the term “material,” and which, according to such authors Lyotard or de Man (we could also include here Rancière and Derrida), desubstantializes the metaphysical idea of matter in favour of its understanding as “pure difference”. Here is how Jacques Rancière interprets Lyotard’s idea from *L’Inhumain*:

First, matter is *pure difference*. By this is meant a difference that is not determined by any set of conceptual determinations, such as timbre or nuance, the singularity of which stands in contrast to the play of differences and determinations that which govern musical composition or the harmony of colours. Lyotard gives this irreducible material difference an unexpected name: he calls it ‘immateriality’.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> The meaning of the term “facticity” which I adopt here differs from its everyday use. I emphasize such properties of factual life as self-sufficiency, originary nature, and turning towards oneself in a practical dimension, its non-reflexive and a-theoretical character, which does not involve meaninglessness. Factual life is always directed towards the future and motivated by the past. It is a structure defined by new references to the future and the past; a nexus of motives and directions, which determine its sense. This sense, however, is not theoretical or predicative. Understanding the phenomenon of factual life comes in contact with what is hidden from intuition of objects, which is a sense rather than a meaning. This sense becomes accessible in the matter of sensory experience, in the reanimation of the living presence of meaning in the sensual. This dimension of the facticity of life, which is made accessible to us by artists, corresponds to the term *aisthesis*. Thanks to aesthetic experience, in particular – thanks to the experience of art – we can “touch” sense. This is because aesthetic experience transposes and extracts from semantic and symbolic sedimentations the original sensory and spatial “architectonics” of sense. What is at stake here, above all, is the internal dynamics of temporality and spatiality characteristic of the experience of the facticity of life as well as aesthetic experience and the expansiveness of aesthetic experience related to this dynamics, which increasingly appropriates the non-aesthetic.

<sup>8</sup> J. Rancière, *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, trans. Steven Corcoran, Polity Press, Cambridge, Malden 2009, pp. 90-91.

Let us emphasize that we are not talking here about a quality that can be perceived by the senses, but an irreducible event of passion [*d'une passion*] – what Lyotard calls *aistheton* – and at the same time pure materiality and a “sign”. However, it is a sign in its trans-semiological sense; it refers to the reality of feeling in which the event of pure materiality acquires an affective sense. I will further add that it becomes part of our immersion in the facticity of the experience of life – affective, event-like, situated in time and space, unfolding between expectation and mourning, hope and melancholy. For Lyotard, art, in particular avant-garde art, as it constitutes its specific world of sensuality, described above, is doomed to dissensus. The inherent “tragedy of dissensus” is not alienation, as in e.g. Adorno’s view; it is not related to the strategy typical of the functioning of capitalist societies, which consists in isolating aesthetic experience for the purpose of its political, economic, and cultural functionalization. Lyotard speaks of a more fundamental dissensus inherent in the human condition. The avant-garde, which is particularly laden with this dissensuality, is more than “a child of its times – an epoch torn apart by contradictions and subjected to various forms of alienation.” Its potential also has universal value. On this point, Lyotard’s views are close to Merleau-Ponty’s, although he maintains a polemical and critical distance.

Paul de Man is another philosopher who refers to Kant’s concept of the sublime. In his *Aesthetic Ideology*, he writes – similarly to Lyotard – about the kind of experiences characterized by the impossibility of giving them meaning, about essentially a-meaningful experiences of the “material”. The irreducible line of resistance of our experience of the world against meaning, to which contemporary art gives expression, constitutes the boundary of the “material”. If the experience of the material does not consist in – as in Greenberg’s view – the modernist turn of art towards its means of representation, but rather in touching the boundaries of representation and meaning, then it becomes an important evaluative category of our contemporary experience of the world in general. It inscribes itself in the broadly understood social, cultural, and political processes of gradual loss of meanings inherited from the Western tradition (and in consequence its beliefs and ideology), that has been already “plowed over” and nihilistically reworked by postmodernist theoretical and artistic practices.

### 3. The problematic return to reality

In the above context, Hal Foster’s analyses of neo-avant-garde art in *The Return of the Real* seem particularly convincing. This art is not so much about engaging in a debate with mimetism – as this would impose an understanding of reality inherent in the Western strategy of representation – but rather about being reality. In other words, in reference to the earlier remarks, it deals with participating in the facticity of experience, together with its trauma, pain, joy, expectations, as well as events of “pure materiality”. Foster notes that “This shift in conception – from

reality as an effect of representation to the real as a thing of trauma – may be definitive in contemporary art, let alone in contemporary theory, fiction, and film.”<sup>9</sup>

The American scholar calls Surrealism “traumatic realism,” to which Pop-art displays many similarities. In this respect, his analyses of Warhol’s works, in particular his paintings from the *Death of America* series, are especially convincing. Using Lacanian tools and his own understanding of the category of the Real, he shows that in Warhol’s work, the Real tears down the veil of repetition, which results in the subject being “touched” by the painting. This touch is analyzed in reference to Roland Barthes’ “punctum”. However, in Warhol’s case, the “punctum” resides not in the detail, but in the repeated “explosions” of the painting. The traumatic effect of the impossibility of making the subject whole again (I will add: the impossibility of obtaining a wholeness of experience, described by philosophers from Dilthey to Benjamin, and expanded by Lacan’s psychoanalysis) and the various ways of referencing the Real are also characteristic of the continuations of Pop-art; it resounds in some examples of Hyperrealism, e.g. Duane Hanson and John de Andrea, the art of appropriation, or in contemporary illusionism). As for the last one, Foster points to such artists as Robert Gober, Charles Ray, Matthew Barney, Katarina Fritch, Mike Kelley, and Anette Messager<sup>10</sup>.

A large portion of contemporary art, especially anti-representational art, cuts off the umbilical cord of metaphysical obligations and in its unfulfillable longing to touch the Real and the pursuit of immediacy of experience, at the same time upholds the idea of truth/authenticity. However, as in the first avant-garde, e.g. in the case of Artaud, although contemporary neo-avant-garde’s “return of the real” undermines the principles of representation and pushes its limits, it is unable to completely depart from it. Simultaneously, it often assumes a form of aesthetic exclusivism, which is least critical of its own assumptions and philosophical affiliations.

One significant example is the exhibition which took place in 2016 at Warsaw Zachęta Gallery, where the exhibited works (e.g. a series of canvases soaked in secretions from dissection tables, a piece showing a drastic injury to the artist’s teeth, an image of sewed lips) affect our senses and neurological system as a shock, causing the spectator to experience suffering, pain, fear, and disgust. They also involve a dose of unhealthy fascination, which certainly has a lot to do with the awareness that we are dealing with something that is exhibited, and not real (analogically, Kant writes about fascinating, sublime natural phenomena, which are viewed from a safe distance). The question is whether this fascination – to announce the direction of our further argumentation – is the combination

<sup>9</sup> H. Foster, *The Return of the Real. The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England 1996, p. 146.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*

of immersion in an experience and distance from participating in it so coveted by artists and aestheticians? Is the aesthetic distance not pulled into the game taking place on another, different, invisible stage that is hidden from our view?

Lacoue-Labarthe<sup>11</sup> – following Nietzsche and Freud – quite aptly notes that art’s attempts to pierce the veil of the devalued, phantom-like “truth” of reality to reach what is true, even if it were to be a shock therapy at the price of suffering (pain and abnegation), will never be sufficiently radical. It “never *presents*, as such, the suffering that it (re)presents (*darstellt*), but on the contrary presupposes a space of derealization, if you will, circumscribed in advance and thanks to which the ‘deepest pathos’ is in fact never anything but *aesthetic play*”. In a world that is conceived of as – following Nietzsche – “an aesthetic phenomenon”, “the suffering itself becomes ecstasy” under which the pain of the aesthetic experience (the thing that is unpleasant, evokes fear, repulsion or disgust, the repressed) is rewarded with an “additional profit,” a “bonus” that is a masochistic satisfaction. In this view, the kind of art whose examples I have mentioned above – triggers a conflict between the conscious and the repressed source of suffering inscribed in neurosis and becomes a psychopathological case. As a result of the dilution of the mimetic moment, the spectator is pulled into a game which contains a blind spot – a moment of risk, loss, or – in different terms – the subject of experience losing him-/herself in something that is arranged by an artist and that surpasses it.

Paraphrasing Nietzsche: If the world is a representation (a fairy-tale), then an escape from its phantom-like truth into an artistic idea of authenticity may mean not the destruction of its scene, but rather its displacement: The “truth” of thus understood artistic authenticity will play out on a primordial scene by the forces which escape the very formula of understanding. The moment of aesthetic exposition is far from being a safe position for a distanced spectator, as Kant or Schiller would have it (especially in de Man’s interpretation from *Aesthetic Ideology*).

It is not the same critical subject who used to lift the “veil of Maya,” denounce accepted forms of validity, expose the mechanism of the theatricalisation of their experience. Rather, the subject him-/herself becomes a place-scene (primordial scene as Freud would say) of a struggle between the forces of the economy of ecstasy and the death drive.

The moment of masochistic, reverse pleasure, which forces us to experience these works “regardless,” seems to deliver us, in Freud’s view, into the hands of the death drive. The aforementioned works do not belong to classical representation. They happen in a space “between libido and death”; they are exhibited, but at the same time they break with the principle of representation. “The death drive works in silence; the whole commotion of life emanates from Eros” notes Labarthe.

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Ph. Lacoue-Labarthe, *The Subject of Philosophy*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, London 1993, p. 105.

#### 4. Ontology versus ideology; thing versus meaning

In order to place the above conceptions in the most current context, let me mention one of the many contemporary publications which raise the question of the relation between the disillusionment as to the rebirth of the declining systems of meanings (and the related axiological systems) and the contemporary turn of the artists towards materiality (as well as embodiment and affect) as the limit of the signifier/representable: Walter Ben Michaels's book entitled *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History* (2004). The book was written under the impression of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, and given today's pressing problem of terrorist attacks, it appears especially relevant and provides additional context for the above-mentioned problems of "materiality" in contemporary art and the interest of contemporary artists, in particular performative artists, in corporeality.

We are bound to agree with the view expressed in the book that "the point of the war on terrorism is to imagine a world no longer divided by the conflicting beliefs of ideologies or conflicting interests of nations" (p. 172). In their book *Imperium* (2005), Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri – stimulated by the need to react to terrorism – raise an important issue of the discourse of globalization, where the talk of wars between ideologies and beliefs is replaced by the talk about defending life, and discourse on political conflict is replaced by talking about a biopolitical conflict (by the way this mutation of discourses is substantiated more broadly than just by the reaction against the terrorism of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, as convincingly argued by Giorgio Agamben). The view that metaphysical tradition has exhausted itself constitutes the broadest philosophical dimension of Michaels's thought, which brings it close to the "weak thought" of hermeneutic philosophy and postmodernism that originated with Nietzsche. In this discourse – mutated under the influence of world wars and terrorism – in place of beliefs we are dealing with needs and desires, and in place of ideas – with bodies. Thus, an artistic statement, e.g. of a Minimalist, aims at transforming a text into a thing, transforming meaning as an object of understanding into a thing or event as an object of experience. In short, in Michaels's own words: "Ideologies are replaced by ontology in terrorism discourse."<sup>12</sup> Therefore, if we can postulate today any form of universality as a weapon against terrorism, it cannot be a universality of beliefs, but rather "a potential universality of desire" or "commonality" as postulated by Judith Butler<sup>13</sup>. Michaels concludes that "the words you write with your own blood testify to your presence without needing to signify it."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> W.B. Michaels. *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford 2004, p. 177.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. J. Butler, E. Laclau, S. Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, London: Verso, 2000; In *The Shape of the Signifier*, Michaels also subjects his views to a critical reconstruction, to which the reader may refer. I do not summarize it here, as it is outside the scope of the present inquiry.

<sup>14</sup> W.B. Michaels, *The Shape of...*, p. 182.

## 5. Rhetorization of cultural reality: ideology versus politics

The traumatizing unattainability of the real present in neo-avant-garde art is compensated in a twofold way: either by the above mentioned preservation of the idea of authenticity as immediate experience of life (whose blind spot is succumbing to Tanatos) or by rhetorization, perspectivism and interpretationism. This poses two dangers to the neo-avant-garde: those of losing itself in “pure authenticity” of experience, or losing itself in the realm of phantasms and delusion.

The second path is one of the progressive rhetorization of modern culture. The shifts we observe in this sphere lead to the fictionalization of philosophical truth and the collapse of the stability of its discourse. As for philosophy, this is the path taken not only by Nietzsche, but also by Vattimo, Lacoue-Labarthe, Žižek/Lacan and Paul de Man.

Vattimo – following Nietzsche – calls metaphysical discourse a fairy tale. This fairy-tale quality of the philosophical story spun by the West is discussed at length by Lacoue-Labarthe. Truth is replaced by rhetorics, which orients itself towards the linguistic nature of its own practice. De Man emphasizes that this process leads to a situation in which philosophy no longer reveals the truth, but produces it. Lacoue-Labarthe speaks of excessive and self-reflexive character of rhetorical representation. The above situation – embedded in the broader processes of the erosion of metaphysical foundations – not only tints the rhetorical character of philosophical discourse with phantasmal shades of rhetoric, but does the same to the culture of late modernity. Late modern art points to itself as representation without a ground, it “plays” with illusions of reference. The rule of fiction means the birth of *homo politicus* as Labarthe excellently shows in his discussion on producing politics as a work of art in the Nazi practice, which involved manufacturing a phantasmal “reality of a dream”.

Thus, according to Foster<sup>15</sup>, both the art of appropriation and *site-specific* works (e.g. by such artists as Fred Wilson or Andrea Fraser) take part in a game with the processes of “institutional coding of art and artifacts”. They show “how objects are translated into historical evidence and/or cultural exempla, invested with value, and cathected by viewers”<sup>16</sup>. They perform a peculiar deconstruction, de-fictionalization of established positions and hierarchies, and, at the same time, cooperate with institutions (such as museums) in constructing and upholding new fictions. Foster rightly sees these activities as a fraud of cynical reason, “in which artist and institution have it both ways – retain the social status of art and entertain the moral purity of critique.”<sup>17</sup> One other example of such strategy is Situationist *détournement*, or practices of demontage and montage – characteristic

<sup>15</sup> Cf. H. Foster, *The Return of...*, p. 195.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 196.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 196.

also of the historical avant-garde – which use old, existing artistic elements, take them out of their context and incorporate them in a new whole.

Another example of a subversive strategy which results in shifts towards the rhetorization of culture (in consequence – dangerously exposes it to yet another mythization and ideologization) is the idealization and mythization of the category of the Other – a peculiar “passe-partout” of political correctness and moral righteousness. On the one hand, the movement and the artistic phenomena on the side of the discriminated Otherness<sup>18</sup> substantiate the regulative idea of cultural equality (democratization of culture), but on the other hand it is lined – as Hal Foster aptly notes – with its rhetorical reversal, which often leads to privileging the new, discriminated definition of cultural identity, and thus paradoxically subverts the idea of democratic equality.

## 6. Towards a new sense of artistic criticality

The turn towards the critical, or maybe merely rebellious, meaninglessness that is antithetical to the meanings of the Western culture, towards the a-semantic, non-sensical, corporeal, desire-able, material, which characterized the first avant-garde in Dadaism, Surrealism, with Artaud at its helm, in line with the “logic of the gambit” became a part of some of the contemporary varieties of the avant-garde (for example, Minimalism) and acquired new meaning in the context outlined by the above-mentioned authors. New meaning was also bestowed upon the old, early-modern (reinforced and ideologized by Romanticism) opposition between the aesthetic (emotional, sensual), and the cultural (communicable, rational, governing the rules of social and political regulation). The escape into meaninglessness, into a revolt against the established meanings and narrations became part of the defense of the autonomy of the aesthetic against the pressures of the cultural.

One unwanted result, as in the case of Dadaism and Surrealism, was the effacement of the critical dimension of this kind of artistic protests. Thus, threats to the criticality of the avant-garde came from two directions: from the side of an overly radical break with meanings and values inscribed in the Western tradition (which endangered the criteria of differentiation and evaluation in the sphere of art) and from the side of the mechanisms of the cultural assimilation of the artistic.

The new avant-garde – in its relation to technological and civilizational changes, as well as the development of mechanism of top-down cultural and social regulation – made it even more exposed to the above dangers. Today’s criticism

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 178,179; Foster support his view with Franco Rella’s claim, who critically distances himself from Lacan, Foucault, Deleuze, Guattari in *The Myth of the Other*, that idealization of otherness often results not only in the effacement of differences, but also politicization: the privileging of a designated entity.

– as noted by Hal Foster – is also subject to these mechanisms of top-down regulation. He asks, therefore:

what is the place of criticism in a visual culture that is evermore administered – from an art world dominated by promotional players with scant need for criticism, to a media world of communication-and-entertainment corporations with no interest whatsoever? And what is the place of criticism in a political culture that is evermore affirmative – especially in the midst of culture wars (...)? Of course this situation makes the old services of criticism ever more urgent as well.<sup>19</sup>

Lyotard and Jimenez<sup>20</sup> write about the avant-garde – especially its later incarnations – as a playground of anonymous institutional, economic, and political forces. Duchamp's deferred gesture entails a cold calculation of the machinery of differentiation, which functions outside the criteria of style, taste, and feeling. In a sense, the gesture prefigures the paradoxical condition of contemporary art: it is something that belongs to the past and at the same time something that is current in the highest degree. In the case of Jimenez – who clearly remains under the influence of Adorno – there appears a new related context which defines the peculiar situation of the neo- and post-avant-garde art, namely the historical context which introduces a discussion with the teleological, Hegelian version of the theme of the death of art. It is an important characteristic feature of many contemporary continuators of the avant-garde: on the auto-thematic and meta-critical level, they feed on celebrating its own end as art as something that is determined by the history of Western representation.

However, this applies not only to the avant-garde. Late modern art in general is experiencing an “endless ending,” which makes it a particularly potent ground for the Hegelian motif of the death of art in its new version (one extreme example is Arthur Danto's theory, for whom the ready-made is a necessary moment of a teleologically oriented logic of history, in which art is preparing for philosophy, until it cedes its place). According to such theoreticians as Danto, Nelson Goodman, Martin Seel, and Christoph Menke, only challenging art in late modernity allows us to understand the sense of the meta-critical mechanism inscribed in the readymade. Duchamp's work is a meta-criticism of its own failure as a mimetic project; its artistic identity is constituted in the face of this failure as an expression of the critical distance towards mimetic expectations inherent in Western metaphysics. As Marc Jimenez rightly points out<sup>21</sup>, Adorno, in his

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. xv.

<sup>20</sup> F. Lyotard, *Les transformateurs Duchamps, Galilee, Paris 1977*; M. Jimenez, *La critique. Crise de l'art ou consensus culturel?*, Paris, Klincksieck 1995.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. M. Jimenez, *Ibid.*, p. 31.

concern about the fate of the avant-garde, infers that the cause of its failure was the loss of its role as a positive or negative mediator between the rationality of social totality and individual sensitivity. According to the French philosopher, late modernity is torn between the ideological promises of consensus and the conflicted reality of particular interests.

## 7. Conclusions

Subversiveness is an intrinsic feature of contemporary neo-avant-garde art. However, it requires a reinterpretation of contemporary experience on the level of reflection, in whose sphere all the forms of contention against a unifying and violent consensus are absorbed and upheld. Rainer Rochlitz ironically notes that the subversiveness of contemporary art reveals itself only when it appeals in this way to social consensus and profits from it. The upholding of the established order by neo-capitalism also takes place by way of stimulating the consumption of cultural goods, and thus by “opening the doors” to the heroes of the new avant-garde and its theoreticians. In this manner, subversion is subsidized by the establishment.<sup>22</sup> Concern for the autonomy of art in the age of the cultural absorption of the aesthetic by neo-capitalist culture acquires a cynical dimension that many neo-avant-garde artists are aware of.<sup>23</sup>

The processes of cultural democratization have a unifying potential – they mask opposition and conflicts, ruptures, nullify the criteria of criticism and differentiation (e.g. between art and non-art; good and poor works of art). These processes are fostered by the mass media revolution, which – as noted by Jimenez<sup>24</sup> – makes us unable to differentiate between fiction and reality. The space of the net is easily governed and manipulated, which deepens the chasm between its initiators and managers and the manipulated participants; between specialists with appropriate competences and the wide audience of the public media.

Following Adorno, Jimenez views artistic criticism as adopting the role of an alibi for the processes of cultural democratization, as otherwise – if it does not serve this role – it is doomed to perdition.<sup>25</sup> Here, the aesthetic and the cultural depart from each other. The results of aesthetic analysis remain in disagreement with the cultural image of a work of art or an artistic event. However, we may conclude that this discord does not necessarily mean that the aesthetic “falls into culture” (resp. politics, economy). Contemporary theorists of the neo-avant-garde do not always inscribe it into a rhetoric of failure, unfulfillable longing for what

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. R. Rochlitz, *Subversion et subvention. Art contemporain et argumentation esthétique*, Paris, Gallimard 1994.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. H. Foster, *The Return of...*, Chapter “The Art of Cynical Reason”.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. M. Jimenez, *Ibid.* pp. 37-38.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. T.W. Adorno, *Prismes. Critique de la culture et société*, Payot, Paris 1986.

was lost (as in the case of Adorno, or partially Benjamin), but they also note its constructive, critical, and reflective aspect: contemporary avant-garde significantly contributes to the condition of our self-awareness as the subjects of the late modern processes. The postulate of aesthetic sovereignty becomes a postulate to free human capacities in the face of the expansion of institutions acting in the name of the mechanisms of their functionalization and unification.

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## **SUBWERSYWNE STRATEGIE ARTYSTYCZNEJ AWANGARDY WOBEC KRYZYSU NOWOCZESNEGO DOŚWIADCZENIA (streszczenie)**

Zamierzeniem niniejszego szkicu jest wskazanie na kilka ważnych dla zmian zachodzących w polu nowoczesnego doświadczenia i odpowiadających im strategii neoawangardy. Awangardowe, jak również neoawangardowe praktyki subwersywne wpisują się w nowe systemy kulturowej funkcjonalizacji, które w ich wielu przejawach prowadzą – z jednej strony – do utraty potencjału krytycznego sztuki. Jednakże z drugiej strony siła oddziaływania i moc przetrwania awangardy w nowej formule, wbrew licznym konstatacjom jej śmierci, po przepracowaniu dawnych formuł jej anty-modernistycznego protestu i kruchych przymierzach z postmodernizmem, tkwi w jej ponownym, krytycznym zanurzeniu się w doświadczeniach współczesnego człowieka. W przechowywaniu przez nią napięcia między zaangażowaniem i krytycznym dystansem cechującego późnonowoczesne doświadczenie.

**Słowa kluczowe:** neoawangarda, kryzys doświadczenia, subwersja, kulturowa funkcjonalizacja, krytycyzm artystyczny, nowa materialność, faktyczność doświadczenia.



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## AVANT-GARDE AGAINST AVANT-GARDE

**Abstract:** In this paper, new media art, which is fundamentally associated with technology and science, will be discussed as a contemporary form of artistic avant-garde. In my argument, I will focus on its connections to earlier manifestations of avant-garde mindsets and attitudes, that is, to historical avant-garde and neo-avant-garde. I will also address the role of the art world and its institutions in establishing their mutual relationships.

**Keywords:** avant-garde, new media art, art & science, cybernetic art, robotic art, bioart, hybrot art.

The rise of avant-garde tendencies, which marked the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, profoundly transformed traditional artistic orders. The most radical changes triggered by avant-garde movements challenged the entire aesthetic system which was grounded on an explicitly defined artist-work-viewer configuration and integrated by equally precisely described creative and receptive processes. Avant-garde revolutions questioned this system as a whole (disturbing and dismantling its inner relations) as well as its individual components (problematizing and undermining all of its elements). Within avant-garde practices, the work as an original product of an artist's own effort was replaced by a ready-made object of his/her choice (as in Marcel Duchamp's readymades), a creation of nature (as in Surrealists' *l'objet trouvé*), or an artefact commissioned to be made by others (as in Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's telephone paintings). Employing such strategies, the avant-garde artists abandoned the imperative of making works-artefacts and became, instead, initiators of artistic ideas. In the art-making process, coincidence and chance came to replace technical skills and creative decision-making, which undercut the relevance of artistic identity and the role of *techné*. At the same time, viewers more and more frequently realized that they decisively contributed to the very emergence or the particular shape of the artworks they experienced. Still, both in the period of the historical avant-gardes, which thrived with particular intensity in the interwar period, and in the times of neo-avant-garde, which germinated in the late 1950s and withered at the point we are still unsuccessfully trying to agree

on, those changes neither transcended nor undermined the humanistic paradigm. Whatever form it took, art was consistently perceived as a human creation, and creativity was recognized as a distinct attribute of the human species. The inner tension, which disrupted the notion of art and its system, arose and was identified within this paradigm. This tension tended to manifest itself in the conflict between the set of concepts and phenomena forming the field of new, anti-traditionalist, and innovative art, on the one hand, and the field of anti-art, which deconstructed both traditional artistic beliefs and the pursuits of new art. As an artistic and social development, the avant-garde emerged from this inner conflict and searched for its identity in transcending it.

Of course, Duchamp's gesture, which I consider to be the founding act of the entire avant-garde paradigm, had deeper implications. His idea of the artwork as a readymade crucially posits that the artwork and, likewise, art as such and its concept are socially constituted. Given this, Duchamp can be viewed as clearing the path for radical constructivism and, consequently, opening up the field in which his concept could be applied beyond the confines of artistic practice. This was, nevertheless, only an indirect feat. A direct effect of Duchamp's work was only paving the way to an institutional concept of art. Duchamp's paradigm as an avant-garde paradigm established its boundaries as charting the space of the self-constituted art and remained enclosed within these boundaries. As a result, the energy was all spent on self-analysis. Art that recognizes and constitutes itself as art in transgression makes up the field of the avant-garde. And despite all their alterity and differences, I believe that this is true about both manifestations of the avant-garde: historical avant-garde and neo-avant-garde. In this model, the avant-garde paradigm has two distinct properties: the humanistic investment (anthropocentrism) and autotelic self-constitution.

This, however, changes with the onset of new media art and its chronologically first variety, that is, cybernetic art. In cybernetic art, non-humanistic parameters of artworks began to prevail in terms of both of their sources – artistic agents – and their other features. The inner avant-garde aporia as described above (new art versus anti-art) developed robustly in new media art, expanding eventually into a comprehensive complex, or network, of conflicting interrelations that stretched beyond the field of art. Nevertheless, also in new media art, the newly proposed order of art is forged in the attempts to use tensions and conflicts artistically, the only difference being that these attempts take altered forms.

Cybernetics produced a space for meaningful interactions between artistic pursuits and scientific practice – interactions developing in the context of technology (which was to develop into an environment shaped by the interplay of digital information, telecommunications, and robotic technologies). Cybernetic ideas came to be an axis for the model of artistic practice in which the arts, science, and engineering made up a system of mutual interrelations.

The development of cybernetic art was another powerful challenge to aesthetics and theory of art. Cybernetic artworks were recognized as autonomous agents, with the sources of their activity located within their own structure. Responding to the stimuli from their environments, the artefacts created by cybernetic artists engaged in performative actions both in galleries and in public spaces. In this way, the artefacts, which had boasted a stable inner organization before, mutated into events and processes. As such, they followed kinetic art in joining the category of time-based arts. More than that, the artworks behaved in unpredictable ways as they responded in real time to equally unpredictable incidents and occurrences around them. Thereby, they questioned the idea of representation specific to visual arts, ultimately abandoning it to embrace the concept of self-presentation.

The autonomy of cybernetic artworks is, of course, technical and not mental. Giving up on representation for the sake of self-presentation, cybernetic art has put a robotic perspective in place of the anthropocentric one. As it made the robot the model of an artwork, cybernetic art adopted the idea and took on the task of making life rather than presenting it. Naturally, what we encounter here is a vision of post-biological life, which entails reconsidering the humanistic standpoint, and – further – including cybernetic art in the process of building trans-humanistic orders. It means also crossing the boundaries of arts towards the technological and scientific environment, and discarding the traditional avant-garde self-interest of art for the sake of exploring transdisciplinary frameworks and hallmarks. Thus, both distinct properties of the avant-garde paradigm evoked above – anthropocentrism and autotelicity – were fundamentally questioned in cybernetic art. And this was just the beginning of a new revolution which, engulfing art, was by no means limited to art.

A direct extension, or, perhaps, transformation of cybernetic art is to be found in robotic art. The continuity, if not mutual interpenetration, of cybernetic and robotic art is strongly corroborated by their respective histories,<sup>1</sup> in which multiple pieces are recurrently ascribed to either of them, starting from such pioneering works as *CYSP I* by Nicolas Schöffer and *Senster* by Edward Ihnatowicz. This attests that the boundaries between the two fields are fluid and permeable, and some works easily fit into both artistic orders. Rather than being torn by mutual frictions, the two movements are united in being conflicted with academic and museum art, including also numerous parallel neo-avant-garde currents.

Importantly, cybernetic and robotic art constructed its identity upon its opposition to traditional art. Edward Ihnatowicz' artistic biography shows this with particular clarity, and the history of reception of Nicolas Schöffer's art is

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g. Eduardo Kac, "Robotic Art Chronology," *Convergence* 7, no 1, Spring 2001; Edward A. Shanken, "Cybernetics and Art: Cultural Convergence in the 1960s," in *From Energy to Information*, eds. Bruce Clarke and Linda Dalrymple Henderson, Stanford University Press, Palo Alto 2002.

only a further testimony to it. Innatowicz began to derive satisfaction from his artistic practice only when he found a way to combine it with engineering work. And his crowning artwork *Senster* was briefly exhibited at a technical museum only to be soon disassembled and destroyed. *Senster* became part of art history when the artwork was actually no more.

At the same time, new media art started to develop in an enforced separation from the art currents traditionally defined as *avant-garde*. This split has persisted till the present day. New media art consistently develops and circulates in a separate circuit, is funded by different institutions, and is relegated by the art world to its peripheries.

The institutional separation of new media art, which gravitates towards technology and science, from art labelled as *avant-garde* is crucial to my argument. Cybernetic art and its new-media continuations have for some time now developed alongside neo-*avant-garde* art, an heir to historical *avant-gardes*. Yet, since the very beginning, the two fields, though parallel, have been disjoined. Both species of the classic *avant-garde* have slowly succumbed to museification, which seems quite extraordinary given their prior revolutionary character. Pop art, Minimalism, and Conceptualism, together with Constructivism, Futurism, and Surrealism, all started to meander their way into in museum collections. The process was, of course, prolonged and did not happen overnight, yet it has proved unstoppable. Museums became receptive to *avant-garde* currents, dismissing only selected, particular expressions of *avant-garde* art. *Avant-garde* art was inexorably becoming museum art.

This resulted in a peculiar situation. Namely, the historical *avant-garde* movements, while retaining their status and descriptions, gradually ceased to be *avant-gardes* in the functional sense of the term, within the actually practiced models of art-making. Their original position was taken by new media art, which unfolded and functioned in ways specific to erstwhile *avant-garde* movements. However, new media arts – and in particular those of their disciplines which most firmly and uncompromisingly engaged not only with technology but also with science – failed, as a rule, to be acknowledged as new forms of artistic *avant-garde* even though, given their functions, they were undoubtedly embodiments of the *avant-garde*. New media arts boasted all the properties attributed earlier to the *avant-garde* standpoint. Nevertheless, instead of recognizing them as new, current, radically future-oriented variants of artistic *avant-garde*, the art world seized every occasion to proclaim the end of the *avant-garde* (prematurely, as it transpired later, even in academic terms), and announced the reign of postmodern art regarded as anti-*avant-garde*. Thus, the actual *avant-garde* of the day, that is, new media art, found itself forced into conflict with the historical *avant-gardes* and excluded from the institutionally defined field of the *avant-garde*, because – perhaps paradoxically – the *avant-garde* as such became a paradigm which was appointed and legitimized by the art establishment.

As time went by, new media arts have advanced, transformed, and consolidated their avant-garde character. Cybernetic art should in fact be appreciated for its pioneering effort not just in spawning robotic art, but also in fostering other developments in the field, such as algorithmic art, generative art, artificial ecosystem art, artificial life and artificial intelligence art, bioart, neuroart, and bio-robotic art. Cybernetic art effected a breakthrough in the order of contemporary art, initiating or boosting the development of its most radical disciplines,<sup>2</sup> which are essentially involved in the transformations our world is undergoing today. Let us now look into examples of various continuations of cybernetic art, i.e., of contemporary avant-garde.

The varied group of robotic artists who follow in the footsteps of Schöffner and Innatowicz includes Louis-Philippe Demers, Ken Feingold, Chick MacMurtrie, Simon Penny, Ken Rinaldo, and Stelarc. Among them, Bill Vorn and his work take a very special position. Besides physically interacting with the audience, Vorn's robots also initiate meaningful emotional and cognitive relationships. Their hybrid status, which combines properties of living organisms (behaviors) and technical devices (appearance), triggers in the viewers correspondingly confused and structurally ambivalent reactions, in which affects are intertwined with cognitive interests, and empathy merges with primal fear and intersects with technophobia. Ideas of artificial life lie at the core of Vorn's explorations, with robotics helping the Canadian artist to develop his research. However, it is not artificial life as such that is his primary area of artistic inquiries. In fact, he is far more preoccupied with human attitudes to intelligent machines, robots, and, especially, artificial life forms. These interests breed multiple questions: What is it that defines life? What does it mean to be human? Can a machine have a life? What is artificial life? Vorn designs his art so as to make knowledge processes part of its aesthetic experience. The viewers discover their readiness (or a lack thereof) to accept the post-human, post-animal, and non-humanistic vision of life and intelligence, and subsequently, return to the world of culturally informed, social beliefs about them. An encounter with Vorn's works helps the viewers to compare the acquired and internalized cognitive patterns concerning life and intelligence with the individual sensations induced by the behaviors of the robotic works they witness. In the next step, this can provoke a confrontational clash between these patterns and sensations, extended by reflective examination of the entire experience. The analysis includes also emotions, which make up an important part of this experience. If the viewers remember that they have mirror neurons, they can easier understand why they recognize emotional aspects in the robots' activities, which does not abolish the

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. María Fernández, "Life-Like": Historicizing Process and Responsiveness in Digital Art," in *A Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945*, ed. Amelia Jones, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford 2006, pp. 557-581; Ryszard W. Kluszczyński, "Paradygmat sztuk nowych mediów," *Kwartalnik Filmowy*, no 85, Spring 2014, pp. 194-205.

fact that they do find and feel these aspects. This is one reason why Vorn carefully builds spectacle into all his pieces in order to impress and amaze the viewers and, perhaps, encourage them to engage in reflection.<sup>3</sup>

The viewers' experiences of Ken Feingold's animatronic sculptures are initiated and shaped in quite similar ways. Feingold, too, tackles the issues of artificial life (artificial intelligence in particular) and invites us to reflect first of all on ourselves: on human life and intelligence, on their transformations and transgressions. Consequently, we are not surprised that Feingold also finds theatricality essential to his projects and makes sure that they stimulate and engage his audiences. Feingold's robotic art involves the viewers in multiple kinds of activity: physical, intellectual, affective, and imaginative. His works aim also to stimulate emotions and not always fully conscious behaviors. Stretched between direct participation and distanced reflection, this art addresses such issues as trans-species relationships, unbridgeable alterity of beings, enigmas of consciousness, and illusory identities, in this way making the viewers face the central challenges of today's world.<sup>4</sup>

If the movements discussed above are interested in artificial life and programmed intelligence, biotechnological art (aka bioart) is preoccupied with lab-grown life and induced intelligence. While the former develop in the space determined only by physical machinery (hardware) and algorithmic codes (software), the latter rely also on biological life-forms (wetware). In such ventures, engineering and IT have found support in synthetic biology, and genetics and tissue cultures have become artistic strategies. If I were to name one pioneer of this kind of art, I would think of Edward Steichen, who put a piece consisting of hybrid delphiniums he had grown and modified on display at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1936. Still, it took several dozen years for the development of bioart to really gather momentum as this discipline grew in relevance only in the 1980s. It was then that artists, such as Dennis Ashbaugh, Kevin Clarke, Ronald Jones, and Larry Miller, began to integrate traditional arts materials and techniques with the living matter and genetic technologies in order to piece together hybrid artefacts. In 1985, Joe Davis showed his *Microvenus*, which initiated art of living transgenic artworks made with the tools and techniques of molecular biology. Davis was soon joined by other artists: Eduardo Kac, Marta de Menezes, Paul Vanouse, and their likes. In further development, the two varieties of genetic art increasingly tended to merge into one trend in which biological techniques were coupled with IT, genetic, and artistic techniques. This tendency is the domain of, for example, Beatriz da Costa and Anna Dumitriu.

<sup>3</sup> See, Dominique Moulon, "Interview with Bill Vorn," in *Robotic Art and Culture: Bill Vorn and His Hysterical Machines*, ed. Ryszard W. Kluszczyński, CSW, Gdańsk 2014, pp. 52-73.

<sup>4</sup> For more information about Feingold's art, see. Ryszard W. Kluszczyński, ed., *Ken Feingold: Figures of Speech*, CSW, Gdańsk 2014.

Aesthetic, cognitive, and critical strategies go into the making of bioart works, which tend to address issues emerging as a result of biotechnological advancements. At the same time, the artworks assimilate strategies characteristic of participatory culture and makers' culture into specialized science, contributing in this way to the development of the transdisciplinary paradigm. Besides revolutionary aesthetic implications, bioartists' practices and projects encourage exploring the interpenetrations of material life and digital virtuality, the programming of life, and the consequences of this process.

Besides genetic (or transgenic) art, the other kind of bioart is art of tissue cultures prominently represented by Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr, founders of the Tissue Culture and Art Project. Their work centers, first of all, on the material aspects of life, on cells and their multiplication, on the substratum, and the ways in which it conditions life. Catts and Zurr develop their projects using living tissue cultures. The artists create semi-living sculptures – objects which exist only thanks to life-support apparatuses in laboratories arranged within galleries. Designed in this way, their works serve to explore life, its understandings and definitions, limits and forms, identity, transgression, exploitation, and life politics.

Similarly to what cybernetic and robotic art did earlier and in a different context, Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr's art breaks with the traditional idea of representation central to Western visual culture, and replaces it with a specific concept of presence. In their works, the artists seek not so much to present life as to create it. The media used by Catts and Zurr are referred to as wet or biological. Practices that develop in and through these media result in forming living or half-living entities. In these pursuits, life is the object of both creation and reflection. At the same time, however, since this life is constructed in laboratory settings, reflection and discussion focus also on the relationships of nature and culture as well as on the philosophical issues involved in creation of life and living beings. In the context of the such bioartistic ventures, the artist's studio inevitably mutates into a research laboratory, artistic tools into scientific paraphernalia, and artefacts into tissue cultures. In this way, in Catts and Zurr's work, the traditional artistic sphere inexorably comes to be rife with ethical dilemmas.

The interactions of biological art involving tissue cultures and engineering with computer and robotic art bring forth bio-robotic art. Bio-robotic art is compellingly exemplified in the work of Guy Ben-Ary. I refer to his practices as *hybrot art*, for his pieces are hybrids combining living neuronal networks and robotic technologies.<sup>5</sup> His most interesting artworks exhibit a capacity of engaging auto-

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Steve M. Potter, et al, "Hybrot: Hybrids of Living Neurons and Robots for Studying Neural Computation," *Brain Inspired Cognitive Systems*, August 29 - September 1, 2004, University of Stirling, Scotland, UK, accessed July 17, 2017. [https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/1480/3b9a-b634aa80b5c36db18a6e2d62560863f4.pdf?\\_ga=2.44028268.839279730.1500497104-1562118606.1500497104](https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/1480/3b9a-b634aa80b5c36db18a6e2d62560863f4.pdf?_ga=2.44028268.839279730.1500497104-1562118606.1500497104).

mously with art-making. For instance, *MEART - The Semi-Living Artist* (2002) was built of two basic, interconnected segments: a neuronal culture and a robot. When a signal from the camera (i.e., eyes) reaches the neuronal culture (i.e., the brain) via the Internet (i.e., the nervous system), the signal is processed and transmitted to the robot (i.e., arms), which starts drawing. Another work by Ben-Ary, *CellF* (2016), is a hybrid of an artificial musician making improvised music in response to sounds (music) from the outside. Both these pieces (like the *Silent Barrage* installation of 2006) feature an autonomous creative agent, performing actions independent of any prior computer programming.

*CellF* brings one more aspect into our argument. In designing and implementing this project, Ben-Ary relied on a technology called Induced Pluripotent Stem Cells (iPSC, for developing which Shinya Yamanaka and John Gurdon won the Nobel Prize in 2012). The technology made it possible to grow the piece's neurons – the brain of *cellF* – from skin cells sampled from Ben-Ary's arm, re-programmed into stem cells, and, finally, converted into neuronal cells. As such, the neuronal culture that operates Ben-Ary's work can be regarded as a *sui generis* extension of his own brain.

The biotechnological and bio-robotic artistic ideas described above generated, for the audience, a hybrid experience fraught with inner tensions, in which aesthetic and emotional reactions merge with cognitive and existential responses, and with philosophical and ethical considerations.<sup>6</sup> They all revolve around the issues of calling living beings into existence, their autonomy, and intelligence. As explored by Guy Ben-Ary, these issues are additionally interwoven with questions of creativity. His works described above are agents of artistic activities and subjects of unique, hybrid, biological-computer-robotic processes in which artworks of the next generation are produced. The same issues were also probed earlier, albeit in a different perspective, by algorithmic art, which is continued in generative and evolutionary artistic practices. In algorithmic art, the work on computer graphics and animations united scientists (such as Frieder Nake, Georg Nees, and A. Michael Noll) and artists (such as Manfred Mohr, Vera Molnar, and Lilian F. Schwartz). All of them realized how much digital technologies contributed to their creative pursuits. They knew also that each computer artwork was generated by digital technology. As a result of this awareness, two subdisciplines were subsequently distinguished within computer art: generative art and evolutionary art, in which artists, including Sonia Landy Sheridan, Ernest Edmonds, Herbert Franke, William Latham, and Karl Sims, deliberately underscored the creative dimension of digital tools. As early as in the 1970s, Harold Cohen presented a computer program

<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere, I labelled the art of Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr as the aesthetics of reason and care; see Ryszard W. Kluszczyński, "The Aesthetics of Reason and Care," in *Crude Life: The Tissue Culture & Art Project. Oron Catts & Ionat Zurr*, ed. Ryszard W. Kluszczyński, CSW, Gdańsk 2012, pp. 72-91.

called Aaron, which made original drawings and paintings all by itself. Currently, this line of work and inquiry is continued by Patrick Tresset and his robots named Paul, which rely on interactivity for generating artworks. Paul, namely, draws portraits from life. Importantly, generative art, which was initially identified with algorithmic art (computer-generated, algorithmically determined works), was recognized as a separate field when it was noticed that generative system can be not only digital, but also chemical, biological, or robotic, for that matter. This is why Guy Ben-Ary's bio-robotic works can be said to derive, on the one hand, from evolving bioart and, on the other, from algorithmic and generative art. Both tendencies intersect in Ben-Ary's projects, producing one of the most radical forms of contemporary hybrid art.

In the collection of the artistic developments discussed in this paper, Stelarc's art is an especially significant phenomenon, as almost all kinds of artistic practices addressed above converge in his work. Among his signature pieces, Stelarc has exhibited *Walking Head* (2006), an autonomous robotic sculpture anchored in cybernetics; biotechnological *Ear on Arm* (2006), i.e. an additional ear implanted in the artist's forearm; *Prosthetic Head* (2003) as a form of artificial intelligence; and a series of performances dating back to the early 1980s, in which he integrates his own body with various technologies (an exoskeleton, a prosthetic arm, monitoring technologies, etc.), enacting the directly experienced concept of artist-cyborg and cyborg art. Stelarc believes that today's cyborg is a network connecting human bodies and minds with technological ties. These couplings affect what the body is and how it functions – the body which Stelarc, in any case, considers obsolete and unadjusted to the demands of the man-made environment. In his performances, he gives over the control of his body to inter-nauts, at the same time perfectly controlling the prostheses he uses. In this way, he problematizes all distinctions and definitions, strips the body of identity, and obliterates the boundaries between its biological and technological aspects. In effect, the evolving body ceases to be an interface and a tool of communication between remote beings or environments, and becomes a hybrid form.<sup>7</sup> No longer external to the body, technology is revealed as the body's extension and, therefore, its property – an aspect of its liquid, elusive identity. Though achieved by other means, this outcome is similar to what the practitioners of bioart, generative art, and bio-robotic art (bred by cybernetic artistic practices) accomplish in pursuing hybridization and deconstruction of boundaries. Giving his body a post-organic form, Stelarc uses it as a tool of post-biological art, which in his rendering engages in an interesting dialogue with Ray Kurzweil's concept of Singularity.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Annick Bureaud, "Stelarc: le bourdonnement de l'hybride," *Art Press*, no. 207 (November 1995).

<sup>8</sup> For more information on Stelarc's art, see *Meat, Metal, and Code: Contestable Chimeras. Stelarc*, ed. Ryszard. W. Kluszczyński, CSW, Gdańsk 2014.

All the currents of contemporary new media art evoked above develop in numerous complex interactions with science, imbue the languages of art with a new quality, and give a new character to their artworks. These languages converge into an aesthetics ridden with tensions and aporias, a transdisciplinary aesthetics in which migration is a constant status subject to ongoing transformations – permanent in mutability and transgression. Artworks, in turn, are re-cast as unique philosophical machines: devices serving to initiate and sustain cognitive discourses, critical and ethical at the same time, as well as to engage in reflection on the condition of the post-biological world. The conflicts inscribed in such works of art – oppositions between the living and the objective, the natural and the cultural, the real and the virtual – are still encoded in culture as irresolvable. Art in dialogue with science seeks, like science, though in different ways and for different reasons, to abolish this irresolvability and bring together disjunctive states in order to put various consequences of such events to an analytical test. Among the events covered by such analysis, special attention is showered on the transformations of the human species, its status, and evolutionary changes unfolding, for a considerable time now, in a new context: in the bio-techno-info-sphere. Because of this new context, the horizon of these transformations ever more clearly takes the form of a post-human world.

New media art, and in particular its currently most radical movement of art@science, is the real contemporary avant-garde. Yet, the art world has framed it as an opposition to the developments which, despite their historical character, have still retained the nominal status of the avant-garde. This has produced a paradoxical situation in which the current avant-garde has been maneuvered into conflict with the historical avant-gardes. Nevertheless, if we assume that, rather than designating a set of conventions, principles, and, even less, stylistic patterns, avant-garde means simply different art, a position always radically confronting concurrent mainstream art, we will easily perceive that art@science is not a reverse but a continuation of historical avant-gardes – their extension in the recent changing cultural context.

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## AWANGARDA PRZECIW AWANGARDZIE (streszczenie)

W podjętych tu rozważaniach sztuka nowych mediów, pozostająca w istotnych relacjach z technologią i nauką, prezentowana jest jako współczesna postać awangardy artystycznej. Przedmiotem rozważań staje się jej relacja z wcześniejszymi manifestacjami postawy awangardowej: awangarda historyczną i neoawangardy oraz rola, jaką w ustanowieniu ich wzajemnych relacji odgrywa art world i jego instytucje.

**Słowa kluczowe:** awangarda, sztuka nowych mediów, art & science, sztuka cybernetyczna, sztuka robotyczna, bioart, hybryd art.



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## WHAT THE AVANT-GARDE STANDS FOR TODAY

**Abstract:** The main question of this article expresses doubts as to whether the end of the avant-garde was not in fact declared too early. Did we state too hastily that postmodernism has completely nullified the significance of the concept of the avant-garde? The resulting question that must be also asked is whether we need the avant-garde today. And if so, how do we use the methods and the theory of the avant-garde in the current context? This article assumes that the characteristics of the avant-garde continue to be recognized in contemporary art. In the beginning of my paper, I will summarize those characteristics as distinguished by Mieczysław Porębski, looking at them from the perspective of Nicolas Bourriaud's conception of relational aesthetics. Its emphasis on intersubjective relationships in their social environment and on the present moment, extends the ideas of the historical avant-garde. Here it meets the theory of encounters - icontrolology. Among the historical avant-garde artists it is Marcel Duchamp who is indicated here in a pivotal role, especially with regard to his concept of the ready-made, which was extended by Joseph Kosuth. The concept of Documenta 14 was linked to the historiography of Frank Ankersmit, based on micronarrations that function as ready-mades. The exhibition of Documenta 14 is shown here as composed of such micro-histories and at the same time, organized around key narratives. Small narratives make up a grand narrative - the story of an open and tolerant United Europe which is against racism and xenophobia and invites the presence of migrants. This is the practical lesson that we draw today from the Holocaust. This is the grand European narrative told in Documenta 14.

**Keywords:** the avant-garde, utopia, the ready-made, philosophy of dialogue, theory of encounters, icontrolology, relational aesthetics, Documenta 14

The avant-garde is the quintessence of modernism, but it has been differently defined. Stefan Morawski and Mieczysław Porębski undertook the task within the context of Polish art criticism. Porębski's definition was formulated on the grounds of art history. Thus, according to the methodological principles of this discipline, he takes a work of art as a reference point. Theory is located as close as possible to the artistic practice. Hence, it will be his approach which will serve as a point of departure for the reflections contained in this paper, and not the approach of Morawski, who considered this issue from the perspective of aesthetics.

Porębski had a special mandate to explore the issue of the avant-garde. He was associated with Grupa Krakowska [Cracow Group], from its establishment after World War II as a continuation of the first group that had operated in Cracow

before the war. The Cracow Group and its Krzysztofory Gallery in Cracow are tangible proof of the continuity of genuine avant-garde tradition, dating back to around 1918, when the first groups of avant-garde artists in Poland began to form. Cracow and the Cracow Group community is now the only place in Poland where such continuation is clearly evident (perhaps besides Łódź, where it can be seen on a smaller scale). World War II caused the decomposition and disbanding of the pre-war groups in other Polish cities, which after the war were no longer able to recover in the non-democratic conditions of the totalitarian regime. In Cracow it was possible because it was the only Polish city where the artistic tradition was particularly developed and which survived the war without ruin. During the German occupation Porębski participated in the preparation of avant-garde theatre performances staged by Tadeusz Kantor. He was a friend of the artists he wrote about, a so-called "participant critic". In his work he combined the critique of art with the knowledge of an art historian.

As a researcher, he also worked on the theory of art criticism itself. He proposed a division into "criticism by poets" and "criticism by experts". The group of poet-critics included, for example, André Salmon, Guillaume Apollinaire, and André Breton. Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler represented expert critics. Porębski, writing as a historian from the distance of time, saw this as a process: poets were replaced by experts (which became visible in the 1960s). Tomasz Gryglewicz, discussing Porębski's legacy in the article "A few comments on art criticism past and present. Dedicated to the memory of Professor Mieczysław Porębski, the last critic in old (good) style", cites some of his most important opinions, showing that Porębski's thinking about art was ahead of its time and his research results could reasonably complement contemporary research on the subject. He quotes Porębski's opinion concerning an "expert critic":

The modern expert has been able to incorporate in this new carnival-culture even the resistant, traditional disciplines of painting, graphic art, and sculpture. He has been able to turn a traditional, international biennale of art – at least for a moment – into a tourist attraction, the event of the season.<sup>1</sup>

Probably no one today doubts that this is how the curators of large, mass artistic events operate, especially in the biennial format, most widespread today. Another remark by Porębski is worth quoting together with the comment by Gryglewicz:

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<sup>1</sup> M. Porębski, *Jeszcze raz o krytyce*, in: Idem, *Pożegnanie z krytyką*, WL, Kraków-Wrocław 1983, p. 159; T. Gryglewicz, *Parę uwag na temat krytyki artystycznej dawniej i dzisiaj. Poświęcone pamięci prof. Mieczysława Porębskiego, ostatniego krytyka w dawnym (dobrym) stylu*, in: *Krytyka sztuki – filozofia, praktyka, dydaktyka*, ed. Ł. Guzek, Akademia Sztuk Pięknych w Gdańsku, Międzywydziałowy Instytut Nauk o Sztuce, Gdańsk 2013, p. 9.

Porębski observed – from the perspective of 1971 – that the change of the character of art criticism from the poetic to the expert mode ‘testifies to the growing importance and scope of visual information in all its manifestations, and in all of its sectors’ This remark should be treated as prophetic, looking from the perspective of the contemporary rapid development of the pictorial civilization based on digital technology and the Internet.<sup>2</sup>

There is thus no doubt that Porębski was prepared in many ways for the comprehensive exploration of avant-garde art. He himself was one of the experts he described; his main curatorial achievements included the permanent exhibition of Polish avant-garde art at the National Museum in Cracow, which presented this art to the Polish viewers for almost 30 years (from the 1970s to the beginning of 2000), and the exhibition at Sukiennice [Cloth Hall], a division of the National Museum, in 1975 (on the occasion of the AICA congress in Cracow), combining older and contemporary art, which in itself is very postmodern. Maria Anna Potocka, who exhibited his systematic drawings in her gallery (today they can be seen at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Krakow), managed to prove the point that he was also an artist.

By the 1980s, when Porębski published his essay entitled "Traditions and Avant-gardes"<sup>3</sup>, in which he included the aforementioned definition of the avant-garde, the question of the avant-garde seemed already closed, the object of interest of art historians (this was also the perspective taken by Porębski, who analyzed the avant-garde from the time gap as a historical phenomenon). The whole modernist era seemed definitively and irrevocably closed. The interest in artistic practice and theoretical reflection both on the artists and on the methodologies of art historians, moved to the time after modernism and after the avant-garde.

Why did we part with the project of the avant-garde? Haven't we dismissed it too quickly, considering it to be too obsolete and useless in both contemporary reflection and research into art? In this paper I offer the thesis that the notion of the avant-garde may be useful in relation to contemporary works, both in art criticism and in the study of art history. It can provide ways of understanding art and bring understanding to the world we live in. For this purpose, I will analyze the definition (a list of defining features) of the avant-garde by Porębski, and pair the features of the avant-garde singled out by him with contemporary works and their curatorial understanding, interpretation, and presentation, basing on exam-

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<sup>2</sup> M. Porębski, *Jeszcze raz o krytyce*, p. 160; T. Gryglewicz, *Parę uwag na temat krytyki artystycznej dawniej i dzisiaj*, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> M. Porębski, *Tradycje i awangardy*, chap. XIII, in: *Sztuka a informacja*, WL, Kraków 1986, pp. 171-178.

ples from Nicolas Bourriaud's "relational theory" and Documenta 14 in Kassel in 2017.

Porębski distinguished ten features of the avant-garde, common to all phenomena of this type. Let us point out that his research is not trans-historic in nature, but refers to the art that is the result of analytical Cubism. However, agreeing with such scholars as Porębski himself and Rosalind Krauss that the art of the avant-garde is a consequence of Cubism, for a complete historical background I would complement this view by noting that it is also a consequence of Duchamp and the ready-made, as it is not only a story of painting but also of the object, understood in terms of the ready-made and not on the basis of the painterly analysis of the object in Cubism and post Cubism. Porębski abandoned art criticism in the 1960s (he wrote a book – a collection of essays – entitled *Farewell to Criticism*), when mass culture entered the art scene and artworks. Then came the 1970s and Conceptualism. As noted by Joseph Kosuth, "All art (after Duchamp) is conceptual".<sup>4</sup> All postmodern art is post-conceptual, and therefore all contemporary art. Thus, contemporary art, from the modernist avant-garde until today, is seen as a whole and can be perceived as a continuity of changes. Within this broadly understood history of contemporary art, the avant-garde comes into view and then recedes into the background again.

Let me now present the ten features of the avant-garde pointed out by Porębski in the context of contemporary art:

1. Belligerence – according to Porębski, it is a general characteristic of the avant-garde, which constitutes its *modus operandi*, and thus determines its practice. According to Peter Bürger, there is no feature (or set of features) of the avant-garde that would pertain to all of its formations. Instead, we can talk about the effects common to all avant-garde, such as shock. However, Bürger operates on the level of the aesthetic means of expression, although the catalog of these means can be extended (while preserving their connecting function) to include the formal ones. But Porębski sees belligerence as a feature bringing together the formal means of art and social assumptions, and it is belligerence that lets us perceive the avant-garde as a whole, and determines its overall style. This style – which is a consequence of the avant-garde's formal solutions, but above all of its position in the social context – enables it to continue to function – beyond its time. Another key word is "energy" as the driving force of creativity (in Polish art history, see the manifestos by Józef Robakowski and Andrzej Lachowicz).

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<sup>4</sup> „All art (after Duchamp) is conceptual (in nature) because art only exists conceptually”. J. Kosuth, *Art after Philosophy*, in: Idem, *Art After Philosophy and After. Collected Writings 1966-1990*, ed. Gabrielle Guercio, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 2002, p. 18.

2. Intransigence – it is the *modus vivendi*, or the ethics of the avant-garde. It is visible not only in the manifestos, but also in the practice of life in which art is more important than practical matters, and artistic goals determine the goals of life. The result is a non-conformist life corresponding to the absolute postulate of artistic innovation. Today we understand it not only as a formal solution, but as the performativity of the entire modernist project – Jon McKenzie refers to it with the reverse postulate: "perform, or else...". And in this perspective, the ethics of the avant-garde is linked to the contemporary ethics of performativity.

3. Elitism – despite the formation of groups and the writing of collective manifestos, the avant-garde was not a mass movement (although it referred to the masses in the social sense). The avant-garde programs assumed elitism by definition. It was created by eminent individuals, heading the groups. These elites were a product of grassroots activity, just like any social activity. Today, when the world of art is institutionalized and media-oriented, its elite is created by the media. But the very principle of elitism in art is preserved. Large exhibitions build their longer- or shorter-lasting elites.

4. Distance towards the present – this distance was due to elitism. The avant-garde had placed itself at the forefront of change in art, and at the forefront of social change. Today that distance is called critique. Art seeks to illustrate social criticism. The large exhibitions, through the creations of invited artists, take up the big task of representing and bringing to the attention of today's global world those who are knocking on our doors in the form of migrants and those affected by religious persecution. Art helps you find your way in a changing world. The status quo is unmanageable. And this is due to the colloquial experience of each of us, as well as the readings and assumptions of performance studies and the title of Jon McKenzie's book *Perform or else*.

5. Re-valuation of tradition – Porębski points out that the avant-garde movement in fact reached back to various traditions, sometimes very distant, for example to Egyptian, African, or pre-Columbian art, Gothic art, or Classicism. Nevertheless, the connection with tradition has also served the present, as it was reworked to create modern works. The interest in anthropology and ethnography is very similar to that in contemporary trends. In the global world, the distance is shortened. Contemporary art is created everywhere and every culture is continually "discovered" for the needs of the projects created in different centers. The local and the global co-exist at large exhibitions.

6. Polycentrism – avant-garde art was created in major European cities, which were joined after World War II by New York, where a large proportion of the avant-garde elite had moved, and which took this opportunity to expand con-

temporary art. But today polycentrism is global, and biennials and museums are everywhere. Each of these local centers strives to both participate in the global discourse of the art world and to add something to it, to promote their own artists. This feature is currently increasing in importance.

7. Interdisciplinarity – although the main field of avant-garde experimentation was painting on canvas, its members also included musicians, poets, literati, dancers, filmmakers, photographers, and journalists. This is another feature that has been gaining importance. Contemporary art projects are interdisciplinary in their assumptions, and exhibitions display works representing many different media and forms of presentation. This is due to the complexity of the issues that they take up, and the overlapping of many contexts in the global world, which requires the cooperation of the artists of many disciplines, and even scientists. In order for a project to be convincing and elaborated, it must be developed on many levels of art and the humanities and requires the knowledge of many areas.

8. Programmaticity – the avant-garde artists and groups wrote manifestos, whose style was similar to that of political manifestos. They not only explained the goals of the group, but also called for specific actions. Let us remember that belligerence was the main feature of the avant-garde, so the style had to be expressive. Today we generate even more texts: artists' statements, catalogue essays, articles accompanying large exhibitions. But the style has changed. The expressiveness of the language has vanished (though it is preserved in the works) and it has been replaced by arguments, better suited to democratic debate. The conditions in which the avant-garde artists had to communicate their messages were far from today's democratic standards. Today, it is rather the opponents of art and democracy (usually they are the same people) who use outrageously expressive rhetoric. The written texts have yet another contemporary aspect – narration: building a narrative around the work and incorporating it into a network of other narratives. Today it is the narrative that makes an *explicit* work *implicit*. And the content of these narratives makes our contemporary art *implicit*. This function of narratives is the premise of contemporary projects and exhibitions, and in this sense is their general programmatic principle, regardless of the content of these narratives. Examples of such narratives in contemporary art will be discussed later on in this paper.

9. The spirit of revolt – revolt involving not only art, but also social practice. Porębski points out that avant-garde art was synonymous with social engagement. This was both an ethical and a moral choice. Today, if the reason for making art is not an aesthetic one (and we understand art as a voice in a global discourse, a constant debate about the world we live in), it implies that also the decision to engage in art is a moral and ethical choice. Today, in a democratic environment,

choices are not bipolar, dualistic and contingent. The means of art, like the means of the narrative are bold, incorporating different kinds of persuasion which we use in critical discourses. In this sense, art retains the spirit of revolt as it deals with social change.

10. Utopia – placed here at the end of the list, though Andrzej Turowski, the chief Polish researcher of the avant-garde, regards it as its main feature. The avant-garde project is romantic in nature. Revolt can be always considered unsuccessful, unfulfilled, unfinished; revolutions fail, degenerate, deny their own assumptions. However, they leave their footprint, which becomes a reference point for the subsequent developments. In Poland, the revolt against the Communist regime, initiated by Solidarity and Lech Wałęsa, seemed to have ended in defeat, as martial law was imposed to stifle this movement of freedom and destroy its achievements. But the idea survived and paved the way for the change in 1989. And today, when a democratic election has brought to power an anti-democratic and totalitarian party, the same impulse triggered protests and led people onto the streets in Poland. Utopia is not a failure, it is not a delusion or a false reality if it still brings real results. So also the historical avant-garde produced works and ideas that have survived and to which we still refer. One example is the revolt of 1968 and the flower power movement in the 1970s. In spite of the apparent failure of these allegedly utopian projects, they are still a reference point and bring real results, not only in the form of artworks, literature, films, but also political ideas that animate contemporary activities. The avant-garde utopia is still a point of reference and has consequences. So is it a utopia when it lives on amongst us? Or are we, perhaps, living in a utopia? Let me conclude this last paragraph with a quotation that will help us draw some conclusions about the nature of contemporary avant-garde:

But while I pondered all these things, and how men fight and lose the battle, and the thing that they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name – while I pondered all this, John Ball began to speak again in the same soft and dear voice with which he had left off. (*A Dream of John Ball* by William Morris, 1888).

Reading the fragment above in relation to the domain of art, we can say that the art of all times has been fighting a battle for making meanings, and it still continues today. The modernist avant-garde was nothing more than just a recent instalment of this battle. It matters to us because it has been fought so close to us in time and we still feel its effects. Its overall significance can be judged only from the distance of time. The avant-garde, with its various repertoires of visual forms and means of expression and its openness to creative individuality (in contrast to the neoclassical canon) had one goal – to give meaning to modernity, modern

man and society. Unity and diversity had one common goal – modernity as a liberating project, giving free hand to creativity. Diversity allowed for more freedom.

Is it possible today to point out any artistic project similar to the avant-garde, representing holistic understanding of reality, covering all aspects of life, up to the dissolution of art in life (as noted in his theory of the avant-garde by Peter Bürger)?

In the 1990s, such a holistic outlook was offered by relational aesthetics. Nicolas Bourriaud launched a project that yielded works of great diversity in the formal and artistic sense. Moreover, it was an open project, which could be joined by younger artists, especially those who appeared on the scene after 2000, when Bourriaud's theory gained wider circulation. What connects the works despite their diversity of forms is the building of interpersonal relationships. In the global world, where we face daily multicultural diversity with its individual visual forms, a meeting with the other is crucial. The openness of structure, participation, and interactivity are the features potentially facilitating relationships, which could happen or not. Relational aesthetics is a clear break from modernism, where the artwork remains isolated from the world, while (as in Bürger's theory of the avant-garde) the world strives to get along with life. This is the ultimate ideal of the avant-garde, attained (according to Bürger) by Dadaism, but its extension to Surrealism, Futurism, Constructivism, and to their successors Situationists – perhaps the last avant-garde before American-imposed commercialization of art – is just as legitimate.

In relational aesthetics, the meeting with the other must be as literal as possible, and the artwork is positioned in between, as something that causes this relationship. In an old dictionary of economics we can find the word “*incontro*” (or “*incontro*”, from the Italian “*encounter*”), which denotes a happy coincidence between supply and demand.<sup>5</sup> “*Incontrology*” is the term for the theory of encounters. The concept appears in the field of pedagogy and the philosophy of dialogue. In Poland, this theory is developed by Andrzej Nowicki; his philosophy of encounters is potentially an interesting tool for the interpretations of artworks. This theory, unlike Emmanuel Levinas and Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue, does not focus merely on face-to-face encounters between people, but extends the study of such encounters to include the presence of artifacts (things).<sup>6</sup> I have used this concept in the interpretation of Piotr Wyrzykowski's performance based on generating random encounters.<sup>7</sup>

An artwork, according to Bourriaud, is thus a meeting place, as it once was (though today it is largely deprived of this role); a public space, like the antique forum. Its form goes beyond the material form of the work. “The contemporary

<sup>5</sup> See for example: *Słownik Wyrazów Obcych M. Arcta*, Wydawnictwo Michała Arcta, Warszawa 1937.

<sup>6</sup> A. Nowicki, *Spotkania w rzeczach*, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warszawa 1991.

<sup>7</sup> Ł. Guzek, *Teleperformance*, <http://doc.art.pl/qq/wyfr.htm>.

artwork's form is spreading out from its material form: it is a linking element, a principle of dynamic agglutination.”<sup>8</sup> Bourriaud's reference to Duchamp's famous term “art coefficient” means that we are looking for this active agent within things, a ready made, a space arrangement, a performance that we see around us. As in Bürger's theory of the avant-garde, in a creative act art and life blend in a new whole. The ready-made is not a work of art, but we see in it the art factor (coefficient). For Bourriaud it is a communicative agent, enabling both a relationship and an encounter. Duchamp's works are primarily a meeting with him; we meet his mind within them, questioning the main principles of art and the perceptions of artworks. Our present encounters with Duchamp's work are also encounters with its interpretation by numerous academics, critics, and last but not least – artists.

The idea of the ready-made has been extended to its uttermost by Joseph Kosuth and is widely used today. After Kosuth we can treat as ready-mades both grand and small narratives, or cultural discourses. Likewise, one can understand the artworks described by Bourriaud as examples of relational practices. Via Duchamp we encounter the very core of the avant-garde. When Kosuth said that “All art (after Duchamp) is conceptual”, he was referring not only to the Copernican revolutionary reversal of the art-value system by shifting it away from the artifact, the surface visual form, to its meaning, but also to conceptual art as the cornerstone of contemporary art and of the practices of relational art. The counterpart to Kosuth's turn is the feminist turn, when Lynda Nead spoke about the need to deconstruct and reinterpret art as a whole, because it has been described from a patriarchal point of view. So it is not just the case of looking at some kind of art next to another kind, but an overall comprehensive change. The conceptual and feminist turns stand side by side, as it was historically in the 1970s and as it is now. So the avant-garde has been acted upon.

Duchamp turns out to be once again a link between the avant-garde and the present. If such a rich discourse has developed on Duchamp, it is because his works enable it. Each of them tells a story that can be developed by its interpreters. Thus they trigger a creative act. This is also true of relational works. Their micro-narratives feed on our imagination. According to Frank R. Ankersmit, in his metaphor they correspond to the readymade.<sup>9</sup> They are interesting in themselves, though in the context of world history they are insignificant - they have not changed the course of art, they are not so important as great historical battles. However, it is through them that one can show meaning and persuade others of it.

Let us take a look at the last example: Documenta 14 in 2017 is an artistic project in itself (curator Adam Szymczyk as an artist – a creator of meanings,

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<sup>8</sup> N. Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Le presses du reel, 2002, p. 21.

<sup>9</sup> F.R. Ankersmit, *Reprezentacja historyczna*, in: *Narracja, reprezentacja, doświadczenie. Studia z teorii historiografii*, ed. E. Domańska, Universitas, Kraków 2004, p. 166.

as is the curator Bourriaud). Documenta is more than a collection of works, it is a dialectical whole, where the components, the individual works, synthesize a more general meaning. This is a beautiful (and perhaps utopian, in the spirit of the avant-garde) message of solidarity in the global world, which is what Europe needs today, faced with the challenge that it is trying to meet. Not everyone, including Poland, passes this exam in maturity to become part of the modern world. These general ideas have been thoroughly described and interpreted. Here I am interested in the creation of this huge exhibition, which functions in the rhythm of a quinquennial as a meaning-making machine. Its scale makes it quite inaccessible to the individual recipient; it takes place in two cities and in many locations. So what does one find in its message?

*Documenta 14* in 2017 was organized according to histories. To be precise: micro-histories. They play the role of the ready made in the whole project. Its great narrative is told in accordance with the historiographical method of Ankersmit. The spectators were able to find many of these micronarratives in the exhibition. The key ones were properly exposed and the viewer could follow them. Even if the spectators could not take in the whole exhibition, these samples allowed them to draw their own conclusions in this act of encounter with the others. When I exchanged remarks with my friends about this show, it turned out that we had noticed the same elements in some works, obviously, but also each of us missed something, and in turn something drew only one person's attention. I believe that this was intended by the organizer. It revealed the meaning as a collective construction.

As usual, the exhibition featured many paintings, films, and artifacts. Each of them could be engaged with by the recipient, who was able to enjoy the whole exhibition by following these individual works. But collectively, the viewers were able to distinguish the key stories and capture the overall message of *Documenta 14*. They were like Ankersmit's micronarrations for the descriptions of ground-breaking events and historical processes. Overall, the exhibition presented the grand narrative of the United Europe today, open and tolerant, rejecting racism and xenophobia. It was the experience of the Holocaust that taught it to be this way. Thus, the contemporary art shown at *Documenta 14* begins exactly at the point where the historical avant-garde ended, with World War II and the Holocaust. Contrary to the postmodern views, grand narratives exist and govern modern Europe. Only in Europe and only because of this experience, an exhibition that runs up a millions-of-euros deficit is possible.<sup>10</sup> And here the *par excellence* European invention – the avant-garde – has its own vital source. Its ideological center is humanism, which today is measured by the attitude to migration. This applies to

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<sup>10</sup> <https://hyperallergic.com/400562/documenta-organizers-call-report-of-e7m-deficit-speculations-and-half-truths/>.

both governments and residents. Humanism as enlightenment was a great modernization project promoted by the avant-garde. Contemporary Europe's encounter with the other – the art shown at *Documenta 14* (individual works and the whole of the exhibition) is an instantiation of this project. Art is referring variously through the works-micronarrations – to these grand narratives. The categories singled out by Porębski, listed at the beginning of this paper, may be the features that also characterize the relational works, whose formal definition is equally difficult to arrive at. But here one can also try to generalize. If the avant-garde was originally united by Cubism, today's relational art is united by the ready-made.

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## CZYM JEST DZIŚ AWANGARDA (streszczenie)

Główne pytanie zadane w artykule wyraża wątpliwość, czy nie za wcześnie rozstaliśmy się z awangardą? Czy nie zbyt pośpiesznie stwierdziliśmy, że postmodernizm dokonał całkowitego unieważnienia znaczenia pojęcia awangarda? I wynikające stąd pytanie, czy awangarda jest dziś potrzebna? A jeżeli tak, to jak dziś na terenie sztuki wykorzystujemy metody działania i teorię awangardy?

Teza artykułu zakłada, iż cechy awangard rozpoznajemy także w sztuce współczesnej. Na początku mojego artykułu streszczam cechy awangardy wyróżnione przez Mieczysława Porębskiego. Następnie cechy te zostały zestawione z założeniami estetyki relacjonalnej Nicolasa Bourriaud. Budowanie relacji międzyludzkich zostało tu wskazane jako idea najlepiej dziś rozszerzająca cechy historycznej awangardy. I tu spotyka ona teorię spotkań - ikontrolologię. Wśród artystów historycznej awangardy to Marcel Duchamp został wskazany jako postać pośrednicząca, a szczególnie jego koncepcja ready made, rozszerzona przez Josepha Kosutha. Natomiast koncepcja Documenta 14 została powiązana z koncepcją historiograficzną Franka Ankersmita, opartą na mikronarracjach funkcjonujących tak jak ready made. Wystawa Documenta 14 została pokazana jako złożona z takich mikrohistorii, a zarazem zorganizowana wokół narracji kluczowych. Małe narracje składają się na wielką narrację - opowieść o otwartej i tolerancyjnej Zjednoczonej Europie, występującej przeciw rasizmowi i ksenofobii wobec obecności migrantów. To praktyczna lekcja jaką dziś wyciągamy z Holokaustu. To wielka narracja europejska opowiedziana w Documenta 14.

**Słowa kluczowe:** awangarda, utopia, ready made, filozofia dialogu, teoria spotkań, ikontrolologia, estetyka relacjonalna, Documenta 14.

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## THE AVANT-GARDE: ART AS THEORY

**Abstract:** The starting point of the paper are the questions formulated in 1993 by Philip Auslander as to whether the avant-garde is possible in postmodernism, or whether postmodernism itself can be regarded as a new phase of the avant-garde. The representatives of avant-garde art considered theory to be of great importance. Therefore, an attempt to answer the questions has been made here from the point of view of three theoretical approaches to the problem. The first one has been discussed with reference to Paul Mann's book *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde* as that art today functions within the framework of a "discursive economy". The avant-garde theories, opposed to the artistic status quo, in fact support the functioning of this mechanism, becoming "discourse productive". Thus, instead of renewing it, they contribute to the death of the avant-garde, which is absorbed by the cultural "exchange effect". The second approach, referred to as "theory-life", is developed on the basis of the renewing attempt, by Peter Bürger. He considered that the basic aspiration of the avant-garde was an attack against the institution of art and revolutionizing life as a whole. This renewal was announced in their writings and manifested in artworks which became a way of undertaking and attempting to solve theoretical problems. I have described this phenomenon as "theorism". The third option discussed is the "end of theory", with reference to Victor Burgin's book of the same title. The British author believes that the concept of art shaped from the Renaissance period onwards through the Enlightenment and Romanticism, has collapsed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Currently art operates not in the area of theory, but in the sphere of the discourses creating "semblances of truth" and performing mobilizing and strategic, not ontological functions. The article concludes with some remarks on the change of metaphors ("death", "life", "end"), which are employed in connection with the avant-garde, as well as the possible consequences of this situation.

**Keywords:** avant-garde, theory, discourse, Paul Mann, Peter Bürger, Victor Burgin

In his 1993 review of the latest publications on the avant-garde, Philip Auslander pointed out that the anxiety of the researchers confronted with this subject was becoming symptomatic. This anxiety stems from the need to look at the avant-garde with reference to postmodernism. The American author observed that "This combination of terms immediately generates penetrating questions. Is postmodernism simply the current version of the avant-garde? If not, is there/can there be an avant-garde under Postmodernism?"<sup>1</sup>. Auslander associated the avant-

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<sup>1</sup> Books. Review by Philip Auslander, "The Drama Review" 1993, vol. 37, no 3, pp. 196-197.

-garde with resistance or opposition, and therefore, in developing his question, he considered whether there is room for such attitudes in our times, whether there are marginal spaces that allow such activities to take place, or whether postmodernism is a culture of total surveillance and absorption, as claimed by Baudrillard and other authors.

These questions are significant. The discussion on the relations between the avant-garde and postmodernism was particularly heated at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s. At that time, the desire to cut oneself off from the illusions associated with the idea of modernity prevailed. The era of postmodernism was conceived as a period after the domination of the idea of universal history, after the "grand narratives", after the faith in eschatology and after the utopian visions of the transformation of the world and man. All these premises were found in avant-garde thinking, and that is why it seemed alien to the young generation of artists. Meanwhile, the situation changed partially in the 1990s. Perhaps that is why Auslander addresses the problem not in a confrontational spirit, but in search of answers. Ultimately, however, a broader reflection on the issue did not take place in the 1990s. The avant-garde seemed to be disappearing from view. It interested mainly aesthetic theorists and art historians, who treated it as a bygone phenomenon, which can be only described and classified after the disputes have ended. Artists did not refer to its slogans, either. They did not look for arguments to support their activities, nor did they oppose its assumptions. There was also no question as to whether certain versions of postmodernism could be considered as updated versions of the avant-garde. A gap has therefore developed in this area, which continues to exist today. Therefore, asking today about the avant-garde and avant-gardes, one should refer to the results of the research into its historical symptoms, and on the other hand, to the question of its replacement. Has the avant-garde become a purely historical fact, or can its aspirations be found in later artistic activities? Addressing these questions requires taking into account the current situation of art, but also taking another look at the avant-garde. However, it should be viewed from a different perspective. I believe that such perspective can be provided by considering the role of theory.

### **Theory-death**

The point of reference for the questions posed by Auslander was, among other things, Paul Mann's book *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde*<sup>2</sup>. The author stated that the problem of the death of the avant-garde should not be associated with the lack of innovative creative practices that pose artistic challenges. He therefore

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<sup>2</sup> P. Mann, *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis 1991.

opposed the views popular in the late 1970s and 1980s, according to which it was cultural exhaustion that triggered the emergence of postmodern tendencies. The advocates of such a position treated postmodernism as an attempt to overcome the crisis in art in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At that time, a return was observed to the ideas of the avant-garde from the beginning of the century, but it was accompanied by the awareness of the different situation now facing the artists. It was therefore not possible to directly continue with the previously formulated slogans. Moreover, there was a belief that the cultural transformation declared in the avant-garde manifestos has not been successful. In such circumstances, the conviction about the end of the avant-garde era seemed fully justified.

This position can be exemplified by the book by Guy Scarpetta, *L'Impureté*<sup>3</sup>, popular in the mid-1980s. Instead of taking into account the context associated with the cultural changes of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the author considered the evolution of the avant-garde itself. He wrote that the impasse and exhaustion of the avant-garde resulted from the impetus of its own radicalization. The avant-garde took its own developmental logic to extremes and as a result brought about its own self-destruction. This provoked disappointment and disillusionment among some artists and art critics. However, as Scarpetta emphasized, others regarded this as liberation. After a period of bans, taboos and asceticism, the artists enjoyed finding fun and pleasure in their work. The tyranny of theory was overthrown. It was decided that artistic activity could be pursued without the tiresome rules accepted or created by the artists themselves. Art can mean drifting, nomadism, it can be a spontaneously undertaken and modified practice. It does not need justification, it can develop freely and on many levels. It may be contradictory, ambivalent, and “impure”.

Mann takes a different point of view. For him, if the avant-garde had died, it was because external and cultural conditions had put a stop to its existence and effectively eliminated its critical activity. The avant-garde cannot exist without criticism. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the situation was different. The protest against the traditional cultural conventions was perceived unequivocally and met with equally unambiguous approval or disapproval. No one attempted to “tame” and incorporate Dadaist or Surrealist scandals in the official culture. There was therefore some room for oppositional practices. According to Mann, in contemporary culture these oppositional practices are annexed by the official public sphere and, consequently, the areas where they can occur are disappearing. The question is whether such practices, which were present in the historical avant-garde, are still going to be perceived as oppositional, questioning the existing order, undermining the artistic status quo, or whether they are just one of the many approaches available on the cultural market.

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<sup>3</sup> G. Scarpetta, *L'impureté*, Figures/Grasset, Paris 1985.

The American author considers both avant-garde art and its criticism as functioning within the framework of, as he calls it, “discursive economy”. This concept derives from Jürgen Habermas’s deliberations on the bourgeois public sphere, which from the outset was an arena of dispute, debate and ideological opposition. Its reference point is the market. Thus, as noted by Mann, “the free zone of contentions was already contained within and determined by market conditions”<sup>4</sup>. The medium of exchange in this cultural economy is discourse. Therefore, artworks are defined “by their ability to move through and hence maintain the discursive apparatus. The work’s value is defined above all by what it can achieve both by confirming and by negating the recognized content. Critical or oppositional art must also be considered within the framework of the principles of “discursive economics”. It cannot escape it, because it is absorbed by it, it always takes the form of discourse. Moreover, Mann claims that the more oppositional art is, the more discourse-productive and consequently more cost-effective it becomes.

Auslander describes the situation that occurred in connection with the performance of Karen Finley. It piqued the interest of the representatives of the Playboy Channel, who wanted to include it in their broadcasting schedule as a sample avant-garde work. Thus, the work was supposed to be “normalized” in the sense described by Foucault. In this form, it was to be introduced into the broader cultural circulation. Ultimately, however, this idea was abandoned; thus performance art remains in the periphery. Auslander points out that in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, artists were not confronted with such temptations. Rebellion or provocation were unequivocally classified as marginalized and as attempts to destroy the official culture. The current situation is more complex. It is possible – according to Auslander – for a performer like Finley to face a dilemma of whether to let her proposal be partly absorbed by the cultural market. She found herself with “one foot already sucked into the vortex, while the other remains positioned within the marginal space outside”<sup>5</sup>. The art critic Mario T. Pramaggiore, who described this situation, praised the artist for resisting such postmodern absorption by controlling her artistic image. In his view in doing this she had employed the criteria of valuation deriving from the avant-garde tradition.

The situations similar to the one presented above do not allow for an unambiguous answer to the questions raised by Auslander as to whether the avant-garde is possible in postmodernism or whether postmodernism is itself a new phase of the avant-garde. As the American author points out, discursive economy makes an ideological difference in the world, as “all goods are perfectly exchangeable, and the only significant effect of the exchange is to keep the economy humming”<sup>6</sup>. In conclusion, Mann stated that all such discourse is finally affirmative: there

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4 P. Mann, *op. cit.* p. 22.

5 Ph. Auslander, *op. cit.* p. 196.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 197.

is no place for critical activity, which was the essence of the avant-garde's aspirations.<sup>7</sup> The concept of "discursive economy" thus provokes anxiety. "For us today", Mann wrote, "the problem of the avant-garde is thus essentially a critical one: how to enter its field without falling [...] into every trap of representation; how to write without merely manufacturing another or even better theory of circulation, another history for exchange. To explore recuperation without being entirely caught up in it [...]"<sup>8</sup>.

### Theory-life

Nevertheless, is "discursive economy" actually the ultimate cause of the death of the avant-garde? Let us consider the way in which the critical functions of art were exercised in avant-garde works in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I would like to refer to the deliberations of Peter Bürger, who emphasized their role most clearly. In an article published more than thirty years after the publication of his seminal book, the German author briefly summarized its principal point of view. He distinguished between two ways of presenting the historical avant-garde. He characterized the first as a typical example of modernist thinking about art, emphasizing the role of autonomy. The second one, on the other hand, he considered to be a rejection of modernism. He regarded Dadaism, Surrealism and Constructivism as particularly important avant-garde currents, as their main aim was to attack the institution of art and revolutionize life as a whole. Both of these aspirations went hand in hand, as "the attack on the institution of art is the condition for the possible realization of a utopia in which art and life are united"<sup>9</sup>. The basis for the achievement of the objectives of the second variety, which Bürger considers to be the avant-garde proper, is therefore critical activity. It is to this goal that works of art are subordinated, losing their former character associated with aesthetic teleology. Not just the role of aesthetic values ceases to matter, but so does the autonomy, so strongly emphasized by Adorno. The work is supposed to revolutionize life. For the "organization of a new life praxis" it is no longer sufficient, if, as in aestheticism, a work "is wholly distinct from the (bad) praxis of the existing society"<sup>10</sup>.

Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades are considered to be the most radical example of actions characterizing such an approach. In their case, it is "not from the form-content totality of the individual object Duchamp signs [that one can] infer the meaning, but only from the contrast between mass-produced object on the one

<sup>7</sup> P. Mann, *op. cit.* p. 77.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>9</sup> P. Bürger, *Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde: An Attempt to Answer Certain Critics of "Theory of the Avant-Garde"*, "New Literary History" 2010, 41, p. 696.

<sup>10</sup> P. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, transl. from the German by Michael Shaw, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1984, p. 50.

hand, and signature and art exhibit on the other”<sup>11</sup>. However, the critical effect on the institution of art could also be achieved in a different way. Bürger assigns a key role in this respect to the assemblage. It stands in opposition to the creation of artistic form as an organic whole or a unity in multiplicity. He traces its beginnings to the collages of Picasso and Braque. “In the *papiers collés* of Picasso and Braque that they created during the years before the First World War, we invariably find a contrast between two techniques: the ‘illusionism’ of the reality fragments that have been glued on the canvas (a piece of a woven basket or wallpaper) and the ‘abstraction’ of cubist technique in which the portrayed objects are rendered”<sup>12</sup>. According to Bürger, this contrast is the dominant interest of the two artists, because it includes an element of provocation that undermines the institution of art related to works of certain value, which are organic entities. Collages also questioned the institution of aesthetics as a field where these values were attributed significant social meaning.

However, the German author cautions us not to overestimate this “element of provocation”, because “although there is destruction of the organic work that portrays reality, art itself is not being called into question”<sup>13</sup>. Much more radical were the achievements of the Dadaists and the Constructivists. In these cases there was a direct reference to reality, which consisted in the fact that the works were not created as aesthetic objects, but rather as “images intended for reading” (such as John Heartfield's photomontages) or objects serving people who satisfy their practical needs (the Productivist phase of Russian Constructivism). Bürger believes that in such situations, “the artist not only renounces shaping a whole, but gives the painting a different status, since parts of it no longer have the relationship to reality characteristic of the organic work of art. They are no longer signs pointing to reality, they *are* reality”<sup>14</sup>.

The attack on the social expectations, carried out by questioning the concept of a work of art, was supposed to lead to challenging the foundations of aesthetics. The categories of perception and aesthetic experience, regarded as highly important in most periods of the development of European culture, proved inappropriate and useless when dealing with avant-garde works. As observed by Bürger,

The avant-gardist work neither creates a total impression that would permit an interpretation of its meaning nor can whatever impression may be created be accounted for by recourse to the individual parts, for they are no longer subordinated to a pervasive intent. This refusal to provide meaning is experienced as shock by the recipient”<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

From the point of view of the artist, such a shock is desirable because it changes human behaviour. The German author believes that “it is the means to break through aesthetic immanence and to usher in a change in the recipient's life praxis”<sup>16</sup>. The former effect probably results from the fact that upon contact with an avant-garde work, the recipient does not discover its principle by him-/herself. This causes surprise, which will be transferred to the realm of practical life: “And this is the intention of the avant-garde artist, who hopes that such withdrawal of meaning will direct the reader's attention to the fact the conduct of one's life is questionable and that it is necessary to change it”<sup>17</sup>. Thus, contact with art did not isolate one form of life (as in the old concepts of aesthetic contemplation), but brought us closer to it and encouraged its evaluation.

The shock tactic seems to be purposeful and effective as regards attacking the institution of art and revolutionizing life. However, Bürger notes the dangers associated with such an approach. He writes that the audience responded to Dadaists' provocations with “blind fury”, and such a state is not conducive to desirable changes in behaviour. Moreover, repeating this effect causes the recipients to start expecting a shock. In turn, “such a nearly institutionalized shock probably has a minimal effect on the way the recipients run their lives. The shock is ‘consumed’”<sup>18</sup>. That is why the shock tactics is replaced by “the enigmatic quality of the forms”. It can be assumed that while the first strategy was connected with the Dadaist approach, the second one is characteristic of Surrealism. The artwork appears immune to the attempts to define its meaning. The recipients unwilling to give up interpretation then move to another level “instead of proceeding according to the hermeneutic circle and trying to grasp a meaning through the nexus of whole and parts, the recipient will suspend the search for meaning and direct attention to the principles of construction that determine the construction of the work”<sup>19</sup>. Bürger believes that in this way an avant-garde work of art provokes a certain split. Instead of looking for meaning, the viewer is forced to concentrate on the principles of construction, which are characterized by the above-mentioned inconsistency, inorganicity resulting from the fact that instead of the whole we are dealing with an assembly of different parts. Thus, instead of the aesthetic satisfaction based on harmonious compatibility, there is a tension that can be applied to the assumed goal of the avant-garde, which is the “revolutionization of life”.

As I have mentioned before, the German author believed that the neo-avant-garde emerging after World War II was a sign of the failure of the avant-garde project. He explains this issue by pointing to the fact that artists turned away from the problems of life after the war. Instead of bringing art to life practice, the neo-avant-garde brought back the forms of artistic activity pursued in the beginning

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in order to restore the traditional aesthetic premises. Clarifying his view on the historical failure of the avant-garde, Bürger drew attention to the museumization of its artistic achievements which, according to the original intentions of their creators were meant as an attack against the institution of art. However, this institution proved extremely resilient and absorbed what was supposed to destroy it. Moreover, the shock effect, which was intended to have a significant impact both on art and in social life, turned out not to destroy but rather to enrich the existing art forms and techniques. The German author writes, “after Duchamp, not only can the everyday artefact claim the status of an artwork but the discourse of the institution is moulded by the avant-gardes to a degree that no one could have predicted. Avant-garde categories such as rupture and shock gain admittance to the discourse of art, while at the same time concepts such as harmony and coherence are suspected of conveying a false appearance and a reconciliation with a degraded status quo”<sup>20</sup>. The failure of the avant-garde as a utopian project concerning life was therefore connected with its success within the framework of institutionalized art.

In these circumstances, should we be talking about the failure of the avant-garde, or rather about its victory, albeit different from the one we were expecting? The answer to this question depends on the role that we attribute to the utopian theories developed by the artists. If we consider them, as Bürger assumes, to be a constitutive component of the movement, designed to be truly turned into reality, then undoubtedly the avant-garde has failed, regardless of the importance attributed to its works. The recognition it is currently enjoying, being both the subject of research in the field of art history and taken into account in popular culture (e. g. in advertising), is rather ironic. The avant-garde can be also seen as an example of a lofty failure, one of the many in the history of culture. However, I believe that a different approach to its programme is also possible.

Talking or writing about the success of the avant-garde, we usually concentrate on the works themselves, disregarding the intentions of the artists expressed in their manifestos or other programmatic texts. As specific works are taken into consideration, we place them in our museum of imagination and decide on the arrangement of the museum halls. We discuss the appropriate placement of the avant-garde in books on art history. However, the basis of the created configurations are the works themselves, considered independently of their theoretical background.<sup>21</sup> Such an approach is different from that described by Bürger, although it still deprives the works of their connection with life. They are subject to objectification because of their separation from theory. How they have emerged, the issues they are meant to resolve, and how they can influence the decisions

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<sup>20</sup> P. Bürger, *Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde ...*, op. cit. p. 705.

<sup>21</sup> Such practices are regarded as postmodernist and can be found even in serious institutions.

made by the later artists is not recognized. Their theoretical content and potential impact are therefore underestimated. The programme included in the works, which may contribute to their life in later realizations, is undervalued. From this point of view, the field of pedagogy may be an exception. The avant-garde's ideas and assumptions have been adopted by some university teachers as part of their teaching practice. I am thinking not so much of the art history classes, but of the practical courses in painting, sculpting, new media or intermediary studies. The students of such courses are acquainted with the achievements of avant-garde artists not with the focus on their role in destroying art institutions, but rather on the artistic challenges which they provided. The issues discussed in Bürger's book, such as assemblage and coincidence, are not meant to overturn the "system of depiction" but to broaden its impact. They do not lead to a "holistic impression", but at the same time they are not something that would completely take an executed painting or sculpture outside the area of art and towards practical life.

It could be argued that such pedagogical use of the avant-garde's achievements is a betrayal of its principles. However, despite the allegations in the theoretical writings of the avant-garde artists that each new direction in art is academised, that Cubist and Futurist "academies" are promptly emerging, one can observe that many artists are interested in the pedagogical consequences of their achievements. One can even say that pedagogization is inscribed in the principles of the avant-garde, even as understood by Bürger. After all, what else is the desire to reject institutionalized art and revolutionize life, if not an attempt to educate? On the other hand, the attempts made by Walter Gropius (Bauhaus), Alexander Rodchenko (*Vkhutemas*) or Władysław Strzemiński (the State School of Fine Arts in Łódź) to create art schools are undoubtedly linked to the pedagogical reform. Here, we cannot speak of the failure of the avant-garde. However, one might wonder whether we are faced with a reduction in its assumptions and a depletion of what constituted the essence of the concept. At this point, we are once again faced with the question of the role of theory in the entire acquis of the avant-garde. I believe that the writings of the artists and art critics associated with them are an integral part of this project.

In his book, Bürger hardly mentions any theoretical statements by the authors he is studying. He tries to make an impression that the ideas and assumptions he is writing about are gleaned from the works themselves. However, a careful reading of the avant-garde theory reveals clearly that the analyses carried out by the German author were motivated by the content of the Dadaist, Surrealist and Constructivist manifestos. The content of these texts is even richer than the assumptions reconstructed in the book, concerning the attack on art institutions and the revolutionization of life. Should we thus expand our way of thinking about the role of theory in avant-garde art?

I took a step in that direction in my 1991 book *Problemy intelektualizacji sztuki w tendencjach awangardowych* [The intellectualization of art in avant-garde

tendencies].<sup>22</sup> My understanding of the word “intellectualization” in the title was twofold. On the one hand, I drew attention to the rich theoretical achievements of the avant-garde artists and analyzed them. On the other hand, I sought out the symptoms of theoretization in the works themselves. I described the presence of theory in the practical creative activities as theorism. I wrote that I understood this concept as “reflection in art on art itself”.<sup>23</sup> This phrase, perhaps not the most fortunate one, resembles Joseph Kosuth's slogan “art as a definition of art”<sup>24</sup>, but within the concept of theorism, it was understood much more broadly. The reflection was to cover not so much the area of art understood autonomously, but the whole range of the theoretical issues arising within the avant-garde. Among the theoretical questions for which visual equivalents were sought in various avant-garde trends, the book also covered the issues which Bürger had identified in his avant-garde concept – the tensions between “illusionism” and abstraction in Cubist collages, the role of chance in Dadaism and Surrealism – but also the “idiotism” proclaimed by Tristan Tzara. An avant-garde work of art was treated as a kind of experiment consisting of a practical (artistic) part and problem assumptions, sometimes taking the form of author's commentary in the form of written text.

One of my sources of inspiration when working on the issue of theorism in avant-garde artists' work was the belief that the reason for the creation of the work should be the program. It may include a change in the relationship between art and life, an attack on social institutions and the revolutionization of human existence, but it may also be an attempt to change the inherited concept of an artistic piece or the relationship between art and other areas of culture. Władysław Strzemiński articulated this issue, drawing attention to the necessity of referring every issue solved while painting to the solutions applied by earlier artists. “Without comparison and juxtaposition we may underestimate and forget about many important and lasting values”<sup>25</sup>, he wrote. Moreover, without such a reflective approach, according to Strzemiński, art is reduced “to performing mechanics, to the recipe for making works modern at any cost”<sup>26</sup>. The founder of Unism

<sup>22</sup> G. Sztabiński, *Problemy intelektualizacji sztuki tendencjach awangardowych*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź 1991.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.

<sup>24</sup> J. Kosuth, *Art after Philosophy*, in: idem, *Art after Philosophy and After. Collected Writings, 1966-1990*, ed. By G. Guercio, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London 1993, p. 24. The difference concerns the fact that Kosuth only considered reflection on art important (he wrote that “art's only claim is for art”; *op. cit.*, p. 24) questioning its references to the issues of life (religion, philosophy of being, social problems, etc.). Besides, he challenged the role of artistic “morphology”, that is issues pertaining to form. For example, he believed that while the issue of the definition of art was indeed present in avant-garde painting (such as by Jackson Pollock) it was tentative and unclear.

<sup>25</sup> W. Strzemiński, *Sztuka nowoczesna a szkoły artystyczne*, in: idem, *Pisma*, ed. Z. Baranowicz, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wrocław 1975, p. 159.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

criticized those artistic activities that are undertaken without any theoretical motivation. "This way", he wrote, "the Constructivist school, which was intended to expand its influence and raise the level of modern art, instead becomes a means of undermining and impoverishing modern art"<sup>27</sup>. Strzeński was referring to situations in which Constructivism became stylistics. It ceased to be a solution to theoretical problems related to a specific painting or sculpture. It lost its function as a "laboratory of forms". It no longer asked questions about how new types of shapes and their arrangement can affect the way a person functions when they are incorporated into functional objects. In these circumstances, Constructivism became a method of producing objects with specific properties, providing decorative motifs that lost their theoretical context. In such a form, according to the founder of Unism, it depleted art without bringing elements of a new life into it.

### The end of theory

In 1985, Victor Burgin, a well-known artist and art theoretician, published his book *The End of Art Theory*<sup>28</sup>. The title issue was elaborated in particular in the last chapter. The author starts with recounting how the meaning of the word "art" evolved in European tradition. He starts with ancient Greece, then discusses medieval and modern views, drawing attention to the gradual increase in the importance of art theory. Initially, painting or sculpture served only as examples in the reflections on the issues of "beauty" or "representation". Thus, there was no theory of art in the contemporary sense of an "explanatory scheme of ideas"<sup>29</sup>. It was not until the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century that the situation changed and painting began to be described as both a theoretical and a practical discipline. However, Kant made a distinction between "science" as an expression of concepts and "art" as an expression of feelings. Since the Enlightenment period, there has also been a firm belief that "'good common sense' is the fundamental most important quality in an art critic"<sup>30</sup>. Romanticism attempted to overturn this view, introducing a wave of irrationalism into art. However, the two seemingly contradictory tendencies ultimately merged. In the eighteenth century, a modernist concept of the specific character of visual arts was developed. As a result, institutions supporting aesthetic autonomy began to be established. As a result, both narratives about art (Enlightenment and Romantic) ceased to be treated as opposing, and realistic, expressionist and formalist theories rarely appeared entirely in isolation.

In the context of the discussed historical transformations, Burgin does not attribute a special role to the avant-garde. He believes that the departure from the artistic quietism and social withdrawal, which characterized former concepts

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 160.

<sup>28</sup> V. Burgin, *The End of Art Theory: Criticism and Postmodernity*, Macmillan, London 1986.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., pp. 144-145.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 150.

of art, appeared only as a result of the French events of May 1968. On the wave of demands for democratization at that time, art opened up to the contemporary world. The seemingly “self-evidently eternal verities of Art, inherited from the Enlightenment and Romanticism [...] were rigorously interrogated”<sup>31</sup>. However, this did not lead to their demise, nor did the disappearance of artistic institutions occur. The debates themselves, however, “were not silenced, they continued in the margins of the art. institutions and, in exile from the increasingly conservative ‘art magazines’, they took up residence in other journals (particularly, the newly-emerging reviews of ‘cultural theory’)”<sup>32</sup>. Art was considered there to be outside of the great tradition, while taking into account references to “micro-political” movements, such as the women's liberation movement or the Black Power movement, ecological, anti-nuclear, anti-psychiatric movements, etc. Thus, it is not the theory of art that came to an end, but the Enlightenment-Romantic art theory. It saw the artist as an individualist expressing himself in an autonomous work. A turn towards post-Enlightenment and post-Romantic theories occurred, based on relations with Marxism, psychoanalysis, semiotics and feminism. It was common for these different concepts, Burgin writes, to reject the conviction that a work of art has its source in the artist's thoughts and feelings. The artist “does not simply ‘create’ – innocently, spontaneously, *naturally* – like a flowering shrub which blossoms because it can do no other. The artist first of all inherits a role handed down by a particular history, through particular institutions, and whether he or she chooses to work within or without the given history and institutions, for or against them, the relationship to them, is inescapable”<sup>33</sup>. Thus, creativity takes place in the area of discourses, and thus is opposed to earlier concepts of authorship. Of course, in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, artists also dealt with issues relevant to their time. However, this reference was made through individual subjectivity, expressing the private way of experiencing events and problems. Besides, it also occurred in an aesthetic aura that created a distance from them. At present, the relationship with regard to the addressed issues has become direct. Theoretical premises concerning art are either revoked or become a subject of critical activity of artists.

Thus, the great theory ends, which for centuries has determined the way of understanding artistic activity and influenced the behaviour of the audience. Nowadays, art cannot be theoretically justified. Burgin links this fact with the post-modern crisis of legitimacy. Referring to Lyotard's reflections on contemporary problems of the justification of science, he points out two possibilities that have so far been taken into account: “art for people” and “art for art's sake”. Neither of these options is convincing today, nor is either valid for current art.<sup>34</sup> This

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 161.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 158.

<sup>34</sup> This problem is analogous to the nineteenth-century crisis of representation, discussed by Fredric Jameson (cf. *ibid.*, p. 179).

problem did not occur in modernist concepts. For example, Clement Greenberg's concept of art can be seen as the culmination of the Enlightenment project to organize knowledge in the framework of independent areas, including art. The author wrote that he considered Kant to be the first modernist. Moreover, he attached great importance to justifying the role of form in art and emphasized the significance of the "medium" considered from the point of view of the evolutionary continuity of means of artistic expression. Today, according to Burgin, theories that legitimize art are outdated. The "de-legitimization" of the main "narrative of *Art*" has taken place. In contrast, art is based on "*local narratives*", which can no longer be accepted as always binding, but "must be continually in process of writing and revision"<sup>35</sup>.

In his attempt to analyze art after the "end of theory", Burgin refers to the concept of discourse understood in line with Michel Foucault's concept presented in his *Archaeology of Knowledge*<sup>36</sup>. The change associated with this is to involve a transition from emphasizing the role of falsification towards "generating an effect". According to the traditional epistemological approach, theories are sets of concepts and theorems referring to a specific field of reality and are considered to be truthful or false by virtue of a confrontation with it. There are no such limitations in the concept of discourse. Discourses are not the result of expressive activities, through which someone expresses ideas, but have a constructive character, creating "effects of truth" and thus forming a social world<sup>37</sup>. The concept of discourses does not dispute the fact that reality exists, but stresses that social access to it is shaped by categories present in discourses. Burgin believes that this concept is in line with the aforementioned Lyotard's observation on the crisis of legitimacy in science, and considers a consequence of the rejection of epistemology to be the replacement of the question "is this discourse true" with the question "what is the effect of the truth effect of his discourse"<sup>38</sup>. As a result, a specific problem, such as sexism, is not a state of affairs that exists on its own, independently of the fact that it has been described in the feminist discourse. It is a construct of this discourse, the aim of which is to bring about specific social effects and change interpersonal relations. Knowledge created by the discourse is therefore meant to serve a mobilizing and "strategic", not ontological, function<sup>39</sup>.

Burgin refers the problem of discourse to the considered great theory of the Enlightenment-Romantic art and combines it with the issue of artistic institutions,

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 180.

<sup>36</sup> M. Foucault, *Archeologie du savoir*, Editions Gallimard, Paris 1969.

<sup>37</sup> Therefore, the concept of discourse analysis is referred to as „social constructivism“. (cf. M. Jorgensen, L.J. Philips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, SAGE Publications, London 2002).

<sup>38</sup> V. Burgin, op. cit., p. 187.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 187.

which still support it today. He writes that one should “recognize the art institution as a *discursive institution*”<sup>40</sup> and deem it to be always ideological. The consequences are far-reaching. Contemporary art does not refer to reality, it is not rooted in its ontology, it does not attempt to transform it, as avant-garde artists assumed. The artist ceases to perceive his role as a “builder of the world” and sees himself as a “social actor” who identifies himself with the “subject positions”. He does not aspire to truth, but to dominate – to make the discourse to which he feels attached a hegemonic project<sup>41</sup>. In such a situation, Burgin believes that “art [...] today is that which is in essence nothing but a blank slate upon which the critical discourse may be inscribed”. There is no theory of art, since art has become an operative field for discourses”<sup>42</sup>.

Thus ends the theory of art. The contemporary category of “art” emerged in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century with the isolation of *homo significans* from *homo faber* and recognition of art as a *theoretical practice*. “This theoretical status of art – Burgin writes – was conformed and consolidated in the discursive-institutional constructions of the eighteenth century (the academy, art history, criticism and so on) to form the foundations of the modern art institution”<sup>43</sup>. Taking this point of view into account, one can conclude that the avant-garde of the first half of the twentieth century was a revolt against the institutions and their theoretical foundations, but it did not change the very model of thinking about art itself. The avant-garde theory was considered to be important as it was supposed to serve as a basis for artistic activities and set the scope of formulated goals. The post-WWII neo-avant-garde reinforced these tendencies. This later became one of the reasons for the attacks directed against the avant-garde approach to art. It was accused of excessive theorizing, “cerebrality”, departure from visual specifics and spontaneity of action. “the apparent ‘emergence’ of theory in the art world of the late 1960s (which so scandalized the self-appointed guardians of art’s intellectual Innocence)”, Burgin wrote, “was therefore simply a resurgence of that which had been repressed in the ideologies of (a degraded) late-Romanticism”<sup>44</sup>. This trend was brought to an end by Postmodernism, within which theorism was replaced by the incorporation of art into the world of discourses. Concluding his deliberations in 1985, Burgin wrote that “‘Art theory’, understood as those interdependent forms of art history, aesthetics, and criticism which began in the Enlightenment and culminated in the recent period of ‘high modernism’, is now at an end”.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 192.

<sup>41</sup> I am referring here to the characteristics of the theory of discourse by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe presented in the book by Marianne Jorgensen and Louise J. Philips., op. cit., p. 2451.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 200.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 203.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

I started this paper by pointing out the external factors determining the continued existence and functioning of the avant-garde model of art. However, the role of the new theories evidencing the innovativeness inherited from the avant-garde is now being neutralized in the context of the “discursive economy” characterizing contemporary culture. The “dialectic apparatus” operating on its basic levels transforms the artists’ critical statements into affirmative ones by placing them within the frame of institutionalized art. As a result, the avant-garde concepts are incorporated into a system in which they become one of the elements of the production and circulation of cultural resources. Their rebelliousness is neutralized, and their radical proposals do not interfere with the processes of the “discursive economics”, but instead seek to uphold them. The absorption of the avant-garde theories by the cultural apparatus is tantamount to the ongoing death of the avant-garde. Theories thus give the avant-garde a kiss of death.

Burgin took the most radical stance on the avant-garde’s theorization of art. He considered it a continuation of the theoretical tendency initiated in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, reinforced during the Enlightenment and modified in the Romantic era. In his opinion, the avant-garde did not thwart the underlying foundations of this concept of art, but merely modified it. The change took place in Postmodernism, with the end of theory and the opening of art to different discourses. However, should it not be concluded based on these concepts, in which “death”, “life”, or “end” are a recurring theme, that a different metaphor ought to be sought and used? It might perhaps invoke a different vision – giving hope to the avant-gardes in Postmodernism or to avant-gardes after the avant-garde.

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## **AWANGARDA: SZTUKA JAKO TEORIA (streszczenie)**

Punktem wyjścia artykułu są pytania sformułowane w 1993 roku przez Philipa Auslendera dotyczące tego, czy awangarda jest możliwa w postmodernizmie, albo czy sam postmodernizm można uznać za nową fazę awangardy? Przedstawiciele sztuki awangardowej przypisywali istotną rolę teorii. Dlatego próba odpowiedzi na zadane pytania podjęta została w nawiązaniu do trzech możliwości, jakie łączono z awangardowym teoretyzowaniem. Pierwsza została omówiona w nawiązaniu do książki Paula Manna *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde*. Polega ona na wskazaniu, że dziś sztuka funkcjonuje w ramach „ekonomii dyskursywnej”. Teorie awangardowe, opozycyjne wobec artystycznego status quo, w istocie podtrzymują funkcjonowanie tego aparatu, stając się „dyskursywnie produktywne”. Zatem zamiast do odnowy, przyczyniają się do śmierci awangardy, wchłonięcia jej przez kulturowy „efekt wymiany”. Druga możliwość, określona jako „teoria – życie”, zostaje rozwinięta na przykładzie tekstów Petera Bürgera. Uznał on, że podstawowym dążeniem awangardy był atak na instytucję sztuki i zrewolucjonizowanie życia jako całości. Odnowa ta była zapowiadana w tekstach i realizowana w dziełach sztuki, które stawały się sposobem podjęcia i próbą rozwiązania problemów teoretycznych. Zjawisko to określiłem jako „teoretyzm”. Trzecia omówiona możliwość to „koniec teorii”. Została ona przedstawiona w nawiązaniu do książki Victora Burgina o tym samym tytule. Angielski autor uważa, że w XX wieku nastąpił upadek koncepcji sztuki kształtowanej od okresu Renesansu, a uformowanej w czasach Oświecenia i Romantyzmu. Sztuka obecna rozgrywa się nie w obszarze teorii, a w sferze dyskursów tworzących „efekty prawdy” i pełniących funkcje mobilizującą i strategiczną, nie ontologiczną. Artykuł kończą uwagi na temat zmiany metafor („śmierć”, „życie”, „koniec”), które są stosowane w związku z awangardą i ewentualnych konsekwencji tej sytuacji.

**Słowa kluczowe:** awangarda, teoria, dyskurs, Paul Mann, Peter Bürger, Victor Burgin.

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## **LAS MENINAS – INTERPRETATION NARRATIVES THROUGHOUT CENTURIES**

**Abstract:** The purpose of this paper is to focus on the interpretations of some 20th and 21st century artworks inspired by the painting *Las Meninas* by Diego Velázquez. The analysis is to show the potential of artistic techniques, the inventiveness of the avant-garde and neo-avant-garde artists, and the meaningful re-readings of the original work. The author concludes that imitative artworks lacking a conceptual dimension are only historical references with no significant role in the history of art due to their submission to the influence of the Baroque model. In contrast, significant conceptualisation and creative attitude towards *Las Meninas* add to intentionally meaningful interpretations, showing the deeper aspects of the masterpiece, and thus becoming autonomous artworks which could be presumably created regardless of the original source of inspiration. The artworks under scrutiny have been selected with regard to their artistic techniques and their interpretative potential which served as a means to define the level of their creative autonomy.

**Keywords:** inspiration, interpretation, forma, conceptualism, transformation

### **A courtly scene as a source of inspiration**

This paper tells the story of *Las Meninas* by Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez, which was painted in 1656. Some art historians regard it as one of the greatest achievements in the history of art.<sup>1</sup> However, I do not mean to dwell on the historical background of the painting, but rather consider its reception and its influence on the most venerated artists since its creation. This could be also viewed as the need to “supplement” the history of *Las Meninas* by the list of artworks and their

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<sup>1</sup> S. Alpers, “Interpretation without Representation, or, the Viewing of *Las Meninas*”, in: *Representations*, University of California Press, No. 1. (Feb., 1983), p. 32: [http://ssbothwell.com/documents/las\\_meninas/Alpers\\_Svetlana-Interpretation\\_without\\_representation.pdf](http://ssbothwell.com/documents/las_meninas/Alpers_Svetlana-Interpretation_without_representation.pdf)

creators affected by this masterpiece throughout the centuries.<sup>2</sup> This painting is a real challenge for many artists, who enter into personal and creative dialogue with it, or try to exploit it as a source of visual allusions, allowing them to create an artistic resonance among the public. I am particularly interested in the inspirational potential of *Las Meninas* and the time span of the never-ending and multi-faceted process of plastic and mental transformations of this work. This type of “magical” impact on artists throughout history reveals a change of its historical perception by the subsequent generations of artists, allowing us to interpret it taking into account its many emerging versions which challenge the original and bear the traces of the time at which they were created.<sup>3</sup> Our question is whether *Las Meninas* should be viewed as the greatest achievement in the history of painting, an exceptional and singular work of the past, or rather as a living piece, still attracting other artists’ imagination? The dialogue with Diego Velázquez’s work, conducted by most acclaimed artists, gives it a unique historical continuity and opens a space for interpretations; its continuing mesmerising attractiveness for the artists captivates their imagination and tempts them to set off on artistic and aesthetic quests.<sup>4</sup> I am fully convinced that Velázquez’s painting will remain inspiring and will never lose its artistic value for future generations, even when you compare it with other masterpieces. *Las Meninas* is like an emblem of the art world, and that is why artists are so hypnotised by it and feel they are compelled to return to it and abandon themselves to its charm.

*Las Meninas* is in no sense a conventional picture It [is] ... concerned with nothing less than the role vision plays in human self-definition. The picture induces a kind of accentuation of consciousness by summoning the observer’s eye to exert itself in responsive action and intensified multiple acts of perception.<sup>5</sup>

My interest in this topic originated from my long-term fascination not only with Velázquez’s painting, but with its impact on other artists, especially since the 20<sup>th</sup> century. My approach could be described as deliberations set in a labyrinth which endlessly continues to trap the mind of the interpreter reading the historical work but sometimes, due to its influence, adding new elements to his/her own imaginary world. It is my intention to look into the recurrence – in the new ver-

<sup>2</sup> M. Foucault, *The Order of Things. An archaeology of the human sciences*, Routledge, Taylor and Francis e-Library, London and New York 2005 and L. Steinberg, *Velázquez’ „Las Meninas”*, JSTOR, in: “October”, MIT Press. Vol. 19 (Winter, 1981), pp. 52-53: <http://faculty.winthrop.edu/stockk/SELF%20PORTRAIT/Steinberg,%20Las%20Meninas.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> The website containing some artworks alluding to *Las Meninas* by Diego Velázquez: “Artble”, [http://www.artble.com/artists/diego\\_velazquez/paintings/las\\_meninas](http://www.artble.com/artists/diego_velazquez/paintings/las_meninas)

<sup>4</sup> M. Kahr, “Velázquez and Las Meninas”, *Art Bulletin*, 57/2, June 1975, pp. 225-246.

<sup>5</sup> L. Steinberg, Velázquez’ “Las Meninas”... p. 52.

sions – of some characteristic themes. *Las Meninas* plays an important role in the history of avant-garde and neo-avant-garde aesthetic revolutions, which in the course of time affected the understanding of art forms, spaces, and colours. The masterpiece in the Museo del Prado remains unchanged, but it provides still new inspirations and allusions for new generations of artists.<sup>6</sup> The painting can give rise to refined interpretations, but also to rebellious and/or ironic approaches, either subverting its aesthetics and its conventional readings, or concentrated on the personal experiences of its unrivalled beauty.

In consequence of my passion for tracing *Las Meninas* in a variety of venues and situations either in physical reality or while browsing the Internet, I have studied many artworks influenced by it, starting from the print by Francisco Goya (1778), up until today, when one can see hundreds, if not thousands, of its versions. Furthermore, being so deeply charmed by Velázquez's painting, some time ago I made a personal pilgrimage to Madrid. The juxtaposition of the aesthetic experience of the piece in its physical space and its hyper-detailed HD graphic digital representation was a great challenge for me.<sup>7</sup> I was happy to encounter the masterpiece "face to face", but on the other hand, it is great to be able to look at it from unconventional perspectives that would not be possible while visiting the Museo del Prado. Later on, I reflected on the widespread appreciation of this masterpiece throughout the centuries, and its unprecedented power to inspire many artists and philosophers; I think that this paper may serve as a good exemplification of this phenomenon.

The artistic allusions to *Las Meninas* discussed below are of different character. But my general hypothesis is that the works that involve only a play with its artistic form should be seen as devoid of meaning, and as such, imperfect, bringing aesthetic dissatisfaction. Formal allusions will always lose in comparison with the awesome original. It is the ones evidencing a deeper analysis of the concepts behind the visible representation and carrying an important message for the spectators of their time that can live their own aesthetic lives and preserve their own identities with respect to *Las Meninas*. Such works, conveying the ideas paramount for the recipients, make us aware of the changing historical circumstances and ready to make new and unpredictable readings rooted in different historical experiences. Velázquez's work is perfect and complete, but its meaning for successive generations may evolve, and can therefore be studied anew and re-interpreted.

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<sup>6</sup> L. Cocchiarella, "When Image sets Reality. Perspectival alchemy in Velázquez's *Las Meninas*", in: *KoG Scientific*, No. 19/2015, pp. 65-83: <https://www.google.pl/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0ahUKewjenfD5vtnVAhWBSRoKHeFxDgkQFggqMAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fhrcaak.srce.hr%2Ffile%2F222632&usq=AFQjCNHPzgrEoRkKZIBgYJ-jnRj0Navwn5g>

<sup>7</sup> *Las Meninas* on the website of the Museum of Prado, picture scan in HD: <https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/las-meninas/9fdc7800-9ade-48b0-ab8b-edee94ea877f>

Researchers in the field have defined some of the most important themes in the history of canvas painting.<sup>8</sup> One of them, which has attracted close attention of art historians, is the figure of Margaret Theresa, the princess prematurely deceased in childbirth at 22. This member of the Habsburg royal family impressed the imagination of the posterity due to her unusual representation as an epitome of a future ruler, the source of responsibility, but also secret control. The image of the Princess, surrounded by her courtiers in the royal art gallery located in the now demolished part of the Royal Palace hosting Velázquez's atelier (Cuarto del Principe)<sup>9</sup>, conveys the social significations broader than its apparent aesthetic representation as a portrait: the sense of royal power and rule, but also loneliness, the burden of authority and historic responsibility. They could be perceived in the Infanta's pondering but playful expression, as she is seemingly unaware of the real meaning of the scene in which she appears. Another point of interest is the Royal Chamberlain Don José Nieto Velázquez, one of the central figures of the painting, who can be seen in the doorway to the Princess's room. He seems to be an ambivalent character, as his devotion to the royal family was in doubt due to the arising suspicions about his hidden intents, perhaps spying, which could be implied here by his position near the two royal rooms. Among the other characters arousing curiosity are the two guardians in the background, attentively watching the scene: Infanta's chaperone Marcela de Ulloa and a bodyguard (probably Diego Ruiz de Azcon). The other historical figures are the Infanta's ladies-in-waiting Maria Agustina Sarmiento and Isabela de Velasco. Additionally, the focal spots at the bottom right include the figures of two midgets, i.e. the achondroplastic German, Maribarbola (Maria Barbola), and the Italian Nicolas Pertusato, the devoted companions of the Princess's childhood.<sup>10</sup> There is also a large sleepy

<sup>8</sup> J. Searle, "Las Meninas" and the Paradoxes of Pictorial Representation, in: *Critical Inquiry* 6 (3), The University of Chicago Press, 1980, pp. 477-488 and one of the many films about *Las Meninas*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WKRKRpz09Fk>

<sup>9</sup> S. Dunin-Wilczyński, „Artysta wpisany w dzieło. Między *Las Meninas* Diego Velazqueza a *New Nightmare* Wesa Cravena”, in: *Zeszyty Naukowe KUL* 57 (2014), nr 3 (227), p. 5: [https://www.kul.pl/files/102/articles/2014\\_3/zn\\_kul\\_2014\\_3\\_stanislaw\\_dunin-wilczynski.pdf](https://www.kul.pl/files/102/articles/2014_3/zn_kul_2014_3_stanislaw_dunin-wilczynski.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> A good example which underscores the meaning of the Infanta's age is a piece by the collaborating artists Equipo Crónica (Rafaela Solbes) and Manolo Valdésa entitled *Las Meninas la salita*, showing the princess in her room in private. This an oil painting of 70 x70 cm, which shows a child's room from the 1970s. You can see there some characteristic objects such as an inflatable duck for a swimming pool or a ball. This is to remind the spectator that the princess is an ordinary girl of the age of five who is surely not interested in aesthetics nor her future political challenges. She discards all political intrigues, men's high ideals and their plots. From the point of view of a common man this seems more realistic than Velázquez's work. The scene where the little girl is playing with her toys in her room is more attractive than the one showing the girl of five as a ruler standing in the royal room. The modern representation shows a scene which could take place in any household, because the royal successor's child-like nature cannot be changed and detract her from home-like family atmosphere. Obviously, this painting refers to the original work, and the message inherent in it, though only implied there. In Velázquez's portrayal it is the princess who dominates the composition; in *Las Meninas la salita* it is a child at play who is more important.

dog in the right corner. Master Velázquez is seen painting the royal couple – Phillip IV and Mariana of Austria, who are only visible as a reflection in the mirror.<sup>11</sup> The painter standing in front of his canvas is seen as dominating all of the elements of the royal room. In the later renditions this is a frequently highlighted feature.

### Artistic "travels in time" – history and interpretations

Throughout history dozens, if not hundreds, of versions of *Las Meninas* were created. For the purposes of this paper I have chosen to discuss the works (created after 1957) of such artists as Salvador Dali (1960), Tadeusz Kantor (1965), Rafael Solbes and Manolo Valdés (1970), Cristóbal Toral (1975), Joel Peter Witkin (1987), Sophie Matisse (2001), Shinji Ogawa (2002), Greg Tatum (2005), Lluís Barba (2007) and Gerard Rancinan (2009). My story of the life of the masterpiece throughout centuries could begin from the description of my predilection for (or I might even say obsession with) Picasso's versions of *Las Meninas*, which he began to create in 1957. Among the 58 of his paintings which Picasso donated to the museum under his patronage in Barcelona as many as 45 pieces were related in some way to *Las Meninas*. Picasso's transformations of the themes from this painting are characteristic for avant-garde artistic experiments. They attempt *inter alia* to explore a variety of possible perspectives, including imaginary ones, in order to enable the viewer to gain unique aesthetic experience and insight due to the exceptional aesthetic features of the painting.<sup>12</sup> As the artist was able to employ Cubist geometry, specifically by breaking up the shapes common in the natural world and then remodelling them in line with his ideas, it was possible for him to focus on the relevant features by rejecting elements of the painting which were redundant, useless and of poor aesthetic quality. Picasso's most renowned piece alluding to *Las Meninas* is a monochrome greyish large-format painting (194 x 260 mm), where Velázquez's "orderly composed narrative" was replaced by the composition of contrasts between white and black values. While Velázquez's painting created in 1656 reflects on the family scene in the palace's calm room, Picasso's version is truly dynamic, if not disorganised. In his picture everything is seemingly carefully located, but the contrasts and light in the upper part of the room strive to divert the viewer's attention, undermining the desired concentration on the aesthetic values of the work. Velázquez's image resembles a posed photo, but Picasso's work evokes chaos destroying a cosy family atmosphere.

<sup>11</sup> Z. Ambrożewicz, *Widzialność niewidzialnego. Las Meninas Diega Velázqueza*, in: „Przegląd Filozoficzny – Nowa Seria”, R. 22: 2013, Nr 1 (85): [http://pf.czasopisma.pan.pl/images/data/pf/wydania/No\\_1\\_2013/6.pdf](http://pf.czasopisma.pan.pl/images/data/pf/wydania/No_1_2013/6.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> H. Bizri, A. Johnson, Ch. Vasilakis, *Las Meninas in VR: Storytelling and the Illusion in Art*, Electronic Visualization Laboratory University of Illinois at Chicago: [https://www.evl.uic.edu/aej/papers/meninas\\_paris.pdf](https://www.evl.uic.edu/aej/papers/meninas_paris.pdf), and 3D film about *Las Meninas* with reference to the version by Picasso: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_B91T6bomh4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_B91T6bomh4)

Velázquez's love of accuracy in revealing details can evoke the mood of persistence and dignity prevailing at the real moment, as contrasted with apparent chaos in Picasso's work. The latter is also widely known for the employed avant-garde painting technique, leading to new experiments with colours and perspective enriched by abstract components. But my point, perhaps somewhat risky, is that except for its appreciated vanguard painting technique, Picasso's representation lacks a deep message, i.e. it could be interpreted as a vanguard manifesto, where Velázquez's work is used as material for re-modelling. Ultimately, Picasso's interpretation relies too much on the original and does not contribute to the formulation of new ideas, therefore it has not become unobjectionably independent from its model to constitute an original work. I would be inclined to maintain that it is rather an attempt to challenge the Grand Master's technique, whose outcome seems somewhat doubtful due to Picasso's neglect of the content layer of the artwork which could allow for its deeper and autonomous interpretation, even though it apparently shows a dramatically different representation.

In 1950 Picasso referred to Velázquez's work and his variations of the theme as follows:

If someone wanted to copy *Las Meninas*, entirely in good faith, for example, upon reaching a certain point and if that one was me, I would say... what if you put them a little more to the right or left? I'll try to do it my way, forgetting about Velázquez. The test would surely bring me to modify or change the light because of having changed the position of a character. So, little by little, that would be a detestable *Meninas* for a traditional painter, but would be my *Meninas*.<sup>13</sup>

Comparing *Las Meninas* by Velázquez with Picasso's vision, one has an impression that Velázquez's painting is artistically complete and rounded off, which has been verified throughout its reception in history. Thus, in general it may be concluded that any artistic (and specifically painterly) attempts, formally innovative, but not contributing new ideas and meanings, would be only ancillary to the original work. Confrontation with Velázquez's achievements may seem as if a novice contested his Master who cannot be defeated in his field. Although I admire Picasso's paintings, I could hardly agree that the Cubist *Las Meninas* conveys a deeper message than its Baroque prototype. It is also worth mentioning that Picasso painted several colour versions of *Las Meninas*, but it seems that his later works also evidence the fact that his continuous attempts to do better than Velázquez have no real hope of success.

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<sup>13</sup> The website dedicated to Pablo Picasso: <http://www.pablocicasso.org/las-Meninas.jsp>

Another attempt invoking the motifs inherent in Velázquez's Baroque painting which attracted my curiosity is a group of four representations that can be jointly discussed, though they evidently reveal stylistic and ideological differences. The works are unquestionably traditional and do not employ specific avant-garde techniques, but they convey meaningful and conceptualised messages allowing them to refine their relations with the original while preserving their own aesthetic identity. All of the said works use unique perspectives, as they are meant to immortalise the visible changes to the setting of Velázquez's scene throughout history. Let us start with the painting *D'après Las Meninas* (1975) by Cristóbal Toral, who rendered the famous royal chamber as viewed after many years. There are dozens of suitcases and packages covered by dust. They may be interpreted as metaphorical assets accumulated over centuries – historical narratives, memorised events of the past, changing the course of history which left its traces in this royal room; also some furnishings which were brought there in particular periods of time, or sometimes taken away. Cristóbal Toral has quoted the painter's canvas as an object from Master Velázquez's work: it is apparently intact despite the historical perturbations due to the changing ideologies over centuries. The figure of the Royal Chamberlain Don José Nieto Velázquez is also preserved, but nowadays he seems to be rather a guardian of the abandoned luggage, as the people under his care died a long time ago. The painting's dark colours, like the dust-covered packages, arouse the sensation of the passing of time for the viewer who is obviously immersed in the current reality.

The next image under investigation is the painting by Sophie Matisse (2001), which shares similar interpretation of a completely empty room: all of the former furnishings are gone (old stuff is useless today), and the door where the Chancellor was standing are now unguarded and open. The colours have become subdued as in Toral's work, but although the room seems well-kept, it is not important for anybody; it lacks its inner spirit of life which, despite the apparent lapse of time, can be still sensed in the painting. This forgotten space may be likened to the entirely disinterested – perhaps interrupted for a while – visits to the room implied by Toral's representation, showing a journey through time where unpacked cases are left carelessly, hinting at no hope to serve their purpose at home. These *signum memoriae* of the past apparently play the role of the artist's subjective interpretations. In turn, Matisse's painting advances the expectations of a cleaning person who would arrive to treat it as a simple contemporary hotel room, showing his/her indifference to the aesthetic functions of the royal room of historical importance.

The third painting belonging to this group is a medium-sized oil canvas by Shinji Ogawa, in the collection of The National Museum of Art in Osaka. The artist has intentionally repeated the arrangement of the figures in Velázquez's original; however he has removed the Infanta. This absurdity allows the viewer to experience the calmness and timelessness of the composition, but also the sense

of its missing component. As opposed to the images mentioned above, which told some stories, this painting shows motionless figures standing as if in an interrupted scene. This image, looking like a still frame, evokes the atmosphere of unbearable tension, anticipation for anybody who could take the acting role and fulfil their mission, deserving tribute and appraisal as they are starring in their own performance. In fact, the Infanta could be replaced by any person wishing to act in this role. This does not necessarily mean that the painter had in mind a specific character of royal blood, but it is possible that the composition was to symbolise the persistence of the system of hierarchical power, allowing everybody to play their role in the greater order to contribute to the maintenance of the system. In this motionless and dramatic scene one may sense some vague feeling of waiting for somebody to deal with this awkward situation. The deprivation of the meaning of life may be experienced as a more severe suffering than any sadness caused by misfortunes; people need a purposeful and meaningful life to avoid apathy, loneliness and/or lethargy.

The last piece belonging to the group mentioned above that I wish to reflect on is the digital artwork by Greg Tatum (2006), where the representation of the Infanta seems to be an allegory of the mechanisms of power. Here, Margaret Theresa is an electro-magnetic puppet wired to a power supply unit by power cables visible under her garments. She seems to be a robot, which is a symbol of the political pressure on the Infanta. She is rendered in white and grey, deprived of natural expression. Next to her is a man in a modern outfit (the author figure), who seems to be showing ostentatious disrespect to her. The guard in the doorway stands as if keeping an eye on everything, namely the political order in which the Infanta-robot plays an important role as a woman who is formally on the top of the pyramid of power, but, in fact, under full control. The artist has used a cold colour scheme to show the room resembling an abandoned hangar with its ceiling lit by two hanging lamps. The canvas invoking the author of the composition, placed in the same spot as in Velázquez's painting, can remind us about the old story which is subconsciously replayed anew.

All of the four artworks I have examined above do not rely so much on their creative aesthetic form, as primarily on their conceptual and meaningful content owing to which one can experience their unique artistic identity. This applies especially to the last work which is a good example supporting my argument. All of them focus on the setting (the royal room) of the original scene. This approach aims to create a narrative about the passing of time by reference to the royal chamber, which conveys the idea of the heart of Europe of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. All of the artists strive to show the passage of history and time, but Tatum's artwork has another layer of meaning which is relevant for people across the world and across cultures. It is related to and inspired by Velázquez's painting, but it clearly shows its own identity. Its substantial value lies in revealing an intrinsic mechanism of power to control its puppets for political purposes; this observation makes it

a creative interpretation of the original due to its reflection on a universal phenomenon rather than to its historical dimension. For the viewer the novelty of the artistic techniques employed in the above artworks is less important, as they more or less closely follow the original; it is rather their content which renders them creative.

Apparently different and enthralling features could be attributed to the next three artworks I wish to discuss. The first of them is Joel Peter Witkin's photographic collage, *Las Meninas. Self-Portrait after Velázquez* (1987). It shows a darkened room with the infant princess in the centre. She is legless, supported by a mobile scaffolding attached to her dress.<sup>14</sup> Her eyes are hidden behind a transparent scarf, she is holding a rope to keep control over the dog.

The photographer, although he kept as the leading figure Infanta Margarita, gave her a new appearance, that of a woman who has lost her nether limbs and whose body is reduced to the upper part of her trunk. Thus, she appears standing on a metallic framework reminiscent of the girl's dress in the original painting. Her company consists of a dog lying in front of her feet, of a masculine figure, of a hybrid that recalls the figures of Picasso's *Guernica* and of a mechanic automat. Velázquez has also been replaced by the photographer, the courtier standing by the door by the figure of Christ, where as in the initial composition, the king and the queen are reflected in the mirror.<sup>15</sup>

In Witkin's interpretation, the Infanta is an intrinsic element of the picture as a royal, however one who is seemingly ruling over an imaginary kingdom and is an unwilling embodiment of the shared ideas about the Habsburg Royal Family prevailing in Europe. The portrayed infanta is a person who is fully aware of her misfortunes due to her too early experience of power turning her praiseworthy intentions of just and wise rule into suffering from emotional abuse. This could be ascribed to her mode of existence which is, unfortunately, reduced to constant discomfort from the outer stimuli bringing her undesired outcomes due to the conventions of the outer expression of power, limiting her visible royal attributes, and proclaiming only the impression of domination instead.

The themes under scrutiny in this artwork range from the religious motifs invoked by the Christ-like figure at the door alluding to the Chamberlain, to imaginary creatures typical for nightmares, waiting in silence alongside the Infanta for further orders to carry out. The overall impression evoked by this monochrome photo is open to different aesthetic judgments. One can also interpret it as

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<sup>14</sup> G. Celant, *Witkin Joel-Peter*, Thames & Hudson, London 1995, pp. 39-40.

<sup>15</sup> E. Papadopoulou, *Provoking the spectator. Las Meninas* by Joel Peter Witkin, in: "InterArtive - a platform for contemporary art and thought", 10/2008: <http://interartive.org/2008/10/Meninas/>

a show of unchanging power and its tough rule. Both Witkin, here channelling the original painter, and Margaret Habsburg, take appropriate positions to arouse relevant aesthetic experience. The role of the artist is to disclose the philosophical meanings related to the represented power, but the Princess seems to embody its nature in a clear and determined manner.

This work can prompt the viewer to ponder on the essence of power, a phenomenon worthy of close examination. The original work by Velázquez also implies this idea, however it is neither so visible, nor of such primary importance. The photo collage by Witkin may be acknowledged as a creative and not imitative interpretation of its source of inspiration owing to its distinctive artistic techniques, as well as its content. It can be perceived as an artwork with its own identity, unique and different from *Las Meninas*. It may serve as a good example of a work inspired by an old masterpiece, which, however, owing to the innovative features of its content need no longer rely on the original.

Another one of the three representations I have mentioned is *Las Meninas* after Velázquez, part of the series alluding to similar ideological content, namely, a photo by Lluís Barba (2007) which gives me an ambivalent feeling. On the one hand I appreciate the artist's intention to give artistic importance to the new characters who were absent in *Las Meninas*, i.e. the two tourists accidentally stopping at the museum to take some photos without caring for the deeper value of the artworks they are passing by. The original, which serves as a background for them, is kept in black and white, so that the contrast between the tourists, appearing against this background in modern colourful outfits, and the portrayed historical characters is striking. Those two said tourists may belong to the category of modern museum visitors who race along the exhibited works. The artist has pasted these figures into the space of the work and has shown them among the noblemen. In fact, I had also imagined myself immersed in the three-dimensional space of the painting. On the other hand, this work sparks the sense of an indecorous treatment of Velázquez's masterpiece due to the use of the techniques borrowed from advertising and pop-culture art. But its strong impact enhancing the aesthetic experience in such a situation seems thought-provoking. It derives from the interaction at the conceptual level of the photo: the presence of the tourists looking at the painting attracts the viewer's attention to the photo. The scene captured in this image is ostensibly devoid of any specific allusions to the content of *Las Meninas*, therefore the "sacred" value of the masterpiece has been intentionally eradicated due to the suggestion of indifference and/or missing knowledge and aesthetic sensitivity among the recipients. The aesthetic quality of Barba's photo is built on the double perception of the historical moment and modern perspective. The artist did not intend to show the majesty of the royals or interact with the 17th century masterpiece, but to show it as simply belonging to the modern realm of the consumption of art characterised by irreverent and happy-go-lucky attitudes to the work of art. This phenomenon could emerge from simple curiosity or the limited time for the visitors to "tick off" the masterpieces on

their “shopping list” and their later appropriation by means of a “selfie” or other photographic forms to share them, e.g. on the social media on the web. Simply, people do not always (if ever) like to deliberate on in-depth interpretations of artworks and their artistic and historical contexts, but the artist certainly wishes to illustrate the broader issue of the emerging new conventions of viewing art typical for a *flâneur* who is only interested in wandering around, gazing light-heartedly at the works and not necessarily engaging in their deep analysis. I believe that the primary point of Barba’s work is his attitude to the historical dimension of *Las Meninas*; to avoid neglecting anything of its historical importance intrinsic in this monumental painting created ca. 300 years ago we should realise that the analyses of its aesthetic value do not seem necessary. However, this stance is not meant to support the concepts of relativism and subjectivism in the perception of art, but to make us aware of the need to accept a variety of ways of upholding our relations with art regardless of the viewer’s aesthetic knowledge. In my opinion, such knowledge contributes to revealing art’s objective meanings and values as well as shaping our ability to deeply appreciate aesthetic qualities and/or art criticism.

The third photo-collage image to be mentioned here is Gerard Rancinan’s *The Maids of Honor* (2009), with a modern burlesque-like character resembling Marilyn Monroe wearing a necklace with a dollar sign and a tattoo on her forearm acting as the Infanta. The other figures resemble the celebrities from the world of modern fashion and pop-culture. A soubrette wearing a pink latex suit bends her knee showing off her high heels, which departs from the Baroque image. Another lady in waiting is shown in a low-cut evening gown made of newspapers and journals and sports a hair-do like a long-haired blond model. The midgets have put on similar clothes, but the female midget mockingly pulls down the skin on her cheeks and the male midget is holding a leash with a large muzzle. In the open plush-sided doorway where we could formerly see the bodyguard, there are now the biblical Adam and Eve, but this time stylised for a pop culture couple. The royal female caretaker resembles a nun, and Master Velázquez has turned into a photographer tattooed all over his body including his bald head. The framed canvas has remained in its historical place, however the “fragile” marking and the inscription beneath informing us about the place of the work’s execution – the artist’s studio in Los Angeles – are also visible. The author has maintained the historical and artistic connection between the artworks by repeating an element from Velázquez’s original: the reflection in the mirror, though in Rancinan’s collage its background has been replaced. The whole work is like an ad for pop-culture lifestyle. Rancinan intends to show the essence of the court life in different times and from modern perspective, where e.g. gaming, fashion, wealth, and satisfying one’s whims rise in importance. His work can be unambiguously interpreted as it displays “strong and unquestionable” aesthetic values and power of expression. Owing to its conceptual content, this representation maintains its own identity, and its creativeness may contribute to its success as an appreciated work of art.

As opposed to the artworks analysed above, Salvador Dali's version of *Las Meninas* from the Museo del Prado, his painting titled *The Maids-in-Waiting* (1960), cannot be separated from its links to the original. It is composed of numbers which represent the elements of the court scene. So, number seven stands for the painter's canvas, the Master, and the Chancellor, as a symbol of sensitivity, eccentricity, and dynamism, as well as deep spirituality. Numbers four and five denote the ladies-in-waiting, because they symbolise logical thinking, persistence, willingness to learn, resistance to stress, and openness. Numbers six and nine standing for the female caretaker and the male bodyguard in Dali's painting characterise kinship relationships, creativity, emotions and sensitivity. The female midget (number three) is associated with the idea of striving for personal development, gifts, entrepreneurship and creativity, as well as relying on someone else's advice hidden before the public. Number two stands for the dog as it symbolizes balance and openness to others, and also sensitivity and emotionality. Number one indicating the male midget represents leadership and individuality alongside willingness to appear in public. Finally number eight standing for Margaret Theresa, symbolizes creative action, intuitiveness, but also strong will and determination. *The Maids-in-Waiting* is an outstanding artistic achievement, expressing similar ideas as its prototype. The form of Dali's work, surprising at first glance, perfectly fits the aesthetic qualities of Velázquez's masterpiece in terms of the continuation and exploration of the intended meanings intrinsic in the 17<sup>th</sup> century painting. Dali's numerological approach is significant and unambiguous as it is an excellent transcription of the traditional aesthetic ideas into abstract form. However, it needs to be underscored that its aesthetic reception is conditioned by its original antecedent, and its conceptual content develops Velázquez's message, but practically does not contribute to the broadening of our knowledge. Dali's painting has an original and novel form, but it should be noted that it strongly relies on the old masterpiece. Dali's philosophical ideas are inherent in Velázquez's artwork, and his numerological interpretation is built on the narrative of its characters. The outstanding Surrealist work is unable to stand alone as a separate aesthetic entity detached from its artistic predecessor, and it can only be treated as its historical supplement.

Before concluding my analysis it is worth noting two major works by Tadeusz Kantor. One of them is an installation from 1965, which is in fact a diptych joined by the hinges attached to the edges of two wooden boards. The upper part displays a sketched portrait of the Infanta, and underneath two joint wooden elements compose her royal gown. The bottom part displays an old, worn up canvas schoolbag. This foldable piece is intended to contain its components like a bag, thus connoting a journey. For some viewers the Infanta is an unforgettable icon, she is constantly invisibly present in their minds, she is with them when they set out on a journey. She belongs to the intellectual and artistic historical "package" which has a considerable impact on our journey through life. Kantor's artwork, striving to tell us a story about our experience of painful commemoration

of the past may be meant to counter-act the pressure of the power of the original work. The folding-up diptych may symbolically epitomise a forgotten moment of history.

The second of the two works mentioned above is an acrylic painting of 146 x 128 cm entitled *Pewnego wieczoru weszła do mojego pokoju infantka Velasquez'a (po raz drugi)* [One evening the Infanta by Velasquez entered my room for the second time] (1990). Kantor's piece, created 25 years after his installation, implies a reconciliation and dialogue to establish the terms of agreement with the masterpiece. Margaret Theresa appears in one of her many portraits after many years, but one can claim that this time the artist did not attempt to unconsciously appropriate her historical image, as she seemingly entered Kantor's studio to offer her image at her free will. This time she has an entirely different appearance from that in the picture painted nearly 400 years earlier. Kantor did not intend to render the court life, he was rather interested in his dialogue with the Master in the form of a different depiction. This could be regarded as a citation from the artist, where imitation has been replaced by a version true to its historical time and artistic conventions.

The first work of the two is clearly original and unique, even though the allusion to the portrayal of the Infant is easily discernible. Kantor's work abandons his personal contexts, implying his belief that for many it is inconceivable to remove *Las Meninas* from their aesthetic experience, and this painting repeatedly returns as their obsession. However, the autonomy of his work is fairly limited due to the fact that the artist's message is focused on the image rather than any contexts which could help its interpretation. The second work discussed here seems to be an epilogue, a final stage in Kantor's artistic journey through time, a point to reach, which allows one to enjoy the kind of peaceful experience which comes from the presence of the Infant. It will be only then that this historical painting would exude calm and the feeling of reliability due to its appropriate assessment of the values of the original and the due appraisal of its creator.

### **Back to the starting point: the story of the Infanta and her many portraits**

The widely acclaimed painting from the Museum of Prado is still an artistic challenge for successive generations of artists, because of its thought-provoking content, perfectly realised form, and the visible touch of Velázquez's genius. This challenge triggers a creative process in many artists which results in a variety of re-makings and re-interpretations of the original. Some of them are only supplements to the masterpiece, in the case of others, the artists made an effort to create original and unique artworks without losing their artistic roots. It is my belief that any takes on the original which are only limited to its formal aspect, and neglect its conceptual dimension, e.g. the print by Francisco Goya (1778), the painting by Salvador Dali (1960) or Howard Podeswa's *The Walkers* - after *Las Meninas* (2005), consequently become subsidiary to the original, losing the

chance to stand out in the history of art. In contrast to them, the artworks displaying both innovative artistic techniques, like those from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and highly elaborated conceptual re-interpretation, have the best chance to achieve aesthetic autonomy, as in the case of the works by Joel Peter Witkin (1987), Greg Tatum (2006), and/or Kantor's installation (1965). The development of art and our historical tradition allows us to take a new look at past artistic achievements and their historical contexts, which is reflected e.g. in the (hi)story of *Las Meninas*. Even if this outstanding painting were lost in the Museum of Prado, it would continue its life in hundreds of its later transformations, while still preserving its position as an unattainable ideal.

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## **LAS MENINAS – NARRACJA PRZEZ WIEKI (streszczenie)**

Celem artykułu jest zaprezentowanie interpretacji kilku XX i XXI wiecznych prac artystycznych, nawiązujących do słynnego obrazu *Las Meninas* Diego Velázqueza. W analizie skupiono się na potencjale warsztatu artystycznego, biorąc pod uwagę jego awangardową i neoawangardową zmienność oraz głębokość konceptualizacji. Z analizy płynie wniosek, że prace, które posiadają niewielki wymiar konceptualny, pozostają jedynie nawiązaniem historycznym, nie zyskując samodzielności w świecie sztuki, pozostając w silnym, determinującym je związku z barokowym pierwowzorem. Z kolei prace, które zostały głęboko skonceptualizowane, zawierające sens i znaczenie wynikające z inspiracji *Las Meninas*, takie, które intencjonalnie wykraczają poza pierwowzór, mogą być łatwiej potraktowane jako niezależne dzieła, które mogłyby nawet powstać w podobnej postaci niezależnie od historycznego oryginału. Prace wybrano do analizy uwzględniając ich cechy warsztatowe oraz potencjał interpretacyjny, co miało być głównym wyznacznikiem ich autonomiczności.

**Słowa kluczowe:** inspiracja, interpretacja, forma, konceptualizm, transformacja.



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## THE SPIRITUALITY OF ART AFTER KANDINSKY

**Abstract:** Wassily Kandinsky defined the character of the spirituality of modern art and outlined its territory, becoming, along with Duchamp, a patron of various trends in modern art. The notion of the spirituality of art has proved to be an important characteristic feature of works of art. It figures prominently in the writings of art historians, theologians, and aestheticians, and it seems to correspond to Charles Taylor's conceptions of epiphanic art. Nevertheless, the very notion of the spirituality of art is far from clearly defined: it can refer to the spiritual nature of an artwork itself or to the creative process, or to the spirituality of a work of art that can be determined by its theological context. In this paper I have compared several distinct readings of the notion of the spirituality of art, with Kandinsky's thought constituting the frame of reference for the interpretations of the works of Rothko and Viola.

**Keywords:** spiritual, modern art, epiphany, religious, Kandinsky, Rothko, Viola.

One of the most significant distinctive features of the avant-garde is that its artists were deeply involved in building a social utopia through new art, which, according to Saint-Simone, was potent enough to achieve results comparable to those produced by technology or industry and which, as Le Corbusier famously stated, was like revolution. A number of heated disputes and fierce polemics centred on what shape art should assume so that it could best achieve its purpose of changing the world and man. Nevertheless, avant-garde artists were unanimous in their politically-tinged opposition to the aesthetic nature of a work of art and, as a consequence, their rejection of aesthetic categories of beauty, mimesis, and aesthetic experience. Wassily Kandinsky's conceptions concerning the spirituality of art are usually placed in this context of utopian thinking. Stefan Morawski defines them as an utopia referring to transcendence, to anti-rational Logos, which he also finds in the work of Malevich, Kruchonykh, Khlebnikov, and Artaud.<sup>1</sup> According to Piotr Piotrowski, the movements which turned the spirituality of the cosmos into a universal foundation of social activity constituted the metaphysical pole of the avant-garde.<sup>2</sup> The importance of this interpretational thread is un-

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<sup>1</sup> S. Morawski, *Na zakręcie: od sztuki do po-sztuki*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1988, p. 349.

<sup>2</sup> P. Piotrowski, *Artysta między rewolucją i reakcją*, Uniwersytet Adama Mickiewicza, Poznań 1993, pp. 51-52.

deniable, validated to a certain extent by Kandinsky's Moscow period, when the artist was actively involved in the organization of the Soviet institutional world of art. However, taking into account the antinomic aims of the avant-garde movements, the non-aesthetic conception of art can also be considered from another, equally appropriate, perspective, with the focus on its spiritual, rather than socio-political, dimension. Such a perspective brings out the trend in modernity to preserve, uphold, and re-establish contact with spirituality in a new way. Michalina Kmiecik, for one, distinguishes a distinct aesthetic-religious current in avant-garde art, which leads her to see it as a response to the ideological crisis.<sup>3</sup> The artists of this circle shared the belief in the spiritual aspect of art, with a work of art becoming a means by which individuals could re-establish their relationships with the source of meaning in the times of the crisis of *Erfahrung*. Art proved to be a place where a deeper dimension of reality, its unchanging foundations and principles, were revealed and could be experienced. The focus was shifted from the revolution against the world of bourgeois values to revealing the spiritual meaning of reality.

On the first pages of his book *On the Spiritual in Art* Kandinsky assesses the crisis brought about by the materialistic viewpoint which affected the modern person: the crisis "which has turned the life of the universe into an evil, purposeless game, is not yet over". Yet the artist announces the awakening of spirituality: "Our souls, which are only now beginning to awaken after the long reign of materialism, harbour seeds of desperation, unbelief, lack of purpose".<sup>4</sup> In the introduction to *Der Blaue Reiter* Wassily Kandinsky and Franc Marc declare that "We are standing at the threshold of one of the greatest epochs that mankind has ever experienced, the epoch of great spirituality".<sup>5</sup> Art is what will release the human soul from the materialistic prison. Grabska and Morawska argue that this text is more of a poetical prophesy than a treatise.<sup>6</sup> It is, however, a prophesy which combines both modernist and post-romantic elements as it draws on science as well as theosophical teachings. Kandinsky, a member of the Orthodox Church, lived in the climate of openness to alternative approaches to spirituality: he undertook ethnographic studies of the peoples of Eastern Finland, and like Mondrian and Malevich, adopted Goethe's holistic view of the world. The artists of the time were fascinated by occultism, Helena Blavatsky's theosophy, Rudolf Steiner's

<sup>3</sup> M. Kmiecik, *Drogi negatywności. Nurt estetyczno-religijny w poezji i muzyce awangardowej w XX wieku*, Uniwersytet Jagielloński, Kraków 2016, pp. 106-111.

<sup>4</sup> W. Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art* in: *Complete Writings on Art*, eds. K. Lindsay, P. Vergo, Da Capo press, New York 1994, p. 128.

<sup>5</sup> W. Kandinsky F. Marc, *The "Blaue Reiter" Almanac*, ed. K. Lankheit, Viking, New York 1944, p. 250.

<sup>6</sup> *Artyści o sztuce. Od van Gogha do Picassa*, eds. E. Grabska. H. Morawska PWN, Warszawa 1963, p. 287.

concepts of art.<sup>7</sup> Kandinsky shared Schönberg's and Scriabin's views on the correspondence of colours and sounds; he engaged in systematic studies on colour, without discriminating between medicine, psychology, chemistry and occult knowledge.<sup>8</sup> Pure art, for Kandinsky, included not only painting and music, but also dance, and, while Mondrian and Malevich restricted its cosmic expression to abstract art, he found it in figurative art as well, providing some examples in the final part of *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Ultimately, he attributed spirituality to humankind and its progress. Seeing in religions little more than manifestations of power and ideology, he had no interest in the theological interpretation of spirit and the soul.<sup>9</sup>

Nonetheless, even before Kandinsky, the Romantics opposed the mechanistic conception of reality deriving from the spirit of post-Cartesian science and found their way towards the spiritual and aesthetic condition of humanity and the world in art and nature, the way given not directly but by symbolic means. They expanded the philosophical and religious background far beyond the Bible drawing on theological texts, Swedenborg, the Apocrypha, and archaic beliefs. Charles Taylor claims that Romantics initiated a fecund trend of thinking of art as an epiphany of being, the trend which was explored and developed by artists of all modernist tendencies. The secularization of the worldview and life itself as well as of time and space, of nature and the human condition, which, as Taylor insightfully demonstrates, has been progressing since the Age of Enlightenment, has effectively obliterated the experience of God's presence: we no longer live our lives against the certainty provided by the metaphysical or theological backdrop.<sup>10</sup> The previous state is impossible to restore, since "a tableau of the spiritual significance of things"<sup>11</sup> is no longer accessible, therefore, the only possible way to preserve the spiritual element is through its subjectivization: "The moral or spiritual order of things must come to us indexed to a personal vision".<sup>12</sup> What we are left with is the testimonies of individual epiphanies, which an artist's imagination can incorporate into a work of art. Art, from this perspective, is not understood in aesthetical categories: the value of an artwork lies in its openness to the spiritual order and its purpose is transfiguration. The spiritual aspect of a work is determined by the strength of the emotional response it provokes, its impact on the public, and, according to Taylor, some epiphanies, like the Gospel or Baudelaire's poetry, retain the ability to draw such a reaction whereas others lose it with time.

<sup>7</sup> J. Elkins, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art*, Routledge, New York 2004, p. 79.

<sup>8</sup> Sixten Ringbom, *The Sounding Cosmos. A Study in the Spiritualism of Kandinsky and the Genesis of Abstract Painting*, Åbo 1970, p. 185. ÅÅ See also on Bauhaus.

<sup>9</sup> W. Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art*, pp. 139-140.

<sup>10</sup> Ch. Taylor, *Oblicza religii dzisiaj*, trans. A. Lipszyc, Zak, Kraków 2002, p. 52 and following.

<sup>11</sup> Ch. Taylor, *Sources of The Self. The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2003, p. 427.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 428.

A work of art arises from an epiphany and is an epiphany in its own right. "What I want to capture with this term is just this notion of a work of art. As the locus of a manifestation which brings us into the presence of something which is otherwise inaccessible, and which is of the highest moral or spiritual significance; a manifestation, moreover, which also defines or completes something, even as it reveals".<sup>13</sup> No formal criteria of spiritual art exist, no one model, since epiphanies can assume various forms determined by the individuality of their creators, and, as a consequence, they express different moral viewpoints. Thus in Romanticism an artwork as a symbol was a reflection of spiritual reality, as exemplified by Friedrich's or Constable's paintings, it held onto the view that nature was good, whether in the Christian sense or as understood by the enlightened rationalism. Taylor calls this view the epiphany of being. In the nineteenth century, apart from the affirmation of nature, the epiphany of translucence, two other types emerged in opposition to Romanticism: Baudelaire's epiphany of counter-nature and Schopenhauer's epiphany of amoral will, fallen nature. When Taylor claims that an artwork as an epiphany is "a revelation of the real face of things",<sup>14</sup> what he has in mind is not some universal truth revealed in a variety of ways, since the real face of things is contextual; in this particular case, he means the banality of life, as demonstrated by Flaubert in *Madame Bovary*. Modernism, on the other hand, rejected the epiphany of being: nature, devastated and subjected to technologization, is no longer liberating. Therefore, it turned inside, towards internal life with its subjectivity and temporality, while epiphanies assumed an indirect form: "The epiphany is of something only indirectly available, something the visible object can't say itself but only nudges us towards".<sup>15</sup> Taylor maintains that this is the form assumed by non-figurative art, which might imply that he sees it as a reduction, or in other words, impoverishment of representational art. Such an assertion can be problematic and it requires further examination of the directness of symbolic representations and the indirectness of abstract ones. In the conclusion Taylor identifies three spiritual orientations of modernism: the affirmation of the power of imagination (futurism, surrealism), a new type of epiphanies deriving from criticism (Proust, Pound, Joyce, Eliot, Mann) and epiphanies seeking means of expression for what is devastated.<sup>16</sup> Taylor's position seems to suggest that what is at stake in epiphanic art is neither a fight nor an attempt to introduce a specific spiritual and moral order (Christian, Manichean ...) into the world of art, but merely an evocation of such an order. And the closer it gets to our times, with each subsequent orientation, the theoretical coherence defining the character of spirituality noticeably declines.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 427.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 431.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 469.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 489.

Kandinsky, as it appears, proposes another type of epiphanic art: he seeks to strip an artwork and a creative art of their subjective components which stem from an artist's personality, he minimizes egocentrism, for which Romantics were heavily criticized, and strives to conceptualize primary qualities and the relationships between them in a methodical way. The internal necessities unveiled by an artist belong to art itself, they constitute this everlasting component, entirely distinct from an artist's personality and from his or her social and historical background. The psychological and sociological aspects are transcended and, having achieved this *epoché*, the artist stands before pure sounds, colours and lines and extends "far beyond the confines of art" so as to express the synthesis of "the 'oneness' of the 'human' and the 'divine'" in his or her work.<sup>17</sup>

In *Point and Line to Plane* we find the description of how a busy street observed through the windowpane is perceived. The sight is devoid of sound and the movement seems *phantom-like*, unreal. Another reality is exposed, *pulsating as if 'beyond'*. And this is the same pulsation of the noise, the tempo, the whirls which we take in with all our senses while standing in an actual street. We experience something similar when we are looking at a play of horizontal and vertical lines and colour patches on a painting.<sup>18</sup> The element shared by these three corresponding realities is the pulsation of lines and colours. This pulsation invests material reality with a spiritual element, which is by no means exclusive to nature but also present in the world of human artefacts. A painting "fixes" this pulsation, a distillate of reality, on the canvas, and it can assume a variety of forms. Spirituality understood in such a way can be perceived in a superficial manner with our consciousness taking in the lines and colours but only for a short time. However, if our perception is deep, more valuable, which Kandinsky refers to as a primal energy of art, we can experience the vibration in an active, multisensory manner, since rather than keeping our distance we become its part. Sixten Ringbom argues that the effect of lines and colour patches pulsating, which Kandinsky mentions a number of times, corresponds to Steiner's observation: "Steiner had maintained that to inner perception the objects begin to 'speak about their inner essence' and that the forces active in the things manifest themselves as 'spiritual line and figures'"<sup>19</sup>.

The spiritual nature of a work of art is determined by means of expression (line, colour), which are autonomous,<sup>20</sup> as they refer to nothing else, they are entirely for themselves, they are self-contained, independent from the subject and qualitatively unique. Hence Kandinsky attributes a cosmic, universal dimension

<sup>17</sup> W. Kandinsky *Point and Line to Plane* p. 21. [https://openlibrary.org/books/OL6033439M/Point\\_and\\_line\\_to\\_plane](https://openlibrary.org/books/OL6033439M/Point_and_line_to_plane) retrieved 18/07/2017

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 17.

<sup>19</sup> S. Ringbom, pp. 192-193.

<sup>20</sup> More on the subject, see: Andrzej Turowski, *Wielka utopia Awangardy. Artystyczne i społeczne utopie w sztuce rosyjskiej 1910-1930*, PWN, Warszawa 1990, pp. 75-90.

to lines and colours and sees the relationships between them as divine, being torn out rather than designed. They do not symbolize something other than themselves, they do not refer to something beyond them, they elude interpretation, whether accurate or erroneous, they are the emanation of quality. Painting qualities, rhythm and particularly colour, have a direct impact on the soul. Feelings are spiritual, since they relate to no external cause, nor do they suggest any personal content: rather they are qualities (they sting, they have weight, they are hot) and they impose on the artist in a most peremptory manner while affecting the recipient with no distortions. The epiphany is the vibration of pure qualities, the pulsation of lines and colours, similar to poetry, which focuses all attention on words alone, as Taylor points out citing Jakobson. It is worth noting that Taylor never mentions Kandinsky, even though in the context of the classifications he proposes, it would be the only epiphany of being in modernism directly descended from Romantics. Kandinsky's abstraction is not an indirect epiphany but a self-presentation of being in a way allowed by painting techniques as well as an artist's personality.

Although Kandinsky's writings contain no specific account of spiritual life, he clearly distinguishes between the psychic organism (mental activities) responding to sensual stimuli and the soul sensitive to the "inner voice", to the spiritual meaning of the components of the outside world. The soul experiences "a nonobjective vibration".<sup>21</sup> These two distinct fields, corporeal-mental and spiritual-emotional, correspond to what Maria Rzepińska writes on the perception of colour and two different functions attributed to it by the artist: iconic and archetypal-symbolic.<sup>22</sup> And although all people are potentially capable of grasping necessary connections, it is but a few who actually do show this ability, this asceticism of looking, of listening imbued with feeling.

According to Kandinsky, forms and colours which superficial, sensual perception enables us to take in, in turn, activate deep perception. And these two processes take place simultaneously not sequentially with the form and the colour affecting us directly and triggering an emotional response. Interestingly, the directness of emotional response has been proved scientifically by neuroscience. Neurobiologists are especially interested in the arrangement of perpendicular and vertical lines in Mondrian's works and Malevich's squares, as geometric forms stimulate a particularly strong emotional response of the viewer, and this process has evolved as an adaptation. Semir Zeki claims that "non-objective sensation and non-objective art of Malevich and his followers is in fact the introspective art of a brain already well acquainted with the visual word, with the objective world".<sup>23</sup> Specific parts of the

<sup>21</sup> W. Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual ...* p. 147.

<sup>22</sup> M. Rzepińska, *Historia koloru w dziejach malarstwa europejskiego*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1983, p. 589.

<sup>23</sup> S. Zeki, *Visual Art and the Visual Brain*, "The Proceedings of the Royal Institution of Great Britain" Vol. 68. 1997, p. 46.

human brain respond very strongly to an arrangement of figures and colours, and abstract painting attaches the utmost importance to learning about forms rather than appearances of things. Therefore, the education of humanity, to go back to utopian themes mentioned at the beginning of this paper, is not achieved through intentionally designed politics, but is a result of common processes helping an individual to adapt to the changing reality. In this context, the first abstractionists' universal language of painting acquires a new interpretation, from the perspective of neuroaesthetics. However, the neuroaesthetical interpretation requires further consideration and more extensive exploration, also in the light of Plato's thought, cited by Zeki, who, not without satisfaction, finds the conclusions of his own research in philosophers' and artists' writings. From the perspective of neurobiological research, spirituality is the reality of the brain, which seems to make the differences between philosophical, theological and artistic viewpoints somewhat less relevant.

Since the last decades of the twentieth century, the humanities have witnessed a shift towards philosophical-theological reflection in place of religion in modernity. At the same time, sociological publications show that religious movements have been enjoying a revival, traditional religions have been on their way back, while syncretic religions have been on the rise. Both artists and exhibition curators take interest in the subject of spirituality and religiousness.<sup>24</sup> It might as well be the case that the same reality is identified and explained by means of different categories: once spirituality constituted an aspect, a facet, or the background of metaphysical beauty, the beauty of art, then the sublime, also of form, whereas now in the notion of spirituality and religiousness theoreticians find an expression of the nature of selected, by no means all, works of art. Although Kandinsky's views are frequently referred to in a number of publications, it is to support quite different tendencies in art. It is generally accepted that Kandinsky's ideas and works anticipated American abstractionism: Pollock, Newman, Rothko, Still. John Golding, having thoroughly analyzed his works, comes to the conclusion that the artist was a Romantic and his painting represented mystical symbolism.<sup>25</sup> Mark C. Taylor, on the other hand, refers to Kandinsky in order to demonstrate the continuation of the ideas of spirituality in Beuys', Barney's, Turrell's and Goldsworthy's works.<sup>26</sup> Also Kandinsky's conception of spirituality features in the debates centred on secular spiritual art, in contrast to religious art. The meaning of the notion of spirituality in art is somewhat problematic, as is its range or

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<sup>24</sup> D.A. Siedell., *God in Gallery (Cultural Exegesis): A Christian Embrace of Modern Art*, Baker Academic, Michigan 2008, pp. 75-109.

<sup>25</sup> J. Golding, *Paths to the Absolute. Mondrian, Malevich, Kandinsky, Pollock, Newman, Rothko, and Still*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2000, p. 82.

<sup>26</sup> M.C. Taylor, *Refiguring the Spiritual. Beuys, Barney, Turrell, Goldsworthy*, Columbia University Press, New York 2012, pp. 188-190.

determining who is competent to authoritatively assign art to this category, since an aesthetician, an art historian, and a theologian will see it from very different perspectives. The question of whether a work fits the definition of spiritual or religious art is pretty much irresolvable. Those discourses are to a great extent untranslatable and have quite different objectives. Furthermore, works of art, mysterious, vulnerable objects, cannot be easily rationalized. What seems far more productive intellectually is establishing the kind of polemics in which the notion of spirituality appears, the categories with which it co-occurs, the changes in the sense of the spiritual in art, and, finally, the kind of social tasks art is supposed to fulfil.

Adorno, speaking about the spirit of art from the aesthetic perspective, maintains that “The aesthetic concept of spirit has been severely compromised not only by idealism but also by writings dating from the nascence of radical modernism, among them those of Kandinsky”.<sup>27</sup> Thereby he argues the existence of the aesthetic conception of spirit, quite distinct from the religious one, which determines different objectives of these two kinds of art. Secular spiritual art demystifies mythologies and myths in social life; a work is a response to social constructs and calls them into question. On the other hand, religious art, in this context, serves to preserve the myth. Therefore, “The metaphysics of art requires its complete separation from the religion in which art originated. Artworks are not the absolute, nor is the absolute immediately present in them”. In another passage he claims that there is no “spirit’s serving to guarantee an absolute to art”.<sup>28</sup> Kandinsky’s conception of spirituality is interpreted by Adorno as a manifestation of totality, accompanied by the experience of being an element of a pre-existing whole, given to an artist rather than created by him or her. However, Adorno believes that the spiritual is inherent in a work, but far from arising from the universal principle of the world, as works of arts “produce their own transcendence”,<sup>29</sup> that is to say, they are hermeneutic objects and their spiritual aspect involves something more, something that requires interpretation. Works of art are spiritual in that they cannot be reduced to objects or facts: the spirit constitutes the objective content of an artwork. Yet this spirit is different from the spirit of the creator, guided by particular intentions and inspiration. The spirit of an artwork is “evoked through the artefact”,<sup>30</sup> it is firmly located in it, in the configuration of everything that manifests in it. The spirit shapes a phenomenon and is shaped by it. It can be construed as a certain quality which determines the strength of the message conveyed by the work, which follows directly from its composition. Spirituality is an anthropological notion and as such can only be ascribed to a human being while the spirit of a work

<sup>27</sup> Th.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 87 [www.heathwoodpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/aesthetictheory.pdf](http://www.heathwoodpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/aesthetictheory.pdf) retrieved 18/07/2017

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 133, 89.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

of art is a theoretical construct and serves to assess a surplus of meaning requiring interpretation.

Hegel's philosophy of spirit is frequently invoked, not only in the interpretations of Kandinsky's work but also when a spiritual element requires justification.<sup>31</sup> Although Hegelian motifs can be found in Kandinsky's writing, it was Kojève who in his Paris lectures completed, as it were, the interpretation of Kandinsky's views and works, proclaiming that they were the realization of Hegel's teachings, that they constitute *total and absolute painting*. Kandinsky's paintings eradicate the difference between the image and reality. It is significant, however, that Kojève holds onto the notion of the beauty, in his words: "The Beautiful of the tableau "Circle-Triangle" exists nowhere outside of that tableau. Just the tableau "represents" nothing external to it, its Beautiful is also purely immanent, it is the Beautiful of the tableau that exists only in the tableau. ... The circle-triangle does not exist in the real, nonartistic world; it does not exist before, outside of, or apart from the tableau; it was created in and by-or as-the tableau. And it is only in and for this creation of the circle-triangle that the Beautiful incarnating it was created. That Beautiful too did not exist before the tableau, and it does not exist outside of it, independent of it".<sup>32</sup> Lisa Florman, who has thoroughly examined the correspondences between Hegel's, Kandinsky's and Kojève's thought, insists that the most important, if not the only possible, reference point for Kandinsky's writing is Hegel's aesthetics, rather than mysticism or occultism, and that Kandinsky's intention was to take up and follow the idea of art as the Absolute.<sup>33</sup> The belief of Kojève, Hegel's follower, in the absolute beauty made manifest, which has heavily influenced the subsequent reception of Kandinsky's works, was sufficiently convincing for Lyotard, who sees Kandinsky's paintings from the concrete period as objective, while holding in higher regard Newman's monochromatic paintings, deeply rooted in subjectivity, and capable of conveying the dread of the sublime.<sup>34</sup>

James Elkins also opts for the differentiation between secular art and religious art; the conclusions he draws, however, are different than Adorno's. He calls into question the spiritual and religious aspects of not only abstract art but of art in general in the name of methodological purity. The separation between fine art and religious art has institutional grounds: universities have separate departments studying art, with history of art departments examining art from a wide range

<sup>31</sup> On Rothko cf. J. Sh. Hendrix, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Spirit. From Plotinus to Schelling and Hegel*, Peter Lang, New York 2005, p. 117.

<sup>32</sup> A. Kojève, *The Concrete Paintings of Kandinsky*, transl. L. Florman, in: L. Florman, *The Concrete in Kandinsky's Art*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2014, p.163.

<sup>33</sup> L. Florman, *The Concrete in Kandinsky's Art*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2014.

<sup>34</sup> On Lyotard's interpretation of Kojève and the political implications of the sublime cf. Th.L. Pangle, *The Ennobling of Democracy: The Challenge of the Postmodern Age. The Challenge of The Postmodern Age*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore&London 1992, pp. 21-26 and following.

of perspectives, including political, gender as well as religious, whereas theology departments are concerned with the spiritual qualities of art.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, in philosophy departments art is the subject of aesthetical interpretations. Elkins acknowledges that at private homes religious pictures and works of art are not separated, but he maintains that private homes are not part of the world of art. The conclusion leads to the assertion that, artists, theoreticians and curators seeking the spirituality (religiousness) of modern art notwithstanding,<sup>36</sup> modern fine art is non-religious.

Elkins claims that although the first signs of art and spirituality splitting up can be seen during Renaissance, it was in Romanticism when the division was effectively concluded by the symbolists such as Friedrich, Rung and William Blake, whose paintings, despite being born of visionary or religious impulses, are vague and should rather be seen as a testimony to their authors' eccentricity. Elkins points out that "Painting, from a theosophical perspective, is a remnant of a lost communication with the spiritual world beyond ordinary vision".<sup>37</sup> As far as abstract art is concerned, Elkins considers the matter from a historical point of view and contends that spirituality is only present in the works of the first generation of abstractionists, due to the theosophical atmosphere prevalent at the turn of centuries. He points out the existence of a secularized conception of abstraction offered by the art historians concerned with analyzing a medium and an artist's minimal self-reflection. Thus abstract art cannot be labelled as spiritual or as referring to spirituality, since many abstract artists do not regard it as such. Elkins cites Kevin Maginnis, the curator of *The Non-Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1985- ????* exhibition saying that "if spiritual abstraction works its magic by "silence and alchemy" this alternate abstraction would make use of >words and science<".<sup>38</sup> The difference between hot abstraction (Abstract Expressionism) and cold abstraction (Geometrical Abstraction) corresponds to this distinction. Calling into doubt the spirituality of Kandinsky's works Elkins does not contest his theory of painting, but argues that nobody actually responds to his paintings in a way described by the artist himself. At the same time he shows a number of ways allowing artists to depict sacredness outside the realm of religious art, the illustration of which he finds in the Dutch painting showing the spiritual nature of

<sup>35</sup> J. Elkins, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art*, Routledge, New York 2004, pp. 16-17.

<sup>36</sup> Elkins points to six areas related to the problem of religiousness in modern, that is, secular art: "The discourse of the sublime ... . The concept of art history as a melancholy discipline ... . The concept of aura ... . The concept of iconophilia, iconoclasm, idolatry, and iconophobia ... . The concept of the unrepresentable ... . Talk of materiality, matter, medium, and substance ... . "Cf. James Elkins, *Iconoclasm and the Sublime: Two Implicit Religious Discourses in Art History*, in: J. Ellenbogen, A. Tugendhaft, *Idol Anxiety*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2011 p. 134.

<sup>37</sup> J. Elkins, *On the Strange Place* p. 79.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 79-80.

domestic life.<sup>39</sup> Like Charles Taylor Elkins also believes that representation is an adequate expression of spirituality in secular spiritual as well as in religious art.

After 1950 American abstract artists (Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Still) brought up the subject of spirituality in art. Mondrian's, Malevich's and Kandinsky's abstraction found its continuation in the conception of a painting reduced to a plane of colour and shape, with the spirituality of art acquiring a unique form and interpretation. Roger Lipsey identifies spirituality with the sublime, tragedy and religious experience.<sup>40</sup> Harold Rosenberg regards Barnett Newman's painting as metaphysical, whereas Rothko's works, in his view, "constituted the theological sector of Abstract Expressionism",<sup>41</sup> but far removed from Kandinsky's. Yet the definitions of such notions as metaphysics, theology or religiousness are not easy to find, their meaning remaining vague, and possible to understand only in the context of a particular artist's position. No one appears to express a desire to construct a universal code of painting based on the language of the form, similar to Kandinsky's in *Point and Line to Plane*. Harold Rosenberg underlines the fact that Rothko was not ">really abstract<, in the sense of cancelling subjective qualities in favour of his idea",<sup>42</sup> the idea of absolute art. The vitality of colours in his works, their intensity and strength, rather than allowing the artist to express himself, express the artist's absence in the work.<sup>43</sup> Rosenberg sees the *ritual of self-purification* in Rothko's painting and he concludes, referring to the artist's suicide, "Like his painting, his act of self-annihilation is a deeply affecting blank".<sup>44</sup> The difference between the first generation of abstract artists' optimistic attitude and Abstract Expressionism artists' pessimism cannot be more striking.

Georg Pattison's contribution to the debate seems particularly interesting, as he interprets modern art from the position of a lay theologian from Oxford. In Mark Rothko's monumental monochromatic paintings, displayed in museums as though they were some sacred artefacts, he recognizes silent anticipation.<sup>45</sup> Those pictures do not impose themselves on us, they say nothing and, in doing so, they place all the burden of establishing the relationship on the viewer. The work and the viewer share the space between them, which offers us the possibility to co-create the image. Rothko never insisted that his works should be viewed in a specific way, it is theoreticians who emphasize their spiritual message. As the criterion

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>40</sup> Roger Lipsey, *The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art*, DOVER PUBLICATIONS, Mineola, New York 1988. p. 229.

<sup>41</sup> H. Rosenberg, *The De-definition of Art*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago&London, p. 100.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 104.

<sup>43</sup> *I don't Express myself in my painting. I express my not-self*. Quote ibidem. p. 105.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., pp. 106-107.

<sup>45</sup> G. Pattison, *Crucifixions and Resurrection of the Image. Christian Reflection on Art and Modernity*, scm press, Norwich 2009, pp. 88-89.

to determine whether art is modern or not, Pattison takes Charles Baudelaire's assertion that a modern artist praises the present, the randomness of events as opposed to artists in the old days who were more concerned with the past. From the standpoint of a Christian theologian he asks: what is the purpose of art focused on the fleeting now? Does it exacerbate human helplessness or does it give us strength and consolation? And his answer is: modern artists' works are the art of the death of God, the art after the death of God, in the Nietzschean sense. Art no longer possesses artistic formulas which would enable artists to depict eternity or transcendence, which for him indicate spirituality. Pattison appreciates the artistic value of Rothko's painting and maintains that they invite us to experience the work as a spiritual journey undertaken on secular terms and with complete freedom.<sup>46</sup> Rothko's paintings by not imposing representation on the viewer "give expression to the great Universal truths which lay behind the pagan and Christian myths".<sup>47</sup>

Interestingly, Donald Kuspit places Rothko's and Newman's painting in the context of Jewish tradition, namely the commandment against making images or likenesses, and claims that "Their abstract art is quintessentially Jewish".<sup>48</sup> Situating them against the background of a non-European tradition and rejecting their modernist lineage enables Rothko's works to function in the context of postsecularism, the intellectual orientation which constitutes the shift towards theological and religious reflection. Postsecularism brings together thinkers from diverse backgrounds who share the aversion to politically or religiously dogmatized thinking and seek to re-examine the relationship between the religious and the secular and to establish the presence of religion in the postmodern world.<sup>49</sup> Post-secular thinking is to a great extent an heir of Romanticism, it can be considered the spirituality of modernity, since, as Agata Bielik-Robson argues, it preserves spirituality protecting it from the devastating progress, from the consumerist lifestyle and the decline of institutional religions. The philosopher differentiates between religiousness in a narrow sense of a belief in a deity and religiousness defined broadly as "reflection on the place of a human being in the universe and his or her sense of existential orientation and meaning".<sup>50</sup>

In postsecularly-oriented art the notions of spirit and spirituality appear less frequently whereas the notions of religiousness and religious experience assume greater importance; thus the emphasis shifts from an inner experience to the com-

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>47</sup> Pattison cites Peter Fuller's comments on Rothko's exhibition in Tate Gallery in 1987, *ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>48</sup> D. Kuspit after M.L. Alexenberg, *The Future of Art in a Postdigital Age: From Hellenistic to Hebraic Consciousness*, Intellect Book/University of Chicago Press, Bristol, Chicago, 2011, p. 118.

<sup>49</sup> More on the subject: *Drzewo poznania. Postsekularyzm w przekładach i komentarzach*, eds. P. Bogalecki, A. Mitek-Dzięba, FA-art, Uniwersytet Śląski, Katowice 2012.

<sup>50</sup> A. Bielik-Robson, *Inna nowoczesność. Pytania o współczesną formułę duchowości*, Universitas, Kraków 2000, p. 297.

munal one. A religious position is assumed to be common to all people, with the special significance attached to the moral dimension. Many artists are involved in building a community through art, the example of which is Jordi Savall's music combining diverse musical traditions.<sup>51</sup> Bill Viola's video works are also worthy of note. Roland R. Bernier labels them visual theology and sees them as part of post-secular thinking, which harks back to negative theology, also known as apophatic theology, a trend in Christian thought, as well as the theological shift initiated by Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion.<sup>52</sup> Bernier argues that Viola's works trigger the sublime, which offers access to the experience of transcendence. Viola draws on the traditions of the European religious painting; it can even be said that he purposefully chooses to be its continuator, as suggested by the settings of the exhibitions and publications where the works of Old Masters are juxtaposed with the video installations.<sup>53</sup> He draws inspiration from a wide range of religions, including Christianity, Sufism, D.T. Suzuki's writings, and Zen Buddhism, to tell a story of death, suffering and birth, in both physical and spiritual sense.<sup>54</sup> Viola's video images are realistic and highly evocative, the artist employs intensive colours, confronts a human figure with the energy of water or fire to compose visually impressive scenes.

The installation *Ocean Without a Shore* (2007), shown during the Biennale in Venice in the church of San Gallo, consisted of three large video screens placed on the stone altars. Entering the dark interior viewers are confronted with the figures emerging from the grey background, stretching out their arms towards them, breaking through the screen of, previously invisible, water and passing through the glistening spray of water to finally stand before the viewer in full colour. The actors portray the souls of the dead, the middle-aged woman in a red dress, the elderly man with shaking hands, who arrive at this place to testify to the existence of immortality through art. The ocean from the title, the symbol of eternity, has but one shore: the thin sheet of water marking the boundary of the two worlds.

In 2014 Viola displayed the installation entitled *Martyrs. Earth, Air, Fire, Water* on one of the walls of the side aisle in St Paul's Cathedral in London. It consisted of four plasma screens, resembling altar panel paintings. The screens showed three men and a woman. One of the men is being pulled up from the earth mound, the woman in a white dress is hanging above the ground with her hands bound above

<sup>51</sup> R. Illman, *Art and Belief: Artists engaged into interreligious Dialogue*, Routledge, New York 2014.

<sup>52</sup> R.R. Bernier, *The Unspeakable Art of Bill Viola. A Visual Theology*, Pickwick!Publications, Eugene 2014, p. 5. (the interview from 2013).

<sup>53</sup> During the *Elektronik Renaissance 2017* exhibition in Florence Renaissance masters' works are juxtaposed with Viola's.

<sup>54</sup> D.A. Ross, P. Sellars, *Bill Viola*, Cantz, New York 1998, p. 143. The issue of death and birth links Viola's works with Hans Belting's thought; their conversation places the emphasis on the spiritual dimension of the video images which show emotions, cf. *Bill Viola*, ed. John Walsh, The J. Paul Getty Museum, The National Gallery Los Angeles-London 2003, p. 199.

her head, the second man is sitting on the chair being engulfed by fire and another is hanging upside down in the stream of flowing water. The pure scenes show, as if beyond time, the vertical workings of the elements and the people immersed in them in the situation of passage. What we see is not corpses but people waiting for the passage, the nature of which is unclear. And the man being pulled up from the earth mound and through earth upwards is also being born from earth. The theme of death and birth is given a cosmic dimension: the elements are eternal, a human being is not, while spirituality originates on juncture of these worlds.

Kandinsky never excluded representational art from the realm of spiritual art and the shifts of light, colour and dominantly vertical lines can easily be seen in the fluid frames of the four images. However, Viola's digital pictures affect the viewer in a different manner: they are entirely rooted in corporeality in that through artistic suggestion they evoke the memory recorded in every person's body, the memory of the sensual experience of water, fire, earth and air. Showing the elements at work Viola provokes not fear but certain reassurance, which arises from a sense of belonging to the cycles of nature. Tranquillity rather than dread emanates from many of Viola's works presenting the subject of death and birth (*The Messenger* (1996), *The Crossing* (1996), *Room for St. John of the Cross* (1983)). In his conversation with Gaston Bachelard, Bill Viola expounded the primal community of a human being and the cosmos on the basis of the four elements residing in the depths of the transcendental self. Here, however, we touch upon a very different theory of spirituality, linked to the original nature of the internal image, which requires its own consideration. The spirituality of Viola's video images lies not in an experience of an anonymous person's subjectless emotions, like it is the case of Kandinsky's works, but stems directly from the existence of people with their own bodies and lives. Nevertheless, Viola's works, contrary to Kandinsky's elitist abstractions, reveal the spirituality of a global person, one who visits art exhibitions all over the world, who is accustomed to the sophisticated imagery of Hollywood movies, to the high-resolution images capable of putting us into a trance with the languid movement of scenes suggestive of sleepiness, dreaming, the unreal.

The reconnaissance undertaken here of the selected points of Kandinsky's, Rothko's and Viola's artistic positions and the interpretations of their works has brought to light a number of issues calling for more thorough and deeper exploration. Nonetheless, it can be safely assumed that in the post-aesthetic times the spirituality of art is becoming its highest value. From Charles Taylor's philosophical perspective, abstraction, along with Futurism and Surrealism, represents epiphanic art and continues Romantic trends, albeit by different means. The spirituality of art is believed to be a remedy for the technological focus of modernity. In the art historian's interpretation it is a historical affliction. Rosenberg's analysis points to an artist's own spirituality and argues that although an artist's experiences are not directly reflected in painting, since the viewer is merely confronted with

planes of colour, stepping outside an artist's experience completely is not quite justified either. The theological view, theoesthetics, in its turn, examines secular spirituality from theocentric angle and sees Kandinsky's thought as an attempt to build a divine kingdom on earth.<sup>55</sup> In the case of Rothko's works secular spirituality proposes the position of anticipation solipsistically centred on the viewer's activity. Viola takes us back to representational art and encourages reinterpretation of mimesis and reconsideration of the status of the digital image. As it seems, an aesthetician can choose the road offered by Adorno and seek to develop autotelic categories critical towards philosophical and theological traditions and distanced from artists' positions. Another option is to follow Kojčve in exploiting traditional philosophical theories and subjecting art to philosophical interpretation. An aesthetician, however, never losing sight of works of art themselves, can pick yet another path through and across those various interpretations and bringing to light the differences between them search for new incarnations for old aesthetical categories.

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<sup>55</sup> M.C. Taylor, *Disfiguring. Art, Architecture, Religion*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London 1992, p. 65.

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## **DUCHOWOŚĆ SZTUKI PO KANDINSKY'M (streszczenie)**

Celem artykułu jest konfrontacja wybranych interpretacji pojęcia „duchowość sztuki” Wasyla Kandynskiego oraz pokazanie dwóch odmiennych podejść do duchowości sztuki: abstrakcji Rothko i video instalacji Billa Viola. W świetle myśli Charlesa Taylora można przyjąć, że pojęcie duchowości zastępuje pojęcie piękna, a duchowość abstrakcji stanowi jedną z odpowiedzi artystów awangardy na instrumentalizm technicyzowanej rzeczywistości. W interpretacji Kojčeva, idącego za Heglem, duchowość sztuki jest tożsama z pięknem, natomiast Adorno niechętny podejściom Kandynskiego i Hegla postuluje krytyczny model duchowości sztuki. W drugiej połowie XX wieku istnieje wiele nawiązań do Kandyńskiego. Duchowy plan dzieł sztuki, pojęty jako kosmiczny pierwiastek rzeczywistości, staje się ich uzasadnieniem, w pewnym sensie zastępuje wartości estetyczne. Równoległe pojawiają się alternatywne podejścia, duchowość zostaje utożsamiona z procesem tworzenia (Marek Rothko) lub przynależy integralnie do przedstawienia, co zbliża sztukę świecką do religijnej (Bill Viola). Dla estetyka interesujące, w tej konfrontacji, jest wydobycie przesunięć w obrębie starych kategorii estetycznych, jak również odnotowanie ich nowych manifestacji w sztuce.

**Słowa kluczowe:** duchowość, sztuka nowoczesna, epifania, religijność, Kandinsky, Rothko, Viola.



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## THE AVANT-GARDE AS MOVEMENT TOWARDS THE PRESENT

### **Abstract:**

This text attempts to reconsider the threads of topicality and happening as the factors defining the artistic avant-garde movement, understood as a creative formation with identifiable common assumptions that transcend disciplinary divisions and historical classifications. I have decided to assume that a large part of modern art remains faithful to the distinctive avant-garde aspirations. It seems that today, as at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the present appears to the artists as still difficult to grasp. This phenomenon manifests itself in both the discussion of art's own borders in the contemporary context, and in its attempts to understand and interpret the changes in the modern life. The intensive focusing of art on the present can be viewed as a lack of reflection, but also as a response to the process of modernisation, i.e. as being unable to separate from it. Some philosophical and anthropological investigations concerning time and the idea of the present (including, above all, the concepts of the "absolute present" of Karl Heinz Bohrer, "modern Constitution" by Bruno Latour and the suspicions concerning the present of the so-called "philosophy of suspicion") will in turn allow for probative diagnoses of the potential causes for anxiety concerning the directions of the contemporary development of art, which can still be observed in its colloquial reception.

**Keywords:** avant-garde, eventness, happening, 'absolute present', shock, liquidity, modernism.

*Human consciousness is a specific form of consciousness that creates a model of the world and then simulates it in time, by evaluating the past to simulate the future. This requires mediating and evaluating many feedback loops in order to make a decision to achieve a goal.<sup>1</sup>*

What is the avant-garde afraid of, so tightly clinging to the present? Is it the fear of its spectrality and transience as a formation? Can it mean the fear of marginalisation and erasure (in the context of the loss of clear metaphysical foundations) of its creators? Whenever I tried to devote some reflection to the attitudes of the artistic avant-garde as a whole, two issues struck me with equal strength: firstly,

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<sup>1</sup> M. Kaku, *Consciousness - a Physicist's View Point in: The Future of the Mind. The Scientific Quest to Understand, Enhance and Empower the Mind*, Doubleday, New York 2014, p. 81 (e-book).

it was the emphasis that those artists seemed to put on capturing the actuality (or even ‘the presence’, if we decide not to limit the meaning of this term strictly to metaphysical-theological traditions) and the need to constantly renew this movement of capturing. Secondly, it was the absence – especially in the case of the avant-garde of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – of more defined visions of the future, which would constitute genuine, constructive suggestions for its development, utilising the skills of planning, forecasting, and various uses of imagination. Instead, it tended to limit itself to particular tests of subjective recognition, or attempts to trigger aesthetic changes through shock or novelty. In the writings of the avant-garde artists of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we rarely encounter any traces of visions and thoughts concerning the future, which would be able to function at least as some alternatives to the commonly adopted version of reality. The most consistent such proposal which I have come across so far is the suggestion made by Malevich, who proposed<sup>2</sup> the following teleological concept: the goal of the technological progress is to liberate mankind from the need for practical reference to the world, and to provide people with as much free time as possible, to allow them to create art understood as something unique and characteristic only for humans. Such ‘pure’ inventiveness is further justified by the fact that the artist also creates things that even the most sophisticated and most purposeful mechanics can never create.<sup>3</sup> Rosalind E. Krauss in her well-known book entitled *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*<sup>4</sup> suggests the Hegelian inspirations of the concept of Malevich. Predicting the ultimate dominance of the spirit, Hegelianism would mean in this case the separation of the spiritual life (seen as a purely abstract principle of discovery, emotions connected with approaching the truth which must transcend reality) and matter (understood as ‘object-iveness’ in its concretisation and practical use), which could seem in these times quite a satisfactory solution to the majority of those who valuing highly their spirituality were additionally able to search for the philosophical foundations of their culture. Satisfactory, of course, under the condition that the grim spectre of the absence of universal emancipation and freedom (that old longing that can be inferred from Christianity) can be kept aside as impossible to be satisfied due to the still insurmountable violence of the ‘outer’ nature, as it was still quite widely believed before World War II. In turn, the artists of the first avant-garde movements, even if they were interested – as it was in the case of Constructivism – in social goals through a specific dialogue with science, they were interested in them in an *ex cathedra* mode, which allowed them to experiment disregarding the reac-

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<sup>2</sup> In one of his theoretical texts devoted to suprematism. Ibid., p. 354-361.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 357.

<sup>4</sup> See: R.E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London 1986.

tions of the users, even if the process claimed to stand behind it was functionality and psychological needs; the spirit of experiment was floating over the waters of nature under the auspices of unnoticed violence. It seems that the most fruitful social role of the avant-garde artist of the time was to assimilate and translate the reality of the time to the others as – finally – perceived, filtered by his/her own sensibility, since reality in the common opinion was changing as fast as in one of Lewis Carroll's famous books (Alice had to put an increasing effort into staying in place, when the ground was constantly trying to escape from under her feet). Not everyone is able to perceive the reality that disappears and emerges so quickly, which has warranted the special role of the artist as a 'mediumic' translator already since the 17<sup>th</sup> century (I will return to these threads later on). Nevertheless, 'object-ivity', meant as the world of things and followed by a world of habits and interactions is changing faster and faster, and it is becoming more and more complicated mainly due to the development of technology and the implementation of the inventions transforming our everyday lives. This, in turn, is a source of constant amazement that refreshes the avant-garde's visions of what is invisible to others, creating new opportunities to interpret and domesticate the reality, staying simultaneously constantly focused on the exploration of the subtleties of the various forms of the spirituality of the artists themselves and the sensitivity of the creative others. Parallel to this initial diagnosis, we can and should continue asking about the reasons of the permanence of the (already being analysed for some time) legend of the particular originality and inventiveness of the avant-garde that neither was in the past nor is now able to provide the basis for the *essential* changes in the world. Artists, like ordinary bread eaters, must also usually find themselves in the role of more or less alienated 'translators' and rarely recognised 'domesticators' of modernity (and at the same time, they are the discoverers of many nuances of the spirit, which privilege I had never any intention to question). This doubt and this interrogation are disabled in a way, for obvious reasons, in the case of the avant-garde architects and utility designers. Of course, in the context of a consequent Platonic-Hegelian solution, the answer to the question formulated a few sentences ago should seem clear.

But now I would like to ask this question here again from today's perspective: is there a chance for us to believe in the myth that imposes the image of the uniqueness of the avant-garde as a formation also on its current strategies – in the sense of their irreducible value as a model or one of the possible models for contemporary art/culture? Or should we rather start to consider the avant-garde as a formation of a historical value? Treating this question as a permanently open one, I feel tempted to continue this argument by attempting to build my own interpretation of "the advantages and disadvantages of the avant-garde" from the perspective of our time.

The originality of the avant-garde has been questioned many times so far in the contexts of such concepts as aura, authenticity, uniqueness, or event.<sup>5</sup> Still, the question of the functioning of avant-garde art in today's world can sound provocative. On the one hand, this is due to the ongoing sacralization of avant-garde and contemporary art, which is increasingly being included in museum collections. The other reason may be the high valuation of the art of the "classical" avant-garde – Adornian in its spirit – as one of the few reasonable strategies of resistance to the massification, commercialisation and mechanisation of life, associated in Adorno's thought with intellectual and moral/spiritual shallowness. At this point, the question of spirituality returns (in its second, but not its last configuration). To what extent the originality/shock effects and the contemporaneity of the avant-garde artists could have been initially provoked by economic calculation? Memoirs from Paris during the "period of prosperity"<sup>6</sup> of the avant-garde in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century show a world in which the struggle for recognition depends largely on the artists' inventiveness – some circus-like ability to exploit the effects of novelty and to self-promote. Looking at the relationship between art and life from such a prosaic side, we can also see the "background operation" of the paradigm already present in art at the time, prompting the artists to calculate the effects of their work. I cannot examine here in details the influence of the development of photography and film on the transformations that took place in modern art, emblematically manifesting themselves in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century painting. I have to restrict myself to noting the growing need, on the side of painting as a genre, to compete with photography in the category of eventness.

At the same time, the already mentioned "background" of avant-garde art should be outlined more clearly: modernity and modernism saw a significant increase of the importance of the present time, especially when linked with such catchphrases as event, change and surprise – on the one hand in reference to the scientific, technical and economic revolution, and on the other – to the dream of overcoming the existing relations or revolutionary-eschatological events of the religious provenance (which, by the myth of the second coming, seem to be quite

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<sup>5</sup> To give a few rather well-known examples – Walter Benjamin diagnosed the disappearing of the aura of the work of art 'in the age of mechanical reproduction', Rosalind E. Krauss wrote i.a. about such phenomena as the inevitable repetitions and borrowings of some motifs by the avant-garde. Polish researcher Tomasz Załuski devoted an extensive publication to repetition in the context of artistic modernism; see: W. Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, transl. J.A. Underwood, Penguin Books, London 2008, R.E. Krauss, *The Originality...*, T. Załuski, *Modernizm artystyczny i powtórzenie. Próba reinterpretacji*, Universitas, Kraków 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the book about Picasso by Brassad', which covers the period from the 1930s to the 1960s, with some trips back in time to *Les Femmes d'Alger*, and the interview with Picasso by Christian Zervos in 1933. See: Brassad', *Conversations with Picasso*, transl. J.M. Todd, University of Chicago Press, 1999; *Artysta o...*, p. 490-496.

closely related to each other). It is also important to note – in accordance with some historians and philosophers dealing with the transformations of the idea of time – that “the present” has been gradually shrinking in the common sense and the practice of labour regulations, starting with the beginnings of the agricultural civilisations, and continuing through the invention of the mechanical clock in the late Middle Ages. In turn, experiments of *magia naturalis*, increasingly released from social bans, and combined with the increasingly undisturbed (by the threat of excommunication or other drastic penalties) possibility of creating new objects (and thus related interactions) have been confirmed with some help of certain founding gestures of the modern order, invoked by Bruno Latour<sup>7</sup>, who symbolically marked “the beginning of the modern Constitution” (proposed by him and understood as still valid ontological grid of modernity)<sup>8</sup> for the 17<sup>th</sup> century, pointing out<sup>9</sup> the key role of two quite famous characters – Boyle and Hobbes. The first one was presented as the creator of the modern scientific method of verifying scientific facts by the consent of the eyewitnesses (not necessarily numerous) authorised to make decisions, while the second was shown as an influential thinker interested in uniting the systems of power and knowledge, which was supposed to guarantee social stability. This process seemed to require, on the one hand, a symbolic interpretation of the Bible, and on the other, the understanding of matter as mechanical and inertial. This was supposed to lead to the elimination of all forces, both of the nature and of spirit, which could help in the mediations with the decisions of the sovereign. Latour argues that the modern constitution remains ‘perfectly’ valid today, producing two powers: one of conceptual purification and the other of the work of translation from one to other of the three basic conceptual constellations. The work of purification laboriously assigns coexistent and influencing each other directly and indirectly (‘networked’) phenomena to separate ontological categories: to nature, which is inhuman, including both natural nature and widely understood man made products resulting from the transformation of the environment; and to culture, which is humanistic, and to which both social beings and individuals are delegated. God is preserved, but as, let’s say, an ‘external father’ who can be addressed only individually, beyond the law in force in everyday, palpable reality. All the beings later identified as uncanny (*das Unheimliche*) have lost their *raison d’être* since that time. In this point exactly, the concept of Latour reveals its vision of our perhaps irreparable non-modernity with all its sharpness; the uncanny is being preserved unconsciously as nothing less than the contents and forms of culture and simultaneously quasi-realities of the first and the second nature (technique), with the ontological ban in force. As

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<sup>7</sup> Cp. B. Latour, *We have never been modern*, transl. C. Porter, Harvard University Press, 1993.

<sup>8</sup> Consisting essentially of three elements - culture, nature, and absent/impotent God.

<sup>9</sup> B. Latour, *Nigdy nie byliśmy nowoczesni. Studium z antropologii symetrycznej*, transl. M. Gdula, Oficyna Naukowa, Warszawa 2011, p. 28.

a result, a large part of the experience of both individuals and the society has been closed to the possibility of understanding. This is an error the avant-garde has been trying to repair. However, its consequences are being supported, above all, by the much more popular and widely accessible types of creative human activities, such as literary horror or horror movies. According to Latour, also the distribution of things to the modern categories of subject and object (such as, for example, less or more advanced tools identified by him as 'actors' influencing our understanding and behaviour) forms a too rigid cultural division. As such, these actors are parts of 'collectives' – this term seems to correspond to the network of relations involving people and 'non-humans'. Although the methodology of possible 'negotiations' between people and 'non-humans' proposed by the French philosopher in order to refine the modern constitution and to 'restart' the process of modernisation seems a bit unclear, the effect of ontological reconsideration of the contemporary world and potential subsequent slowing down of its processes of changing builds the strong side of this conception. Perhaps Latour himself, being aware of the difficulty of the task of practical reconsideration, does not propose to us in *We have never been modern* a particular method, but rather slowing and congesting of the process of translation, which should cover introducing to people of what has been considered non-human and repressed, and human motivations to 'non-humans' – no matter how this process could look like today or in future (e.g. it is extremely difficult for a today's 'rational' man to notice and admit the existence of his own animistic reactions). Interpreted in the context of Latour's anthropology from *We have never been modern*, the avant-garde would, as it seems (in general), perform two types of actions – one would be the constant 'translation' of the modern world as a world modified and still being modified by the technique imposing itself on the nature into the languages of various types of subjectivity, which would facilitate if not understanding, then at least emotional experiencing of modernity (what is a form of domesticating the shock of the incomprehensible changes). The second type of action would be much more episodic but also much more influential 'translation' between the language of science and its findings (staying under the established rigors of the scientific procedures) and the sphere of the social reception expressing itself through 'experimental' avant-garde movements interested in the mass deployment of their 'discoveries'.<sup>10</sup> Returning to the 'modern Constitution' from the side of the freedom and ban antinomy – we have, as it seems, a certain, if not the greatest problem with the freedom to create what is social, in contrast to the freedom of creation of things. If one decides to follow Latour's categorisation further, it may appear a logical

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<sup>10</sup> The quotation marks used here are not the signs of my distancing from the experiments of art and understanding them as illegitimate. My intention was only to highlight the differences between the two fields – art and science, while we can observe maybe even deepening convergence of their terminology.

consequence that we still live under the jurisdiction of the 'right of the sovereign' (the instance of absolute authority, which has the right to irrevocable decisions) - replaced later by the 'updating concepts', such as the nation, globalisation, economic law, or 'impossible to be eliminated threat of chaos' (and above all, the principle of the law in general, as maybe Franz Kafka could add here), which requires absolute submission despite its own mutability and with preserved principle of representation. Even momentary adoption of such a hypothesis, perhaps somehow clears out the thick fog hiding the causes of the 'banality of evil' - the phenomenon of 'ordinariness' of criminals who fit perfectly within the social standards of everyday life, and more or less professional decision makers who use the relative flexibility of the basic conceptual grid to keep the majority in obedience. This relative flexibility, allowing the possibility of personal change at the top, sometimes 'manifests itself unexpectedly' as the so-called 'human nature' causing scandals and fatalistic moods, when an individual or group periodically adopts the role of the sovereign using non-democratic methods. The philosopher Latour would probably say that it happens, as we still have to deal with the modern constitution in its unchanged form, which is being seen as nonnegotiable, just because some of its components have been established as such. Obviously, we should systematically think over the basic ontological categories, according to which (or under which) we live, and first of all, try to tame somehow the impetus of the processes of their purification, which according to Latour, is the main factor responsible for the production of the so-called hybrid beings - quasi-realities of things, phenomena, connections, and interactions that we do not see at all or see clearly mainly because we are not allowed to see them as real. Latour even lists in his book the recommendations for the modifications that could change the 'modern Constitution' into a more realistic one from his (anthropological) point of view. I do not intend to explore the issue of this particular proposed change, around which some philosophical discussions have already grown, further here. However, this ontological diagnosis of modernity itself seems to work surprisingly well in different contexts. It can be also assumed that the feeling of alienation and helplessness in the 'liquid world' of ever-changing relations is also emerging from the consequences of the work of the 'modern Constitution'. On the side of the spirit, constructive planning of the future has become for long, or until today (depending on the exegesis) extremely unpopular as potentially criminal, but still the production of new (also lethal) beings on the side of the matter or nature is being continued very dynamically. At the same time, the weightlessness of the social and economic significance of each particular individual (despite some improvements in the representation and political recognition of the specific groups) is still deepening, even if in some cases only in their own reception of the situation. The strategy of coping with the shock of liquidity, proposed by Zygmunt Bauman in his *44 Letters from the Liquid Modern World*, and intentionally popularised, resembles the heroic strategy of existential individual resistance

'till the end' in the name of the values – the character of Sisyphus is depicted here, who, following the advice of Albert Camus, should be imagined as happy; "The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill the man's heart",<sup>11</sup> concludes Bauman. In such context, my mind is inevitably haunted by the spectre of Franz Kafka again as an artist's overwhelmed by the obsessive fear of objectification and marginalisation. Kafka is being often identified as one of the most convincing novelists in reaching the very essence of the modern life, as perceived by the unhappy consciousness. Is such a Nietzschean advice sufficient in the face of possible prevalence of Kafkian type of experience? And, first of all, is it the only possible strategy of resistance against deepening alienation, being raised as a matter of high importance by constantly reappearing in various forms philosophy of suspicion? A separate problem constitutes the 'free' technization (in the sense grasped by Latour and others<sup>12</sup>) – with time, we are able to see more and more of the global environmental and social challenges triggered by the shortcomings of the 'modern Constitution', such as global destabilisation, as it seems, caused mainly by the 'logic of production'.

I do not intend to depreciate the principle of artistic, individual expression and the attempts to speak one's own language. I would only like to stress that if the classical avant-gardes were delegated to disclose the complexities of the modern world and simultaneously the subject immersed in it, they have not revealed any kind of adequately complex future planning strategy, though they were seemingly promising to do it, deceiving by means of forward-looking rhetoric. In this situation, we should also take a closer look at possible patterns of formal, some stylistic and rhetorical strategies of the time. Of course, speaking of the avant-garde's methodology seems to be extremely risky in the face of the multiformity of its artistic realisation and the multiplicity of the distinctions used to classify it. Let me still defend the conviction that applicable in the majority of cases distinguishing features of this formation can be selected; the avant-garde method would consist of a form of self-affiliation to the present time and would look for the effect of radical eventness, aesthetic experience that could be perceived as 'new every time', what has been being achieved by these days by various means. Postulated emphasis on the present, actuality and momentum manifests itself both in the selection of the broadly understood 'object' and in the technique of creating the work of art, what is also expressed in the majority of the avant-garde texts of the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>13</sup> Leaving the thread of freedom of

<sup>11</sup> Z. Bauman, *44 Letters from the Liquid Modern World 44*, Polity Press, Cambridge, Malden, 2010, p. 254.

<sup>12</sup> Comp. also with (e.g.): W.G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction, Modern Library*, New York 2004.

<sup>13</sup> To some extent some painters looking for the uniqueness of their own, subjective artistic idiom, like e.g. Matisse, break away from this principle. Still Matisse was always, as he claimed in one of his rare comments concerning his art, following the striking experience of one leading

creating things as following the pattern established by science and technology,<sup>14</sup> let's focus on some historical artistic patterns of eventness analysed by Karl Heinz Bohrer within the framework of his conception of the 'absolute present'.<sup>15</sup> We will be interested here in those of them that are recognised as an image of the revolution introduced into art in the characteristic form of Romantic poetics, as well as the appreciation of the concept of 'the present' in the literature of modernist classics (as the most strongly influencing the rhetoric of the avant-garde). Bohrer goes even so far as to formulate a suggestion of the direct chain formed by the Romantic inspirations: "Under cover 'of the sign of the electric' and new, experimental, brave syntax 'revolution' became a durable ferment invented by romantic poets of the modernism."<sup>16</sup> 'The sign of the electric' refers to the images and metaphors of the storm used by Romantic poets. Besides, "An always active [...] consciousness, which informs about the fundamental change of the paradigm, a sudden collapse in the presented time"<sup>17</sup> can be noted. The 'brave syntax', along with some borrowings from ancient poetic, adapts to the content announcing the 'storm event' of inspiration equated with a divine anointing – "the imaginary revolution was transformed into the very work of art."<sup>18</sup> In addition, it seems that the imagination relating such event to the transcendence has never been completely removed from it.<sup>19</sup> One of the quotes from Hölderlin cited by Bohrer shows the structure of a poetic call to remain in a constant receptiveness to the present. This constant readiness to translate or rather transfer the message of the illumination seems to be the principle of the prophetic function or the function of the oracle delegated in modernity perhaps exclusively to the world of art. Adopting such a perspective seems to explain satisfactorily both the programmatic ambiguous-

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colour adjusting to its dominance the relations of other colours and forms in the picture; thus each of his pictures was becoming a separate spiritual, subjective and perceptual event. Another case of quasi-exception could be Mondrian who was seeking for the balance of the elements of the image philosophically-metaphysically included in the theoretical description of the picture model. However Matisse strongly opposed to the symmetry, which allows assuming also in this case each time search for an idiomatic, intellectual and emotional harmony. See: *Artyści o...*, pp. 90-99, 366-368.

14 Latour might say that it is an unconscious quest, covered by the work of purification, sharing the modern world into the natural-'object-ive' and the spiritual parts. One of the contemporary artists who spectacularly breaks the ontological border between modern art and technology is Damien Hirst, and it is not the only hardly visible limitation that is easily crossed by him. We will come back to him for a moment later on, in the attempt to redefine the function of contemporary avant-garde art. Adding a short explanation of the sentence bearing footnote – it is not my definition of art, but only an observation concerning a specific historical phenomenon and the historical direction of the flow of inspiration.

15 Cp. K. H. Bohrer, *Absolutna terażniejszość*, Oficyna Naukowa, Warszawa 2003.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 32. Transl. M. P.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 30. Transl. M. P.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 26. Transl. M. P.

19 Cp. F. Hölderlin, *Selected poems*, transl. D. Constantine, *Bloodaxe Books*, Newcastle upon Tyne 1990.

ness of the messages presented by many modern artists and poets, and their focused, self-directed listening, the purpose of which is to establish some instructions for the audience to read 'the will of the gods' (now meaning rather such instances as fate, economy or technology), which, however, as in an ancient oracle, can never be read very clearly. It allows the modern creator to always retain at least the potential opportunity to catch a prophetic vision with the increased chance of avoiding the responsibility for the future, which, in turn, does not particularly serve well the collective future as such. However, this strategy may serve much better the personal future - what kind of sensible function has a chance to carry now the self-expressive attitude of the avant-garde artists? Does the avant-garde art retain its value primarily for the self-discovery function, or/and as a meeting of self-aware, aesthetically educated sensitivities close to the Kantian *sensus communis*? May it preserve for the artists (and as well the spectators) also the function of self-healing, domesticating the shock of the present? It seems that we can now state its functionality on each of these planes, which, of course, does not exhaust the list of possible questions regarding these issues. More elaborate answers to the above questions, as well as the formulation of new ones, are staying beyond the objectives and possibilities of this essay. We may, however, follow the track of the self-therapeutic function in Bohrer's book, as the one that should lead us to eventness produced by the collisions of sense and form in the avant-garde art and poetry. Bohrer describes on Baudelaire's example the state of suspension in personal timelessness (deriving it again from the romantic uncanniness), which does not want anything anymore, but it is satisfied with a kind of perverse imagination, in the aesthetically contemplative mode. This gesture, which Bohrer presents as Baudelaire's ultimate retreat from history, is then set up with the 'moments of being' of Virginia Woolf. The 'moments of being', while still disturbing and faulted states of emergency, have the same illuminative quality as the positive, totally spontaneous affirmation. Woolf describes the moments of ecstatic delight that shuts off her unhappy everyday consciousness. The term 'shock' is used by her to point out such a moment of illumination, impossible to foresee, which breaks the everyday mode of orientation in temporality, hijacking the author to the timeless time - the eternal present. It is also a metaphor for art in general - Woolf's female characters run away from the pressure of the banal demands of everyday life into the world of fiction in search of 'shock' - 'moments of being'. Art is a pass to the world of happy reality, even if the second one appears only in short flashes and in contact with perception or memory. Parallel to Woolf's books, but without any contact with them, was the work of Walter Benjamin (also mentioned by the German philosopher). He was methodically looking for the ways of participation in the 'messianic reality' through such inventions as the 'dialectical picture' (an image resulting from the collision of etymological and cognitive/associative meanings within the word or sentence), careful documentation of the perceptual and thought experiments with stimulants, vigilant attention devoted to the objects

preserving the remains of childhood's auras. The contradiction (says Bohrer, reconstructing the analysis of *Mrs. Dalloway* by Ricoeur) between providing a sense of unlimited inner time (which is constituted by the increased contemplativeness combined with the ability to easily traverse the broad land of individual memory), and the external time, called 'monumental', underlined in the book by the systematic tolling of Big Ben, carries a tragic tone with itself. The lovers of the internal time feel horrified in the face of the figures of authority, the representatives of external order, which must result, as it appears here, in a retreat from the universe of the ideas implementable in the external world, and therefore from the thought devoted to the future.

We can ask at this point whether for example Benjamin was thinking about using his own (individual) 'moments of being' as the means to strengthen both his own and potentially everybody's 'weak messianic power' understood not only as a theological-soteriological strategy, but also one which might be useful on the social level, even as a sum of individual attitudes. In other words, could he plan, given his serious interest in aesthetics (today we would say 'everyday aesthetics'), the common utility of domesticating the shock experience on the individual level through everyday aesthetic experience? By the way, one can note the obvious critical-feminist tone of Woolf's work and notice that Woolf's female characters are 'secular others', still condemned to eternal liquidity, without the ability to effectively decide about their fate, therefore 'their kingdom is not of this world', and their choices are characterised by the proneness to spontaneous escape. Doesn't the strategy of domesticating the shock of contemporary life nowadays 'pass the exam' in countless cases of the so-called consumers of culture on different levels of complexity and elitism as a strategy of not so much permanent escape as consciously applied self-regeneration, the potency of strengthening the feeling of subjective existence and self-calming, and also strengthening their ability to (sarcastically recalling Bauman's advice) roll the Sisyphus stone? Bohrer has come to some justifications, especially cryptologic, of the need to experience the absolute present as the 'experience of the essence of things' that lies beyond time. When referring to Proust's remarks, he could probably also include in his concept the respectable figure of Husserl, if he would allow himself in case of philosophy for such an amount of interpretative freedom, which was applied to the artists examined in the book about the 'absolute present tense'.

The sacral sources of the meaning of a work of art and its specific temporality derived from the sacral modi of time can be explored in fascinating contemporary interpretations, such as e.g. the ones of Hans Belting and Giorgio Agamben. Thus let me, inevitably approaching the end of this investigation, refer the reader to their works (especially *The Time That Remains* by Agamben). One should also mention here Hans-George Gadamer's concept of the special qualities of the holiday or festive time. The question of the possibility of interpreting hardly perceptible or invisible objects and relations in the context of Lacan is fascinating but too

complex to be recounted even very briefly in this essay. The ‘social’ construal of the systems of temporality as dependent on some types of cultures, sketched by some historians of ideas and sociologists such as, for example, Norbert Elias, reveals, like close reading of *Being and Time*, the arbitrariness of our ‘inevitable’ current everyday concept of time. I can only hope that I will find an opportunity to write about all these highly inspiring issues elsewhere.

Finally, let me return to the question that has been accompanying us from the very beginning, although not expressed explicitly so far: Is avant-garde art able to consider the future on the basis of its evaluation of ‘many feedback loops’? I believe it is, additionally preserving its character of a unique event refreshing the perception of the individual, empowering the subject and providing the space for encounters. It seems that all these functions are often offered by the contemporary stylistically ‘postmodern’ art, extremely rich in its potential of meanings (cf. the art of Damien Hirst, or the Polish artists Zbigniew Libera and the duo Kijewski/Kocur). The contact with contemporary avant-garde art not only evokes aesthetic experience, reflection on the form of a work of art, and the existence and operation of what is usually invisible. It also enables potentially fruitful experience of thought movement in the context of the reflection on the future thanks to the abundance of references to the contemporary phenomena investigated in the contemporary philosophical-critical discourse. It seems that contemporary art is sufficiently densely ‘networked’ to allow us to engage in thinking about the future. On the other hand, the preserved (mainly on the level of meaning) eventness of this art, which usually leads to profound reflection on the contemporary world, also constitutes a constant series of potential breakthroughs from stiff ontology and existing interpretations, which could mean a step towards the ability to shape a more rational (in a good sense) future. To this end, however, it is also necessary to explore the historical and contemporary systems of meanings and knowledge with the accompanying capacity to emotionally domesticate the shock of the present.

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## **AWANGARDA JAKO RUCH W KIERUNKU TERAŻNIEJSZOŚCI (streszczenie)**

Tekst stawia sobie za zadanie namysł nad wątkami aktualności i wydarzeniowości ujmowanymi jako definiujące artystyczny ruch awangardowy, rozumiany w związku z tym jako formacja twórcza o identyfikowalnych wspólnych założeniach przekraczających podziały dyscyplinarne i historyczno-filozoficzne klasyfikacje. Zakładam, że duża część sztuki współczesnej pozostaje w ten sposób wierna pewnym dającym się wyróżnić inicjalnym dążeniom awangardowym. Wydaje się, że także

obecnie, podobnie jak na początku XX wieku, terażniejszość jawi się artystom jako wciąż trudno uchwytna. Zjawisko to dotyczy zarówno komentarzy, które odnoszą się do własnych granic i charakteru sztuki (wypowiadającej się wciąż na nowo o sobie samej wobec zobowiązującego ją wciąż imperatywu nowości), jak i jej prób rozumienia i interpretowania przemian życia współczesnego. Natężone skupienie sztuki na tym, co obecne, może być klasyfikowane jako słabość refleksji, ale także jako reakcja na tempo modernizacji, nieodłączne od niej samej. Filozoficzne i antropologiczne ujęcia czasu i współczesności (m.in. i przede wszystkim koncepcje absolutnej terażniejszości Karla Heinza Bohrera, nowoczesnej Konstytucji Brunona Latoura i podejrzenia odnośnie współczesności tzw. "filozofii podejrzeń") pozwolą z kolei na próbne diagnozy potencjalnych powodów zaniepokojenia kierunkami rozwoju sztuki współczesnej, które daje się wciąż obserwować w jej powszechnej recepcji.

**Słowa kluczowe:** awangarda, nowoczesność, wydarzenie, absolutna terażniejszość, szok, płynność, modernizacja.

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## ADORNO AND PRACTICALLY USELESS ART, OR AUTONOMY INSTEAD OF AVANT-GARDE

**Abstract:** Adorno's aesthetic theory allows us to treat him as an anti-theorist of the avant-garde. We can find in his work many accurate observations grasping the essence of the changes that were introduced by this artistic formation. Adorno himself used the term "avant-garde" in a slightly different meaning – as denoting artistic production going against the traditional aesthetic tastes, but also resistance to commercialization and reification. In the context of Adorno's whole philosophy such resistance is illusory. The mechanisms governing the sphere of culture are total and efficiently pacify any aesthetic rebellions. Therefore, it is not in the formal experiments that Adorno saw the rebellion of art against the existing system. According to the German philosopher, the critical function of art – its main vocation – is realized in the antithetic attitude to reality and is due to the so-called "ideal of transformation". And those are only conditioned by the autonomy of art. In the present paper I discuss the points in Adorno's aesthetic theory at which he shows art as autonomous.

**Keywords:** Adorno, autonomy, logic of art, content of art.

The aesthetic heritage of Theodor W. Adorno is discussed from many different interpretative perspectives. So, for example, especially the English-speaking authors often place it somewhere between the subjective aesthetics of Kant and the objective aesthetics of Hegel.<sup>1</sup> This interesting approach requires that the binding notional distinctions in the traditional paradigm of aesthetics are respected. However, the main intention of Adorno was not so much to go beyond this paradigm, as to lift it. Probably for this reason a far more widely used strategy is to place him in the context of the discussion on avant-garde art and to treat him as its theoretician,<sup>2</sup> especially in the area of the theory of music he had been involved in since the

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<sup>1</sup> See: S. Jarvis, *Adorno. A Critical Introduction*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2007, p. 90-123; and also R. Wilson, *Aesthetics*, in: *Theodor Adorno. Key Concepts*, (red.) D. Cook, Cromwell Press 2008, pp. 147-160

<sup>2</sup> Adorno's aesthetic theory is one of the main points Peter Bürger is referring to in his *Theorie der Avantgarde* (1974). In the Polish literature this perspective is present, among others, in Liliana Bieszczad in *Kryzys pojęcia sztuki* (2003); and also in Beata Frydryczak in *Estetyka oporu* (1995).

earliest years of his career in music journalism. By the age of thirty he had to his name nearly a hundred articles mostly devoted to musical criticism, published in recognized professional journals (*Zeitschrift für Musik*, *Die Musik*, *Pult und Taktstock*, and *Musikblätter des Anbruch*, among others).<sup>3</sup>

Lucia Sziborsky claims that the key musicological categories, whose theory was developed by Adorno – especially the category of ‘musical material’, and also the question of the relation between the subject and the object in music – are perfect for the description and interpretation of the works of the musical avant-garde created by the members of the so-called second Vienna school represented by three composers: Arnold Schönberg, Anton Webern and Alban Berg. On the other hand, Günter Anders describes Adorno as “undoubtedly the most outstanding and competent philosopher of music since the Pythagorean metaphysicians”.<sup>4</sup>

However, it seems that the “undoubtedness” of this opinion is a bit too far-reaching, as it has its outstanding opponents. Carl Dahlhaus, for example, claimed that although the theory of Adorno’s “new music” had some impact on the development of 20<sup>th</sup> century composition, it only lasted for a short time. Also Arnold Schönberg questioned the theoretical interpretations that the philosopher of music proposed for his works.<sup>5</sup>

Because of my lack of musical competence, I admit that I am not able to settle this controversy. However, the aesthetic theory of Adorno cannot be restricted to the area of music only. It constitutes a general theory of art and thus it can be applied to the description and interpretation of the whole area of creative activity, including that of the historical avant-garde. Adorno’s theory of artworks matches the avant-garde concept of the non-organic work of art, which was convincingly shown by Peter Bürger.<sup>6</sup>

On the nearly 700 pages of Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*, the term “avant-garde” appears only eight times, in its most ordinary sense – as an antonym to ‘the traditional, backward, obscure, and regressive’. Adorno definitely values avant-garde art positively, but he gives this name only to the art that meets the slightly different criteria than those defined by the theoreticians researching the avant-garde as a specific artistic historical formation. His concept of a non-organic artwork, resulting from the more general research strategy – the critical theory of the Frankfurt school, concerns not only the formal issues. It introduces the perception of art as a critique of the existing reality. This strategy may be applied to the whole domain of art: to art created not only in a particular historical period, but throughout the ages.

<sup>3</sup> R. Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School. Its History, Theories and Political Significance*, transl. M. Robertson, Polity Press, Cambridge 1994, p. 70.

<sup>4</sup> See: L. Sziborsky, *Teoria estetyczna Adorna – teoria awangardy?*, in: „Sztuka i Filozofia” 1994, no 8, 1994, p. 19-40.

<sup>5</sup> See K. Sauerland, *Dahlhaus a Adorno*, in: *Muzykalia II - 2008 - Materiały konferencyjne 2*, website: demusica.pl (27.07.2017).

<sup>6</sup> P. Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt 1974.

The leading motif of Adorno's aesthetics is the principal question of truth in art. His *Aesthetic theory* shows art in the historical process of having to reach for increasingly dissonant and formally disharmonious materials.<sup>7</sup> This obviously makes it easier to associate it with the artistic avant-garde, one of whose intentions was to go against the aesthetic tastes of the bourgeois audience. For Adorno this process is, most of all, an about-face performed by art to free itself from the increasingly tight grip of the cultural industry, degrading it to the status of a commodity, and thus forcing it to reproduce the ruling ideology masking the oppressive mechanisms controlling the social reality. This is the diagnosis that Adorno and Horkheimer gave in *The Dialectics of Enlightenment* to contemporary culture, writing about the "administered" and "reified" world, dominated by "instrumental reason" and "the exchange principle."<sup>8</sup> In order to avoid the degradation to commerce and to protect its status of the last bastion of truth about the external reality, art had to renounce beauty – understood as a harmonious set of sensory elements. In other words, what was smooth, harmonious and easy in consumption has been replaced with the rough, shapeless and resistant.

Already in his *Philosophy of New Music* Adorno, citing Clement Greenberg, wrote that art has split into kitsch and the avant-garde, adding that

(...) kitsch – the dictatorship of profit over art – has long since subjugated the particular, socially reserved sphere of art. This is why reflections on the development of truth in aesthetic objectivity must be confined uniquely to the avant-garde, which is excluded from official culture.<sup>9</sup>

Let us note, however, that defining kitsch as "dictatorship of profit over culture" we do not say anything about the properties of a given kitsch item, but only about its functioning in its cultural setting. The avant-garde, considered here as an inverse of kitsch, is reduced to the sphere of artistic activity that cannot find its place in the official culture. It cannot find its place there because it was expelled from it or managed to escape it. It seemed that art would be able to escape from the official culture by renouncing its "culinary" aspect – being prone to consumption. However, even in the late 1940s Adorno's writings already reveal his conviction that avant-garde's formal revolutions will not protect art from subordination to the logic of the market. Thus the avant-garde – and all art – is dying, inevitably turning into an object of consumption, and ultimately losing its emancipative functions.

<sup>7</sup> I have discussed this process more broadly elsewhere. See: *Duch sztuki i obietnica nie do spełnienia. W poszukiwaniu pozytywnych konkluzji „Teorii estetycznej” Adorna*, in: „Sztuka i filozofia” 2006, no 28, pp. 151-163.

<sup>8</sup> See, Th. W. Adorno, with M. Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, translated E. Jephcott, Stanford UP 2002.

<sup>9</sup> Th.W. Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, translated and edited Robert Hullot-Kentor, University of Minnesota Press, 2006, p. 13.

It does not lose such potential, however. Given an appropriate theory, it may play the functions expected by Adorno – reveal the truth about the social reality and break free from “the administered world”, dominated by instrumental rationality. This can be achieved by art only when it becomes autonomous. Dubbed “the last mandarin of modernism”, Adorno owes this label not only to his elitist expectations of highest-quality artistic craftsmanship, but also, or perhaps primarily, to the fact that he was one of the last so influential defenders of the thesis of the autonomy of art.<sup>10</sup> This thesis assumes that, by setting its own rules, art secures for itself a space free from the determinants of the reality that we know from our everyday experience.

In order to explain Adorno’s construction of the category of autonomy I propose to start with the general assumption which – as I have argued elsewhere – makes the core of his whole philosophy of art.<sup>11</sup> Nearly all of his writings on aesthetics reveal the underlying belief that the social character and the social role of art consists in its antithetical stance towards the external reality. Art becomes an antithesis to the world by distancing itself from it, drifting away from reality. How does art achieve this distance? What makes artworks recognizable as antithetical to the existing social reality? The shortest answer to this question is: art’s distance from and antitheticality to the world is determined by its substance, or content. The German philosopher claims that every artwork has its own individual objective content independent of the recipient. Thus the readings of the work and the interpretations it is given do not modify its content. Adorno equates this objective content with the logic of art, which he describes as a certain obscure consistency characterizing the individual creations, similar to the logic of dreams. When we recount our dreams after awakening, sometimes they seem absurd even to ourselves, as contradictory to the logical sequencing of events that we experience in our daily life. However, despite this contradiction, the events we have dreamed of appear to us to be convincingly embedded in their temporal context. The logic of art also provides us with a seemingly wider palette of solutions; i.e. there is no simple entailment that is typical for the classical logic.

Abandoning the ambition to generate unequivocal entailments and precise specifications makes the logic of art somewhat loose. This does not yet mean that it is completely deprived of any power of determination. For example, the logic of art defines and determines the objectiveness of its creations. Owing to the logic of art, artworks are what they are; it constitutes a work as an exceptional and specific one. It is thanks to the logic of art that artworks become “a second nature” or “a second world”, as Adorno has called them – the same, but also different.<sup>12</sup> The

<sup>10</sup> See: *Adorno: między moderną a postmoderną*, A. Zeidler-Janiszewska (ed.), Warszawa-Poznań 1991.

<sup>11</sup> See: R. Czekaj, *Krytyczna teoria sztuki Th. W. Adorna*, Kraków 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Th.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, translated and edited Robert Hullot-Kentor, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p. 138.

same – because certain formal categories of art, such as time, space, or causality are also the categories of the empirical world. But it is already a different world, because in the empirical world those categories occur as forms of dominance, as everything is embedded and administered in time and space. Everything is also precisely regulated by the laws of causation. However, in artworks, these laws, or forms of dominance – as they are called by Adorno – undergo modification. Art exposes us to a different world.

This seems quite obvious. Let us take the category of time. In reality, time passes relentlessly and it strictly determines the order of events. But in art time can be freely modified: it can be condensed, stretched, or completely stopped. In the real world, time, space and causality occur as something inevitable and irreversible. But – as Adorno puts it – art can revoke the inevitable. Art is completely free to use those forms. Adorno writes that the world constituted by art is admittedly composed of elements coming from the empirical world, external to art, but this does not involve a simple transfer or mapping. “There is nothing in art that does not derive from the world; and yet all that thus enters art is transformed.”<sup>13</sup> When it comes to the “forms of dominance”, their transfer to art results in their subordination to its special logic and, as a consequence, these forms lose their apodictic character and cease to be what they were in the external world – they are no longer forms of dominance. In this sense, an artwork is a second world, but at the same time one with a negative attitude towards the original.

Such an approach is extremely valuable to Adorno, as it allows him to treat art as a kind of an agent playing against what the philosopher contended with in all of his writings: the dominance of instrumental reason. The modifications of the forms of dominance in art are not confined only to them; they also extend to the principle that controls and uses them. Such forms as time, space, and causality are consistent with the model of instrumental rationality predominating in the world, and when art revokes their inevitability and undermines their assertiveness, it also seems to revoke the rationality that rules over those forms.

The logic of art differs from the logic of instrumental rationality, and if an artwork is able to embody this difference, it demonstrates the existence of a logic different from that obtaining in our everyday experience, and of a rationality different from what we take for granted in everyday life. This difference rests on the freedom from the tyranny of instrumental rationality in our personal and perhaps primarily social life. The difference cannot, however, be rendered in art in terms of a simple analogy. We would be dealing with analogy if coercion and dominance were simply mapped in art, and if an artwork communicated them directly. In this case, the artwork would be only replicating what it should contest. Imitative art would have to absorb these forms of dominance such as they really

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

are; they would not undergo any modifications – their assertiveness and inevitability would not be revoked. In consequence, coercion and dominance would not be eliminated from the second world, and without such elimination the very existence of such world – a different reality – would not be even possible to imagine. This is one of the reasons why Adorno claims that the content of an “authentic artwork”, which makes the artwork antithetical to the external reality, cannot be expressed literally and directly; it cannot be reduced to the “plot” of the work, i.e. the story it is telling; if treated in this way, art would be degraded to the status of “a clattering machinery demonstrating world views”.<sup>14</sup>

One may point out three factors ensuring the autonomy of art within Adorno’s theory of aesthetics. First, autonomous art does not copy the mechanisms governing the external reality (cf. Adorno’s criticism of literal expression in art presented above). This comes down to the often quoted principle, which Adorno formulates as follows: “the communication of artworks with what is external to them (...) occurs through noncommunication.”<sup>15</sup> He rated so highly the work of Samuel Beckett and Arnold Schönberg precisely because they rejected communicative language – narrative prose and tonal music, respectively – as the medium of art. Secondly, art is competent to set its own rules. It is autonomous when it acts on this competence, although it does not draw these rules out of nothing – *ex nihilo*, but modifies the ones that obtain in the world external to art. This is the so-called “ideal of transformation”, coming down to the already cited statement that there is nothing in art that does not come from the world, but at the same time everything is transformed. Thirdly, autonomy means independence from the rules external to it.

This last requirement seems at the first glance rather problematic. For art to prove its autonomy, it has to extract itself from the social conditioning to which it is nevertheless subordinated, and which it can never really escape. Here we come to Adorno’s philosophical method which, in short, consists in constructing constellations out of pairs of antithetical concepts. It does not seem possible to talk about beauty without talking about its antithesis – ugliness. It is the same with autonomy. Talking about autonomy – and what is more – wishing to view it as a condition of the social role of art, Adorno must talk about art as heteronomous at the same time. In *Aesthetic Theory* he describes an artwork as “something for itself”, but, at the same time, as a “social fact”. One seems to exclude the other, as Adorno perfectly realized, writing that “their double character is manifest at every point; they change and contradict themselves”.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Th.W. Adorno, *Trying to Understand “Engage”*, in: “New German Critique”, No. 26, Spring-Summer, 1982, p. 120: this opposition towards expressing specific thesis and messages in art situates Adorno in the opposition to such proponents of political and social engagement of an artist as, at least, Sartre or earlier Brecht.

<sup>15</sup> Th.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory...*, p. 5.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 227.

In order to better observe this interdependence between the social role of art and its autonomy and heteronomy, I propose to consider Adorno's claim that in the context of advanced capitalism the autonomy of art has undergone fetishization. The accusation is directed mainly at aestheticism and "the pure art" – or "art for art's sake" – concept it promotes. Such criticism has been raised by the proponents of so-called socially useful art, and Adorno supports this stance. He claims that the critics are correct in noting that the "fetishization" of the concept of "pure artwork" makes the artworks, which are in fact social products, close themselves up against their social background and the reality they belong to. In this way they only simulate their independence from the modes and mechanisms of the external world. Thus, every piece of "pure art" may be accused of spreading false consciousness and criticized for its ideological bias. The *l'art pour l'art* slogan promoted the ideal of beauty in opposition to society that is of little interest to aestheticism. It took the form of an antithesis: the beauty of art on the one side and the ugliness of the society on the other. But – rather paradoxically – this neo-Romantic autarchy of beauty, its exalted declarative resentment towards the social made art an easy target of market mechanisms. There are no aesthetic rebellions that would not burn in the hell of the pop culture. This says a lot about the aporetic situation of art. If it derogates from its autonomy, i.e. it renounces its competence to set its own rules, then it dooms itself to the replication of the external mechanisms responsible for the contemporary world, whose pivotal moment was the barbarity of WW II. But on the other hand, when art is clinging to its autonomy, when it shuts itself off from the world and remains something for itself only, there is no guarantee that it will not be integrated into the existing system as yet another tame craft, harmless for the system, becoming a silent accomplice for the mechanisms it should contest.

Accusing art of absolutizing its own autonomy, however, has its reverse side. Although the charge was correct when art was faulted for reinforcing the ideological character of its works and leaving the world to itself, in a sense it is also misguided: it is precisely art's fetishized autonomy, its closure against the world that allows us to see the important truth about art. This truth comes down to the constataion that an artwork, being something "only for itself" is, at the same time, an antithesis of "being for something else". This "being for something else" is the realization of the exchange principle – one of the hidden forms of the dominance of instrumental reason. An artwork *feigning* its own autonomy, or *simulating* its being only for itself, goes against this principle. Of course, it is hard to negotiate the fact that art is a part of reality, the reality in which all relations are defined by the rules of market economy. Art is produced, distributed and consumed like any other commodity, but the difference is that an artwork seems to be living its own life. Its form creates an enclave free from the rules and principles that govern and determine the social reality. I believe that such is the sense of Adorno's statement often quoted in the discussion on the relations between art and society: he claims

that “insofar as a social function can be predicted for artworks, it is their functionlessness.”<sup>17</sup> The “functionlessness” of art is understood pragmatically. Adorno regards as authentic only those artworks which seem to have no clear purpose. Their practical uselessness is manifested in their autonomy.

Adorno can thus be said to have reached a kind of rotten compromise with the claims of the radical aestheticism. He needs it, as under the reign of instrumental rationality, this uselessness of artworks renders them as islands of irrationality in the ocean of the rational world – if I can use such a metaphor. In other words, the practical uselessness of art undermines the monopoly and hegemony of the instrumental reason. An artwork understood in this way – as a thing among other things – appears as a slightly *Wallenrodian*<sup>18</sup> saboteur:

the more the artwork's own organization assimilates itself to a logical order by virtue of its inner exactitude, the more obviously the difference between the artwork's logicity and the logicity that governs empirically becomes the parody of the latter; the more reasonable the work becomes in terms of its formal constitution, the more ridiculous it becomes according to the standard of empirical reason. Its ridiculousness is, however, also part of a condemnation of empirical rationality; it accuses the rationality of social praxis of having become an end in itself and as such the irrational and mad reversal of means into ends.<sup>19</sup>

Let us remember the diagnosis that Adorno gave to the contemporary culture. We are living in the world where everything is meant for something. It seems unthinkable that something with no application could exist: something that could not be used as a tool and a means for a certain purpose. By consolidating itself as autonomous, art becomes a broken link in the endless chain of means and purposes along which our instrumental reason makes us follow. An artwork displays a world in which the tools, the forms of dominance, and the procedures of instrumental rationality are suspended. An artwork creates a space in which the rules governing the external reality are presented as arbitrary. As arbitrary, they may be liable to reconfiguration. Therefore, art suggests to us that it is possible to change the existing conditions.

Autonomous art – viewed from such perspective – does not convey any positive messages, generate any positive programme or opt for any specific position. Adorno denies art the right to such practices in order to whip it away from the magic circle

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 227.

<sup>18</sup> Konrad Wallenrod – a character from a poem by the Polish literary prophet, Adam Mickiewicz. Wallenrod, as a Lithuanian child found himself under the care of the Teutonic knights. Under their protection he reached the position of the Grand Master of the Order. Simulating loyalty to his adopted homeland, he actually realized a pro-Lithuanian political agenda.

<sup>19</sup> Th.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory...*, p. 119.

of communication. Each positive performance, each positive statement requires the use of formulaic and formatted means of communication, which precludes going beyond the established order. Only the art that rejects communication, by the very fact of being art, is able to delineate the space free from the dominance of instrumental reason and rationality of aims.

The lack of a positive program in the content of art is also reflected in the model of its social engagement. Art is deprived of the chance to conduct a dialogue on concrete issues. On the other hand, however, this is how it preserves its “purity” – in its constitution an artwork remains independent and free from the external reality. However, remaining “a thing among other things” it is still subjected to the laws and mechanisms of the market. It is in this hybrid of autonomy and heteronomy that Adorno locates the social function of art. In the world where every-thing exists for something, something exists just for itself: a broken link in the rationality of purposes, whose omnipotence is limited by the “practically useless” art.

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## **ADORNO I PRAKTYCZNIE BEZUŻYTECZNA SZTUKA, CZYLI AUTONOMIA ZAMIAST AWANGARDY (streszczenie)**

Teoria estetyczna Adorna pozwala na traktowanie go jako teoretyka awangardy. Znajdziemy u niego wiele trafnych analiz dotyczących istoty zmian, jakie wprowadziła ze sobą ta formacja artystyczna. Sam Adorno jednak używał terminu „awangarda” w nieco szerszym znaczeniu – jako produkcja artystyczna, która nie tylko łamie tradycyjne gusta estetyczne, ale także stawia opór komercjalizacji i reifikacji. W kontekście całej filozofii Adorna taki opór jest jednak iluzoryczny. Mechanizmy rządzące sferą kultury są totalne i skutecznie pacyfikują wszelkie bunty estetyczne. Dlatego to nie w formalnych eksperymentach Adorno widział rebelię sztuki przeciwko panującemu systemowi. Funkcja krytyczna sztuki – wedle frankfurczyka naczelne jej powołanie – spełnia się w antyteptycznym stosunku do rzeczywistości i dzięki tzw. ideałowi przetworzenia. Ich warunkiem z kolei jest autonomia sztuki. W niniejszym tekście przedstawiam te momenty teorii estetycznej Adorna, w których ukazuje on sztukę jako autonomiczną właśnie.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Adorno, autonomia, logika sztuki, treść sztuki.

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## **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”.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> R. Schechner, *Performance Theory*, p. 181-182.

<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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

<sup>3</sup> J. McKenzie, *Perform or Else: from Discipline to Performance*, p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> 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 30<sup>th</sup> October and ended on 7<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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’”.<sup>7</sup> 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-

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<sup>6</sup> See A. Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, pp. 10-28.

<sup>7</sup> *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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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”.<sup>10</sup> The beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> 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 coexistence. 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,

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<sup>8</sup> See: M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, pp. 92-93.

<sup>9</sup> N. Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 2002, pp. 7-10.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

autarkic types of production, etc. (...[and]) suggests other trading possibilities than those in effect within this system”.<sup>11</sup> *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 redispensing 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”.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> On the one hand, *Independent Monument* becomes a pretext to activate local communities, trigger

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> J. Rancière, *Aesthetics as Politics*, 2009, p. 21.

<sup>13</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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-recipient; 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".<sup>14</sup> 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

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

answering the questions “what?”, “how?”, and “why?”<sup>15</sup> 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 *ipse*, 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 *ipse* 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”.<sup>16</sup> *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.<sup>17</sup> 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.

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According to Arthur C. Danto, “To imagine an artwork is to imagine a form of life”.<sup>18</sup> 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-

<sup>15</sup> See: P. Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, transl. K. Blamey, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1990, pp. 140-168.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>17</sup> See: *ibid.*, pp. 115-125.

<sup>18</sup> 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.

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

W niniejszym artykule autor stara się przedstawić projekt kolektywu K.A.U. i Małgorzaty Wdowik *Transit Monumental* – Droga niepodległości jako przykłady późnonowoczesnego 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.

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## **FASHION AS THE OTHER OF ART. THE POSITION OF CLOTHING DESIGN IN THE AVANT-GARDE ART AND IN THE CONTEMPORARY ERA**

**Abstract:** Analyzing the relationships between art and fashion, I will refer to the category the Other/identical. For several decades, it has been popular in the humanistic debate, subject to various interpretations (Derrida, Foucault, feminism, post-colonialism). In the meaning adopted here, just as the Other is a condition for the existence of the identical, so, I believe, fashion is a point of reference for art. It functions as an element allowing art to build its identity on being different from it. This situation was particularly evident in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the introductory part of my paper, I will present some examples of avant-garde artists' involvement in the design of clothing treated on an equal footing with artistic activity. For the Futurists and Constructivists, the Other and the identical were equal. The second part of the paper describes the situation that arose at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when equality between the Other and the identical took a different form. The identical started imitating the Other - art now resembles a fashion show, advertising photography or a luxury boutique. This reveals the anti-nomical character of art, its secret connection with fashion, anticipated by Theodor W. Adorno. Contemporary art no longer has the strength to resist it. They blend into the aesthetic visual sphere.

**Keywords:** The Other/identical, the avant-garde, Theodor W. Adorno, fashion, Futurism, Prada Marfa, Vanessa Beecroft

In this paper, I present the history of the dangerous relations between fashion and art. The relationship between these disciplines has been frequently explored and described. Most often, the discussion is limited to trying to determine whether fashion is an art. The answer has usually been negative. At best, clothing design is relegated to the domain of applied arts, and these are ranked lower in the hierarchy than fine arts. Practical application itself allegedly implies that we are dealing with something inferior and secondary. Analyzing the relations between art and fashion, I do not want to invoke these traditional categories, but I am going to address the “identical/other” relation. I believe that fashion is the Other of art, through which art has often built its own identity.

The category of Otherness has gained an important place in the humanistic debate in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It appears, for instance, in Jacques Derrida's philosophy of difference, as well as in the critical reflection of Michel Foucault, who notes that apart from the prevailing discourses, there are other ways of thinking, other discourses with subversive potential. Marginalized and excluded, they came to the fore in the postmodern era. The notion of otherness also plays an important role in feminist and post-colonial reflection.<sup>1</sup> The notion of otherness entails the category of identity, and the question of relations between them. The Other, treated as incomprehensible and therefore incapable of being assimilated, is at the same time a condition for the existence of the identical.

In my reflections I am going to refer to the ideas of Otherness mentioned here, as well as to different takes on it. However, my intention is not only to constate the strangeness of fashion in relation to art. I will try to demonstrate that the identical/Other relationship entails the necessity of their coexistence. I consider this situation as analogous to the view of Sartre, who believed that we can learn who we are through our attitude towards the Other.

One of the most important factors distinguishing art from other types of skills was the attribution of aesthetic values, rather than functional or utilitarian ones, to artworks. Immanuel Kant defined fine arts as the sphere of selfless contemplation, not serving any external purpose. The English philosopher Robin George Collingwood believed that the artist, unlike the craftsman, had freedom in his creative decisions. His activity is not limited by a predefined function or purpose, apart from creating aesthetic experiences.

The reason for the exclusion of fashion from the realm of art was its usefulness. Clothing has always served some function, be it protective, defensive, ritual, representative or communicative, meaning that it has emphasized the importance and social position of the user, helped him/her to stand out or assimilate with a specific social group. Great tailors have been "dictators" in name only. In fact, they are dependent on the tastes and generosity of their customers. Meanwhile, the inherent feature of art is autonomy, i.e. freedom from external economic, religious and ideological influences. The most radical form of art is associated with the slogan "art for art's sake" – art that does not serve any purpose. Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, the great 20<sup>th</sup> century author of the theory of art's autonomy, claimed that art is characterized by duality – it is an autonomous and a social phenomenon at the same time. He pointed out that

art becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art. By crystallizing in itself as something unique to itself,

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. G. Sztabiński, *Estetyka „inności”*, in: *Konteksty Sztuki. Konteksty estetyki*, vol. I, ed. K. Wilkowska, A. Zeidler-Janiszewska, Wydawnictwo Oficyna, Łódź 2011, p. 249.

rather than complying with existing social norms and qualifying as 'socially useful,' it criticizes society by merely existing...<sup>2</sup>

According to Adorno, the history of art is the history of its progressive autonomization. Artistic activity is being gradually freed from traditional cultural functions, such as religious or court ones. Fashion has never had such autonomy, nor has it had a tendency to rebel against the society. The concept of autonomy is normative, it is a tool for determining whether something can be accepted or if it should be excluded from the sphere of art. Based on this principle, fashion that does not meet certain rules has been excluded from the realm of art.

Despite those facts, and all its weaknesses and flaws, fashion has aroused interest in the artistic circles. Cally Blackman, British writer and lecturer in art history notes observes that

Artists of every kind tend to be in the vanguard of fashion, or choose to dress differently from the majority – a by-product of the self-belief, required to pursue their profession, of the avant-garde milieu they inhabit and its disregard for convention and of a certain indulgence, if not expectation, on the part of the public to be shocked by them. Since the early nineteenth century, a cult of the artist-as-genius flourished, leading to the self-conscious promotion of an 'artistic' image.<sup>3</sup>

An inseparable element of the nineteenth-century artistic bohemians was a black cloak and hat with a wide rim. Among the Dadaists, monocles were fashionable. Taken from the dandy dress, they suggested that the user was of aristocratic descent. Thus, they were a kind of perverse provocation.<sup>4</sup> Andy Warhol was recognizable thanks to his silver wig, without which he never showed himself in public. He refused to undergo a necessary surgical procedure because it required the removal of the wig. The "uniform" of the German artist Joseph Beuys consisted of a felt hat, a fishing vest, a white shirt and jeans trousers. Beuys' felt hat, Viola Michely writes, was a "trademark of the modern revolutionary. It is the cry of a citizen who makes use of democracy and wants to use it and seize it with the audience..."<sup>5</sup> Thus, a specific outfit had a function to serve for the artists, it was a mask that

<sup>2</sup> T. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, transl. R. Hullot-Kentor, Continuum, London-New York, p. 226.

<sup>3</sup> C. Blackman, *One Hundred Years of Manswear*, Laurence King Publishing, London, 2015, p. 66.

<sup>4</sup> Por. E. Roditi, *Interview with Hanah Höch*, in: *Dadas on Art: Tzara, Arp, Duchamp and Others*, ed. L.R. Lippard, Courier Corporation, New York 1971, p. 77.

<sup>5</sup> V. Michely, *Letters as Works of Art Beuys and James Lee Byars*, in: *Joseph Beuys: The Reader*, ed. C. Mesch, V. Michely London: Tauris, pp. 88-106. [https://books.google.pl/books?id=YfFeBA-AAQBAJ&pg=PT70&dq=josef+beuys+hat&hl=pl&sa=X&ved=0ahUKewiWyr\\_Gn6\\_JAhWEknIKHQ4CukQ6AEIjAB#v=onepage&q=josef%20beuys%20hat&f=false](https://books.google.pl/books?id=YfFeBA-AAQBAJ&pg=PT70&dq=josef+beuys+hat&hl=pl&sa=X&ved=0ahUKewiWyr_Gn6_JAhWEknIKHQ4CukQ6AEIjAB#v=onepage&q=josef%20beuys%20hat&f=false) [4.07.2016]

helped to build their artistic *emploi*. Moreover, they did not limit their interest in clothing to themselves only.

Despite the inclusion of these characteristic elements in their outfits, the avant-garde artists rejected fashion as a cultural phenomenon, just like other conventions of the world against which they rebelled. However, they were indeed preoccupied with clothing, believing that the revolution would change people's way of thinking in this matter as well, and lay the foundations for a new reality. The Italian Futurists wanted to replace fashion with wearable artworks. In 1913, recognizing fashion as a tool for the propaganda of modernity, Giacomo Balla, the protagonist of the movement, announced a manifesto concerning men's clothing (*Manifesto futurista del vestito da uomo*). He promoted asymmetrical suits in bright colors, "bi-colored shoes, polychrome neckties made of plastic, cardboard or wood, sometimes equipped with colorful lightbulbs that would go off and on at will."<sup>6</sup> These clothes were "an expression of modernity and praised the dynamics of urban life."<sup>7</sup> Thus, they performed the same task as all futuristic art. Balla's colorful suits and vests were not mass-produced; single pieces were made by local Roman tailors and by the artist's daughters. In their private lives, the Futurists dressed conservatively. Balla sometimes wore vests adorned with patterns of his own design, but only on occasion, such as openings of exhibitions.

It is important for my deliberations that the Futurists extended their artistic activities to include the design of clothing, which they combined with their creative ideology. In their utopian vision, fashion was to become art, that is, the Other was to become identical. The Russian Constructivists had a similar outlook on the role of the clothing. They wanted to integrate art with the mass production of functional clothing. Designing fabrics and clothes, Varvara Stepanova and Lubov Popova tried to give the principles of Constructivism a more practical dimension. They "successfully applied the dynamics of modern visual language to a utilitarian art form: clothing (...) they pioneered the practical application of abstraction to everyday objects, and thus consolidated the link between the art and design movements of the post-war era,"<sup>8</sup> writes Bonnie English, professor of history and art theory. In this case, both clothes/the Other and art/identical had to follow the ideology of Communism, especially with the advent of Productivism.

The avant-garde identity seemed unambiguous and well-defined, while at the same time an inner contradiction was seen in fashion. It was corrupt in spite of the appearance of freedom, and was prone to making concessions to the bourgeois worldview. Nowadays, when the boundaries between the two domains are no longer defined as clearly, and modern fashion fares even better in the commercial world,

<sup>6</sup> G. Lista, *Futuryzm*, Polish transl. E. Grządęk, Wydawnictwo Arkady, Warszawa 2002, p. 150.

<sup>7</sup> C. Blackman, op. cit., p. 66.

<sup>8</sup> B. English, *A Cultural History of Fashion in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries: From Catwalk to Sidewalk*, Bloomsbury, London-New York 2013, p. 44.

art seems to envy it that position. Until now, fashion designers had been inspired by the works of the artists, and now the order is reversed. Distant sources of this upheaval may perhaps be traced back to 1964, when Andy Warhol presented his *Brillo Boxes* – copies of soap-flakes carton boxes that were no different from shop goods – at the Stable Gallery exhibition in New York. Perhaps the change had occurred earlier, with Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*. In any case, since the 1980s, the opposition between utility objects (including fashion) and art conceived as the category of identical/Other has been gradually dissolving. As noted by Grzegorz Dziamski, "Today's art can look like advertising, fashion, or entertainment, it can resemble consumer goods, toys, sports equipment, kitchen appliances, social or political activities - in one word, it may look like anything, but unlike other products and activities it must be free."<sup>9</sup>

How the identical imitates the Other can be traced by analyzing the effects of collaboration between the famous fashion houses and the stars of the art scene. Vanessa Beecroft, an Italian artist living in the United States, uses live models in her installations, just as it is done during fashion shows. Models, naked or partially dressed in underwear, wearing stilettos and sometimes wigs, stand for hours without making any sudden movements. The actions consist in confronting the semi-naked girls with the clothed spectators. Beecroft's works are sometimes interpreted as criticism of the mechanisms governing fashion, the treatment of the models, and the imposition of beauty standards by the media. However, the artist does not treat her models any differently than they are treated during the process of preparing the presentation of clothes for the catwalk. They are subjected to many hours of preparation: the depilation of their whole body, a unifying make-up; the models are exposed to the public view, and the photos constituting the documentation of the action are retouched in the same way as the photographs in fashion magazines. The visual pleasure offered to the viewers by Beecroft is of a luxurious character. The clothes in which her models appear are rented or specially designed by famous fashion designers such as Miuccia Prada, Helmut Lang, Tom Ford (Gucci), Valentino. In 2005, Beecroft staged a performance to celebrate the opening of Louis Vuitton's store in Champs Elysée in Paris. The models were positioned on the shelves next to the leather goods for sale. Thus, the artist placed her activity on the borderline between art and marketing. A similar ambiguity was evident when Beecroft staged an action with models at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in April 1998. The models stood for two and a half hours, wearing a bikini and high-heeled shoes designed by the Gucci fashion house. The guests invited to the performance could buy both commemorative photographs of the artist's works and Gucci underwear in the museum shop. This blurred the difference between a museum object and a commodity.

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<sup>9</sup> G. Dziamski *Sztuka po końcu sztuki. Sztuka początku XXI wieku Galeria Miejska „Arsenal”*, Poznań 2009, p. 12.

Art and fashion became fused with each other. The Other and the identical were made equal, although based on a different principle than in the work of the artists of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-garde. For the representatives of the avant-garde, clothing was to become art. Otherness was to be weakened and even to become the basis for artistic nobilitation by discovering new ways of modernizing life. In the case of contemporary art and the activities of such artists as Beecroft, fashion also intertwines with art, but this is not related to the need for a revolution in the social life.

I believe that in the context of Vanessa Beecroft's work with semi-naked girls, Adorno's words are particularly meaningful:

The disdain of fashion ... is provoked by its erotic element, in which fashion reminds art of what it never fully succeeded in sublimating. Through fashion, art sleeps with what it must renounce and from this draws the strength that otherwise must atrophy under the renunciation on which art is predicated.<sup>10</sup>

Adorno represented a position close to the avant-garde and saw fashion as an element that could revive art by discovering ways of socializing artistic activities that had hitherto not been taken into account. However, he also recognized the dangers of this perspective. In fashion lies an element of treacherous temptation for art, which it must resist in order to remain self. Adorno believes that fashion exposes the position of art. He writes, "Fashion is art's permanent confession that it is not what it claims to be. For its indiscreet betrayals fashion is as hated as it is a powerful force in the system; its double character is a blatant symptom of its antinomy."<sup>11</sup> In the construction of the Other/fashion, the philosopher sees a mask concealing the alter ego of art. It is obvious that fashion designers are fascinated by the artistic world, but Adorno seems to suggest a hidden, commonly anticipated dark side of art, its dependence on fashion, weakness, inner conflict: "art must resist fashion, but it must also innervate fashion in order not to make itself blind to the world, to its own substance."<sup>12</sup>

Writing about fashion, Adorno has in mind a broader meaning of this concept: the changing lifestyle and customs associated with the era and the standards of a given society. In my article I refer to a narrower understanding of this concept, namely clothing subject to seasonal changes, but I also demonstrate more general directions of changes, tendencies, and transformations taking place between pure art and fashion. For example, art museums are increasingly eager to organize exhibitions of famous fashion designers. They break records of attendance, generating profits for museums. Designers in turn treat artistic institutions as

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<sup>10</sup> T.W. Adorno, *op. cit.*, p. 316.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 316.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 316.

places to promote their own collections. The benefits are therefore mutual. The curators of such exhibitions had to deal with the problem of how to present clothes so that they would not be associated with the commercial activity and the space of a shop. Fashion objects and works of art were thus readily arranged together. For example, at the exhibition *Madame Grès - La couture à l'oeuvre* in the Parisian Musée Bourdelle in 2011, the designer's draped dresses were juxtaposed with antique sculptures. The pedestals for the outfits were sculptural cavats. As pointed out by Piotr Szaradowski, lecturer at the School of Form in Poznań, "Apart from its unique aesthetic qualities, this exhibition offered a different look at the clothes as a kind of sculpture."<sup>13</sup> Such events put the Other in the place of the identical.

A special type of experiment that eliminates the boundaries between art and fashion are exhibitions presenting the works of fashion designers and artists side by side. The first exhibition of this kind was the Firenze Biennale in Florence in 1996. The exhibition was moved to the Guggenheim Museum the following year. During these events, apart from historical works documenting the fashion/art relations since the beginning of the twentieth century, the results of collaboration between leading contemporary artists and fashion designers were presented. These included Damien Hirst and Miuccia Prada, Jenny Holzer and Helmut Lang, Roy Lichtenstein and Gianni Versace, Julian Schnabel and Azzedine Alaïa, Tony Cragg and Karl Lagerfeld, Oliver Herring and Rei Kawakubo. This way, the paths of pure and applied art were deliberately crossed in the space reserved for artists.

A testimony to the contemporary expansion of fashion associated with the names of famous clothing designers can be found in initiatives integrating various cultural phenomena. Miuccia Prada and her husband founded a foundation supporting contemporary art in 1993. Its director is a well-known curator and historian, Germano Celant. The foundation has exhibition spaces in Milan and Venice, where works by renowned artists such as Anish Kapoor, Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst, Louise Bourgeois, Bruce Nauman, or Maurizio Cattelan are presented. Located near the Guggenheim Museum in New York, the Prada shop has an area reserved for presenting contemporary art next to the commercial section. For example, photographs by Andreas Gursky were displayed there. The fact that in his works he criticizes consumer culture adds irony to the event.<sup>14</sup> In this case, art is located in the consumption area, so the identical shares space with the Other.

Prada collaborates with artists on various levels. Prada Marfa is an example of this kind of activity. It is a building that resembles a boutique of this famous Italian fashion house. It was created in October 2005 just off the U.S. Highway 90 in West Texas. Two exhibition windows occupying the whole wall of the building

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<sup>13</sup> P. Szaradowski, *Sposoby na modę*, p. 26. <http://muzealnictworocznik.com/api/files/view/19986.pdf> [5 Aug 2017]

<sup>14</sup> R. Arnold, *Fashion: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2009, p. 45.

allow visitors a glimpse at a collection of Prada handbags and shoes. Above the awnings the brand's authentic logo is displayed, the color scheme reflects the typical Prada colour scheme, goods on display also come from Prada. However, the building is not a commercial object - the doors do not open, nor is there any staff inside. The "boutique" is located in the Chihuahua desert, in the middle of nowhere. Luxury goods that are the object of desire of many consumers landed like a UFO in a space far from the consumer world. The status of this object is unclear. The Texan Department of Transportation classified the building as illegal outdoor advertising. However, this is not quite correct, as it was not commissioned by the fashion house. It was financed by the local non-profit local art organization Ballroom Marfa and Art Production Fund of New York, and the authors of the installation are Scandinavian artists Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset. This allows the object to be classified as a work of art. The more so because in 2014 the investor of Prada Marfa reached a compromise with the Texas Department of Transportation and the building was reclassified as a museum facility. It is a site specific installation. Maria Slowinska draws attention to the minimalist character of the building, its symmetry and the form of presentation of goods, evoking the standards of displaying artistic objects in galleries. She compares it to the white cube, a canonical place of art perception, considered neutral, deprived of the context of time and social conditions. She also draws attention to the surroundings of the building. It is located 40 miles from the town of Marfa - a place where Donald Judd, one of the leading representatives of American minimal art, lived and worked. His enormous installation, consisting of fifteen open concrete blocks, is located in Marfa and provides a context for the object. Although Prada Marfa is not an open concrete form, but, as Maria Slowinska observes, it makes a similar visual impression thanks to the glass windows filling the front of the building.<sup>15</sup>

How shall we interpret the relationship between art and fashion, between the identical and the Other in this case? The artistic installation resembles a shop with fashionable accessories, meaning that art imitates a commercial object. The identical imitates the Other. Unlike in the past, when designers attempted to catch up with art, inspired by the works of artists. It is worth mentioning that the goods inside the building are not of full value - there are only the right boots from each pair and the bags have their bottom sections removed. Thus they can be called original mockups. The mockup of the Other became a work of art.

Undoubtedly, the Prada fashion house benefits from the fact that this building exists. Although located outside the city center, it is an effective marketing tool. It is a destination for tourist pilgrimages, it attracts media attention, it is an object of analyses and comments. Can we hope that there is a feedback respon-

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<sup>15</sup> M.A. Slowinska, *Art/Commerce: The Convergence of Art and Marketing In Contemporary Culture*, Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag 2014, p. 64.

se? Is the brand a vehicle that propels art? Many people claim that thanks to such artistic activities those who do not normally visit museums have a chance to experience art. Built in the desert with biodegradable materials, Prada Marfa is, as Erika Doss, professor of the American University of Notre Dame writes, “an ironic comment on the vagaries of fashion and the unchecked growth of western materialism.”<sup>16</sup> According to the fashion journalist Mitchell Oakley Smith, “it functions as a contemporary memento mori, a meditation on morality and the futility of existence.”<sup>17</sup> Art therefore appears to benefit from the collaboration with fashion, but it has to meet certain conditions, as evidenced by the incident associated with this building. Prada Marfa has repeatedly been the victim of vandalism. One of such acts is worthy of attention because its author was an artist who wanted to test whether it was possible to have a dialogue in contemporary art. To what extent an object described as an example of art that evokes reflection on the subject of contemporary times corresponds to these assumptions. In March 2014, Joseph Magnano, former student of the Art Institute in San Francisco, painted the walls of the building in blue and covered the windows with posters bearing the inscription “TOMS”. Toms is a footwear company selling espadrilles. It is known for its philanthropic activities based on the “One for One” model, which means that for every item sold, a poor child is given a new pair of shoes by the company. Magnano's action was not directed against Prada. In his manifesto, he questioned the pro-social image of Toms, a company that in fact exploits its employees and its manufacturing operations have a negative impact on the environment.

Joseph Magnano treated the Marfa building as a canvas, a place of artistic expression presented to the public. He changed Prada Marfa to Marfa Toms. However, his work was interpreted by the Ballroom Marfa and the authors of Prada Marfa as an act of vandalism and devastation. His intentions were not analyzed. The discussion in the artistic space, which Elmgreen and Dragset had assumed, proved impossible. The artist was arrested, sentenced to a fine of \$1000 and ordered to cover the cost of refurbishing the building, which was estimated at \$10,700.<sup>18</sup>

Fashion is now such a powerful cultural phenomenon that it does not need to be defended. In this respect, it can be said that the Other has obtained an advantage over the identical. The avant-garde concepts in the art of the first half

<sup>16</sup> E. Doss, *The Process Frame: Vandalism, Removal, Re-siting, Destruction in Companion of Public Art*, in: *A Companion to Public Art*, ed. Ch. Knight, H. Senie, John Wiley & Sons, Oxford 2016, p. 413.

<sup>17</sup> M. Oakley Smith, A. Kubler, *Art/Fashion in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Thames&Hudson, New York 2013, p. 196.

<sup>18</sup> The artist no longer carries out such interventions. He makes his living painting images of cows. <http://www.7qinterviews.com/interviews/joseph-magnano>

of the twentieth century were developed on the basis of the belief that in the face of the prevailing cultural crisis artistic activity is the very area that retains its value. That is why the avant-garde representatives believed that by reforming art, they would create the foundations for the modernization of the whole culture.<sup>19</sup> Adorno's concept preserves the basic components of this positive assessment of art. Although the German philosopher took into account many factors that undermine the power of this conviction, he did not contemplate the problem of saving art. However, he was concerned with the need to save fashion. He wrote, "What makes it worth salvaging, however, is that though it hardly denies its complicity with the profit system, it is itself disdained by that system. By suspending aesthetic values such as those of inwardness, timelessness, and profundity, fashion makes it possible to recognize the degree to which the relation of art to these qualities, which are by no means above suspicion, has become a pretext."<sup>20</sup> The position of fashion is thus characterized by reference to art and in contrast to art. Taking into account the contemporary cultural situation, one can ponder whether these relations have not been reversed.

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<sup>19</sup> The only avant-garde trend that emerged from this was Dadaism.

<sup>20</sup> T.W. Adorno, op. cit., p. 316.

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## **MODA JAKO INNY SZTUKI. MIEJSCE PROJEKTOWANIA UBIORU W TWÓRCZOŚCI AWANGAR- DOWEJ A WSPÓŁCZESNOŚĆ (streszczenie)**

Analizując związki między sztuką a modą odwołuję się do kategorii Inny/tożsamy. Od kilku dziesięcioleci jest ona popularna w debacie humanistycznej podlegając różnym interpretacjom (Derrida, Foucault, feminizm, postkolonializm). W przyjętym tu sensie, podobnie jak Inny stanowi warunek istnienia tożsamego, tak, moim zdaniem, moda jest punktem odniesienia dla sztuki. Funkcjonuje jako element pozwalający sztuce budować tożsamość na zasadzie odróżnienia się od niej. Sytuacja ta ze szczególną wyrazistością ujawniła się w pierwszej połowie XX wieku. W początkowej części tekstu przedstawiam przykłady zaangażowania artystów awangardowych w problematykę projektowania ubioru traktowanego na równi z działalnością artystyczną. Dla futurystów i konstruktywistów Inny i tożsamy były sobie równe. Druga część tekstu pokazuje sytuację rodzącą się pod koniec minionego stulecia, gdy równość między Innym i tożsamym przyjęła odmienną formę. Tożsamy zaczął imitować Innego – sztuka przypomina obecnie prezentację mody, fotografię reklamową lub luksusowy butik. Wyszła na jaw przeczuwana przez Theodora W. Adorna antynomiczność sztuki, jej sekretny związek z modą. Współczesna sztuka nie ma już sił opierać się jej. Roztapia się wraz z nią w estetycznej sferze wizualnej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Inny/tożsamy, awangarda, Theodor W. Adorno, moda, futuryzm, Marfa Prada, Vanessa Beecroft.



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## AVANT-GARDISTS AND PRIMITIVISM

**Abstract:** Today, the relations between modern art with primitive art are almost legendary. Contemporary appreciation of non-European artists' contribution to the development of modern art was reflected, for instance, in the ground-breaking exhibition held in 1984 at the New York Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), titled *Primitivism in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, curated by the influential art critic and director of this institution, William S. Rubin. Even before that, however, reflections on the phenomenon of primitivism had been based on the combined exhibitions of tribal art and modern art, such as a display of Picasso's works combined with African sculptures, organized in Berlin and in Dresden in 1913, as well as the presentation of African art at Alfred Stieglitz's 291 Gallery in New York. Deeper and broader reflection on the importance of the contribution of tribal cultures (including, of course, African culture) to modern art appeared in 1938 in Robert Goldwater's book entitled *Primitivism in Modern Art*. The avant-gardists' expectations concerning so-called primitive art varied. Most often, they sought formal inspirations (Cubist painters, modern sculptors Constantin Brancusi, Pablo Gargallo, Alberto Giacometti, Jacques Lipchitz). However, some artists have looked to it for new representations and symbols as well as a source of human creativity. The article concludes with the words of Georges Salles that the art of black Africa has renewed European artistic scene.

**Keywords:** Avant-garde, visual arts, primitivism, Black Africa, artistic affinities.

Today, the relations between modern art and primitive art are almost legendary. Contemporary appreciation of non-European artists' contribution to the development of modern art was reflected, for instance, in the ground-breaking exhibition held in 1984 at the New York Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), titled *Primitivism in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, curated by the influential art critic and director of this institution, William S. Rubin. Even before that, however, reflections on the phenomenon of primitivism had been based on the combined exhibitions of tribal art and modern art, such as a display of Picasso's works combined with African sculptures, organized at the Neue Galerie in Berlin in December 1913 and in Dresden, as well as the presentation of African art at Alfred Stieglitz's 291 Gallery in New York, organized on the initiative of Marius de Zayas in 1914 under the eloquent title *Statuary in Wood by African Savages: the Root of Modern Art*.



Fig. 1. African art presentation at Alfred Stieglitz's New York 291 Gallery, 1916  
[https://pl.pinterest.com/pin/350295677238150684/\\_\[20.07.2017\]](https://pl.pinterest.com/pin/350295677238150684/_[20.07.2017])

Deeper and broader reflection on the importance of the contribution of the tribal cultures (including, of course, African culture) to modern art appeared in 1938 in Robert Goldwater's *Primitivism in Modern Art*<sup>1</sup>.

The avant-gardists' expectations concerning so-called primitive art varied. Most often, they sought formal inspirations (Cubist painters, modern sculptors: Constantin Brancusi, Pablo Gargallo, Alberto Giacometti, Jacques Lipchitz). However, the artists from the *Die Brücke* group looked to it for new representations and symbols as well as a source of human creativity. The interest in the latter issue was related to the research in human psychology carried out by Sigmund Freud in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Expressionists were also inspired by the nudity, presented as part of the life of the tribal communities. It is worth mentioning, however, that some of the artists themselves (e.g. Pablo Picasso) frequently denied the influence of African art on their works.

African culture had not always enjoyed such interest of the Europeans; on the contrary, during the colonial period, the continent was treated only as a source of slave labour, and its inhabitants were thought to have no civilization, culture, or art.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> R. Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1986. The book was first published in 1938.

<sup>2</sup> Although the European artists were eager to incorporate black protagonists into their works of art, for instance in the popular iconographic motif of the Three Wise Men that came to baby

A deeper appreciation of the objects coming from Africa appeared only at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was when literary works, such as *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad<sup>3</sup>, started to show colonialism as a great destructive force, which not only exploited the continent, but also degenerated its inhabitants and their culture. Almost overnight memorabilia from overseas journeys left the curio cabinets, so-called *Kunst-und Wunderkammern*<sup>4</sup>, and appeared in the collections of ethnographic museums, such as the Berlin Museum für Völkerkunde operating since 1873,<sup>5</sup> and Musée Ethnographique du Trocadéro, established in 1878 by Ernest Théodore Hamy, providing a treasury of information about the Black Continent. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Guillaume Apollinaire (1880–1918), a leading theorist of Cubism, came up with a daring idea. In 1909 he suggested that “The Louvre Museum should present some of the masterpieces of exotic art, the sight of which is as moving as the beautiful sculptures of the western civilization”.<sup>6</sup>

Interest in the African culture in ethnographic terms resulted in the methodological description of its artefacts. One of the earliest analyses of African sculptures from an aesthetic point of view is a dissertation titled *Negerplastik*.<sup>7</sup> This text was published in 1915 by Carl Einstein (1885–1940), an influential writer and critic associated with the movement of German Expressionists. The author is of the opinion that the distance and stereotypes which prevailed in the relations between the Europeans and the inhabitants of Africa prevented “any aesthetic valuation”. Moreover, a European viewing African art was absolutely convin-

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Jesus or in Shakespeare’s *Othello*, still it was not until the 19<sup>th</sup> century Romanticism and its fascination with the Orient when painters decided to depict black characters more willingly. The visions of oriental, mysterious Africa and its inhabitants were the subject of paintings by Jean August Dominique Ingres (1780–1867), Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863), Theodore Chasseriau (1819–1856) or Lawrence Alma-Tadema (1836–1912). The counterweight to these visions were the drawings and paintings by artists who actually took part in exotic expeditions. See more on that subject in A. Pawłowska, *Afryka - kontynent bez sztuki i historii? O relatywizmie kultury afrykańskiej*, in: *Przeszłość bez historii*, ed. J. Janus, R. Knapik, P. Tomczok, Katowice 2007, pp. 66–75.

<sup>3</sup> J. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, “Blackwood’s Magazine” (February 1899–April 1899), vol. CLXV pp. 164–460, 460–621, 620–781 and Idem, *An Outpost of Progress*, “Cosmopolis”, t. VI–VII (June–July), 1897.

<sup>4</sup> *Kunst-und Wunderkammer* (cabinet of curiosities) was a way of exhibiting collected works of art from other continents among shells, feathers, or bones, that became highly popular in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. This tradition lasted till the mid- 19<sup>th</sup> century. More on that subject: A. Pawłowska, *O potrzebie tworzenia kolekcji sztuki afrykańskiej*, in: *Muzeum sztuki. Od Luwru do Bilbao*, ed. Maria Popczyk, Muzeum Śląskie w Katowicach, Katowice 2006, pp. 272–281.

<sup>5</sup> The museum is based on the cabinet of curiosities, known as *Kunst-und Raritätenkabinett*, that once belonged to Joachim II, Elector of Brandenburg (1505–1571).

<sup>6</sup> After: [http://detoursdesmondes.typepad.com/dtours\\_des\\_mondes/2007/12/apollinaire.html](http://detoursdesmondes.typepad.com/dtours_des_mondes/2007/12/apollinaire.html). Cp.: *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art. A Documentary History*, ed. J. Flam, M. Deutch, University of California Press, Berkeley 2003, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> C. Einstein, *Negerplastik*, Verlag der weißen Büche, Leipzig 1915.

ced of his culture's "unconditional, simply fantastic superiority".<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, describing the spatial characteristics of sub-Saharan African sculpture, Einstein used the term "cubic space", very close to the "cubist space", used in the texts referring to Cubism. Another reference to Cubism in the text is the emphasis on the closeness between the visual structure of Cubist painting and African art, but "(...) what seems abstraction here [in Cubism] is directly natural there. In the formal sense, Negro art will turn out to be orthodox realism".<sup>9</sup>

The first French-language publication on African art was the work of the merchant and collector of modern and African art, Paul Guillaume (1891-1934). [Fig. 2] In 1917, he published the book *Sculptures Nègres*, illustrated with 24 photographs. Its introduction was written by Apollinaire, who emphasized that the purpose of the publication was not only pleasing the sense of sight, but also collecting and grouping items that are typical from the aesthetic point of view.<sup>10</sup> Soon, with



Fig. 2. Paul Guillaume in his first gallery in 1914  
<https://pl.pinterest.com/pin/350295677238150414/> [20.07.2017]

<sup>8</sup> After: K. Tkaczyk, *Negerplastik Carla Einsteina nowe spojrzenie na sztukę Afryki*, in: *Kultury Afryki w świecie tradycji, przemian i znaczeń*, ed. A. Nadolska-Styczyńska, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, Toruń 2009, p. 102.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 104.

<sup>10</sup> G. Apollinaire, *Concerning the Art of the Blacks*, in: *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art. A Documentary History*, ed. J. Flam, M. Deutch, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 2003, pp. 107-110.

Guillaume's help, the first exhibition of art from Africa and Oceania, titled *Première Exposition d'Art Nègre et d'Art Océanien*, was organized. The exhibition was held between 10<sup>th</sup> May and 31<sup>st</sup> May 1919 at Devambe Gallery; the catalogue was prepared by Henri Clouzot and Andre Level, in collaboration with Apollinaire.

Another important intellectual contribution to the body of knowledge on the art from the Black Continent, showing, at the same time, an increase in understanding non-European forms of artistic expression, was the essay "Negro Sculpture" by the artist and critic Roger Fry (1866–1934).<sup>11</sup> He discovered African sculpture in 1919 through the above-mentioned substantial collection of the merchant Paul Guillaume. Fry's article, published in the journal *Athenaeum*, was a commentary on the exhibition of thirty African objects of artistic nature at the Chelsea Book Club in London in 1920. With the superiority typical of the white race, he noted: "We have the habit of thinking that the power to create expressive plastic form is one of the greatest of human achievements (...). It seems unfair to be forced to admit that certain nameless savages have possessed this power not only in a higher degree than we at this moment, but than we as a nation have ever possessed it."<sup>12</sup> adding that what distinguishes African sculpture from the sculpture known in the West is "complete plastic freedom". Fry's unquestionable achievement was his highlighting of two basic features of African sculpture: its freedom from realistic representation and its emphasis on the formal meaning of solid three-dimensionality.<sup>13</sup>

I have to admit that some of these things are great sculpture – greater, I think, than anything we produced even in the Middle Ages. Certainly they have the special qualities of sculpture in a higher degree. They have indeed complete, plastic freedom; that is to say these African artists really conceive form in three dimensions. Now this is rare in sculpture.<sup>14</sup>

The author summarized his disquisition by stating: "It is curious that people who produced such great artists did not produce also a culture in our sense of the word."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> R. Fry, *Vision and Design*, New York 1924, p. 99-103. Original: R. Fry, *Negro Sculpture at the Chelsea Book Club*, "Athenaeum", 1920, vol. 94, April 16, p. 516.

<sup>12</sup> F. Spalding, *Roger Fry, art and life*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1980, p. 233.

<sup>13</sup> The second author, who also published a review of the same exhibition, was Clive Bell. In his opinion, the greatness of African art stemmed from the fact that "savages create furiously. (...) an artist must retain that primitive energy if the past is to act as his partner". Such an understanding of African sculpture assumed that it was not an outcome of creative intelligence, but a matter of instinct. Compare: T.M. McLaughlin, "Clive Bell's Aesthetic: Tradition and Significant Form", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 1977, no. 4, p. 437.

<sup>14</sup> R. Fry, *Vision and...*, p. 100.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p. 103.

The artists associated with the modernist trends discovered a new fascinating form in the sculptures brought from Africa. They were excited by the simple, austere shapes, the economical use of the material and the deliberate deformation of the human figure. These features coincided with the new aesthetic taste of the period. The first viewer to draw attention to it was Marius de Zayas Enriquez y Calmet (1880-1961), a Mexican artist and owner of the influential modern art gallery in New York. In his racism-tinged text from 1916, titled "African Negro Art and Modern Art", filled with parallels between the mentality of a child and a black man, de Zayas noted that "Negro art has re-awakened in us the sense for abstract form".<sup>16</sup>

From the very beginning, the legend-shrouded history of 20<sup>th</sup>-century artistic avant-garde was inseparably intertwined with the notion of primitivism, which indigenous African art was thought to exemplify.<sup>17</sup> According to the legend based on the artists' memories, everything began in 1905, when the Fauvist painter Maurice Vlaminck visited a bar in Argenteuil after finishing his plein-air work, and saw three African sculptures on the shelf between the bottles of alcohol. In his memoirs, Vlaminck wrote about his earlier visits, with Andre Derain, to the Paris ethnographic museum at the Trocadero Palace, which housed numerous examples of African sculpture, but, according to the artist, "neither Derain nor I treated these works as something more than barbarian fetishes"<sup>18</sup>. [Fig. 3] A mask of the Fang tribe, given by an unknown person to Vlaminck at the turn of 1904 and 1905 has been preserved until today. Vlaminck, in turn, showed it to Derain, who was allegedly "struck dumb with delight". He bought the mask and then showed it to two other pioneers of modern European painting: Pablo Picasso (the author of Cubism and pioneer of modern art in many respects) and Henri Matisse (the most famous Fauvist painter). The above-mentioned mask of the Fang people was, of course, only one of the many items brought from Africa to Europe and sold at antique shops<sup>19</sup>. As recalled by Matisse, "At that time everyone started looking for Negro figurines. They could be found without much difficulty".<sup>20</sup>

Picasso's fascination with African sculpture played an extremely important role in the artist's work. It is not without reason that the early years of Cubism

<sup>16</sup> M. de Zayas, "African Negro Art and Modern Art" in: *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art. A Documentary History*, ed. J. Flam, M. Deutch, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 2003, pp. 92-99.

<sup>17</sup> African art was not considered as "primitive" until c. 1915. More: K. Tkaczyk, *Negerplastik...*, pp. 103-104.

<sup>18</sup> M. de Vlaminck, *Portraits avant décès*, Flammarion, Paris 1943, pp. 105-107.

<sup>19</sup> What is interesting is that the said mask was identified as an inspiration for Cubists and Fauvists. Currently it is a part of Alice Derain Collection. Compare: F. Willett, *African Art. An Introduction*, Thames & Hudson, Toledo 1988, pp. 35-36.

<sup>20</sup> A. Vallentin, *Picasso*, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warszawa 1959, p. 188.



Fig. 3. Corner of the studio in André Derain, Paris, circa 1912-1913  
<https://pl.pinterest.com/pin/761108405746785398/> [20.07.2017]

(1907–1908) are referred to as the “Negro period”. A flagship work of the artist from this period – *The Young Ladies of Avignon* – has many features that coincide with African woodcarving. The body is presented here in a new way, divided into parts, into segments. Moreover, the head of one of the women is very clearly inspired by the Baule mask (Ivory Coast).<sup>21</sup> Although Picasso repeatedly denied the influence of African art on his painting<sup>22</sup>, there is plenty of evidence that it was close to him. It is known that already in 1910 he had collected a lot of items from Africa, which is confirmed by his long-time female companion, Fernanda Olivier. In her journal, she wrote: “Picasso is becoming a fanatic of Negro sculptures, he has more and more statues, masks, fetishes from different parts of Africa”.<sup>23</sup> [Fig. 4] It is also worth mentioning that another Cubist, Georges Braque (1882–1963), admitted openly in a letter to his merchant: “These primitive masks have opened up new horizons for me”,<sup>24</sup> while Picasso himself, asked by a journalist to describe what effect “Negro art” had on his work, replied impatiently: “Negro art? I do not know anything like that”.<sup>25</sup> [Fig. 5]

The second trend which drew artistic inspirations from primitive plastic arts in the early 20th century was German Expressionism. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1905–1913), Fritz Bleyl (1905–1907), Erich Henkel (1905–1913), Karl Schmidt-Rottluff (1905–1913), Max Pechstein (1906–1912), and Emil Nolde (1906–1907) – members of the Dresden-based group *Die Brücke*, active in 1905–1914, discovered a new world of forms, materials, images, and symbols in the art of non-European cultures. Their appreciation of the culture of Africa and Oceania was associated with a wider phenomenon of the return to “primitivism”, rooted in the European ideas of exotic countries, and with the search for the source of human creativity. The interest in the latter issue was related to the research into human psychology carried out by Sigmund Freud in the late 19th century. The Expressionists were also inspired by the nudity presented as natural in the life of the tribal communities. The lifestyle and interior design of the studios of *Die Brücke* artists reflected their defiance of “civilized refinement” and “civilized” sexual norms. Their wooden, severely hewn sculptures and wood engravings represented their search for a new way of expression. It was not a coincidence that Kirchner painted figures of people with pseudo-African sculptures and exotic accessories, or

<sup>21</sup> Picasso’s friend and art dealer D. Kahnweiler, mentioned the influence of a mask from the *Wobé tribe* (also known as Gere from Ivory Coast), that Picasso is said to have seen. Compare: D. Kahnweiler, “Negro Art and Cubism”, *Horizon*, December 1948, pp. 412–420.

<sup>22</sup> Picasso did not acknowledge the link between Cubism and his interest in African art. He believed that these were separate issues. Compare: Brassai (G. Halasz), *Conversations with Picasso*, Gallimard, London 1964, pp. 92–106.

<sup>23</sup> F. Olivier, *Loving Picasso, the private journal of Fernande Olivier*, Harry N. Abrams, New York–London 2001, p. 84.

<sup>24</sup> F. Willett, *African Art...*, p. 36.

<sup>25</sup> A. Vallentin, *Picasso*, p. 189.



Fig. 4. Picasso at his studio in the Bateau Lavoir, Paris 1908  
<https://pl.pinterest.com/explore/bateau-lavoir/?lp=true> [20.07.2017]

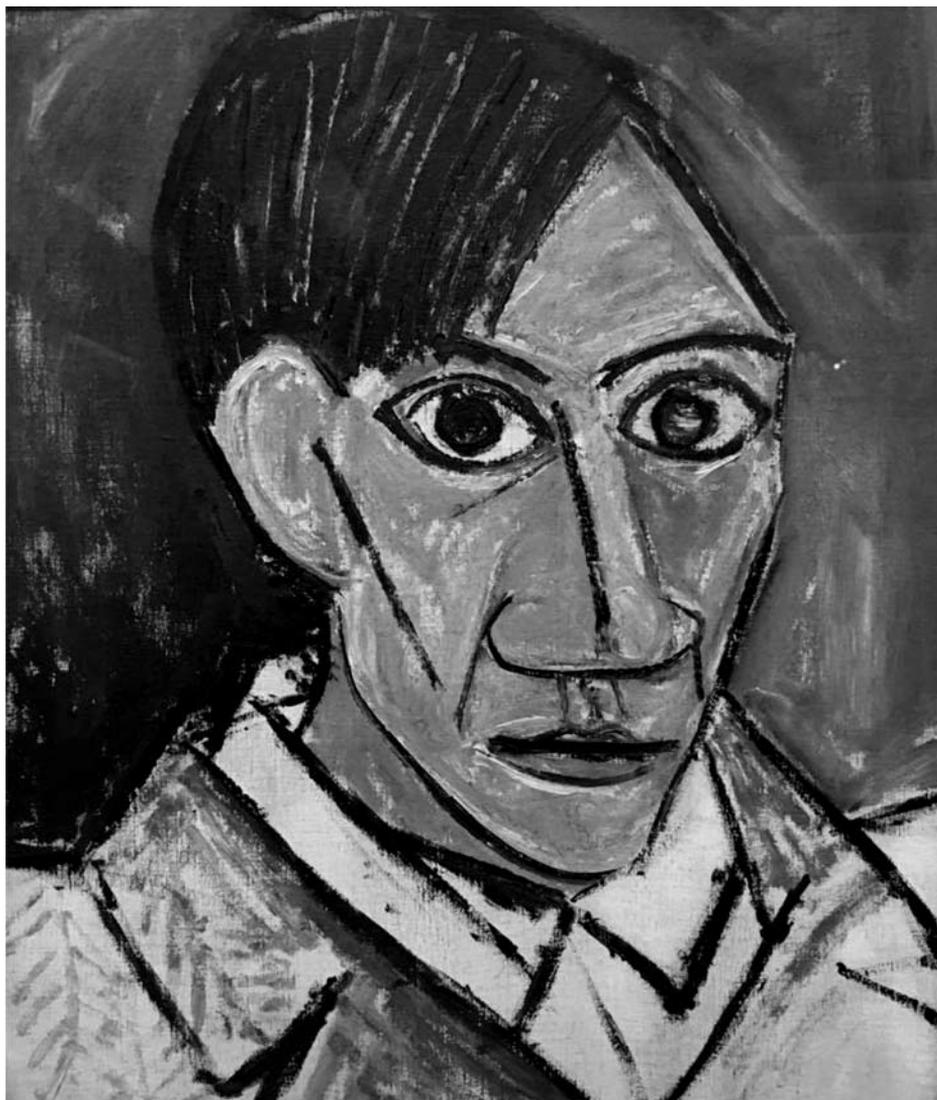


Fig. 5. Pablo Picasso, *Self-Portrait* from “Negro period”, 1907, Veletrzní Palác Prague, fot. E. Podawczyk

against the background of frescoes or curtains with “primitive” motifs of lovers. For this purpose, he used the decorations of his Dresden studio. Kirchner's mature paintings, such as *Playing Naked People* (1910) and *Female Nudes Striding into the Sea* (1912), appear to be clearly inspired by the statues of the Bambara peoples (today's Mali). The unobstructed nudity of the young people shown in

these paintings at the same time calls up associations with the state of primordial freedom. Even during the First World War, the young artists from Zurich, associated with the decadent Dadaist movement, were fascinated by the primitive origins of African art. Especially Richard Huelsenbeck (1892–1974) was obsessed with African rhythms. “He particularly liked a great slit drum, whose sounds usually accompanied his recitations of the defiant *Prayers (Phantastische Gebete)*.” As noted by his friend, another Dadaist, Hugo Ball (1886–1927): “He pleads for an intensification of rhythm (Negro rhythm). He would best love to drum literature and to perdition”.<sup>26</sup> Elsewhere, Ball recalls Marcel Janco (1895–1984), an artist coming from Bucharest, also associated with the Dadaist revolt in art, who was fascinated with masks: “For another evening, Janco prepared a series of more than fine masks. (...) The masks not only made it necessary to complement them with a costume, but they also dictated a strictly defined, pathetic gesticulation, verging on madness. (...) These masks simply demanded starting a ridiculously absurd dance”.<sup>27</sup> Of course, it is unnecessary to add that the masks created by the artist were clearly inspired by African masks both in their form and in their dynamic ritual function.<sup>28</sup>

A momentous change in the evaluation of African art occurred after the First World War. The war, which caused so much havoc and highlighted the enormity of human suffering, also accelerated the rhythm of life, brought with it poisoned pleasures, and gave rise to new emotions. Sclerotic pre-war art turned out to be too weak to express the chaos caused by the fall of the classic myths. In such a climate, the wide public discovered non-European art, and especially African art, together with all its forms of artistic expression. Jazz, imported from America via radio transmissions, shook Europe with its unsettling rhythm; African poetry attracted attention with its original naivety, refined in its simplicity; African sculpture also enjoyed great interest. During the decade between 1915 and 1925, the popularity of primitive sculpture reached its apogee. In May 1919, the Devambez Gallery organized the first exhibition of sculptures from Africa and Oceania in Paris; *Anthologie nègre* by Blaise Cendrars was published in 1920, and in the same year the avant-garde magazine *L'Action* published the comments of leading modernist artists on African art. Félix Fénéon (1861–1944), an influential critic with anarchist views, conducted a questionnaire, asking the leading figures in early 20<sup>th</sup> century culture and art: “Will there be time when works from distant places will be exhibited in the Louvre?”<sup>29</sup> In 1923, Paris was overwhelmed by

<sup>26</sup> <https://diegosartlabblog.wordpress.com/2016/09/17/richard-huelsenbeck-dada-poet/> [29.04.2017]

<sup>27</sup> H. Richter, *Dadaizm*, trans. J. Buras, Wydawnictwo Artystyczne i Filmowe, Warszawa 1983, p. 32.

<sup>28</sup> More on African inspirations in art: A. Pawłowska, *Inspiracje kulturą Afryki w malarstwie europejskim pierwszej połowy XX wieku*, “Afryka” 2007, no. 25, pp. 71-90.

<sup>29</sup> F. Fénéon, *Will arts from the remote places be admitted into the Louvre*, in: *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art. A Documentary History*, ed. J. Flam, M. Deutch, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 2003, pp. 148-166.

the ballet *La création du monde* with Darius Milhaud's jazz music and Fernand Léger's costumes, with the libretto based on African cosmogony, by Blaise Cendrars. Josephine Baker (1906–1975), a black American, who danced barefoot and almost naked as if in a tribal trance, enjoyed her success. An important figure in Paris in the 1920s was the charismatic jazzman, dancer and boxer, a lover of Jean Cocteau: Al Brown (1902–1951). From 1925 Brown and Baker danced in the sensational *La Revue Nègre*,<sup>30</sup> clearly contributing to the phenomenon known as *Negrophilia*, which swept through the avant-garde Paris. At that time, everybody danced jazzing dances of African origin, such as charleston, lindy hop or black bottom, and their artistic equivalents were created by the abstractionist Piet Mondrian (1872–1944). Women imitated the hairstyle of Josephine Baker, while the neo-Cubist artist Sonia Delaunay (1885–1979) designed dresses and fabrics inspired by African jazz rhythms. It should be noted that in this period the uncritical admiration for tribal art had nothing to do with ethnographic evaluation of the produced objects, for example their religious or functional context, but it merely focused on their formal qualities seen through the filter of contemporary European art. The first author to mention it was the Italian Carlo Anti (1889–1961) in the text devoted to the exhibition of African sculpture entitled *Primitive Negro Art, Chiefly from the Belgian Congo* (April–May 1923) at the Brooklyn Museum in New York.<sup>31</sup> In 1926, Paul Guillaume and Thomas Munro (1897–1974) published the book *Primitive Negro Sculpture*. The 134 pages of the publication contained as many as 41 photographs of items from the collection of the American Barnes Foundation. They wrote:

If negro sculpture is to be enjoyed at all, it will probably be through its plastic effects. In other ways it is apt to be unmeaning or even disagreeable to civilized people. But in shapes and designs of line, plane and mass, it has achieved a variety of striking effects that few if any other types of sculpture have equalled.<sup>32</sup>

The admiration of the critics and art theorists for the purely artistic quality of the sculptures from the Black Continent aroused considerable interest in African objects among the European sculptors. This phenomenon is clearly visible e.g. in the works of the famous masters of the avant-garde: Constantin Brâncuși (1876–1957), Pablo Gargallo (1881–1934), Alberto Giacometti (1901–1966)

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<sup>30</sup> P. Archer-Straw, *Negrophilia: Avant-Garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s*, Thames & Hudson, London 2000, pp. 70–74.

<sup>31</sup> C. Anti, *The sculpture of the African negroes*, in: *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art. A Documentary History*, ed. J. Flam, M. Deutch, University of California Press, Berkeley–Los Angeles–London 2003, pp. 180–183.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Guillaume and Thomas Munro. *Primitive Negro Sculpture*, Harcourt, Brace & Company, New York 1926, p. 7.

and Jacques Lipchitz (1891–1973). These sculptors were eager to create objects inspired with African ones, such as masks, but made in metal (Pablo Gargallo, *Sleeping Muse*, 1911); the Surrealist Alberto Giacometti, fascinated by primitive sculpture, created mysterious, simplified figures, constructed from geometric segments that resembled idols, fetishes or masks (*Woman-spoon, Couple*, 1926).<sup>33</sup> Jacques Lipchitz, who worked mostly in stone, was fascinated by wooden Dogon sculptures, for a long time attributing them wrongly (due to the perfection of their simple form) to Egyptian artists.<sup>34</sup> He collected African since he started living in Paris in 1909. Echoes of African sculpture may also be found in the work of the controversial painter and sculptor, Amadeo Modigliani (1884–1920). His stone sculptures created of ca. 1912, inspired by masks, depict elongated heads with evocative eyes. The notes of Jacob Epstein, another sculptor influenced by *Art Nègre*, show that Modigliani used to put candles on these stone heads in the evening, which made the visitors to his studio feel as if they were at a temple. [Fig. 6]

After the First World War, the dominant trend in the avant-garde movement was the use of symbols and signs. The works created by the artists associated with this trend, such as Max Ernst (1891–1976), Paul Klee (1879–1940), Joan Miró (1893–1983) were visibly inspired by African art. The style of those artists was often a subtle combination of the elements of Surrealism, organic abstraction, and graphic characters resembling primitive art and children's drawings. Paul Klee was fascinated not only by the culture of black Africa. His stay in Tunis at that time resulted in representations of mosques and deserts, stylized to the point of abstraction. In his collages, Max Ernst frequently introduced the motif of a man with a bird's (cock's?) head, evoking the image of the shoulder masks found among the Nimba and Baga peoples from Guinea. In 1950, he created the lithographic series called *The masks*, which explicitly refers to African masks. The inspiration with African culture was most evident in the flagship image of surrealism, titled *The Elephant Celebes* from 1921. The oval shapes of the fantastic elephant are inspired by the animal-shaped coffins of the Ga people.<sup>35</sup>

The United States was another country which could not resist the powerful influence of *African Negro Art*. It was a fundamental inspiration for the activities of the African-American artists: musicians, writers, and visual artists. The most eminent characters associated with the movement promoting the creativity of black Americans, the so-called *Harlem Renaissance*, were Lois Mailou Jones (1905–1998), Meta Warwick Fuller (1877–1968) and Aaron Douglas (1899–1979), who was active in the early 1920s. Theoretical basis for the movement

<sup>33</sup> More on the impact of African art on 20<sup>th</sup> century sculpture: A. Kotuła, P. Krakowski, *Rzeźba współczesna*, Wydawnictwo Artystyczne i Filmowe, Warszawa 1985, pp. 136-139, 216-219.

<sup>34</sup> Attributing African sculptures to Egyptians and looking for connections between these two, was popular in the beginnings of 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>35</sup> J. Bingham, *African Art & Culture*, Heinemann-Raintree, Chicago 2005, p. 37.

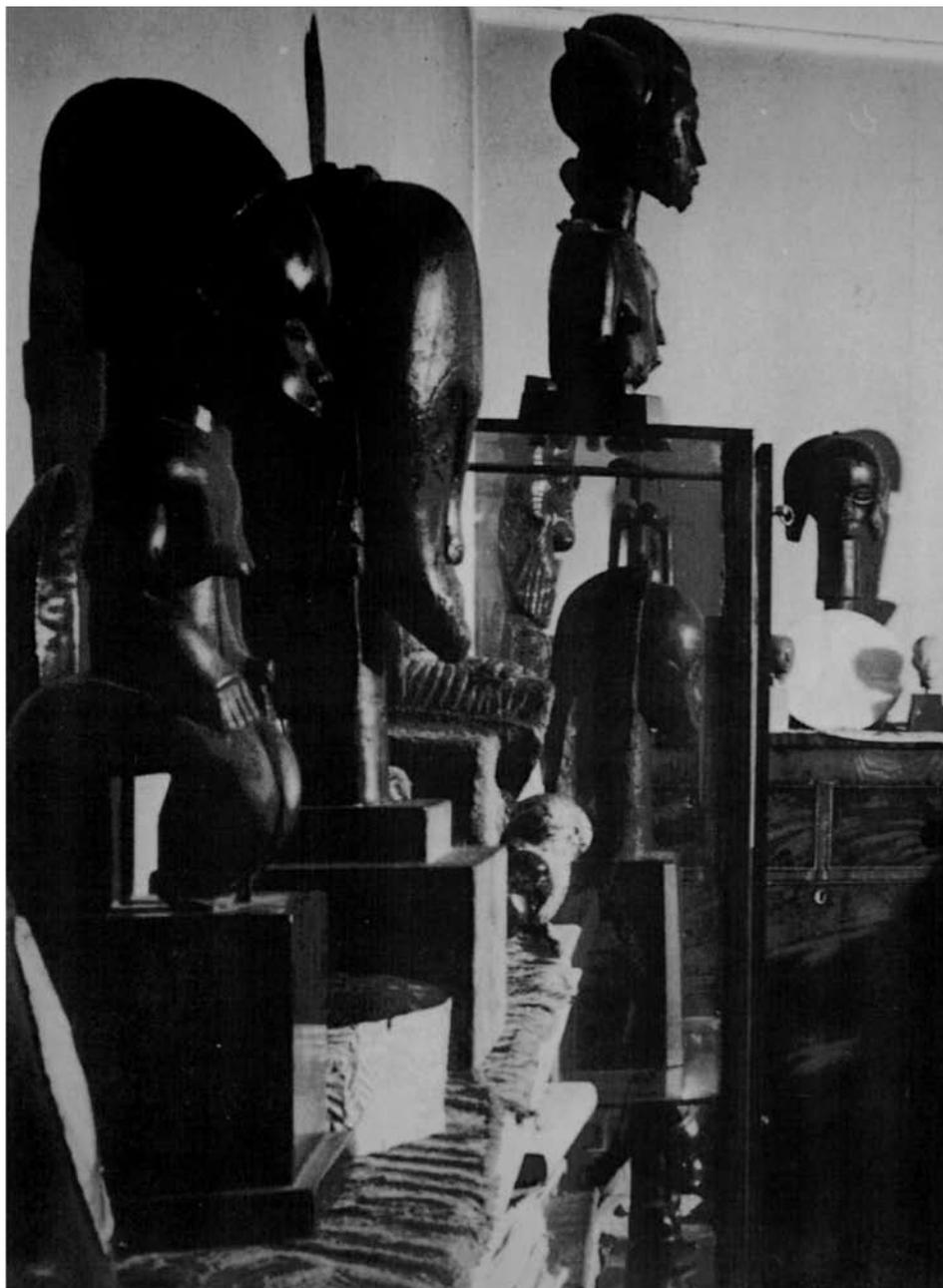


Fig. 6. Part of Jacob Epstein's collection of Fang sculptures, circa 1919  
<http://pl.pinterest.com/adamorton39/jacob-epstein/?lp=true> [20.07.2017]

was created by Alain Locke (1886–1954), who in 1925 published the manifesto of *The Legacy of Ancestral Art*. Locke called for young black artists from the United States to look for new formal solutions and content, as did the European modernists some time before.<sup>36</sup>

Looking at the changes taking place in art from the perspective of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it can be said that the contact with the mysterious world of African forms at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century proved to be extremely inspiring for modern European art. The simple, yet refined forms of the masks and figurines, their remarkable economy and wonderful spatial form played a major role in the formation of Cubism. The unique deformations of African cult objects, aimed at obtaining the maximum expressiveness of magical forms, sometimes getting close to abstraction, inspired German Expressionism and French Fauvism, allowing the release of “wild existential rage” (Nietzsche). It is worth recalling here the remark of the outstanding French art historian and promoter of the idea of modernism, Georges Salles (1889–1966) on the art of black Africa:

Since I am closing this article of question marks with some wishes, I will add that of seeing some pieces of these primitive arts take their place in the great conservator of the arts of the past, which is our Louvre Museum. Just because an art presents itself without papers and certificates is no reason to exclude it from the company of those that carry with them the guarantee of numbered archives. What should be enough is that it is a gripping and novel expression of the oldest human concerns. If it did not have this quality, Negro art would not have been able to renew our artistic world and refresh our sense of mystery during the past decade.<sup>37</sup>

Similar comments may be also made on the African-influenced avant-garde trends in the European art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At the same time, although in certain artistic trends, such as Constructivism or Surrealism, it is difficult to find direct quotations from African sculptures, we strongly feel their interest in a certain kind of mental attitude referred to as primitive, which frees the artists from the status ascribed to them for ages.

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<sup>36</sup> R.J. Powell, *Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance*, University of California Press, London-Berkeley 1997, pp. 5-12.

<sup>37</sup> *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art...*, op. cit., p. 204.

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## AWANGARDYŚCI I PRYMITYWIZM (streszczenie)

Związki sztuki nowoczesnej z prymitywną są już dziś nieomal legendarne. O tym, że obecnie ich wkład w formowanie sztuki nowoczesnej został w pełni doceniony świadczy chociażby przełomowa wystawa w nowojorskim Museum of Modern Art's (MoMA) z 1984 r. zatytułowana *Primitivism' in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and Modern*, której kuratorem był wpływowy krytyk sztuki i zarazem dyrektor tejże placówki William S. Rubin. Zasadniczą podstawę do refleksji na temat zjawiska prymitywizmu stanowiły wspólne ekspozycje sztuki plemiennych i sztuki nowoczesnej, podobnie jak widoczne w twórczości awangardowych artystów inspiracje sztuką plemienną (n.p. prezentacja dzieł Picassa zestawionych z afrykańskimi rzeźbami, zorganizowana w Neue Galerie w Berlinie w grudniu 1913 r. i w Dreźnie czy prezentacja sztuki afrykańskiej w nowojorskiej Galerii 291 Alfreda Stieglitzeta, zorganizowana z inicjatywy Mariusa de Zayasa w 1914 r. pod wymownym tytułem - *Statuary in Wood by African Savages: the Root of Modern Art*. Poszerzona i pogłębiona refleksja nad doniosłością wkładu kultur plemiennych (w tym oczywiście afrykańskich) w sztukę nowoczesną pojawiła się w 1938 r. w książce Roberta Goldwatera *Primitivism in Modern Art*. Oczekiwania awangardystów względem tak zwanej sztuki prymitywnej były niejednorodne. Najczęściej uwzględniano inspiracje formalne (malarze kubiści, rzeźbiarze: C. Brancusi, P. Gargallo, A. Giacometti, J. Lipchitz). Twórcy z niemieckiej grupy *Die Brücke*, poszukiwali nowych wyobrażeń i symboli a zarazem źródła twórczości ludzkiej. Zainteresowanie tym ostatnim zagadnieniem związane było z badaniami nad psychiką człowieka prowadzonymi przez Zygmunta Freuda w końcu XIX w. Inspiracją dla ekspresjonistów była także nagość, której prezentacja nawiązywała do życia w warunkach społeczności plemiennych. Warto dodać, iż sami artyści niejednokrotnie - np. Picasso - zaprzeczali wpływom sztuki z Afryki na ich dzieła. Konkluzją artykułu jest myśl G. Sallesa, iż sztuka z Czarnej Afryki odnowiła tę z Europy.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Awangarda, sztuki wizualne, prymitywizm, Czarna Afryka, powinowactwa artystyczne.



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## **CAN WE TALK ABOUT CONTEMPORARY AVANT-GARDE OUTSIDE WESTERN CULTURES? THE CASE OF CONTEMPORARY ART IN THE REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA**

**Abstract:** The appreciation of the importance of the avant-garde, and of its re-thinking of the socio-cultural reality, ensues from its fundamental role for 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century art practice and theory. However, in the contemporary global world, asking about the persistence of the avant-garde, we should take into consideration the different social/historical/cultural conditions of the specific geographical regions. In the following article, I focus on postcolonial art in the Republic of South Africa, relating to postmodernism, demonstrating a critical, emancipatory approach and an artistic responsibility for the partial view of the world which the artist co-constructs. I try to answer the question of whether we can talk about avant-garde ideas and approaches in South African art, though they have a different background and are not rooted in the tradition of western avant-garde.

**Keywords:** avant-garde formation, avant-garde attitude, postmodernism, post colonialism, South African art, critical engagement.

### **Introduction**

The appreciation of the importance of the avant-garde, and of its re-thinking of the socio-cultural reality, ensues from its fundamental role in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century art practice and theory. Whether continued, or enriched, or opposed, avant-garde with its ideas serves as a reference point for neo-avant-garde, post-avant-garde, and for more traditional art which is still being created. Its validity is confirmed by the dedication of this issue of *Art Inquiry* to it, in celebration of its centenary in Poland (with its beginning dated to the First Exhibition of Polish Expressionists in 1917). Contemporary reflection on the role of the avant-garde should first of all differentiate between its understanding as a specific cultural and historical movement, and as a set of assumptions, attitudes towards reality, and ideas that can be transformed and/or developed. I recognize this differentiation

thanks to the writings of Tadeusz Szkołut<sup>1</sup>, and I find it crucial for a well-based analysis of the avant-garde today, which needs to look beyond just European cultures. In this paper, the term “Avant-garde” with a capital “A” refers to the specific 20<sup>th</sup> century Western artistic formation; and “avant-garde” with a small “a” refers to the set (though not exactly fixed) bundle of ideas, wishes, and desires inspiring avant-garde artists.

The main problem I would like to tackle focuses on the question of whether we may talk about the avant-garde in Africa, and if so – in which sense? In what ways does it manifest its presence? I have chosen the art from the Republic of South Africa as my case study because I have had the pleasure and opportunity to learn about it in recent years through my participation in the international consortium of researchers co-operating on the project funded by the European Commission: “Technologies of Imaging in Communication, Art and Social Sciences”. I am obviously aware of the deficiencies of my individual viewpoint, but an all-encompassing presentation would go beyond the limits of this paper and calls for an extensive analysis of the avant-garde in its broader context (which will be hopefully carried out collectively in this issue of *Art Inquiry*). My ambitions here are more modest and I will be satisfied contributing to the overall construction.

In the first section of the paper, which remains predominantly within the framework of the Polish discourse in aesthetics, I argue for the clarification of some terms and concepts. This will allow me to use those as tools in my further analysis. In the second part of the paper I will give a short overview of contemporary art in the Republic of South Africa, taking into consideration the historical, cultural, and social conditions of each example of specific art practice, posing the question of whether we can call them avant-garde. This demands engaging in reflection on the complex relations between post-colonial, postmodern, and avant-garde art.

### **Avant-garde: a movement and an attitude**

I have mentioned above that I agree with Tadeusz Szkołut in differentiating between “the Avant-garde as a compact, militant artistic formation, playing the leading role in the modernist culture” and “the avant-garde attitude.”<sup>2</sup> Description of the avant-garde as an attitude towards the world can be also found in other publications, for example those of the eminent Polish art historian and critic Mieczysław Porębski, for whom the avant-garde is one of the artistic attitudes defined by pugnacity, intransigence, exclusivity, distance from contemporaneity, anti-traditionalism, polycentrism, interdisciplinarity, a spirit of revolt, and utopianism,<sup>3</sup> of the American

<sup>1</sup> T. Szkołut, *Awangarda, neoawangarda, postawangarda*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, Lublin 1999, p. 229.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 223.

<sup>3</sup> M. Porębski, *Tradycje i awangardy*, in: *Sztuka i informacja*, Krakow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1986, pp. 171-176.

theorist Michael Kirby, interested mostly in avant-garde performance, who described the avant-garde as a worldview concerned with the historical directionality of art and social change;<sup>4</sup> of the Romanian critic Adrian Marino<sup>5</sup> and the American artist and critic Richard Kostelanetz,<sup>6</sup> who perceive avant-garde as timeless, an impulse that pertains to the past, the present, and the future.

The avant-garde attitude is characterized by radicalism, criticism, and intransigence that can be realized in a socio-political and/or cultural-formal manner. This attitude is opposed to the basic principles of postmodernism, as presented by its various theoretical reviews. Postmodernism in art has been regarded as an irresponsible, ungrounded, superficial play with forms and meanings, which is often commodified.<sup>7</sup> This perspective/image of postmodernism is not the only one, however, because, as pointed out by Wolfgang Iser, the main characteristic of postmodernism is the rejection of belief in any exclusive, totalizing vision of the world, and the acceptance of pluralism.<sup>8</sup> Therefore we may talk about various postmodernisms, similarly to the distinction between different variants of modernism.

The discussion concerning the continuing existence of the avant-garde in post-modern times takes into account the fact that the Avant-garde movement came into being within modernity (in connection with industrialization, democratization, and totalitarianism) and modernism (with its instrumental reason, utopias, and a search for new forms in thought, political action, and art) during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in Europe and North America, and was based on the belief in the teleological character of civilizational progress, as “measured by the increasing homogenization, rationalization, and systematization of all spheres of life.”<sup>9</sup> “The decline of modernism” awakened doubts about the intrinsic value of progress and suspicion of any utopian emancipatory projects which promised a perfect world, without any evil, suffering, or conflicts. The mission of the avant-garde artist in the modern times (and in modernism) was to actively participate in creating a new man, society, and culture. The transition from modern to postmodern reality “had to cause change in the attitude of artists towards their cultural heritage.”<sup>10</sup> Post-modern art is seen as “a glass bead game,” conflating meanings and themes of cultural heritage, playing with ideas and forms taken out of their context. However, Szkołut inquires:

<sup>4</sup> M. Kirby, *The Art of Time*, New York: EP Dutton, 1969, p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> A. Marino, *Avant-Garde: Rupture, Renversement, Destruction*, in: “Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich”, 1978.

<sup>6</sup> R. Kostelanetz, *Introduction: What is Avant-Garde?* in: *The Avant-Garde Tradition in Literature*, ed. by R. Kostelanetz, New York 1982.

<sup>7</sup> S. Morawski, *Komentarz do kwestii postmodernizmu*, cz. II, “Nowa Krytyka” 1992, no 3 (4), p. 35.

<sup>8</sup> W. Iser, *Unsere Postmoderne Moderne*, Weinheim: VCH, 1987, pp. 78-79.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

Has postmodernism in art (...), giving expression to its disappointment with the ethos of modernism, nevertheless preserved some elements of the avant-garde tradition, or has it broken up completely with its artistic heritage (...), which becomes only an object of 'deconstruction', material for disobliging 'language games', parody, pastiche, etc.?<sup>11</sup>

Traditional philosophers, such as Stefan Morawski, understood postmodern art as stylistically eclectic, aesthetically superficial, accepting consumerism and conflating the difference between elite and popular art, aiming at flattering the common tastes.<sup>12</sup> In this perspective we have to agree that the trend of postmodernism is openly anti-avant-garde, without any ambition of changing the world or emancipating man. Alicja Kępińska also claims that the term "avant-garde" has lost its sense in postmodern times, and that we no longer feel the avant-garde impulse to participate in constructing a better world.<sup>13</sup>

However, as argued by other philosophers, such as Bogusław Bakula or Wolfgang Iser, postmodern art has not completely abandoned the main ideas of the avant-garde. Bakula writes that postmodern art belongs to the avant-garde formation, acting as its *rear guard*. It has not done away with the dreams of reconstructing the world's image based on tradition, but it is also conscious of the impossibility of belief in the vision of achieving any stable, irrefutable, universal sense of humanity and the world.<sup>14</sup> For Iser too, postmodern art is not casting away any attempts to construe an overall image of the world, but is rather oriented towards creating a whole which would not be closed, defined, and oppressive. For these reasons he stresses the importance of multiplicity liberated from the dominance of coherent unity.<sup>15</sup>

Some characteristics essential for the avant-garde attitude in the 20<sup>th</sup> century are obviously no longer there: the utopian visions of re-structuring the world and man of the future towards fuller justice; the belief that reason and civilizational progress inevitably lead to a better, more equal world; these have disappeared today. The causes of this abandonment are to be found not just in theoretical arguments, but in the observable effects of instrumental reason, moved by utopian political visions, on the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this situation, Western artists and theorists

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>12</sup> S. Morawski, *Postmodernizm: jak go rozumiem i dlaczego nie lubię?*, in: "Integracje" 1991, no XXVII, pp. 37-42.

<sup>13</sup> A. Kępińska, *O zdejmowaniu ciężaru z ciała niebieskich*, in: "Akcent" 1997, no 1 (67), pp. 29-30.

<sup>14</sup> B. Bakula, *Człowiek jako dzieło sztuki. Z problemów metafleksji artystycznej*, Wydawnictwo "WiS", Poznań 1994, p. 184.

<sup>15</sup> W. Iser, *Postmoderna dla wszystkich: architektura postmodernistyczna*, transl. into Polish by A. Zeidler-Janiszewska and R. Kubicki, "Magazyn Sztuki. Kwartalnik" 1996, no 3 (11), pp. 192-194.

also had to revise the fundamentals of their thinking. However, the absence of a drive to propose and impose coherent utopian visions of culture in its social aspect, and on the artistic culture in particular, does not annihilate other avant-garde ideas, such as critical attitude towards the *status quo*, or the search for new forms to express new meanings. Szkołut calls for this kind of art, writing:

If postmodern art actively joins in the process of the revaluation of modern values, if it stimulates critical judgement of contemporary civilizational tendencies with the aid of its specific (formal-constructional) aesthetic means, if it takes up the task of uniting the broken world of the present culture around some new essential rules, it could smuggle the most valuable elements of 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-garde ethos, especially the pathos of the critical-emancipatory activity, into the postmodern era. Then it would acquire the status of unique 'postmodern avant-garde'.<sup>16</sup>

The absence of modernist characteristics in postmodern art stems from the belief in the power of reason and civilizational progress, no longer feasible in contemporary times. Nevertheless, while abandoning the belief in reason, there is no need to fall into irrationalism. It seems more fruitful to discern different kinds of rationalities, connected with and reflected by universal reason. As observed by Wolfgang Iser, "The new conception of rationality no longer permits the demonstration of ultimate unity and order," but this does not imply a complete rejection of reason. Opposing those giving a "farewell to Reason," as well as those believing that we no longer need reason, and rationality alone will suffice, because "throughout modernity we have developed a comprehensive range of rationalities able to cover all conceivable questions," Iser advocates a "transversal reason [that] makes clear to us the multitude of rationalities so that we can recognize their complex conditions as the real constitution of rationality."<sup>17</sup>

It is important to emphasize that in order to justifiably pose the question of the feasibility of the avant-garde in contemporary art practice in non-Western cultures, we should not adopt a simple multicultural perspective, acknowledging the existence (and equality to a certain extent) of different cultures, because that does not allow us to focus on the interrelations between those cultures. This focus is possible if we adopt an intercultural perspective, searching for mutual relations, influences, convergences. This creates space to address my primary question: Can we talk about the avant-garde in contemporary art practice in the Republic of South Africa?

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<sup>16</sup> T. Szkołut, *Awangarda, neoawangarda, postawangarda...*, p. 106.

<sup>17</sup> W. Iser, "Rationality and Reason Today", in: *Criticism and Defense of Rationality in Contemporary Philosophy*, ed. by D.R. Gordon, J. Niznik, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998, pp. 17-31.

### The avant-garde in the postcolonial Republic of South Africa?

Contemporary art practice in the Republic of South Africa is conducted – first of all – within the context of the relatively recent decolonization and the consequent development of postcolonial discourse. If we take into account the fact that apartheid politics formally ended just 23 years ago (the new constitution was written and the first free elections took place in 1994) then we realize that in such a short time the process of long-term changes in society would have just commenced, and such changes are not yet fully implemented. Of course the criticism of colonialism started before 1994, and the dismantling of the legal arrangements of apartheid went hand-in-hand with the work by the African National Congress and Nelson Mandela starting in the 1950s. Anti-colonial discourse contributed to the decolonization of Africa, stressing the importance of Africa in the modern world and working for the de-marginalization of Africa in a global perspective.<sup>18</sup> The post-colonial discourse drawing on anti-colonialism has brought to light many problems of the social system. Windsor Leroke, a South African philosopher, writes:

Post-colonialism has brought to the foreground issues of identity, gender, race, ethnicity, writing, representation, orality, difference, marginality, multiplicity, and heterogeneity. Post-colonialism positions itself as a critique of issues of totality, unity, and sameness. It emerges as a critique of Enlightenment ideas and views. (...)

Post-colonialism emerged in the context of politically independent countries. However, unlike the previous anti-colonial discourse, post-colonialism wants to provide an internal critique of the independent Third World and the relationship that it has with the First World. It came to question the viability of certain socio-economic, cultural, and intellectual developments within the Third World. What is distinctive about post-colonialism is that it is not an economic critique, or political critique in a narrow sense. Its political critique is broad. In fact, the politics of post-colonialism are embedded in the critique that it makes of post-colonial conditions in the Third World.<sup>19</sup>

The above brief description of post-colonialism in South Africa, which can be considered a specific extension of international post-colonialism,<sup>20</sup> shows some convergence with postmodernism, though it should not be confused with it. Of course, the “post-“ in “post-colonialism” does not just mean a new moment in

<sup>18</sup> W.S. Leroke, *Post-colonialism in South African social science*, in: *Theory and Method in South African Human Sciences Research: Advances and Innovations*, ed. by Johann Mouton, Johan Muller, Peter Franks, Themba Sono, Pretoria, HSRC Press: 1998, p. 55.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 55-56.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

history, *after* colonialism; it refers instead to the critical inquiry, engagement, re-thinking of colonialism, overcoming it or leaving it behind, which brings post-colonialism closer to postmodernism. Focusing on the art world, we acknowledge that not all art created during the post-colonial period is postcolonial or post-modern. We may also find examples of neo-traditionalism, especially if we look at the African countries that won independence in the 1960s (one interesting example is analyzed by Kwame Anthony Appiah: the sculpture *Man with a Bicycle*, shown in 1987 at the exhibition *Perspectives: Angles on African Art*, presented at the Center for African Art in New York).<sup>21</sup> The particular history of each African country matters. The Republic of South Africa overcame apartheid in 1994, and young black artists who appeared on the global postmodern and consumerist scene, based on multimedia images, found themselves in a world quite different from half a century earlier.

We should then try to see post-colonialism as both a historical succession and a specific perspective, or a paradigm in theory and in practice. The main presumed feature of post-colonialism, critical engagement, is becoming visible in different guises after the decline of the concept of one “right” identity, defined in an Eurocentric way and rooted in the Enlightenment. The self-contained, coherent, and rational identity surely has not disappeared, but has become only one of the many possible forms of identity – the identity of the Other, the other to many marginalized blacks. The clue to this otherness is the thematic thread of post-colonialism: interested in multiplicity, hybridity, and different ways of writing, speaking, and representation by persons of different genders, ethnicities, ages, professions, social status, and... *others*.<sup>22</sup>

Post-colonialism can be thus understood as an emerging paradigm in the humanities,<sup>23</sup> but is also underlying the artistic practice of various South African artists, including Kitso Lynn Lelliot, Lauren Mulligan, and Palesa Shongwe from the young generation. Kitso Lynn Lelliot, Johannesburg-based audio-visual artist originally from Botswana, is working simultaneously on academic and artistic levels using the multimedia: bringing into existence the ghosts of her ancestors, visualizing and analyzing the modes in which those ghosts are haunting the present mind/body/identity of the artist herself. This is her way of making visible and audible “the enunciations and knowledges produced as marginal through processes of disavowing the legitimacy, value, or presence of the ways of knowing and being that are <other> as they are different from hegemonic norms.”<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> K.A. Appiah, *Is the Post-in Postmodernism the Post-in Postcolonial?*, “Critical Inquiry”, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Winter, 1991), pp. 336-357.

<sup>22</sup> W.S. Leroke, *Post-colonialism in South African social science...*, p. 60.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>24</sup> K.L. Lelliot, *South Atlantic Hauntings: Geographies of Memory, Ancestralities and Re-Memberings*, in: *Theoretical Basis of Visuality from Intercultural Perspective*, ed. by A. Lukaszewicz Alcaraz, PUNO Press, London 2018 [in print].

The video work *My story, no doubt is me/older than me* from 2015, presented at the Kampala Art Biennale, is part of Lelliot's broader artistic and academic research on socio-cultural formations that took shape over the Atlantic during the African slave trade in the Global South (a project she initiated during her residency with the Sacatar Foundation in Brazil). The video shows a view of a small town or suburbs with a few low houses, trees, and kids playing, in front of which we see a stone circle where slaves were put on display to be sold. A woman wearing a white gown and headscarf, is standing there, unmoving, subjugated, sometimes irregularly multiplied. A network of light rays starts connecting various points on the bodies of the multiplied woman. Sometimes this net hangs in the air, with the single woman partly caught in it, and sometimes it appears against the backdrop of the starlit sky, the star-like symbols inside the rolling circles.



II. 1. Kitso Lynn Lelliot, *My story, no doubt is me/older than me*, video still, 2015, from courtesy of the artist

The attitude presented by Lelliot is obviously post-colonial, focusing on the marginalized subject of the past and of the present. It shows the imaginary but living presence of the slave ancestors in the life of a black woman artist making her way in the contemporary social and art world. Lelliot calls this presence “a haunting”, after Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and many other writers, such as Michael F. O’Riley, Alfred Lopez, Avital Ronell, and Avery Gordon.<sup>1</sup> It is a real presence,

<sup>25</sup> Avery Gordon states that “haunting rather than history (or historicism) best captures the constellation of connections that charges any <time of the now> with the debts of the past and the expense of the present” – A. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p. 142.

beyond Western metaphysics maintaining the division between being and non-being. The ghosts of the ancestors are real, though deprived of their separate material form – they inhabit present-day people. Lelliot rightly claims that this presence and its effect on the constitution of the subject should be taken into consideration in the process of defining the identity of contemporary black people with the experience of slavery in their family past. This identity has to be newly construed, as black slaves were subjugated by the imperialist and racist discourse.

The newly changed circumstances after the abolishment of the apartheid demanded the expression and transmission of the unspoken experience of the Others to European culture in order to reclaim a voice. In the late 1980s, Gayatri Spivak tried to answer the question: “Can the subaltern speak? Does s/he have a history and a voice?” Time has shown that the subaltern can express their own experience in their specific way, relating to the past without entering the hegemonic Western discourse but rather expressing their perceptions, feelings, and reflections. This was not so possible during colonialism, and this is reflected in Spivak's answer: she concludes that in the colonial, imperial reality subalterns cannot speak, their voices fade, their role is erased, and they do not participate in the process of representation.<sup>26</sup>

Spivak was devoted to deconstructionism, feminism, and post-colonialism, and her focus was on disavowing epistemic violence while she was criticizing colonialism and imperialism. To be frank, it is quite common in the discussion on representation that visual representations co-construing identity are hardly ever reflected upon. Talking about representation, Spivak marks out “speaking for” as political representation and “speaking about,” or re-presenting, as showing a “portrait” of people. Favoring speech, language, and knowledge is a vestige of the linguistic turn characteristic of a large section of the humanities in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is also characteristic of structuralists and deconstructivists like Foucault and Deleuze, whose thought Spivak was drawing from in her analyses of knowledge(s), language(s), ideology(ies), and discourse(s).<sup>27</sup> However, works like Lelliot's clearly express and co-construe the present-day identity of a black woman in South Africa.

The images in the video *My story, no doubt is me/older than me* show black woman/women in the slave circus inscribed in a dynamically changing geometric structure of light lines and geometric symbols inscribed in illuminated circles rolling on the starlit sky. These images enter into a visual dialogue with the image of the Vitruvian man/male, not trying to reconstruct it, but proposing a completely different vision of a different subject – who is the Other to the European subject.

<sup>26</sup> G.Ch. Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, in: *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. by C. Nelson and L. Grossberg, University of Illinois Press, Urbana 1988, p. 28.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

This Other is not the same as in colonial times, when the First World appropriated and re-inscribed the Third World as an Other, which “can result in an exoticisation and <orientalisation> of the Third World, an approach to the margin <as a tourist> which in turn advances the project of knowing the Third World to control it.”<sup>28</sup> This Other in Lelliot’s work expresses herself, although not in a clearly defined way, as transparent and coherent as the Man painted by Leonardo da Vinci, but as a multiple, fading and appearing, immersed in the moving light structure. In other South African works we may find specific examples of (co-) construing identities different or (O)ther than the Western ones, not just situated in the opposition between the African and the Western World. The proposals of those artists offer more complex insight in terms of roots, cultural background, gender, and sexual orientation.

Palesa Shongwe is a young director, writer, and cinematographer from South Africa, who also searches for places of elision, in which the subjugated experience can be enunciated. This experience expressed in words and images, phrases, and montages, contributes to the quest for the construction and representation of the identity of black people. In her video film *Atropy and the fear of fading* from 2010,<sup>29</sup> Shongwe researches spontaneous and ritual dance, animating the whole body and connecting the dancers with their selves, their community, heritage, and god(s). This and Shongwe’s other videos are hard to categorize and ascribe to any specific cinematographic genre. It is neither a feature film, nor another documentary. She uses fragments of different film materials, some she recorded herself and some archival photos and footage material from Rapid Blue, SABC, and The National Film Archives, and she edits them into a very personal story. Thanks to its anthropological core, this film speaks to a broader public with not only black experience, conveying profound meaning that was suppressed and that finds its place in the elision of the moving body. The artist’s poetic narrative complements the images, blending with them, especially when her voice changes into an image of the written text.

As argued by Trinh T. Minh-ha in her essay *The Totalizing Quest of Meaning*, a statement that goes in accord with Shongwe’s video, “there is no such thing as a documentary,”<sup>30</sup> that would be objective and natural, and films (good films or videos) are original art forms.<sup>31</sup> Shongwe presents archival images without subtitles, which enables the transformation of the representation into a concrete fact

<sup>28</sup> V. Andreotti, *An Ethical Engagement with the Other: Spivak’s ideas on Education*, “Critical Literacy: Theories and Practices”, Vol. 1, no 1, p. 73.

<sup>29</sup> P. Shongwe, *Atropy and the fear of fading*, video, South Africa, 2010: <http://impakt.nl/channel-2/videos/palesa-shongwe-atropy-south-africa-2010-745-mins/>

<sup>30</sup> T.T. Minh-ha, *The Totalizing Quest of Meaning*, in: *Theorizing Documentary*, ed. by M. Renov, Routledge, New York 1993, p. 90.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

located in time and space. Images of the girls and women from the past dancing, and of contemporaneous men and women also dancing, appear not as scientific data, but as examples and evidence of some broader practices – of ritual and of youthful free-play – in each case allowing one to regain “the memory of one’s past lives” in a communion with the community, or in the young-and-free’s glamorous movements in a confined space. Shongwe perceives these practices as part of the game of power and the politics of space, which is negotiated by the movements that shatter the confining suburban environment. The expression present in her video is external to the Western metaphysics of the subject, descending to the anthropological core, giving it the value of (limited, relative) universality. The sincerity of the artist, not the search for objectivity, allows us to feel a common truth about our body/mind/soul connecting us with the past, with our ancestors and community, but also to reflect on the specific bodily experience and its expression by the young black people in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century.



II. 2. Palesa Shongwe, *Atropy*, video still, 2010, courtesy of the artist

The question of identity is asked by many other South African artists, to name just one more – Lauren Mulligan, photographer and video-artist from Cape Town, also based in Johannesburg. Many of her photos are single and multiple portraits of modern black people; she is interested in the non-normative subject and its representation in South Africa, especially in the non-heteronormative subject of color from modern big cities.



II. 3. Lauren Mulligan, *Vintage Crew*, digital print, Maboneng precinct, Johannesburg, 2013, courtesy of the artist

Her video work *Hello... Megan* made with Brett Hirson in 2016<sup>32</sup> directly invokes the issue of name and of communication. Who is contacting me? Why? Is this my name? In a clearly modern apartment, we see a young woman serving herself tea in the kitchen and peeking into a fridge, when somebody contacts her on her computer. She moves onto a sofa with the computer, where she sees that an unknown person is writing to her on Facebook. At the same time she receives a mute phone call and the computer screen turns black, with a central green dot. She closes the computer. We see the words appearing on the closed screen: *Hello... Megan*.

There are many more interesting examples of South African art we may wish to analyze, but I would like to propose my answer to the question: Can post-colonial art be considered as avantgarde? In what sense? The pieces I have mentioned above are of course not a large enough corpus on which to base strong conclusions. They represent the work of a group of young, successful South African artists, affiliated with the Wits School of Art at the University of Witwatersrand, presenting their works at biennales and festivals, receiving grants and inscribing themselves in the broader art scene of South Africa. These examples are thus not

<sup>32</sup> L. Mulligan, B. Hirson, *Hello... Megan*, video, 2016 <http://www.laurenmulligan.com/2017/4/5/hello-megan>

fully representative of all artists, and my own conclusions should be understood as approximations.

On the one hand, it is noticeable that the pieces mentioned here (as well as all other current works that I know) lack any utopian vision, which was one of the essential characteristics of avant-garde art. New South African art does not seek to create a utopia; instead, it is looking for novel forms of representation (with a critique of Eurocentric representations in the background, but with a broader focus than just that) allowing for the expression of the discriminated/invisible black experience (and also the experience of homosexual people of color). On the other hand, the artists use novel forms of artistic expression, allowing them to speak for the new subject – the Other for the Europeans – and this drive to represent the Other, combined with the drive to experiment with form, are the characteristics which can be described as avant-garde. Experimentation, which is important not just for its own sake, but as an exploration oriented towards a better, more just future, without the imposition of a fixed, desired new world order. I recognize this as an avant-garde impulse – but one that is now mitigated, contextualized, and partial – which are supposed to be the general characteristics of avant-garde art in our postmodern times.

### **Conclusions: When, how, and why should we talk about the avant-garde in non-European cultures?**

The question of the persistence of avant-garde ideas and attitudes cannot be approached in the same way as we ask it about contemporary art in Europe and on other continents. My examples of South African postcolonial art show that although we may find there the avant-garde ideas of criticism and orientation towards the social change, the ground on which this art has developed is very different from the Western tradition of the avant-garde. Therefore, using the term “avant-garde” to describe South African art can only be partly helpful, at best, in discussing its radical critique and its experimental attitude aiming at changing the world of representations as well as the socio-political world. There is no need to use the concept of the avant-garde as a skeleton key to interpret all contemporary art outside Europe, even if we may find some superficial similarities (but arising from different causes).

Although the argument proposed here may lead one to doubt the need for the continued use of the term “avant-garde” in all geographical contexts, I am of the opinion that the direction set by the avant-garde ideas is distinctive and valuable not only in terms of aesthetics, but also from the epistemological and ethical points of view. Thus we should and will still enjoy avant-garde art, thoughts, and actions.

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## **CZY MOŻEMY MÓWIĆ O WSPÓŁCZESNEJ AWANGARDZIE W INNYCH KULTURACH NIŻ KULTURA ZACHODU? NA PODSTAWIE WSPÓŁCZESNEJ SZTUKI W REPUBLICIE POŁUDNIOWEJ AFRYKI (streszczenie)**

Doniosłość rozważań poświęconych awangardzie i jej przemyślenie w zmieniających się warunkach społeczno-kulturowych wynikają z fundamentalnej roli tego ruchu dla praktyki artystycznej i teorii sztuki w wieku XX i XXI. Jednakże we współczesnym globalnym świecie, pytając o trwałość awangardy powinniśmy zastanowić się nad różnymi społeczno-historyczno-kulturowymi uwarunkowaniami w poszczególnych miejscach geograficznych, które bierzemy pod uwagę. W artykule koncentruję się na sztuce Republiki Południowej Afryki, która jest postkolonialna, powiązana z postmodernizmem, która ukazuje podejście krytyczne i emancypacyjne oraz odpowiedzialność artysty/artystki za częściowy obraz świata, który on/ona współ-konstruuje. Zatem, staram się odpowiedzieć na pytanie, czy możemy mówić o ideach i postawie awangardowej w sztuce Południowej Afryki, choć wyrastają one na innym podłożu i nie mają korzeni w formacji zachodniej awangardy.

**Słowa kluczowe:** formacja awangardowa, postawa awangardowa, postmodernizm, postkolonializm, sztuka Południowej Afryki, krytyczne zaangażowanie.



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## **ANTHROPOPHAGY AS A CONCEPT OF THE BRAZILIAN AVANT-GARDE AT THE END OF THE 1920S. BETWEEN HISTORY, MYTH AND ARTISTIC CONCEPTION**

**Abstract:** The metaphor of anthropophagy is one of the most vital phenomena in contemporary Brazilian culture. It originated as an artistic concept introduced by Oswald de Andrade in his *Anthropophagous Manifesto* (1924), and since its inception it was characterised by an intrinsic link between text and visual images. The concept of anthropophagy should be regarded as a manifesto of singularity of the Brazilian modernist movement, despite being related to contemporary global trends within the avant-garde movement. In creating the metaphor, Brazilian modernists have drawn on the topoi of cannibalism, associated for centuries with the native inhabitants of America. Anthropophagy is present in the work of many Brazilian artists, including the initiators of the concept (Oswald de Andrade, Tarsila do Amaral), the artists working in a later period (Candido Portinari), and contemporary artists (Andriana Varejão).

**Keywords:** anthropophagy, Brazilian avant-garde, *The Anthropophagous Manifesto*, Oswaldo de Andrade, Tarsila do Amaral, Adriana Varejão

### **Anthropophagy in Brazil**

When the New World was discovered, America was considered as the wildest of the continents, as it was unexplored, distant, exotic and enigmatic. Allegorical representations of the four continents often emphasised the “barbarian” character of America. The continent was depicted as a half-naked female warrior, accompanied by a huge lizard. In order to emphasise the cannibalistic inclinations of its inhabitants, the personification of America was frequently accompanied by a cut-off human head at her feet. Such representation is exemplified by the image found in the iconographic compendium of Cesare Ripa, published in 1593. For us, though, the key source will be the first illustrated edition from 1603, in which the 684 allegorical descriptions were accompanied by 151 woodcut prints, including the image of America. The author explained all of the attributes appearing in the illustration with great precision:

America. A Woman almost naked; a tann'd Aspect; has a Veil folded over her Shoulder; round her Body, an artificial Ornament of Feathers of divers Colours; in one Hand a Bow, and a Quiver by her Side; under one Foot a human Head pierc'd with an Arrow, and Lizard on the Ground. Necked, because the Inhabitants are all so. The Arms are what both Men and Women use there. Head shews that they are Cannibals. The Lizard, they are so big here, that they devour Men [Ill. 1].<sup>1</sup>

Elements of anthropophagy have since become integrated with the symbolic representations of the continent, especially in the tales about inscrutable, tropical lands, inhabited by semi-savage tribes. Therefore, anthropophagy was also incorporated by default into the descriptions of newly discovered lands, now belonging to Brazil.

The Europeans discovered Brazil in 1500, when the fleet of Pedro Alvarez Carbal reached the eastern shores of South America.<sup>2</sup> Initially, the Portuguese colonizers were not interested in these new territories and remained more engaged in the conquest of Asia.<sup>3</sup> The American lands, on the other hand, were treated more as an economic supply base for the European monarchy. When the Portuguese arrived, Brazil was inhabited by three most important groups of Native Americans, classified by historians and anthropologists according to the linguistic criteria as Tupi-Guarani, Arawak on the northern shore, and the Caribbean population.<sup>4</sup> The first descriptions of Brazil consistently included stories about cannibalism.

Information about the cannibalistic practices of the Native Americans starts to appear in the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Yet, the most influential account of it was provided by Hans Staden, a German soldier and explorer. In the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> c., during his second journey to Brazil, he had the misfortune of being taken into captivity by the Native American tribe Tupinamba.<sup>5</sup> After he was finally released in 1555, he went back to Germany and decided to write down his memoir. The final version, entitled *Warhaftige Historia und beschreibung eyner*

<sup>1</sup> C. Ripa, *Iconologia or Morall Emblems by Caesar Ripa of Perugia explained in 326 figures*, Pierce Tempest, London 1709, p. 53.

<sup>2</sup> There is also a theory that this part of South America had been visited before the Portuguese by the French, Spaniards, Italians or even by the Germans; cf. S. Buarque de Holanda, *História geral da civilização brasileira*, vol. 1/1, Editora Bertrand Brasil, Rio de Janeiro 2010, pp. 53-58; but, as rightly observed by Marcin Kula, "from the point of view of the historical consequences", Brazil was discovered by Pedro Alvares Cabral; M. Kula, *Historia Brazylia*, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wrocław 1987, p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> J. Sánchez Gómez, *El Brasil portugués*, in: *Historia de América*, ed. J.B. Amores Carredano, Editorial Planeta SA, Barcelona 2012, p. 877.

<sup>4</sup> Above that there were many other minor groups that were using different languages than those named above, *Ibid.*, p. 875.

<sup>5</sup> W. Arens, *Mit ludożery. Antropologia i antropofagia*, transl. W. Pessel, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warszawa 2010 [1979], p. 53.

*Landtschafft der Wilden Nacketen, Grimmigen Menschfresser-Leuthen in der Newenwelt America gelegen*, [The True Story and Description of a Country of Wild, Naked, Grim, Man-eating People in the New World, America], was prepared with the help of Johannes Eichmann (Dryaner), a professor of anatomy at the University of Marburg, as noted by the scholar himself in the prologue of the book. However, we do not know the exact nature of Eichmann's help. The inaugural edition (1557) was enriched with woodcut illustrations. The book was incredibly successful and was reprinted several times.<sup>6</sup> It gained even more popularity after it was included in the editorial project of Théodore de Bry<sup>7</sup> and became part of the series titled *Americae tertia pars: memorabile provinciæ Brasiliæ historiam continens*, published in 1592.<sup>8</sup> William Arens emphasises that Staden's account was based on his memories after he had returned to Europe, and therefore it was rather inaccurate. The anthropologist also pointed out that the text is mainly composed of the author's beliefs about the Native Americans, which were not verified, as he was not able to communicate with the indigenous tribes. Staden, who did not know the language spoken by the natives, cites whole dialogues, suggesting authentic quotes, such as the conversation that took place on the first day of his enslavement, when the natives were discussing amongst themselves how and when they will eat him.<sup>9</sup>

The first Polish record regarding Brazil was telling the same repulsive, yet exciting story about the savage practice of cannibalism. In the 1630s Krzysztof Arciszewski, a captain with the Dutch West India Company reached Brazil and left a written testimony of ritual cannibalism practiced by the Tupuia tribe.

Examples of alleged anthropophagy could be also found in the written testimonies of journeys illustrated with vivid images, as well as cartographic representations. Therefore, Europe developed a common belief (though not entirely true to facts), according to which the inhabitants of the exotic lands were cannibals. From among the many alluring visual representations, it is worth mentioning those created by the Dutch artist Albert Eckhout (around 1610–1665), who came to Brazil in 1636 and stayed there until 1644. In his paintings we can see certain "types" of the Brazilians. He portrayed different people, representative of all of the social layers – hence there are images of people of all colours: white, black, mulatto, as well as Native Americans.<sup>10</sup> In the painting entitled *Mulher Tapuia* (Tapuya woman), the artist depicted a Native American woman in a rather

<sup>6</sup> C.A. Jáuregui, *Canibalia. Canibalismo, calibanismo, antropofagia cultural y consume en America Latina, Iberoamericana*, Vervuert, Madrid and Frankfurt am Main 2008, pp. 110-111.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>8</sup> J.F. Moffitt, S. Sebastián, *Brave New People. The European Invention of the American Indian*, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque 1996, pp.324-328.

<sup>9</sup> W. Arens, *Mit...* p. 56.

<sup>10</sup> As for the recent works about the artistic activity of Eckhout and his Brazilian images, see: R. Parker Brienen, *Albert Eckhout: visões do paraíso selvagem*, Capivara, Rio de Janeiro 2010; D. Daum, *Albert Eckhouts „gemalte Kolonie“: Bild- und Wissensproduktion über Niederländisch-Brasilien um 1640*, Jonas Verlage, Marburg 2009; Q. Buvelot, *Albert Eckhout: a Dutch artist in*

static pose (which appears in all of his individual portraits of the Brazilians), holding a fragment of a human arm that has been cut off. On her head, she is carrying a basket with some food items. Our attention is immediately drawn to a human foot, distinguishable among other victuals [ill. 2]. In time, such representations entered the collective consciousness of the Europeans; anthropophagic practices among the native Brazilians came to be regarded as a fact.

### The beginning of modernism in Brazil and the first avant-garde manifestos

It is commonly acknowledged that the naissance of Brazilian modernism can be traced to the legendary Modern Art Week (*Semana de arte moderna*) – the art festival that took place in São Paulo from the 13<sup>th</sup> through the 17<sup>th</sup> February 1922.<sup>11</sup> Undoubtedly, modern artworks had been created by the Brazilian artists before that event took place, yet this date marks the definition and consolidation of the modern movements in art. The festival was an important celebration of art that brought together many artistic currents. It featured many concerts, recitals, conferences, and, of course, visual arts exhibitions. Scandals, insults, and gossip were the *menu do dia* (menu of the day).<sup>12</sup> The most notable people who stood behind this spectacular event were the painter Emiliano di Cavalcanti and the poet Mario de Andrade. The first modernists from São Paulo are often referred to as Grupo dos Cinco (the Group of Five). It included the aforementioned Mario de Andrade, two other poets: Oswald de Andrade<sup>13</sup> and Menotti del Picchia, and the visual artists Tarsila do Amaral and Anita Malfatti. According to Emiliano di Cavalcanti, the leading character responsible for bringing together different Brazilian artistic formations was Graça Aranha, respected novelist and diplomat. It was thanks to him that the North met the South in the “coherent modernism” of The Modern Art Week.<sup>14</sup>

The first Brazilian avant-garde manifesto was *Klaxon* written by Mario de Andrade, which included a kind of poetic recapitulation of The Modern Art Week.<sup>15</sup> The next one, written in 1924 by Oswald de Andrade, was entitled *Mani-*

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*Brazil*, Waanders, Zwolle 2004, published on the occasion of the exhibition *Discovering Brazil with Albert Eckhout (1610-1666)* at the Dutch National Museum Mauritshuis in The Hague, held between 27 March and 27 June 2004.

<sup>11</sup> C.A. Jáuregui, *Canibalia...*, p. 399.

<sup>12</sup> M. Gomes, *Oswaldo de Andrade y el Modernismo*, in: O. de Andrade, *Antología poética*, M. Gomes, ed. Fundarte, Caracas, 1988, p. 8.

<sup>13</sup> Mario de Andrade and Oswald de Andrade were not related to each other.

<sup>14</sup> E. di Cavalcanti, *Sobre la semana de Arte Moderno*, in: *Arte y arquitectura del modernism brasileño*, ed. A. Amaral, transl. M. Traba, Biblioteca Ayacucho, Caracas 1978 [1955], p. 19.

<sup>15</sup> M. de Andrade, *Klaxon*, in: *Arte y arquitectura del modernism brasileño*, ed. A. Amaral, transl. M. Traba, Biblioteca Ayacucho, Caracas 1978 [1922], pp. 135-136.

*festos of Pau-Brasil Poetry (Manifesto da Poesia Pau-Brasil)*.<sup>16</sup> The author searched for the origins of Brazilian modernism in the industrialization and modernisation of São Paulo. Indeed, after 1890, at the turn of the century the city developed in an abrupt way. By 1920, the population had increased ninefold, the urban area expanded and industry became a significant element bringing prosperity to the new metropolis.

São Paulo became an economic centre of the country, and soon most of the financial institutions moved their headquarters here. Oswald de Andrade's great enthusiasm for industrialisation and modernity had its origin in the avant-garde tendencies from Europe. In 1912, he visited "the Old Continent", where he discovered Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's *Fondazione e Manifesto del futurismo* (1909). After he came back, he began to spread the new ideas and profess his profound adoration of technological progress.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly to their European counterparts, the Brazilian artists considered museums as disputable institutions. In poetry they used metaphors referring to electricity, aeroplanes, or violence.<sup>18</sup> With time, it became fashionable to emphasize the importance of commercialization and speak of the export of natural resources from Brazil as conducive to the development of the country. Although in the 1920s the exports were mostly coffee and sugar, Andrade reached back to the colonial heritage. In his cultural dialogue, the symbolic sign of commercialisation was the first product exported by 16<sup>th</sup> century Brazil: *pau brasil* (*caesalpinia echinata*, also known as Pernambuco tree or Brazilwood).<sup>19</sup> There was a certain tension in the artistic culture of the 1920s in Brazil. The artists were torn between adjusting themselves to the cosmopolitan European modernism and the urge to find national elements in their post-colonial reality. Consequently, the *Pau Brasil* manifesto contains an indigenous element, referring to the natural asset of the country, the first export product of colonial Brazil. On the other hand, the form of the text is highly avant-garde, full of expressions typical for the cosmopolitan modernism. The ideas expressed in the manifesto were taken up both by poets and writers and by visual artists.

On the cover of Oswald de Andrade's book of poems, *Pau Brasil* (1925), designed by Tarsila de Amaral, features the Brazilian flag, in the centre of which, the constellation of stars and the inscription "ordem e progresso" (order and progress) were replaced by a blue circle cut by the inscription "Pau Brasil".

<sup>16</sup> O. de Andrade, *Manifesto de Poesia Palo-Brasil*, in: *Arte y arquitectura del modernism brasileño*, ed. A. Amaral, transl. M. Traba, Biblioteca Ayacucho, Caracas 1979 [1924], pp. 137-141.

<sup>17</sup> C.A. Jáuregui, *Canibalia...*, pp. 395-396.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 400.

<sup>19</sup> The name of Brazil itself comes from the term *pau brasil*. At first, the newly discovered land was named "Land of the Holy Cross", however the commercial exploitation of wood, which began to be highly valued and used as a carpentry material and also in the production of luxurious red dye, dominated the initial name of these Portuguese lands in South America. The name Brasil comes from the Portuguese word "heat" (*brasa*); M. Kula, *Historia...*, p. 12.

Allusions to the Brazilian trees and timber felling also appeared in the photographs of Mario de Andrade [Ill. 3]. In the Brazil of the 1920s, the spread of the ideas of modernism was accompanied by the pursuit of “ethnographic” cultural heritage.<sup>20</sup>

### The Anthropophagous Manifesto

The most distinguished text that has been genuinely inspiring for many contemporary Brazilian artists until today is *The Anthropophagous Manifesto* (1928) written by Oswald de Andrade. Even before it was published, in 1925, José Bento Renato Monteiro Lobato prepared an edition of Hans Staden’s memoir in Portuguese (*Meu cativo entre os selvagens do Brasil*). The same writer, two years later, composed and published a story for children entitled *As Aventuras de Hans Staden*. These literary initiatives evidenced the high significance of the myth of cannibalism among the Brazilian intellectuals and the desire to transform the memoir of the German traveller into a national story that makes up “our history”.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, Oswald de Andrade decided to use the myth of “cannibalism” to create an essential concept of contemporary Brazilian culture. His *Anthropophagous Manifesto* was published in 1928 in the magazine *Revista antropofagica*, printed specially for that occasion [Ill. 7]. Cannibalism itself was in this context a kind of metaphor helping people to understand the origins of Brazilian culture, as well as facilitating the process of defining Brazil’s own identity and coming to terms with its colonial past. The main impulse that inspired Andrade was a birthday gift from Tarsila Amaral – an oil painting entitled *Abaporu* [Ill. 4]. Its title was composed of the words from Tupi-Guarani language, where *aba* means “human” and *poru* “the one who eats”. The whole word can be translated as “eating humans”, therefore an anthropophagus.<sup>22</sup> Tarsila was using the motif of cannibalism in her other works, such as her painting *Anthropophagus* from 1929 [Ill. 5], numerous drawings [Ill. 6] or illustrations accompanying the Manifesto itself [Ill. 7].

<sup>20</sup> C.A. Jáuregui, *Canibalia...*, pp. 405-406. It was also the moment when Brazilian Baroque art started to gain appreciation. Since the publication of *Pau Brasil*, artists started visiting the historical cities of Minas Gerais: Tiradentes, Mariana, Ouro Preto, Sabará, Congonhas do Campo. It was with true delight that Tarsila Amaral described the sculptures of Aleijadinho and the “ingenious” forms of sacral architecture. Cf. T. do Amaral, “Pintura Pau-brasil y antropofagia”, in: *Arte y arquitectura del modernism brasileño*, ed. A. Amaral, transl. M. Traba, Biblioteca Ayacucho, Caracas 1978 [1939], p. 37.

<sup>21</sup> C.A. Jáuregui, *Canibalia...*, p. 409.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 410.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 411; “The philosophical generalizations of the Oswaldian anthropophagy were then framed after the ideas of Freud, Montaigne, Friedrich Nietzsche, and even Hermann Keyserling”, B. Nunes Benedito, *Anthropophagic Utopia. Barbarian Metaphysics*, in: *Inverted Utopias. Avant-Garde Art in Latin America*, M.C. Ramirez, H. Olea, eds., Yale University Press, New Haven and London 2004, p. 60.

The *Anthropophagous Manifesto* is a highly metaphorical text. It consists of fifty two aphorisms, in which we can find allusions to literature, history, politics, and the personal experiences of the author.<sup>23</sup> It contains references to figures known from the Western Europe, such as Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, Napoleon, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, or Catherine de' Medici. Apart from the French Revolution, the text refers to the October Revolution, The Haitian Revolution and The Surrealist Revolution. The Manifesto is also rich in phrases, names, and allusions referring to the indigenous history. Hence the appearance of Visconde de Cairu – a Brazilian politician active at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, or the figure of father António Vieira, who was famous for his Baroquely erudite sermons. Fragments mentioning cannibalism, Caribs with their culture, and the Native Brazilians, are recurrent and noticeable. The text of the Manifesto is not an integral programme that could allow a certain definition of methodical artistic strategy; it is hard even to explain several terms, such as the key term of “anthropophagy”. The first paragraphs of the Manifesto read as follows:

Only anthropophagy unites us. Socially. Economically. Philosophically.  
 The only law in the world. The masked expression of all individualisms, of all collectivisms. Of all religions. Of all peace treaties.  
 Tupi or not Tupi, that is the question.<sup>24</sup>

The last sentence, written in English in Andrade's original Portuguese text, is particularly noteworthy. It is reminiscent of the famous line from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*,<sup>25</sup> and over time it will become the most emblematic phrase of Brazilian modernism. The Manifesto also included words from the Tupi-Guarani language. Oswald de Andrade, like Tarsila do Amaral before him, reached for this language, “magical” and “surreal” from the artist's point of view. Andrade writes:

We already had Communism. We have already had Surrealist language.  
 The Golden Age.  
 Catiti Catiti

<sup>24</sup> O. de Andrade, *The Anthropophagous Manifesto*, in: *Inverted Utopias. Avant-Garde Art in Latin America*, eds., M.C. Ramirez, H. Olea, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 2004 [1928], p. 466.

<sup>25</sup> Shakespeare was interested in the discovery of the New World and in the accounts of those who travelled to America. It is known that his library contained the English edition of Michel de Montaigne's (1604) „Of cannibals”, translated by Giovanni Floro. Shakespeare refers to cannibalism not only in relation to the famous Caliban of *The Tempest*, but also in *Othello* and the third part of *Henry the VI*, V. Cf. Silva Echeto, R. Browne Sartori, *Antropofagias. Las indisciplinas de la comunicación*, transl. G. Machado Lima, M. Pelegrini, Biblioteca Nueva, Universidad Austral de Chile, Madrid 2007, pp. 96-97.

Imara Notiá  
 Notiá Imara  
 Ipujú<sup>26</sup>

The indigenous text comes from the song *Catiti* (New Moon), which, according to the romantically-inclined folklorist José Vieira Couto de Magalhães, was dedicated to the deity of love (*Rudá*).<sup>27</sup>

The Brazilian *Antropofagismo* can be regarded as fitting the contemporary trends of the European avant-garde movements, both in terms of how it was organised, and in terms of its message.

In this context, it has become part of the dialogue with the avant-garde, conducted on both sides of the Atlantic, in the course of which Brazil and Europe have influenced one another. There were undoubtedly strong ties between *Antropofagismo* and European Surrealism, as the general trends of those times. One could point to the works of Salvador Dalí<sup>28</sup> or to the theoretical works of Francis Picabia. According to Eduardo Subirats, Dalí is the person responsible for the “cannibalistic turns” in Surrealist aesthetics. The dependency on the European avant-garde was evident both in terms of the transfer of ideas, and in the direct contact between the artists of both currents.

Since the Brazilian manifesto was written and published in 1924, the idea of anthropophagy has settled for good within the Brazilian culture. Oswald de Andrade himself came back to it several times in his reflections and artistic pursuits.<sup>29</sup> Other artists have also let themselves be influenced by this attractive idea. In 1941, one of the more renowned Brazilian artists, Candido Portinari,<sup>30</sup> illustrated the aforementioned memoir of Hans Staden. The drawings were published more than 50 years later, in 1998, their publication being an important event in the Brazilian art world [III. 8].<sup>31</sup>

The concept of anthropophagy remains one of the most important ideas within Brazilian visual arts to this day. The contemporary artist Adriana Varejão uses the idea in her work, linking it with the multicultural roots of Brazil, uniting the colonial past and the heritage of slavery with local indigenous cultures. De Varejão juxtaposes colonial and Portuguese compositions with her own work, re-interpreting old objects and giving them new meanings. She references the illustrations from

<sup>26</sup> O. de Andrade, *The Anthropophagous...*, p. 466.

<sup>27</sup> C.A. Jauregui, *Canibalia...*, p. 419.

<sup>28</sup> E. Subirats Eduardo, *Del surrealismo a la antropofagia*, trad. C.A. Calil, in: *De la antropofagia a Brasilia. Brasil 1920-1950*, eds. M. Casanova, Ma. V. Menor, Insitut Valencià d'Art Modern, Valencia 2000, pp. 24-25.

<sup>29</sup> C.A. Jauregui, *Canibalia...*, p. 411.

<sup>30</sup> C. Portinari Cândido, *Portinari devora Hans Staden*, Ed. Terceiro Nome, São Paulo 1998.

<sup>31</sup> L. Vila Bôas, *O Hans Staden de Portinari: esquecimento e memória do passado colonial*, “Pandaemonium” 2016, vol. 19, no 27, pp. 103-125.

Hans Staden's book, while at the same time affirming the culture which, despite its Portuguese roots, is feminised and transformed [Ill. 9]. In another one of her works, she alludes to the first representation of America, discreetly introducing the anthropophagical context in the background with small ceramic tiles painted with flowers and fragments of the human body [Ill. 10]. The artist has also created a composition dominated by wounds and human organs protruding from them. The wounds break through the surface of the traditional Portuguese-Brazilian ceramic tiles, *azulejos* [Ill. 11]. These objects constitute a commentary and a reflection regarding the traumatic experiences to which the Brazilian society was subjected by its history of colonialism and slavery.<sup>32</sup> As the final example of the visual manifestations of the concept of anthropophagy, I would like to point to the great works of Brazilian avant-garde permeating into popular culture. Gui Boratto, an electronic music producer, entitled his 2014 record *Abaporu*, adorning the cover with a paraphrase of Tersila do Amral's painting of the same title.<sup>33</sup> [Ill. 12]

## Conclusions

Despite its relation to global avant-garde tendencies, the concept of anthropophagy should be regarded as a manifestation of the singularity of Brazilian modernism. Creating this new metaphor, Brazilian artists have drawn on the topos of cannibalism, associated for centuries with the native inhabitants of South America. Through the metaphor of anthropophagy, Brazilian culture has been presented as vital, aggressive, greedy, capable of absorbing everything it meets on its way. It has been characterised as dynamic, expansive and predatory, devouring the European culture, absorbing newcomers, and transforming the shocked "victims" into Brazilians. The metaphor has changed its function over the years. Firstly, it had been used to define the distinctiveness of Brazil within the modernist world. Later on, it was employed to deal with the colonial trauma of the Brazilian society. Finally, it has come to evidence the "colonial mentality" of modernism itself, and has become a metaphor for erotic cannibalism, related to consumption and sensual joy of life. Today, anthropophagy is still relevant to the current reflection and commentaries on the condition of contemporary Brazilian society, and the historical experience of Brazil and the Brazilian people.

transl. Alicja Reksć and Karolina Grzech

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<sup>32</sup> M. Lash, *An Immodest Proposal: How the Baroque meets Cannibalism in Adriana Varejão's Tileworks*, in: *Baroque Tendencies in Contemporary Art*, K.A. Wacker, ed., Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle 2007, pp. 144-160.

<sup>33</sup> This is not the only case of anthropophagy's influence on music. See: J.M. Misnik, *Antropofagia y musica*, in: *De la antropofagia a Brasilia. Brasil 1920-1950*, eds. M. Casanova, Ma.V. Menor, *Insitut Valencià d'Art Modern*, Valencia 2000, pp. 295-307.

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## **ANTROPOFAGIA JAKO KONCEPCJA BRAZYLIJSKIEJ AWANGARDY KOŃCA LAT 20. XX W. POMIĘDZY HISTORIA, MITEM I KONCEPCJĄ ARTYSTYCZNĄ (streszczenie)**

Metafora antropofagii jest jednym z bardziej żywych fenomenów obecnych we współczesnej kulturze brazylijskiej. Zainicjowana została, jako koncepcja artystyczna, przez Oswalda de Andrade w jego *Manifesto Antropofagicznym* (1924) i od początku charakteryzuje się silnymi związkami pomiędzy tekstem i obrazem. Koncepcję antropofagiczną, mimo jej wpisania w światowe tendencje awangardy, należy traktować jako manifest odrębności brazylijskich modernistów. W kreowaniu nowej metafory sięgnęli oni do toposów kanibalizmu od wieków łączonych z rodzimymi mieszkańcami Ameryki. Pojawiają się one w twórczości wielu brazylijskich artystów, począwszy od inicjatorów idei (Oswald de Andrade, Tarsila do Amaral), poprzez artystów działających w późniejszym okresie (Candido Portinari), aż po współczesnych twórców (Adriana Varejão).

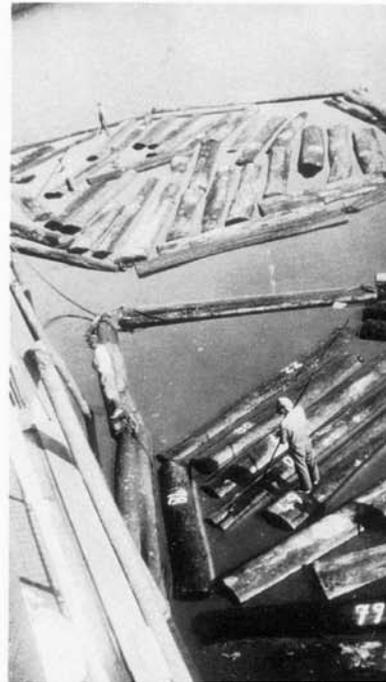
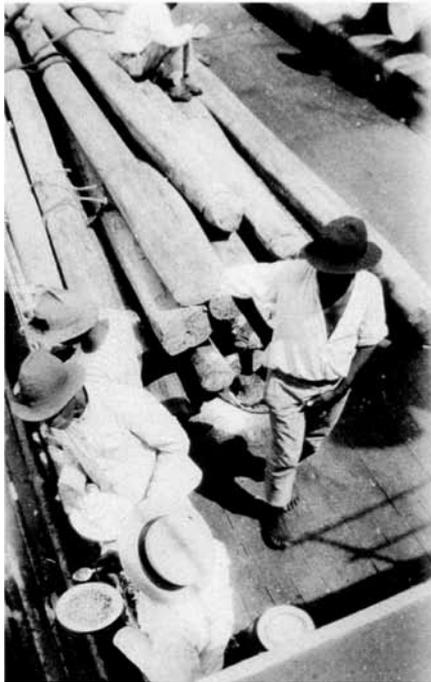
**Słowa kluczowe:** antropofagia, awangarda brazylijska, Manifest Antropofagiczny, Oswaldo de Andrade, Tarsila do Amaral, Adriana Varejão.



1. *America*, anonymous artist, (C. Ripa, 1618); Isaac Fuller the Younger, *America*, (C. Ripa, 1709) (phot. E. Kubiak, 2014)



2. Alberta Eckhouta (c. 1610-1665), *Mulher Tapuia* (Tapuya woman), 1641, oil on canvas, Ethnographic Collection, the National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen (phot. E. Kubiak, 2010)



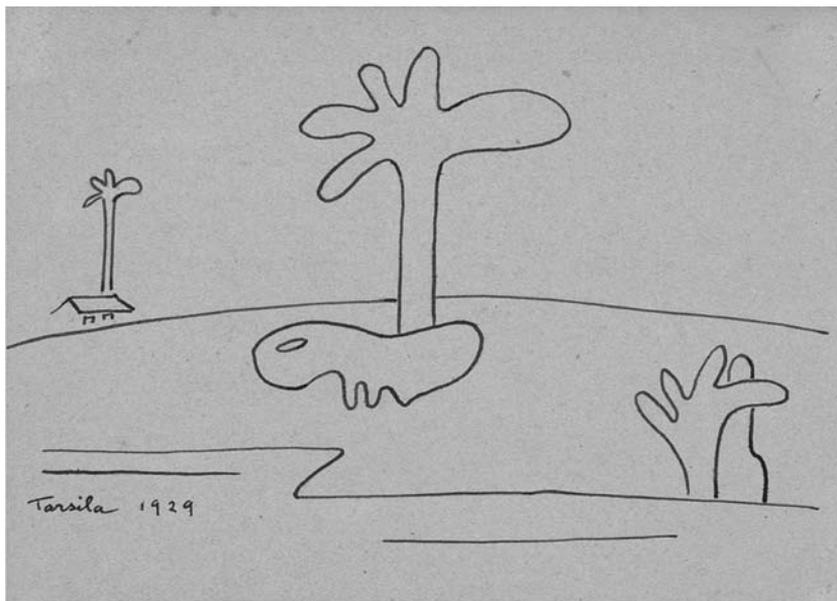
3. Oswald de Andrade, *Pau Brasil*, 1925, Cover of the book with illustration of Tarsila do Amaral; Mario de Andrade, *Jangadas de magno* (Mahogany Rafts), the 23<sup>rd</sup> of June, 1927; *Almoço da 3a classe* (Lunch of 3<sup>rd</sup> class), the 6<sup>th</sup> of August, (phot. E. Kubiak 2011)



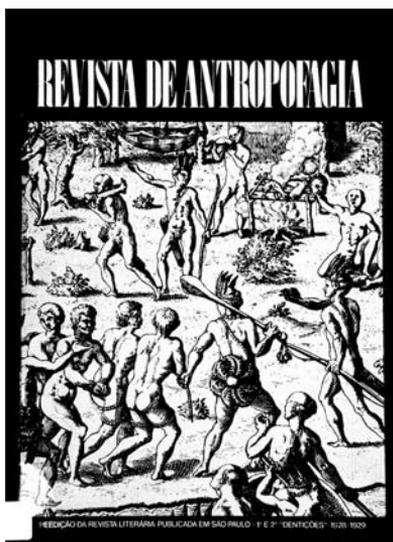
4. Tarsila do Amaral, *Abaporu*, 1928, oil on canvas, MALBA, Collection Costatini, Buenos Aires (phot. E. Kubiak 2012)



5. Tarsila do Amaral, *Antropofagia*, 1929, oil on canvas, Fundação Jose e Paulina Niemirowsky, São Paulo (phot. E. Kubiak 2011)



6. Tarsila do Amaral, *Paisagem Com Bicho Antropofágico II*, (Landscape with Anthropophagic Bug II), Tarsila do Amaral, 1929, ink on paper, (phot. E. Kubiak 2011)



7. Cover “Revista de Antropofagia”, facsimile ed. Augusto de Campos (São Paulo: Metal Leve/ Editora Abril, 1975); Excerpts from *Manifesto Antropofago*, “Revista de antropofagia” 1928, 1, no. 1, p. 3. (phot. E. Kubiak 2011)

DE - O ESTADO DE S. PAULO

CADERNO 2  
LANÇAMENTO

SEGUNDA-FEIRA, 21 DE SETEMBRO DE 1998

## Sai o livro de Hans Staden com inéditos de Portinari

*A obra, um clássico da antropofagia, será lançada hoje na Livraria Cultura*

CARLOS HAAG

Os índios que, a golpes de taças, se transformaram em respeito de indígenas não poderiam imaginar que o seu indígena fim se transformaria, um dia, em sucedâneo de luto. Como se não bastasse ser tema da biografia deste ano, a antropofagia retorna na sua fonte original: *História Verdadeira*, narrativa das aventuras de Hans Staden. O livro faz parte de *Portinari Desenhos de Hans Staden* (Terceto Novo, 144 págs., R\$ 60,00), que traz, além das gravuras da época, os 26 desenhos inéditos feitos por Cândido Portinari, em 1941, para uma edição americana malograda da obra do alemão. A obra será lançada hoje, às 18h30, na Livraria Cultura (Avenida Paulista, 2.073).

Com o historiador e crítico multilíngüe Azevedo de Almeida Torres de Albuquerque, Nise e Craúla Comodoro de Serra Euzébio, *Situação no Novo Mundo da América, Deconstrução Antiga e Depois de Amas Crível*, o livro de Staden (1588-1597), publicado em 1957, na Alemanha, foi o primeiro documento a falar do País, após a carta de Colombo. Em 80 anos, foram mais de 30 edições, mas o Brasil só teve a versão em português, pela primeira vez, em 1997 (Portinari). Devoa trata uma boa nova tradução, de Angélio Rogagnoni. Lá fora, por modernismo, serviu para a construção da bobagem de Oswald de Andrade e foi usada por Villa Lobos para entreter amigos europeus, com o mestre colocando-se, charmosamente, no lugar do protagonista.

Cristóvão Colombo do século 16 nasceu em Gênova e visitou o Brasil duas vezes, em 1497 e em 1498. Na segunda ocasião, a mais longa, após um naufrágio, encontrou-se (dele se ficou preso por nove meses) com os índios, safou-se, arranjou um emprego (indicado por Tomé de Souza) como conselheiro de uma fortaleza, em Berço, apenas para ficar, depois, novamente prisioneiro dos selvagens, desta vez, dos tupi-guarani, conhecedores

dos antropófagos.

O contato com os índios em suas aldeias, lutas e rituais (entre eles, o ritualístico) serviu como matéria-prima da narrativa de suas desventuras rocambolescas, com Staden sempre na incógnita de se transformar em refúgio para, graças às orações e ao fato de curar um nativo, salvar-se de ser comido em honra do barão. Lira, retornou à França em 1555.

**Apetite degenerado** - O tom de suas descrições, é claro, vem temperado dos preconceitos do branco europeu, que via os índios como um bando de melados, que "viviam ambaudado da moral e desprezando os mandamentos cristãos". Mas, na contramão do vício, está a virtude de Staden: teimosa, a Deus em demanda, enfoca-se em contar a verdade e acabou por

criar um relato fascinante da vida nas tribos, seus hábitos e tradições (foi pioneiro ao entender o canibalismo como uso-culto e não como apetite degenerado), a fauna e a flora da região.

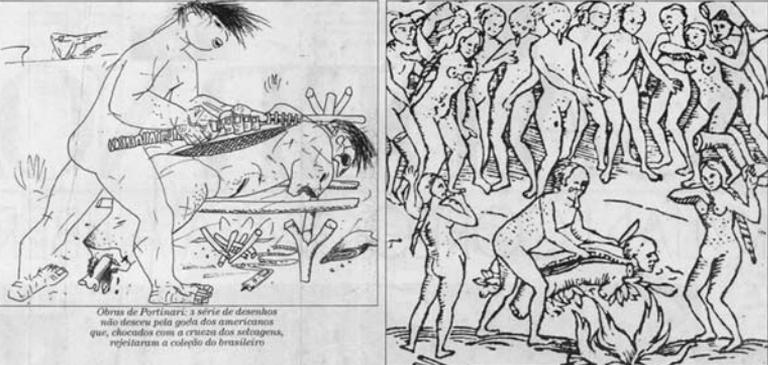
Foi também para honrar a Deus que, ao suas crônicas, fez editar a *História*, com gravuras feitas a partir de seus desenhos. Que inspiraram (na época) a gravura desta página, séculos depois, Cândido Portinari, conhecido. Que inspiraram (na época) a gravura desta página, séculos depois, Cândido Portinari, conhecido.

analogias a *Estirantes* (membros descomuns, figuras tocas em um inferno dramático, em especial no ritual antropofágico), a série de 26 desenhos não desceu pela goela dos americanos que, chocados com a cruzada dos selvagens chiapanques, chocados com a cruzada dos selvagens chiapanques, chocados com a cruzada dos selvagens chiapanques e desengoados de um exotismo light, rejeitaram a coleção do brasileiro.

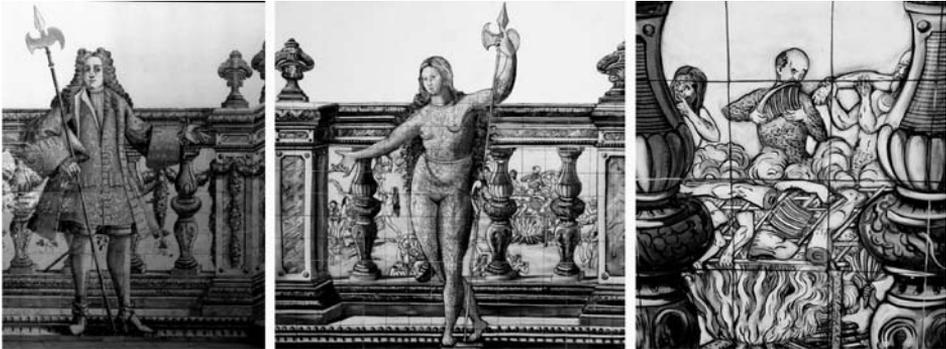
Que, assim, estava inédita até esse lançamento, trazendo, ao lado da obra de Staden, as memórias de um tempo em que os índios é que ganhavam fogueira e modernidade tinham tudo para combater. Mas, com traços fortes, rudes, essenciais, feitos a marquin, com

**SÃO 26  
DESENHOS  
FEITOS PELO  
ARTISTA EM 1941**

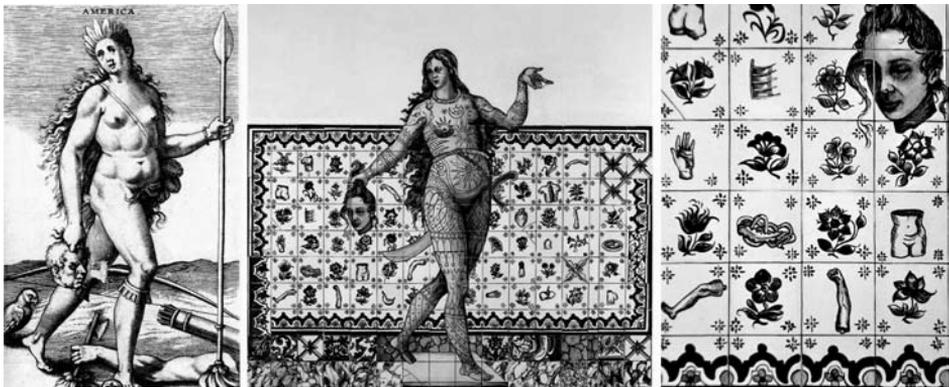
*Hans Staden: pioneiro ao entender o canibalismo como um culto e não como apetite degenerado*



8. Hans Staden and Candido Portinari, "Cuaderno 2", 21 of September 1998 (phot. E. Kubiak 2011)



9. Palácio da Mitra, interior, panel with *azulejos* on the main staircase, 18<sup>th</sup> century, Santo Antão do Tojal, Portugal; Adriana Varejão, *Entrance Figure I*, 1997, oil on canvas, whole composition and detail



10. Philippe Galle, *America*, prosopography, (1579); Adriana Varejão, *Entrance Figur III*, 2005, oil on canvas, whole composition and detail



11. Adriana Varejão, *Green tilework in live flesh*, 2000, oil on canvas and polyurethane on aluminium and wood support



12. Gui Boratto, *Abaporu*, CD Cover, (2014)

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## INTERWAR WORKS BY IZRAEL LEJZEROWICZ IN THE CONTEXT OF THE “NEW ART” MILIEU’S ACCOMPLISHMENTS IN ŁÓDŹ

**Abstract:** The article attempts to demonstrate associations between works by Izrael Lejzerowicz and avant-garde artists working in Łódź during the interwar period. Lejzerowicz's painting is sometimes connected with a trend called Jewish Expressionism, although many of his works are closer to Symbolism or even to naturalism. However, this text concerns only those artist's paintings and drawings that reveal his fascination with new directions in the art of the first half of the twentieth century: Expressionism, Cubism, Futurism and even Constructivism.

**Keywords:** Jewish art, Lejzerowicz, art in Łódź, Expressionism, religious syncretism.

### Jung Idysz and the birth of the Łódź Avant-garde

In the early twentieth century, Łódź witnessed the birth of an artistic community in which Jews played a significant role. Their presence became an element defining the culture and the visual image of the city in 1900–1914, which was manifested, *inter alia*, by spreading *Art Nouveau*, a style perceived as strange and corresponding to Jewish tastes<sup>1</sup> in the architecture of the city. Painters and sculptors who were then active in Łódź represented a conservative attitude, probably in line with the expectations of their clients and patrons, creating their art in the spirit of realism, Impressionism and Symbolism. Until the middle of the second decade of the century, their works only slightly absorbed the early experience of the Western European Avant-garde, despite support by the local bourgeoisie, which in other centres constituted a major group promoting and financing innovative

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<sup>1</sup> Secession was described as the art expressing Jewish tastes by i.a. Rudolf Klein and F. Bedoire. See: R. Klein *Secession; „un goût juif”? – Art Nouveau Buildings and the Jews in some Habsburg Lands*, “Jewish Studies at the CEU” 2009, vol. 5, pp. 91-124; F. Bedoire, *The Jewish Contribution to Modern Architecture 1830-1930*, KTAV, Jersey City NJ 2004.

activities, i.a. within art and architecture. Growing emancipation, being in other places an impulse for the search for a new language of visual forms, breaking with the traditions of Greek antiquity that determined the aesthetics of Western civilization, advanced more slowly in developing Central and Eastern European cities, meeting with opposition by the conservative majority of the Jewish community. The situation changed during the First World War and after its end, when Jewish artists faced the need to define themselves in the space between different religions, ethnic groups, different visions of the world and the homeland. Their desire to understand their own identity and redefine the national art was parallel to the goals pursued by Polish artists, although the situation of the former and the latter was somewhat different. Regaining Polish independence and the associated need to build a modern European state reaffirmed the need to create a national art with a modern formula. This task was carried out by a group of “Polish Expressionists,” known after 1919 as the “Formists.” Its representatives referred to motifs taken from Polish folklore (mostly from Zakopane), using them not only as a source of folk iconography, but, above all, as a repository of “primitive” forms expressing the Polish spirit that was not infected by outside civilization.<sup>2</sup> Another, no less important inspiration for the “Formists” was religion, treated as the foundation of national identity. Reference to the “Formists” in the context of deliberations on Jewish artists of the “new art” in Łódź seems to be justified, given their mutual contacts and similar aspirations, inspirations and means of artistic expression. Another impetus for development of Jewish art in the “Polish Manchester” was contacts with Poznań’s “Bunt” group. Its members, publishing texts and graphics in the avant-garde magazine entitled “Zdrój”, emphasized the group’s universal goals, calling for introduction of a new language of art that would be able to radically oppose naturalism. According to them, art was to be a tool of protest, expressed in order to transform the society with particular artistic means.<sup>3</sup> The Poznań artists represented an attitude that emphasized the relationship between art and the political situation of the 1920s, which placed the “Bunt” milieu in a specific historical and philosophical context.<sup>4</sup> We should emphasize relationships of the group with the second generation of German Expressionists (after 1919), while pointing out that the ultimate goal of the Polish artists was not a universal social revolution and fraternity across borders but on the contrary: a striving to delineate new borders within which the Polish state should be established. The above-

<sup>2</sup> P. Piotrowski, *Od nacjonalizacji do socjalizacji polskiego modernizmu 1913-1950*, “Artium Questiones” 2004, vol. XV, Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, Poznań, p. 108-109.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. M. Bartelik, *Jeszcze jeden most do przebycia: BUNT a wielokulturowość sztuki polskiej*, in: *BUNT. Ekspresjonizm Poznański 1917-1925*, ed. G. Hałasa, M. Waller, Muzeum Narodowe w Poznaniu, Poznań 2003, p. 30.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. J. Malinowski, *Sztuka i Nowa Wspólnota. Zrzeszenie Artystów Bunt 1917-1992*, Wiedza o Kulturze, Wrocław 1991.

mentioned artistic formations, their programs and formal exploration significantly influenced art of the “Jung Idysz” group, which was active in Łódź in 1919–1921 and the works of visual artists who were its spiritual heirs, including Izrael Lejzerowicz. The avant-garde “Jung Idysz” group was the first Polish artistic and literary association of young Jewish artists.<sup>5</sup> This milieu was the only group in the country having such wide international contacts, and, at the same time, intentionally belonging to Yiddish culture. Seeking the roots of Eastern European Judaism, group members, such as writers – Moshe Broderson, Jecheskiel Moshe Neumann, and visual artists – Jankiel Adler, Icchok Brauner, Henryk Barczyński, Dina Matus, Ida Brauner, Lindenfeld, Zofia Gutentag – turned to tradition, craft, and folklore. The group was formed in the difficult period when Poland regained its independence. Acting in Poland and maintaining contacts with Polish avant-garde artists, the group functioned within Polish art partly on the basis of anti-nomy. Drawing inspiration from Jewish folk culture and literature, the artists were forced to seek a compromise between their own vision of the national art and the current concept of Polish art. To be seen in the consciousness of a non-Jewish audience, this “Jewish Expressionism” had to not only apply certain formal solutions, but also introduce elements of the new iconography. Thus, in the works by “Jung Idysz” members, Christian motifs appeared alongside typical Jewish themes. As far as form was concerned, the artists associated with the group turned to the achievements of French Fauvists, German Expressionists, Italian and Russian Futurists, which they knew thanks to personal contacts established during their stay abroad (Adler, Szwarz, Broderson, Lindenfeld), access to avant-garde magazines and exhibitions. Expressionist art, representing a new synthetic means of expression, using simplified, dynamic forms, violent, applying clashing colour combinations, was able to evoke individual experience in a particularly powerful way. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that artistic groups operating in Łódź in the interwar period eagerly drew on both the works of European Expressionists and “Jung Idysz,” although diverse styles, tendencies, and inspirations present in the works of artists living in Łódź led to the establishment of artistic groups with different programmes, such as “Srebrny Wóz”, “Grupa Łodzian”, “Stowarzyszenie Artystów <ST.ART>”, “Stowarzyszenie Artystów i Zwolenników Sztuk Plastycznych”, or “Zrzeszenie Artystów Plastyków w Łodzi”. The works of Jewish painters associated in these groups were mostly a synthesis of Post-impressionism and specifically interpreted Expressionism, manifested in slight distortion, an expressive form, and deep, saturated colours.

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<sup>5</sup> The first one to describe the group’s history was Jerzy Malinowski, whose work on this topic is still the main source of information about the activities of the Łódź association. See: J. Malinowski, *Grupa Jung Idysz i żydowskie środowisko „nowej sztuki” w Polsce, 1918-1923*, Warszawa 1987.

### Izrael Lejzerowicz (1902–1944)

Izrael Lejzerowicz was over a decade younger than the majority of “Jung Idysz” members. He debuted in 1921, when, during an exhibition of Jewish artists organized in Łódź by the Tel-Aviv publishing house, he presented three works: *The Inquisitor*, *I know*, and *The Martyr*, revealing a direction of his later interests and focusing on issues of religion and suffering. Despite many years of research and reconstruction efforts, the artist's biography remains incomplete, which hampers the analysis and interpretation of preserved or reproduced works.<sup>6</sup> The relatively best-known period of Lejzerowicz's work is the last years of his life spent in the ghetto of Łódź, although, also in this case, information about his artistic activity and daily existence is sometimes fragmentary and requires verification.<sup>7</sup>

According to the account of Oskar Rosenfeld thanks to a scholarship from the Łódź industrialist, Nachum Eitingon, Lejzerowicz studied at a private art school in Berlin.<sup>8</sup> The biography prepared by Chaim Lejb Fuks, a writer associated with Jung Idysz, includes information that in the 1920s Lejzerowicz collaborated with magazines dealing with the issues of contemporary Jewish art and poetry (“Toyz Royt”, “Vegn”, “Shveln”) and daily Yiddish newspapers, such as the “Lodzer Tageblatt” and “Najer folksblat”.<sup>9</sup> In 1924, Lejzerowicz's name appeared on the occasion of a collective exhibition organized in May in the halls of the newly created City Art Gallery in Sienkiewicz Park in Łódź.<sup>10</sup> The artist's work was also displayed a year later, in April 1925, on the premises at 63 Zachodnia street. In a short note published by “Republika”, the author remarked: “Undoubtedly, among four young artists, Lejzerowicz, Chajmowicz, Mittler, and Spiegel, who are organizing the exhibition, there is an artist who stands on the threshold of fame. That is Lejzerowicz, an extremely profound and subtle painter, who bewilders with the new, original content of his canvases and determined colours (the main navy black colour against the background of the background of clearly separating outline).”<sup>11</sup> In 1926 and 1930, Lejzerowicz, as a member of the “START”

<sup>6</sup> Research on the artist is being conducted by William Gilcher Ph.D. and its results are being published on regular basis at: <http://www.lejzerowicz.org>

<sup>7</sup> A full bibliography on the topic, together with quotations in Polish, German, and English is provided by W. Gilcher. See: <http://www.lejzerowicz.org/styled/index.html>

<sup>8</sup> The information about his studies is confirmed by Lejzerowicz's niece, Ruth Lewis, who remembers him well during his stay with her family in Berlin. Oskar Rosenfeld, who knew Lejzerowicz well in the ghetto, writes in the *Ghetto Encyclopedia* that he studied with an Eitingon fellowship in Berlin. Cf. O. Rosenfeld, *Malerei im Ghetto*, YIVO Archives, New York, Nachman Zonabend collection, RG241, folder 863, English transl. W. Gilcher in: <http://www.lejzerowicz.org/styled/index.html>.

<sup>9</sup> See: *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur, Alveltlekhn Yidishn Kultur-Kongres*, New York 1956–1981, vol.5, col. 132–133. Cf. <http://www.lejzerowicz.org/styled/index.html>

<sup>10</sup> Her, *Wystawa artystów łódzkich*, “Tygodnik Ilustrowany” 1924, no. 24, p. 399.

<sup>11</sup> *Wystawa obrazów i rzeźb*, “Republika 1925, no 117, p. 7.

group, presented his paintings in Łódź and Kraków. An overview of his work took up most of the review published in “Głos Polski”. The works were still assessed positively, although the author of the text noticed indecision and inconsistency of the artistic vision, writing: “He cannot be pigeonholed in any painting school. Symbolism, Expressionism, Impressionism... they all can be found in his works... There is no iron artistic logic in Lejzerowicz yet.”<sup>12</sup> In the 1930s, the artist’s exhibition activity ceased and press articles about him concerned mainly his financial problems and bailiffs’ visits.<sup>13</sup> An exception was the extensive interview which appeared in “Głos Poranny” on the occasion of the competition for the artistic prize of the city of Łódź.<sup>14</sup> In the 1930s Lejzerowicz maintained close contacts with the Margolin family, who supported his work.<sup>15</sup> At that time, the main source of the artist’s income was painting portraits on commission. He gave up this activity at the end of the decade to take it up again during his forced stay in the ghetto. The last trace of the painter’s pre-war activity is his membership card in the “Żydowskie Towarzystwo Krzewienia Sztuk Pięknych” (Jewish Society for the Support of the Fine Arts) dated 31 January 1939.<sup>16</sup> During the German occupation, between 1942 and 1943, Lejzerowicz worked for the *Wissenschaftliche Abteilung*; he also made portraits of Chaim Mordechai Rumkowski and employees of the ghetto administration. Although he was in a much better situation than the average inhabitant of the closed quarter, documents, fragments of letters and notes, as well as excruciating pictures preserved in the Jewish Historical Institute reveal the artist’s deepening depression.

### **Baal Shem Tov, Christ, saints, and prophets. Religious syncretism in the artistic activity of “Jung Idysz” and Izrael Lejzerowicz**

In addition to naturalist and Post-Impressionist portraits, Lejzerowicz’s artistic output includes works in which the artist experiments with form and colour and individually interprets threads taken up by the Expressionists, an example being religious motifs, primarily messianic, Christological, less often biblical. In the iconography of “Jung Idysz”, which seems crucial for Lejzerowicz’s paintings, this subject occupies an important place. The genesis of the presence of selected motifs in the works of the group’s artists should be linked, first and foremost, to the strong influence of the German philosopher and scholar, Martin Buber, who

<sup>12</sup> *Wystawa Startu*, “Głos Polski” 1926, no 355, p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> *Sekwestrator w pracowni artysty-malarza*, “Republika” 1939, no. 68, p. 6.

<sup>14</sup> Gel, *Nagroda artystyczna Łodzi*, “Głos Poranny” 1932, no 110, p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> More on this subject see: William Gilcher, *The artist and the patron: Izrael Lejzerowicz and the Margolin/Spektor family in pre-war Lodz* in: *Art in Jewish Society*, eds. J. Malinowski, R. Piątkowska, M. Stolarska-Fronia, T. Sztyma, TAKO, Toruń 2017, pp. 85-94.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.lejzerowicz.org/photos-4/files/page30-1006-full.html>

on the one hand was fascinated by Christian mysticism, and on the other, contributed to an increasing interest in Jewish folklore, legends, and rituals. Works published by him, *Die Geschichten des Rabbi Nachman* (1906) and *Die Legende des Baalschem* (1908), turned out to be an invigorating impetus for the new art and Jewish literature. According to Małgorzata Stolarska-Fronia, “The Hasidic movement, recounted by Buber in the form of anecdotal legends, experienced a renaissance, especially after the First World War, when the devastating experiences of this worldwide apocalypse and the collapse of old values spurred people to embark on a spiritual quest for a ‘new religion’.”<sup>17</sup> Buber’s reflections also included elements of religious syncretism. In, *Die Legende des Baalschem* the author compared Baal Shem Tov with St. Francis of Assisi and Buddha. A plot of the coexistence of divine beings representing different beliefs is also present in Broderson’s 1921 book, *Tchies Hamejsin (Resurrection)*, in which the hindu trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, Moses, Buddha, Jesus of Nazareth, Mohammed, St. Francis of Assisi, the tsaddik of Kock, Mother Rachel, Cain, angels, Cherubs, and Seraphs, and the thirty-six righteous opposed to Asmodeus. Hasidic motifs, which artists associated with “Jung Idysz” used willingly, are not present in Lejzerowicz’s works that are known to us; yet, they contain an interesting topic of Sabbatai Zevi, called the “false Messiah.”<sup>18</sup> During the interwar period, colourful tales about the life of the mystic fascinated many Jewish writers, for whom he was the same “topos as the (noble) Satan in the literature of the Young Poland.”<sup>19</sup> In Lejzerowicz’s works, the presentation of Sabbatai Zevi is an element of messianic and apocalyptic iconography, which is present in the entire career of the painter. Although his composition created in 1924 has more in common with symbolist painting than avant-garde art, the figures of the main character and the accompanying woman are related to Jankiel Adler’s early works. They become apparent mainly in the way of shaping faces and characteristic hands with elongated fingers. The image of a false Messiah created by Lejzerowicz, with a pale, elongated face, deep-set eyes, dark beard, and long hair corresponds to depictions of Uriel Acosta and Christ, known in Jewish art.

Figures of Christ, saints, and the scenes of the New Testament often appeared in the works of “Jung Idysz” artists. Whereas, as Jerzy Malinowski notes, they disregarded the notions “which would be difficult to accept for the Jewish

<sup>17</sup> M. Stolarska-Fronia, *Saints and Tsadikim - The Religious Syncretism of Jewish Expressionism in: Jewish Aspects in Avant-Garde. Between Rebellion and Revelation*, eds. M.H. Gelber, S. Sjöberg, The Gruyter, Berlin-Boston 2017, p. 168.

<sup>18</sup> Sabbatai Zevi (1626-1676) an initiator of the largest Messianic movement in the history of Judaism, called Sabbathaism. In 1665, Zevi announced that he was the Messiah, and a year later, he converted to Islam at the court of the Sultan of Turkey. He considered himself the successor of Christ, gathering seed spread by God in various religions. Imprisoned in 1773 in Dulcingo, he died three years later.

<sup>19</sup> I. Piekarski, *Falszwy mesjasz: o jednym toposie żydowskim w twórczości Juliana Strykowskiego*, “Pamiętnik Literacki” 2008, vol. 99, part 2, p. 58.

audience.”<sup>20</sup> The presence of iconography that strongly accentuated a connection between Jewish and Christian traditions in the works of Jewish inter-war artists was a signal of growing distance, separating their generation from the religion of their fathers, and the same time, as a tool for shaping a new, secular identity. It enabled them to exist in the space of international art. Lejzerowicz's works also feature motifs pointing to a fascination with Christian themes.

In an interview in 1932, the artist invoked the *Apocalypse of St. John*, which indicates that he knew this passage from the New Testament.<sup>21</sup> Certain references to its content can be found in symbolic paintings, showing processions of sinners following the cross or walking towards it. However, what seems more interesting from the perspective of Lejzerowicz's painting and its association with avant-garde art, is a painting from 1924, titled *Christ*, a work created during the same period as the Sabbatai Zevi discussed above. Both works portray the Messiah, the ascetic and mystic with elongated eyes, accompanied by two people. In the case of *Christ*, these are Mary and St. John. Lejzerowicz, as an enthusiast of medieval art, used the iconographic scheme known from Western European painting, where the Virgin Mary is on the right hand of Christ and John on the left. This reference to gothic art was characteristic of the Expressionists, but what is much more interesting in the case of this painting is a method of presenting faces resembling masks. The face of the Messiah, placed in the centre of the composition, was shaped by the contrast of light and dark planes, with expressive, almost sculpted lines of the eyebrows, the bridge of the nose, the cheekbones, and the pointed chin. Squinting eyes and long hair make him similar to Sabbatai Zevi. But in this representation we can also find inspiration from the famous graphic work by Henryk Berlewi, *Uriel Acosta* (1921).

### **“Inhospitable harbour.” Izrael Lejzerowicz in the context of Strzemiński’s painting concepts.**

In the middle of the 1920s, Lejzerowicz created several works revealing attempts to experiment with form and colour. He then departs from mystical themes,

<sup>20</sup> J. Malinowski, *Malarstwo i rzeźba Żydów Polskich w XIX i XX wieku*, Wydawnictwa Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2000, p. 207. The most common motif was the scene of the Annunciation, the image of the *Holy Family* (Braunerówna, Szwarc), *Worship of the Three Wise Men* (Icchok Brauner), *Crucifixion* (Marek Szwarc, 1917), *Deposition from the Cross* (M. Szwarc 1919), *Resurrection* (Jankiel Adler circa 1918). Images of the evangelists are also known, e.g. St. Luke (M. Szwarc, circa 1918), St. Peter - St. Francis, St. Anthony (H. Barczyński), St. Barbara (Icchok Brauner). Lithographs by Marek Szwarc also contain expressive representation of Christ's head, treated with a strongly deformed line and images of St. Francis.

<sup>21</sup> Processions painted by Lejzerowicz may also be inspired by suggestive visions contained in Broderson's poem discussed above, *Tchies Hamejsin*: “Forgive, our Father, your adrift children. Who have not experienced happiness, walking across the desert without reprieve. Forgive their sins and relieve the suffering of the harassed! Send them your grace! Heal from purulent wounds! Feed their hungry souls - give them new breath in their misery!” See: M. Broderson, *Tchies Hamejsin*, trans. D. Dekiert, Łódź 1921.

though not giving up religious threads. In compositions, such as *The Nocturnal Wandering* (1925), *Moses*, or a *Design of Masquerade* (1926), he introduces bold deformations, breaks shapes, does not avoid geometric styling. We can see inspiration from the art of Italian Futurism and even Constructivism, although it should be noted, in the latter case, that it is very superficial. The press release concerning the exhibition of the “START” group in 1926 contains a brief description of *The Feast* (1926) and a *Design of Masquerade*, interesting mainly because of information on the colours of the presented works and their expression: “In *The Feast* Lejzerowicz mainly focuses on the composition. But here a purple tone of the whole picture symbolizes passion whipped bloody, an orgiastic nature of the feast. It rarely happens that a form alone fills the picture, like in Witkiewicz’s works. One such rarity is a decorative design of the masquerade, harmonious in the layout and colour transposition, despite the whole battle of triangles, hemispheres of colours.<sup>22</sup> A described clash of geometric figures prompted the author of the text to describe the project as constructivist, while recognizing “noble decorativeness” in it.<sup>23</sup> Taking into consideration formal distinctions characteristic of Israel Lejzerowicz’s works, his indifference towards radical aesthetics of abstract art seems to be interesting. In Łódź, where, thanks to the international contacts of local visual artists and the exchange of avant-garde periodicals, artistic ideas circulated without much disturbance, theoretical texts about new trends in art must have been known to Lejzerowicz, although in the 1930s he himself stayed away, not participating in local bohemian activity. In this context, it is worth mentioning a part of the artist’s statement on Władysław Strzemiński, published in *Głos Poranny* on the occasion of a discussion about candidates for the artistic prize of the city of Łódź in 1932.<sup>24</sup> Sympathizing with the difficult situation of contemporary artists and pitying his own hard lot and financial problems, Lejzerowicz stated: “The only painter in Łódź who deserves the prize... as an outstanding art theorist is Władysław Strzemiński. I am saying that openly although ideologically I am his strong opponent. Recognizing the value of intellect in art, I do not recognize the advantage of this factor over other elements. I believe that Strzemiński’s “unism,” being the most extreme result of almost all basically formalist trends in visual art, is eventually a bright but inhospitable harbour in contemporary art, from which we can normally sail away. “Unism,” as I predict, will play an extraordinary role in further development of painting synthesis, because it is the “ism” that will swallow all other “isms” and will die together with them, marking the

<sup>22</sup> *Wystawa <Startu>*, “Głos Polski”, *Głos Polski 1926*, no. 355, p. 6.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Candidates for the prize, apart from Strzemiński, were Łódź citizens: Maurycy Trębacz, Karol Hiller, Artur Szyk, Henryk Jan Szczygliński and professors of the Kraków Academy of Fine Arts: Leon Wyczółkowski and Wojciech Weiss. Cf. Gel., *Władysław Strzemiński was awarded the first artistic prize of the city of Łódź, amounting to 10 thousand zlotys*, “Głos Poranny” 1932, no 120, p. 1.

beginning of great art.”<sup>25</sup> Lejzerowicz perceived Strzemiński mostly as a theoretician, not so much as an artist. Undoubtedly, he knew Strzemiński’s concept of unistic painting described in the book published in 1928; however, he himself was inclined to Expressionism and Symbolism, which was expressed in his delight with the works of Aron Haber (Beron) from Łódź, whose works reveal a far-reaching similarity to Lejzerowicz’s pieces.

## Conclusion

Izrael Lejzerowicz debuted in 1921 at the age of 17. In this period, as reported by one of the daily newspaper, Łódź, located in the central part of the reviving Polish state, was the most important centre of Jewish artistic and literary life in the country, primarily because of the expressionist “Jung Idysz” group working there.<sup>26</sup> The group’s programme, expressed in the form of a manifesto, emphasized the importance of the national (folk) tradition as the cornerstone of Jewish art, and it emphasized transcendent aspects of art, meeting postulates formulated in 1912 by Wassily Kandinsky, who wrote: “The [artist’s] eyes should be open to their own inner life, and their ears directed to the side where the voice of inner necessity comes from... This is the only way to extract the truly spiritual necessities.”<sup>27</sup> The longing for God-Logos, declared by the “Jung Idysz” members, made them interested in religion and Christian iconography, which resulted in numerous works on the subject, placing their work in the heterogeneous space of avant-garde art. The “Jung Idysz” group was ephemeral, but its influence on the younger generation of Jewish artists from Łódź proved to be long-lasting,<sup>28</sup> manifesting itself mainly through the reinterpretation of iconographic motifs and imitation of the means of artistic expression. The works of Izrael Lejzerowicz contain numerous references to the works of “Jung Idysz” members, especially Jankiel Adler, but also Henryk Barczyński and Icchok Brauner. It should be noted, however, that this is not a matter of indisputable convergence, finding similarities between particular canvases or graphics. What seems more important is recalling a spiritual bond, a kind of relationship with “Jung Idysz’s” idea of a universal Jewish art. Lejzerowicz’s works described here are characteristic of Expressionists: anti-traditionalism (understood as opposition to nineteenth-century realism) and an inclination towards metaphor and symbolism. He willingly used deformation and unnatural colours as tools to express extreme emotions. Contrary to the represen-

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<sup>25</sup> Gel, *Nagroda artystyczna Łodzi*, “Głos Poranny” 1932, no 110, p. 7.

<sup>26</sup> “Republika” 1923, no 10, p. 4.

<sup>27</sup> W. Kandyński, *O duchowości w sztuce*, transl. S. Fijałkowski, Łódź 1996.

<sup>28</sup> A majority of group members left Łódź after its breakup, but some of them, such as Icchok Brauner and Moshe Broderson, stayed in the city. They gathered the milieu of young Jewish artists, for whom ideology and the art of “Jung Idysz” remained an important point of reference.

tatives of the so-called Great Avant-garde, Lejzerowicz did not want to completely cut off from the tradition of figurative painting. The idea of a transcendent art was also unfamiliar to him. His art, developing in a peculiar complex of spiritual and synthetic inspirations, can be embedded in the context of emerging modernity, which for the artist turned out to be only a transitional stage on the way back to naturalism.

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*Sekwestrator w pracowni artysty-malarza* (1939) "Republika", no 68, p. 6.

<http://www.lejzerowicz.org>

<http://www.lejzerowicz.org/styled/index.html>

## **MIĘDZYWOJENNA TWÓRCZOŚĆ IZRAELA LEJZEROWICZA WOBEC DOKONAŃ ŚRODOWISKA "NOWEJ SZTUKI " W ŁODZI (streszczenie)**

Artykuł stanowi próbę wykazania związków pomiędzy twórczością Izraela Lejzerowicza i innych awangardowych artystów działających w Łodzi w okresie międzywojennym. Malarstwo Lejzerowicza łączy się niekiedy z nurtem tzw. żydowskiego ekspresjonizmu, choć wiele z jego prac bliższych jest symbolizmowi czy wręcz naturalizmowi. Niniejszy tekst dotyczy jednak wyłącznie tych obrazów i rysunków artysty, w których ujawniają się jego fascynacje nowymi kierunkami w sztuce I połowy 20 wieku - wspomnianym już ekspresjonizmem, kubizmem, futuryzmem a nawet konstruktywizmem.

**Słowa kluczowe:** sztuka żydowska, Lejzerowicz, sztuka w Łodzi, ekspresjonizm, synkretyzm religijny.



1. I. Lejzerowicz, *Self-portrait*, c. 1927



2. I. Lejzerowicz, *Sabbatai Zevi*, 1924



3. I. Lejzerowicz, *The Christ*, 1924



4. I. Lejzerowicz, *The procession in Grey* (fragment), 1923 / 1925?



5. I. Lejzerowicz, *The Nocturnal Wandering*, 1925



6. I. Lejzerowicz, *The masquerade decoration*, 1926



7. I. Lejzerowicz, *The Feast/ The Revel*, 1926.

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## THE INTERMEDIALITY OF THE AVANT-GARDE OR THE AVANT-GARDE OF INTERMEDIALITY? IS THE AVANT-GARDE INTERMEDIAL?

**Abstract:** The article is an attempt to answer the question “Is the avant-garde intermedial?” Intermediality is not a new concept in the field of art and media theory; it has a long history, going back to 1965, when Dick Higgins published his essay *Intermedia*. The artist then tried to put his ideas into words as an intermedial manifesto of the avant-garde. This paper characterizes its assumptions, defines the notion of “intermedium”, and determines the basis of intermedial strategies. In the subsequent section of the paper the author starts a discussion about media theory and mediality in avant-garde art, looking at intermedial relationships in many artworks, and drawing attention to the objectification of art, which has led to the development of intermedial ready-mades and poème-objets. An important aspect of the intermedial activity of the avant-garde artists seems to be also the tension between the opposing poles of “gesture aesthetics” and “discourse strategy”. In the subsequent sections of his discussion of intermedial practices of the avant-garde artists, the author refers to the allegorical strategy described in Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, whose aim is to work out the notion of a non-organic avant-garde work. It is characterized by montage, which can be compared to the process of integrating heterogeneous elements into a “new” whole, similar to the intermedium, which is a combination of different media. In this context montage may be understood as an intermedial process. The answer to the question “is the avant-garde intermedial?” is not obvious. The intermedial theories presented here seem to be anachronistic or even erroneous, because nobody understands intermediality currently like the avant-garde in the 1960s.

**Keywords:** Dick Higgins, avant-garde, intermedium, intermediality, objectification of art, Peter Bürger, allegory, collage/montage.

### Introduction

The reflection on intermediality (within art and media theory) in the context of avant-garde art is not a new phenomenon. It is enough to mention the famous essay-manifesto of Dick Higgins, *Intermedia* (1965)<sup>1</sup> to realize how long the debate

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<sup>1</sup> See D. Higgins, *Intermedia*, in: *Multimedia. From Wagner to Virtual Reality*, eds. R. Packer and K. Jordan, W.W. Norton & Company, New York and London 2001, pp. 27-32. See also D. Higgins, *Intermedia*, “Leonardo” 2001, vol. 34, no 1, pp. 49-54.

on avant-garde's intermediality has continued. This question appeared in the field of reflection on avant-garde art in the 1960s. Moreover, it can be referred to the work of Dick Higgins, who constantly emphasized the link between the theoretical and practical aspects of avant-garde art. Higgins's reflections are part of the debate on the "new" status of the artwork.<sup>2</sup> However, in this regard the artist does not try to define it, but gives it the label of an "intermedium", which is born in the field of avant-garde art. It is difficult not to agree with Higgins's observations. The question of the integration and correspondence of particular art genres, raised already in Romanticism, remained ignored and underestimated. Only avant-garde art has shown the importance of the tendencies described by Higgins. For this reason, his reflection seems to be so important, designating the turning points in the history of avant-garde art.

Higgins was one of the most versatile Fluxus artists, a poet, composer, performer, publisher, essayist, film and theatrical producer, and author of academic papers. He studied literature at the Yale University in New Haven and Columbia University in New York, and publishing techniques at the Manhattan School of Printing. His interest in art came early and quickly became more concrete. At the end of the 1950s Higgins decided to take up music, beginning composition studies with John Cage and Henry Cowell. During this time, he performed his first happenings and outdoor actions. After marrying the artist Alison Knowles, in 1964, Higgins founded the publishing house Something Else Press (active from 1974), where he published the works of avant-garde artists from the Fluxus circle.

### **The intermedial reflection of Dick Higgins on avant-garde art**

Higgins's reflection on intermediality in the context of avant-garde art begins in 1965, when he published his essay "Intermedia", in which we read:

Most of the best work being produced today seems to fall between media. This is no accident. The concept of the separation between media arose in the Renaissance. The idea that a painting is made of paint on canvas or that a sculpture should not be painted seems characteristic of the kind of social thought – categorizing and dividing society into nobility with its various subdivisions, untitled gentry, artisans, serfs and landless workers – which we call the feudal conception of the Great Chain of Being. This essentially mechanistic approach continued to be relevant throughout the first two industrial revolutions, just concluded, and into the present era of automation, which constitutes, in fact, a third industrial revolution.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See A. Książek, *Sztuka przeciw Sztuce. Z teorii awangardy XX wieku* [Art Against Art: From the Theory of the Avant-Garde of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century], Wydawnictwo AKME, Warszawa 2001, pp. 230-244.

<sup>3</sup> D. Higgins, *Intermedia*, in: *Multimedia...*, pp. 28-29.

The first sentence can be considered a diagnosis of the state of the avant-garde art at the time, and it also turns out to be helpful in trying to define the term “intermedium”. It highlights the place in which intermedia are situated: they “fall between media”, as it was put by Higgins.<sup>4</sup> Intermedia are thus “in-between media”,<sup>5</sup> which can also participate in the process of mass communication. Higgins was aware of this, as evidenced by his “Statement on Intermedia”, in which we read that “Art is one of the ways that people communicate”.<sup>6</sup> In this context, avant-garde art can participate in the process of communication.

The findings made here may appear to be inaccurate if one follows the subsequent arguments of Higgins, in which he makes a distinction between “art media” and “life media”. This distinction allows us to understand the intermedial character of ready-mades, which – according to Higgins – “suggests a location in the field between the general area of art media and those of life media. However, at this time, the locations of this sort are relatively unexplored, as compared with media between the arts”.<sup>7</sup> The second case involves the aspects of nonverbal communication widely used by the happening and in social interactions.

The communication perspective on art, emphasized by Higgins, points to a very wide range of media that can be integrated. Higgins writes, among other things, about visual poetry.<sup>8</sup> In addition, he also develops the idea of “polyarticism” (the more appropriate name is “polymediality”), i.e. combining many areas of art in one artwork that can be exemplified, for example, by “visual scores” or circular musical notation present in many choral canons of Joseph Haydn.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. E. Rewers, *Post-polis. Wstęp do filozofii ponowoczesnego miasta* [Post-polis: Introduction to Postmodern City Philosophy], UNIVERSITAS, Kraków 2005, p. 169. Attention should be also drawn to the fact that phrase “in-between media” discloses the relationship between the media. It therefore takes on special significance, becoming almost a sign of contemporary “media culture” and capturing its very important features – the medial transformation of the processes of social relationships and communication – and its sphere of influence is constantly expanding, including within its scope the of video art and interactive works that are situated in the “in-between-worlds” between real and virtual reality. See R.W. Kluszczyński, *Społeczeństwo informacyjne. Cyberkultura. Sztuka multimediów* [Information Society: Cyberculture: Multimedia Art], Rabid, Kraków 2001, pp. 152-165.

<sup>6</sup> D. Higgins, *Statement on Intermedia*, in: *Dé-coll/age (décollage)*, no. 6, ed. W. Vostell, Typos Verlag and Something Else Press, Frankfurt and New York 1967. On-line source: <http://www.artpool.hu/Fluxus/Higgins/intermedia2.html> (access 2017-06-23). See also D. Higgins, *Statement on Intermedia*, in: *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, eds. K. Stiles and P. Selz, The University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London 1998, p. 851.

<sup>7</sup> D. Higgins, *Intermedia*, in: *Multimedia...*, p. 30.

<sup>8</sup> See D. Higgins, *The Strategy of Visual Poetry: Three Aspects*, in: *Horizons: The Poetics and Theory of the Intermedia*, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale and Edwardsville 1984, pp. 29-39.

<sup>9</sup> See D. Higgins, *Music from Outside*, in: *Modernism since Postmodernism. Essays on Intermedia*, San Diego University Press, San Diego 1997, p. 163.

Higgins's essay "Intermedia" was intended to explore the structure of the new avant-garde art, and to describe the avant-garde artworks that emerged in the 1960s, which, due to the degree of their formal complexity, could appear difficult for the recipient, because they did not offer any possibility for dialogue.<sup>10</sup> The artist constantly refers to historical (classical) artworks, because the avant-garde was the heir to a rich cultural heritage that linked it primarily to the artistic culture of Romanticism.<sup>11</sup> However, the traditional notions used in the reflection on avant-garde art proved inadequate for discussing its achievements. Higgins is trying to build an intermedial terminology for describing new avant-garde art, making the subject of his reflections Fluxus, visual poetry, and the happening. He designates the happening, "developed as an intermedium, an uncharted land that lies between collage, music, and the theatre",<sup>12</sup> as a primary space of intermedial relationships, but this is not the only intermedial example of avant-garde art represented in the "Intermedia Chart" (1995). There were several vacant spaces in this chart, which indicated that some more intermedia would still appear in the future. The interactive media appearing today do fill the empty spaces, confirming the "Intermedia Chart" as still valid.

According to Maryla Hopfinger, in the contemporary culture of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the happening, Hyperrealism, and Conceptualism are the basic intermedial strategies, by which the author understands the processes that are "firstly, the crossing of established, recognized and observed divisions; secondly – the recognition of new possible connections, fusions, relationships; and thirdly, they incorporate into the new integrated whole the different initial components".<sup>13</sup> These strategies, situated between the media, are expressions of the intermedial relationships of words and images, in which separate elements are connected into an integral whole.

The happening owes its categorization as intermedial to Higgins's reflection. It was him who defined similar kinds of events as intermedia. But the happening has served a wholly different purpose: first of all, it broke with the conventions of theatre, changing the relationship between the spectacle and the viewer, between the world and the subject who perceives it.<sup>14</sup> The history of the happening has shown that the theatricalization of the visual arts can have a completely different dimension, which does not correspond to the terms accreted around it. As noted by Grzegorz Dziamski:

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<sup>10</sup> D. Higgins, *Intermedia*, in: *Multimedia...*, p. 29.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> M. Hopfinger, *Doświadczenia audiowizualne. O mediach w kulturze współczesnej* [Audiovisual experiences. The media in contemporary culture], Wydawnictwo Sic!, Warszawa 2003, p. 72.

<sup>14</sup> See M.C. Pasquier, *Współczesny teatr amerykański* [Contemporary American Theatre], transl. E. Radziwiłłowa, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warszawa 1987, pp. 44-45.

Theatricality (...) did not bring visual arts to the theatre, with its rules and conventions. On the contrary, if the happening was a form of theatre – the theatre of the visual artists – then it referred to completely different assumptions than theatre. The happening did not bring visual arts closer to the theatre, but drew attention to the theatricality of everyday life, to the spectacular character of contemporary culture.<sup>15</sup>

Michael Kirby described the happening as the theatricalization of everyday life.<sup>16</sup> The theatricality of social interactions that emerged drew attention to the still insufficiently visible aspect of the connectedness and interrelationships between the “spectacle of everyday life” and the theatre as an artistic form. The happening was supposed to be a theatre composed of everyday life, but at the same time it provided the impetus for the reflection on the concepts of game, mask, truth, fiction, theatricality, reality, and their relationship.<sup>17</sup>

In the context of the current cultural transformations, the happening has initiated yet another tendency, perhaps the most important one mentioned. This tendency is the spectacular character of reality as described by Guy Debord, that has led to “the degradation of human life”.<sup>18</sup> The relativization of the concept of “truth” induced by the described processes has highlighted the basic features of capitalist consumer societies, in which the spectacle is perceived as a mechanism creating “illusion”, translating direct experience into a representation/picture, visual event, into fragmentarily appearing pictures that reconstruct reality and by this token become more and more “authentic”. This aspect emphasizes the “iconic” character of contemporary culture.

Happening, performance, and Fluxus, whose development was the consequence of the emergence of Conceptualism, made the recipient aware that the area of avant-garde art became a new, absent space “beyond” the traditional places of art presentation, outside galleries, museums, and artists’ studios – the space of the streets, beaches, and other public areas. The works of this kind did not have a wide audience; they were most often viewed by a group of invited or random witnesses. However, they were also shown in and reached a wider array of recipients through the media – photography or film, i.e. in the manner typical for Conceptualism.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> G. Dziamski, *Dwa modele teatralizacji: happening i performance* [Two Models of Theatricalisation: Happening and Performance], in: *Teatr w miejscach nieteatralnych* [Theatre in Non-Theatrical Places], ed. J. Tyszka, Wydawnictwo Fundacji Humaniora, Poznań 1998, p. 43.

<sup>16</sup> See M. Kirby, *Happenings: An Illustrated Anthology*, Dutton, New York 1965, p. 67.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. G. Dziamski, *Happening i Performance* [Happening and Performance], in: *Encyklopedia kultury polskiej XX wieku. Od Awangardy do postmodernizmu* [Encyclopaedia of Polish Culture of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: From the Avant-Garde to Postmodernism], ed. G. Dziamski, Instytut Kultury, Warszawa 1995, p. 350.

<sup>18</sup> See G. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, transl. D. Nicholson-Smith, Zone Books, New York 1995, pp. 9–53.

<sup>19</sup> See G. Dziamski, *Sztuka u progu XXI wieku* [Art on the Verge of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century], Wydawnictwo Fundacji Humaniora, Poznań 2002, pp. 101–121.

Art was becoming life, and the activity of Fluxus, and earlier of the Russian Constructivists, Dadaists, and Surrealists, with their desire to break the boundaries separating art from life, was an important element of avant-garde ideology.<sup>20</sup>

Higgins' concept makes us look at avant-garde art from the perspective of the intermedia. The recipient should be aware, however, that its essence is not the combination of many thus far distinct media of artistic expression into a "new whole" – a polymedia message – but rather the transgressive crossing of the existing divisions by the artist, as well as the constitution of an intermedium in the new space "between" the media: music and philosophy, in the works of such composers as John Cage and Philip Corner, music and sculpture, in the musical instruments of Joe Jones, music and theatre, in the instrumental theatre of Mauricio Kagel, or poetry and sculpture in the "action poets" Emmet Williams and Robert Filliou.<sup>21</sup> This the notion of intermedia should be understood metaphorically and very broadly. In addition, the context of its use is limited to the relationships between the media. Grzegorz Działowski claims that:

The idea of intermedium, highly typical of the proposals made in the Fluxus circle, freed the artist from the existing media divisions, not only giving him total freedom to choose the ways of reaching the recipient, but also pinpointing the way in which he could benefit from the freedom offered to him. An example of an intermedium was both an elaborate happening and a modest event, with the difference, however, that the former attempted to transform itself into a full-fledged artistic medium, whereas the latter lacked such ambitions. In the second case, the focus was not so much on the medium (or media) statement(s) as on the source of the statement, not so much on objects and ways of using objects by the artist as on the artist using the objects.<sup>22</sup>

Conceptualism opens another chapter in the history of the intermedia. Its example illustrates the tendency to use the media in a comprehensive way within a single artwork. However, as observed by Maryla Hopfinger,

The media used only serve as the carrier of information about the design of the work – not the work itself; they are auxiliary materials, providing the space to facilitate the recipient's construction of the mental whole. The ways of presenting the idea of the work are primarily of documentary character.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> See R.W. Kluszczyński, *Awangarda: rozważania teoretyczne* [The Avant-Garde: Theoretical Considerations], Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź 1997, pp. 49-62.

<sup>21</sup> D. Higgins, *Intermedia*, in: *Multimedia...*, p. 32.

<sup>22</sup> G. Działowski, *Performance – tradycje, źródła, obce i rodzime przejawy. Rozpoznanie zjawiska* [Performance – Traditions, Sources, Foreign and Native Manifestations: The Recognition of a Phenomenon], in: *Performance* [Performance], eds. G. Działowski, H. Gajewski, and J.St. Wojciechowski, Młodzieżowa Agencja Wydawnicza, Warszawa 1984, pp. 27-28.

<sup>23</sup> M. Hopfinger, *Doświadczenia audiowizualne* [Audiovisual Experiences]..., p. 116.

This triggered deep transformations in the model of the aesthetic situation, consisting mainly of emphasizing the role of the recipient in the process of creating the avant-garde artwork. The new approach was adopted in the field of artistic activity and passed through successive stages of development until it was fully realized in interactive multimedia art. Ryszard W. Kluszczyński distinguishes three stages in the evolution of the structures of this system:

1. the conceptual variant – the starting point, which initiates the whole paradigm and establishes its initial values;
2. the post-conceptual variant, occurring in numerous mutations, which retains the essential features of the previous model, but, at the same time, subjects the whole system to serious modifications;
3. the hypermedia variant, which through other modifications of the starting system introduces the analyzed paradigm into the context of cyberculture.<sup>24</sup>

Interactive art, understood as a consequence of the development of Conceptualism, is an area in which the idea of the intermedia can be most fully realized. Today it is film and video which occupy a particularly strong position among the media developing intermedial strategies. These media get involved with a particularly large number of other media (literature, painting, photography, theatre, and ballet) in order to establish mutual intermedial relations.<sup>25</sup>

Higgins draws attention to the fact that the use of the term “intermedium” is not characteristic only of the avant-garde art of the 1960s. Perhaps for this reason, in 1981 he proposed a gloss to his *Intermedia* essay. Higgins writes it from the perspective of the transformations that have already introduced the described intermedial strategies. In this part the artist looks for the sources of the term “intermedia”, which “appears in the writings of Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1812 in exactly its contemporary sense – to define works which fall conceptually between media that are already known”.<sup>26</sup> Higgins has revealed the close relationship between the discourse of avant-garde art and the Romantic tradition. This connection indicates that “the avant-garde has made the most radical revolution not so much in art but in thinking about art”.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> R.W. Kluszczyński, *Film - wideo - multimedia. Sztuka ruchomego obrazu w erze elektronicznej* [Film - Video - Multimedia. The Art of the Moving Image in the Electronic Age], Instytut Kultury, Warszawa 1999, p. 97. R.W. Kluszczyński, *Od konceptualizmu do sztuki hipermediów. Rozważania na temat modelu sytuacji estetycznej w sztuce multimedialnej* [From Conceptualism to Hypermedia Art: Reflections on the Model of the Aesthetic Situation in Multimedia Art], in: *Piękno w sieci. Estetyka a nowe media* [Beauty in the Network: Aesthetics and the New Media], ed. K. Wilkoszewska, Universitas, Kraków 1999, p. 78.

<sup>25</sup> R.W. Kluszczyński, *Film - wideo - multimedia* [Film - Video - Multimedia]..., pp. 69-92.

<sup>26</sup> D. Higgins, *Intermedia*, “Leonardo”..., p. 52.

<sup>27</sup> T. Pękala, *Awangarda i ariergarda. Filozofia sztuki nowoczesnej* [The Avant-garde and the Rearguard: The Philosophy of Modern Art], Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, Lublin 2000, p. 208.

In the 1970s, the term “intermedia” began to appear in the publications of other authors and was often confused with “mixed media”, the latter referring, among other things, to “paintings which incorporate poems within their visual field” and opera. In the case of opera, “the music, the libretto, and the *mise-en-scène* are quite separate: [...] the operagoer [...] is seeing the *mise-en-scène*, the stage spectacle, hearing the music, etc”.<sup>28</sup> In his essay in *Horizons...*, Higgins argued that unlike “mixed media”, “intermedia” involve a conceptual fusion of many, initially distinct media.<sup>29</sup> Higgins draws attention to the fact that “In intermedia [...] the visual element (painting) is fused conceptually with the words. We may have abstract calligraphy, concrete poetry, «visual poetry»”.<sup>30</sup>

In contemporary culture, “place”, integrally connected with space, has changed its character, and being “between” becomes its constitutive feature, and so does in consequence the form of the “in-between”, which is particularly relevant in the case of the media. The problem of designating the “in-between” was very important for Higgins, and it was to determine the specificity of the intermedia. There is no doubt that intermediality situates avant-garde art in the “in-between”. This “place” is, for many theorists, the proper space for intermedial relationships that can be considered as the effect of the progressive transgression of norms. This cultural transformation is, in turn, a consequence of the development of new communication technologies and of the appearance of media reality and the corresponding intermedial space in interactive art that emerged as a consequence of the development of Conceptualism.<sup>31</sup>

### Media theory and mediality in avant-garde art

In order to answer the question “is the avant-garde intermedial?”, it is useful to adopt the historical perspective that may be also useful in the search for the contexts of intermediality in avant-garde art. According to Anna Jamroziakowa,

Avant-garde art is (...) a continuation of the artistic assumptions and technical fascinations (the principle of the “golden ratio”, ideal proportions, descriptive perspective, colour gradation relativized by the sizes and distances of forms) apparently established in the early Renaissance and constantly present in the art and aesthetic inquiries not only of all the subsequent classicisms, but also of Romantic thought (if one is aware of its “subcutaneous” Orphic roots and the worldview consequences of the idea of *correspondance des arts*).<sup>32</sup>

<sup>28</sup> D. Higgins, *Intermedia*, “Leonardo”..., p. 52.

<sup>29</sup> D. Higgins, *Horizons*, in: *Horizons...*, p. 111.

<sup>30</sup> D. Higgins, *Intermedia*, “Leonardo”..., p. 52.

<sup>31</sup> See R.W. Kluszczyński, *Od konceptualizmu* [From Conceptualism]..., pp. 77-86. See also R.W. Kluszczyński, *Film - wideo - multimedia* [Film - Video - Multimedia]..., pp. 95-101.

<sup>32</sup> A. Jamroziakowa, *Obraz i metanarracja. Szkice o postmodernistycznym obrazowaniu* [Picture and Metanarration: Sketches on Postmodern Imaging], Instytut Kultury, Warszawa 1994, p. 59.

The intermedial theories are strongly rooted in the understanding of avant-garde art in which the process of creating an artwork leads to the emergence of a media hybrid, that is, a heterogeneous universe uniting in itself the distinct elements belonging to the separate art genres. However, in this optics an important element seems to be the understanding of separate “art genres” as “the media”, because only then we can properly talk about the relationships between the media as relationships between the art genres. In this theoretical perspective questions remain to be asked whether avant-garde art understands art genres as the media and whether mediality is a category of the avant-garde artwork.

The answer to such questions is by no means obvious. However, we can talk about the understanding of the separate art genres as media by avant-garde art, as evidenced, for instance, by the example of Kazimir Malevich. The artist provided a context for intermedia art when he began creating new artworks of a meta-artistic and metalinguistic – and by extension also metamedial – nature. The theoretical perspective for this kind of tendency was the concept “the medium is the message” by Marshall McLuhan, who proclaimed that the medium therefore becomes as important as the message itself. McLuhan noted that “Cubism, by seizing on instant total awareness, suddenly announced that *the medium is the message*”.<sup>33</sup> This thesis significantly influenced the transformation of painting in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as evidenced e.g. by the paintings by Kazimir Malevich *The Black Square on a White Background* (1913) and *The White Square on a White Background* (1918), which became in this way an artistic manifestation of the “new aesthetics” of non-objective art, incomprehensible for the recipient,<sup>34</sup> but constructing a new context for intermediality in art. These processes gave rise to an aesthetic reflection in which “the medium itself becomes the message, and presentation takes the place of representation (for example Malevich’s square)”.<sup>35</sup>

On the other hand, although the happening and Conceptualism are among the basic intermedial strategies, the subject of mediality, apart from the oft-cited essays of Higgins, seems absent in the theoretical reflection on avant-garde art. For this reason it is also difficult to recognize intermediality as a category of avant-garde theoretical reflection. The aesthetic debates undertaken by theoreticians and avant-garde artists have mainly concerned the verification of such

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<sup>33</sup> See M. McLuhan, *The Medium is the Message*, in: *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, The MIT Press, Cambridge (2001), p. 5.

<sup>34</sup> It is worth recalling that Kazimir Malevich’s painting was the realization of the aesthetic principles of suprematism, which can be summarized in the following way: “No more «likeness of reality», no idealistic images – nothing but a desert! But this desert is filled with the spirit of non-objective sensation which pervades everything”. K. Malevich, *The Non-Objective World: The Manifesto of Suprematism*, transl. H. Dearstyne, Dover Publications, Mineola and New York 2003, p. 68.

<sup>35</sup> K. Wilkoszewska, *Estetyki nowych mediów* [Aesthetics of New Media], in: *Piękno w sieci* [Beauty in the Network]... p. 11.

notions as art, artwork, or the procedures of reception. The institutional theory of art of George Dickie, which arose on this basis,<sup>36</sup> practically does not take into account the perspective of the relationships between the media and the correspondence of arts. The case is similar with the “new aesthetics” proclaimed in the writings of Michael Kirby,<sup>37</sup> who proposes to abandon the medial perspective.

However, the problem of the “media theory” and “mediality” appears in the texts of Timothy Binkley, who makes the diagnosis that the 20<sup>th</sup> century is the age of “new media”, because “[a new] medium seems to emerge when new conventions are instituted for isolating aesthetic qualities differently on the basis of new materials or machines. Film became an artistic medium when its unique physical structure was utilized to identify aesthetic qualities in a new way”.<sup>38</sup> According to Binkley, the medium is not a physical material, but only a convention designating the “medial” space mediating between the physical material from which the artwork has been made and the aesthetic values that it carries. Thus the painting medium establishes a convention in which the paint, and not the canvas or the frame, must remain unchanged. At the same time paint is not a conventional architectural invariable. The identity of the aesthetic work can be designated by the described conventions, which determine the non-aesthetic qualities used. In this way each medium, through the converging conventions, determines the non-aesthetic criteria for identifying an artwork.<sup>39</sup> Binkley’s theoretical perspective treats in an universal way all forms of artworks that have appeared so far, granting them the role of “the media”. Adopting this assumption leads to a position in which:

The medial character of art makes itself known in the entire space of its functioning. It is evident in the creative process as the constant selection and correlation of respective elements of the work in order to create a coherent, suggestive whole. It is also visible, perhaps above all, in the mode of existence of artistic structures, where all dualistic distinctions are lost. [...] The medial character of art is also evident in the process of its reception, because understanding is never not only a subjective projection, but a kind of agreement between the sense written into the artistic form and the individual psyche of the recipient.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>36</sup> See G. Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York and London 1974.

<sup>37</sup> See M. Kirby, *The Art of Time: Essays on the Avant-Garde*, Dutton, New York 1969.

<sup>38</sup> T. Binkley, *Piece: Contra Aesthetics*, “The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism” 1977, vol. 35, no 3, p. 270.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 269. Krzysztof Polit claims that “Aesthetics uses conventions of media to classify and identify artworks”. K. Polit, *Sztuka awangardy w teoriach estetycznych* [The Art of Avant-garde in Aesthetic Theories], Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, Lublin 2000, p. 94.

<sup>40</sup> F. Chmielowski, *Medialność jako problem filozoficzny* [Mediality as a Philosophical Problem], in: *Piękno w sieci* [Beauty in the Network]..., p. 126.

As is clear from the last quote, the mediality of art, including avant-garde art, seems to be indisputable.

### **Aesthetic reflection on the object, allegory, and montage/collage in avant-garde art**

The answer to the question “is the avant-garde intermedial?” requires a search for intermedial relations not in the theory of avant-garde art, but in its practice, in its way of creating artworks. It is worth recalling examples in avant-garde art that appeared with making the “object” – a fragment of external reality – an artwork (ready-made). There is no question that avant-garde art has made the object an object of an internal and intermedial game that led to the emergence of a relationships “between” the media. This perspective brings spotlight to the problem of the “objectification” of avant-garde art, which should be distinguished from the “reification”, because the latter process perceives the object in an artwork as an aesthetic and decorative element. On the other hand, the objectification of avant-garde art is accomplished through the conscious “gesture” of the artist. The evolution of avant-garde art, begun by Marcel Duchamp, proceeds from the subject in art (reification) to the “art of the object” (objectification), thus discounting the previous reflections on the “death of art”, and this allows us to set the direction of the development of avant-garde art into the postmodern art.<sup>41</sup>

The objectification of avant-garde art means the attempt to cross the boundary between the real world and the artistic world. This transgression can be bilateral. An avant-garde artwork can be transferred to the world beyond the realm of art, or vice versa, the subject from everyday reality can be defined as (an artefact) or an artwork. The inclusion of the object in the once sacred space of art occurs through an artistic “gesture”. Duchamp’s act of selection is also within the scope of this “gesture”, since the placement of an object as an artwork in gallery space is realized in the form of a ready-made.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the activity of the avant-garde artist stretches between two opposing poles: “the aesthetics of gesture” and “the strategy of discourse”. This situation involves the “gesture” of transferring the object to the new space of “discourse” and making it an artwork.<sup>42</sup> Duchamp’s gesture left the door open: the ever-growing presence of the object in avant-garde art drew attention to the fact that it could function in artistic space. At the same time, the forms of behaviour of avant-garde artists had a very strong influence on the change and redefinition of the artwork, and consequently changed the way the object functioned in everyday reality. This “revolution of the object” had its culmination in surrealist art.

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<sup>41</sup> See B. Frydryczak, *Między gestem a dyskursem. Szkice z teorii sztuki* [Between Gesture and Discourse: Sketches from the Theory of Art], Instytut Kultury and Wyższa Szkoła Pedagogiczna im. T. Kotarbińskiego, Warszawa and Zielona Góra 1998, pp. 47-49.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 34-41.

The intermedial contexts of the described transformations are seen in the depiction of Duchamp's ready-made or found subject in some sense as an intermedia, but not "pure medium".<sup>43</sup> Grzegorz Dziański claims that there are objects: "between sculpture and bicycle wheel, sculpture and drier for bottles, sculpture and urinal. The ready-mades can be viewed as a sculpture or as an ordinary, banal object of daily use, but the point is to see in them both, and to see how art enters into life and life into art".<sup>44</sup>

Krystyna Janicka, discussing the conception of André Breton, points out that the "Surrealist object" has unknown, unclear or undefined origin, meaning and purpose, or differs from everyday objects – as Breton described it – through "a simple mutation of their role".<sup>45</sup> One of the classifications of Surrealist objects was presented in the journal *Cahiers d'Art*, which included a special glossary of the objects presented at the exhibition at Charles Ratton's House in 1936. This is a classification of a mocking character, which goes beyond any kind of systematics. Among objects there are intermedial there are the ready-mades and *poème-objets*. The variety of surrealistic objects has led to the spread of a trend for collecting junk and trash and making artworks out of it. However, the issues raised in the context of the classification of surrealistic objects proved to be much more complex, since from the moment of the emergence of Surrealist and Dadaist art, as Ryszard K. Przybylski points out,

'a comprehensive revolution of the object' has taken place. It includes important revisions:

1. the object was detached from its utility; endowed with a new name, it began to function in a way different than previously – ready-made;
2. additional meaning was acquired by the found objects, which were subject to external circumstances (fire, earthquake) and became devoid of their original utility value – *objets-trouvés*;
3. new objects are appearing, made up of components of other objects – from collages to *assemblages*.<sup>46</sup>

To approach the surrealist object through the category of the intermedium was to refer to its hybrid structure. In this context, the *poème-objet* seems to be

<sup>43</sup> D. Higgins, *Intermedia*, in: *Multimedia...*, p. 29.

<sup>44</sup> G. Dziański, *Od syntezy sztuk do sztuki post-medialnej* [From the Synthesis of Arts to Post-Media Art.], "Estetyka i Krytyka" 2009/2010, no 2/1 (17/18), p. 35.

<sup>45</sup> A. Breton, *Gradiva* (1937), in: *Free Rein*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln 1995, p. 21.

<sup>46</sup> R.K. Przybylski, *Prześwit między przedmiotami* [Clearance Between Objects], in: *Człowiek i rzecz. O problemach reifikacji w literaturze, filozofii i sztuce* [Man and Thing: The Problems of Reification in Literature, Philosophy and Art], eds. S. Wysłouch and B. Kaniewska, Wydawnictwo „Poznańskie Studia Polonistyczne”, Poznań 1999, p. 352.

particularly important, coming into being as a result of the intermedial combination of visual elements or even material parts of pictures with the words of a poetic text.<sup>47</sup> Breton described *poème-objet* as “composing a poem in which visual elements take their place between the words without ever duplicating them”.<sup>48</sup> Owing to the intermedial relationships between poetry and visual arts, surrealism led to the correspondence and integration of these two art genres.

The appearance of the object in avant-garde art can be approached from two perspectives. The first is the “aesthetics of allegory”. Visual representations with an allegorical dimension can achieve the status of intermedia in several ways. First of all, they can be found in typical intermedia, such as for example a film or a video. Second, they can give pictures in the above-mentioned media the structure of a collage, stimulating their inter-textual (intermedial) context. The objects that we find in pictorial representations derived from the intermedia are combined with their allegorical meaning. For this reason, avant-garde artworks can be treated both as separate “objects” with an aesthetic dimension and as allegorical collections of objects, which was very popular in Surrealism and Dadaism.

The “aesthetics of allegory” treats artworks in terms of the montage of heterogeneous elements into a “new” whole, similar to the intermedium, which is the combination of separate media. An intermedium as a heterogeneous whole returns in the intermedial theories of the avant-garde. Peter Bürger in his book *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* identifies Georg Hegel’s aesthetic concepts<sup>49</sup> of the artwork with the organic model and sets it in opposition to the non-organic model. The aim of the discussed avant-garde theory is to develop the notion of a non-organic work that is realized in the concept of avant-garde work. In the non-organic work individual elements are independent of one another. As Bürger puts it:

<sup>47</sup> See K. Janicka, *Światopogląd surrealizmu. Jego założenia i konsekwencje dla teorii twórczości i teorii sztuki* [Surrealism Worldview: Its Assumptions and Consequences for the Theory of Creativity and the Theory of Art], Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, Warszawa 1985, p. 223.

<sup>48</sup> A. Breton, *Surrealist Situation of the Object* (1935), in: *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, transl. R. Seaver and H.R. Lane, The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor 1972, p. 255.

<sup>49</sup> According to Anna Zeidler-Janiszewska Georg W. F. Hegel was the patron of the “aesthetics of allegory”. See A. Zeidler-Janiszewska, *Między melancholią a żałobą. Estetyka wobec przemian w kulturze współczesnej* [Between melancholy and mourning: Aesthetics and the changes in contemporary culture], Instytut Kultury, Warszawa 1996, pp. 76-77. Beginning with Hegel, two concepts in aesthetics are differentiated: allegory and symbol. See G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. I and vol. II, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1975. However, the separation of these concepts did not define them clearly. The symbol, unlike allegory, is characterized by a clear relation of the image to the idea and the content to the form, it offers immediate meaning, but the allegory cannot be easily understood, it must be deciphered, meaning that the sign and meaning do not overlap. See H.G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, transl. J. Weinsheimer and D.G. Marshall, Continuum, London and New York 2004, pp. 61-70. This semantic delay is present in Gershom Scholem’s reflection. See G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Schocken Books, New York 1995.

The organic work intends the impression of wholeness. To the extent its individual elements have significance only as they relate to the whole, they always point to the work as a whole as they are perceived individually. In the avant-gardist work, on the other hand, the individual elements have a much higher degree of autonomy and can therefore also be read and interpreted individually or in groups without its being necessary to grasp the work as a whole. In the case of the avant-gardist work, it is possible only to a limited extent to speak of the work as a whole as the perfect embodiment of the totality of possible meaning.<sup>50</sup>

It seems that the regularity observed in the non-organic (avant-garde) work becomes the basis for the construction of the intermedia references within the aesthetics of allegory. Bürger describes the category of allegory using Walter Benjamin's<sup>51</sup> concept and presents the following scheme:

<sup>50</sup> P. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, transl. M. Shaw, *Theory and History Literature*, vol. 4, Manchester University Press and University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1984, pp. 72-73.

<sup>51</sup> Walter Benjamin proposes a model of the allegorical strategy based on his analysis of Baroque art. In this way he rehabilitated allegory and made it one of the most important artistic strategies and interpretative tools. The allegorist's activity destroys the meaning of the object, but at the same time it reconstructs its new dimension. For this reason, the allegorical strategy is defined as destructive and creative, while the allegorical reading of the object becomes arbitrary and allows the center of gravity to shift from the allegorist to the allegory. See J. Dąbkowska-Zydroń, *Kulturotwórcza rola surrealizmu* [The culture-creating role of Surrealism], Wydawnictwo Fundacji Humaniora, Poznań 1999, p. 189. Benjamin claims that "If the object becomes allegorical under the gaze of melancholy, if melancholy causes life to flow out of it and it remains behind dead, but eternally secure, then it is exposed to the allegorist, it is unconditionally in his power. That is to say it is now quite incapable of conveying any meaning or significance of its own; such significance as it has, it acquires from the allegorist". W. Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Verso, London 1998, pp. 183-184. This allegorical gesture can be interpreted as follows: isolating an object from its original context is essentially a process of desemiocisation, and introducing it into a new one - resemiocisation. Allegory is not imitation, it is a denial of mimetic representation, because its role is not so much to imitate as to refer to "something else". See A. Kuczyńska, *Piękny stan melancholii. Filozofia niedosytu i sztuka* [Beautiful state of melancholy: The Philosophy of Non-profit and Art], Instytut Filozofii UW, Warszawa 1999, p. 220. The allegorist is more interested in the meaning to which the object refers than the object itself. The characteristic feature of allegory is discontinuity, the contradiction between the visual sign or the image and its meaning. This dualism causes the allegory to be diametrically opposed to the symbol. "The nature of the allegorical object is that in the process of its destruction it is deprived of its original meaning so that within the reconstruction plan it is possible to give it a new meaning, to establish a new whole from the pieces or fragments, or as Benjamin has it, to «construct it»". B. Frydryczak, *Świat jako kolekcja. Próba analizy estetycznej natury nowoczesności* [The world as a collection. An attempt at analyzing the aesthetic nature of modernity], Wyd. Fundacji Humaniora, Poznań 2002, p. 116. However, according to Zeidler-Janiszewska, the allegorical strategy was not so much a clear opposition to the symbol as an attempt to rescue the transient: mediated mythical energies in the situation of a second "disenchantment" of the world. See A. Zeidler-Janiszewska, op. cit., p. 82. This kind of activity can be noticed in the surrealists, who tried to bypass the intertextual side of the allegorical strategy. See T. Kostyrko,

1. The allegorist pulls one element out of the totality of the life context, isolating it, depriving it of its function. Allegory is therefore essentially fragment and thus opposite to the organic symbol. [...]
2. The allegorist joins the isolated reality fragments and thereby creates meaning. This is posited meaning; it does not derive from the original context of the fragments.
3. Benjamin interprets the activity of the allegorist as the expression of melancholy. [...] The allegorist's traffic with things is subject to a contact alternation of involvement and surfeit [...]. Benjamin also addresses the sphere of reception. Allegory, whose essence is fragment, represents history as decline.<sup>52</sup>

Benjamin points to the connection between allegory and melancholy. Bürger explains this connection on the level of artistic creativity – as the disappearance of the shared experience and social function of avant-garde art, and on the level of reception – as an image of deconstructed history.<sup>53</sup> Bürger's interpretation differs from Benjamin's conception, according to which is the process of the reconstruction of meaning is more important than its deconstruction.<sup>54</sup>

Bürger identifies the characteristic features of the allegory with the practice of artistic montage, which is one of the structural elements of avant-garde artwork.<sup>55</sup> For this reason, as Jolanta Dąbkowska-Zydroń emphasizes,

To the category of montage, which connects with Benjamin's allegory, only avant-garde context gives – according to Bürger – a proper sense, cutting it off from the traditional artwork in which each component is endowed with meaning (often connected with the biography of the artist). Currently, the work does not constitute an organic whole; it is rather a sum of fragments montaged

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*O kilku kwestiach w związku ze specyfiką przedstawień symbolicznych* [On several issues connected with the specificity of symbolic representations], in: *Symbol i poznanie. W poszukiwaniu koncepcji integrującej* [Symbol and cognition: In search of an integrative concept], ed. T. Kostyrko, PWN, Warszawa 1987, pp. 119-127. Zeidler-Janiszewska claims that "The choice of the context that is broken down, as well as the choice of the new context, depends entirely on the allegorist's decision. The «mute» element undergoes a new semioticisation, yet transforms the new context. On the one hand, the process of constructing meaning determines that context; on the other, the semantics of the context is transformed by the element introduced into it. The latter appears as the carrier of the preceding meaning, which in effect builds tension between the «broken» and the «new» context. This tension has been defined in modern semiotics as intertextuality. The deconstruction proper to the first allegorical phase is accompanied by the process of construction and reconstruction, and the complexity of this second phase is not captured by Bürger's interpretation of Benjamin's concept". A. Zeidler-Janiszewska, op. cit., p. 81.

<sup>52</sup> P. Bürger, *Theory...* p. 69.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 73-82.

with a view to the properties of matter itself, and not to the meanings and functional context superimposed upon it. The montage (*Die Montage*) in Bürger's approach consists in the combining of ready elements taken from reality into a new whole.<sup>56</sup>

In this context, the idea of montage approaches that of *assemblage*, which assumes the incorporation of real objects into one three-dimensional whole. Another term for a similar strategy is *accumulation*.

The classical *assemblages* are Daniel Spoerri's "trap-images", made up of ordinary objects fixed to various surfaces hung on the wall (*Shower*, 1962). Pierre Arman's accumulations consist in collecting objects found in a trash can, a banknote file, or musical instruments. These objects are then flooded with a transparent mass of plexiglass or placed in a glass container. [...] Both Spoerri and Arman can be considered the creators of a particular (metaphorical, and not only object-related) form of still-life.<sup>57</sup>

The object has also sometimes been referred to as a fragment of collage that determines the aesthetics of collage, or montage, because the essence and also the mode of creation of the collage is the montage of heterogeneous elements, which plays an important role not only in the fine arts and literature, but also in film. In this context montage may be understood as an intermedial process, in which the heterogeneous structure of the media comes into being. According to Adorno,

montage disposes over the elements that make up the reality of an unchallenged common sense, either to transform their intention or, at best, to awaken their latent language. It is powerless, however, insofar as it is unable to explode the individual elements.<sup>58</sup>

On the other hand, Eddie Wolfram's concept illustrates montage (*assemblage*) as one of the features of collage, which is characterized by heterogeneity, the defragmentation of material (*decoupage*), and lack of continuity in a fundamental way influencing representation.<sup>59</sup>

In the field of avant-garde art, interest in the object arose together with the rise of Surrealism and Dadaism, but only owing to Duchamp's ready-mades were the intermedial mechanisms set in motion that made the object an artwork and the catalyst of the relationships between the media. These manifestations are

<sup>56</sup> J. Dąbkowska-Zydroń, *Kulturotwórcza* [The Culture-Creative]... p. 133.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.

<sup>58</sup> Th.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, transl. R. Hullot-Kentor, Continuum and The University of Minnesota, London and New York 1997, p. 56.

<sup>59</sup> E. Wolfram, *History of Collage*, Macmillan Publishing, New York 1975, p. 175.

the beginning of the “aesthetics of gesture”, which is tightly connected with the problem of the presence of the object in the sphere of art. Beata Frydryczak claims that:

The artistic gesture hides in itself the questions and reflections on the essence of art, the meaning of the artwork and its place in the social reality. It also refers to something else – to the idea of art. What is continued then in the artistic gesture are the questions haunting the avant-garde – about the boundaries of art, its mode of existence, and also the relations of the artwork with the world.<sup>60</sup>

The indicated role of the object reveals the possibility of explaining the aesthetics based on the ways its presence has been used in avant-garde art. This approach led to the fact that the avant-garde did not carry out a formal revolution, but as suggested by Teresa Pękala, “In this field it was rather the heir of Romanticism, Symbolism, and Art Nouveau, an heir aware of the rich heritage that it multiplied and to which it gave value exceeding the invested means”.<sup>61</sup> The described avant-garde translates into a situation in which intermediality is equated now with the renewal of thinking about tradition and historical continuity in avant-garde art.

### **Conclusion: The avant-garde theories of intermediality are anachronistic**

The reflection on the examples of intermedia in avant-garde art presented in this text aimed to answer the question “is the avant-garde intermedial?”. On the one hand, the answer seems obvious. But on the other hand, it is impossible to avoid the impression that the reflection presented here is anachronistic. Today, nobody understands intermediality like the avant-garde, and nobody refers to the texts presented here, except for those who write about the archeology of the intermedia. What is worse, only in such a context can such reflections be understood today. Higgins’s theory was verified by the German theorists of the media, but not without criticism. Jürgen E. Müller wrote that

Higgins situates the intermediality of artworks between the various media, and not within specific media contexts. This leaves unacknowledged a fundamental condition, researched by Aumont, who described the relationship of painting and film. Intermediality does not mean the sum of the various

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<sup>60</sup> B. Frydryczak, *Od Duchampa do Anti-Duchampa, czyli o geście artystycznym* [From Duchamp to anti-Duchamp. On the artistic gesture], in: *Awangarda w perspektywie postmodernizmu*, [Avant-garde in the perspective of postmodernism], ed. G. Dziamski, Wydawnictwo Fundacji Humaniora, Poznań 1996, p. 104.

<sup>61</sup> T. Pękala, op. cit. p. 157.

media concepts or the positioning-between-media of individual works, but the integration of the aesthetic concepts of individual media in the form of a new media context.<sup>62</sup>

It is difficult not to note the kind of error that lies in the presented intermedial concept of Higgins in the context of the avant-garde. The prospect of relationships between the media seems to some extent limited. However, according to Müller, aesthetics is among the sciences that are strongly influenced by the theory of intermediality.<sup>63</sup> This situation was initiated by avant-garde manifestos that undermined traditional aesthetic notions by introducing new ones. The concepts proposed by Higgins were read in a similar vein too. But in the end it is worth recalling the present and recalling the present thinking about intermedia art,

which [according to Kluszczyński] in each of its individual manifestations, initiates in an inevitable way the relationships between the various media. The sense of relationship understood in this way, the network of intermedial references, replaces complex of attributes, by which we characterize each type of art. Intermedial art is not a total field, nor is it a combination of qualities specific to different arts (as Ricciotto Canudo<sup>64</sup> sees it), or a combination of hitherto distinct arts into a new whole (as Dick Higgins<sup>65</sup> sees it), but it is the referring of one medium to another, the seeing of one medium through another, the mutual activation and stimulation. Intermedial arts, in the first place, do not, therefore, differ in terms of the properties they possess, but the choice of media to which they refer and the manner in which they do so.<sup>66</sup>

It is not disputed that the extensive passus quoted above is a response to the question whether the avant-garde is currently intermedial, showing how intermediality can be understood today, and at the same time that it fully emphasizes the anachronistic character of intermedial avant-garde theories. However, the final conclusion is that the avant-garde turns out to be devoid of the intermedial contexts which in the historical perspective have been ascribed to it.

<sup>62</sup> J.E. Müller, *Intermedialność jako prowokacja nauki o mediach* [Intermediality as a provocation of media studies], in: *Współczesna niemiecka myśl filmowa. Od projektora do komputera. Antologia* [Contemporary German film theory. From projector to computer. Anthology], ed. A. Gwóźdź, Wydawnictwo "Śląsk", Katowice 1999, p. 152.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 151-153.

<sup>64</sup> See R. Canudo, *The Birth of the Sixth Art* (1911), transl. B. Gibson, D. Ranvaud, S. Sokota, and D. Young, in: *Film Theory: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies*, vol. I, ed. P. Simpson, A. Utterson, and K.J. Shepherdson, Routledge, London and New York 2004, pp. 25-35.

<sup>65</sup> See D. Higgins, *Intermedia*, in: *Multimedia...* pp. 27-32. See also D. Higgins, *Intermedia*, "Leonardo"..., pp. 49-54.

<sup>66</sup> Ryszard W. Kluszczyński, *Film - wideo - multimedia* [Film - Video - Multimedia]..., p. 76.

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## **INTERMEDIALNOŚĆ AWANGARDY ALBO AWANGARDA INTERMEDIALNOŚCI. PRÓBA ODPOWIEDZI NA PYTANIE „CZY AWANGARDA JEST INTERMEDIALNA?” (streszczenie)**

Artykuł jest próbą odpowiedzi na pytanie „czy awangarda jest intermedialna?” Intermedialność nie jest pojęciem nowym na gruncie teorii sztuki i mediów, gdyż ma ono długą historię, która sięga 1965 roku, kiedy Dick Higgins opublikował esej *Intermedia*. Artysta wyraził wtedy swoją myśl jako intermedialny program awangardowy. Artykuł charakteryzuje główne jego założenia, dokonuje zdefiniowania pojęcia „intermedium”, określa podstawowe strategie intermedialne. W dalszej części tego tekstu podejmuję dyskusję na temat teorii mediów i medialności w sztuce awangardowej jako problemu intermedialnego, poszukuję relacji intermedialnych w poszczególnych dziełach sztuki i zwracam uwagę na uprzedmiotowienie sztuki, które doprowadziło do powstania intermedialnych *ready-mades* i *poème-objets*. Ważnym aspektem intermedialnej działalności artystów awangardowych wydaje się również zawieszenie pomiędzy dwoma opozycyjnymi biegunami: „estetyką gestu” i „strategią dyskursu”. W kolejnych etapach omawiania intermedialnych praktyk artystów awangardowych odnoszę się do strategii alegorii opisanej w *Teorii awangardy* Petera Bürgera, której celem jest wypracowanie pojęcia nieorganicznego/awangardowego dzieła sztuki. Jego wyznacznikiem jest montaż, który można porównać do procesu scalania heterogenicznych elementów w „nową” całość, podobnie jako mediów w jedno intermedium. W tym kontekście montaż można rozumieć jako proces intermedialny. Odpowiedź na pytanie „czy awangarda jest intermedialna?” nie jest jednoznaczna. Przedstawione teorie intermedialne wydają się anachroniczne, albo wręcz błędne, ponieważ nikt obecnie nie rozumie intermedialności tak jak awangarda w latach 60.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Dick Higgins, awangarda, intermedium, intermedialność, uprzedmiotowienie sztuki, Peter Bürger, alegoria, kolaż/montaż.

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## INTERMEDIALITY AND PERFORMATIVITY IN THE CONTEXT OF PERFORMANCE ART

**Abstract:** Performance art is one of the most controversial trends of neo-avant-garde and one of the most difficult to characterize. Therefore, this paper will examine two notions which could prove useful in grasping some of its aspects: intermediality and performativity. The former was first used as early as 1911 by Samuel L. Coleridge, and subsequently adopted by Dick Higgins, whereas the latter gained popularity with the proclamation of the performative turn. Intermediality is discussed on the basis of the views of such artists as Dick Higgins and Artur Tajber, while performativity, among others, in the context of the work of young artists presented during the conference titled *The Aesthetics of Performative Arts* in 2012 in Kraków-Przegorzaly.

**Keywords:** intermediality, performativity, performance art., neo-avant-garde, performative turn

As pointed out by Rosalee Goldberg, “performance art actually defies precise or easy definition beyond the simple declaration that it is live art by artists, and this still holds, although each emerging performance artist, and each new writer on performance, inevitably expands the scope of that definition”.<sup>1</sup> Such a perspective opens possibilities for surprising and paradoxical attempts to assign this term to various artistic activities between the 1950s and the 1970s. The origins of performance art are usually associated with the Fluxus group, which is elsewhere regarded as a precursor of happenings. Another artist frequently mentioned in the context of those two art forms is John Cage and his composition *4'33"*. Erika Fischer-Lichte, a German professor of Theatre Studies, cites similar examples of creative projects, but sees in them the source of the performative turn.<sup>2</sup> From this perspective, the works of both Herman Nitsch and Cage can be seen as activities capable of going beyond the conventions of, at least, semiotic aesthetics, by challenging the long-established division of roles between the artist and the audience and transcending the boundaries of a musical piece.

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<sup>1</sup> R. Goldberg, *Performance. Live Art Since 1960*, London-New York 1998, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> E. Fischer-Lichte, *Estetyka performatywności*, transl. M. Borowski, M. Sugiera, Księgarnia Akademicka, Kraków 2008, p. 23 and following.

Dick Higgins's term "intermediality", often brought up in the context of performance art, does not help to uphold those distinctions either. Grzegorz Dziamski argues that this concept fits all kinds of activities, including those of Fluxus<sup>3</sup>, but Higgins defined it in reference to happenings. In his opinion happening has become an intermedium, an unmarked territory between collage, music, and theatre. No rules govern it and each work determines its own mode of expression and form according to its needs. However, he also claims that the use of intermedia is becoming more common in all fields of art, as an important feature of our new mentality is continuity rather than categorization.<sup>4</sup>

Such reflections and views prompted me to re-examine the two notions: intermediality and performativity, which seem to work well in respect to selected examples of performance art. The word "intermedia" was first used as early as 1911 by Samuel L. Coleridge<sup>5</sup>, which Higgins himself noted, whereas "performativity" gained popularity with the proclamation of the performative turn.

For clarity's sake I will keep the discussion limited to the artistic context, although the performative turn<sup>6</sup> goes far beyond the study of art. As for intermediality, owing to the great number of senses of the second element of the word ("medium"), it is necessary to restrict the following analysis to one of them; according to Higgins, it denotes either modes of expression or artistic techniques employing these modes (collage), but also genres (theatre, music). In the later part of this paper I will analyze the prefix "inter-".

The above-mentioned terminological confusion when defining countercultural activities or anarcho-artistic positions, as Stefan Morawski called them<sup>7</sup>, is by no means the fault of theoreticians or caused by their mistakes in ascribing specific activities to notional categories, especially as artists themselves purposefully aim at broadening, transcending, or completely abolishing genre boundaries between arts. Gregory Bacttock (1979) claims that, as far as performance is concerned, it is not even clear whether it is a mode of expression or an artistic trend.<sup>8</sup> No mani-

<sup>3</sup> G. Dziamski, *Performance - tradycje, źródła, obce i rodzime przejawy. Rozpoznanie zjawiska*, in: *Performance*. Praca zbiorowa, ed. G. Dziamski, H. Gajewski, J.S. Wojciechowski, transl. K. Biwojno, M. Gutkowska, H. Siodlak, M. Śpik-Dziamska, M. Zamecka, Młodzieżowa Agencja Wydawnicza, Warszawa 1984, p. 26 and following.

<sup>4</sup> D. Higgins, *Intermedia*, transl. M. Zielińska, T. Zieliński, in: *Nowoczesność od czasu postmodernizmu oraz inne eseje*, Selection, edition and afterword Piotr Rypson, słowo/obraz/terytoria, Gdańsk 2000, p. 123.

<sup>5</sup> S. L. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (Chapters 4, 18), [www.online-literature.com/coleridge/biographia-literaria/4/](http://www.online-literature.com/coleridge/biographia-literaria/4/) (retrieved on 21/01/2010).

<sup>6</sup> I refer here to Fischer-Lichte's understanding. E. Fischer-Lichte, *Estetyka performatywności*, p. 23 and following.

<sup>7</sup> S. Morawski, *Nurt główny aktualnych postaw anarchoartystycznych*, „Rocznik Historii Sztuki” 1981, t. XII, p. 228-241.

<sup>8</sup> G. Battcock, *L'Art Corporel*, in: *The Art of Performance*, Venice Aug., Buenos Aires - New York 1979.

festo or artistic programme exists which would offer criteria enabling us to differentiate it from other avant-garde movements (cf. Morawski 1981). Furthermore, it can hardly be seen as a typical neo-avant-garde historical phenomenon, since it remains very much alive and constantly changes its forms. All this, however, does not alter the fact that performance poses a challenge for an aesthetician who, like Clement Greenberg, engages in the nostalgic search for resemblances among the media or some kind of basis to define their character more or less precisely, although there is no longer any hope for the purity of genres in the arts.

Initially it seemed that the notion of intermediality would be “handy”, especially with regard to neo-avant-garde activities. Performance art was also quite frequently characterized in this way. A number of other concepts were also employed in the attempts to define this phenomenon. It was described as happening “live”; as emphasizing the physical presence of the artist or a psychophysical condition; as abandoning attempts to express the artist’s mental states, choosing physical activities instead; as disregarding the material intermediary – a work of art (a charge which was refuted by Jerzy Beres<sup>9</sup>); as insurgent and acting against any conventions, including institutional ones.

Comparing the closely related activities of happening and performance, we see that the division tends to go along the lines set by the concept of participation – presence, creating a situation – presenting the artist’s psychophysical condition, or his or her private experience. Therefore, the theoretical framing of happening was determined by its social character, its tendency to initiate events and bring art closer to life. In the case of performance art, on the other hand, what counted most was the ambiguity of the term, with the special emphasis on the artist, the creative process, and individuality (with reference to Jackson Pollock). Thus when Wolf Vostell took people on a trip in order to view the boulevards of Paris from bus windows (*Petite Ceinture*), he created a situation in which the elements of everyday life became the fabric of art, and he united the co-creators, the participants of the one-off ephemeral event, turning them into a community. When, on the other hand, Vito Acconci in *Proximity Piece* tested the vernissage viewers’ personal space, he focused on the interaction between the artist and the audience, induced by the artist’s too intrusive presence. Similarly in *Step Piece*, when Acconci “presented” his own psychophysical condition and, at the same time, tested his viewers’ mental endurance, by jumping naked on and off a stool until he was too exhausted to continue. But the sheer diversity of performance art, as Dziamski points out, makes it impossible to define, even in approximate terms.<sup>10</sup> If we use the criteria for the performance/happening distinction to describe creative activities, we may discover e.g. that the Fluxus group represents elements of both performance art and happening.

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<sup>9</sup> J. Beres, *Wstyd*, *Otwarta Pracownia*, Kraków 2002, p. 155-156.

<sup>10</sup> G. Dziamski, *Happening, Performance*, in: *Od awangardy do postmodernizmu*, ed. G. Dziamski, Instytut Kultury, Warszawa 1996, pp. 352-357.

Moreover, the interpretation of intermediality does not really help us to systematize the criteria for differentiating between the two. I believe that the problem stems from the notion of medium itself, which, according to Timothy Binkley, has become aesthetics' principal tool for identifying works when the criteria based on aesthetic qualities failed.<sup>11</sup> Is it the point of anarcho-artistic neo-avant-garde to create a new medium, or rather to extend this notion to its limits until it bursts or is rejected? It is conceivable that the artists of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century wanted to free themselves from this notion in the same way as they chose to abandon other aesthetic categories, e.g. the work of art as an artist's permanent creation, its form (performance art, happening), or its aesthetic qualities (conceptualism). Therefore, the question here is whether the objectives of the artists' activities are constructive or destructive.

Intermediality is typically interpreted as searching for the areas "in between" various forms of expression or media, the combination of different creative techniques or modes of expression, the lack of genre purity. This is the position shared by Grzegorz Dziamski and Łukasz Guzek.<sup>12</sup> Dziamski sees this term as capable of covering the works which cannot be otherwise classified as a genre, e.g. concrete poetry or calligraphy. However, he also gives examples of what he calls "unidentified messages", located in between e.g. music and philosophy, sculpture and hamburger, or life and art, which include Duchamp's *Fountain* as well as Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs*. From this perspective, most neo-avant-garde projects can be regarded as intermedial, which would divest the term of some of its practicality.

Therefore, one can argue that intermediality has gained too many senses, losing its unique character in the process. If we take Higgins's words from his essay "Intermedia" literally, he seems to have in mind some new quality which emerges as a result of a synthesis of different modes of expression and which has to be brought to light by a unifying term, namely "intermedia".<sup>13</sup> However, Eric Andersen, a Fluxus artist, does not share this viewpoint. He makes a distinction between two ways of understanding an artistic performance: as multimedia, which he characterizes as faithful to the concept of the medium, and intermedia.<sup>14</sup> Thus the concept of intermediality would only be useful to denote a certain mode of creation, and should be seen as merely a new technique or a form of expression.

Artur Tajber, one of the founders<sup>15</sup> of the Faculty of Intermedia established in 2007 at the Kraków Academy of Fine Arts, is of a similar opinion. He does not

<sup>11</sup> T. Binkley, *Przeciw estetyce*, in: *Zmierzch estetyki - rzekomy czy autentyczny?*, ed. S. Morawski, Czytelnik, Warszawa 1987, pp. 429-431.

<sup>12</sup> Ł. Guzek, *Przez performance do sztuki*, „Didaskalia” 2005, no 69, online: <http://witryna.czaso-pism.pl/pl/gazeta/1055/1169/1247/>;

<sup>13</sup> T. Załuski, *Wstęp*, in: *Sztuki w przestrzeni transmedialnej*, ed. T. Załuski, ASP w Łodzi, Łódź 2010, p. 11.

<sup>14</sup> A. Tajber, *Sztuka performance versus performatyka, performatyczność, performance studies*, in: *Zwrot performatywny w estetyce*, ed. L. Bieszczad, Libron, Kraków 2013, p. 46.

<sup>15</sup> The cofounder was Antoni Porczak.

restrict the term “intermediality” to either happening or performance art. Tajber, who identifies himself as a performance artist, explains the rationale behind his reasoning, based on Dick Higgins’s visual diagram.<sup>16</sup> He points out that the field of performance art only partly overlaps with the field of the intermedia”, i.e. not all of it can be characterized as such, while Fluxus is not only *not* connected to performance art at all, but is also “covered” by intermedia in its entirety, which means that Tajber is far from viewing intermediality as a “unifying” concept.

Why then does he choose this particular term, referring to Andersen? He mentions neither a synthesis nor a unity, but only his own concept of intermedium as possessing unique qualities, while “unique” here does not mean the creation of a new medium or genre, but, as Tajber’s words suggest, an artist’s individual activities of unique character.<sup>17</sup> It is unnecessary to create a specific label to define the work of a given artist, since what is important is the relationship between various phenomena, exchange, or movement instigated by an artist, which are different every time and cannot be predefined.

Higgins’s diagram referred to by Tajber seems better-suited to conveying the meaning of the concept of intermediality than any previous attempt using words only. In the light of the pictorial visualization, the relational understanding, proposed by Ryszard W. Kluszczyński as a “redefinition” of the old term, appears more convincing. “Intermedia art for me means the kind of art which in any of its specific manifestations inevitably initiates relationships between different media. Understood as such, relationalism, a network of intermedial references, supplants here the sets of attributes normally used to characterize particular art genres. Intermedia art is a total field, it is neither a combination of the features typical of various arts ... nor a blend of so-far separate arts into a new whole ..., but reference, seeing one medium through another, as they activate and stimulate one another”<sup>18</sup>. In my opinion, the relational version completes the definition and at the same time opens new possibilities.<sup>19</sup> It is important to note that on Higgins’s diagram intermedia only partly overlaps with performance art rather than including it, which leaves us with the task of looking for new definitions.

Thus the key of this interpretation seems to lie in the prefix “inter-”, usually associated with linking different perspectives.<sup>20</sup> In reference to art, however, “inter-” tends to suggest going beyond them. Neither philosophers nor artists can agree whether in the case of performance art we should talk about mixed media

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<sup>16</sup> See the visualization of the diagram in: A. Tajber, *Sztuka performance*, p. 47.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>18</sup> R.W. Kluszczyński, *Film, wideo, multimedia. Sztuka ruchomego obrazu w erze elektronicznej*, Instytut Kultury, Warszawa 1999, p. 76.

<sup>19</sup> See also: K. Chmielecki, *Estetyka intermedialności*, Rabid, Kraków 2008.

<sup>20</sup> This interpretation can be found in various contexts, most importantly interdisciplinarity.

(Richard Kostelanetz<sup>21</sup> and Andersen), or not (Dziamski, Guzek, Grzegorz Sztabiński<sup>22</sup>).

It is also far from clear what should be understood by mapping out the areas “in between” modes of expression, forms, or genres. Searching for the undeveloped “greenfield land” in art can involve either finding new original combinations or creating heterogeneous hybrids<sup>23</sup> designed to frustrate any attempts at creating a combination and to destabilize, to persistently go beyond, to be constantly on the move to avoid being ensnared by any newly emerging conventions or notions. I see the heterogeneous performance art among the latter.

Thus intermediality, understood as a network of relationships, to some extent enters the territory of transmediality. The prefix trans- (defined as ‘across, beyond, through’) seems to make a better use than inter- or ‘between’, and can be also applied to the activities in which modes of expression are not combined or merged, but still produce a new quality. Załuski asserts that ‘transmediality’ refers to the dynamics of the transfer of a given practice from the territory of one media to that of another, additionally emphasizing the internal heterogeneity.<sup>24</sup> It also covers those activities in which artists seek to conceal the medium, such as Sunrise by Tomasz Ciecierski.<sup>25</sup> Finally, it encompasses the activities associated with hypermediation or mediality, cited by Dziamski or Kluszczyński.<sup>26</sup>

I will argue that, in this relational understanding, intermedia can be linked to various activities within performance art, in regard to which the formula of a unifying notion is ineffective. Another such notion, open to various interpretations, focused on the diverse character of performance is performativity.

Tajber appears to doubt its usefulness and claims that certain things are not altered “by the import of new terminology”, with which I cannot fully agree. He regards it merely as a new term for old phenomena rather than a new quality required by performance studies. Still he brings up the concept due to the conference topic<sup>27</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Kostelanetz, however, refers to early performance as ‘mixed-means theatre’, R. Kostelanetz, *The Theatre of Mixed Means*, in: *Contemporary Dramatists*, New York 1977.

<sup>22</sup> G. Sztabiński, *Performatywna koncepcja artysty w sztuce współczesnej*, in: *Zwrot performatywny w estetyce*, ed. L. Bieszczad, Libron, Kraków 2013, p. 34.

<sup>23</sup> Grzegorz Sztabiński uses the term the “new” hybrid’ to refer to performance art with reference to Laurie Anderson and understands it as the creation of a “living whole”, emphasizing the fact that the elements in this new arrangement are energized. G. Sztabiński, *Performatywna koncepcja artysty*, p. 34, footnote 9. Fischer-Lichte also talks about energizing. Załuski interprets a hybrid in the context of „transiting” of elements which do not lead to a synthesis and associates it with transmediality. T. Załuski, *Wstęp*, p. 11 and following.

<sup>24</sup> *Wstęp*, T. Załuski, in: *Sztuki w przestrzeni transmedialnej*, ed. T. Załuski, p. 11.

<sup>25</sup> See: W. Kazimierska-Jerzyk, *Transmedialność jako poziom lektury*, in: *Sztuki w przestrzeni transmedialnej*, pp. 54-58.

<sup>26</sup> He applies to another definition of the media, different than the one in this paper, that is, interactive multimedia means of communication. R. W. Kluszczyński, *Film, wideo, multimedia...*

<sup>27</sup> The conference titled The Aesthetics of Performative Arts was organized by the Department of Aesthetics at the Jagiellonian University in 2012 under the patronage of the Polish Society of Aesthetics.

relating it to performative arts. In this context he expresses his reservations about the tools and terminology introduced by performance studies and it cannot be denied that he has a point resisting the oppressive intrusion of the trendy “p” words: performance, performativity, performativism.<sup>28</sup> Instead he proposes that the term intermediality continue to be used with regard to performance art. In my view, however, the artist, rather than seeking to detract from the achievements of performative studies, only expresses his conviction that certain issues, such as ephemerality, the process of dematerialization of a work of art, or contextualization, were analysed without difficulty before the performative turn gained popularity.

However, performativity brings a new quality to the research on performance art. I would like to offer two examples of the presentations given by the Faculty of Intermedia PhD and MA students invited by Tajber.<sup>29</sup> A young promising artist, whose aim was to involve the conference participants in a verbal-situational game, was particularly noteworthy. Her performance took place in a designated space hidden behind the steps going down from the building’s courtyard to a small wooded area. Going downstairs each participant disappeared from other people’s sight and on their own had to face an ongoing situation affecting them personally. A sense of anxiety and uncertainty resulting from the unpredictability of what was awaiting downstairs was additionally magnified by the atmosphere of the night and the darkness surrounding the trees. At the bottom of the stairs, out of the sight of the others, the participant was suddenly flooded with a spotlight reacting to their bodily movement, while another beam of light fell on three human figures directly in front of them – naked, hideously contorted in convulsions and spasms, salivating, repulsive. Above their heads on the wall large clearly-seen words were displayed, saying ‘There are four of us’. These words completely altered how the viewer saw the situation and led them to reconsider their own position. Who was the subject and who the object of the performance? Who found themselves in this frustrating and uncomfortable situation? The actual event forcing the participants to look at themselves ‘in the mirror of others’, in effect, called into question and destabilized the well-established divisions between art and life, fiction/illusion and reality, the viewer and the viewed by placing the participant in the space ‘in between them’.

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<sup>28</sup> J. Wachowski, *O modnych słowach na „p” albo w obronie barona Mülhchausena*, “Dialog” 2012, no 9, p. 168-176. I use this term here as it was proposed by Anna Zeidler-Janiszewska who questioned the translation of performance studies suggested by Kubikowski. She argues that in polish *performatyka* (performance studies) is too similar to old notions such as *semiotyka* (semiotics), while its character is entirely different as it is more of an anti-discourse or anti-discipline. A. Zeidler-Janiszewska, *Perspektywy performatywizmu*. In: *Perspektywy badań nad kulturą*, ed. R.W. Kluszczyński, A. Zeidler-Janiszewska, Łódź 2008, p. 87.

<sup>29</sup> The Faculty of Intermedia PhD and MA students were invited to participate in the conference thanks to my cooperation with Artur Tajber, the associate dean of the faculty at the time.

Artur Wnuk's performance<sup>30</sup> also took place in the forest surrounding the university buildings. The artist intentionally waited until late at night so that frequent changes of direction would confound the participants and make them feel lost in the wooded area. The silence of the forest amplified noises and smells in the surroundings, which would go unnoticed in the commotion of the daylight. Lack of visibility made the participants rely on 'the eyes of imagination', which added to the tension and a growing sense of threat, relieved temporarily by conversations in the group and bursts of laughter. At one point the guide disappeared and the confused group came to a sudden halt at a loss to know what to do. The participants, left on their own, experienced what felt like an interminable wait and were not in the least ready for the unexpected touch of the warm lips having appeared seemingly from nowhere, licking each of their hands in turn. They could only know about the presence of somebody in the dark because of the muffled screams of surprised 'victims', whose clothes were marked with fluorescent green paint. At that moment nobody was willing to admit to the emotions which this warm but also moist sensation provoked. On the one hand, the experience connected the participants, but, on the other, it divided them, as none of them shared the emotions they felt deep inside with others. Thus touch, a physical contact, as Fischer-Lichte would put it, destabilized, in a way similar to John Austin's performatives<sup>31</sup>, dichotomous pairs of notions, such like public/private, closeness/distance, acting/watching.<sup>32</sup>

Both of these artists prove that performance works best as an event in which the conception of the media seems less important than seeking 'the space in between' in the experience shared by participants. In the first case, the modes of expression used belong to diverse genres: the theatre gesture and the written word. In the second one, the intimately felt physical touch dominated over diversity of techniques. What they have doubtlessly in common is performative efficacy, as Fischer-Lichte puts it, the physical co-presence of an audience and performers, thanks to which an event is a result of interaction, co-created by the participants' physical presence, perception and response.<sup>33</sup>

The notion of performativity is useful to appreciate certain aspects of these activities. In both cases, the 'presence of the artist' has to be seen from the perspective of the experience of their corporeality, which brings to mind van Gennepe's liminal experience of passage.<sup>34</sup> They take part in a real situation, and the spe-

<sup>30</sup> The artist also brings up performative themes in his paper. K. Wnuk, *Oddaję wam słowo performance*, in: *Zwrot performatywny w estetyce*, pp. 95-104.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. E. Fischer-Lichte, *Estetyka...*, p. 33 and following.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 99, 101, 105 and following.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 46, 47.

<sup>34</sup> Gennepe studied rites of passage in a very broad sense of the term, including any transformation of an individual's role into another in a given social group, like, for instance, the passage from childhood into adulthood.

cific relationship between the participants and the artist enables them to undergo a kind of transformation, thanks to the departure from the dichotomy between the viewer and the viewed. They feel 'bodily, volitionally, emotionally, energetically and motively'<sup>35</sup> the actual processes happening beyond the order of representation, through the immediate ('live') contact with the artist. In such events we can also find the elements of a ritual, like for example marking the people who have undergone the transformation, the 'baptism', with the brand of green paint. (The term is not new as it was also used by J. Bereś or Z. Warpechowski.)

These activities also contain certain elements of the performative turn, as it is interpreted by Fischer-Lichte, the most interesting among which is, in my opinion, the creation of a certain dynamic situation taking place 'in between' an audience and (a) performer(s) (setting up a reality), which includes ritualistic components, such as, for example, a transformation of an audience. Other aspects of significance are the experience of participants' corporeal co-presence and material means of interaction, in other words, their somatic, audio and spatial aspects.<sup>36</sup>

These are not the only features associated with performativity, which could be applied to performance art, which Richard Schechner in the 5<sup>th</sup> part of *Performance studies* referred to as a blanket term covering practically every artistic activity which does not fit into boundaries of classical genres.<sup>37</sup> Following Jacek Wachowski<sup>38</sup> I would like to highlight, on the one hand, the emphasis in artistic activities on the somaticity of a subject-performer, who is at the same time a creator, material and a processual 'work', and, on the other, the effects of these activities (agency), the results which can be seen in a material (physical) sphere, like, for example, Schwarzkogler's castration, but also the way they affect participants' perception, when, for instance, the impact of the emotions they felt make them change their behaviour in everyday life. This kind of results Marina Abramović had in mind when she said that '(...) in the works which involved inflicting pain I treated myself as a sort of mirror. The audience sees my fear, pain, repulsion. And if I can go through what is a metaphor of what we face in life, the viewer will feel stronger. Rituals performed even in early communities have the same purpose'.<sup>39</sup>

I also believe that the dynamics of performativity cannot be properly understood without performance and performance studies. Therefore, in conclusion I would like to underline how different this perspective is. Richard Schechner argu

<sup>35</sup> E. Fischer-Lichte, *Estetyka...*, p. 21.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> R. Schechner, *Performatyka. Wstęp*, transl. T. Kubikowski, Ośrodek Badań Twórczości Jerzego Grotowskiego i Poszukiwań Teatralno-Kulturowych, Wrocław 2006.

<sup>38</sup> J. Wachowski, *O performatywności sztuk performatywnych*, in: *Zwrot performatywny w estetyce*, pp. 19-20.

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in: [http://wyborcza.pl/1,75475,12611722,Mój\\_pogrzeb\\_trzy\\_trumny\\_w\\_trzech\\_miastach\\_\(retrived\\_on\\_11/01/2015\)](http://wyborcza.pl/1,75475,12611722,Mój_pogrzeb_trzy_trumny_w_trzech_miastach_(retrived_on_11/01/2015))

es that „Performance studies is <inter> – in between. It is ingeneric, interdisciplinary, intercultural – and therefore inherently unstable. Performance studies resists or rejects definition. As a discipline, PS cannot be mapped effectively because it transgresses boundaries, it goes where it is not expected to be. It is inherently <in between> and therefore cannot be pinned down or located exactly”.<sup>40</sup> The case of performativity is not much different. Not only can we find as many interpretations of the notion as there are authors who use it, but even its origins seem to raise some doubt.<sup>41</sup> Although I am unable to present here a comprehensive study of the term, one more important and interesting quality of performativity needs to be noted.<sup>42</sup> It is treated as not only a feature of artistic activities, but can also serve as a tool for analysing them. Thus it is worthwhile to investigate ‘performative efficacy’<sup>43</sup> as a tool for examining both „theoretical and practical construction”<sup>44</sup> of performance art.

Furthermore, artists themselves are engaged in a constant debate and they keep reviewing its theoretical interpretations, the notable example of which is Abramović, a grandmother of performance, to use her own words. During the 2010 exhibition *Artist is Present* she not only cooperated with artistic institutions, which performance art was initially supposed to oppose, but also within this cooperation she arranged several events, for instance inviting Ulay, her partner of many years, to take part in the exhibition. Additionally, by showing her past works in galleries, the artist questions the requirement of presenting performance live. Furthermore, as Grzegorz Sztabiński interestingly describes, she is actively involved in a sort of dialogue with other artists, referring to their works and reinterpreting them.<sup>45</sup> Thus she challenges the artistic and theoretical context, calling for new analytical tools for performance art.

<sup>40</sup> R. Schechner, *What is Performance Studies Anyway?*, 1998, (quoted in: J. McKenzie, *Performuj albo... Od dyscypliny do performansu*, Tłum. T. Kubikowski, Universitas, Kraków 2011, p. 63, footnote 44.) Remarkably, Marvin Carlson maintains that performance art is one of the sources of performativity. This interpretation is not as commonly accepted as John Austin’s linguistic one (performative) or those derived from the variety of different meanings of the verb ‘perform’. M. Carlson, *Performans*, transl. E. Kubikowska, Warszawa 2007.

<sup>41</sup> Performance in this broadest sense is regarded as not only the subject of performance studies research, but also an analytical tool. It is also the case of performativity, as interpreted by Bachman-Medick. D. Bachman-Medick, *Cultural turns. Nowe kierunki w naukach o kulturze*, transl. K. Krzemieniowa, Warszawa 2012.

<sup>42</sup> McKenzie and Carlson believe that the feature of ‘performative efficacy’ is liminality, which is typically associated with Arnold van Gennep’s rite of passage. A. van Gennep, *Obrzędy przejścia*, Transl. B. Biały, PIW, Warszawa 2006. Victor Turner, an anthropologist, sees it as a transitional state between two other states, which he links to performance as “a border field of negotiation”. V. Turner, *Od rytuału do teatru; powaga zabawy*, Transl. M i W. Dziekanowie, Oficyna Wydawnicza Volumen, Warszawa 2010. See also: J. McKenzie, *Performuj albo...*, p. 46 and following.

<sup>43</sup> McKenzie maintains that ‘performative efficacy’ is a theoretical genesis of performance studies.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. J. McKenzie, *Performuj albo...*, p. 47.

<sup>45</sup> G. Sztabiński, *Obecność artysty: kto działa?*, “Estetyka.Biuletyn”, 2015, no 2 (2), pp. 8-24.

As we can see, performance art can hardly be confined to a specific time period, and each new activity means an act of expanding as well as transcending its boundaries, if any were accepted in the first place. Artists will never cease to ponder on the words of Sabine Gova, according to whom „[performance art] does not have a purpose as such, forming itself it simultaneously self-annihilates, and always remains as it was before having formed. It is at the same time an act of transcending boundaries and rejecting those boundaries”.<sup>46</sup> This element of self-annihilation constantly reminds us of the process of an incessant dialogue, when, to quote McKenzie, „Theory becomes performance (and performance becomes theorized) (...)”.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> S. Gova, *Pojęcie techniki ekspresyjnej zwanej performance*, in: *Performance...*, p. 24.

<sup>47</sup> McKenzie spoke with regard to performance in its broad sense, not limited to the artistic one. J. McKenzie, *Performuj albo...*, p. 47.

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## **INTERMEDIALNOŚĆ I PERFORMATYWNOŚĆ W KONTEKŚCIE SZTUKI PERFORMANCE’U (streszczenie)**

Sztuka performansu jest jednym z bardziej kontrowersyjnych nurtów neoawangardowych, a jednocześnie najtrudniej uchwytnym. Dlatego w tekście przeanalizowane zostały dwa pojęcia, które mogą być pomocne w uchwyceniu niektórych jej aspektów – intermedialność i performatywność. Pierwsze pojawia się już w 1911 w ujęciu Coldridge’a do którego nawiązuje Dick Higgins, drugie, stało się popularne wraz z proklamowanym w latach 90. zwrotem performatywnym. Intermedialność zostanie

zaprezentowana na przykładzie wypowiedzi dwóch artystów: Dicka Higginsa i Artura Tajbera, zaś performatywność m.in. w kontekście działań młodych artystów występujących podczas Konferencji „Estetyka sztuk performatywnych” w 2012 roku w Krakowie-Przegorzalach.

**Słowa kluczowe:** intermedialność, performatywność, sztuka performance’u, neoawangarda, zwrot performatywny.



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## **DIGITAL PERFORMANCE AND AVANT-GARDE ARTISTIC DISTINCTIONS**

**Abstract:** Digital performance is an artistic phenomenon isolated at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the subsequent years, the scope of interest of the researchers analyzing this phenomenon has extended not only to new projects, but also to the works constituting its “prehistory,” dating back to the 1960s and 1970s, and to selected avant-garde projects from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This interest has resulted in a number of theoretical studies on digital performance, which is associated on the one hand with the latest achievements in information technology, and on the other with human bodily performance, frequently contrasted with technology-based approaches in art. Digital performance seems to be a concept integrating both of those areas. Basing on this example, one can examine the various manifestations of apparent interdependence between its components, as well as the evolution of the issues that were of interest to the historical avant-garde.

The present author argues that digital performance is a unique artistic phenomenon that does not fit within the usually employed theoretical categories. There are three possible perspectives from which it can be approached. Firstly, it might be considered in the context of postmodernism, as a kind of postmodern hybrid, a cross between the tendencies previously regarded as opposed (e.g. in avant-garde and neo-avant-garde art). However, as suggested by such authors as Steve Dixon, it is also possible to separate it from the postmodern strategies and see it as a manifestation of the hidden aspirations of artists from both the first and the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the new artistic phenomenon, they have taken on an explicit form thanks to the use of the latest technological developments. The second interpretation of digital performance is to regard it as a characteristic manifestation of cyberculture, combining the biological and the technological (cf. Roy Ascott, R.W. Kluszczyński). According to this interpretation, it functions “in-between” (in interspaces and “intertimes,” revealing the multidimensional fluidity of the contemporary world. The third of the theoretical perspectives discussed here reflects the views of W.J.T. Mitchell and Mindy Fenske. Contrary to the cybercultural interpretation, which presupposes the convergence of the performative and the digital, the existence of a dialectic opposition between them is emphasized here. Overcoming it through transition from thesis to anti-thesis in order to achieve synthesis (or, using different terminology, dialogue negotiation) involves searching for a connection between biology and technology, even if the result of this search is still incomplete and not definitive. The concept of dialogue assumes that even if performativity and digitalism are converged, the original nature of the starting elements is sensed, and it is possible to consider different ways in which these elements are involved in the dialogic interaction.

**Keywords:** digital performance, Avant-Garde, postmodernism, cyberculture, performativity, “dialogical interaction”.

Digital performance is an artistic phenomenon which was noticed in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is considered that the occasion on which it emerged as a distinct entity was the research project initiated by a request sent out in 1999 to the major artists using computer technologies and employing performative activities in their artistic endeavours, asking them to submit documentation of their works. The materials thus obtained formed the basis for the establishment of the Digital Performance Archive (DPA).<sup>1</sup> In the subsequent years, the range of the collected materials expanded, encompassing not only new projects, but also works that constituted a “prehistory” of sorts, dating from the 1960s and 1970s, as well as works by the avant-garde of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At the same time, theoretical studies on the new phenomenon began to emerge; a phenomenon which, on the one hand is linked with the latest developments in information technology, and on the other with human bodily performance – frequently juxtaposed with technology-based approaches in art. Digital performance seems to be a concept integrating both of those areas. Basing on this example, one can examine the various manifestations of apparent interdependence between its components, as well as the evolution of the issues that were of interest to the historical avant-garde.

Steve Dixon, author of a comprehensive monograph on digital performance, writes that this concept should be understood as covering all actionist projects, “where computer technologies play a key role rather than a subsidiary one in content, techniques, aesthetics, or delivery forms.”<sup>2</sup> Enumerating the various employed techniques, he includes digitally produced or manipulated projections, performance based on the actions involving robots or virtual reality, installations and theatrical works implemented with the use of instruments equipped with sensors or telematics techniques. In addition to this, or perhaps in the first place, he considers performative works and other activities available via the computer screen, such as cybertheatrical events, MUDs, virtual worlds, computer games, CD-ROMs and performative net-art activities. The line between the “live” and artificial components is drawn in different ways. It is therefore impossible to classify the collected material by identifying fixed types of relations between the biological and technical components. In addition, they have been assigned different meanings in artistic actions. The matter is further complicated by the fact that when discussing the issues of digital performance, Dixon refers to the artistic experiments from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (especially selected achievements of Futurists, Dadaists, the Bauhaus and Russian Constructivists), as well as the neo avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s. He points out that new theatrical and ballet

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. S. Dixon with contribution by B. Smith, *Digital Performance. A History of New Media In Theater, Dance, Performance Art., and Installation*, The MIT Press, Cambridge Mass. and London, 2015, p. IX.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

projects incorporate elements of technology similarly to the early manifestations of performance art. In many cases, it is precisely the meeting of the “live” and the mechanical that is an important element of the authors’ artistic philosophy. Usually, however, both types of components are treated as a means of expressing meanings, recognized by the avant-garde as being of primary importance. This was the case, for example, with the first attempts to use digital technologies undertaken in the 1960s. The author draws attention to the performance of Laurie Anderson, pointing out that

Anderson’s use of digital technologies, and particularly her creation of new instruments, effects, and sounds, bears testimony more to her drive to find the most appropriate means of communicating what she wants to say, than to any formalist approach to technology, or desire to experiment with it for its own sake. [...] Anderson experiments and creates with digital technologies in exactly the same fashion as she experiments and creates with everything else – to maximize the effectiveness of her statement, using myriad available tools – digital, nondigital, analog, nonanalog, organic, inorganic.<sup>3</sup>

In this situation, it would seem appropriate to treat digital performance as a broad category encouraging free combination of various media and including them within the framework of postmodern tendencies. Dixon examines the role of digital media in relation to the idea of postmodernism, considering two of its aspects. The first is related to the emphasis that its representatives (both artists and theorists) have placed on the importance of recycling. The postmodern perspective entails that artistic concepts are simply, endlessly, and variously, based on the use of what was found, also in the past. He contrasts this position, however, with the view that technological practices and systems change, that they are subject to development and can be considered as truly new and different at particular moments in time, both formerly and in the recent decades. Thus Dickson argues that we cannot describe modern art, especially with respect to the latest technology, as based on recycling. The idea of novelty as an important artistic category is not confined to the avant-garde, to the short period in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. On the other hand, one should not overestimate the role of the new technologies used by artists, or, especially, reduce the development of art to the transformation of the technical means employed. Dixon argues against the view expressed by Lev Manovitch, who wrote that the greatest contemporary artists are computer science specialists, and that the greatest masterpiece is the new technology itself. This “digital culture commentator,” as Dixon calls such theorists, claims that the Web is the largest intertextual work, more complex, unpredictable, and dynamic than the novels written by James Joyce. The most important interactive work is the

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 108.

human-computer interface itself. Dixon opposes such fetishization of technology. He says that the concept of “technology for technology’s sake ... has tended to mar rather than advance critical understandings of the relationships between technology and art.”<sup>4</sup> He also proposes to “analyze the particularities of *performance* and *performances* in relation to how they have adopted and utilized technological developments in varied ways in order to create different types of content, drama, meanings, aesthetic impacts, physiological and psychological effects, audience-performer relationships, and so on.”<sup>5</sup> It can be said, therefore, that this suggestion is aimed at incorporating digital performances, despite their often shocking difference, into the general principles of art contemplation and its aesthetic reception.

The second perspective from which the relations between digital performance and postmodernism can be considered involves its tendency to “consume” other trends. Dixon observes that digital performance connects the old to the new in a “classically” postmodern way. He claims, however, that this should rather be treated as “an emergent avant-garde, [...] rather than merely a manifestation of a wider, all-consuming postmodernism.”<sup>6</sup> To justify this view, he cites Andreas Huyssen on the one hand, and Peter Bürger on the other. The former maintained that technological development in the 20<sup>th</sup> century had a major impact on the emergence of the avant-garde. New technologies were not only a source of inspiration for the artist's imagination, introducing such features as dynamism, machine worship, the beauty of technology, constructivist and productivist attitudes, but also penetrated into the heart of the work itself. The latter author defined it as an attempt to organize a new life practice based on art. Dixon believes that all these qualities can be seen in digital performances. Although he agrees that they no longer reflect the interest in influencing fundamental social change and transforming the way in which collective life operates, typical of the classical avant-garde, in some of them one can see the need to make art practical again. Critical Art Ensemble and Electronic Disturbance Theater are cited as examples. However, it is difficult to assess the extent to which they are typical and whether their activities are balanced by the large number of theatre and ballet spectacles and performances in which the use of digital effects is clearly ludic in character. It is therefore possible to say generally that “digital performance’s impulse toward the creation of the new avant-garde forms and a more radical engagement with the nature of virtual realities places it outside the confines of dominant postmodern paradigms.”<sup>7</sup>

Searching for a theoretical model to interpret the phenomenon of digital performance, one can also refer to research on the “realm of media reality.” As

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

a consequence of its emergence, “liminal areas were created, places of contact, interaction, and interpenetration of the media world and real world.”<sup>8</sup> It is from them that digital performance is derived. Ryszard W. Kluszczyński believes that the nature of the border on which communication between the virtual reality of the media and the real and material world occurs is fundamental. It has become “at the same time a source and model for all other borders, whose existence has been caused or modified by the media.”<sup>9</sup> It is characterized by instability, variability, as much of time as of space. It is possible, as stated by the Polish author, to consider it as “extraspacial and extratemporal, since – as a *sui generis* mental phenomenon – it lacks these dimensions, but merely refers to them, a process in which we observe a continuous exchange of quality.”<sup>10</sup>

How do these traits relate to the arts of performance? Reflection on this issue has evolved over the years. In the 1960s and 1970s, the opposition of performance against the objective character of painting and sculpture, and its anti-technological attitude were usually emphasized. Thus, action art was treated as being anti-media. Performance was meant to overcome the “reification” typical of the visual arts. It was associated with the slogans of liberation from the alienation and commercialization that plague the modern life. Morawski wrote that the goal of performances, as well as other, ideologically similar manifestations of neo-avant-garde art, is “the recognition of the randomness and ephemerality of phenomena, and an attempt to reach all the potential encoded in humans, explore and manifest it, especially during play or in a ‘ritual,’ and in addition to stage a spontaneous protest against all forms of enslavement of individuals and the destruction of the natural resources.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, they were humanistic and concentrated on people who did not need a reference to technology in performance art, and freed themselves from media and mediatization. The body of the artist has become a medium that could carry content. This would be different in the case of another, technological-media variety of creativity. Here, Morawski asserted,

the starting principle and the destination [...] is to build structures, algorithmic in the highest degree, and to obtain a result similar to that of an engineer, an

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<sup>8</sup> R.W. Kluszczyński, *Spółeczeństwo informacyjne. Cyberkultura. Sztuka multimedialna*, Rabid, Kraków 2001, p. 149.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> S. Morawski, *Na zakręcie: od sztuki do po-sztuki*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1985, p. 265. It should be noted that Morawski addressed this issue twice. For the first time, he presented the typology of avant-garde trends in the article “Awangardy XX wieku – stara i nowa”, *Miesięcznik Literacki*, 1975, No 3, p. 53-72. For the second time – in the abovementioned book. In the latter case, however, the author paid less attention to classification and commented more broadly on the contexts of the particular varieties of the avant-garde and neo-avant-garde.

IT specialist, or an expert on electronics. Also taken into account is the symbiosis of man with his technology, with the world of artificial devices, and a change in the way of seeing reality through these mediations.<sup>12</sup>

Within this neo-avant-garde model, a reference was thus made to modern technological devices, the coupling of art and technology, the mediatization of human activities.

In his analysis, Morawski sought the worldview bases of these choices. He believed that they were not completely contradictory, that they converged in the specific cases of artistic accomplishments. However, he believed that this convergence should not blur the basic differences between the worldview options. He wrote that

The main demarcation line runs between conformism and contestation, and between the technological-scientific and the philosophical-anthropological vision of today and tomorrow. It is ultimately these decisions that determine the concept of the artist – either as a manager of information resources, or a builder of enormous spectacles, a designer of alternative realities, or a guide through the labyrinths of today's culture and civilization.<sup>13</sup>

According to Morawski, an artist-performer is a representative of the second option. He does not base his activity on the possibilities offered by the new media, nor does he succumb to their seductive influence. If he takes them into account in his activities at all, it is not as a partner he interacts with,<sup>14</sup> but merely as an object of criticism or a neutral means of documenting his activities.<sup>15</sup>

Today, the concepts of culture based on the existence of the opposition are contrasted with the idea of cyberculture. Writing about the “transformation of the world” resulting from the invasion of the media and especially the advancement of digital technology, Kluszczyński points out not so much the accompanying disappearance of borders, but their increasing fluidity. Consequently, “our lives are conducted in unique interspaces and intertimes, in the hybrid world ‘in-between.’”<sup>16</sup> He focuses on one of the elements of this approach – the relation between reality and virtuality – presenting two perspectives on it. The first assumes that the interpenetration of the real and the virtual leads to “an invincible multiplicity of the world,”<sup>17</sup> expressed in ontological transgressions. The second per-

<sup>12</sup> S. Morawski, *Na zakręcie ...*, op. cit. p. 264.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 271.

<sup>14</sup> In some performances from the 1960s and 1970s, electronic devices were featured. An example is the work by Wolf Vostell, who included TV sets broadcasting current programs in his actions and installations. However, the purpose of using these media components was to criticize the mass culture that enslaves man.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. J. Baudrillard, *Słowa klucze*, transl. S. Królak, Wydawnictwo Sic!, Warszawa 2008, p. 36-42.

<sup>16</sup> R.W. Kluszczyński, op. cit. p. 150.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

spective, inspired by the ideas of Jean Baudrillard, assumes that we lose the ability to differentiate between the two, and that reality and virtuality converge, forming new kinds of reality, called simulacra. Gradually, they displace and replace formerly predominant forms of existence, and therefore the French author wrote about the disappearance of reality. With regard to the issues being of interest here, such a situation would result in performances blurring the boundaries between the real body and its media simulations, engineering an exchange between them. However, Kluszczyński, like many other researchers of cyberculture, favours the first of the abovementioned perspectives. He believes that one of its advantages is that it allows us to better understand the processes taking place in modern reality without falling victim to excessive generalizations. The pluralism assumed in this view suggests new types of interaction between the technological and the biological. He notes that

the development of the media has led to the development and transformation of the technosphere. Initially, it was perceived in opposition to the biosphere. Contemporaneously, with the emergence of a post-biological world, it is rather believed that the boundary between them becomes as fluid as the boundary between the real world and the virtual reality of the media. Both of these domains have made up a biotechnosphere, internalizing their mutual relationship and dynamizing their borders.<sup>18</sup>

By employing the concept of the post-biological world, the Polish author refers to the conception of Roy Ascott, who wrote about the advent of the “post-biological era.” The noun used in the phrase, referring to the temporal consequence, suggests that the processes occurring today mark a new period in history. It is characterized by fluidity, and resistance to opposition. Shaping the new world, however, is not based on the negation of the existing one (as was suggested by the avant-garde), but is performed by absorbing it into a new whole. In the opinion of the British author, this process is taking place in different areas. In the world of the media, Ascott sees a change that involved overcoming the existing opposition between “dry” and “moist” media. In his short text *The Future Is Moist*, he synthesizes the concept of interspace between the silicon and dry world of virtuality and the moist world of nature. In the post-biological era, the two will converge. Ascott sees it as a distant edge of the communications network. He writes:

It is my contention that moist media will constitute the substrate and vehicle of the transformative arts of the new millennium. For some years now artists working at the edge of the Net have been exploring Artificial Life technology. More recently, the whole field of biotechnology has begun to be taken on

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 152.

board – neuroscience, genetics, molecular engineering, nanotechnology – all are the subjects of artists' attention.<sup>19</sup>

In this way, art participates in the emergence of postbiological culture, and at the same time enters the “new artistic trajectory.”<sup>20</sup>

The English author believes that this approach is constructive. Thus, it can be considered that it breaks with the tradition of avant-garde and neo-avant-garde protest, destructive and critical actions, and promotes the concept of art as building a new world. It also rejects the expressive and contemplative tradition characteristic especially of the visual arts. The aim is not to present existing realities. “The building of new worlds is what it is about: new entities, identities, new meanings and values. Art based in moist media will be conceptually driven, behaviourally based, technologically assisted.”<sup>21</sup>

Is there a place for performance art within the scope of such a concept of art? As we remember, Morawski associated it with the attempts to reach the potencies encoded in man, to explore them and protest spontaneously against all forms of enslavement of the individual. Such an actionist approach, which played a very important role in the 1960s and 1970s, is certainly not taken into account here. Nevertheless, its rootedness in human biology, the reference to the body as a material element, remains valid. However, interest in these factors is subject to a reorientation. They are to be used not in opposition to technology, but in cooperation with it, not against virtualization, but as part of the search for contact points with it or principles of co-existence. At the same time, as Ascott points out, a change is occurring in the field of new technologies. He has claimed that the dominant trend at the threshold of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be the new definition of nature, the concept of Nature II and the search for how to “re-create ourselves in a world which is neither simply digitally dry or biologically wet.”<sup>22</sup> Under such circumstances, technologically oriented art will be characterized by a departure from “the cultural ethos of the 'immaterial' to a 're-materialisation of art.’”<sup>23</sup>

In the field of performance art, this phenomenon is probably most clearly visible in Stelarc's works. He started his career in the 1960s with group multimedia projects. Later, he went on to performance actions, the starting point of which was his own body. He tested its sensitivity and limitations and sought to go beyond it by using technical devices designed for this very purpose. From actions that involved hanging his body suspended on hooks piercing his skin in a variety of ways, he moved on to projects involving biological factors whose capabilities were intensified and technologically transformed. The most famous project of

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<sup>19</sup> R. Ascott, *The Future is Moist*, “Art Inquiry. Recherches sur les Arts”, 1999, vol. I, p. 85.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

this kind is *Third Hand* – a metal prosthetic device with electronic controls, which was supposed to aid the functioning of the two biological hands of the artist. In an interview, Stelarc said: “It was the experience of weakness and imperfections of the body that aroused in me the desire to expand it. The *Third Hand* is therefore not so much a prosthetic replacement, as an extra accessory for the body.<sup>24</sup> It is not a symbol of absence, but “an image of excess.” It indicates the unused capabilities of the body that can be taken into account in collaboration with technology. The *Third Hand* became an “intimate interface,” a part of the body that is electromyographically moved by abdominal and leg muscles. The artist used it during performances, or presented it as an object displayed at exhibitions. *Extender Arm*, 2000, was similar in character. In this case the device increased the range of Stelarc's right hand. These works comprise the *Amplified Body* series. Commenting on these actions, Kluszczyński wrote:

As part of these presentations, Stelarc used physiological processes originating deep inside his body as their primary material, which, as a source of impulses, shaped and directed the course of various events, building the structure of the performance: sound emission, light and video projections. In this way, the performance was transformed into a specific, biotechnological environment [...].<sup>25</sup>

This art thus transcends the division between art and media. It is simultaneously a performance, a visual art object, and part of the environment.

The “transcendence of the body” based on the search for a synthesis between biological and technological elements, was also present in Stelarc's later works, although it occurred in other contexts. While the examples mentioned above were based on the conviction of the “obsolescence of the body,”<sup>26</sup> the following ones take into account thinking and will. The work *Prosthetic Head* from 2005 examines the problem of head transplantation, together with the issues of human awareness and communication functions. Piotr Zawojki writes that this is a reference to the question of artificial intelligence and the “philosophical machine,” and at the same time a reference to the philosophical conceptions addressing the issue of human thinking. Thus there is again a question of the function of our body (when thinking is considered in relation to carnality, as in the views of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Lacan, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari) and its obsolescence. Zawojki notes that “In this project, the artist returns to the problem of the ‘obsession with individuality,’ demonstrating once again that in

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<sup>24</sup> Rozmowa ze Stelarcem. Rozmawiał Maciej Ożóg, in: *Stelarc. Mięso, metal i kod. Rozchwiane chimery*, Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej Łaźnia, Gdańsk 2014, p. 41.

<sup>25</sup> R.W. Kluszczyński, *Spółczesność informacyjna* ..., op. cit., p. 196.

<sup>26</sup> Stelarc used this phrase in an interview with G. Hall and J. Żylińska (cf. J. Żylińska, *Ewolucja Stelarca*, in: *Stelarc. Mięso*..., op. cit. p. 100).

the times of network communication, the idea of a single body endowed with unique, 'finite' consciousness is just as obsolete as our body."<sup>27</sup> The work also uses an element of replacement, which is the image of the artist's head, but the event is discursive in character – the head answers the questions that it is asked. Thus, it can be considered as an equivalent of an "avatar duplicate," as Zawojcki describes it, which stands in for the artist in answering the questions.<sup>28</sup> However, it is possible that in time, with an increased database, it will become autonomous. Therefore, a reference to the idea of posthumanity is also present here. "A human being will be neither a real body nor a machine, but an autonomous entity multiplied by the network and the digital media. This humanoid will have all the characteristics of an alternative being of a chimeric nature, composed of a number of bio-components and technological prostheses, which will function in reality extended to the virtual and cybernetic dimension."<sup>29</sup>

If we regard Stelarc's works as performances, then in the light of the terminology in this field worked out by Richard Schechner, Erica Fischer-Lichte or Peggy Phelan, they should be considered as "performances outside performance" – turning into something that undermines the essence or ontology of this kind of art, and even contradicts it. First of all, we can ask (considering e. g. *Third Hand*) whether, if we are dealing with the artist in person, biological carnality forms complex relations with the mechanical devices as a reference point for their presentation? We do not really what is presented: whether it is the body entering various relationships that is of primary importance, or the invented device, for which the body is only a reference point or a correlate. The next question concerns the Prosthetic Head: can the statements made as a reaction to the audience's questions by Stelarc's head resembling Stelarc's own appearance – be regarded as a performative work? From the scope of the artist's biological presence, only his voice remains. And also, could it be said that the actions which the artist does not undertake on the basis of his own decisions, but which are remotely controlled by the audience (*Ping Body*) are performances? It is not possible to answer these questions unequivocally.<sup>30</sup> The audience which directed Stelarc's actions only watched his image on the computer screen and reacted to it, ordering him to perform specific activities that the electronically-controlled artist had to execute. Can we say, then, that there is a connection between the biological and the technological, or rather a tension between the two spheres and the disclosure of opposites?

<sup>27</sup> P. Zawojcki, *Kim jest i co mówi nam Stelarc*, w: *Stelarc. Mięso...*, op. cit., pp. 80-81.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Two Polish artists who formed the group Sędzia Główny, carried out performances similar to this concept. During the action presented on television, they behaved in accordance with the suggestions made by the viewers over the phone.

The questions I have formulated are not intended to undermine the concept of “digital performance,” but merely to draw attention to the fact that the existence in interspace, in intertime, in the hybrid world “in-between” is more about contrasts, discussion, change from one oppositions to another and attempts to unite them, than about fluid and non-colliding unification of what was treated as entirely contradictory in the 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-garde. Mindy Fenske draws attention to this aspect of digital performances, linking it to the “unfinished aesthetics.” The starting point for her reflections is the article by W.J.T. Mitchell, devoted to the issue of artworks in the age of biocybernetic reproduction.<sup>31</sup> The author draws attention to the contemporary fascination with new technologies employed in performance, on the one hand, and to the research on its ontology on the other, which inspires him to search for the defining characteristics of performance. These approaches are competitive and each of them aims to dominate the other. At the turn of the millennium, the dispute reached the stage of stagnation, because none of the concepts could gain an advantage over the other. Fenske believes that this state of affairs cannot be overcome, but should be differently interpreted. She proposes, therefore, to include the relation between bodily materiality and technological virtuality into performance, not as opposition or supposed unity, but within a dialectic relationship.

In the aforementioned article Mitchell states that we are not quite post-human yet and we are still struggling with our real material condition. Despite the positive and productive potential of our digital and virtual identities and the emerging rationality of post-humans and cyborgs, there is still resistance to embracing this potential. It is manifested in several ways, from the treatment of bodily practices as a form of protest against simulations, to treating digital technologies as yet another disciplinary discourse that seeks to control and manipulate bodies. Thus, the ideological contexts in which the technological model of the avant-garde was juxtaposed with the model defending humanistic values and human freedom have not disappeared completely. However, according to Fenske, differences can be observed. Instead of a simple opposition there emerges a field of dialectic relationships. Therefore, we can speak, to borrow Michael Heim's formulation, of “cyberspace dialectics,” which we can navigate in different ways. This navigation can be multidirectional and can have different destinations. It therefore negates the simple, binary organization of the field in which it occurs, taking into account a more complex system.

Fenske first takes into consideration the position of the body within this dialectic field. She believes that its situation is usually treated as an “either/or” relationship. In the cyber-era, the problem of the reality and materiality of the body does not disappear, as evidenced not only by the performance projects that emphasize its

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<sup>31</sup> W.J.T Mitchell, *The Work of Art. In the Age of Biocybernetic Reproduction*, “Modernism/Modernity”, 2003, no. 10, pp. 481-500.

role, but also by the commonly encountered procedures of tattooing and piercing. These practices can be understood as “a protest against the ideology of identity construction and simulation.”<sup>32</sup> In the case of cutting one's body, it cannot be presumed that it is just play with what is strongly associated with the sense of our identity. The irreversibility of the resulting marks must be interpreted as a protest against the notion that everything can be changed. “The body in this case,” Fenske says, “is a site of refusal.” The body refuses to succumb to the provisionality and performativity of identity by attempting to mark its reality through permanence.”<sup>33</sup>

And how should we then understand Orlan's surgical performances, which, according to their many interpreters, complicate the issue of identity construction? Are the surgical treatments that Orlan undergoes an expression of the emphasis on identity, or its virtualization?<sup>34</sup> Fenske believes that neither the former nor the latter is correct, if considered separately. The work of the French artist relies on a dialectic transition from the thesis to the antithesis, and the search for the possibility of synthesis, which, however, is never completed. “Orlan's performance,” writes Fenske, “calls identity into question, while simultaneously reaffirming the force of the body's corporeality. [...] The question becomes whether or not the body's corporeality is separate from (a mask), or the location of, identity”.<sup>35</sup> Taking into account other examples, the author notes that even such artistic discourses that intentionally aim at breaking the binary dialectic structure eventually restore it. One example of this is the activity of The Critical Art Ensemble (CAE). CAE members emphasize in their theoretical publications that data have become the center of social life, and our organic body is nothing more than an image representation of individual data. The bodies exist, but not for the socio-economic apparatus. Instead, there is a “new body” functioning in this domain, which results from the interference of the biological organism with the ideological-engineering entity. Despite this diagnosis and the sad perspective associated with it, which predicts a “cyborgic identity” of the modern human, CAE representatives do not suggest that one should fear or fly from the current situation. “Their call,” writes Fenske, “is for disruption or non-rational interventions than resist this structure.”<sup>36</sup>

The examples mentioned above, referring to theoretical stances as well as artistic activities, show that the belief in the interpenetration or even homogeneous uniformization of the components of cyberculture is unduly generalized. It does not tolerate conflicts that caused the polarisation of positions during the avant-garde

<sup>32</sup> M. Fenske, *The aesthetic of the unfinished: ethics and performance*, “Text and Performance Quarterly” 2004, no. 1, p. 3.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>34</sup> Kluszczyński employs the latter method to interpret her works, classifying her, alongside Stelarc, as „a representative of virtual body art.” (*Spoleczeństwo informacyjne ...*, op. cit. p. 200).

<sup>35</sup> M. Fenske, op. cit., p. 4.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

and neo-avant-garde periods. At the same time, opposing views are interrelated and interdependent. As regards the problem under consideration in this section, according to Fenske, we “neither valorize nor condemn either corporeality/materiality or digitality/virtuality.”<sup>37</sup> The artists and theorists she discusses seem to suggest that “there ought to be a way to engage these concepts without reproducing binaries that reject the human for the post-human or unrealistically reject of embrace the possibilities of virtuality. The problem is that within these efforts to escape the binary, their rhetoric tends to reconstruct it.”<sup>38</sup>

It is in this context that Fenske refers to Stelarc's work. However, unlike the other authors who write about him, she does not stress the merging of all the ingredients and aspects of his work “into a single hybrid post-biological network.”<sup>39</sup> She does not believe that it expresses “the concept of the synthesis of a biological and technological element, the fusion of flesh and metal, software and hardware, which in his works are organized into a new hybrid network order using the digital element – the code.”<sup>40</sup> In agreement with Mitchell's view, she argues that Stelarc “is like a virtual surgeon because he is both materially connected to his art through, for example, a prosthetic device, and distanced because spectators may control his movements.”<sup>41</sup> According to Fenske, despite efforts aimed at arranging the coexistence of intimacy and distance, the dialecticity of cyberspace is revealed here.

Expanding the analogy between the situation of a surgeon and Stelarc, the author points out that in the former instance, in the virtual world, possibilities are considered and attempts are made to solve the problem, which later find application during the medical procedures performed on the real body. In the case of the performer, however, technology is not a range of exercises, but an integral element of the changes that are made in the body. It may be a prosthetic device (e. g. *Third Hand*) and may be controlled by muscle or breath, but it may also allow the public to influence the artist's behavior (e. g. *Ping Body* or *Prosthetic Head*). In both cases, however, there is no intentional assignment, as in the case of surgery. There is a separation between the “cyber” and the “corporeal.” Searching for the possibilities to bring them closer together forms the content of the performer's actions. Thus, it is not unity that is revealed, but the binary character and a chance for dialectic relationships between biology and technology.

Fenske suggests that they should be approached with reference to Bakhtin's concept of dialogism, where speech is understood as a confrontation of at least two voices, as well as the associated ethics of responsibility. She therefore suggests that questions of digital performance should be addressed not only in technological,

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> R.W. Kluszczyński, *Wprowadzenie*, in: *Mięso ...*, op. cit. p. 10.

<sup>40</sup> Ibidem, p. 11-12.

<sup>41</sup> M. Fenske, op. cit., p. 5.

but also in ethical terms. This is about the responsibility related to the actions, which, based on the English translations of Bakhtin's texts, she describes as answerability. This word has a double meaning. It means responsibility to someone, as well as something one can answer. The two meanings appear in Bakhtin's approach to the aesthetic act of contemplation, which is understood as the relationship between "I" and "the other", as well as between "life" (participation, experience) and "culture" (theory, abstract). Something is answerable "when these two 'faces' are unified and made responsive to each other, rather than existing on separate planes or looking in opposite directions." The ethical requirement is therefore that the dialectic of biological life and technological virtualization should take the form of a dialogue. It is unethical, in contrast, to aim at a simplistic understanding of the body, for example through its normalization (regulation, standardization, typification). Ethical practices of performance assume many forms.

The above considerations indicate that digital performance is a unique artistic phenomenon that does not fit within the usually employed theoretical categories. There are three possible perspectives from which it can be approached. Firstly, it might be considered in the context of postmodernism, as a kind of postmodern hybrid, a cross between the tendencies previously regarded as opposed (e.g. in avant-garde and neo-avant-garde art). However, as suggested by such authors as Steve Dixon, it is also possible to separate it from the postmodern strategies and see it as a manifestation of the hidden aspirations of artists from both the first and the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the new artistic phenomenon, they have taken on an explicit form thanks to the use of the latest technological developments. The second interpretation of digital performance is to regard it as a characteristic manifestation of cyberculture, combining the "wet" and the "dry," *the biological and the technological*. According to this interpretation, it functions "in-between" (in interspaces and "intertimes," revealing the multidimensional fluidity of the contemporary world. The third of the theoretical perspectives discussed here reflects the views of W.J.T. Mitchell and Mindy Fenske. Contrary to the cybercultural interpretation, which presupposes the convergence of the performative and the digital, the existence of a dialectic opposition between them is emphasized here. Overcoming it through transition from thesis to anti-thesis in order to achieve synthesis (or, using different terminology, dialogue negotiation) involves searching for a connection between biology and technology, even if the result of this search is still incomplete and not definitive. The concept of dialogue assumes that even if performativity and digitalism are converged, the original nature of the starting elements is sensed, and it is possible to consider different ways in which these elements are involved in the dialogic interaction. It should be also noted that in the latter concept, the issue raised by Morawski in connection with the two orientations of the neo-avant-garde – technological and performative – returns. This time, however, from the perspective of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, these are not two fundamentally contradictory artistic options concerning the principles of cultural development, but a single one, comprising a dialectic correlation

between artificial and natural bodies. Nevertheless, it does not lose its awareness of humanistic issues, including ethical ones, which used to be inherent in the original perspective of performance.

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## DIGITALNY PERFORMANS A AWANGARDOWE PODZIAŁY ARTYSTYCZNE (streszczenie)

Digitalny performans jest zjawiskiem artystycznym wyodrębnionym na początku XXI wieku. W następnych latach zakres zgromadzonych przykładów był powiększany nie tylko o nowopowstałe realizacje, a również o prace stanowiące rodzaj „prehistorii”, pochodzące z lat 60. i 70., oraz o wybrane dokonania awangardowe z pierwszej połowy XX wieku. Jednocześnie zaczęły pojawiać się opracowania teoretyczne dotyczące tego zjawiska, które z jednej strony związane jest z najnowszymi osiągnięciami elektroniki, z drugiej zaś odnosi się do cielesności człowieka, którą często w sztuce przeciwstawiano zabiegom opartym na technologii. Dlatego na jego przykładzie można prześledzić różnorodne sposoby występowania zagadnień, które stanowiły przedmiot zainteresowania historycznej awangardy.

Przedstawione w artykule rozważania wskazują, że digitalny performans jest szczególnym zjawiskiem artystycznym, nie poddającym się konceptualizacji w ramach zwykle stosowanych kategorii teoretycznych. Po pierwsze można rozważać go w kontekście postmodernizmu, przyjmując, że jest rodzajem ponowoczesnej hybrydy stanowiącej rezultat skrzyżowania tendencji uważanych

wcześniej (np. w sztuce awangardowej i neowawangardowej) za przeciwstawne lub, co sugeruje np. Steve Dixon, poprzez oddzielenie go od strategii postmodernistycznych i dostrzeżenie w nim rezultatu ujawnienia się dążeń występujących w postaci ukrytej w poszukiwaniach artystów zarówno z pierwszej jak drugiej połowy XX wieku. Przybrały one jawną postać dzięki zastosowaniu najnowszych osiągnięć technicznych. Druga wersja interpretacyjna digitalnego performansu związana jest z uznaniem go za charakterystyczny przejaw cyberkultury, łączącej w całość to, co biologiczne i technologiczne (Roy Ascott, R.W. Kluszczyński). Przy tej interpretacji funkcjonowałby on „po-między” (w między-przestrzeniach i między-czasach), ujawniając wielokształtną płynność współczesnego świata. Trzecia z omówionych w artykule perspektyw teoretycznych nawiązuje do rozważań W.J.T. Mitchella i M Fenske. W przeciwieństwie do interpretacji cyberkulturowej, zakładającej zjednoczenie elementu performatywnego i digitalnego, akcentuje się tu występowanie dialektycznych opozycji między nimi. Ich przewyższanie na zasadzie przejścia od tezy do antytezy w celu osiągnięcia syntezy, czy też, stosując inną terminologię, dialogowe negocjowanie, zakłada poszukiwanie związku między biologią a techniką, jednak wciąż niepełnego i nie ostatecznego. Koncepcja dialogu wskazuje, że nawet wówczas, gdy dochodzi do zjednoczenia performatywności i digitalności wyczuwalny jest pierwotny charakter elementów wyjściowych i możliwe jest branie pod uwagę różnych sposobów ich „dialogicznego obcowania”.

**Słowa kluczowe:** digitalny performance, awangarda, postmodernism, cyberkultura, performatywność, „dialogiczne obcowanie”.

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## FROM SIGN TO WORD IN CONTEMPORARY POLISH "HTML LITERATURE". POST-AVANT-GARDE HEIRS OF MODERNIST TYPOGRAPHY

**Abstract:** Digital literature or "HTML literature" is one of the more expressive and important trends of the Polish literature of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In order to present the main aims and objectives of HTML literature, it is essential to take under consideration the digital works characterized by the autonomisation of words, as well as the isolation of words from the linguistic and non-linguistic context and reality, so that "the word itself and for itself would have a clear meaning" – as it was claimed in the late 1960s by one of the main representatives of Polish language art and the icon of Polish concrete poetry, Stanisław Dróżdź. The authors search for the predecessors of such an approach to literary texts in the period of the Great Avant-garde – one can refer here to the pronouncements of the Polish Formists and Constructivists (the true beginning are the literary manifestoes and poems of Tytus Czyżewski from 1921, inspiring such Polish Constructivists as Henryk Berlewi, Mieczysław Szczuka, Teresa Żarnowerówna, as well as Władysław Strzemiński, the latter author deserving special attention. Contemporarily in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the works of Piotr Kowalczyk are renowned for a similar treatment of "the isolated word". Kowalczyk, who works under the pseudonym of Nick Name, is the author of such works as: *iPhone Stories*, *Twitter Fiction*, *Tech Quotes*, *Transtories*, as well as *Short stories for geeks*.

**Keywords:** Great Avant-garde movement, "HTML literature", visual arts, 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, Polish avant-garde poetry.

"HTML literature" in Poland is a new and young trend. The beginning of digital poetry worldwide is dated back to 1959, when Max Bense persuaded his student Theo Lutz to devise the first digital generator for the random creation of texts. In Poland this trend was initiated by the group Perfokarta, whose members met at

the workshops on cybernetics at the Institute of Philosophy of the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań in 2005. While the first American hypertext, *afternoon. a story* by Michael Joyce appeared in 1987, in Poland the important dates are 1996 or 2002, which is connected with the debate on which work should be regarded as the first example of hypertext fiction: *Æ* by Robert Szczerbowski (1996), or *Blok* by Sławomir Shuty (2002). Unfortunately, however, Polish e-literature is still on the margin or periphery; it constitutes a niche.<sup>1</sup>

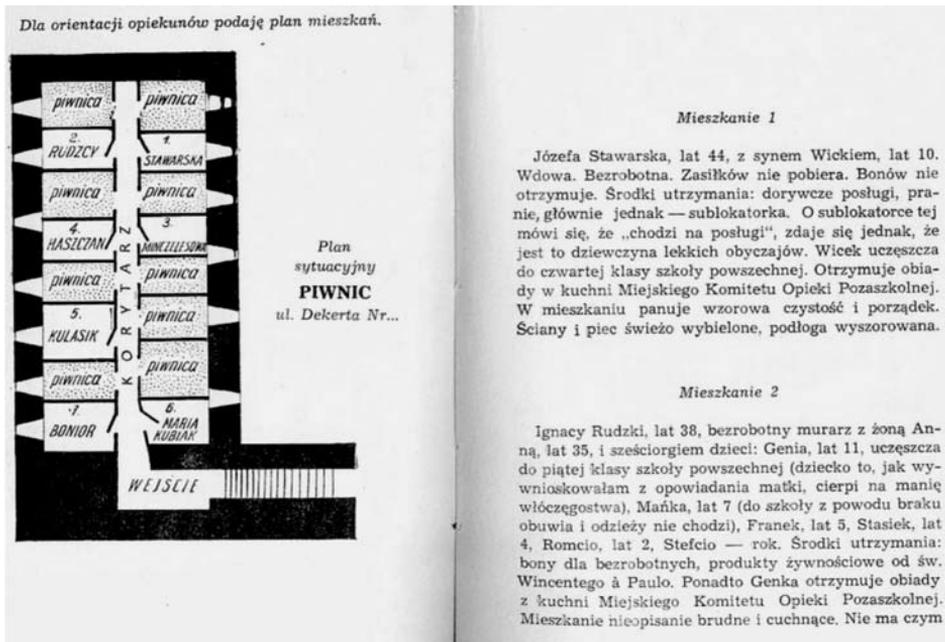


Figure 1. Sławomir Shuty, *Blok*, [http://www.techsty.art.pl/m9/s\\_wyslouch\\_blok.html](http://www.techsty.art.pl/m9/s_wyslouch_blok.html) (30/06/2016)

In order to present the main ideas of the contemporary authors of HTML literature, manifesting themselves in the isolation of words from their linguistic and non-linguistic context, so that "the word itself and for itself would have

<sup>1</sup> Digital literature is entering Polish literature and Polish schools (some subjects at media studies) cautiously and step by step. According to M. Pisarski, "E-literature in Poland is hardly perceptible (...). There could be many reasons for this, with perhaps the main one being a rather late embracing of computer technology in schools and at state universities. Combined with the lack of any tradition of creative writing as a classroom activity, it resulted in a cyber-literary landscape as we see it today: highly individualistic, with several isolated, single-author islands and with scarcely any trends or schools". Read more in: M. Pisarski, *Polish cybertext histories. An introduction to the Polish part of 'Cybertext Yearbook'*, [http://www.techsty.art.pl/magazyn/magazyn7/cybertext\\_yearbook\\_2010.html](http://www.techsty.art.pl/magazyn/magazyn7/cybertext_yearbook_2010.html) (18/07/2017).

a clear meaning”, one can refer to the works of the main representative of Polish language art and the icon of Polish concrete poetry, Stanisław Dróżdź (1939-2009), while attempting to pinpoint the highlights of his poetic activity (e.g. the exhibition entitled *Stanisław Dróżdź. Structural Poetry. Concept-Shapes*, at the “od-Nowa” Gallery in Poznań, in March and April 1969). His best-known single work is the textual cave entitled *Między* [Between].

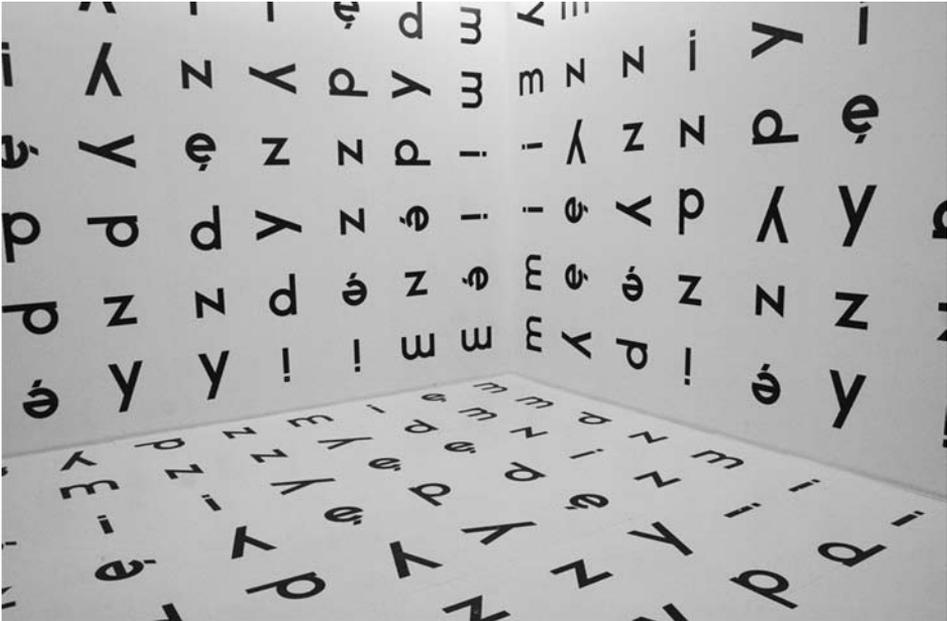


Figure 2. Stanisław Dróżdź, *Między*, MOCAK, Kraków, fot. A. Pawłowska

This installation is currently on display and can be admired at the MOCAK (Museum of Contemporary Art in Cracow). For this project the artist covered the white cube space of the gallery with even rows of letters selected at random from the set limited to “m,” “i,” “ę,” “d,” “z,” and “y”, with some of their combinations seemingly close to forming the word “między”, but never actually arriving at it. The viewer/reader can enter the cube and thus be truly “between.”<sup>2</sup>

The progenitors of “HTML literature” in Poland can also be sought and found in the activities of the artist Stanisław Czycz (1929-1996), who created a series of non-linear polyphonic poems, in which he placed columns of parallel voices one beside the other. He refused to be confined by a standard-sized page, and sought

<sup>2</sup> Read more in: A. Le Nart, *Stanisław Dróżdź*, <http://culture.pl/en/artist/stanislaw-drozdz> (08/08/2017).

to expand his writing surface, experimenting with a regular-sized typewriter and an A3 sheet, or gluing pages together to obtain scrolls. His most famous works are *And* (1961), *Ajol* (1967), *Laor* (1967) and *Arw* (1975-1980). The last piece started as a screenplay about the life of the painter Andrzej Wróblewski (1972-1957), commissioned by the film director Andrzej Wajda, but in the end it turned into a long experimental poem.

However, when analyzing the issues of digital literature in more detail, it is essential to look back to the period of the Great Avant-garde and the work of many Polish Constructivists, such as Henryk Berlewi (1894-1967), Mieczysław Szczuka (1898-1927), Teresa Żarnowerówna (1897-1949) and Władysław Strzemiński (1893-1952). It is also necessary to consider the statements of the Formists, especially the radical pronouncements of the artist Tytus Czyżewski (1880-1945) in his manifesto of 1921, which were visibly reflected in his architectural, inter-medial poetry – visual and verbal representations of multi-sensory reality, as well as his poems about the “mechanical instinct” – concerning various processes in the field of biology and automatics.

As declared by Czyżewski, "Contemporary poetry must work out a new, distinct form sensitive to the needs of contemporary readers, hungering after nervous, synthetic emotions (...). The artists will use the subject as little as possible and will construct as much as possible" and "contemporary poetry [is] the synthetic art of the 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century man". Despite his obvious ignorance of the coming technological revolution which will occur several decades later, Czyżewski mentions the 21<sup>st</sup>-century man, foreseeing a reality completely dominated by technology. His uniquely rhythmical poems invite a digital approach. Multiplicity and randomness appear in the piece *Oczy tygrysa* [Eyes of the tiger], the problems of mathematics are present in *Poemat liczb* [A poem of numbers], a repetition scheme appears in *Muzyka z okna* [Music from the window], simultaneity is much used in *Szpital obłąkanych* [Mental asylum], spatiality is part of *Hymn do maszyny mego ciała* [An anthem to the machine of my body] and multifacetedness is a feature of *Noc - dzień* [Night - day]; all of which seems like a detailed map for the future digitalization of these poems.

Looking for the roots of HTML literature in the Great Avant-garde, it is also worth mentioning the importance of the pioneering achievements of such celebrated artist as Władysław Strzemiński<sup>4</sup> in the field of lettering and so-called functional printing. He tirelessly believed in the importance of new artistic ideas and he

<sup>3</sup> S. Czycz, *ARW*, Korporacja Ha!art, Kraków 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Władysław Strzemiński, Polish avant-garde painter, formulated his influential theory of Unism [pol. Unizm] in the late 1920s in relation to painting, but subsequently extended its theoretical application to sculpture, architecture, and typography in 1931-1933. The general principle of Unism, pertaining to all forms of artistic expression, was the requirement of “unity between the artwork and the place of its creation”.

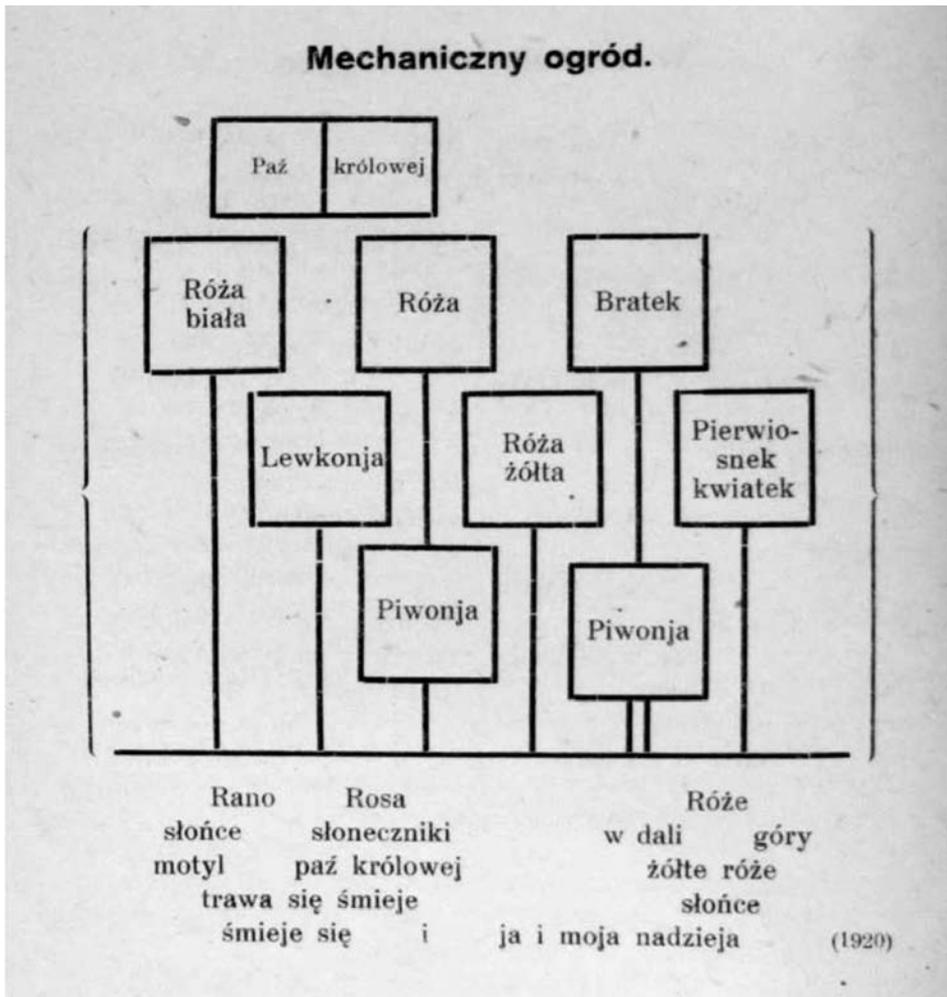


Figure 3. Poem „Mechaniczny ogród” [Mechanical garden] by Tytus Czyżewski from his book *No - dzień. Mechaniczny instynkt elektryczny*. Kraków 1922, Czas Publishing House

refused to ever discontinue his insightful explorations in the domain of art. His own functional print projects managed to integrate the meaning of words and phrases with their graphic form, so that they may be even called visual poetry. His book covers established a model of text composition, where the lettering is an important element of the structure, cf. *Z ponad* [From above] by Julian Przyboś, published in 1930). This artist saw progress, in both artistic and social terms, as the guiding force of action, and he constantly strove to go even further in his understanding of art. The connection between visual arts and poetry, strongly

emphasized in the manifestos of the avant-garde group "a.r."<sup>5</sup>, was for Strzemiński not only the matter of layout, typesetting, and design, but also the question of treating the typographic composition as something that enables us to understand the internal rules of the work's structure. Strzemiński believed that modern art speaks a universal language, and as a result the artists who create images produce the same effect as the artists who compose their works with words.<sup>6</sup> In his article entitled *Druk funkcjonalny* [Functional typography], he wrote: "A typographic composition should be similar in structure to a literary work".<sup>7</sup>

The convergence of visual and verbal arts may be achieved through a variety of means, by freely connecting the domains that at first seem entirely distant from one another. In this context, the discussions on poetry conducted by Strzemiński with Tadeusz Peiper and Julian Przyboś, as well as the formation of the "a.r." group in cooperation with poets, gain a deeper meaning. Searching for the ways of bringing together painting and poetry was seen by Strzemiński as an obligation, from which he did not want to release himself, both in his theoretical statements and his artistic practice.

Summarizing the pioneering work of the Great Avant-Garde movement, one can refer to the claim of Leon T. Chwistek, a painter and art critic, member of the Formism Movement<sup>8</sup>, that modern artists always tend to adapt art to the changing reality:

Formist poetry is closely connected with the extension of language, a typical impulse of all new poetic movements. An essential role is also played by the intangibility of the described subject matter. These factors are a sufficient

<sup>5</sup> The „a.r.” artistic group (“revolutionary artists”, or “real avant-garde”), active in 1929-1936, was one of the most influential Polish avant-garde groups of the interwar period. It was created by poets and artists – former .associates of the Kraków *Zwrotnica* magazine and ex-members of the avant-garde groups Blok and Praesens. Members of “a.r.” included the sculptor Katarzyna Kopro, the painters Władysław Strzemiński and Henryk Stażewski, and the poets Jan Brzękowski and Julian Przyboś. The group’s programme chiefly reflected the views of Strzemiński. In two leaflets entitled *Komunikaty a.r.* [‘a.r. bulletins’] the group declared itself in favour of a ‘laboratory’ version of Constructivism and avant-garde art that influenced social life in an indirect and gradual manner. Read more in: Z. Baranowicz, *Polska awangarda artystyczna 1918-1939*, Warszawa 1975, pp. 158-188.

<sup>6</sup> See more: J. Zagrodzki, *Władysław Strzemiński - obrazy słów*, PWSFT, Łódź 2015 and *Zmiana pola widzenia*, ed. P. Kurc-Maj, Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź 2014.

<sup>7</sup> W. Strzemiński, „Druk funkcjonalny”, *Grafika* 1933, no 2, pp. 37-45.

<sup>8</sup> Formism (previously known as Polish Expressionism) was an avant-garde art movement, developed in Kraków, active in Zakopane and Lwów (partially also in Warsaw and Poznań) from 1917 to 1922. Participating artists included Tytus Czyżewski, Leon Chwistek, Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, Zbigniew Pronaszko, Andrzej Pronaszko, Konrad Winkler, August Zamoyski, Jan Hrynkowski, Tymon Niesiołowski, Jacek Mierzejewski. The group proclaimed a departure from Realism, and argued for the superiority of form over content.

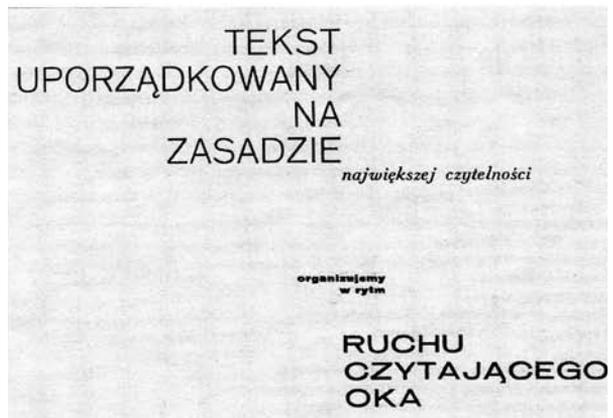


Figure 4. Sample designs from the book edited by Władysław Strzeмиński, *Functional typography*, in: *Zmiana pola widzenia*, Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki 2014, p. 44

basis for stimulating the poets' spontaneous creativity, leading them in the right direction regardless of any theories.<sup>9</sup>

Contemporary writers similarly seek to integrate their vision of language and literary content, adding 21<sup>st</sup> century technologies into the mix. Hence today's broad definition of literature subsumes hypertext poetry, interactive, generative, and visual poetry.

However, in Polish electronic literature, the word is more valued than the form, since the latter is based on relatively simple software, created by the author himself (Radosław Nowakowski) or with the help of only one other person (cf. Sławomir Shuty, collaborating with Mariusz Pisarski on his hypertext novel *Blok*, Kondrad Polak was helped by Piot Marecki in his work on the first i-phone novel, *Schemat*. It is interesting that those helpers are journalists, critics and publishers, not IT specialists). Shuty has no understanding of hypertext; he does not know its history or the mechanism of its operation. He seems to have been invited to do a project and taken it on without much reflection. Interviewed by Urszula Pawlicka, Shuty admits: "Unfortunately, I do not follow the developments on the hypertext scene, and I am not familiar with the discourse on this topic".<sup>10</sup> Radosław Nowakowski admits: "I haven't read any hypertext novel. I have never gained any theoretical background. I did have a practical one in the form of my books".<sup>11</sup> This is another feature that distinguishes Polish hypertext scene. Obviously, there are pros and cons of such a situation. While the form of their works may not be technologically sophisticated, the content is highly valuable, and when reading foreign digital works, we may get an impression that they are only meant to play on form, and the content remains secondary or even irrelevant.

Most Polish digital works in fact carry a message independently of technology. This makes one wonder why they are made digitally, when they would still be fully-fledged works without this. We come to realise that those hypertext works are simply rendered in the digital mode, and were not designed specifically as digital from the start. Furthermore, their authors have not created their texts in close cooperation with IT specialists, as it is done in the United States. Their works are

<sup>9</sup> In the original Polish, Chwistek used phonetic spelling, which made the text look very fresh and unconventional: „poezja formistyczna łączy się ściśle z zagadnieniem rozszeżenia języka, co jest stałą cechą każdej ludzkiej się do życia poezji. Prucz tego odgrywa zasadniczą rolę neuhwytność samych zdażeń. Czynniki te są wystarczającą podstawą do pobudzenia żywiołowej twórczości poetuw, prowadząc ih niezależnie od wszelkiej teorii na właściwy teren” (L. Chwistek, „O poezji”, Nuż w brzuchu 2 jednodniuwka futurystuw wydańe nadzwyczajne, Krakuw – Warszawa 1921).

<sup>10</sup> U. Pawlicka, *O czynie, który wyprzedza myśl. Ze Sławomirem Shutym rozmawiała Urszula Pawlicka*, <http://niedoczytania.pl/o-czynie-ktory-wyprzedza-mysl-ze-slawomirem-shutym-rozmawiala-urszula-pawlicka/> (19/07/2017).

<sup>11</sup> R. Nowakowski, *Rashomon do potęgi entej*, in: *Litemet.pl*, ed. P. Marecki, Rabid, Kraków 2003, p. 11.

published for free on the Internet, or turned out by the independent publishing house Ha!art, proclaiming itself to be interested in everything that is not economically lucrative; they are known mainly to the researchers in media studies and culture, less often philologists. Interestingly, digital literature abroad is discussed as part of the comparative literature courses at the faculties of philology, but as for Polish such literature, the persistent belief is that it cannot be classified as a separate literary genre, and it is largely ignored. It is discussed by small groups of devotees (e.g. at the meetings organised by the Liternet Foundation) or at small conferences (e.g. *Od liberatury do e-literatury* in 2009); critical writings on digital literature always turn out the same names. A researcher looking for some sources finds many stumps, compilations, re-hashed versions of the same article etc. This is aptly illustrated by the quotation from *Zwał* by Shuty, which sums up such an academic scene as "the world of mini quotes, samples, collages and borrowings [which] resembles fishing for the more appetizing pieces in a goulash soup...".<sup>12</sup>

There are two major terms in Polish for "HTML literature" of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: Jerzy Ablewicz's *litenet*, and *e-liberature* coined by Agnieszka Przybyszewska. *Litenet*, which is a blend of *literature* and *Internet*, encompasses both "literature on the Internet", i.e. digitalized literature, and "world wide web literature", i.e. digital literature. *E-liberature* is a term based on the concept of *liberature* (literature whose material form is as essential as its content) proposed by Katarzyna Bazarzik and Zenon Fajfer, and denotes liberature created on/for the Internet, in which this fact is a fundamental element. Among the forms of this kind of literature it is worth mentioning collaborative fiction, e.g. *Krótką historią Iwony Tramp* by Krystyna Kofta (2000/2001) or *Rok bez siedmiu minut* (2001) by Jerzy Pilch. New hypertext literature includes, most importantly, *Blok* (2006) by Shuty, which is partly a hypertext novel, and many others, like *Tramwaje w przestrzeniach zespolonych* and *Kooky Ja Said* by Dr Muto, *Gmachy Trwonienia Czasu* by xnauta, rh+ by Joanna Roszak or *Carlos* by Jarosław Szatkiewicz. *Koniec świata według Emeryka* by Radosław Nowakowski would fall into the category of e-liberature, as would another hypertext project by the same author, entitled *Liberland* (2010), in which he declares:

This is my state. My country. Neither democracy, nor a kingdom. A textdom. A hypertextdom. A work in constant progress. Endless construction. Infinite reconstruction. A tale having its beginning in the middle and being developed and spread in all directions. A free book for a free reader. You pay almost nothing visiting this country, only the time you waste on reading. You can even earn a little for you can always spend the same time doing something even more needless and unnecessary.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> S. Shuty, *Zwał*, W.A.B, Warszawa 2004, p. 126.

<sup>13</sup> R. Nowakowski, *Liberland*, <http://liberatorium.republika.pl/liberlandia.html> (21/07/2017).

As summed up in one critical source<sup>14</sup>,

[Polish digital literature] differs from such foreign literature in the conscious serendipity of its interrelations and bolder, I'd say swashbuckling, charges into the unknown. Polish hypertext authors seem to shun reconstructive, post-structural or postmodernist inspirations. They find their points of reference in visual literature, concrete poetry (Szczerbowski), literature as a new literary genre (Nowakowski) or naive and primitive forms (Shuty).

There are three major formations to be mentioned in regard to Polish electronic poetry: Perfokarta, Cichy Nabiau and *Rozdzielczość Chleba*. An attempt at a chronological presentation of the scene would yield the following order of events<sup>15</sup>: 2003 is marked by the online publication of Michał Kaczyński's volume *warszawa płonie* (2002) in which the verbal content is enriched by illustrations and graphic layout. Two years later, Roman Bromboszcz and Tomasz Misiak (with occasional collaboration of other artists on projects), launched a non-commercial collective KALeKa (a blend of the Polish words *kalka* 'calque' and *kaleka* 'cripple'), which combines poetry, sound and animation, resulting in visual, sound, and text poetry. In 2005 the same authors formed Perfokarta, a group known not only for working out the theoretical grounds of cyber poetry, but also for their practical application in the form of cyber-projects, which paved the way for electronic poetry in Poland. In 2006 Nescitus (Paweł Kozioł) published *Low Fidelity. Hiperpoemat*, a hypertext narrative poem in construction. One year later, Zenon Fajfer created his kinetic acrostic *Ars Poetica*. 2008 was marked by two events: the launch of the art blog of Cichy Nabiau, and the publication of the volume *digital. prayer* by Roman Bromboszcz, which experimented with typography. In 2011 Tomasz Wilmański started writing concrete digital poetry (*EMOH2*), Leszek Onak and Łukasz Podgórn established the publishing project *Rozdzielczość Chleba* (replacing Cichy Nabiau's *Dom Szkocki*) and launched a magazine of the same title; Roman Bromboszcz published his volume *Hx*. A year later, three digital poetry volumes were published: another one by Bromboszcz entitled *U-man i masa; noce i pętle* by Podgórn, and *Zespół Szkół* by Tomasz Pułka. The same year saw the publication of animation poetry *C(n) Du It* by Katarzyna Giełżyńska and the volume entitled *918-578* by Bromboszcz. There was also an attempt at adapting the Formist poetry of Tytus Czyżewski<sup>16</sup> by Pawlicka and Podgórn, resulting in the project entitled *Cyfrowe Zielone Oko*, which features hypertext, interactive, visual, and generative poetry.

<sup>14</sup> P. Marecki, M. Pisarski (eds.), *Hiperteksty literackie. Literatura i nowe media*, Korporacja Ha!art, Kraków 2011, p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> Chronology after U. Pawlicka, *(Polska) poezja cybernetyczna. Konteksty i charakterystyka*, Korporacja Ha!art, Kraków 2012.

<sup>16</sup> Tytus Czyżewski (1880-1945) - Polish avant-garde painter and poet; his first poetry volume is *Zielone oko*.



Figure 5. Cichy Nabiau, *Cyber%ul 2014 (S)hit Mix*, <http://rozdzielchleb.pl/cichy-nabiau-cyberzul-2014-shit-mix/> (30/06/2017)

While the earlier, more experienced Polish authors of digital literature (Shuty, Nowakowski) did not draw inspiration from its foreign representatives, the younger ones soak up all the novelties from abroad ("smartliterature" = literature + smartphone, Twitterature = literature + Twitter, cyber-poetry).

A certain infatuation of the younger authors with the foreign trends can be also seen in the marketing and promotion of books: book trailers (e.g. *Biuro zagubionych zabawek* by Iwona Czarkowska, animation (Roman Bromboszcz), viral marketing. The last one can be found in Konrad Polak's work entitled *Schemat* (a hyperlink takes us to the webpage of the Ha!art publishing house, where we find *One hundred million million poems* by Raymond Queneau, which is on offer), smartphone novels, described by *Słownik Gatunków Literatury Cyfrowej* as

literary works adjusted to the systems, interfaces and reading habits typical of mobile devices, like smartphones, which – in terms of their advanced technology and use – may be regarded as placed between the systems, interfaces and reading habits typical of desktop and portable computers, and traditional mobile phones. A distinguishing feature of this genre of works is a special physical text placement; a composition which complies with screen limitations (e.g. literature delivered in portions and in sessions, small screen to display the text) and also a multi-platform way of distribution.<sup>17</sup>

Apart from smartphone novels, there are also smartphone short stories by Piotr Kowalczyk, who writes under the pseudonym Niżej podpisany (Nick Name in English). We consider him to be the most interesting, multidimensional, and experimental of all Polish digital writers. This digital storyteller is relentless in his search for novelty: his current interest is in poetry based on bar codes (using a mobile phone, we will be scanning bar codes from products and leaving comments using a special application called StickyBits, making the best of the mundane and the ethereal<sup>18</sup>). For all the reasons mentioned above, we have decided to look more closely at his work.

Nick Name's short stories making up the collections *Password Incorrect* and *Failure Confirmed* belong to the category of so-called "geek fiction". The introduction to *Password Incorrect* presents the stories as follows:

5 short, sometimes funny and sometimes mean stories ideal to rediscover the joy of reading a book as shiny and beautiful as a brand new cell phone. A look

<sup>17</sup> *Słownik Gatunków Literatury Cyfrowej*, entry by M. Pisarski, <http://www.ha.art.pl/prezentacje>

<sup>18</sup> /42-sownik-terminow-literatury-cyfrowej/2129-sownik-terminow-literatury-cyfrowej-powiesc-na-smartfona.html (20/07/2017).

U. Pawlicka, *W roli przedskoczka. Z Piotrem Kowalczykiem rozmawiała Urszula Pawlicka*, <http://niedoczytania.pl/w-roli-przedskoczka-z-piotrem-kowalczykiem-rozmawiala-urszula-pawlicka/> (20/07/2017).

from a distance at the absurdity of our present day lives: fights with the less and less comprehensible equipment, pursuit of the latest technological news, pitfalls of our modern lifestyle, useless inventions and issues racing in all directions at breakneck speed. A lot of entertainment and a little food for thought. Just perfect for the moment when you're finally bored with exploring the alarm settings on your new iPhone.<sup>19</sup>

Another one of his stories begins in a similar way:

Because this story will be painfully banal, it will be also painfully short. Peter Maria Kędzierzyna of the Tschekan coat-of-arms bought himself the newest model of a 25<sup>th</sup> generation cell phone from Siemens-BenQNokia-LG ABC 123, incorporating all achievements of the human race up to the time when Bill Gates became an honorary president of the United States.<sup>20</sup>

Nick Name is also the author of *Tech Quotes*, in which he replaces the human perspective by the technological one, i.e. the viewpoint of robots, computers, gadgets etc. This lets us know what technology would make of us. The following are two bits of such robot wisdom. The first one is the Robot Proverb: "The most dangerous thing about humans is that they are so irrational"<sup>21</sup>, the second one is an observation by an Intel Microprocessor: "Man's microprocessor is called 'brain' and it's an awful waste of space".<sup>22</sup> On the one hand, those are playful and tongue-in-cheek; on the other, a bitter reflection "that we humans are not the only ones to be right and own truth".<sup>23</sup>

Another experiment of Nick Name is *One Picture Stories*. They are picture stories created for an iPhone, which Kowalczyk calls iPhone Stories. These images show the influence of technology, especially the social media, on our lives. Kowalczyk is also a literary twitterer – he creates literary works of up to 140 characters (which is the limitation imposed by Twitter). One example of this twitterature is: "A bottle of bug fixes, please. 'Universal?' 'No, Android only, I'm on a diet.'"<sup>24</sup> The author demonstrates that despite the limited form, the content does not have to be minimalistic; on the contrary, it becomes an incentive for unconventional creative description of today's world. He says about Twitter fiction: "Our lives are turning digital and the stories are designed to grasp the dynamics of the process. I have been creating them since early 2009. This site is mobile-friendly, you can

<sup>19</sup> Feedbooks, <http://www.feedbooks.com/book/3127/password-incorrect> (20/07/2017).

<sup>20</sup> P. Kowalczyk, *Password Incorrect*, transl. A. Etmańska, BookRix Edition, Munich 2008, p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> P. Kowalczyk, *Password Incorrect Blog*, <http://www.passwordincorrect.com/2011/05/22/tech-quotes-what-would-technology-say-about-humans/> (21/07/2017).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> P. Kowalczyk, Twitter Fiction, <http://twitterfiction.passwordincorrect.com/> Posted on 30 June, 2013. (20/07/2017).

open it from your phone”.<sup>25</sup> Polish and foreign twitterature began to appear in 2009, and its culmination is *#VSS Anthology. A Twitter Anthology of Very Short Stories # Vol. 1*, a world anthology of microprose made public on Twitter, published by Brent Millis in 2010, which also features works by Nick Name. He also has a blog at <http://www.passwordincorrect.com/> where he writes about e-literature, sharing his experiences as the author of digital literature, and giving tips on how to write for mobile devices and how to publish one’s work. In all his writings, Nick Name perceives the world of new technology with irony, and looks at it with a sneer, a smile, and puts it into perspective. He often employs humour: “Between his 798,785<sup>th</sup> and 798,786<sup>th</sup> tweet, Alan even managed to talk to his family: ‘I’m hungry, please retweet’”.<sup>26</sup> The author also frequently relies on hashtagging (#), which is used to tag posts to facilitate the location of tweets relating to the same tag, and to create so-called hashtag stories, which he describes as an “attempt at reaching the most intimate emotions”.<sup>27</sup> Hashtag stories, in the words of the author, are a simple recipe for a mash-up (a new work created on the basis of already existing ones) which is a huge challenge, not only because of the limitation imposed by the number of signs, but also by the character and number of the available tags. Such stories can be also classed as hypertext, because hashtags are nothing more than links that send us to other variations of the same tag. This is one example of a hashtag story: “#iremember #inhighschool #crashlove #ashes #IAmAGrownUp”.<sup>28</sup> Twitterature has a lot in common with the tradition of micro-stories, which are characterized by lack of description, or even anti-description, speed, brevity, fragmentation, creative minimalism. The difference is in the medium, the mode of writing/ reading, and in a more precise and rigorous sign limitation (140); it is a kind of digital hyper-micro-story, a micro-story befitting the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Let us make here two short digressions. Another twitterature author, though not as creative as Kowalczyk, is Piotr Wereśniak, the author of *Twitter Fiction. 37 ultra short stories in English and Polish*. This bilingual collection came out in the late summer of 2009. This is a sample story: “The big whale was lying on the beach and looking at the stars. ‘Can someone write about me on Twitter?’ he thought.”<sup>29</sup> Closely related to Twitterature is text messaging poetry, represented e.g. by *Esemesy z dnia na dzień. Książka dla wszystkich i dla nikogo* [Text messages from day to day. A book for everyone and no one] from 2003 by Marek Oktawian Bulanowski, who “inhabits the Polish lang, which he trits az a uzeful enaf tul to

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> B. Millis (ed.), *#VSSAnthology. A Twitter Anthology of Very Short Stories # Vol. 1*, Smashwords Edition, Los Gatos (CA) 2010, p. 27.

<sup>27</sup> U. Pawlicka, *W roli przedskoczka...*

<sup>28</sup> B. Millis (ed.), *#VSS Anthology...*

<sup>29</sup> P. Wereśniak, *37 ultra short stories in English and Polish*, s.n., s.l. 2009, p. 13.

pursue kreatif aktywności"[inhabits the Polish language, which he treats as a useful enough tool to pursue creative activities].<sup>30</sup>

Coming back to Kowalczyk again, it is worth mentioning that his work is also interesting for those interested in translation and new technology. In his *Google-translated fiction*, also known as *Transtories*, the author makes use of the automatic Google translator. The challenge consists here in writing the story in Polish in such a way that mistakes can be avoided in Google translation and the text can be translated into all 50 different languages that Google supplies; this is a kind of literature created specifically with Google in mind. It is worth emphasizing that both the Polish and the English versions come out at the very same time. As the author himself points out, it is about drawing our attention to the fact that "the Internet and new technology eliminate communication barriers between people".<sup>31</sup> The fragment below comes from the story "04.Video from Cairo" posted on 9 February 2011:

Adam Labbe watched the news from Egypt, when he heard a loud rumble from outside. Without thinking, he quickly ran to the window. A speeding ambulance crashed into an old van, carrying a cage of birds. A cloud of white doves rose into the air. Then came a new message: "we need you in Cairo, immediately, a matter of life and death!"<sup>32</sup>

It comes together with a Google map indicating the spot where the described event took place (Google Maps also featured in Charles Cummings' story "21 steps"). More interestingly, other young generation writers, even not necessarily the digital ones, also find inspiration in Google. For example, Dorota Masłowska's book *Honey, I Have Killed Our Cats* shows her inspiration by the errors in Google translations. As she has put it, "our mother tongue is Google Translator"<sup>33</sup>, and her book is filled with artificial phrases, calques, and language mutilations resulting from mechanical translation. Nick Name's works also provide a distorting-mirror linguistic image of people's addiction to novelties and technological gadgets. Even the author describes himself as a techno-absurdist. The Internet is his source of inspiration, something that enables him to create, but also the object of criticism, irony and sarcasm. The author explains that these two opposing worlds can come together:

Because a large portion of our daily stresses and strains comes from using technology, and because it has a way of imperceptibly influencing our lives,

<sup>30</sup> M. Bulanowski, *Strefa blogeratury*, <http://bulanowski.pl> (21/07/2017).

<sup>31</sup> U. Pawlicka, *W roli przedskoczka...*

<sup>32</sup> P. Kowalczyk, *Transtories*, <http://transtory.passwordincorrect.com/04-video-ffom-cairo> (21/07/2017).

<sup>33</sup> D. Masłowska, *Kochanie, zabiłam nasze koty*, Noir sur Blanc, Warszawa 2012, back cover.

I want to express and immortalise it by the very medium – among other things Twitter and hashtags – a communication means that it started.<sup>34</sup>

The majority of Polish Internet users have not yet accepted „HTML literature”. They often react to it with disregard and mockery. Polish e-literature is often more visible and much more appreciated abroad than in Poland, which is quite absurd, as such literature has roots in the Polish avant-garde. It is a real pity that the Polish public is so conservative, It is high time to break the mould and tame the beast of new technologies in literature; not indiscriminately, but in the manner of the HTML writers – so that the new technologies do not paralyze us.

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<sup>34</sup> U. Pawlicka, *W roli przedkoczka...*

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## **MIĘDZY ZNAKIEM A SŁOWEM WE WSPÓŁCZESNEJ POLSKIEJ LITERATURZE „HTML”. POSTAWANGARDOWI SPADKOBIERCY MODERNISTYCZNEJ TYPOGRAFII (streszczenie)**

Jednym z bardziej wyrazistych trendów polskiej literatury XXI wieku jest literatura cyfrowa, czyli HTML. Chcąc oddać główny zamysł piśmiennictwa HTML należy wziąć pod uwagę dzieła odznaczające się zautonomizowaniem słowa oraz wyizolowaniem słów z kontekstu językowego i rzeczywistości pozajęzykowej tak, „żeby słowo samo w sobie i dla siebie znaczyło” - jak twierdził już od końca lat 60 XX w. przedstawiciel polskiego *language art'u* (czyli poezji konkretnej) Stanisław Drózd. Autorki upatrują protoplastów takiego traktowania wypowiedzi literackiej w okresie Wielkiej Awangardy - można odwołać się tu do wystąpień polskich formistów i konstruktywistów (początkiem są literackie manifesty i wiersze Tytusa Czyżewskiego z 1921 r., kontynuacją działania polskich konstruktywistów, takich jak Henryk Berlewi, Mieczysław Szczuka, Teresa Żarnowerówna oraz Władysław Strzeмиński; na szczególną uwagę zasługuje ten ostatni artysta). Współcześnie, w XXI w., z podobnego traktowania „wyzolowanego słowa” słynie twórczość Piotra Kowalczyka (występującego pod pseudonimem Niżej podpisany, ang. Nick Name), autora *iPhone Stories*, *Twitter Fiction*, *Tech Quotes*, *Transtories*, oraz *Short stories for geeks*.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Wielka Awangarda, "literatura HTML", sztuki wizualne, XX i XXI wiek, polska poezja awangardowa.



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## **BAUHAUS – THE SCHOOL THAT BECAME THE AVANT-GARDE**

**Abstract:** The article presents the Bauhaus school as an idea that was not intended to start an independent movement, but to be one of the styles of modern art education. The school founded by Voltaire Gropius was based on the foundation of arts and crafts education which developed in the era of the Art Nouveau. The author shows the evolution of the Bauhaus, which existed barely fourteen years, but its myth spread to the entire 20<sup>th</sup> and now the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The article also touches on the difficult political context in which Bauhaus' was launched and developed. Every contemporary designer must know this German school and should be able to define his/her work in relation to its achievements, but at the same time s/he must remember that the gas chambers of the Nazi concentration camps were also built by the Bauhaus architects. It is a difficult legacy and a difficult avant-garde.

**Keywords:** Bauhaus, Auschwitz, the avant-garde, design, Art Nouveau Tadeusz Peiper, Walter Gropius.

### **Gropius' school**

Tadeusz Peiper, a Polish poet, critic, and essayist visited the German Bauhaus School in 1927, during his stay in the then Weimar Republic, where he had gone to handle some artistic and personal affairs. He described the visit extensively on the pages of "Zwrotnica", a journal devoted to new art and literature:

Bauhaus, the one in Dessau. [...] Three hours on a regular train from Berlin. We arrive at five o'clock in the evening. The legs on the stairs leading out of the station's tunnel are already an indication that this is a provincial area. It is not a Prussian province, however. [...] This is the territory of the Anhalt duchy. Small one- and two-story houses, similar to those in Krakow's Szewska Street or Elektoralna in Warsaw. Around the perimeter of the city chimneys sprout long and red flames. We are in one of the centers of the Central German coal mining region ... There is no time to waste. We need to call Gropius, Director of the Bauhaus. We go to a café. I start making phone calls. He is in! He is

very happy, invites us to stay at his house for the night, comes to get us at the café in his directorial car. A noble face, wrapped in fatigue, tensed with truth.<sup>1</sup>

Peiper's writings, dressed in literary ornamentation, provide an observant description, juxtaposing the parochialism of the surroundings with the nonchalance and modernity associated with Walter Gropius, the modernist architect, the principal originator of a school that was initially known as the *bauhaus*, consistently spelled in lowercase. It was primarily a school of contemporary thinking about applied arts, originally established in 1919 in Weimar as a result of the merger of the Academy of Fine Arts with the School of Arts and Crafts. As an art school, it was intended to train excellent craftsmen, who would go on to work in the name of the principle specified in the program manifesto, namely that "art is not a profession" and "mastery of skill is essential for every artist." Gropius perceived the school as the embodiment of the German Romantic idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the total work, understood as a perfect building. The founding manifesto was also based on an ideology that referred to the utopian vision of society without class divisions, rooted in the left-wing notion of the needs of modern communities. Gropius wrote:

Let us create a new *guild of craftsmen*, without the class distinctions which rise an arrogant between craftsman and artist. Together, let us conceive and create a new building of the future, which will embrace architecture *and* sculpture *and* painting in one unity and which will one day rise toward heaven from the hands of a million workers, like the crystal symbol of the new faith.<sup>2</sup>

Scholars might find it intriguing that the manifesto was untitled; it was only decorated by Lyonel Feininger's lithography titled *The Cathedral*, therefore, text and image should be read as a mutually complementary semantic unity:

The immediacy with which the image addresses the viewer is echoed in the immediacy of the text's appeal. Text and image – at least this seems to be the case – complement one another, all the more so since a few detail in the image can be interpreted as the faithful translation of particular phrases: for instance, the different parts of the building, which refer to the composite character of a building, or the stars, which could describe art's *Lichtmomente* (this term – literally light moments – means moments of inspiration). Together they establish the context for the proper understanding of the *Program of Staatliches Bauhaus in Weimar*.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> T. Peiper, *W Bauhausie*, in: idem *Tędy. Nowe usta*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1972, p. 164. The text was first printed in June 1927 in „Zwrotnica.”

<sup>2</sup> W. Gropius as cited in Gillian Naylor, *Bauhaus*, Littlehampton 1968, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> M. Bushart, *It Began with a Misunderstanding. Feininger's Cathedral and the Bauhaus Manifesto*, in: *Bauhaus a conceptual model*, Haitje Cantz Verlag, Berlin 2009, p. 31.

The complementarity of the text and the image of the cathedral was intentional. Gropius was a trained architect, and it is well known that sacred buildings, especially the ones from the Gothic era, are characterized by both artistry and aesthetic craftsmanship. Medieval engineering and artistic unity was a tradition that was to be revived by founding an art school for modern man. In the structure of the Bauhaus we find many more allusions to the certainly phantasmagorical vision of the medieval community of artisans and artists.

It should be pointed out that Gropius' school was not intended as yet another avant-garde trend, but was primarily meant to teach. Today, we consider it one of the movements within the scope of the avant-garde thinking about art in the twentieth century, focusing mainly on design. Years ago, Stefan Morawski distinguished the constitutive features of the phenomenon of the avant-garde, which consisted of: time constraints, occurrence in various socio-political contexts, which resulted in an emphasis on the issues of form or content. The scholar also pointed out that the avant-garde was associated with the civilizational progress of the bourgeoisie.<sup>4</sup> The story of the Bauhaus proves that the Polish aesthetician was correct in his assessment, as the school was only active for fourteen years and was affected by various social and political influences. Its accomplishments and great aesthetic success are unmistakably linked with the development of the middle class in the second half of the twentieth century.

At the 2009 exhibition *Bauhaus, a Conceptual Model*, Annemarie Jaeggi, Director of the Bauhaus-Archiv in Berlin suggested that Gropius had created a conceptual model of teaching which can be used to explain both the *raison d'être* of the school and its function in the contemporary reception of avant-garde trends:

Answers to these questions may be discovered – if one approaches the Bauhaus as a conceptual model. In this context, the term *model* should be understood in two different ways: first, in the broadest sense, as an ideal, prototype, and model, exemplar and image, measure and standard, guideline and reference object. Secondly, a model can also be a means for concretizing circumstances, relationships, and structures (whether verbal or visual), hence rendering them comprehensible. Underlying all models is capacity to function regulatively and provide definitions.<sup>5</sup>

Jaeggi also drew attention to an important detail concerning the name itself. Defining the school, Gropius did not use any of the available and popular formulas<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. P.J. Przybysz, A. Zajdler-Janiszewska, *Stefan Morawski - wstępny szkic do portretu* in: S. Morawski, *Wybór pism estetycznych*, Universitas, Kraków 2007.

<sup>5</sup> A. Jaeggi, *Bauhaus: a Conceptual Model in: Bauhaus a conceptual model*, Haitje Cantz Verlag, Berlin 2009, p. 13.

<sup>6</sup> Jaeggi cites the following example: in 1924 in Berlin, Bruno Paul founded the school: Vereinigte Staatsschulen für freie und angewandte Kunst (United State Schools for Free and Applied Art).

that would be relevant to any educational purpose. The name of the school was a reference to the medieval *Bauhütte*, meaning a thatched roof. Symbolically, it was meant to unify all artistic disciplines. Bauhaus was also supposed to be a byword that would become a brand used to easily identify all extra-institutional activities of the school, that is the Bauhaus Week, the Bauhaus Dance, the Bauhaus Festival, or the Bauhaus Books. Oskar Schlemmer, one of the school's charismatic teachers, even designed the Bauhaus signet ring for outstanding school personalities. "Small wonder, then, that as early as the late 1920s, the advertising and fashion industries appropriated the exceedingly efficacious label *Bauhaus style* for anything and everything that appeared modern and functional in the broadest sense – and in contradiction to the school's self-image, which to be sure saw itself as trendsetting, but by no means wanted to create a signature style."<sup>7</sup> It was the first school in the history of artistic education that built its brand from the very beginning. It is interesting to note that before the Bauhaus fully shaped the product, the economic and social market sanctioned the brand and even transferred it through the system of culture.

The fact that Gropius was accepting everyone regardless of age or nationality contributed to the popularization of the school. Moreover, the curriculum diverged considerably from the academic requirements. Academic titles were abandoned and the names of craftsmen's guilds re-established. Thus, there were no "professors" and "students," just "masters," "journeymen" and "apprentices." Education consisted of two basic segments: practical and theoretical. The former provided knowledge of materials and processes of production and the latter involved teaching how to produce perfect shapes of the designed objects. Instruction was divided into three thematic blocks: observation or study of nature; representation, including geometry, construction theory, design drawing and modeling; composition, including the theory of space and color. Over the course of the education process, the trainee attended three courses, the most famous of which was the first one, which lasted six months and "was intended to liberate the student from all conventional knowledge he had so far acquired and introduce him to the theory and practice of the craft."<sup>8</sup> After completing it, the would-be graduate went to workshops where the study lasted three full years and ended with an exam and the title of "journeyman". The third stage was the specialization: weaving, ceramics, carpentry and architecture. The students did not only learn valuable craftsmanship skills, but also carried out external orders for specific projects for which they received remuneration. Gropius developed a circular diagram in order to present his views, the center of which was the *bau*, or building, the main purpose of the education, understood both metaphorically and practically. Regardless of all efforts to create craft and creative workshops, the field that was the most important for the school was the architectural education.

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<sup>7</sup> A. Jaeggi, p. 14.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

In 1919, the curriculum attracted more than 200 pupils from Weimar, aged 17 to 40. Gropius accepted a total of 106 men and 101 women,

which demonstrates the modern character of the Bauhaus as the first school to respect gender equality and promote women's emancipation. Thus, women enrolled there to study, hoping to break out as artists in a traditionally male dominated environment. In fact [however], (...) this *man of the future*, who was supposed to be shaped by the school, was male because in the organization of studies the issue of educating women was not entirely solved.<sup>9</sup>

The female students were mainly sent to the weaving workshop, sometimes to the bookbinding studio or pottery workshop. Until the end of the school's existence, the female enrollment rate was around 30% of the total intake.

The first students were recruited mostly from among the soldiers who had experienced the trauma of the First World War. Their financial situation was often borderline destitution. Understanding the struggles of his students, Gropius obtained permission from the Minister of Education of Weimar to temporarily abolish tuition fees. Gillian Naylor, the author of the monograph of the school, emphasized that the students, after the hard time of the war, needed a sense of community and a purpose in life. The school gave them both, as one of them recalled:

"I was not financially secure, but I decided to enroll at the Bauhaus. It was after the war. The carefree and complete lives we lived in those years made us forget our poverty. Bauhaus members hailed from all social classes. Some still wore their uniforms, others were barefoot or in sandals, others with beards of artists or ascetics."<sup>10</sup>

Analyzing the Bauhaus phenomenon in the context of other artistic communities in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Małgorzata Leyko emphasized the uniqueness and distinctiveness of Gropius' school. The scholar referred to the concept of *Lebensreform*, which emerged in the German culture of the time as a general idea, referring to all types of reform measures, which challenged and opposed the progress of industrialization and urbanization of life. Significantly, the Bauhaus emerged after the defeat of Germany in the First World War. "In the universal atmosphere of the dissolution of the former socio-economic order and aggravating political struggles, the Bauhaus was to be an island of positive thinking, progressive artistic activity and all ideological influences. The Bauhaus *Lebensreform* program was primarily concerned with the

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<sup>9</sup> M. Leyko, *Teatr w krainie utopii, słowo/obraz terytoria*, Gdańsk 2012, p. 241.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

radical modernization of everyday life, engendered by artists – designers and craftsmen.”<sup>11</sup> That is why Gropius’ curriculum consisted of more than just teaching specific subjects. Bauhaus was a school of life, a style of new student existence extending beyond the school’s venue, as various public exhibitions, festivals and other events were held in Weimar and Dessau.

The introductory course was taught by Johannes Itten, who developed his own teaching methods. He was a painter, in his youth associated with the German Expressionist group *Der Blaue Reiter*, later also sympathizing with the Parisian Cubists. There were numerous anecdotes about his classes, which were considered extremely difficult because Itten focused on teaching colors and shapes by awakening the intuitive imagination of the students. Also famous was his eccentric character – he would arrive in the classroom wearing unconventional outfits. In addition, he kept a “catalog of original hairstyles” and once had a star shaved on the back of his head. He also followed a macrobiotic diet regimen and belonged to a mystical cult inspired by Zoroastrianism. Deyan Sudjic, a design historian, believes that the school was “a hothouse for squabbling exhibitionists, philanderers and egotists struggling for position.”<sup>12</sup> The teachers allegedly had a habit of seducing their female students and constantly fought and bickered amongst themselves, while the students were notorious for their drunkenness and brawling.

Although it existed only briefly, the school fundamentally changed the image and the role of art. It created the aesthetics of simple forms, putting the principle of functionality first. In his examination of Gropius' activity, Sudjic believes that he had a clearly defined plan for what the design of the society of the machine era should look like. Appreciating the functional thinking inspired by the Bauhaus education, Leyko argues that the design of a comprehensive system of everyday objects covering a wide range of art, from buildings, furniture, fabrics or lighting to subjugating the modes of people’s movement in the newly defined space

was intended to liberate the user from fetishization of objects, and in consequence directly affect the way of life. Therefore, even though artistic design was meant to operate on a different scale, it was in principle developed from (...) the utopian belief in the possibility of making changes in the world through art, and thus faith in the precedence of art / artist over political interests and social processes.<sup>13</sup>

In order to achieve his goal, the director was ready to accept the diversity of political, social, and artistic views of his staff.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 233-234.

<sup>12</sup> D.Sudjic, *B is for Bauhaus, Y is for YouTube: Designing the Modern World from A to Z*, Rizzoli Ex Libris, New York 2015, p. 29.

<sup>13</sup> M. Leyko, *Teatr w krainie utopii*, p. 234.

<sup>14</sup> Sudjic believes that Gropius “put talent well ahead of adherence to any specific party line. and he was ready to make the most of the gifts of his ideological opponents,” p. 29-30.

With all the artistic eclecticism that existed in the Bauhaus education system from the beginning, modern scholars are surprised by the lack of general education in the humanities in the school's curriculum. There was no literature, poetry or philosophy, not even aesthetics. Attention is also drawn by the relatively insignificant involvement of the students in the political and social situation of Germany, for example the failed Munich coup of Adolf Hitler and General Erich Ludendorff, which took place on the night of 8 November 1923. Although one may conclude that the attitude of focusing mainly on work in the craft workshops certainly helped the school to steer clear of many problems, especially in the early days, politics was nevertheless entangled in the story of the Bauhaus.<sup>15</sup> In the mid-1920s, the school turned out to be inconvenient for Weimar, especially when the right-wing party won the local elections. Gropius had to find another place. Frankfurt offered to take the school. In 1925, the director chose Dessau, a town near Berlin, which had an ambitious mayor and showed a willingness to finance the construction of the school building.

In 1928, forced to focus on his own work as an architect, Gropius stepped down as the head of the school, and Hannes Meyer, a Swiss architect with strong Marxist leanings, took over. During his tenure, the school changed its educational profile, and the new director departed from the utopian vision of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* towards more practical, even popular solutions, making the Bauhaus products accessible and common. The school, among other things, received a lucrative contract from the city of Dessau for the design of social housing. Bauhaus workshops produced a commercially successful wallpaper pattern. The growing Nazi party even planned to use it to decorate the main building of the National Socialists' HQ. Despite this financial success, Meyer soon faced a difficult choice, as a group of students wanted to organize a Communist Party base on campus. The director was asked by the Dessau authorities to regulate the situation and expel the students. Meyer refused. At that point, Gropius was asked to replace the school's director. In 1930, the founder of the Bauhaus entrusted this position to Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, an architect from Belgium. The latter, understanding the importance of the school, wanted to keep it functioning in spite of the increasingly unfavorable political circumstances. First, he expelled all of the communist students, and then he decided to transfer the school to Berlin. Unfortunately, his efforts did not bring the expected result, and when he came to work one day in 1932, van der Rohe found Gestapo officers on the premises. It was the end of the innovative educational institution.

The Nazis were not satisfied with closing down the school, they also wanted to demolish the building in Dessau, designed by Gropius in 1926. It consisted of three wings, which were designed to serve various purposes: to house the work-

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. D.R. Winkler, *Moralność i mit. Bauhaus - próba nowej oceny*, Polish transl. K. Szymaniak and Adam Puchejda in: *Wybór najważniejszych tekstów o dizajnie*. Widzieć-Wiedzieć, eds. Przemek Dębowski and Jacek Mrowczyk, Wydawnictwo Karakter, Kraków 2015, p. 437-447.

shops, administration, and a student dormitory. The structure was based on a reinforced concrete framework, finished with white plaster with light grey accents. The fascist press wrote in reference to the first brochure advertising the school with Gropius' manifesto and Feininger's lithography, of "the Bauhaus that was the cathedral of Marxism, a cathedral, however, which damned well looked like a synagogue."<sup>16</sup> Despite such radical and at the same time destructive (in the light of the ideology of that era) associations being employed in the propaganda rhetoric, the building actually remained intact. In the 1940s, it served as a school for Nazi officials, and later it was converted into an aircraft equipment factory. During the Communist era, it fell into disrepair. Currently, the building has been restored and in 1999 it was put on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

After Hitler came to power, Gropius, considering his Jewish origin, decided to emigrate via England to the United States. In the US, he also worked as an architect, designing such objects as the Pan Am (now MetLife) skyscraper in Manhattan, New York (1958–1963). From 1937, he lectured at Harvard University's Department of Architecture, where he served as Dean from 1938 to 1952.

The above-mentioned Deyan Sudjic concluded that every successive generation of artists needs to see their own Bauhaus exhibition. At the time when it was active, the school enjoyed enormous prestige. After the Gestapo closed the school, a myth was born that is constantly growing. At present, it is impossible to talk about contemporary design without referencing the Bauhaus achievements. The success of Gropius' school would certainly not have been so spectacular without the teachers who were invited to cooperate. The staff consisted of the most important representatives of the world avant-garde, including Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, László Moholy-Nagy, Kazimir Malevich and Oskar Schlemmer. Sometimes, they represented contradictory views, such as the Expressionism of the *Der Sturm* group, the strong accents of the Russian Constructivism, sympathizing with the Dutch group *De Stijl*, and the spiritual Suprematism. This produced unprecedented effects. The geometric forms of the utility items were developed on the basis of the broad knowledge of the human nature and its biological and spiritual conditioning. The aforementioned Peiper noted a correlation in Gropius' apartment between the objects and the research of human physiology; referring to the simple shape of the chair he was sitting on he called it comfortable, but having the appearance of "medical implements."<sup>17</sup>

### **Strzeмиński and the project of modern artistic education**

In Poland, the principles of Gropius' school met with criticism from Władysław Strzeмиński, the avant-garde painter and art theorist who co-created the artistic

<sup>16</sup> Quote from "Völkischer Beobachter" cited in: *Deyan Sudjic, B is for Bauhaus*, p. 33.

<sup>17</sup> T. Peiper, *W Bauhausie*, p. 165.

groups Blok and Praesens. In 1932, he published an extensive article in the magazine *Droga*, entitled “Modern Art and Art Schools”, discussing the educational methods that had developed in Europe since the Baroque. Against such a broad background, he analyzed the system introduced in the Bauhaus. The Polish avant-garde artist did not like it that the German school was mainly focused on utilitarian art and architecture. He believed that such an approach to teaching bound the artist to the productive nature of the object, which was subject to mass standardization in the process of manufacture. For Strzemiński, the outcome of such education was a distorted perception of the function of art, which should be based on continuous creation, and which involved a laborious creative process. For Strzemiński, Gropius' postulate of utility entailed simplification and even depriving art of its intellectual values. He wrote:

The main drawback of the production schools' curriculum is the static treatment of art, the fact that art is viewed not as a process of becoming, but as a piece of the whole, artificial and unrelated to what caused it. Art is an infinite development. Each closed entity has a certain number of combinations. Once they are exhausted, depletion and degeneration of the system follows.<sup>18</sup>

Strzemiński's diagnosis ended with a pessimistic prophecy that the education initiated at the German school would soon lead to the depletion of the production capacity, due to the limited number of combinations of the commonly useful forms. The artists would also begin to feel the constraints imposed by the education system, which would have a destructive effect on the human creative potential. Ironically, when after the Second World War Strzemiński co-developed the curriculum of the State Higher School of the Arts in Łódź (today the Strzemiński Academy of Fine Arts), he referred to the idea of the Bauhaus. On the one hand, he wanted to create an academy to educate artists and attract creative personalities, but on the other hand, the school would train good craftsmen: apparel designers, shop window designers, and graphic designers working for the propagation of a new society. While Strzemiński did emphasize teaching composition and art history as the theory of artistic vision in his curriculum, it was equally important to study proper apparel design consistent with human anatomy. The word “utility”, hated by the avant-garde in the 1930s, would become important to him when the school was established in the 1940s. It should be noted that, unlike the nineteenth-century model of an art academy, which clearly separated the aspect of mastering the skills from aesthetic qualities, thus introducing a distinction between a craftsman and an artist, the Bauhaus proposed a different understanding of the principles of creative education, as it emphasized the development of individual abilities.

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<sup>18</sup> W. Strzemiński, *Sztuka nowoczesna a szkoły artystyczne*, in: idem *Pisma*, PAN, Warszawa 1975, pp. 159; the text was first published in the magazine *Droga*, 1932, no. 3 p. 258-278.

I believe that Karol Stryjeński was the closest to Gropius' thinking about modern artistic education when, in 1922, he became the principal of the State School of Wood Industry in Zakopane (today the Antoni Kenar School of Art). Stryjeński's students not only honed their professional skills; the principal also put great emphasis on individual artistic development. As a result, at the Exhibition of Decorative Arts in Paris in 1925 the school won three prizes: for woodcutting, for teaching methods and a gold diploma for sculpture. It was one of the most important Polish educational achievements in artistic education in the interwar period.

Now, almost a hundred years after the founding of the Bauhaus in Weimar, one can say that the idea of the school has neither grown old nor has been forgotten, contrary to what Strzemiński predicted. The everyday objects created by the students of the German school continue to be a source of inspiration for contemporary designers, which is most evident in the style represented by the Swedish brand IKEA.<sup>19</sup> The reason for this unceasing popularity is primarily the attitude of Gropius, who from the very beginning of the school's existence did not enclose it in a rigid framework of a single ideology. Although his stance today is criticized by scholars, it should be noted that it was the Bauhaus that laid the foundations of modern, avant-garde approach to design. Its popularization by large corporations only confirms Foster's assertion that avant-garde trends succeed only after some time, and that the beneficiaries of progressive thinking are only the subsequent generations of recipients.

### **Bauhaus - Art Nouveau - Constructivism**

In his analysis of the development of avant-garde trends in the twentieth century, Stefan Morawski noted the lack of a clear delineation that would allow us to pinpoint the exact moment the avant-garde began. The esthetician believed that avant-garde thinking had its roots already in Romanticism, while the explosion of Art Nouveau was evidently a proto-avant-garde movement. At that time, "there was intense artistic confrontation aimed against the rules and norms of academism and dominating canons, coupled with questioning the social status quo and sympathy for certain radical ideologies (Marxism or anarchism) or even engaging on their side. These tendencies intensified during the fin de siècle era within Modernism, on which, in the subsequent phase, the avant-garde proper was formed."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> IKEA is one of the companies of which it can be said that their ideas are derived from the Bauhaus. It offers a uniform style of interior arrangement. The Swedish design is based on simple forms, which are meant to be first and foremost useful.

<sup>20</sup> S. Morawski, *Awangarda i neoawangarda (o dwu formacjach XX wieku)* in: S. Morawski, *Wybór pism estetycznych*, introduced selected and edited by P.J. Przybysz, A. Zeidler-Janiszewska, Universitas, Kraków 2007, p. 200.

The Bauhaus became a model example of the avant-garde rooted in Art Nouveau. Creating the school, Gropius consciously developed the ideas outlined two decades earlier at the Weimar School of Artistic Crafts, which until 1914 was headed by Henry van de Velde, a Belgian painter, architect, furniture designer, and author of complete interior designs. He was one of the most important artists of the Art Nouveau period, famous for his compositional accuracy with which he approached utilitarian art. Mieczysław Wallis,<sup>21</sup> author of the Polish monograph on the artistic movements at the turn of the twentieth century, cites an anecdote about Van de Velde. In 1895, the architect built the “Bloemenwerf” villa for his family in Uccle near Brussels. He designed not only the building, but also the interiors and even the dresses to be worn by his wife as well as the crockery for the particular rooms. The whole set was characterized by compositional consistency, color harmony, and coherence of all the employed patterns. Allegedly, the owner instructed the servants to always put red fruit on green platters. The Belgian artist was the first to design artfully planned objects on such a scale, and was therefore the forerunner of the broad concept of utilitarian art and design in the modern sense of the term.

It should be noted that Art Nouveau has been deliberately mentioned. This trend not only lacks one international name (in Polish it is known as *secesja*, for example), but it also has no uniformity of style. The art of the turn of the century is usually associated with soft floral lines as well as gold and elaborate ornamentation. This could not be further from the truth. *Jugendstil*, as it was called in the German culture, is also simple forms, geometric patterns, symmetrically structured spaces, use of reinforced concrete, façades with large windows, and, above all, the readiness to apply technical innovations in various fields. The artists of that period were not afraid to experiment and wanted to create art for modern society. Van de Velde, for example, designed a hairdressing facility in Berlin in 1900, in which he combined practical functionalism with fine ornamentation. Electric cables, gas pipes and water pipes were deliberately left exposed so that they could complement the meaning of the whole. Wallis points out that the Belgian artist was an indefatigable advocate of the new style, a theoretician, author of a series of lectures published as *Renaissance in Contemporary Artistic Crafts*, 1901, *Sermons for Artisans*, 1902 and *The New Style*, 1907. In his attempt to identify the exact beginning of the avant-garde, Morawski noted that in his activity Van de Velde combined the notion of artistry with an engineering skill, which in this context brings him closer to the contemporary concept of the “artist” in Gropius' view.

Developing his curriculum, Gropius drew on the experience of Van de Velde, but he made an important change. For the Art Nouveau artists, the priority was decoration and composition, even for the price of inconvenience, such as, for example, when the lady of the house had to move through the different rooms

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. M. Wallis, *Secesja*, Arkady, Warszawa 1967.

when changing her clothes. The Bauhaus founder rejected such ideas in favor of the new concepts of “functionalism” and “utility.”

The Bauhaus was often mistakenly identified with Constructivism, probably due to the relatively large participation of Russian artists. Interestingly, in her analysis of the Russian theater of the revolution era Christine Hamon-Siréjols<sup>22</sup> also assumed that it derived its thinking from the eclectic art of the Art Nouveau period. According to the French researcher, it is evident that Modernism of the turn of the century was the first period in modern history that resolutely sought to break with academic thinking, creating a lifestyle and a vision of art that departed from the old standards, encumbered with a strong attachment to the academic interpretations of antiquity (such as Neo-Classicism). Constructivism, as well as Art Nouveau, was not afraid to exploit technology and use new materials, often paving the way for inventions. Setting the Bauhaus within eclectic currents explains the lack of homogeneous ideology visible when discussing the achievements of the school. By the very fact of inviting artists from vastly different avant-garde groups, Gropius embraced diversity. He also combined theoretical education with practice, and sometimes with experiment. This is probably why the Bauhaus art was not focused solely on interior styling, designing new things, refining existing objects, designing houses or factory space. Two years into the school's operation, the principal introduced theater classes into the curriculum, which fundamentally liquidated any potential pressure of the program of a production facility, as Strzeмиński put it. Although the Bauhaus itself did not create any artistic group, it certainly belonged to the category of the avant-garde as understood by Morawski.<sup>23</sup> It was a school that was undoubtedly characterized by innovativeness of its core curriculum, making significant changes in the very approach to the creative process and artistic individualism as a creative attitude. Its avant-garde nature was also manifested in addressing various subjects, the purpose of which was to rebuild or rather build a new space for the modern man according to the Gropius' diagram.

### **Bauhaus - Nazi episodes**

At the very end of this rather brief discussion of the Bauhaus school I should tackle the most difficult issue. Politics crept into the school not only in Dessau or Berlin. The aforementioned Gillian Naylor, design historian and author of the important monograph of the Bauhaus, ends her book with Van der Rohe being taken out of the school by the Nazis. She makes no mention of the fate of the students or the use of the university's achievements by the German regime in the 1940s. This aspect of the reception of Gropius' school is only now being discovered, disclosed and examined.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Ch. Hamon-Siréjols, *Le constructivisme au théâtre*, CNRS, Paris 2004.

<sup>23</sup> S. Morawski, *Paradoksy estetyczne najnowszej awangardy*, „Studia Socjologiczne” 1973, no 3.

At this point I would like to mention just two significant episodes concerning concentration camps. The first begins in 1937, when Franz Ehrlich, a former student of Gropius' school, expelled for his Communist views and then sentenced for them, was sent to Buchenwald. Two years later, he finished serving his sentence, but the Nazis offered him a job. The prisoner became an employee of the same concentration camp, located – ironically – near Weimar. The task of the young architect was to prepare the land for the expansion of the facility. The design was to include not only a dozen or so barracks for prisoners, but also a separate recreation area reserved for the guards (including, for example, a mini-zoo). Ehrlich was also the author of the inscription on the gate of the Buchenwald camp, which read: *Jedem das Seine* (To each what he deserves). He used the Bauhaus typography for that purpose, but the slogan serving the propaganda of extermination was designed in an unusual way. The inscription can be read only when leaving the camp, not when entering the area of oppression. One possible interpretation of the author's intention was that he wanted to communicate to the victims that time would come for revenge. Ehrlich was never sentenced for his work for the system of extermination because he tried to help the prisoners and protect them whenever possible.

The second episode is more drastic and ends with convictions for the complicity in crimes against humanity. Walter Dejaco and Fritz Ertl, also Dessau school graduates, were the authors of the architectural design of the buildings at Auschwitz intended as gas chambers.<sup>24</sup> Their spectacular drawing with perfectly laid out structures can now be seen in the camp grounds. The viewers may be surprised by the amount of care the architects took to render every detail so that the building would be utilized up to its maximum capacity. The change that they made in the connotations of the term “functionality,” Gropius' favorite word, is appalling for modern audiences. For the head of the Bauhaus, the term was associated with the principle of “utility” and therefore “usefulness,” i.e. activity intended to benefit humankind, not to destroy it. The two architects designed not only the gas chambers, but also the well-prepared facilities for the disposal of the corpses. They built a well-functioning death factory, where nothing could go wrong.

Deyan Sudjic noted the irony when writing of the reluctance of the Nazi propaganda towards the school at the beginning of the 1930s. He pointed out that shortly after the closure of the Berlin facility, many of the artists found work on the broad Fascist program of the country's expansion. “Hitler loved classical architecture, but the Luftwaffe's airbases looked like typical architectural products of the Bauhaus.”<sup>25</sup> Ernst Sagebiel, also from Gropius' school, designed the building of the Ministry of Aviation headed by Herman Göring.

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. Jean-Louis Cohen, *Auschwitz, miejsce wieloprzemysłowe*, „Autoportret” 2017, no 1 (56), p. 68-71.

<sup>25</sup> D. Sudjic, *B jak Bauhaus*, p. 33.

At this point it is important to note the other side of the story; it must be remembered that the victims of the Fascist mass murders were also the teachers and other artists from the Bauhaus, including Otti Berger, who had a successful textile studio, Lotte Mentzel, or Friedl Dicker-Brandeis. The ambivalence of human attitudes, an integral part of the human nature, is sometimes greatly tested, especially when it is confronted with the historical machinery of the times in which an individual happens to be born. When attempting an assessment of the German school, it is important to bear in mind the remarkable contribution that the Bauhaus made to art. Sudjic commented unequivocally:

For half a century, the products manufactured by every advanced industrial economy in the world looked the way that they did because of what had happened at the Bauhaus. Even America, with its addiction to a diet of market-driven built-in obsolescence, and the overripe sensuality of Elvis Presley seasoned by the Buick-and-Coke-bottle school of styling, could not escape its influence. Texture, typography, furniture, architecture and ceramics were all indelibly marked by the Bauhaus and its chilly neutrality. It was a movement that seemed to have the prestige of historical inevitability on its side.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

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## **BAUHAUS – SZKOŁA, KTÓRA STAŁA SIĘ AWANGARDA (streszczenie)**

Artykuł prezentuje szkołę Bauhausu jako ideę, która w założeniu nie miała stać się samodzielnym nurtem awangardowym, a być jedynie jednym ze stylów nowoczesnego kształcenia artystycznego. Uczelnia założona przez Waltera Gropiusa oparta była na założeniach szkolnictwa rzemieślniczo-artystycznego, jakie wykształciło się w dobie secesji. Autorka pokazuje ewolucję Bauhausu, który istniał ledwie czternaście lat, ale jego mit rozpostarł się na cały wiek dwudziesty i dwudziesty pierwszy. Artykuł porusza również trudny problem polityczności, jaka wtargnęła do Bauhausu i jaką stosowano wobec Bauhausu. Każdy współczesny dizajner musi znać tę niemiecką szkołę i powinien umieć określić swoje dzieło wobec jej dokonań, ale jednocześnie musi pamiętać, że komory gazowe nazistowskich obozów koncentracyjnych też wybudowali architekci Bauhausu. Jest to trudne dziedzictwo i trudna awangarda.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Bauhaus, Auschwitz, secesja, dizajn, design, awangarda, Tadeusz Peiper, Walter Gropius.



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## THE AVANT-GARDE ROOTS OF POLISH DESIGN IN THE SOCIALIST REALISM PERIOD. A CASE STUDY

**Abstract:** Due to the pragmatic orientation and continuation of modernist artistic solutions, it is difficult to find explicit Socialist Realist traits in the Polish design of that time, especially as the term “Socialist Realist design” remains undefined. Design that is neutral in form can be linked to the doctrine on the level of the socialist concept, aiming at consequent changes in the socialist forms of life. However, the idea of socially oriented design combined with modernization unquestionably had its roots in the broadly understood avant-garde movements.

We should not treat this phenomenon as an ideological contradiction. In spite of their avant-garde pre-war provenance, many ideas were (successfully) put into practice at that time as the design of life for a better tomorrow of the egalitarian (socialist) society.

**Keywords:** Socialist Realism, design, avant-garde

### Introduction

The relation between modernism (the avant-garde) and the Polish design from the period of Socialist Realism is a complex phenomenon. This issue is becoming remarkably important in the year of the avant-garde’s centenary, when its legacy is being extensively discussed,<sup>1</sup> though seldom in the context of design.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth remembering that contemporary reflection on modernism combining various research approaches has resulted in the reconfiguration of the concept. Cp. T. Majewski (ed.), *Rekonfiguracje modernizmu. Nowoczesność i kultura popularna*, Wydawnictwa Profesjonalne i Akademickie, Warszawa 2009.

<sup>2</sup> The events organized in Poland to celebrate the centenary of the avant-garde tended to avoid the questions directly concerning design, although much attention was paid to the avant-garde’s legacy. One of the institutions participating in the celebration was the Museum of Modern Art in Łódź. The Museum’s website announced that the “events prepared by tens of museums, theatres, galleries, as well as other cultural or research institutions will all be part of the celebrations to mark the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Polish avant-garde. They will serve as a reminder of the most prominent personalities and phenomena of interwar avant-garde and will draw attention to the artists who developed the principles of the avant-garde in the post-war period. Some projects will pose questions concerning the relevance of the avant-garde legacy for con-

A research perspective focused on the period of the thaw (1956), which gave rise to the myth of reborn modernity, making it possible to contrast modernism with Socialist Realism<sup>3</sup>, prevails in popular and academic discourse in Poland. As a result, contemporary analyses and descriptions of architecture and design from the period of Socialist Realism are often created on the basis of binary oppositions: socialist *versus* modernist or anachronistic *versus* progressive. This problem needs to be more thoroughly analyzed, especially with regard to design. Design is a discipline that, in a narrow sense, can barely be described by the terms derived from the history of art, such as “modernism”, “soc-realism”, etc.<sup>4</sup> Although pragmatic and utilitarian design is often a tool of cynical manipulation, it is linked with industrialization, technology and modernization, and it cannot be comfortably fitted into aesthetic frames.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, it is very difficult to clearly define the concept of Socialist Realism in the sphere of design. However, there is a visible connection between Socialist Realism, modernism, and modernization rooted in the tradition of the avant-garde. “The avant-garde” is obviously a simplified concept. I will refer to several currents in avant-garde discourse, especially Constructivism, which, according to Piotr Piotrowski, became the Polish national avant-garde tradition.<sup>6</sup> Modernist emancipation of design will be particularly important here, with a focus on its utilitarian concept and social significance. These modernist ideas were accepted by the doctrine and suited the doctrinal slogan of the “socialist content” well.

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temporary cultural practices.” See: <http://msl.org.pl/en/eventsms/events/100-years-of-the-avant-garde-in-poland,2107.html> [12 Aug. 2017]. A similar “visual” perspective was adopted by the MOMA, which prepared an outstanding presentation of the heritage of Russian Constructivism: *A Revolutionary Impulse: The Rise of the Russian Avant-Garde 3.12.2016-12.03.2017*. The main emphasis was put on poetry, film and photography. The website read: “In anticipation of the centennial of the Russian Revolution, this exhibition examines key developments and new modes of abstraction, including Suprematism and Constructivism, as well as avant-garde poetry, film, and photomontage”. More: <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1668> [12 Aug. 2017].

- 3 “Universal palinode and the removal of any shameful trace of cultural Sovietization after the Socialist Realism period in Poland imperceptibly became a kind of moral blackmail: mentioning any artist as involved in previous art practices meant discrediting him”. See: A. Markowska, *Dwa przełomy. Sztuka polska po 1955 i 1956 roku*, Wydawnictwo UMK, Toruń 2012, p. 469.
- 4 T. Fry, *A Geography of Power: Design History and Marginality*, in: *The Idea of Design*, eds. V. Margolin, R. Buchanan, The MIT Press, MA 1995, p. 217. “A non-universal design history is not simply an additional or supplemental approach within a plurality of positions. Rather, it is a fundamental challenge to the nature and authority of the current Eurocentric models of history writing. It will not be based on the same agenda, objects, rhetoric, or concerns”.
- 5 “Design is the product of our economic system. It bears the stamp of technology that we have to deal with. It is a kind of language and reflects emotional and cultural values”. See: D. Sudjic, *Język rzeczy. W jaki sposób rzeczy nas uwodzą*, Karakter, Warszawa 2013, pp. 57-58.
- 6 P. Piotrowski, *Awangarda w cieniu Jałty. Sztuka w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej w latach 1945-1989*, Rebis, Warszawa 2005, p. 51.

I propose looking at the complex issue of the so-called Socialist Realist design from a perspective which takes into account the continuity of the multilayered processes, including those characteristic for the avant-garde and modernization.<sup>7</sup>

The research conducted by two Russian scholars – Vladimir Paperny and Boris Groys in the 1970s and 1980s included the relation between Socialist Realist architecture/ design and modernism, and its strong influence on current practices. Paperny and Groys tend to place Socialist Realism in a broad context and employ Western theoretical frameworks, such as structuralism (Paperny<sup>8</sup>) and post-structuralism (Groys<sup>9</sup>). The legacy of the Russian avant-garde became the basic point of reference for the art and architecture of Socialist Realism in both researchers' papers. However, while Paperny focuses on describing them in terms of oppositions, contrasting what he calls “culture one” and “culture two”, Groys deconstructs these oppositions and tries to show that the avant-garde anticipated Socialist Realism and totalitarianism, fulfilling their ideas and goals. In this view, Socialist Realism becomes a concrete, and monstrous, realization of the utopian and totalist aspirations of the avant-garde<sup>10</sup>. However, although the avant-garde and Stalinism shared certain broad assumptions about modernization, Groys's conclusions go too far. His argument is a product of the postmodern revision of modernism and is a simplistic approach; it is therefore not useful for a study of the complexity of modernism or Socialist Realism. Socialist Realism is a complex phenomenon that cannot be placed in a simple opposition to modernism, nor can it be seen as a “shame” of the avant-garde.<sup>11</sup>

### Design national in form, socialist in content

The directives of the national variants of the doctrine were extremely difficult to implement in product design. However, the broader formula of “socialist content”

<sup>7</sup> See: A. Sumorok, T. Załuski, *Rama teoretyczno-historyczna projektu*, in: *Socrealizmy i modernizacje*, eds. A. Sumorok, T. Załuski, Akademia Sztuk Pięknych im. Wł. Strzemińskiego, Łódź 2017 (in print).

<sup>8</sup> V. Paperny, *Architecture in the Age of Stalin. Culture Two*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2002.

<sup>9</sup> B. Groys, *Stalin jako totalne dzieło sztuki*, transl. P. Kozak, Sic!, Warszawa 2010.

<sup>10</sup> As a result, Groys's critical analysis is aimed not so much at Stalinist art, but, above all, at the modernist avant-garde: Socialist Realism becomes a tool for delegating and rejecting avant-garde projects concerning social life. In Poland, a similar approach is represented by W. Włodarczyk, *Socrealizm. Sztuka polska w latach 1950-1954*, Paryż 1986; see also: L. Nader, *Co za wstyd! Historiografia o socrealizmie w latach 80.* (case study), <http://artmuseum.pl/pl/publikacje-online/luiza-nader-co-za-wstyd-historiografia-o-socrealizmie> [12 Aug. 2017].

<sup>11</sup> It is worth remembering that “the history of the Polish avant-garde goes beyond the interwar period. The avant-garde tradition and ethos had significant impact upon Polish artists decades later and largely determined the shape and direction of their work.” It should be added that this was also true of Polish design. Cf. <http://msl.org.pl/en/eventsms/events/100-years-of-the-avant-garde-in-poland,2107.html> [12 Aug. 2017].

was much better represented here. Most designers saw “socialist content” as a promise of attaining the avant-garde objectives of the social utility of art and design as a tool for changing and forming the new man.

The doctrine of Socialist Realism was a Soviet product from the beginning of the 1930s, initially concerning literature. It developed over the years and did not directly pertain to architecture or design. Its assumptions and guidelines changed with time, and were clearly represented in model works, such as, in the case of architecture and design, the Moscow subway, and later the construction of Moscow high-rise buildings (*vysotkas*).

The doctrine of Socialist Realism gradually implemented in so-called Eastern Europe since 1948, after the rejection of the Marshall Plan, took the form of ready-made slogans. In Poland, the doctrine was officially imposed in 1949. During carefully prepared meetings (so-called congresses), gathering the representatives of all art disciplines, schematic rules for each of them – literature, art (architecture), film and music were introduced and adopted. Notably, the sphere of applied art and design was not included in a separate program. David Crowley noted that “the politically correct face of design and the applied arts was (...) less clear. The tenets of Socialist Realism were difficult or even impossible to apply to the design of a vehicle or a teapot”.<sup>12</sup>

Design and interior design were situated at the intersection of art and architecture, though the program was defined according to the doctrinal guidelines concerning other disciplines, not directly design. The guidelines were made clear through exhibitions (occasionally devoted to design<sup>13</sup>) or model works. General slogans stated that forms must be socialist and humanist above everything else, to serve all human needs. However, the forms themselves were not clearly specified. They were to be easily recognized and therefore needed to refer to the well-known forms from the past. According to the Soviet model, history was understood as a kind of a bank of forms, details, and ornaments, from which it was possible to freely choose, although the state determined the degree of freedom.

The basic stylistic conventions were the European styles derived from the “classical” heritage: the architecture of ancient Greece and Rome, elements of the Renaissance, and above all, the Neo-classicism, especially the academic style.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> D. Crowley, “Design in the service of politics in the People’s republic”, in: *Out of the Ordinary. Polish Designers of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, ed. Cz. Frejlich, Adam Mickiewicz Institute, Warsaw 2011, p. 186.

<sup>13</sup> In fact, only one major exhibition devoted to design was held in the Socialist Realism period. Moreover, it was focused on the applied and decorative art rather than industrial or product design, whose role was downplayed. The First National Exhibition of Interior Architecture and Applied Art took place only in 1952. See: *I Ogólnopolska Wystawa Architektury Wnętrz i Sztuki Dekoracyjnej*, catalogue, Zachęta, Warszawa 1952.

<sup>14</sup> See. B. Groys, *Stalin...*

The most important doctrinal postulate was that the new socialist forms were to be... NON-modernist.<sup>15</sup> However, it was only the modernism in its avant-garde version that was condemned. In practice, continuity on both the ideological and the artistic level was clearly visible.

### **Design for the masses. The complex relationship between the avant-garde and Socialist Realism**

The relationship between the prewar avant-garde design and the avant-garde of the Socialist Realism period cannot be reduced to the problem of style or forms. The issue of continuity lies in the sphere of ideas, especially those concerning the social role of design and its ability to create a new, better life for everyone. It must be remembered that the idea of designing everyday life was formulated in the 1920s by the avant-garde movement. Constructivists, like Osip Brik, postulated then that

our cultural creation is founded on a specific purpose. We do not conceive of a cultural and educational work unless it pursues some kind of a definite, practical aim. The concepts of »pure science«, »pure art«, »independent truth and beauty« are alien to us. We are practitioners – and in this lies the distinctive feature of our cultural consciousness.<sup>16</sup>

During the interwar period in Poland, the avant-garde ideas pertaining to space and design, particularly originating in Constructivism, were developed by such artists and designers as Władysław Strzemiński, Szymon Syrkus, Barbara and Stanisław Brukalskis – members of the groups Blok and later Praesens. The Constructivists strongly believed in the social equality of the New Man that can be attained thanks to a properly designed, modern and functional environment filled with mass-produced objects, especially steel furniture – the functionalist “fetish”.<sup>17</sup> The avant-garde movements saw the role of design in a broader context, not only as the production of objects of daily use, but as an active factor in the transformation of the society.

This idea gained appreciation in Poland. However, avant-garde forms were not widely accepted in the Polish society. More familiar, not so anonymous objects

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<sup>15</sup> See: E. Goldzamt, *Zagadnienie realizmu socjalistycznego w architekturze*, in: *O polską architekturę socjalistyczną: materiały z Krajowej Partyjnej Narady Architektów odbytej w dniu 20-21.VI.1949 roku w Warszawie*, ed. J. Minorski, PWT, Warszawa 1951, p. 38; J. Minorski, *Architektura polska w dobie obecnej i odpowiedzialność architektów za jej dalszy rozwój. Referat Zarządu Głównego Stowarzyszenia Architektów Polskich na Krajową naradę Architektów*, rps, Warszawa 1953.

<sup>16</sup> O. Brik, "Ot kartiny k sistu" *Lef* 1924, no. 2, p. 27-34; quoted after: *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde. Theory and Criticism 1902-1934*, ed. J. E. Bowlt, Thames and Hudson, London 1988, p. 245.

<sup>17</sup> D. Raizman, *History of Modern Design. Graphics and Products since the Industrial revolution*, Laurence King Publishing, London 2010, p. 196.

and furniture, moderately modern and made of wood, were much more popular among the intelligentsia.<sup>18</sup>

The co-operative of artists ŁAD (Order), established in 1926, was an influential group in prewar Poland. ŁAD's designers of pottery, textiles, and furniture promoted "good" design (believing in its potential of forming the new/modern man and his identity), manifested in not so extreme functional forms, closer to the tradition of Arts and Crafts.<sup>19</sup> However, as argued by Crowley, "ŁAD's members saw their designs as prototypes for manufacturing, even if the group did not actively pursue strong connections with the Polish industry."<sup>20</sup>

Regardless of the forms and the methods of their production, the new functional and moderately modern design played an important role in the process of modernization in interwar Poland. It is worth remembering that there were many concepts and models of modernization in the 1930s, often contradicting one another. Andrzej Szczerski, commenting on the inter-war modernization taking place in Central and Eastern Europe, notes that they showed "how differently modern mechanisms can be used to shape the unknown reality".<sup>21</sup>

After 1945, the idea of modernization, although subordinated to Communist politics, adapted to the local economic realities, and related to the process of the country's post-war reconstruction, gained even more intensity.<sup>22</sup> Modernity, modernization, or futurology, although manifested in different forms and formulas, and dressed with ideological slogans, was more important than ever before. On the one hand, we are dealing with Soviet-imposed modernization. On the other, with overlapping pre-war ideas which, though subjected to a central program, were not always possible to control.

The pre-war model of modernization was still believed in, especially by the artists. In the domain of design and applied art, rational/modern organization of the living space for the new man seemed possible to implement. In fact, after 1945, design was to be transformed into an essential, modern element of the economic system. This was also the time of the consolidation of Władysław Strzemiński's functionalist ideas, such as the idea of using art as a tool for the modernization of everyday life, reflected e.g. in the curriculum of the newly founded art school in Łódź.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, Wanda Telakowska's concept of industrial design was also widely introduced. Telakowska pointed out that:

<sup>18</sup> Compare: H. Bilewicz, „Meble w Zameczku prezydenta Ignacego Mościckiego w Wiśle. Kwestia chronologii, inwentarza i atrybucji”, *Porta Aurea* 2009, no. 7-8, p. 338.

<sup>19</sup> D. Crowley, "Conflicting modernities: Design in the Inter-war Years", in: *Out of the ordinary...*, p. 100.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>21</sup> A. Szczerski, *Modernizacja: sztuka i architektura w nowych państwach Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej 1918 - 1939*, Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, Łódź 2010, p. 333.

<sup>22</sup> Compare: A. Leder, *Prześlona rewolucja. Ćwiczenia z logiki historycznej*, Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, Warszawa 2014.

<sup>23</sup> See: T. Załuski, „Futerał na ciało. Tayloryzm i biopolityka w koncepcji architektury funkcjonalistycznej Katarzyny Kobro i Władysława Strzemińskiego”, in: *Architektura przymusu*, eds. M. Domański, T. Ferenc, Akademia Sztuk Pięknych im. Wł. Strzemińskiego w Łodzi, Łódź 2013, pp. 21-37.

Design is becoming increasingly visible in the city, the house, the environment in which people live and work, and the objects they use and are surrounded by. Not only personal items and everyday products such as clothing, footwear or furniture, kitchenware, sanitary ware and tableware – design goes further, affecting the appearance and performance of factory equipment, stations, means of transport, schools, hospitals, workplaces and leisure.<sup>24</sup>

Telakowska understood design as the “beauty of everyday life, for everyone”. The program she formulated was directed against low-quality industrial production and quasi-folk objects. She put particular emphasis on the cooperation of designers with artists and folk craftsmen, leading to the establishment of creative collectives, combining experience and knowledge with natural “talent”. Telakowska believed that the products created in this way would be characterized by exceptional power of expression. Moreover, she demanded research on the issues of design and collaboration with the industry.

In the postwar reality, although externally imposed, the idea of involving artists in the production process and establishing creative collectives was put into practice. Professionally educated artists cooperated with amateur folk artists. It should be remembered that the roots of the creative collectives lie in the conceptions of the avant-garde of the 1920s, primarily the Constructivists. Telakowska argued that artists were responsible for the effective and creative operation of the collectives. She also stressed that the artists must have the highest professional competence, plus moral and pedagogical skills, and the knowledge of folk art.<sup>25</sup>

Part of the Polish artistic community feared such far-reaching changes and limiting the role of the fine (pure) arts, especially when The Office of Production Aesthetics Monitoring (Biuro Nadzoru Estetyki Produkcji, BNEP) was founded in 1947. Its main goal was to stress the importance of industrial design and applied art. The BNEP Office established five workshops: metal, furniture, ceramics, glass, and fabrics and garments, in which models for both craft and mass production were developed by many artists of different backgrounds, including avant-garde ones, such as Władysław Strzemiński and the members of ŁAD, e.g. Władysław Wincze.<sup>26</sup>

The Exhibition of the Regained Territories held in 1948 in Wrocław became a spectacular showcase of the actions undertaken to shape a new modern reality, manifested in new architecture, interiors, and design. Such promotion of modernity was also propagated at the same time in the press and professional magazines. *Architektura* – the only architectural magazine in Poland – claimed that “The

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<sup>24</sup> Quoted after: *Sztuka dla życia. Wspomnienia o Wandzie Telakowskiej*, eds. K. Czerniewska, T. Reindal Warszawa 1988, p. 26.

<sup>25</sup> See: P. Korduba, *Ludowość na sprzedaż, Bęc Zmiana*, Warszawa 2013, p. 215.

<sup>26</sup> W. Telakowska, *Wzornictwo, moja miłość*, “Biblioteka Wzornictwa Instytutu Wzornictwa Przemysłowego” 1990, no. 18, p. 16.

Exhibition (July-November) has been a proof of the innovativeness of modern Polish architecture and construction [as well as design - AS]”.<sup>27</sup>

In practice, post-war interior and furniture design was initially associated with industrial production. In 1949, exhibitions devoted to cheap and functional furniture for residential interiors were organized, among others, on the initiative of the Central Board of Furniture Industry and Central Board of Wood Industry.<sup>28</sup> Jerzy Hryniewiecki noted in a review: “Mass-produced furniture based on artistic designs can and will become ‘functional’, an object of everyday use as well as of artistic expression. Like no other object, furniture is closely connected with life and is a true reflection of its era.”<sup>29</sup>

Even after the adoption of the principles of Socialist Realism, much attention was paid to industrial design or to design adapted for industry, although this tendency gradually decreased after 1951. In 1950, the Museum of Creative Industries in Cracow held an exhibition entitled “Art for Industry”, where the students and professors from the Cracow State School of the Arts presented their works. In press commentaries and reviews, stress was put on the need to educate a new type of designer and artist, knowing both craftsmanship and the methods of industrial production, so that he could become a “rationalizer” in industry to enhance the aesthetics of the products.<sup>30</sup> Similarly to the modernist ideas of social art, emphasis was put on the art of everyday objects, which, thanks to the new methods of production, would become available to everybody.

It was already in 1951, on the occasion of the exhibition organized by the Association of Polish Artists in Warsaw, also including participants from the section of interior architecture and design, that the critics postulated an intense involvement of artists in fulfilling the requirements of mass production.<sup>31</sup>

Changes in design and applied art during the period of Socialist Realism were more related to political and organizational changes than to those associated with aesthetics and form. Crowley writes: “design was to be given an instrumental role in this new rational mechanism for meeting the needs of society”<sup>32</sup>, to be successfully included in the program of modernization originating in the 1920s. However, as he points out, “High demand and low level of production, as well as

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<sup>27</sup> In fact, the whole issue of the architectural magazine was devoted to the exhibition. See *Architektura* 1948, no. 10, p. 33.

<sup>28</sup> J. Hryniewiecki, *Na drodze do nowego mebla*, “Architektura” 1948, no. 1, p. 23.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>30</sup> W. Chomicz, *Sztuka dla przemysłu*, quoted after: *Polskie Życie Artystyczne 1944-1960*, rok 1950, ed. P. Strożek, v. 4, p. 24.

<sup>31</sup> *Kronika krajowa. Wystawa malarstwa, rzeźby, grafiki, architektury wnętrza i sztuki dekoracyjnej Związku Polskich Artystów Plastyków Okręgu Warszawskiego*, in: “Przegląd artystyczny” 1951, no. 3, p. 66.

<sup>32</sup> D. Crowley, *Design in the service of politics in the People`s republic*, in: *Out of the ordinary...*, p. 188.

the artificial pricing regime, meant that this was a producers' market in which the consumer had relatively little sway over things which reached the shops".<sup>33</sup>

Due to the political directive of centralization, there were two monopolist institutions in the field of applied arts and design: Cepelia (Polish Arts and Handicraft Foundation) and IWP (Institute of Industrial Design). The Institute of Industrial Design was transformed into a major company. However, its role was later diminished. Its priority, at least theoretically, were still the tasks of modernist provenance: the training of artists, establishment of creative collectives, and popularization of design and industrial production.<sup>34</sup> Both IWP and Cepelia were concerned with supporting the development of craftsmanship, deepening cooperation between artists and folk artists, and between artists and industry, according to the postulate of "spreading the ideas associated with art's new social function in the People's Republic of Poland".<sup>35</sup> Despite the monopolistic practices of these state institutions, it cannot be denied that they were based on the interwar legacy, especially that the designers continued to pursue their modernist interests often slightly adapted to the new, poorly defined and enigmatic guidelines.

It is also worth remembering that the state patronage and protection over art and design, based on the Soviet model, was the dream of many artists of the interwar period.<sup>36</sup> In practice, the new difficult political reality sometimes did provide new opportunities, but, on the other hand, economic and ideological constraints limited artistic freedom.

Public interiors were as a whole much closer to the Socialist Realist guidelines than single objects or products (il. 1, 2). However, even the most prestigious state buildings, historical reconstructions, details and ornaments remained aesthetically distant from the Soviet "wedding cake" eclectic style.

### **Design education, curricula, and (the absence of) Socialist Realism**

The history of the curriculum development at the Academy of Fine Arts, renamed the State School of Arts, shows the vitality of the modernist ideas, including those of the avant-garde origin, in the field of design. The lack of tradition of design departments inevitably led to the references to the interwar period, when the idea of design as such began to take shape. Wojciech Włodarczyk emphasizes that "The authorities had no idea what Socialist Realism should look like at such a department. Instead of working out a common specific program, particular gro-

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> IWP, *Z działalności instytucji plastycznych*, "Przegląd artystyczny" 1951, no. 6, p. 79.

<sup>35</sup> See: A. Wojciechowski, *O sztuce użytkowej i użytecznej. Zbiór studiów krytyk z zakresu współpracy plastyki polskiej z rzemiosłem, przemysłem i architekturą w latach 1944-1954*, Sztuka, Warszawa 1955.

Compare: I. Luba, *Duch Romantyzmu i Modernizacja. Sztuka oficjalna Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej*, Neriton, Warszawa 2012.

ups of academics were pursuing their own interests.”<sup>37</sup> Regardless of the political changes, the curricula differed, and the direction of research was determined by individuals (mostly deans), such as Jerzy Soltan in Warsaw, Władysław Wincze in Wrocław, Marian Sigmund in Cracow, Władysław Strzemiński and Stefan Wegner in Łódź, and their artistic interests, usually distant from the Socialist Realism doctrine and rooted in modernism.

One of the most interesting curricula that originated in the avant-garde tradition was introduced in Łódź for the new art school established there in 1945.<sup>38</sup> It was based on Władysław Strzemiński's theories and modeled in many ways on the Bauhaus tradition. Emphasis was placed on socially useful design, industrial design, and holistic interior design. The Department of Spatial Engineering, later transformed into the Department of Interior Architecture, oriented its educational program primarily towards architecture and construction. The program included such subjects as general construction, geometry, constructional law, statics, materials science, mathematics, public utility buildings design, housing design, urban planning, concrete and reinforced concrete structures, and steel structures. Although this modern curriculum was changed in the period of Socialist Realism and Władysław Strzemiński was expelled from the school, the Department of Interior Architecture was not formally closed until 1955.<sup>39</sup> The school was made to concentrate on textile design. The head of the Department of Textile Design was Lucjan Kintopf, who continued his pre-war work with jacquard.<sup>40</sup>

The curriculum strongly rooted in the interwar tradition, promoting the mission of applied arts, but implemented in non-avant-garde forms was adopted by the Architecture Department at the Higher State School of Arts in Wrocław. The curriculum, created by Władysław Wincze<sup>41</sup>, member of the ŁAD group and its main postwar re-organizer, was based on the one developed at the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts in the interwar period. The program included such basic courses as interior design, furniture design, technical drawing, geometry, and composition, along with the history of interior and architecture, and workshops concentrating on the knowledge of materials. The students also took a general course in painting,

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<sup>37</sup> W. Włodarczyk, *Akademia Sztuk Pięknych w Warszawie w latach 1944-2004: 100 lat Akademii Sztuk Pięknych w Warszawie, Akademia Sztuk Pięknych w Warszawie*, Warszawa 2005, p. 128.

<sup>38</sup> Państwowa Wyższa Szkoła Sztuk Plastycznych im. W. Strzemińskiego w Łodzi 1945-1995, ed. G. Sztabiński, Państwowa Wyższa Szkoła Sztuk Plastycznych im. W. Strzemińskiego, Łódź 1995.

<sup>39</sup> J. Ładnowska, *Kronika Państwowej Wyższej Szkoły Sztuk Plastycznych w Łodzi, 1945-1994*, in: *Państwowa Wyższa Szkoła Sztuk Plastycznych im. W. Strzemińskiego w Łodzi 1945-1995*, ed. G. Sztabiński, Łódź 1995, pp. 127-161.

<sup>40</sup> See: *Lucjan Kintopf: mistrz żakardu i jego uczniowie, exhibition catalogue*, ed. M. Wróblewska-Markiewicz, Centralne Muzeum Włókiennictwa, Łódź 2015.

<sup>41</sup> I. Huml, *Władysław Wincze, twórca i pedagog*, in: *Szkice z pamięci. Państwowa Wyższa Szkoła Sztuk Plastycznych we Wrocławiu, we wspomnieniach jej założycieli, studentów i pedagogów. Lata 1946-1996*, ed. A. Saj, Akademia Sztuk Pięknych we Wrocławiu, Wrocław 1996, p. 109.

sculpture, and graphic forms. In accord with the tradition of craftsmanship and ŁAD, the main emphasis was put on furniture design.<sup>42</sup> The artistic credo of Władysław Wincze he passed on to the students was: “interior design is a creative enterprise that brings harmony and order into a given space.”<sup>43</sup>

### **Socialist Realist furniture design. Is there such a thing as a soc-realist chair?**

Professional designers active in the period of Socialist Realism in Poland (1949-1956) were mostly representatives of the generation that began their careers in the 1930s and were influenced by modernist ideas. In fact, they continued their earlier artistic pursuits, slightly adapted to the requirements of the new doctrine, especially in the field of furniture design. The artists largely abandoned the avant-garde forms, but not the universal idea of social design (not contradictory to the doctrinal guidelines).

The new, imposed tendencies in furniture design affected more than just forms, the system of production, and the type of the produced/manufactured furniture. The main stress was put not on furnishing residential interiors (and therefore enhancing the culture of everyday life), but public interiors: the more luxurious ones of the state institutions, and those at public utility buildings – kindergartens, schools, social clubs and conference rooms. They represented traditional forms, slightly more massive than those of the pre-war period, but still far from the socialist realist guidelines concerning historical stylization. The furniture was manufactured in small series, sometimes handcrafted by local (often prewar) craftsmen. The mass production of furniture postulated at the beginning of the 1950s was fiction.

Despite the political and institutional changes, the formal tendencies in furniture design were similar to those observed in the prewar period. In fact, furniture was often the least Socialist Realist element of an interior. It was also difficult to formulate doctrinal expectations for furniture.

If any historical stylization was implemented at that time, it was subtle historical reference rather than formal eclecticism, as in the case of the furniture designed by Jan Bogusławski (for the Council of Ministers) or Czesław Konthe (Hotel Warsaw). Even the furniture created for the most important, prestigious state premises (e.g. the Parliament) presented elaborate elegant forms, avoiding pathetic solutions (e.g. Jan Bogusławski’s furniture for the party headquarters) (il. 3).

Moreover, traditional, mostly ŁAD-style (only slightly changed) furniture prevailed in the first half of the 1950s. Many utilitarian, non-representational sets of furniture were made for conference rooms, libraries, so-called “palaces of culture” (often typical buildings; the term “palace” was used figuratively) (il. 4).

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<sup>42</sup> I. Huml, *Władysław Wincze...*, p. 109-110.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted after: *ibid.*, p. 109.

Sets that were functional and simple in form were also designed for the interiors of state institutions (e.g. PKPG – State Economic Planning Commission) by Olgierd Szlekys and Władysław Księżyc, among others (il. 5).<sup>44</sup>

Similar style was characteristic of the furniture designed by Władysław Wincze: harmonious, structural and logical, designed for representative state and public utility interiors in Wrocław. Wincze can be described as the “classic” of furniture design. This term can be also applied more widely to the whole generation of prewar designers and their students.<sup>45</sup> The group of designers educated by Władysław Wincze included Irena Pać-Zaleśna, Tadeusz Forowicz, Tadeusz Kowalczyk, Zbigniew Kawecki and Józef Chierowski.

Marian Sigmund was an influential designer representing the same prewar style and artistic background (ŁAD). Sigmund’s furniture intended for the interiors of Nowa Huta, especially the Administration Center, displayed substantial similarity to his earlier work, such as the lobby set of armchairs with a table. The armchairs were characterized by softly shaped forms, further emphasized by its colour of light volt and supported by thin, delicate legs characteristic for Sigmund's style.<sup>46</sup>

In the case of textiles or metalwork, Socialist Realism manifested itself in figural forms, though we rarely encounter schematic, doctrinal realism. It is worth mentioning the textiles of Józefa Wnukowa, the jacquard fabrics designed by Lucjan Kintopf, the tapestries of their students Helena and Stefan Gałkowski, and Andrzej Milewicz, and the metalwork inspired by the art deco tradition (il. 6) by Henryk Grunwald. These artists, although far from closely following the directives of the doctrine (if any such directives indeed existed – sic!), were positively evaluated by contemporary critics, such as Aleksander Wojciechowski. Moreover, their work actively aided the process of reconstruction and the construction of the new country, and thus modernization.

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Due to the pragmatic orientation of the artists and the continuity of modernist artistic solutions, it is difficult to find explicit Socialist Realist traits in the design of that time, especially as the term “Socialist Realist design” remains undefined. Design that is neutral in its forms can be linked to the doctrine on the level of the socialist context, aiming at consequent changes in lifestyle. However, the idea of socially-oriented design combined with modernization was unquestionably derived from broadly understood avant-garde movements.

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<sup>44</sup> I. Huml, *Artystyczne curriculum Olgierda Szlekysa*, in: Olgierd Szlekys. *Wnętrza, meble, malarstwo*, ed. T. Wyderkowa, Związek Polskich Artystów Plastyków, Muzeum Historyczne m. st. Warszawy, Warszawa 1982, pp. 5-17.

<sup>45</sup> See: I. Huml, *Władysław Wincze ...*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

We should not treat this phenomenon as an ideological contradiction. Despite the absence of avant-garde forms and of mass industrial production, many avant-garde and pre-war ideas were (successfully) put into practice at that time, such as the design of life for the better tomorrow of the egalitarian (socialist) society.

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## **AWANGARDOWE KORZENIE POLSKIEGO DESIGNU W LATACH 1949-1956. KILKA SPOSTRZEŻEŃ (streszczenie)**

Trudno w sztuce użytkowej i designie lat 1949-1956 doszukiwać się cech jawnie socrealistycznych. Zresztą trudno byłoby je też precyzyjnie zdefiniować. Socrealistyczność designu, formalnie neutralnego, tkwić mogła co najwyżej w sferze socjalistycznego kontekstu, wytworzenia w konsekwencji zmian ustrojowych socjalistycznej formy życia. Ale sama idea zorientowanego społecznie designu połączonego z kwestią modernizacyjną wywodziła się z szeroko pojętych ruchów awangardowych. Relacja polskiego designu z okresu realizmu socjalistycznego z modernizmem i awangardą wcale więc nie jest oczywista. W powszechnym dyskursie dominuje jednoznaczne przeciwstawienie modernizmu socrealizmowi zakorzenione w odwilżowym micie przełomu 1956 roku. Problem ten zaś wymaga większego niuansowania, zwłaszcza w odniesieniu do designu.

**Słowa kluczowe:** socrealizm, design, awangarda



1. Socialist Realist furniture? Furniture for the Medical University's auditorium, design W. Borawski, Łódź, photo A. Sumorok



2. The Parliament: hall, design B. Pniewski and team, Warsaw, photo W. Kamiński



3. Table designed for the former party headquarters, author Jan Bogusławski, Warsaw, photo W. Kamiński



4. Typical library furniture, Palace of Culture in Gdańsk Nowy-Port, photo A. Sumorok



5. Set of furniture for the former PKPG, design Cz. Knothe, W. Księżyc, Warsaw, photo W. Kamiński



6. The Parliament: metalwork, detail of the brass barrier, Henryk Grunwald, Warsaw, photo W. Kamiński

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## **DESIGNING UTOPIA. AVANT-GARDE ARCHITECTURE VS. PROCESSES OF MODERNIZATION**

**Abstract:** In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the relations between the social revolution, the processes of modernization, and avant-garde art and architecture were very close. Piotr Juszkiewicz, analyzing the relations between modernism and totalitarian and authoritarian regimes, stated that “totalitarian regimes did not reject a certain form of artistic language by default because they were interested in their utility”. “Fundamental elements of our architecture are conditioned by the social revolution”, wrote El Lissitzky. In the face of such declarations, the relations between avant-garde designers and social or Communist trends should not come as a surprise. Post-revolutionary Russia became a true test site for new movements, whereas modernist and Constructivist artists enthusiastically proceeded to build the new (better) reality. The development of industry (primarily heavy industry) was to become a driving force behind the modernist processes.

Examples of industrial plants built in the 1920s and 1930s in the Soviet Union show the enormous impact exerted by modern construction and urbanism on the formation of the “new man”. Numerous products of avant-garde architecture reflected the image of the “new world” and became the transmitters of the new Soviet ideology. For the inhabitants of Ekaterinburg, Magnitogorsk, or Kharkov, modernist buildings and landscape layout formed a permanent image of the city and its concept. Urban designs, such as the “Linear City” of Ernst May in Magnitogorsk, were utopian modernist dreams executed on an enormous scale. The circumstances of their creation, followed by the times of their greatness and fall, form a portrait of the avant-garde architecture understood as a utopia, the future that never arrived.

**Keywords:** architecture, avant-garde, modernization, Constructivism, utopia, dystopia

The purpose of this article is a general characterization of the relations between the architectural avant-garde of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the processes of modernization taking place during this period in the Soviet Union. The land of the soviets, the workers’ councils, was the arena of the biggest social, political, and economic experiment in history and an unprecedented attempt at realizing utopian ideas – also on the artistic and architectural ground. The fate of the architectural avant-garde is closely connected with the wide-scale activities aimed at modernizing the country; however, they are also a part of the dystopia which Communist Russia most certainly became. Many publications have been dedicated to the topic of the architectural avant-garde and urban planning, which is why this article does not make another attempt at systematizing the legacy of the Russian

Constructivism or describing its most prominent works. It is, instead, supposed to provoke reflection on how the utopian nature of the movement led to the dystopia of the Soviet social engineering.

### Utopia and modernism

The term “utopia” itself derives from the Greek phrases that may be translated as “no place” (*ou-topos*) and “good place” (*eu-topos*).<sup>1</sup> It has come to denote a set of ideas assuming a struggle for an ideal organization of the world despite the impossibility of their implementation and without taking into account objective external obstacles. Karl Manneheim considered that literary (or rather “ideological”) utopias become ideologies the moment they make contact with reality, i.e. the moment an attempt is made to implement them.<sup>2</sup> The example of the Constructivist activities in the first years of the existence of the USSR illustrates this process rather clearly.

Jerzy Szacki distinguished between heroic and escapist utopias, where the latter ones are based on the visions of an ideal world (country, continent), whereas the former ones combine the dream of a better tomorrow with an imperative to act, whose effect would be the construction of an ideal society from scratch. The faith in the possibility of changing the entire society is what differentiates the heroic utopia of politics from the heroic utopia of order which assumes a priori that the entire society cannot be changed, which is why those who “believe” in the change should, to the extent possible, isolate themselves from the “unbelievers”.

In the light of the above premises, can modernism, as a creative avant-garde project, be regarded as a movement of a utopian nature? According to Chad Walsh<sup>3</sup>, utopia assumes that an individual, as a component of society, is good by definition, whereas his/her character and the character of the entire group may be subject to flexible molding. The ideologists of the Communist country in the initial phase of its formation blindly believed in the possibility of creating a new man. Modern architecture and urbanism constituted the tools of social engineering. House-communes erected in the initial years of the USSR can serve as examples of that strategy.<sup>4</sup> Breaking with old habits, uprooting what was understood as “retroactive” laid ground for the arrival of the “new”. Nikolai Kuzmin, in his project of the apartment block-commune for the miners in Anzhero-Sudzhensk (1928 - 29), even designed a “detailed timetable for the inhabitants down to the minute and even (...) regulated their intimate relations.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> J. Szacki, *Spotkania z utopią*, Iskry, Warszawa 1980.

<sup>2</sup> K. Manneheim, *Ideology and Utopia. An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1954, pp. 87-88.

<sup>3</sup> C. Walsh, *From Utopia to Nightmare*, Godfrey Bles., London 1962, p. 70.

<sup>4</sup> K. Nawratek, *Ideologie w przestrzeni: próby demistyfikacji*, Universitas, Cracow 2005, p. 75.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

Walsh described utopia as an assumption that the goal of all rational beings should be the struggle for general happiness. There are no obstacles impossible to remove in this struggle. This opinion was shared by modernist artists, while le Corbusier himself made a slightly humorous sketch illustrating a fictitious act of the President of France, which was supposed to facilitate the complete reconstruction of Paris.<sup>6</sup> Both he and his followers believed that large-scale actions are fully justified, and that they, the artists, have a moral right to undertake them. They perceived development as a linear process, while the future, through its limited number of possibilities, seemed largely predictable.

The Constructivist movement was the one in which the utopian dream of the new city and new society began to take shape with increasing intensity.<sup>7</sup> On the Russian territory, their roots may be found in the 19<sup>th</sup> century writings of the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin. He believed that society does not need authority and its structure will be created from the bottom by the “communes” which will autonomously determine the production goals of action and needs. His ideas were taken up by Pyotr Kropotkin, who saw the cure-all for the ailments of the modern society in far-reaching decentralization. The embodiments of the idea of common life were Moisei Ginzburg’s or Nikolai Kuzmin’s houses-communes, social residential areas designed in Poland by Helena and Szymon Syrkus, and the le Corbusier’s Unite d’Habitation. The leading theorist of the utopian Communist anarchism died in 1921 and, in his final years, he was able to see how the Soviet utopia was morphing into a dystopia. “No place” which was supposed to become a real utopia, a “good place”, became a “bad place” instead.

At the same time, in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Yevgeny Zamyatin wrote a dystopian novel *We* (Russian: *Мы*) which was a horrific vision of the totalitarian world, where the will of an individual had been trampled by the will of the collective. The protagonists have no names and their only identification consists of a string of letters and digits. The symbol of the totalitarian world is a square, a clear reference to Kazimir Malevich’s *Black Square*.<sup>8</sup> The attention of a Polish reader will be surely drawn by the idea of the “glass houses”, which in Zamyatin’s novel becomes the opposite of Stefan Żeromski’s vision of modern light-filled edifices known from the pages of his *Przedwiośnie* (Early Spring). Here, the glass houses become a dystopian tool of oppression. Thanks to the transparent walls, the Assistance Office can constantly monitor the citizens, converting the country into a huge Panopticon. References to the totalitarian regime of the USSR are quite obvious.

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<sup>6</sup> J. Wujek, *Mity i utopie architektury XX wieku*, Arkady, Warszawa 1986, p. 17.

<sup>7</sup> M. Ilczenko, *Opisując architekturę awangardy. Przypadek Jekaterynburga*, „Autoportret” 2016, no 2 (53), p. 77.

<sup>8</sup> F. Miks, *Czerwony kogut Picasso. Ideologia a utopia w sztuce XX wieku. Od czarnego kwadratu Malewicza do gotówka pokoju Picassa*, trans. M. Szymanowski, Wydawnictwo, Cracow 2016, p. 23.

### The avant-garde and the revolution

In the era of dynamic social and political changes, artists also shared the revolutionary spirit. New (better) world that was supposed to appear on the debris of the old order was to be shaped also by painters, sculptors, and architects. "Lenin turned everything upside down, as I do it in my paintings", wrote Marc Chagall enthusiastically<sup>9</sup>, while El Lissitzky shouted emphatically that Malevich supremacism "shall liberate all those who will become a part of an artistic process, all those who are leading the world to perfection".<sup>10</sup> "After the Old Testament, there was the New Testament. After the New Testament – the good news of communism. After communism, there will be Supremacism."<sup>11</sup> Religious rhetoric is combined with the revolutionary elation and quite an ingenuous faith that art will replace politics.

It turned out relatively early that the expectations of the Communist authorities and avant-garde artists were different. Already in the 1920s, those governing the Soviet Union were not unanimously in favor of the The The Constructivists who still saw a great opportunity for the realization of their most daring ideas in the new regime. Lenin himself criticized the new trends in art. "I cannot regard the works of Expressionism, Futurism, Cubism, and other isms as the highest expressions of human genius. I do not understand them".<sup>12</sup> It is no surprise that in spite of the social and ideological involvement of the The The Constructivists, already in the 1930s their achievements were dubbed an "international bourgeois conspiracy of formalism, functionalism, individualism, and collectivism".<sup>13</sup> Together with the rejection of the avant-garde aesthetics came the negation of its program policies. In 1930 the Central Committee in one of its resolutions explicitly pointed out that "the kind of currently indestructible utopias include the projects focused on the immediate creation, at the expense of the state, of communist residential areas with an entire collectivization of all the areas of life". "Architects must avoid living in the world of fantasy" – it was cautioned.<sup>14</sup>

In the majority of discussions on the history of the architecture in the Soviet Union, there are mentions of the participation of The Constructivists in the first post-revolution stage of the Land of Councils' construction, omitting the part of the avant-garde in the following actions. The analyses of art of the period in question often reject the totalitarian nature of modernism right away, seeking the origin of its cooperation in the ethos of loyalty to art. The most convenient

<sup>9</sup> M. Chagall, *Ma Vie*, for: F. Miks, *Czerwony kogut.*, p.

<sup>10</sup> J. Milner, *Kazimir Malevich and the Art of Geometry*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1996, p. 174.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Ch. Jencks, *Modern Movements in Architecture*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1977, pp. 86-87.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>14</sup> J. Wujek, *Mity i utopie...*, pp. 68-69.

argument of the defenders of the purity of the avant-garde artists' intentions would surely be the thesis on the ignorance of the criminal nature of the system. Unfortunately, at least regarding some of them, we cannot have any illusions – Alexander Rodchenko idealized the Soviet system of “resocialization” through work, and his position did not drastically change even when he had an opportunity to visit one of the labor camps.<sup>15</sup>

It is important to remember that Communism, also during the Stalinist era, was a project entirely modernization-oriented. When in the 1930s Stalin ordered the undertaking of a gigantic work of transforming and modernizing Moscow, former The Constructivists sprang into action hand in hand with faithful advocates of Social Realism. Nikolai Ladovsky or Victor Viesnin together with Karo Alabian and Boris Iofan were creating the modern metropolis.<sup>16</sup> This exceptional symbiosis caught the attention of such researchers as Pare, Hudson, and Schlegel. At the same time, Piotr Juszkiewicz, when analyzing political entanglement of the Constructivist avant-garde in the USSR, emphasized that the history of the relation of modernism and the totalitarian country should be “reconstructed with the highest possible level of precision”.<sup>17</sup>

### **New city for the new man**

One of the most significant goals of the Constructivists involved in the construction of the new Communist Russia was the modernization of the backward country. They were not the first to pursue this objective. As mentioned above, the roots of the modernist utopias of the 1920s and 1930s must be sought in several decades-old anarchist concepts. Already at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Kropotkin had called for combining industrialization with the traditional agrarian character of Russia. “The industrial nations are bound to revert to agriculture, they are compelled to find out the best means of combining it with industry and they must do so without loss of time”<sup>18</sup> – he wrote. In spite of leaning generally towards decentralization, Kropotkin admitted that some branches of industry required a well-developed centralization; “co-operation of hundreds, or even thousands, of workers at the same spot is really necessary”.<sup>19</sup> The reality of a totalitarian country

<sup>15</sup> P. Juszkiewicz, *Cień modernizmu*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, Poznań 2013, p. 11.

<sup>16</sup> The situation of modernist architects in the USSR obviously changed, but their contribution to the construction of the totalitarian country was undeniable. P. Juszkiewicz, *Cień modernizmu....*, pp. 15-18.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>18</sup> P. Kropotkin, *Fields, Factories and Workshops, or Industry Combined with Agriculture and Brain Work with Manual Work*, New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1901, p. 127.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179.

was, of course, far from what one of the fathers of anarchism had imagined. However, despite that fact, in case of the USSR we can talk about a certain degree of decentralization consisting in the ascension of peripheral centers to the rank of metropolises through, among others, “the scattering of industries over the country – so as to bring factory amidst the fields, to make agriculture derive all those profits which it finds in being combined with industry”.<sup>20</sup>

Attempts to change the nature of the existing imperfect forms of settlement made the avant-garde architects of the end of the 1920s to begin searching for a new formula for cities. Partially inspired by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century concept of Arturo Soria y Mata’s *Ciudad Linear*, they rejected traditional centric urban layouts in favor of “linear settlements”. Dynamically developing residential areas, city districts, and new cities built near emerging industrial plants were rationally planned complexes of homogenous multifamily residential apartment blocks and buildings with social and administrative functions that came with them.

Designed in the 1930s by Ivan Leonidov and Nikolai Milutin, the new district of Kharkov was closely related to the tractor factory located there. The linear city was divided into sections consisting of repetitive residential blocks and functional buildings, such as schools or kindergartens. Simple building forms with red brick elevations and artistic shapes of public edifices were kept in the convention of functionalism. The design of the city district itself was based on an east-west axis with a perpendicularly situated axis integrating the cultural center, green areas, and, farther away, the tractor factory.

In the context of Kharkov, Ekaterinburg, “the Russian Manchester”, appears to be an entirely Constructivist city. Its avant-garde architecture does not form a closed enclave functioning next to the former center, but it is the heart of the big city structure. The city was renamed Sverdlovsk and designed in a modern manner – its wide streets and vast squares were surrounded by geometrically-shaped residential and public buildings. The speed of its construction was indeed revolutionary – in the late 1920s and early 1930s one new building a week was commissioned.<sup>21</sup> “Machine” aesthetics and the scale and momentum characteristic for the whole trend became the dominant means of expression in the city area. This Constructivist monoculture had an effect on the inhabitants who, in their majority, were peasants who had come to Sverdlovsk. Since that time, the terms “city”, modernity”, and “Constructivism” became equivalent for them.<sup>22</sup>

As much as the Soviet authorities supported avant-garde urban planning of new socialist cities (*socgorods*) and modern aesthetics in their architecture up to a certain moment, they remained skeptical about the new type of buildings proposed by the Constructivists, namely, the houses-communes. Nikolai Ladovsky tried

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 183.

<sup>21</sup> M. Ilczenko, *Opisując architekturę...*, p. 75.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

to popularize the idea of a house-commune in the 1920s<sup>23</sup> and his concepts were developed, among others, by Nikolai Kuzmin, the author of the project Housing Commune for a Miners' Settlement in Anzhero-Sudzhensk (1928-1929). Within the scope of a modernist residential district, he proposed to split the traditional (therefore bourgeois) family and divide the inhabitants by age (separately children, youth, adults, and elderly people). The majority of functions were moved to the common areas, while the apartments were practically reduced to sleeping cabins.<sup>24</sup> Political decision makers put an end to such experiments quite quickly, probably considering them "the manifestation of dangerous utopian ideas".<sup>25</sup>

### Monuments to industrialization

It is worth noting that Communism, even during the Stalinist era, was a thoroughly modernist project. None other than Joseph Stalin himself wrote in 1929: "We are becoming a country of metal, a country of automobilization, a country of tractorization".<sup>26</sup> The Futurists and the Constructivists, fascinated by the possibilities of modern technology, would have surely identified themselves with these words.

One of the prominent constructions of the time was a residential district in Magnitogorsk designed by Ernst May. The contest announced in the 1920s did not deliver satisfactory results; however, it did bring the first conceptions of de-urbanization propounded by Moisei Ginzburg, among others. They assumed urban development combining the characteristics of the countryside and the city and elimination of their contrasts.<sup>27</sup> With time, those conceptions were abandoned, whereas the city became a "grandiose factory for remaking people", a place where "yesterday's peasant... becomes a genuine proletarian"<sup>28</sup>. Ernst May, famous as the designer of social residential areas in Frankfurt am Main, arrived in the USSR in 1929 at the invitation of the Soviet authorities. In 1931 he presented the concept of a residential district that would accommodate 150 000 inhabitants. The linear layout of the residential area was complemented with green areas and public buildings with repetitive forms ("Magnitogorsk" type schools, municipal institutions designed by Margarete Schutte-Lihotzky).

The project rejected any representation of the city "contrary to its socialist nature".<sup>29</sup> Central and cultural center was to be established in the result of the con-

<sup>23</sup> Z. i T. Tołoczko, *W kręgu architektury konstruktywistycznej, neokonstruktywistycznej i dekonstruktywistycznej*, Wydawnictwo Oddziału PAN, Cracow 1999, p. 37.

<sup>24</sup> S. Jacoby, *Drawing Architecture and the Urban*, Wiley, West Sussex 2016, p. 180.

<sup>25</sup> K. Nawratek, *Ideologie w przestrzeni...*, p. 76.

<sup>26</sup> A. Leszczyński, *Skok w nowoczesność: polityka wzrostu w krajach peryferyjnych 1943-1980*, Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, Warsaw 2013, p. 209.

<sup>27</sup> P. Trzeciak, *Przygody architektury XX wieku*, Nasza Księgarnia, Warsaw 1974, p. 129.

<sup>28</sup> S. Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain. Stalinism as a Civilization*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1995, p. 72.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

centration of buildings with a specific nature and exceptional scale. Graduation of altitude was also reserved for houses-communes planned around the concentration point of traffic towards the factory.<sup>30</sup> Magnitogorsk grew at the speed worthy of the homeland of the revolution. Work on the construction of the conglomerate began in the mid-1930s, but two years later the city already had 230 000 inhabitants.<sup>31</sup> During the final stage of the construction, known only from the article published in 1932 and a fragment of the plan, May decided to distinguish the public buildings located around the station.<sup>32</sup> It is difficult to clearly assess if this “centralization” was the result of the general intellectual climate in the USSR and the coming Socialist Realism.

In the case of new city districts built near old city centers, the “central” functions were moved to the old center. Designing the residential district Kostino for 25 000 inhabitants, which was never built, Nikolai Ladovsky did not have a representational center in mind. Nikolai Milutin and Ivan Leonidov did the same in Kharkov, where the most important public buildings were located in the very center of the city, far from the new district. The most important building in the “city of tractors” – the Palace of Industry (Derzhprom in Ukrainian, Gosprom in Russian) was built between 1927 and 1929, to a design by Sergei Serafimov, Samuel Kravets and Mark Felger.<sup>33</sup> The fragmented form of a huge scale and incredible constructional complexity is almost a manifestation of the utopian vision of Constructivist cities. Located in a vast square, the building used to be surrounded by other modern projects which after World War II were transformed in the spirit of the Stalinist neoclassicism. Derzhprom maintained its original character and we can admire the soaring tower with the lightness achieved thanks to a great amount of glazed surfaces and reinforced concrete passages measuring 26 meters, which connect different parts of the building at a considerable altitude over the ground. When it was created, the edifice must have caused admiration thanks to its size and momentum. It was a statute of modernity, the forecast of the direction undertaken by the Soviet Union. Did its language, however, speak to the society in a clear and express way, as its creators would have wanted? In spite of its seemingly egalitarian inclusive nature, the modern culture of the post-revolution Russia created by the Constructivists was alien to the agrarian society. It became a utopian dream of the narrow group of intellectuals, partly supported by the government. Zdzisława Tołłoczko did not exaggerate much when she said that Constructivism was a “great intellectual adventure and fascination of the Moscow's and St. Petersburg's (Leningrad's) intelligentsia.”<sup>34</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., pp. 73-74.

<sup>31</sup> A. Leszczyński, *Ideologie w przestrzeni...*, p. 171.

<sup>32</sup> T. Flierl, “Być może największe zadanie, jakie kiedykolwiek postawiono architektowi. Ernst May w Związku Radzieckim (1930-1933), in: *Ernst May 1886-1970*, ed. C. Quiring, W. Voigt, P.C. Schmal, E. Herrel, Muzeum Architektury we Wrocławiu, Wrocław 2012, p. 85.

<sup>33</sup> P. Trzeciak, *Przygody architektury...*, p. 131.

<sup>34</sup> Z. i T. Tołłoczko, *W kręgu architektury...*, p. 11.

## The Polish contexts

The Constructivist avant-garde had a huge impact on the architectural concepts in Europe, including Poland. The Soviet experiences seem extremely interesting in the context of the projects of social residential districts in interwar Poland. Jakub Wujek wrote that “in the stable state structures, [Constructivism’s] broad perspectives had shrunk”.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, if we take a look at the workers’ residential districts in Łódź designed in the 1920s and 1930s, their scale does not resemble that of the Constructivist cities in the USSR. Although they did share the same basic ideas on particular projects, while the local authorities emphasized that “satisfying the housing demand is one of the most urgent and important tasks of the local government”<sup>36</sup>, they had massive differences in the area of social, political, and economical premises and the resulting investment scale. In spite of that, the links between the undertakings of Ernest May or Nikolai Lodovsky and the concept of the Romuald Gutt’s residential project in Nowe Rokicie (1928) in Łódź seem very strong. Simple linear layout was filled with repetitive outline of the apartment blocks. It looks as if the authors wanted to embody the words of Siegfried Giedion who in the same year wrote in “Bauen in Frankreich” that an architect attempts to achieve an anonymous and collective form at the same time.<sup>37</sup>

It seems symptomatic that one of the most interesting visions of the “new world” emerged in Poland right after World War II. “Functionalized Łódź”, the matter in question, remained, however, an unrealized utopian vision of W. Strzemiński who, following the steps of Russian Constructivists, planned the creation of a better living environment “ex nihilo”. The idea of the *functionalized Łódź* itself was based on the ideas of pre-war modernists and constituted an opposition to the 19<sup>th</sup> century industrial city. Large densely populated tenement houses with offices were replaced by functionalist apartment blocks in a linear layout. In place of small and dirty internal yards Strzemiński designed vast green areas providing adequate exposure to sun and ventilation.<sup>38</sup> The artist was convinced that the enormous scope of the necessary transformations of the existing construction in Łódź made it unviable. Instead, he proposed the construction of an entirely new center located along the existing railway tracks to Zgierz. In time, Strzemiński supposed, the “old” Łódź would lose its population in favor of the “new” one. Several decades before, Moisei Ginzburg spoke in a similar manner: “We know the modern city is fatally ill, but we do not wish to treat it. On the contrary, we prefer to destroy it and replace it with new socialist forms of settlement”.<sup>39</sup> These words,

<sup>35</sup> J. Wujek, *Mity i utopie...*, p. 124.

<sup>36</sup> E. Rosset, *Samorząd łódzki w walce z głodem mieszkaniowym*, Drukarnia Polska, Łódź 1930, p. 20.

<sup>37</sup> S. Giedion, *Bauen in Frankreich*, Klinkhardt & Biermann, Leipzig & Berlin 1928, p. 10, for: J.L. Cohen, *Mechanizacja przejmuję władzę*, “Autoportret” 2015, no. 3 (50), p. 22.

<sup>38</sup> W. Strzemiński, *Łódź sfunkcjonalizowana*, „Myśl współczesna” 1947(XI), no. 11(18), pp. 446-447.

<sup>39</sup> J. Wujek, *Mity i utopie...*, p. 38.

found in a letter to Corbusier, were written right before the Famine in Ukraine, the Stalinist purges, and the fight against the avant-garde, whose victims included also Ginzburg himself. Strzeminski's concept emerged on the eve of the darkest times of the Stalinist terror in Poland. In both cases, the avant-garde utopia was replaced by the dystopia of the totalitarian country.

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## **PROJEKTOWANIE UTOPII. AWANGARDOWA ARCHITEKTURA A PROCESY MODERNIZACYJNE (streszczenie)**

W pierwszej połowie XX wieku związki pomiędzy rewolucją społeczną i procesami modernizacyjnymi, a awangardową sztuką i architekturą były bardzo silne. Piotr Juszkiewicz, analizując relacje pomiędzy modernizmem, a ustrojami o charakterze totalitarnym i autorytarnym dowodził, że „reżimy totalitarne nie odrzucały z góry jakiejś formuły języka artystycznego, bo interesowała je ich użyteczność”. „Zasadnicze elementy naszej architektury uwarunkowane są rewolucją społeczną” – pisał El Lissitzky. W obliczu takich deklaracji nie powinny dziwić związki awangardowych projektantów z prądami o charakterze socjalistycznym czy komunistycznym. Porewolucyjna Rosja stała się prawdziwym poligonem doświadczalnym dla nowych ruchów, a twórcy o modernistycznej i konstruktywistycznej proweniencji ochoczo przystąpili do budowy nowej (lepiej) rzeczywistości. Kołem zamachowym procesów modernizacyjnych miał być rozwój przemysłu (przede wszystkim ciężkiego).

Przykłady ośrodków przemysłowych realizowanych w latach 20. i 30. XX wieku na terenie ZSRR pozwalają ocenić ogromny wpływ, jaki nowoczesne budownictwo i urbanistyka wywarły na proces kształtowania „nowego człowieka”. Liczne obiekty awangardowej architektury niosły ze sobą obraz „nowego świata” i stawały się przekaźnikami nowej ideologii radzieckiej. Dla mieszkańców Jekaterynburga, Magnitogorska czy Charkowa, modernistyczne budynki i sposób urządzenia przestrzeni kształtowały trwałe wyobrażenie o mieście i jego idei. Osiedla, takie jak charkowskie „Miasto Linio-we” czy realizacja Ernsta Maya w Magnitogorsku, były realizowanymi w ogromnej skali utopijnymi marzeniami modernistów. Losy ich powstawania, a następnie czasów świetności i upadku, tworzą portret architektury awangardy pojmowanej jako utopia - przyszłość, która nie nadeszła.

**Słowa kluczowe:** architektura, awangarda, modernizacja, konstruktywizm, utopia, dystonia.



1. Residential block in the linear city of Magnitogorsk - (photo Aleksandr Zykov, Wikimedia Commons)



2. Residential block in the linear city of Kharkov (photo Błażej Ciarkowski)



3. Elementary school in the linear city of Kharkov (photo Błażej Ciarkowski)



4. House of State Industry (Derzhprom) in Kharkov (photo Błażej Ciarkowski)



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## BEYOND A NARRATIVE. FUNCTIONLESS MODERNIST HERITAGE BUILDINGS AND THE AESTHETIC AUTONOMY OF THE CITIZENS

**Abstract:** The article presents the current situation of some selected modernist heritage architectural objects in the city of Katowice, or rather their ruins. The author discusses their phantom-like status, describes some local artistic interventions to highlight their plight and points out their potential to create a sphere of aesthetic autonomy in the citizens' daily life.

**Keywords:** modernism, urban planning, architecture, heritage, ruins.

*The ruin liberates function from its subservience to purpose. (...) The ruin is the temple of the non-useful.*

Robert Ginsberg<sup>1</sup>

### Nocturnal Activities

On a hot summer night in 2014, the Silesian artist Szymon Szewczyk opened his installation, located at the 5<sup>th</sup> floor of the declassified and abandoned hotel Silesia in Katowice. The visitors had only three hours to find and reach the suite no. 520, where the "Plants and Animals" project was taking place. It was not an easy task, as none of the elevators were working – there is no electricity in the building. However, after a short ascent by a staircase, the effort was rewarded by the fabulous experience of a tropical garden, created inside the old-fashioned suite 520. The garden's creator is known as a lover of potted plants, which are used by him to initiate the process of, as he puts it, „taming of the austere urban space”.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> R. Ginsberg, *The Aesthetics of Ruins*, Rodopi, Amsterdam-New York, 2004, pp. 33, 45.

<sup>2</sup> S. Szewczyk, *Rośliny i Zwierzęta / Plants and Animals*, in: M. Lisok, *Nocturnal Activities*, BWA, Katowice 2014, p. 136.

The strategy employed by Szewczyk seems to be very similar to the one adopted by the founders of the famous Echigo Matsumoyama Museum in Niigata.<sup>3</sup> Designed by Takaharu and Yui Tezuka, in cooperation with Masahiro Ikeda, for the 2003 Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial, the building is widely recognized as a „rusted submarine covered in snow”. It is believed that its creator, Tezuka, wanted it to look like a ruin from the beginning. It is worth noting that Tezuka’s design is complemented with a floral arrangement designed by the world-famous architect Kawamata Tadashi, who covered the exterior of the building with local plants able to survive high temperatures and extremely heavy snowfalls. Those plants are intended to destroy the building in approximately 30 years’ time.

It is striking that both of the projects mentioned above involve a “natural factor” in the process of creation and utilization of a ruined space. Both of them also seem to be intended as a kind of a battlefield or war between organic, living nature and artificial, dead structures. What is more, they provide the same type of narration for visitors, which requires their bodily engagement and confronts them with sensory discomfort.<sup>4</sup>

Although we could list a lot more of such projects, it has to be recognized that their contexts are radically different. The Echigo Matsumoyama Museum is a singular projection of the architect’s idea; a sensory experiment carried out in the middle of nowhere, a fascinating and unique object, a curiosity. In contrast, suite 520 at the hotel Silesia is a representative of thousands of nameless places hidden in today’s city of Katowice. While the “snow museum” seems to arise from a lack of such spaces in the area, Szewczyk’s project speaks rather of the overabundance of ruins. One of the critics has called it a “wildcat installation”, which „seems to be a unique cure-all that releases this urban creature from its death throes, changing its internal codes, affecting its organs, and resuscitating its long-forgotten life functions. After years of stagnation and life in exile, the forgotten building comes back to the architectural map of the city.”<sup>5</sup> In fact, the event was only a part of a big art project called *Nocturnal Activities*, carried out in Katowice by the Bureau for Art Exhibitions in 2014. It was intended to induce a kind of deregulation of the panoptic system of control making invisible the places which have lost their readable function. The methods proposed by the project’s curator, Marta Lisok, were radical, as she spoke of “persuading the visitors to take a series of risky walks in the city’s back streets.”<sup>6</sup> Those spontaneous, uncontrolled initiatives

<sup>3</sup> All details from. J. Petri, *Aesthetics of Snow in Heavy Snowfall Zones*, in: J. Petri, *Performing Cultures*, Libron, Kraków 2015.

<sup>4</sup> The staircase leading to the viewing point situated in the characteristic tower of Echigo Matsumoyama is left in the dark and filled with occasional lights and noises produced by some audio-visual equipment hidden in the structure of the building.

<sup>5</sup> A. Hoenszer. *The Anatomy of the City*, in: M. Lisok, *Nocturnal Activities*, BWA, Katowice 2014, p. 144.

<sup>6</sup> M. Lisok, *Loitering*, in: *Nocturnal Activities*, BWA, Katowice 2014, p. 14.

are understood as a form of an “antithesis of contemporary strategies regarding the public space, according to which preventing danger in crowded areas can be achieved by keeping strangers at a distance and surrendering to the obsession of visibility, which originates from the belief that being able to see everything around you is a guarantee of being able to quickly identify a stranger or intruder.”<sup>7</sup> The problem identified by this young curator seems to be very important in the context of the ruins, semi-ruins, and other devastated or declassified modernist buildings in Katowice. The first important question here is: why are public buildings allowed to be used only half of the time – in daytime? The problem itself is not new. It was already noted in the 1950s by the members of the Situationist movement. This question however, entails another, more important one: why have so many well-planned and popular modernist buildings become invisible on the map of the modern city?

### **The diagnosis**

The situation of the modernist heritage buildings in Katowice is paradoxical. If we begin to count the modernist era’s leftovers spread around the city, we would create a list full of well-known landmarks: the famous UFO-shaped sports and entertainment center “Spodek” [Saucer], the Silesia Hotel, the Bureau of Art Exhibitions, or the Super Unit block of flats, to name just a few. At a first glance, none of them seems to be about to disappear from the city map in the nearest future; all of them would be rather considered as emblematic, not only of Katowice, but of the whole Silesia region. We could even say that there is probably no reason for the local city movements to raise alarm, as most of the mentioned objects are protected by the municipal regulations. However, this is only half of the truth. The other half is that although the modernist era was the time of intense and rapid development of the whole Silesia region, today we have lost the key to understanding its ideas. One of the respected Polish architects, Tomasz Konior, calls this situation dramatic, as in his view, modernism itself had already destroyed some of the traditional, accumulated codes of living in a city. In his opinion, modern people have not only lost what he calls their “city genes”, but worse, the changes taking place now are far more dangerous than those in the 1960s or 1970s.<sup>8</sup> The problem of modern Polish cities, which is recognized not only by Konior, is the total absence of any real urban planning.

It is perhaps worth refreshing our memory to understand what “real urban planning” meant in Silesia. Not everyone remembers the middle period of the Polish People’s Republic,

<sup>7</sup> M. Lisok, op. cit., p. 14.

<sup>8</sup> For the discussion of Konior’s diagnosis see J. Petri, *The Garden Cities of Katowice. A study of Cityholia*, in: “Art Inquiry, Recherches sur les Arts” 2016, vol. XVIII (XXVII), pp. 127-145.

but the local authorities of the time took proper care of promoting the “image of the city” among the citizens and visitors. Their main propaganda product, a beautiful album of photographs, entitled *The Colors and Rhythms of Silesia* can be still found in many Polish homes.<sup>9</sup> The book presents the Silesian metropolis as similar to Ebenezer Howard’s garden city, a hybrid of industry and nature, which allows its citizens to work in the city center and return to a home located in a forest. Strikingly, there is a special chapter dedicated to the capitol of the region, entitled “The New Katowice”. Not surprisingly, it describes the post-war reconstruction of the city as “healing the wounds inflicted by the Second World War”.<sup>10</sup> In fact, many of the historical tenements and monuments in Katowice were demolished after the war, in consequence of the need to free the space for new, modernist architecture, such as the Brutalist building of the new railway station. The New Katowice was meant to be a model socialist city, which would simply pop up from the pages of the book:

Gradually, new houses are being built – the same type for all residents, about equally bright, with colorful elevations. [...] Today Katowice is beautiful and new, because it is being built not only for its current citizens, but also for the future ones.<sup>11</sup>

Although we can speak about modernism as the artistic framework of the described transformation, the whole concept of the new city of Katowice had a very strong socialist component. It was designed and built by the citizens of a socialist country for the citizens of this socialist country. This fact creates a far stronger context than in the case of the modernist buildings springing up in capitalistic cities. For example, the famous designs of Le Corbusier for Modulor and Modulor 2 concern the housing projects that are supposed to improve people’s quality of life in the way which is criticized today as “designing the citizens”. However, they are still miles away from the idea of a uniformly socialist community, which was an objective for the architects of the People’s Republic. The „normative” citizen was understood there as a working class hero, devoted to his labour and ascetic in his private life. It is striking that even the private villas of the key public figures in socialist Poland were nothing more than square-shaped, two storey, single houses, very typical for the time. Apart from the better standard of interior design, they did not differ from other houses. That is the opposite spectrum of the standards known from other socialist countries, such as Romania, where dictator Ceausescu had his private palace with dozens of luxurious rooms. One case is extremely instructive here. Although many consider the Super Unit,

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<sup>9</sup> A. Bogusz, A. Chojnacka, C. Leżyński, *Barwy i rytmy Śląska*, Arkady, Warszawa 1969.

<sup>10</sup> A. Bogusz, A. Chojnacka, C. Leżyński, op. cit., p. 96.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

built in Katowice by Mieczysław Król as a copy of Le Corbusier's building from Marseilles, there are many significant differences here. Filip Springer points out that in spite of the initial plans, no leisure facilities for the residents (such as the sun terrace and the swimming pool known from the Marseilles project) were provided in the building, as they were understood as not necessary for working class citizens.<sup>12</sup> The problem was that general Ziętek, who was in charge in the region of Silesia in those times, just wanted to impress his principals in Warsaw, even at the price of the quality of the building, which, with its centrally heated walls, was still considered a luxury by the Communist officials. The hiatus between the impressive form and the poor building quality, seems to be one of the main causes of problems with the condition of the architecture from those times today.

It is important to mention that such projects as the Super Unit or the Silesian Park (a park planned for the scale of the whole Voivodship) were making a powerful impression in the 1960s and 1970s, and it cannot be denied that even today, their fame is still viable. Filip Springer entitled his series of articles on PRL architecture "Badly born", which points to the special status of those buildings. They were meant to be an interpretation of the newest architectural trends, but they were built in a chaotic way, as cheaply as possible, just to be figures in the plan of rapid development. This results in their present situation: while still visually attractive, they just simply do not fit today's standards of performing, and are too expensive to be rebuilt for modern functions. The public aqua park called "Fala" [Wave], highly popular during the time of PRL, becomes an example of those problems. "Fala", part of the Silesian Park, was operated until 2015, but in its last years it was becoming more and more neglected. Although it was built "for the future", according to the best standards at the time of its creation, it simply does not fit the modern standards for such objects. Another problem is the scale, as those facilities, apart of poor quality workmanship, were overscaled, built for the masses, thousands of people coming from many Sielsian cities. It is thus important to note that in spite of the still cultivated myth of Fala, it began to be avoided by the Silesians as soon as other, newer aqua parks were developed in the area. The number of the visitors decreased rapidly in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The problem with those „badly born” modernist icons seems to be directly represented by the case of Fala. While still keeping their status of local legends, they are not able to function according to the modern expectations of performance. Paraphrasing the motto representing the modernistic movement in architecture, "Form & Function", they last as forms without functions.

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<sup>12</sup> F. Springer, *Żle urodzone. Reportaże o architekturze PRL*, <http://www.dwutygodnik.com/artyku-1/3289-zle-urodzone-reportaze-o-architekturze-prl-u-fragment.html> (20.07.2017)

## Performing City

Among the most dramatic changes in urban planning in Poland is what we could call the perspective of the architectural objects' performance. During the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the socialist vision of a city as a working mechanism interfered with the modernist paradigm of the readable form of the buildings, which resulted in the conviction that good architecture has to produce grand forms that will last for generations. The imposing, overscaled buildings, such as the Spodek sports arena or the Super Unit were intentionally designed as megastructures to satisfy the demand not only of the current citizens of Katowice, but also of the future generations. It is hard to believe today, but in fact nobody could imagine the collapse of the socialist urban management system in those times. However, the impossible happened, and urban management has been transformed in accordance with the new economic paradigm. The transfer from the realm of direct socialist planning to the reality of a capitalist city was a starting point of what is known as a performing city.

John MacKenzie was one of those thinkers who understood performance not only as a specific artistic activity, but as a phenomenon characterizing daily life in general. In his view, performance appears to be the main force shaping today's reality, also the reality of the urban life.<sup>13</sup> The power of performance is the power of transformation, although it has to be clearly stated that the promises of a creative transformation of the urban environment with the intention to improve the quality of urban living, made in the name of urban performativity, are usually empty. It may be observed that new urban lifestyles and concepts redefining the use of old urban structures are extremely easy to fit into the functional logic of the traditional city projects. In today's reality, however, functionality is understood as an ability to earn money, so in fact all the "revolutionary" projects for the city have to be ultimately cost-effective, predictable, and easy to operate. The revolutionary "Performing City" is only a figure, an attractive slogan, nothing more than an interactive spectacle, which does not seem to have enough energy to transform the reality of modern urban life.

However, the concept of the "Performing City" appears as a whole: we can speak of its two functional ranges: the range of the economic performance and the range of the aesthetic performance. In fact, both of them are subordinated to the logic of economic efficiency.<sup>14</sup> It is striking that over centuries, the urban aesthetic performance, embodied by innovative urban design, was based on economic

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<sup>13</sup> J. McKenzie, *Perform or ... Else*, polish edition, *Performuj albo.... Od dyscypliny do performansu*, Kraków 2011.

<sup>14</sup> L. Kern, *Sex and the Revitalized City: Gender, Condominium, Development and Urban Citizenship*, Toronto, 2010, p. 151 „These reinvented, re-aestheticized city spaces facilitate the intensification of a consumerist model of citizenship, wherein the right to make claims on the city is performed through acts of consumption”.

growth. In today's reality, the dependency has been reversed: innovative urban planning has become a source of economic growth for modern cities.<sup>15</sup> In this case, the corporation named Performing City tends to produce an illusion that free actions of an aesthetic nature, taken by its citizens, are an important contribution to the process of reshaping the city. Sharon Zukin unveils the nature of this process and points out that many agents taking part in the process of urban aesthetic performance present themselves as independent, civic movements, whereas they are significantly entangled in the mechanisms of urban power and control. In this frame, urban culture is presented as a strategy used to power the economic growth of the city, which does not however improve the quality of its citizens' life.<sup>16</sup> The problem is widely recognized, and researchers like Paul Makeham state that some kind of an ethic criterion should be applied to the process of adaptation of an aesthetic performance to the mechanisms of economic efficiency. For Makeham, this should be accomplished only by the realization of the principle of full participation, where citizens are not only actors in a kind of urban theatre, but genuine performers with a real power to enable the change.<sup>17</sup> However, even Makeham admits that this expectation cannot be easily fulfilled, because urban authorities would have to agree on the consequences of the performance also in a long-time perspective and accept all of the costs and risks that it takes, which is not possible in a short-span logic of modern urban economic performance.<sup>18</sup>

Applying the logic of the performing city to Silesian relic modernist structures meant for most of them the necessity of rapid transformation into commercial objects. This was easy in the case of the buildings in the vicinity of the Katowice market square, such as the Skarbek department store, but is still a great problem for the Silesian Park, BWA pavilion, or the Super Unit. The current situation of the emblematic Spodek arena provides a sad example of those difficulties. Its well-recognized familiar shape, and its large capacity combined with its long history of hosting sports and cultural events should ensure success even today. However, the already refurbished, beautiful arena, which hosted the legendary final of the Volleyball World Championships only three years before, has lost the competition with the brand new Tauron Arena in Kraków, and is resigned to organizing rather minor events. All this shows that most of the modernist buildings in Katowice

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<sup>15</sup> A. Gospodini, *European Cities in Competition and the New „Uses” of Urban Design*, "Journal of Urban Design" 2002 vol. 7, no 1, 59-73.

<sup>16</sup> S. Zukin, *The Cultures of Cities*, Blackwell, Massachusetts 1995.

<sup>17</sup> P. Makeham, *Performing the City*, *Theatre Research International* 2005, vol. 30, no. 2, p. 152 „Good city planning, then, promotes the full participation of citizens, both as performers in the urban drama and as spectators of it, and the most innovative planners embrace this principle willingly”.

<sup>18</sup> P. Makeham, *ibid.*, p. 158: "For this theatre to function in practice rather than as a fanciful metaphor, the city administration must accommodate not only set and props but the performance in its entirety, including the dramas of transgression and disharmony which impel social narratives, and lend substance to shared existence”.

appear to be still determined by their original context and thus unable to fit the reality of economic performance, which sets the standards of the modern city. Despite their great history and attractive form, they are easily put into the “not profitable” category, not only by the authorities, but also by the citizens adopting the short-time perspective logic of urban growth.

### The question of autonomy

In 2016, another interesting event was held at the BWA gallery in Katowice. The exhibition called *Widmo / The Phantom* was meant to document the phantom pains after the transformation of the center of the city. Once again, curator Marta Lisok proposed an exploration of a kind of performative urban geography, this time, however, concentrated on the sense of loss. It was based on the idea of performative recreation of the previous status of the phantoms – mainly modernist buildings in Katowice, such as the BWA pavilion and the Varietes Centrum (a restaurant). The Silesian art historian Irma Kozina points out that in the economic reality of the modern cities, “it seems that the only space which allows altruistic reflection on the city – free from the interference of the big capital and based on the actions that affirm social values – is offered by art”.<sup>19</sup> In fact, the field of autonomous action seems to be wider, and not necessarily connected with artistic practice, though art is undeniably one of the possible instruments of achieving aesthetic autonomy in the world of the modern cities. This aesthetic autonomy is extremely important, as it enables the re-creation and re-shaping of the experience of the urban space. Following this principle, the artists collaborating on the Phantom project try to restore the lost experience of the emblematic objects of modernist Katowice, “evoking associations related to the former appearance of the city”, which allows “each individual to trigger their memory, to dive deep into the recesses of oblivion and search this so far untouched depository of important images from the past, images recorded during one individual existence”.<sup>20</sup> During one of these re-creations, the artist Mikołaj Szpaczyński asked the son of Stefan Michalik, the famous chef in charge of the Varietes Centrum, to draw some sketches of the interiors of the demolished building from memory. Then, “based on these reconstructions, Szpaczyński played a recording of some events that took place at the venue in the 1980s”.<sup>21</sup> Such actions can be defined in terms of the performative “restored restored behaviour”. Performance researcher Richard Schechner points out that the repetition of an act which is culturally and socially restored can result in the creation of completely new meanings.<sup>22</sup> It is important to note that this

<sup>19</sup> I. Kozina, *Art in the Face of Accepting Changes in Urban Space - The Case of Architecture in Downtown Katowice*, ed. Marta Lisok, *The Phantom / Widmo*, BWA, Katowice 2016, p. 54.

<sup>20</sup> I. Kozina, op. cit., p. 54.

<sup>21</sup> M. Lisok, *Phantom Geography*, ed. M. Lisok, *The Phantom / Widmo*, BWA, Katowice 2016, p. 12.

<sup>22</sup> R. Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, Routledge, London, 2002, p. 28: „the training and practice, of learning appropriate culturally specific bits of behaviour, of adjusting and performing one’s life roles in relation to social and personal circumstances”.

delineates the field of aesthetic autonomy, which is not accessible via the activities performed in accordance with the logic of the Performative City. This is so, because the logic is based on the idea of the subordination of the aesthetic performance of citizens and social groups to the objective of economic performance. However, the methodology of the “phantom pains treatment” proposed by the Phantom project seems to be free of any kind of links to the Performing City. It appears to be a private, intimate practice rather than a vote “for” or “against” the changes of the urban space of modern Katowice. It is rather an invitation to a kind of an individual journey, which can enhance one’s experience of the city. It is important to remember that the notion of “enhanced experience” appears in the context of Richards Shusterman’s project of Somaesthetics.<sup>23</sup> Krystyna Wilkoszewska points out that it has both qualitative and quantitative dimensions as it draws attention to the multisensory aspect of the aesthetic experience, but also to its meliorative effect.<sup>24</sup> In this sense, the proposed method of restoring restored behavior can be understood directly as the practice of enhanced experience, as it multiplies its sensory aspects and restructures one’s relations with others and with the external world. How does all this relate to the status of the phantom-like modernist buildings in Katowice? Their fate probably cannot be reversed. However, this does not mean that they are simply unimportant. To highlight the possibilities that they offer in their current status, I would like to quote a small anecdote concerning murals, which comes from the city of Łódź. The world-class street artist Aryz came to Łódź to paint a very well-received, large-scale mural depicting a young woman reading a love letter. However, the mural, one of the first works in the Urban Forms Gallery collection may soon disappear, as it was executed on an old layer of paint that is now decomposing. Although in 10 years’ time there will be no Aryz mural in Łódź, I am pretty sure that it will become one of the icons of the city and will be preserved in millions of photos and in millions of good memories of the citizens of Łódź.

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<sup>23</sup> R. Shusterman, *Transactional Experimental Inquiry: From Pragmatism to Somaesthetics*, “Contemporary Pragmatism” 2015, no 12, p. 194.

<sup>24</sup> K. Wilkoszewska, *Estetyka pragmatyczna w perspektywie bio* - „Przegląd Filozoficzny” 2016, no 1, p. 220.

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## **POZA NARRACJĄ. POZBAWIONE FUNKCJI OBIEKTY ARCHITEKTONICZNE MODERNISTYCZNEGO DZIEDZICTWA JAKO POLE ESTETYCZNEJ AUTONOMII MIESZKAŃCÓW (streszczenie)**

Artykuł podejmuje zagadnienie specyficznego statusu obiektów modernistycznego dziedzictwa architektonicznego w rejonie współczesnych Katowic. Autor prezentuje, skoncentrowane na tych budynkach i zespołach architektonicznych, zabiegi podejmowane przez lokalnych artystów oraz podejmuje próbę analizy ich potencjału w zakresie wytworzenia strefy estetycznej autonomii w obszarze życia codziennego mieszkańców miasta.

**Słowa kluczowe:** modernizm, urbanistyka, dziedzictwo architektoniczne, ruiny.

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**Magdalena Samborska** - PhD in fine arts, assistant professor at the Władysław Strzebiński Academy of Fine Arts in Łódź. In her work as an artist and researcher, she focuses on the relationship between pure and applied art specific to the tradition of the Łódź school, as well as the experimental endeavors in the field of clothing design. Samborska's attitude of critical distance towards fashion stems from her interest in feminism and has led her to inter-media use and research. In her work, she uses photography, film, as well as objects that could be classified as a cross between clothing and sculpture, etc. She received a scholarship from the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage in 1998 and 2008 and won the Grand Prix at the 3rd Art Biennale in Piotrków Trybunalski in 2013. Major group exhibitions: *Labirynt*, VII Festiwal Nowej Sztuki, Radio Słubfurt, Frankfurt (2016); 6<sup>th</sup> Photography Biennial, Stary Browar/Słodownia, Poznań (2008); *Kobieta*

*o kobiecie*, Bielska Galeria BWA, Bielsko-Biała (2007); *Miłość i demokracja*, Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej "Łaźnia" (2005). Selected texts published in "Art Inquiry": *The hidden other. Clothing as an art object* (2010), *Citing gender. The relationship between dress and gender identity* (2012), *The Art of Women - from Margin to Mainstream* (2014).

**Aleksandra Sumorok** - PhD, art historian, Assistant Professor at the Strzebiński Academy of Fine Arts in Łódź. Her research focuses on 20<sup>th</sup> century Polish architecture and design. Author of many articles and the book *Architektura i urbanistyka Łodzi okresu realizmu socjalistycznego* [Architecture and urban planning in Łódź in the Socialist Realist period]. Topics of interest: Socialist Realist interiors and design (research 2012-2017, grant NCN); the architect and the state, 1949-1956; industrial cities in Eastern Europe in the 1950s; the architecture of Socialist Realism in Eastern Europe; diversity in the time of totalitarian doctrine.

**Paulina Sztabińska** - PhD, associate professor in the Department of Art History, University of Łódź, lecturer at PWSFTviT in Łódź. Winner of the Jan Józef Lipski award for best MA thesis (2003) and the Szczęsny Dettloff award for best PhD thesis (2008). Author of the books: *Geometria a natura. Polska sztuka abstrakcyjna w drugiej połowie XX wieku* [Geometry and nature. Polish abstract art in the second half of the twentieth century], Warszawa 2010 and *Sztuka geometryczna a postmodernizm* [Geometric Art and Postmodernism], Warszawa 2011. Co-author and co-editor of the book *The proper names in the art of Łódź. Contemporary painting, graphic arts, sculpture and intermedia*, Łódź 2008. Editorial associate of the journal *Art Inquiry. Recherches sur les arts*. Her research interests focus on 20th century art and art theory.

**Grzegorz Sztabiński** - professor in the Department of Art History at the University of Łódź and at the Faculty of Visual Arts at the Academy of Fine Arts in Łódź, where he is head of the Department of Theory and History of Art and Studio of Intermedial Composition. His theoretical research focuses on the philosophy of modern art and issues of contemporary aesthetics. His publications include three books on these subjects, four edited collections and over 150 articles in Polish and foreign journals. He also writes critical reviews. He has been a member of AICA (Association Internationale des Critiques d'Art) since 1995 and has participated in the boards of academic journals and art galleries. Concurrently with his academic work, he is an author of paintings, drawings, installations, and a number of performances. His work was shown in some 70 solo exhibitions in Poland and abroad; he has also taken part in many collective Polish and international exhibitions (e.g. the São Paulo Art Biennial (1979); the International Triennial of Drawing in Wrocław (1978, 1981, 1988, 1992, 1995); the Symposium of Systematic and Constructive Art in Madrid (1989)).

**Tomasz Szczepanek** - Master of Fine Arts, graduate of the Theatre Directing Department at the Aleksander Zelwerowicz Theatre Academy in Warsaw (2014). In his MFA thesis *The End of Art - Post-historical Theatre* he analysed Arthur C. Danto's conception of the end of art and attempted to show the parallel processes taking place in the field of performing arts. Currently he is a PhD student at the Department of Aesthetics of the Institute of Philosophy, University of Warsaw. His main fields of interest are aesthetics, theory of art, performance studies.

**Anna Wendorff** - PhD, assistant professor at the Department of Spanish Studies of the University of Łódź. Her academic research focuses on avant-garde literature in Polish and Spanish. Her publications include two monographs: *Vanguardias poéticas en el arte digital en Latinoamérica* [Poetic avant-gardes in the digital Art of Latin America] Gobierno Bolivariano de Aragua, Aragua, 2010 - a study devoted to Ibero-American experimental poetry - and *Estructuras narratológicas en la literatura digital de Jaime Alejandro Rodríguez* [Narratological Structures in Digital Literature of Jaime Alejandro Rodríguez], Aracne, Roma, 2015], which focuses on narration in Latin American e-literature.

