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## ARTISTIC ALLERGIES

In its literal application, the term *allergy*, connoting a reaction different from the customary – from the Greek *allos* (“different”) and *ergos* (“reaction”) – is used in the field of medicine. However, in the cultural domain, and particularly in the realm of art, one may discern some reactions analogous to the pathological behavior of a tissue when confronted with an allergen. Such behavior manifests itself in the form of negative sensitivity, lacking normal justification, which leads to a subconscious or semi-conscious avoidance of certain notions or works of art, or even to their active negation and rejection. Such reactions may be individual in nature or may be manifested by smaller or larger groups of people. The causes of such allergies or hypersensitivity may be genetic or environmental. They may be sought in the original circumstances or in some activities of the organism; one can try to establish them by focusing on the incidence of the infection.

Artistic allergies understood in this way have occurred frequently in the history of various arts, also manifesting themselves in the fields of art theory and aesthetics. The present issue of *Art Inquiry* sets out to describe some of their varieties and to examine the mechanisms governing their appearance and their subsequent course.

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*Translated by Krzysztof Majer*

## **ALERGIE ARTYSTYCZNE**

Słowo alergia oznaczające odmienną reakcję (gr. *allos* – inny + *ergos*-reakcja) stosowane jest w znaczeniu dosłownym w medycynie. W dziedzinie kultury, a chyba szczególnie w sztuce, zauważyć można jednak sposoby reagowania zachodzące analogicznie do patologicznej reakcji tkanek na alergen. Przejawiają się one jako pozbawione normalnego uzasadnienia negatywne uwrażliwienie, prowadzące do nieświadomionego lub częściowo tylko świadomego pomijania, odrzucania pewnych idei lub dzieł, a także ich zwalczania lub negowania. Reakcje takie mogą mieć charakter indywidualny lub dotyczyć mniejszych lub większych grup ludzi. Ich uwarunkowania mogą być genetyczne albo środowiskowe. Przyczyn uczuleń lub nadwrażliwości poszukiwać można w warunkach początkowych czy sytuacjach rozwojowych, albo koncentrując się na występowaniu infekcji, zarażania się.

Alergie artystyczne miały miejsce wielokrotnie w dziejach różnych dziedzin sztuki, a także w teoriach artystycznych i w estetyce. Opisanie niektórych ich odmian, a także próbom prześledzenia zasad ich pojawiania się i przebiegu poświęcony jest niniejszy tom *Art Inquiry*.

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## **THE MONET SEASON**

Anyone who has suffered from allergies understands what I am going to say. A perpetual accumulation of antibodies within the human body is important, especially during those seasons when allergies are in effect. As bodily immune systems may become defensively debilitated, allergies intervene sporadically, if not frequently, thus inhabiting the body and inciting their effects. Allergies depend on the existence of an immune deficiency. Without such a deficiency it would be unlikely that they could perform their malfeasant role. Therefore, the inability of the system to fend off recurrent infestations, whatever the source, incites a negative reaction. If nothing is done to repair the system, these stealthy viral intruders may intensify and continue to prey on their subjects. One can speak of a strong physiological as well as a psychological basis to these reactions. Yet, there may also be an aesthetic dimension to all of this, a dimension further removed from obvious observable circumstances, which in time will constitute an abbreviated, yet degenerate engagement. This may further constitute what some are willing to call the dark side of art. But this is not entirely the case.

Aesthetics knows well the penumbra of gradations, and pays less attention to those demarcations that perennially give rise to hard contrasts. And even if aesthetics lends itself to the dark side of art, it is clearly not a systemic delivery, especially given the mental and sensory components that both harness and diminish our conceptual immune systems. More likely than not, the causes relate to a deficiency within the subject who is specifically predisposed to such recurrences. Often this may be traced to certain manifestations of lack, which delimit the subject's ability to engage with a non-utilitarian entity for which he is neither focused or prepared. Without the purview of aesthetic consciousness, this proposed lack of visual acuity will find a necessary vacuum or surrogate – namely, an obsession with an hyperbolized market – in essence, a desire for the accumulation of work that should have been violently disposed of long

ago. The obsession to retain such waste will most assuredly incite a flourish of allergies, concurrent with the times: the utter absence of a cogent sensibility with regard to corpulent manners wherein mental and sensory devices impinge upon a certain self-centered lassitude, beguiled by nothing, enabled by nothing, curtailed by nothing, other than the indeterminate sequence of allergic blips that scatter randomly across an empty screen. Is this the posthistorical future that we have all become? Have we suddenly transmuted into a throng of automatons anticipating the next trend inevitably conceived and manufactured in high style by an international watch dog who lavishes in the silken suds of an increasingly glib art media?

So what season are we in? I wonder, as I recline against a sweet-smelling haystack on a blithe autumn day muttering Monet's middle name over and over again – "Oskar! Oskar! Oskar!" Between these hyperbolic enunciations comes the contrapuntal sneezing, the itching ears and nostrils, the nausea, the indefatigable watering of the eyes in which the saccharine colors of Monet all run together. The rhythmic sound and visual effects of these allergic synapses are fascinating to observe, but only by distancing oneself from the incessant contortions forever on the verge of suddenly giving forth. One fundamental respite or diversion (as the case may be) from such nasty and unpredictable sinus outbreaks, often accompanied by severely swollen glands, is to contemplate the obsessive sculptural portraits of F.X. Messerschmitt. These portraits are known to represent extreme expressions of certain allergic reactions. For many who suffer inflammation of the sinuses, Messerschmitt may provide a reflexive analysis in detecting symptoms latent within the viewer. However, any such relief is temporary and essentially a displacement of the actual symptoms. Therefore, the effects offered in the sculpture of this Teutonic dyspeptic are limited and short term at best. His highly repressive portraits will not solve the problem over the duration of an extended allergic reaction. Moreover, the problem at hand is unrelated to the work of this abject scoundrel but to the work of the well-known French chromophobic, Claude Monet. The mere sound of his name incites his viewers to sneeze between the vowels?

Most museum visitors do not know – nor have they considered – that the Monet had a middle name, let alone the name of Oskar, except for those who spend time in Basel. Therefore, the tiny placards that accompany each of the artist's many paintings in the venerated Kunstverein is destined to include three names instead of two. Over and over, visitors are expected to read *ad nauseum* – "Claude Oskar Monet" – aside each pastel tinted oil on canvas. Furthermore, you will kindly note that his "nom d'entre acte" is spelled with a "k" and not with a "c." Why do you suppose? Basel, as we know, is

fundamentally a German speaking town with an authentic German “kitsch” kitchen. Therefore the inhabitants would like you to know that the painter was not all true blue, which is French. There was some German in the mix, interrupting the flow between the two names at either end, the family name and the given name Yet, how sweet the sound without the Oskar. But if you say to yourself – “Claude Monet.” Soon you will be hypnotized by these golden phonetics, by those illimitable vocables, emanating from the French-speaking world. Then as you enter the galleries of the Basel Kunstverein you get the cold shower, so to speak. You realize that the intervention of the middle name in this triumvirate is not French. Your illusions of pastel purity run down the drain, when you realize the wedge that stands in-between. There amid the paintings of the sweet-smelling poplars you may softly ululate, “*Monet n’était pas français, seulement! Peut-être, Il était un homme du nord-ou’est, Alsace-Lorraine!*”

Has the season for Monet already passed... or has it just begun? Whatever the case, let’s just call it the Monet Season. Why not? “My, O My – How time flies,” as the English expression goes. Even so, it would seem that the season is right! Stacks of hay are bundled in the French countryside most any time of the year, but particularly in the Fall. This is the season in which the farmers make way for the winter days ahead. One may presume a touch of melancholy here, a nod toward expressionism, even though we are told by venerated historians of art that Monet was an impressionist, presumably because he painted impressions. He did not express himself like Munch, for example, or even Van Gogh. He was not a symbolist, but on his way to something else. He was not trying to pull the interior self out into the world, but to keep the outer self outside where it belonged through a temporally limited, though extended act of perception. To his credit, Monet endorsed the concept in his work of “the objective passage of light.” I cannot recall where I read this phrase, whether it was Roger Fry or the French color theorist Chevreuil. Regardless, I find this remark significant in omitting the unbearable nostalgia and sentimentality associated with Monet’s colors. The exceptions are, to a degree, in the Haystacks (1891) and in the Rouen Cathedral (1894). Each canvas within each series was painted during the course of a particular time each day. The artist would begin at dawn and work till noon or begin latter and work till dusk. Occasionally (though rarely) he would he paint the entire span of a twelve hour day. *Mais oui! Le déjeuner is tres important!* The vivid production of these *plein air* paintings was systematically programmed over the course of several days whereby each canvas was given its appropriate time in order to secure the most accurate light.

In comparison with the facades of the *Rouen Cathedral* (1994), the color within the *Haystacks*, painted three years earlier, appears less maudlin and more “scientific” in its application. For example, they are less given to the blithering, if not heart wrenching nuances of *Les Coquelicots* – a *plein air* scene of strollers mindlessly cavorting amid a field of red poppies. So blustering and precise are these poppies, one may be tempted to inquire if Monet sublimated his desire to remove acne from the human skin and return it to nature? Was he, in fact, seeking the naturalist life-style of Jean-Jacques Rousseau as a requiem for the loss of human dignity through painterly exorcism? Whatever the reason, it is for certain that whatever he lost in the poppies, he would further gain in the *Haystacks*, thus happily dismantling the infestation of one allergic symptom for another. Inevitably, the presence of hay may engender what Americans call “hay fever” – a condition that severely affects the sinuses and generally arrives in the Spring anywhere from April through June.

Allergies – whether physiological, psychological, dietary, or aesthetic – exist in solitary confinement in the body of the host. When they appear outwardly there is little recourse other than to accept the consequences. There are anti-histamines and related medications, of course, preferably taken through the oral vectors with some form of guidance – an accomplice (if a repository is used), such an experienced nurse, a concubine, or a Buddhist monk. If the latter is employed, followers of the Pure Land sect are generally recommended. They are the safest known among connoisseurs seeking aesthetic taste.

Yet the question still lingers. What is the true season of Monet? Where did he discover this ultimate infestation – this pungent sorcery – to assist him in bolstering his lethargic eyesight and swollen glands? There amid those maudlin *plein air* landscapes – those lethal poplars and bulging infectious haystacks – we begin to sniffle and sneeze, to exude viscous substances that can only be attributed to the strategic or unconscious placement of noxious allergens? First we must inquire as to the true nature of Monet’s late aesthetic amid the wisterias that cling and climb over the elevated protractor represented in his last and final canvases as *le pont Japonaise*. Where, in fact, do we begin to acknowledge the cause and effect of this relationship? For Monet there is always another beginning that seethes beneath the surface. Is it the pond or the bridge, the lilies or the reeds, the color or the antiseptic delirium of space and time, confused to the utmost, yet lacking a clearly discernable understanding of what aesthetic truth is at bay and where it will find itself in this disorder and chaos of a changing perception of life based on the ambivalent reception of certain technological advances? Whether our inquiry commences with a soft bristling light in the grey skies over the River Thames or we indulge in the



final gasping moments while observing the maestro's brush swirling again and again in order to resurrect those insipid Ukiyo-e lily-pads, there is always a new beginning, a renewed awakening and a raucous allergen seeking its opponent in the landscape of tumultuous haystacks, reeking havoc from the countryside to the urban excitation of le Belle Époque!

As the maestro's brushwork swirls in the night, the dark purples and violets, grow colder and darker, the salacious green weeds run wild and wet, and the untempered chromatic primaries infiltrate the pond trickling through the stark light and shadows of the sacred jardin de Giverny. The errant history of emaciated brushwork is further dispensed by the maestro himself. Secure on his rattan throne beside Rive du Ru, a tributary of the sacred Seine, we sense the ultimate impressions of wistful wisteria engendered by this intrepid Impressionist monster. As Oskar's eyes redden, his chroma turns green; as his nostrils expand, his lily-pond turns purple, as his ears begin to itch, the weeping willows clutter the surface, the sky becomes a liquid reflection, and tree-trunks bend their axis in an attempt to disguise the hideous overpainting with dabs of white blossoms easing the tension of this otherwise raucous and unrefined color. The allergies augment in their intensity as these morsels of pictorial flatulence await their turn to inhabit museum walls in Paris and Basel, then Boston and Kansas City, and eventually Chicago. Like dew drops on the powdered cheeks and chromium purple eyelids of the porcelain-faced bourgeoisie, the sneezing, tearing, choking, and sputtering becomes auditory at the auctions. In the event that the season of Monet happens to begin again, my advice is to carry a handkerchief and prepare for the worst.

**Keywords:** Aesthetic consciousness – Claude Monet – modern art

### **MONETOWSKA PORA ROKU (streszczenie)**

Nawet jeśli alergie występują sporadycznie, to jednak wywołują negatywne reakcje. Gdy nie robi się nic, żeby podreperować system zdrowotny, przejawy ich działania mogą intensyfikować się. Podobnie jest w przypadku występowania pewnych cech w wymiarze estetycznym, gdzie drobne początkowo zakłócenia mogą przerodzić się w degeneratywne zaburzenia stając się ciemną stroną sztuki.

Autor rozważa krótko rolę estetyki w relacji do naszych pojęciowych systemów immunologicznych. Następnie zaś, biorąc pod uwagę różne aspekty związane z osobą i dziełem Claude'a Oskara Moneta wskazuje na pojawianie się miejsc artystycznych zagrożeń alergicznych. Rozważa też możliwe antyhistaminy oraz podobne leki, jakie w związku z tym mogą znaleźć zastosowanie. Problem jest istotny, gdyż, jak metaforycznie zauważa autor tekstu, w czasach jesieni nasilają się objawy alergiczne.



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## **THE EXISTENTIAL PITFALLS OF AESTHETIC (OVER)SENSITIVITY**

**Abstract:** In the following paper, I argue that a positive aesthetic experience does not make a person morally sensitive. Nor does it make him/her morally oversensitive. In the world of strong aesthetic values even the ugliest evil can be aesthetically attractive. People are doomed to live in a world of values. It is worth remembering that they live in this world even if they base themselves solely on aesthetic values. People cannot live without values, and they may find them in the world of aesthetics, though in the long run aesthetic values pay only lip service to ethical values.

**Keywords:** aesthetic sensitivity – modern art – aesthetic values – ethical values

We tend to divide people into many categories: we divide them into men and women, adults and children, tall and short, wise and stupid. We regard some of them as sensitive and accuse others of being insensitive. Every now and again, we stumble upon an individual whom we consider to be either oversensitive or touchy.

### **SEVERAL BASIC DEFINITIONS**

Philosophical dictionaries define sensitivity as an ability to experience various sensations, these being both emotions and feelings<sup>1</sup>. Psychological dictionaries, on the other hand, define the term either negatively or positively. In the former case, the term signifies susceptibility to stimulation, whereas in the latter case the term signifies lack of resistance.

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<sup>1</sup> In this part of my considerations, I make use of certain conclusions reached by my student, Joanna Przybył, in her thesis, *Antynomie wrażliwości estetycznej* [Antinomies of Aesthetic Sensitivity], written under my supervision in June 2010 at the Academy of Fine Arts in Poznań.

Sensitivity is the most basic way in which we react to all sorts of stimuli that constitute our whole world. A stimulus is an impulse that triggers off an action, or – in other words – the organism’s reaction. The reaction is determined by the force and duration of the stimulus and by its type.

The way that sensitivity is defined determines how the concepts of insensitivity and oversensitivity are understood. If insensitivity, sometimes also identified with insensibility, is understood as a lack of reaction to a stimulus, then oversensitivity is usually understood as extremely high sensitivity to the stimulus. Oversensitivity is often equated with touchiness. All of these anomalies can be subsumed under the term *dysesthesia*, i.e. “abnormal” or “bad” sensitivity. Decreased sensitivity can be identified with *agnosia*, i.e. a loss of ability to recognize particular stimuli. Insensitivity is characterized as an increased threshold of stimulus recognition, and thus an increased threshold of stimulus reaction. While oversensitivity is sometimes referred to as *sensitization*, oversensitivity can be associated with *allergy* as well, but the latter term has a thoroughly biological meaning. Allergy is usually understood as an incorrect stimulus recognition by the organism that results in activating its immune system against the stimulus. Allergy is also associated with *anesthesia* and *desensibilization*. While the former term signifies temporary pain release from various sensations, the latter term signifies long-lasting habituation to the allergen that triggers off an inappropriate reaction.

## PROBLEMS WITH LIFE

Although life is undoubtedly the good whose lack makes all other values lose their sense and meaning, various thinkers, priests and “life-experts” have done everything humanly possible to make it taste as sour as vinegar. And quite rightly so, for it is precisely these thinkers, priests and “life-experts” that we turn to when we crave for a sweeter life. All sorts of moralizing cooks differ from ordinary cooks in that they do not seek to spice up our lives, but rather to find some guarantee that all our attempts to satisfy the most natural needs of life will eventually induce vomiting. An honest and metaphysically profound life does not search for any existential seasoning, but rather for a spoon of tar.

Life has always had to excuse its most natural needs and desires. Accordingly, various moralists explained, at times patiently and at times with pirate-like bravado, why it is good for man to take no pleasure in life and why it is bad for them to relish it. The moral account of a pleasant life has always been miserable. A pleasant life was hardly lived by any big-hearted people: truly

valuable men (philosophers, knights, saints and for centuries also artists) avoided pleasure at all cost. No decent man could ever doubt that a life free from pleasures implied genuine humanity. As people were expected to be allergic to all sorts of sensual pleasures, every decent morality sought to sensitize them to it.

Christianity bestowed a soul upon man, making him thereby a hostage to immortality. In this context, Zygmunt Bauman aptly observes that while immortality cannot be earned, it cannot be avoided, either, for it is simply a stroke of fate that cannot be fled.<sup>2</sup> The fear of a life imbued with everlasting suffering has always been the greatest threat to any hope for a happy afterlife that would give justice to the worldly life. The fear of everlasting suffering was generally supposed to desensitize us against the natural fear of any earthly suffering. “By [Jesus Christ] also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; And patience, experience; and experience, hope: And hope maketh not ashamed”<sup>3</sup>.

Although Thomas Aquinas stubbornly maintained that Christianity turned the water of philosophy into the wine of theology, it firmly stigmatized the moral quagmire that seduced all passionate servants of Bacchus. He who bows to the misty eternity must disrespect the hard worldliness. He who chooses the ephemeral attractions of the worldly life, discards the certainty that is guaranteed by eternity. It was not by chance that Abba Arsenius, one of the Desert Fathers, contrasted love for God with love for men. The thinker observed that while God saw that he loved people, he could not be with God and people at the same time; in other words, he could not forsake God so as to reach people<sup>4</sup>.

Father Arsenius was wise enough and disregarded Saint John’s warning: “He that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?”<sup>5</sup>. Logical love for all children is easy, logical love for all men and women is simple, logical love for all people is obvious and necessary (Kant would probably characterize it as reasonable). The problems begin when one has to get up at night to attend to a crying baby, or when one has to live up to the expectations of a trusting woman or a man, for in all these cases one faces particular individuals. Children, women and men in general do not have

<sup>2</sup> Z. Bauman, *Na szanicach wieczności* [*On the Ramparts of Eternity*], 2010 (manuscript).

<sup>3</sup> R 5, 2–5,5.

<sup>4</sup> See *Apoftegmaty Ojców Pustyni*, vol. I, transl. M. Borkowska, M. Starowieyski, M. Rymuza, ATK, Warsaw 1986, p. 90.

<sup>5</sup> 1 J 4, 20.

a body, whereas it is the body that determines the horizon of human existence. Obviously, mankind, culture and civilization have no body, either. It is only the individuals, i.e., the particular child, the particular woman and the particular man that possess a body. That is why the so-called moral authorities, of whom Arsenius is an undeniable patron, bet on the world that succeeds in negating the senses and knows no intimate caress or even tender words.

The only worldliness that is good is the one that can destroy all self-love. As Saint John admonished: "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not for him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away"<sup>6</sup>. "The lust of the flesh", which today goes under the respectful label of a successful and rich sex life, definitely belongs to this world. Here also belongs "the lust of the eyes", which brings to mind the broadly understood aesthetic domain. Lastly, this world is also familiar with "the pride of life", which nowadays comprises three sinful and blind desires: the desire to rule the world (i.e. science), the desire to rule people (i.e. politics), and the desire to possess things (i.e. wealth).

It was quite appropriate that one of the works by the medieval thinker Lotarius, the later Pope Innocent III, was entitled *De miseria conditionis humanae sive de contemptu mundi* (*On the Poverty of Man and Contempt for the World*). From an economic and emotional point of view, life was then extremely cheap, because no particular costs were involved in living it. The short-lived need for sexual satisfaction was the sole investment in every life. Other social investments were exceptions rather than a rule in everyman's life. Such cheap life, inspiring neither respect nor esteem was not worth loving. As a matter of fact, one neither needed nor was allowed to love it. People did not have the right to get settled in this world. All such attempts were regarded as tantamount to discarding the genuine values on which every life should build. The meaning of life and happiness were inconceivably distant, as they were plainly banned from this world.

In the so called "high culture", of which nineteenth-century Puritanism was the last radical and relatively widespread manifestation, all thought about the sexual sphere of life was determined by the interpretation offered by Gregory the Great (540-604). While the pope emphasized that marriage in itself was not sinful, he made it also clear that every pleasure involved sinning. It is already in Saint Augustine that we find an answer to the question of why there can be no pleasure without sin. Sexual satisfaction distracts one from the real goal

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<sup>6</sup> 1 J 2, 15-17.

and meaning of life, since – as the philosopher maintains – in pleasure all consciousness and alertness of mind are gone<sup>7</sup>. Pleasure makes one sink into the state of oblivion and absent-mindedness. Pleasure is sinful, for it makes us avoid the sentence that has banished us from paradise for ever. Worldly lovers give everything not to the world or God, but rather to each other. Their ecstasy does not unite them with God, but rather asserts their omnipotence, autonomy and autarchy. Thus, they create a world that contains nothing but themselves. Consequently, their eternity is confined to the ephemeral here and now. Within the eternal boundaries of their momentarily love they have everything. Yet, that is not the way it should be. It was symptomatic that in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century Ludwig Feuerbach recognized practical atheism, i.e. the repudiation of God in heart, speech, thought and action.

It is only within the horizon stretching from the height of one person's love to another that the well-known saying *homo homini Deus* can apply. In the world of human love, man is entitled to be the only God. Ludwig Feuerbach used to say that it was not God who had created man in His own image, but rather it was man who constantly created God in the image of his own fears, concerns, hopes and dreams. We must not love the world, for there is nothing that binds us stronger than love. There is no point in our getting attached to something that we will have to abandon soon and forever. Zygmunt Bauman points out that contrary to its common slanders, the Christian doctrine does not debase the episode of carnal life: it does not deprecate it, but rather lets it specify the content of eternity. The fate of the immortal soul is determined by the body. It is the mortal life that can either elevate the immortal soul to paradise or condemn it to hell. There will be no second chance, since after the death of the body there will be no appeal to the sentence or any commutation of it<sup>8</sup>.

Without any worldly life there can be no striving for any eternal life. Nevertheless, worldliness can bring us closer to eternity only when it suppresses our worldly desires. Worldliness is important, since in favorable circumstances it can lead a soul to eternity. Still, even the most important worldliness is nothing more but worldliness, i.e. a negation of eternity in every possible dimension. That is why even a good life is nothing more but a finitely good life. As death is the final event in worldly life, it also belongs to the worldly life rather than to eternity. Irrespective of how long worldliness will make its existential run, it will always be too short to leap to the other side of infinite eternity on its own. Regardless of how good every finite life is, it will never contain as many good moments as are needed to constitute the image of eternity. While worldliness

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<sup>7</sup> See S. Augustine, *The City of God*, transl. H. Bettenson, Penguin Books, London 2003, p. 533.

<sup>8</sup> Z. Bauman, *Na szanłcach wieczności*.

is too small, eternity is too great and, therefore, it is impossible for them to meet in a loving embrace. Christianity, on the one hand, grants people responsibility, yet at the same time, it deprives them of it, or – at least – significantly limits it: “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast”<sup>9</sup>. Grace transcends man’s reason, strength and will.

Naturally, we know that human nature makes man a friend of pleasures rather than their foe. We indulge in pleasant life and that is why we crave for anything that might spice it up. Yet, people who believe that they have the right to live a life of ease, must also have self-esteem, which will make relishing life morally legal. Every democratic society needs people with self-esteem, for such individuals, being proud citizens, lay the very foundations for it. In a feudal society, a subject took the place of a proud citizen. Clearly, they look at the world quite differently. The awareness of one’s own sinfulness prepares one better for the role of a subject than the belief in one’s uniqueness and greatness. By making a pleasant life morally dubious or downright wrong, the official ethics produced hosts of sinners. The sinners had to apologize for their deeds, words, thoughts and failures either to the moralists or to themselves. The omnipresence of those miserable sinners was guaranteed by the sinfulness of thoughts and desires which travel freely within all the ignoble corners of human life.

A real change in thinking about the world and the worldly life came with modernity. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, a fifteenth-century Italian humanist, who coined the saying that “everyone is the architect of their own fortune”, wrote the famous treaty under the meaningful title *De hominis dignitate (On the Dignity of Man)*. It was around this time that people began to think highly of themselves and to look around with growing appetite.

While it is art that makes the world a likeable place, it is quite difficult to part with the world that we accept for aesthetic reasons only. It was already Suger, a medieval art lover, who believed that an aesthetic experience would transfer man from a lower to a higher world. Art liberates us from all our habits of this world. It makes us see things differently. Eventually, the aesthetic and unrealistic nature of art becomes more real than the world, whose natural transiency art dares to challenge with its own artificial eternity. Modern art had to meet the challenge, whose obviousness would come only with the French Revolution. People found it more and more difficult then in recognizing themselves as subjects.

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<sup>9</sup> Eph. 2,8 – 2,9.



Art became autonomous in the societies that began to believe in the democratic strategies of life. A democratic citizen could no longer be sinful, as this implied the social status of a subject. A democratic citizen had to have an identity satiated with self-esteem. Gradually, the official view of pleasures began to change. A sin ceased to be the sole or even main character on the stage of the world. Sensual pleasures were smuggled into the public sphere, where they became ethically legal goods. As the world could not be directly desired, it was through art that people could make passionate love, express their romantic and at the same time sinful dreams in an absolutely moral, legal and sinless way. Owing to this hedonistic aesthetics, pleasure ceased to be a lesser sister of the so-called fundamental values on which every view of a decent and honest life had previously been built. The importance and dignity of every man's life began to be emphasized. Gradually, guilt decreased, while self-esteem and uniqueness increased in importance. While people were still deprived of an unconditional access to carnal pleasures, they could legally experience aesthetic pleasures through paintings and sculptures.

We still cannot relish fully the world and life. But we can enjoy their images. Although it is only at times that we dare to build our lives on pleasure, we can finally live without the horrible feeling of guilt. It does not suffice to say that art is the source of pleasure; it also provides the kind of pleasure that is enjoyed by the educated and refined individuals. Art teaches us how to perceive nature as a source of pleasure. Let us quote Ernst Gombrich who so suggestively described the impact of Claude Lorrain's (1600–1682) landscapes on the then elites:

It was Claude who first opened people's eyes to the sublime beauty of nature, and for nearly a century after his death travelers used to judge a piece of real scenery according to his standards. If it reminded them of his visions, they called it lovely and sat down to picnic there. Rich Englishmen went even further and decided to model the pieces of nature they called their own, the gardens on their estates, on Claude's dreams of beauty. In this way, many a tract of the lovely English countryside should really bear the signature of the French painter.<sup>10</sup>

A positive aesthetic experience does not make a person morally sensitive. Nor does it make him/her morally oversensitive. In the world of strong aesthetic values even the ugliest evil can be aesthetically attractive. People are doomed to live in a world of values. It is worth remembering that they live in this world even if they base themselves solely on aesthetic values. People cannot live without values, and they may find them in the world of aesthetics, though in the long run aesthetic values pay only lip service to ethical values.

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<sup>10</sup> E.H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, Phaidon, London 1950, pp. 396–397.

Who we are and what we are is generally determined by our surroundings, a mirror in which we examine our reflection. Every person is a finite being and that is why he/she should have the courage to place their life within the horizon of the finite existence. When facing eternity, everyone learns that he/she is either an unsuccessful copy that can interest only a second-rate museum or a poor reproduction that is bound to land at the dump of worldliness. Yet, when we recognize ourselves in worldliness, it does not return our loving gaze, as we would like it to do. Eternal happiness is uncertain, painfully dumb and faded. The worldly happiness is equally uncertain, even though it offers the sounds and colors of life.

As we seldom find happiness in our happiness, we seek to find some of it in unhappiness. The existence of happiness has been put in doubt. On the other hand, there are no individuals who would complain about the lack of unhappiness. While we attend numerous celebrations of happiness, unhappiness gives no parties, which does not make it less present in our lives. Happiness bets on its presence or existence in its absence. It is the eternal need and the ever-present hope for a happy life that in the controversy over the existence of happiness are the irrefutable argument for its nonexistence.

In the history of mankind, every idea or concept that went against man's natural instincts could not be conducive to happiness. We find no allies of such happiness in the hope for eternal life, nor in the earthly ideals of humanity. Such slogans as "God, honor and the homeland" fail to warn us against the charms of a happy life, but they also point to a rescue from them. Today, such slogans have less impact than they used to have and that is why they rarely (though sadly still too often) suck out our blood and reason. They rather (though sadly not only) bare their teeth at us, trip us up and undermine our reasoning. With time, all everyday pleasures of our life turn out to be helpless, weak, emaciated and sterile substitutes for happiness. We recite our litanies of possible fulfillments that would add more taste to our life; the taste that we would like not only to remember, but also be able to retain and preserve for ever.

## **CONCLUSION**

When Greek philosophers dreamed of the unity of good, beauty and truth they deliberately did not place this unity in an ontologically unstable and unserious man, but in the Being which easily met all the ontological criteria for seriousness and stability. As long as this Being is the locus of values, there is

enough of it for each value, and therefore their interrelationships are satiated with the spirit of love, solidarity and reciprocal support. For the same reasons, medieval theologians had no difficulty in defining God with the aid of extreme concepts and adjectives. God's omnipotence was the only problem as it might imply that God could even divide by zero. The situation changed when the locus of values was transferred to man. In contrast to the Greek's Being or the God of medieval theologians, man is ill equipped for this role. He is deficient in both time (he has only the present moment) and space (while one might say that we are only here and now, the virtual world of the media has managed to impugn even that). Most importantly, there is not enough man in man. That is why sooner or later, in one aspect of life or another, a caricature of man will inevitably prove more real than man himself. In such a man no value is secure. The values, once placed in either Being or God, might have complained of agoraphobia in the language of perpetual silence. Now, the values have been doomed to all possible fears of claustrophobia in the continuous din of life. That is why it is not the spirit of solidarity that is the patron of the world of values, but the self-enamored spirit of envy and competition. If I bet on beauty, then I give up truth and good. When I seek for the truth in myself, I forget about beauty and good. If I am a good person, I disregard truth and beauty. While art sensitizes us aesthetically, it also desensitizes us ethically. Art saves only those who believe solely in art. Beyond art there is no salvation.

Modern art neither sensitizes nor desensitizes us. It merely exists. Modern art exists although it actually has no right to do so. That is why there is nothing our postmodern world needs more than art, even though this art does not meet any criteria for being "decent". It is precisely for the same reason that we need philosophy, not only the philosophy of art and aesthetics, but every philosophy and all kinds of art. After all, only philosophy and art have the courage to be unnecessary and the world needs that.

#### **EGZYSTENCJALNE PUŁAPKI ESTETYCZNEJ (NAD)WRAŻLIWOŚCI (streszczenie)**

W artykule pokazuję, że pozytywne przeżycie estetyczne nie uwrażliwia człowieka moralnie ani tym bardziej nie czyni go moralnie przewrażliwionym. W świecie żywych wartości estetycznych nawet najbardziej paskudne zło może być estetycznie atrakcyjne. Człowiek skazany jest na życie w świecie wartości. W tym świecie – warto o tym pamiętać – żyje on także wówczas, gdy buduje siebie wyłącznie z wartości estetycznych. Gdzie nie ma wartości, tam nie ma też i człowieka. Lecz w świecie wartości estetycznych nikt nie narzeka przecież na brak wartości. Dlatego wartości estetyczne udzielają jedynie pozornego wsparcia wartościom etycznym.



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## THE ALLERGY OF PHILOSOPHICAL AESTHETICS TO SENSUALITY AND ITS DESENSITIZATION IN VIEW OF PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

**Abstract:** I intend to show how traditional aesthetics isolates sensuality and how its efforts are compensated by philosophical anthropology. I assume that philosophical aesthetics has an allergic reaction to sensuality. This means that its “immune system” opposes something not quite harmful. It could be said (metaphorically, of course) that it is wrongly oriented. I shall attempt to show that the allergy has its deeper causes in the inadequacy of the patient’s circumstances. They have to be slightly changed, and the allergen should be applied in the form of a vaccine. Both such actions, amounting to a research reorientation, have been offered by philosophical anthropology – to some extent in its classical period (*i.a.* by Arnold Gehlen, Helmuth Plessner), and most fruitfully in contemporary times (mainly by Gernot Böhme). Allergy may be also an excessive reaction to some external stimulus. With regard to aesthetics the situation is very similar. In its original meaning aesthetics – through aesthetic experience – is “a return to the body”, to sensuality. But at the same time there is a constant fear that sensuality would be equated with mere physical pleasure. Anthropological perspective does not depart from aesthetic discourse, but rather – as I believe – efficiently argues against some of its methods.

**Keywords:** philosophical aesthetics – atmosphere aesthetics – philosophical anthropology – embodiment – sensuality

The metaphors of disease are quite common in human sciences, though they are usually employed in order to discredit a phenomenon. One symptomatic example might be kitsch, which was described by Herman Broch as neurosis<sup>1</sup>, by Andrzej Osęka as cancer<sup>2</sup>, and by Andrzej Banach as bacteriosis<sup>3</sup>. The

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<sup>1</sup> H. Broch, *Kilka uwag o kiczu i inne eseje*, transl. by D. Borkowska, J. Garewicz, R. Turczyn, Czytelnik, Warszawa 1998, pp.116–117.

<sup>2</sup> A. Osęka, “Słowo wstępne”, in: A. Moles, *Kicz czyli sztuka szczęścia. Studium o psychologii kiczu*, transl. by A. Szczepańska, E. Wende, PIW, Warszawa 1978, p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> A. Banach, *O kiczu*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1968, p. 17.

writings of those authors manifest a conviction of the irreversible effects of these diseases, of their incurability and epidemic threat<sup>4</sup>.

In the present article I would like to evoke the metaphor of allergy<sup>5</sup> in pursuit of a different goal. I intend to show how traditional aesthetics approaches sensuality and how its efforts are compensated by philosophical anthropology. I assume that philosophical aesthetics has an allergic reaction to sensuality. This means that its “immune system” opposes something not quite harmful. It could be said (metaphorically, of course) that it is wrongly oriented. Confronted with an allergic disease, aesthetics adopts the simplest and most efficient therapy – elimination of the allergen. Philosophical anthropology, on the other hand, applies an allergen-specific immunotherapy. For it is not a bad case of allergy. When we discover the allergen, the patient’s hypersensitivity can be gradually toned down. It seems that in the case of aesthetics it has been considerably brought under control. The most popular contemporary aestheticians – and at the same time the ones that tend to reorient the subject of study of their discipline most radically – are those who attach particular importance to bodily experience and to the broadening of the objective scope of aesthetics. They include Richard Shusterman, Arnold Berleant, Wolfgang Iser, and Carolyn Korsmeyer.

Accordingly, I shall argue that allergy has its deeper causes in the inadequacy of the patient’s circumstances. They have to be changed, and the allergen should be applied in the form of a vaccine. Both such actions, amounting to a research reorientation, have been offered by philosophical anthropology – to some extent in its classical period (*i.a.* by Arnold Gehlen, Helmuth Plessner), and most fruitfully in contemporary times (mainly by Gernot Böhme). With regard to the presently discussed context, one more aspect of allergy is worth noticing. This disease tells us as much about the patient, the condition of his immune system, his inappropriate reactions to his surroundings, as it does about the surroundings themselves – that they are a reservoir of unexpected threats. The allergens are countless, and we can become allergic to something which was previously tolerated. In fact, allergic reactions occur in healthy organisms as well; those will, however, produce a small amount of antibodies,

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<sup>4</sup> Banach and Molesca are somewhat tolerant of Kitsch, mainly due to the fact that they characterise different types of this phenomenon. Only the most highly pathogenic type is, according to them, unacceptable as art.

<sup>5</sup> I use the term *allergy* in its everyday sense and adopt it as a metaphor of certain cultural phenomena. This text does not aspire to medical expertise. I follow the basic terminology with regard to the symptoms, diagnoses, prevention and treatment of allergy used in *Allergy* [quarterly under the patronage of Polish Society For Fighting Allergic Diseases], link “for patients” <http://www.alergia.org.pl/pacjent/pacjent.htm>; G. Leibold, *Alergie*, transl. by D. Dowiat-Urbański, Videograf, Katowice 1993.

unlike the organisms of the allergy sufferers, whose defence reactions are excessive. Allergy is thus an indication of an excessive reaction to some external stimulus. With regard to aesthetics the situation is very similar. In its original meaning, aesthetics – through aesthetic experience – is “a return to the body”, to sensuality. But at the same time there is a constant fear that sensuality would be equated with mere physical pleasure. Therefore, the anthropological perspective does not depart from aesthetic discourse, but rather – as I believe – efficiently argues against some of its methods.

**ALLERGY AND OTHER “MEDICAL ISSUES” OF THE AESTHETIC SUBJECT; THE “HEALTH” OF PHILOSOPHY AND ART (A LOOK AT THE EUROPEAN TRADITION OF THE AUTONOMISATION OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE)**

As Martin Jay points out, the emergence of aesthetics as a branch of philosophy is combined with the emergence of a new modality of experience – namely aesthetic experience<sup>6</sup>. Only presenting them as a *novum* could remove the odium of unreliability and corruption from aesthetic feelings. Alexander G. Baumgarten was the first to write on the multidimensionality of aesthetic experience and defend it as a form of knowledge<sup>7</sup>. His choice of the Greek term *aisthesis*, according to Arnold Berleant, is a constant reminder (in the very name of the discipline) of the fact that the sensual component is inseparable from aesthetic experience<sup>8</sup>. This reminder, however, has proved ineffective. The appearance of aesthetics together with its central category of experience ought to be ascribed not only to the Enlightenment and its processes of rationalisation, secularisation, and, in consequence, new legitimisation of art (which, from that time forth, has no longer been entirely in the service of religion or politics). Its rise is also connected with increasing diversity – or even deepening divides – characteristic of modernity. And it is precisely at that point that allergic reactions to sensuality become apparent. Thus, on the one hand, we are dealing with an increasing demand for art, with the broadening of its audience, on the other with increasing concerns about its standards. This has resulted in such large divergences that many authors regard either

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 133.

<sup>7</sup> In the work *Aesthetica* it was still an inferior type of knowledge. However, according to Odo Marquard, “in modernity it has been promoted to supposedly highest (that is artistic) potency of human creativity and brilliancy”. O. Marquard, *Szczęście w nieszczęściu. Rozważania filozoficzne*, transl. by K. Krzemieniowa, Oficyna Naukowa, Warszawa 2001, p. 46.

<sup>8</sup> A. Berleant, *Przemysłość estetykę. Niepokorne eseje o estetyce i sztuce*, transl. by M. Korusiewicz, T. Markiewka, Universitas, Kraków 2007, pp. 99.

metaphors of disease or emancipatory and political metaphors to be best suited for the description of this situation.

It could be generally said that modern philosophy inherits – from the long-reigning ancient tradition of dualistic approach to spirituality and corporeality – “the silent, limping body of philosophy”<sup>9</sup>. This state is described by Richard Shusterman as follows:

The pervasive experience of bodily weakness may be philosophy’s deepest reason for rejecting the body, for refusing to accept it as defining human identity. Overwhelming in death, somatic impotence is also daily proven in illness, disability, injury, pain, fatigue, and the withering of strength that old age brings. For philosophy, bodily weakness also means cognitive deficiency”. [...] Regarding the body at the best a mere servant or instrument of the mind, philosophy has often portrayed it as a torturous prison of deception, temptation, and pain.<sup>10</sup>

Yet when this body is brought to the state in which it is able to fulfil its role in the philosophical project of unifying human experience<sup>11</sup>, it turns out to be suffering from impotence. Immanuel Kant – the founder of the idea of aesthetic experience as contemplative judgement – is directly accused of “the flight from the desiring body”<sup>12</sup>. Moreover, his understanding of experience – as Jay concludes – is “passive and spectatorial, distancing the self from the world and our appetite to possess or consume it.”<sup>13</sup>

Kant, however, is the founder of a broad aesthetic tradition, exceeding, even distorting his intentions. The conviction about aesthetic autonomy – commonly ascribed to him – when assimilated by later authors has not always entailed praise for the “disinterestedness of aesthetic judgement” and “purposiveness without a purpose”<sup>14</sup> as attributes of art. Still, a departure from Kantian principles does not quite guarantee good health. On the contrary, the most extreme radicalization of aesthetic autonomy, with which we are dealing in many examples of *l’art pur l’art*, sometimes can be even devastating and self-

<sup>9</sup> This phrase comes from the chapter “The Silent, Limping Body of Philosophy. Somatic Attention Deficit in Merleau-Ponty” in: R. Shusterman, *Body Consciousness. A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2008, p. 49.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>11</sup> It is the first strategy of instrumentalisation of art by philosophy described by Wolfgang Welsch. See: W. Welsch, *Estetyka poza estetyką. O nową postać estetyki*, transl. by K. Gućzalska, Universitas, Kraków 2005, pp. 7–13.

<sup>12</sup> M. Jay, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>14</sup> I. Kant, *Krytyka władzy sądzienia* [The Critique of Judgment], transl. by J. Gałeczki, PWN, Warszawa 1986, pp. 100, 117.



mutilitating<sup>15</sup>. As concerns the psyche, the richness and intensity of experience free from all – especially moral – limitations results in anaesthetic boredom. And with regard to physique, an aesthete inevitably falls victim to diseases to which, “lifted by the spirit of resistance and rebellion”<sup>16</sup>, he to some extent consciously agrees.<sup>17</sup> Therefore Jay reminds us that Charles Baudelaire associated “the horrors of life” with the spleen.<sup>18</sup>

As we can see, the subject of aesthetic experience is in severe pain (or even agony). However, the subject of philosophical reflection on art suffers as well. According to Wolfgang Iser, philosophical reflection is involved in consecutive unsuccessful therapies. In the first place, it rescues art from the trouble into which it had fallen due to the loss of cultural esteem in which it was held thanks to its involvement in politics and religion. Thus aesthetics “becomes a cultural advertising agency, promoting the product called ‘art’”<sup>19</sup>. However, one side effect of the autonomisation of art is its loss of legibility. In this situation philosophy offers another therapy in an attempt to cure art of the effects of social isolation<sup>20</sup>. Above all, it argues for the importance of art in view of one of humanity’s biggest philosophical dreams – of unity. Beginning from the influential *Critiques* of Kant, “aesthetics has been developed as something that restores the unity – of reason (by Kant), of human existence (by Schiller), of society (in German idealism), and of philosophy (by Schelling)”<sup>21</sup>. These processes were described by Arthur C. Danto as “a philosophical enslavement of art”<sup>22</sup> and by Iser as “a philosophical ghetto”<sup>23</sup>. Contemporary aestheticians are convinced of the instrumental exploitation of art by philosophy. Art becomes a tool, only this time in the therapy of philosophy, for philosophy (as was the case with the Kantian subject of aesthetic experience) suffers from impotence<sup>24</sup>. It cannot achieve its goal alone and must be supported by art. Frederick W.J. Schelling explicitly made the following

<sup>15</sup> M. Jay, op.cit., p. 153.

<sup>16</sup> Ch. Baudelaire, *O sztuce. Szkice krytyczne*, transl. by J. Guze, Ossolineum, Wrocław 1961, p. 219.

<sup>17</sup> A day from a dandy’s life, full of sacrifices for his own body, was described by Ian Kelly. See: I. Kelly, *Beau Brummell. The Ultimate Man of Style*, Free Press, New York 2006, pp. 91–223.

<sup>18</sup> Jay, op.cit., p. 224. Jay also refers to an interesting book on the role of disease and hypochondria in writing (e.g. in Baudelaire’s work). See: R. L. Williams, *The Horror of Life*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1980.

<sup>19</sup> W. Iser, op.cit., p. 3.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>22</sup> A.C. Danto, “Filozoficzne zniewolenie sztuki”, *Studia Estetyczne* 1986–1990, vol. XXIII, pp.17–19.

<sup>23</sup> W. Iser, op.cit., p. 17.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

diagnosis: “The work of art merely reflects to me what is otherwise not reflected by anything, namely that absolutely identical which has already divided itself even in the self. Hence, that which the philosopher allows to be divided even in the primary act of consciousness, and which would otherwise be inaccessible to any intuition”<sup>25</sup>.

It seems that the philosophy of art can also adopt another strategy<sup>26</sup>, i.e. develop a peculiar allergy to sensuality. We find its ideal exemplification in George W. Hegel’s thought. According to him, art is one of the forms of Absolute Spirit, though only limited and imperfect, as it reveals the truth by means of sensual phenomena. Luckily this “surrendering of spirit to feeling and sense” can be, as Hegel maintained, “overcome in interpretation”<sup>27</sup>. Conceptual art, which is commonly regarded as subscribing to Hegel’s thesis, takes, however, the form of fascinating iconoclasm. It re-emerges in the secularised word precisely as an interesting tool of art analysis<sup>28</sup>. It has been used, among others, by Welsch and Berleant. They both agree – though from different standpoints – that art loses its materiality and physicality. Welsch calls it “the inherent iconoclasm of the philosophy of art”<sup>29</sup> whereas Berleant views it as “art without object” and “the art of the unseen”<sup>30</sup>. We ought to remember, however, that iconoclasm is not reduced to the practice of destroying images and suppressing their creation, but it also displays both faith in the power of images and the fear of such power<sup>31</sup>. The subversive character of iconoclasm reveals – in a metaphorical way – the allergic character of this approach. In their allergic reaction to sensuality, iconoclasts do not eliminate the allergen, but rather – as in allergen-specific immunotherapy – show signs of desensitisation to the allergen. As Berleant emphasizes, iconoclasm implies making art, not deserting it<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> F. W. J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, transl. by P. Heath, University of Virginia Press 1997, p. 230.

<sup>26</sup> At the same time the second strategy of instrumentalisation of art by philosophy described by Wolfgang Welsch.

<sup>27</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Wykłady o estetyce* [Lectures on Aesthetics], transl. by J. Grabowski, A. Landman, PWN, Warszawa 1964, vol. I, p. 24.

<sup>28</sup> I use it in my article: W. Kazimierska-Jerzyk, “Obraz a idea. Estetyczno-antropologiczne paradoksy sztuki konceptualnej (implikacje ikonoklastyczne)” in: *Sztuka jako idea, ludzie, czasy. W kręgu polskiego konceptualizmu*, ed. G. Sztabiński, Ł. Guzek (in press).

<sup>29</sup> W. Welsch, op.cit., p. 17.

<sup>30</sup> A. Berleant, op.cit., pp. 138–171.

<sup>31</sup> D. Freedberg, “Idolatry and Iconoclasm” in: D. Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*, University Of Chicago Press, Chicago 1991, pp. 378–428.

<sup>32</sup> A. Berleant, op.cit., pp. 162–165.

## REMEDIES FOR PHILOSOPHY'S ALLERGY TO SENSUALITY

As Jay points out, the most important current in the tradition of the autonomisation of aesthetic experience, discussed in the first part of this article, originates from the pragmatic thought of John Dewey<sup>33</sup>. It owes its present popularity largely to its innovative development by Richard Schusterman. I believe we may credit Kantian thought with the inspiration for yet another current<sup>34</sup> – philosophical anthropology. I am referring to the so-called “classical philosophical anthropology”<sup>35</sup> and among its representatives to those who raise the issue of embodied sensory experience. In one of its most recent formulations this approach seems close to the American variant, since Gernot Böhme describes his views as “philosophical anthropology in a pragmatic frame”<sup>36</sup>. When it comes to such classics as Arnold Gehlen or Helmuth Plessner, we find that they are rarely taken into consideration in aesthetic discourse. Aesthetics was not their main interest, thus their influence is discernible rather in digressions. For example, when Welsch considers the consequences of the impenetrability of philosophical aesthetics, he repeats after Gehlen that “most people tend to ... lead their life outside contemporary art”<sup>37</sup>. And surely one of the most ennobling references was incorporating Plessner's dialectics of being and having a body into Erica Fischer-Lichte's discourse of performance.<sup>38</sup>

I shall confine my reflections here to the selected aspects of Gehlen's, Plessner's and Böhme's thought, hoping that a comparison of these authors will show the difference between aesthetic and anthropological views on sensuality. By discussing them in that order, I also hope to show the growing interest in the embodiment of sensual experience.

<sup>33</sup> M. Jay, *op.cit.*, p.161.

<sup>34</sup> There are, without doubt, many more such variants. Not all of them, however, make up different philosophical or aesthetic traditions, due to the fact that they do not aspire to holistic solutions. Contemporary feminism is precisely such type of discourse: “The term ‘feminist’, whether it modifies a political movement, a perspective in academia, theorists, or artists, describes an orientation and a set of shared questions, but not conclusions, product, or strategies. More particularly, ‘feminists philosophy’ does not comprise a group of theories that agree on every point, so looking for the feminist perspective on anything is always wrongheaded”. C. Korsmeyer, *Gender and Aesthetics. An Introduction*, Routledge, London & New York 1994, p. 5.

<sup>35</sup> S. Czerniak, “Antropologia filozoficzna (szkic historyczny i problemowy)”, in: S. Czerniak ed., *Lorenz, Plessner, Habermas. Dylematy antropologiczne filozofii współczesnej*, Wydawnictwo Rolewski, Nowa Wieś 2002, pp. 7–17.

<sup>36</sup> G. Böhme, *Antropologia filozoficzna. Ujęcie pragmatyczne. Wykłady z Darmstadt*, transl. by P. Domański, Wydawnictwo Instytutu Filozofii i Socjologii Polskiej Akademii Nauk, Warszawa 1988.

<sup>37</sup> W. Welsch, *op.cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>38</sup> I shall refer to it further on in this article.

While traditional aesthetics treats human corporeality like an aggravating allergen, it is valorized by anthropology. Stanisław Czerniak observes, however, that this does not always inspire progress in the research on the body, or result in its ennoblement.

In Gehlen's approach, one has to do with negative instrumentalization of the body. Without it man would not be who he is<sup>39</sup>. However, as regards his natural endowment, man is "a being marked with deficiency". Yet for that very reason he is also a creative being; he creates his environment, institutions, artefacts (mainly of culture), which aid his deficient instincts<sup>40</sup>. Thus, what is uniquely human is different from the body, which is merely an instrument, a medium. Still, Gehlen emphasises the richness of its experiences, as potentially important for aesthetics, even talking about the "physiology of art". As he observes, mainly due to the glorification of language by the authors studying culture, "an aesthetics of meaning, language, ideal and thought has been imposed. 'Perceptual' art has been approached with more or less developed philological presumptions, with so much success that it seemed the only possible way"<sup>41</sup>. Gehlen appreciates the achievements of human sciences after the so-called "linguistic turn"; however, he argues that they are powerless when it comes to explaining the "physical motion of speech as a means of producing sound"<sup>42</sup> (especially in the case of the works that have the character of performance). In such situations it is a special type of motion combining the qualities of aesthetic feeling with the whole range of human behaviour and impulses – for in art we are not dealing with some "separate, ascetic, private life of consciousness"<sup>43</sup>. The linguistic paradigm fails to explain the ability of art to fascinate and also the somatic effects of this fascination: "rapid pulse, breathtaking enthusiasm"<sup>44</sup>. These explanations become possible from the perspective of aesthetic experience. However, this classical (post)Kantian discourse to which Gehlen is referring should be considered in the light of the fact that "motion was separated from sensuality"<sup>45</sup>, as Gehlen sanctions the view that "aesthetic pleasure ... shares some features with contemplation. It

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<sup>39</sup> S. Czerniak, "Pomiędzy Szkołą Frankfurcką a postmodernizmem. Antropologia filozoficzna Gernota Böhme na tle klasycznych stanowisk antropologii filozoficznej XX wieku", in: S. Czerniak, *Lorenz, Plessner, Habermas. Dylematy antropologiczne filozofii współczesnej*, p. 45.

<sup>40</sup> A. Gehlen, *W kręgu antropologii i psychologii społecznej. Studia*, transl. by K. Krzemieniowa, Czytelnik, Warszawa 2001, pp. 75–118.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 185.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187.

does not entail activity”<sup>46</sup>. He paraphrases Kant, not without a dose of irony: “beautiful is what we enjoy without consequences”<sup>47</sup>. It would be a mistake, however, to see it as a critique of Kantian thought, as this kind of aesthetics follows Gehlen’s main postulate: “return to culture!”<sup>48</sup> In what, thus, consists the corporeality of aesthetic experience? It should be understood as “reversal of the direction of drives”<sup>49</sup>. In aesthetic experience the direction is from the outside in – the object arouses emotions in the subject. In the case of impulses the situation is quite opposite – they originate in the subject and aim to change external reality<sup>50</sup>. At the same time Gehlen observes that in avant-garde art we are dealing with such level of intellectualisation that it results in diminishing the role of sensory perception<sup>51</sup>. This is a further reduction of sensuality, already radically curbed by Kant. These changes mirror the general retreat of culture from sensory perception, which is caused by its technicization. This retreat does not disturb the integrity of our spiritual life<sup>52</sup>, but it lets us observe a new phenomenon – “an overwhelming attractiveness of ‘pure’ solutions”<sup>53</sup>. The acknowledgement of the avant-garde and the openness to the new conditions of aesthetic experience is not identical with an open understanding of art<sup>54</sup>. As Gehlen warns us: “too rich, too sophisticated culture results in too much ease, which we cannot accommodate. ... Ancient institutions and stern professional corporations are weakened, law becomes flexible and religion sentimental”<sup>55</sup>. The motto “return to culture” is a firm declaration for tradition, which – as Gehlen puts it – provides “something essential for our health”<sup>56</sup>. Relatively autonomic aesthetic experience remains for Gehlen part of this tradition.

As Stanisław Czerniak observes, Plessner’s approach is much more sophisticated<sup>57</sup>. He does not view corporeality as a negative force whose weakness is constantly exposed by culture. Humanity is described by him as an

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. Cf. I. Kant, op.cit., p. 62–64.

<sup>48</sup> A. Gehlen, op.cit., p. 98.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p.190.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., pp.190–191.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 246. See “the inherent iconoclasm” of Welsch and “the art of the unseen” of Berleant.

<sup>52</sup> A. Gehlen, ibid., p. 246.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 250. The metaphor of “pure art” is used by Gehlen in the sense introduced not by aestheticism, but by the avant-garde.

<sup>54</sup> I.e. such which allows possibly anything to be acknowledged as art. Cf. M. Weitz, “The Role of Theory in Aesthetics”, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 1956, vol. XV, pp. 27–35.

<sup>55</sup> A. Gehlen, op.cit., p. 98.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 104.

<sup>57</sup> S. Czerniak, “Pomiędzy Szkołą Frankfurcką a postmodernizmem...”, p. 46.

embodiment of roles. First of all, a person receives a specific corporeal role, as s/he *is* a body. Secondly, s/he may play roles to gain social identities – as s/he *has* a body. Finally, s/he is distinguishable by another type of role, a social function, though it is not performed but factual. There is a difference between becoming a father (which equals having a certain legal status) and being a father<sup>58</sup>.

In the context of aesthetics, this multidimensionality of roles turns out to be of great importance. By being eccentric and distant, one can realize oneself in the field of art not only through “the material of one’s existence”<sup>59</sup> but also by “the performative generation of materiality”<sup>60</sup>. The acting subject becomes free from himself and creates a new existence. Similar openness and distance to oneself are demanded in everyday common experience<sup>61</sup>. Plessner’s dialectics of being and having a body also determines the creation of materiality of another kind: spatiality and tonality<sup>62</sup>. A sound, e.g. a scream, evokes in the receiver the impression of an acting body, affects his body and penetrates through it, resonates, etc.<sup>63</sup> The activity of making sounds teaches us that art is a realm of bodies that influence each other in different roles. Such a view on art has little in common with contemplative distance and the detachment of sensuality. Art is not about creating borders, but about crossing thresholds. The boundary between the performer and the spectator should be viewed as a threshold. This does not follow solely from an observable (factual) transfer of corporeality. This aesthetics is founded on anthropological ideals<sup>64</sup>. Man, as an eccentric and distanced entity, needs thresholds to cross:

Humans must cross thresholds to (re)turn to themselves as another. As living organisms endowed with a consciousness as embodied minus, they can become themselves only by permanently bringing themselves forth anew, constantly transforming themselves, and continuing to cross thresholds<sup>65</sup>.

One more aspect of Plessner’s thought is highly innovative – his views on the role of senses in aesthetic experience. Berleant claims that a serious impasse

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<sup>58</sup> H. Plessner, “Pytanie o *conditio humana*”, in: H. Plessner, *Wybór pism*, transl. by M. Łukasiewicz, Z. Krasnodębski, A. Załuska, PIW, Warszawa 1988, p. 91.

<sup>59</sup> H. Plessner, “Przyczynek do antropologii aktora”, in: H. Plessner, *Wybór pism*, pp. 207–221.

<sup>60</sup> E. Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance. A New Aesthetics*, transl. by S. I. Jain, Routledge, London & New York 2008, pp. 76–77.

<sup>61</sup> With the exception that the actor’s activities are subjected to images constructed for the spectator. H. Plessner, “Przyczynek do antropologii aktora”, p. 211.

<sup>62</sup> E. Fischer-Lichte, *op.cit.*, p. 125.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 205.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

has occurred in aesthetics due to the sanctioning of the division of senses into distal (sight and hearing) and proximal (taste, smell and touch). This corresponds to the division into the sensory and the sensuous, and in consequence to what is commonly considered as aesthetic and physical (erotic)<sup>66</sup>. Berleant questions this division, pointing out that it is founded on moral rather than aesthetic grounds<sup>67</sup>. Similar reservations have also been expressed by Carolyn Korsmeyer<sup>68</sup>. Like Berleant<sup>69</sup>, she goes back to the ideas of George Santayana to grasp this peculiar aspect of the allergic isolation of sensuality<sup>70</sup>. For Santayana this isolation is a condition for aesthetic contentment:

The soul is glad, as it were, to forget its connection with the body and to fancy that it can travel over the world with the liberty with which it changes the objects of its thought. The mind passes from China to Peru without any conscious change in the local tensions of the body. This illusion of disembodiment is very exhilarating, while immersion in the flesh and confinement to some organ gives a tone of grossness and selfishness to our consciousness. The generally meaner associations of physical pleasures also help to explain their comparative crudity.<sup>71</sup>

In the field of anthropology, it was already Johann G. Herder that constructively argued against the above-mentioned hierarchization of the senses. He regarded hearing as superior and also best suited for expression, as it is less distanced than sight and less close than touch, thus being a balanced sense. He criticized sight for an excessive variety of sensations and their simultaneous occurrence, and touch for the vagueness and momentariness of sensations. Hearing, in turn, is characterized by uniformity and temporality. From all this Herder concluded that visual sensations are bothersome and touch sensations are cold, whereas hearing goes straight to the soul<sup>72</sup>. Plessner, on the other hand, studied the connection between the senses rather than developing the arguments for their hierarchization. She observed that our upright posture (a broad field of vision and free hands) makes sight and touch interact and overcome distance together. Direct representation by sight is aided and enhanced by a grasping hand which covers the distance separating it from the object. The cooperation of representation and activity (optical, motoric and tactile) develops our

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<sup>66</sup> A. Berleant, *op.cit.*, pp. 98–106.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 106–108.

<sup>68</sup> C. Korsmeyer, *op.cit.*, pp. 84–102.

<sup>69</sup> A. Berleant, *op.cit.*, p. 98.

<sup>70</sup> C. Korsmeyer, *op.cit.*, p. 88.

<sup>71</sup> G. Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York 1936, p. 29.

<sup>72</sup> H. Paetzold, "Język jako klucz do rozumienia człowieka w antropologii Herdera", in: *Filozofia. Podstawowe pytania*, eds. E. Martens, H. Schnädelbach, transl. by K. Krzemieniowa, Wiedza Powszechna, Warszawa 1995, pp. 479–496.

orientation and lets us control our field of action. Seeing, grasping and touching thus enables us to come into contact with the object<sup>73</sup>.

Plessner's "field of action" anticipates the radical "environment aesthetics" or "atmosphere aesthetics" – that is the work of Gernot Böhme. He came up with a "different aesthetics"; a result of his strong disapproval of contemporary aesthetic discourse which reduced its interest solely to reception – especially of sign structures. The activity of aesthetics no longer corresponds to its name, argued Böhme, and – like Gehlen – criticized the domination of semiotics in aesthetic inquiry<sup>74</sup>. In relation to Baumgarten's *aisthesis* he describes his standpoint as "a general theory of vision"<sup>75</sup>. Its role is to bring emotions back into the domain of vision, to restore involvement in perceiving. Perception is a sensory "placement in environment"<sup>76</sup>, "the bodily being-present of the subject in space"<sup>77</sup>, which also influences the perceiving subject. The key notion of mood refers to the quasi-objective emotional properties which can be ascribed to objects, people, landscapes, spaces, and which affect the subject. Moods are spaces "coloured" with the presence of objects, people, or their constellations<sup>78</sup>. Yet they are not something objective, a set of qualities; neither are they subjective states of the soul, though they equally belong to the subject – as it is the beholder who experiences them through his own body<sup>79</sup>. Therefore – according to Fischer-Lichte – the mood is a property of the performative rather than of geometric space<sup>80</sup>:

The term "spheres of presence" evidently refers to a specific mode of presence of pertaining to things. Böhme further explains it as the "ecstasy of things" or the special manner in which a thing appears present to a perceiver.

Not only the thing's colors, odors or sounds – its secondary qualities – are thought of as ecstasies but also its primary qualities such as its form<sup>81</sup>.

One may find a similar intuition in Gehlen's work, as he writes: "in the presence of aesthetic values we experience a peculiar pressure [...] We feel

<sup>73</sup> H. Plessner, "Pytanie o *conditio humana*", p. 61.

<sup>74</sup> G. Böhme, *Filozofia i estetyka przyrody w dobie kryzysu środowiska naturalnego*, transl. by J. Merecki, Oficyna Naukowa, Warszawa 2002, pp. 25–26.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> G. Böhme, *Atmosphäre. Essays zur neuen Ästhetik*, Frankfurt am Main: 1995. Qtd. after E. Fischer-Lichte, *ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> G. Böhme, *Filozofia i estetyka przyrody...*, p. 6.

<sup>80</sup> E. Fischer-Lichte, *op.cit.*, p. 115.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p.116. Cf. G. Böhme, *Filozofia i estetyka przyrody...*, p. 7.



a gravity, strongly infused with emotions, direct and livening, and at the same time somehow punctual and not entailing further outcomes<sup>82</sup>. The difference is, however, all too clear. According to Böhme, corporeality is an independent factor which neither serves anything nor is a negative necessity<sup>83</sup>, whereas in Gehlen's thought aesthetic experience is a reduced, biologically neutralised instinct<sup>84</sup>. Aesthetic experience retains a trace of somaticity in order to take part in a universal task of exposing the deficiency of human nature<sup>85</sup>.

Eventually Gehlen should be ranked among the authors moderately allergic to sensuality. Plessner, on the other hand, displays his anxiety about human sensuality in only two cases – these are laughing and crying. He claims that in these states the body does not act a role or experience “a blockade of embodiment”; the distance vanishes and one loses one's self-control<sup>86</sup>. These purely corporeal reactions of laughing and crying might be treated as the “limits of human behaviour”<sup>87</sup>. Though Plessner does not dismiss them, he suggests that they should be treated as marginal phenomena.<sup>88</sup>

Therefore only Böhme affirms human corporeality without limits and unhealthy anxieties. He links the potential of “environmental aesthetics” with a new function of art – namely that of creating atmospheres<sup>89</sup>. Such art might contribute to shaping a new attitude of man towards nature, or even new social relations. However, its commentators regard this approach as doubly utopian. The experiences pursued by Böhme are too rare and too difficult to abstract from common human activities, for instance from those framed by signs<sup>90</sup>. “Environmental aesthetics” was conceived to be a kind of therapy for man, who has changed his environment to such an extent that he is suffering the consequences of the destructive modifications on his own body<sup>91</sup>. Even if it did not prove successful within the ecological scheme which Böhme explicitly invokes, in aesthetic thought it is a *novum* which might desensitize our allergy to sensuality.

*Translated by Igor Kaźmierczak*

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<sup>82</sup> A. Gehlen, op.cit., p. 188.

<sup>83</sup> S. Czerniak, “Pomiędzy Szkołą Frankfurcką a postmodernizmem...”, p. 47.

<sup>84</sup> A. Gehlen, op.cit., p.188.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>86</sup> H. Plessner, “Pytanie o *conditio humana*”, p. 97.

<sup>87</sup> S. Czerniak, “Pomiędzy Szkołą Frankfurcką a postmodernizmem...”, p. 47.

<sup>88</sup> H. Plessner, “Pytanie o *conditio humana*”, p. 98.

<sup>89</sup> G. Böhme, *Filozofia i estetyka przyrody w dobie kryzysu środowiska naturalnego*, pp.7–8.

<sup>90</sup> Cf. S. Czerniak, “Pomiędzy Szkołą Frankfurcką a postmodernizmem...”, pp. 73–74; E. Fischer-Lichte, *ibid.*, p. 193.

<sup>91</sup> G. Böhme, *Filozofia i estetyka przyrody w dobie kryzysu środowiska naturalnego*, p. 5.

**FILOZOFICZNO-ESTETYCZNA ALERGIA NA ZMYSŁOWOŚĆ I JEJ ODCZULANIE  
W PERSPEKTYWIE ANTROPOLOGII FILOZOFICZNEJ****(streszczenie)**

W artykule zamierzam ukazać, w jaki sposób tradycyjna estetyka filozoficzna separuje zmysłowość oraz jak równowazy jej wysiłki antropologia filozoficzna. Przyjmuję, że estetyka filozoficzna reaguje alergicznie na zmysłowość. To znaczy, że „jej system immunologiczny” przeciwstawia się temu, co wcale nie jest dla niej takie szkodliwe. Można powiedzieć (metaforycznie oczywiście), że jest źle ukierunkowany. Alergia ta ma swoje głębsze przyczyny, które nie wyrokują o śmierci pacjenta, a raczej o nieadekwatnym dla niego środowisku. Trzeba je nieco odmienić oraz zaaplikować alergen w formie szczepionki. Te dwie zmiany w formie reorientacji badawczej oferuje antropologia filozoficzna, częściowo już w jej okresie klasycznym (m.in. Arnold Gehlen, Helmuth Plessner), a z najbardziej owocnym skutkiem w czasach obecnych (przede wszystkim w koncepcji Gernota Böhmego).

Alergia jest też sygnałem o czymś obcym (zwłaszcza o jego nadmiarze). Z estetyką jest pod tym względem podobnie. Estetyka – u swego źródłowego znaczenia – poprzez doświadczenie estetyczne jest przeciwieństwem „powrotu do ciała”, do zmysłowości. Tym natomiast, czego się obawia, jest zrównanie jej z przyjemnością fizyczną. Toteż perspektywa antropologiczna nie zrywa z dyskursem estetycznym, a skutecznie polemizuje – jak sądzę – z niektórymi jego metodami.

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## **TOPICALITY AND TIMELESSNESS AS ARTISTIC ALLERGIES**

**Abstract:** The terms “topicality” and “timelessness” may evoke both positive and negative emotional reactions. The present article is a reflection on their role in the context of art. In various perceptions of art, offered both by artists and by theoreticians, one may find traces of their underlying approval or rejection. Praising the supertemporal profundity of various works has led to negative reactions to the actual; the reverse situation, although much less common in the past, consisted in emphasizing present significance at the expense of eternal endurance. The above situations may be regarded as symptoms of the artistic allergies manifesting themselves in the instinctive fear, hatred or distrust of certain qualities and in attempts to formulate such theoretical models that would lead to the reduction, or even complete elimination, of the qualities lying outside the scope of what is (consciously or unconsciously) valued as positive.

The article consists of three parts. The first presents the allergy to topicality as manifesting itself in the concept of the masterpiece (developed in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and supposedly characterized by the “strategy of assumed immortality”); the concept of timeless content in art; and the idea of autonomous form, independent of cultural contexts. The second part of the article analyses the ways in which elements of supertemporality were introduced into art history. The third part depicts the allergy to the seemingly eternal, invoking 20<sup>th</sup> century notions of art. Examples of actualism typical of the Dada movement are analyzed; furthermore, contemporaryism is depicted as a present-day strategy of approaching art in a democratic and pluralistic society.

**Keywords:** time and art – masterpiece – historicity – actualism

“Topicality” and “timelessness” are not the terms frequently found together in theoretical reflection. The former term may be used in reference to events occurring at the moment of locution or in a very recent past, or may describe the concerns of the people living in the same historical period. Thus, the facts belonging to the past or to the future are considered to exist in opposition to topicality. “Timelessness”, on the other hand, draws our attention to that which transcends temporality, which persists despite the passage of years or even centuries. Therefore, it implies remaining in opposition to the actual course of events. Everything that is subordinate to sequential time can be considered as an antithesis to the “timeless”. Nevertheless, the juxtaposition of these two

terms appears justified if we consider the nature of our desires or our aversion to certain circumstances. If we evaluate a certain object or event as positive, we want it to last forever. Thus, we wish to halt the transience of the actual so that it may transcend the principle of temporal causation. An analogous situation occurs when we evaluate something as negative. In this case, we want this object or set of circumstances to pass, to cease to be actual and become the past. We await a new status quo, which, by becoming the present, may prove to be better. Understandably, timelessness would thwart such expectations, and would therefore threaten the desired mutability.

Recurring reactions of this sort may lead to the formation of what might be called a sensitivity syndrome. Depending on our individual and collective experience, they may consist in the desire to perpetuate something and thus exclude it from the normal course of changes. In such circumstances the emergence of new, diverse situations evokes negative reactions. In this case timelessness is understood not only as a desire for something to evade temporality, but as immutability. It is precisely this meaning that we assume when stating that “truth and falsehood are timeless”. Nevertheless, in the struggle to overcome change one may go further, even as far as negating time, or concluding that at least some phenomena elude the universal law of consequence. At such moments, we may say, for instance, that “time is necessary for us to be able to constitute an eternal life” (L. Lavelle)<sup>1</sup>. This statement suggests that the appearance of the desired (or undesirable) state is not sudden: its emergence requires a longer period of formation. Therefore, one may conclude that transient phenomena accumulate in eternity, the importance of which is supreme. If this is so, then something is truly actual only if it contains the prospect of becoming timeless.

In both of the analyzed cases the current situation is approached with reluctance. One either strives to transcend it in search of the truly important or develops a negative sensitivity towards what currently exists but will soon become the past. For this reason, one attempts to neutralize the present. In the former of the two cases, this is effected by singling out something unchangeable and ascribing fundamental meaning to it. Thus, the quality of being excluded from transience is regarded as synonymous with profundity. The currency of an event or object is irrelevant; only what is capable of surviving, i.e. overcoming the present, is regarded as truly significant. In the latter case a timeless dimension is discovered within some course of events. Temporality is thus seen as necessary, but not intrinsically so: the actual is instrumental in

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<sup>1</sup> In A. Lalande, *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie*, Paris 1976, pp. 527–528.

revealing that which transcends the present. In this case, one may say that the actual constitutes timelessness in its wake.

The desire for timelessness leads to an allergy to the present. As its consequence, one does not appreciate the topical. Being in accord with the present moment and the actual state of events may evoke mistrust or aversion.<sup>2</sup> The present is revealed as incurably imperfect. Such reactions may be temporary and may appear only in connection with particular objects or events. Nevertheless, as has frequently been the case, their scope may widen. This may result in a generalized mistrust of the topical and has manifested itself in suspending immediate judgment of things or events, the attitude of “Let us wait and see if it passes the test of time”. It has been also suggested that in one’s actions, one should not be swayed by the present, but should always assume a supertemporal perspective. The most extreme consequence of this allergy to topicality is the condemnation of the new precisely because it is relevant to the present moment, whereas from the supertemporal perspective its significance appears dubious.

#### **STRATEGIES OF TIMELESSNESS IN ART AS MANIFESTATIONS OF AN ALLERGY TO TOPICALITY**

Although artistic practice is connected with a particular time and place, it can be argued that some works transcend such limitations. The acknowledgment of this fact gave rise to the concept of the masterpiece, which continues to be in use to this day<sup>3</sup>. Its emergence is traced to the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century. David Hume wrote: “the same Homer, who pleased at Athens and Rome two thousand years ago, is still admired at Paris and at London. All the changes of climate, government, religion, and language, have not been able to obscure his glory. Authority or prejudice may give a temporary vogue to a bad poet or orator; but his reputation will never be durable or general. When his compositions are examined by posterity or by foreigners, the enchantment is dissipated, and his faults appear in their true colours. On the contrary, a real genius, the longer his

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<sup>2</sup> This indicates that the present is not usually treated as achievement of the desired state: the valuable is yet to come (prospective utopia) or it has already occurred in the past (retrospective utopia).

<sup>3</sup> In the Middle Ages, the term was used in the context of the law regulating craftsmanship. The masterpiece was the final work created by an apprentice, on the basis of which he was given the title of master craftsman. During the Renaissance the link between the masterpiece and craftsmanship weakened; the term assumed a broader meaning, not necessarily connected with art but, for instance, applied to God’s creation (Cf. W. Cahn, *Masterpieces. Chapters on the History of an Idea*, Princeton University Press 1979, chapters I–V).

works endure, and the more wide they are spread, the more sincere is the admiration which he meets with”<sup>4</sup>. Championing the idea that high regard for Homer’s works is independent of such factors as climate, the political system, religion or language, the English philosopher also considered the temporal aspect. During his reign, a ruler may ensure that a mediocre artist will enjoy fame, but he is not able to secure similar veneration for him in the future. This is why enduring interest is so important in the case of masterpieces: one must believe that such admiration will last for all eternity. Thus, a masterpiece is a work which transcends topicality and becomes timeless.

Initially, when describing masterpieces, the factor of timelessness was linked to the ease with which a given work was accepted regardless of the linguistic or geographical barriers. It was even suggested that, in order to determine whether a work stood the chance of becoming a masterpiece, one ought to take into account its current reception in several countries<sup>5</sup>. Gradually, however, fundamental significance was assigned to the criterion of transcending temporal limitations. In connection with that issue, Walter Cahn wrote about the “strategy of assumed immortality”<sup>6</sup>. It is rather difficult to wait a millennium or two for the verdict of posterity. Therefore, if we wish to know whether the future generations will share our enthusiasm, one or two centuries are enough: if the high regard for a given work is maintained, then it can be assumed that its fame will last forever<sup>7</sup>.

Another issue related to timelessness as a quality of masterpieces was that of tradition. Cahn argues that the position of an individual creation on the scale of

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<sup>4</sup> D. Hume, “Of the Standards of Taste”. *The Philosophical Works of David Hume*, Edinburgh 1826, p. 523.

<sup>5</sup> In his book, Cahn quotes the views of Joshua Reynolds, who advised that the work’s “solid foundations” should be examined by subjecting it to a similar test that is applied to a joke. If it retains its comic value when translated into other languages, it may be considered universal. Similarly, the English painter argued, “that picture which pleases only one age or one nation, owes its reception to some local or accidental association of ideas” (J. Reynolds, *Seven Discourses on Art* as quoted in: W. Cahn, p. 163).

<sup>6</sup> W. Cahn, p. 162.

<sup>7</sup> Cahn also emphasizes the fact that as early as the 18<sup>th</sup> century there was discussion about the possibility of repairing, over subsequent centuries, of the contemporaries’ unjust verdict on certain works. For this purpose, he invokes an essay by Diderot, where such suggestions are made concerning the works of Richardson. Obviously, in order for such a situation to occur, the work must be characterized by physical permanence. In the case of literary works this idea was connected with existing in numerous copies, whereas in the case of visual arts the artifacts had to have been executed using durable materials. Therefore, an important feature of the masterpiece was that it did not crumble or undergo changes. Nevertheless, because the quality of the materials used for numerous masterpieces of the past evoked concern over their imminent destruction, Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres suggested that copies of those be made, using more durable material, e.g. enameled fired clay.

value may be determined only by comparing it with a perfect model<sup>8</sup>. This view is correct if we restrict our reflections to analyzing the relations between particular works, taking into account the order in which they emerged and the ensuing possibility of influence. However, such reasoning may lead one to assume the absolute quality of masterpieces – to suppose that they inaugurate tradition, themselves remaining uninfluenced. Yet the notion of tradition is broader<sup>9</sup> and cannot be limited to a relation between earlier and later works. From the perspective assumed for the present purpose, we should differentiate between at least three aspects of tradition. The first relates to the fundamental, “deep” sources. The second has to do with the respect for the masters who were active in the past. The third is connected to what is real, i.e. in accordance with the essence of things or the nature of being. Nevertheless, these aspects need not be analyzed separately; indeed, on numerous occasions they were taken into account together. However, they mark different strategies of timelessness, which in turn exhibit a variety of approaches to transcending the present.

The first concept emphasizes the role of the origin. The indispensability of certain principles is linked to their divine source, to the actions of supernatural beings, to the revelations conveyed by the prophets, and so forth. Thus, in this case, the importance of tradition is founded on its superhuman derivation: its authority originates in the unquestionable character of the source. Therefore, the timeless quality of the masterpiece is derivative in the sense that it is determined by a relation to the extratemporal cause of origin. As regards the second concept, “heritage” is perhaps a more precise term than “tradition”. Here, we are dealing with a set of rules created by humans at a particular historical moment and subsequently passed from generation to generation. In this case, timelessness consists in the ability to endure, whereas its foundations lie in the role of the great masters, whose authority does not weaken, and their (also posthumous) influence on posterity. The third aspect of the notion of tradition is connected with the inviolable foundation of particular beliefs, which, however, have no extraterrestrial, supernatural source; they persist because they are perceived as true. Although their origin is human and natural, their profundity is not based on the authority of any human being who was alive at a particular moment, but on the truth which is verifiable at all times. Perceived in this way, tradition is liberated from dogmatism. Furthermore, it also enjoys a special relationship with topicality. In the first of the above cases topicality is practically synonymous with eternal actuality (existing beyond time, characterized by supernatural origins); in the second, it consists in a particular creation’s accordance with models of perfection and in the preserva-

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<sup>8</sup> W. Cahn, p. 163.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. E. Souriau, *Vocabulaire d’esthétique*, Paris 1990, pp. 1352–1353.

tion of hierarchy for the purpose of maintaining the status of authority. In the third case, however, topicality involves repeated testing for authenticity. It is seen as providing opportunities for the experimental confirmation of the legitimacy of ascribing the supertemporal quality to a given object.

An example of an art movement taking into account both the second and the third conceptions of tradition is neoclassicism. Its representatives did not consider themselves traditionalists in the popular sense. Hugh Honour argued that the difficulty of perceiving the youthful and subversive element in the neoclassical movement is connected with the name itself<sup>10</sup>. The term was invented in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a pejorative reference to what was then regarded as “reviving antiquity” through such practices as, for instance, imitating Greco-Roman sculpture. However, at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, neither the term “neoclassicism”, nor even “classicism” was used to describe the style mentioned above. As Honour suggests, the critics, theoreticians and the artists themselves referred to it simply as “true style,” describing it as a “resurgence (*risorgimento*) of art” – a new renaissance, a confirmation of timeless truths – and never a mere fad<sup>11</sup>. Thus it is clear that the representatives of neo-classicism manifested an allergy to topicality (understood as emphasizing the present, a sheer obsession with novelty), but at the same time they sought to grasp the genuine character of their time, which – in their opinion – was not antithetical to the true tradition of antiquity. While they rejected decorative allusions to that period, they accepted antiquity as an invigorating and masculine source of new artistic truths and ideals<sup>12</sup>. What is particularly telling is the use of the suffix *neo* – “new” in this context: the antique procedures are thus revealed as truly topical.

Honour believes that the convictions characteristic for the neoclassicist current found their most logical fulfillment in architecture. As he argues, neo-classicism was characterized by a fascination with the truths of universal application, with the rules revealed and illuminated by the pure light of nature and reason; this fascination in turn led the artists to look for ideals further and further back in history, where increasingly purer and more elementary forms could be found<sup>13</sup>. Thus, the reason behind regarding the art of antiquity as genuinely topical was predominantly the belief that its principles matched the principles of being and expressed a genuine knowledge thereof. Władysław Tatarkiewicz claimed that the Greeks, who established the canons, were not interested in the subjective sensations of beauty in the recipients of the works

<sup>10</sup> H. Honour, *Neo-Classicism*, Harmondsworth 1968, p. 14.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.



created in keeping with those canons. The value of architecture and sculpture was thus perceived as objective in the sense that it agreed with the principles of being. As Tatariewicz argues further, “the canon of sculpture applied largely to nature rather than art”<sup>14</sup>. Such principles are immutable and eternal; hence, the works designed in keeping with them are characterized by timelessness. Consequently, if such creations are negatively evaluated during certain historical periods, this is not so much a result of new artistic discoveries as a sheer betrayal of truth. Thus, novelty and topicality have no intrinsic value; the only appropriate meaning of these terms is related to a return to perennial principles. From this perspective, the label of “modernity” or “topicality” – understood as being in harmony with the beliefs appropriate for the current moment – is seen as mere justification of erroneous or false actions. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that the representatives of the neoclassicist movement manifested such contempt or impatience towards contemporaneity understood in this way. They behaved similarly towards other fashionable historical styles, e.g. the Rococo, which Honour describes as the most abhorrent to the champions of “true style”<sup>15</sup>.

Striving for timelessness was also evident in the content of the artistic creations. It was feasible, now and then, to agree that elements of style must undergo change so as not to tire the recipients; nevertheless, the expressed ideas, if true, were regarded as perennial. This approach was grounded in the theoretical reflection on the relationship between poetry and art, which were treated as sister arts – employing diverse means, but identical in their essence. Poetry, it was believed, seeks that which transcends specificity and individuality, and is characterized by attempts at generality and timelessness<sup>16</sup>. Thus it was assumed that the painter ought to act analogously, i.e. to express general rather than specific truths. Since the beginnings of the Renaissance it was believed that a painting should contain a story, a narrative. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, French theoreticians stated emphatically that the content of a painting ought to be universal. Topics were sought primarily in the Bible and in the literature of Greco-Roman antiquity. Nevertheless, the greatest opportunity for the artist to express universal ideas was afforded by allegorical works, since they most perfectly embody the permanent in the singular: the represented circumstances

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<sup>14</sup> W. Tatariewicz, *Historia estetyki*, vol. I, Warszawa 2009, p. 69.

<sup>15</sup> H. Honour, p. 15.

<sup>16</sup> Jean Chapelain, the 17<sup>th</sup> century French poet, critic and literary theorist, expressed this very tendency when he compared poetry to history: “History speaks of things as they are, while poetry speaks of things as they should be. The former reflects on specific things in their specificity, with no other goal except to report, and therefore in historical works events and incidents are varied and unregulated, as if dependent on chance. Conversely, poetry, this profound skill closely aligned with philosophy, reflects on specific things from a generalized perspective” (cited in: W. Tatariewicz, *ibid.*, p. 465).

and events lose their earthly quality and acquire timelessness. For this reason, allegory was regarded as the best means of expressing that which supposedly eludes the confines of topicality.

What was assumed in the concept of allegory as a “universal image”<sup>17</sup> was the permanence of the principles governing the world and the continuity of the cultural tradition. Nevertheless, paradoxically, from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards the conviction of the universality and permanence of the principles in various domains of knowledge was gradually losing its stability. Hence, on the one hand, it was postulated that art should express the ideas connected with the timeless, while on the other hand there was increased awareness of instability and change in the assumed worldview. This status quo became more pronounced during the next two centuries. Maria Poprzęcka observes that “previously, when Power was personified, the artist knew what attributes to bestow on the figure embodying it so that it could be properly interpreted – the convention was amply described in textbooks on allegory and symbolism. Furthermore, it was clear what Power meant, to whom it was due, and what its qualities were. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, not only were the prior conventions rejected or forgotten, but, when depicting Power, it was necessary to specify to whom it belonged: to the people, the republic, the king? Perhaps to the capital?”<sup>18</sup>

Thus, the roots of the allegorical system, understood as a set of artistic means used to express timeless content, are twofold. First and foremost, ideas of supertemporal significance (or at least those to which exclusion from temporality is ascribed) must exist, and there must be a consensus about the means by which they may be conveyed. Such was the case in the cultures or periods characterized by stability: what was presented as timeless in works of art was substantiated in actuality. The belief that humans existed in an eternity of sorts was confirmed in artistic creations. However, such periods – at least in the history of European culture – were rare. Consequently, the permanence of the allegorical system suggested not so much the harmony and stability of the worldview as the durability of the cultural order. The use of allegory in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century art was more expressive of a desire for such an order than its actual stability. Thus, what is revealed is an allergy to change rather than a conviction about the durability of immutable universal ideas.

The strategies of allegorization were diverse. One consisted in the endeavors to maintain the tradition (identified with timelessness) by means of simply continuing the practice of previous allegories. In the field of the visual arts,

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. M. Praz, “Tradycja ikonologiczna” in: C. Ripa, *Ikonologia* (translated into Polish by I. Kania), Kraków 1998, p. XXII.

<sup>18</sup> M. Poprzęcka, *Akademizm*, Warszawa 1977, p. 105.

this strategy was employed particularly often in monumental and decorative sculpture. As a justification, it was argued that the works situated in city parks and decorating public buildings, and thus designed for universal viewing, must be comprehensible to a broad spectrum of viewers. This indicates that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the premises of timelessness and tradition had become too weak to counter the accusations of creative inertia and lack of invention. In addition, the artists encountered problems regarding the conventions of allegorical representation themselves. A painter who decided to address Biblical themes as timeless faced the problem of form. Poprzęcka pointed out that “the academic principles had always imposed on painters the obligation of maintaining eminence and decorum in religious scenes, but at the same time demanded that they be faithful to the literary (in this case, Biblical) message. Furthermore, it was necessary for painters to ensure the verisimilitude of scenery, physiognomy, attire, etc. The earlier painters’ tendency to dress sacred figures in contemporary garments was condemned by 17<sup>th</sup> century academics as anachronistic, and subsequently such figures were attired in timeless drapery. The matter was complicated further by 19<sup>th</sup> century historicism. To the costume principle and the ideal of the learned painter was added the necessity of being *au courant* with the quickly developing historical knowledge. A tendency emerged to depict Biblical scenes as they might have actually looked”<sup>19</sup>. Hence, the allegorical strategy of timelessness proved internally incoherent. A painting in which one sought to express general content through a Biblical parable carried a universal message which was nonetheless rendered by means of individual figures situated in a particular space. What resulted from this was a tension between, on the one hand, the individual character of the depicted scenery, physiognomy and attire and, on the other, the content, which was supposed to be universal. Poprzęcka’s examples of the painters’ attempts to resolve this dilemma indicate that they were unable to develop a good solution to this problem and, depending on the historical period and the cultural context which they represented, they tried out various strategies. Nevertheless, none of these were in fact perfect because the timeless was invariably subject to diverse circumstances and limitations connected with the particular historical moment<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 82.

<sup>20</sup> A radical attempt at solving this difficulty may be found in the decisions of various representatives of abstract art who regarded geometric forms as the most accurate means of expressing universal ideas. Some of them made recourse to the tradition of geometric symbolism, invoking various systems of signification, from the Pythagorean-Platonic to the Far Eastern ones. However, the most interesting representatives (e.g. Piet Mondrian or Kasimir Malevich) did not endeavor to assign universal meanings to geometric shapes on the basis of cultural conventions, but to detect these meanings in the forms themselves. As a result, particular geometric figures were to unify the signifier with the signified, thus becoming a visual

In the 18<sup>th</sup> and particularly in the 19<sup>th</sup> century yet another problem appeared, rendering it impossible to regard allegory as a way of infusing art with super-temporal character. At that time the scope of the universal content expressed in works of art began to widen dramatically. As a result, attempts were made to connect new notions with previous motifs, either by secularizing religious images or by updating mythological scenes. This phenomenon was particularly noticeable during the Great French Revolution, when it became necessary to find new expressive means to fit the emerging ideas. The issue was so weighty that the minister of internal affairs established a special committee of “learned citizens” who were to determine suitable artistic means (e.g. which tree would best symbolize the new notion of Science and Art). The artists frequently invoked earlier models of allegory, adapting them to the current purpose. For instance, in his proposal of the monument to the French People, Jacques-Louis David alluded to Phidias’s *Athena Parthenos*; however, in lieu of the tiny figure of the victorious Nike, he proposed that the female should hold the embracing figures of Freedom and Equality personified. Subsequently, many similar adaptive maneuvers aimed at updating previous motifs were made. This was motivated on the one hand by the need to express new ideas (such as Electricity or Smallpox Vaccination) and on the other by the desire to ensure their appropriate significance by means of an allegorical form sanctified by tradition. Current importance was clearly not enough: it had to be complemented with supertemporal aspect.

Nevertheless, the most radical modern strategy revealing an allergy to topicality was the tendency to emphasize the autonomy of art. Attempts were made to discover the element which would allow for the separation of art from the variable sources of its inspiration and the diversity of its functions, thus making it possible to regard art as existing in and of itself. André Malraux claimed that Greece, Egypt and the Middle Ages had no term by which this idea could be expressed. In order for it to be born, it was necessary to detach works of art from everyday practice. The deepest metamorphosis began when it was concluded that art has no other goal apart from itself. This process was aided by the emergence of museums and art galleries, which made it possible to separate works of art from their changeable original contexts and their primary functions. Thus, art was placed in sterile spaces, where the artifacts existed primarily in relations with one another, outside their social or religious functions. Furthermore, this stimulated a reception that was independent of the works’ cultural and historical context<sup>21</sup>.

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language which directly expressed universal content (cf. A. Turowski, *Wielka utopia awangardy. Artystyczne i społeczne utopie w sztuce rosyjskiej 1910–1930*, Warsaw 1990, p. 146).

<sup>21</sup> Malraux emphasized that the transformed receptive situation also influences artistic creation. He argued that at a moment when painters, by dint of the fact of painting, realize the

A Byzantine icon, as Harold Osborne notes, “is nowadays for most people a work of art and no longer a Christian symbol or a theophany; its impact is visual and the emotional religious appeal is attenuated”<sup>22</sup>. Obviously, faced with some ancient works exhibited in a museum, we may attempt to reconstruct the primary mindset which accompanied their creation. However, even with the historical or archeological context, we will never be capable of fully experiencing the spiritual condition which inspired them, let alone make it our own. What we have at our disposal instead is the possibility of “appreciating the formal qualities of these things as art objects and in so far as the aesthetic impulse has been pretty well universal among men, even when it worked blindly and unrecognised, we can thus to some extent recover and share their qualities as human products”<sup>23</sup>. Thus, the aesthetic attitude, which consists in focusing on what is directly given in a work of art, creates an opportunity to detect its truly timeless aspect. This aspect does not include what is frequently the direct motivation for the artist, inevitably entangled in the ideological disputes of the era: the content, current or considered universal at the time, but ultimately revealed as changeable. Similarly, it cannot be identified with the stylistic devices regulated by the conventions of various periods. Instead, it may be associated with the general principle of the work’s organization, described as “organic unity” or “unity in variety”.

Osborne traces the notion of unity in art to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, where it was applied to the action of drama. Subsequently, he notices its manifestations in the works of the authors ranging from St. Augustine, Alberti and Hogarth to Birkhoff, who endeavored to transform it into a mathematical formula. Nevertheless, these concepts were in fact limited in scope. They referred either to particular aspects of the work’s organization or were considered as pertaining to only one domain of art. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, the notion of organic unity acquired a broader meaning, becoming the distinguishing element of artifacts regardless of their originary moment. Creating a system which constitutes a unity in variety is not a rational procedure based on the application of particular rules; neither can it be analyzed. Rather, the artistic whole is perceived in one act of “synoptic” perception, “*seen* as a single thing or unity”<sup>24</sup>. The notion of an artifact as an organic unity, or unity in variety –

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timelessness of their art, their Imaginary Museum is filled with works of which history knows nothing. The reason for this was not mere ignorance; Malraux claimed that children’s drawings are as alien to historical time as Eskimo masks (*La Métamorphose des dieux. L’Intemporel*, Paris 1976).

<sup>22</sup> H. Osborne, *Aesthetics and Art Theory*, Worcester and London 1968, p. 186.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 192. It is worthwhile to add that Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, considering the problem of unity in variety as applied to the realm of painting, differentiated between the composition and structure of Pure Form. The former pertained to ways in which shapes within

acknowledged by some theoreticians in previous centuries – in the 20<sup>th</sup> century became perhaps the most consistent manifestation of the belief in the timeless essence of works of art and, simultaneously, an expression of a wish to overcome their entanglement in topicality.

## HISTORY AND THE DESIRE FOR TIMELESSNESS

During the modern times, art entered history. The strategies of timelessness discussed above were intertwined with a sense of artistic change. Analyzing these tendencies, one should take into account the various endeavors to limit relativization, to demonstrate that the truly significant in art is immune to change – that the masterpieces endure, transcending the boundaries of time<sup>25</sup>. However, assuming a temporal perspective does not necessarily lead to the total subordination of works of art to the historical context. Their time is not determined solely by the connection with their originary moment. Although none of them are in fact timeless, on account of their role in history they may transcend their situational topicality.

Leopold Ettliger noted that when reading Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* one may be under the impression that the text consists of no more than chronologically ordered biographies, from Cimabue to Michelangelo. However, if we interpret the text in this manner we completely forget that the analyses of particular artists' oeuvre are part of a "permanent structure"<sup>26</sup>. Vasari wanted his reader to understand the causes of the changes occurring in art, which he perceived as manifesting decline or progress. Similarly, several centuries later Winckelmann, when discussing the art of antiquity, refused to limit his

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a painting could be rationally organized. As regards the organization of colors, Witkacy described it in terms of harmony and disharmony. Conversely, the structure of Pure Form encompassed all elements of the work, and was connected with the intensity of the artist's Metaphysical Feeling, transcending the boundaries of rationalization. Similarly to the Metaphysical Feeling, it did not undergo historical change (Cf. S.I. Witkiewicz, "New Forms in Painting and the Misunderstandings Arising Therefrom" in: D. Gerould, ed., *The Witkiewicz Reader*, Evanston 1992).

<sup>25</sup> It is worthwhile to indicate that in Roman Ingarden's phenomenological system this feature is ascribed not only to masterpieces, but to all works of art as intentional beings, differentiated from aesthetic objects, which are constituted through acts of concretization. Ingarden believed that works of art are "temporal" in the sense that they are executed at a particular historical moment (which is why they may not be counted among ideal objects such as mathematical sets), but "temporality" is not part of their essence (cf. J. Makota, *O klasyfikacji sztuk pięknych. Z badań nad estetyką współczesną*, Kraków 1964, p. 163).

<sup>26</sup> L. Ettliger, "Kunstgeschichte als Geschichte", *Jahrbuch der Hamburger Kunstsammlungen*, vol. 16, 1971.

reflection to the issues pertaining to that particular period. He made connections with the art of the Renaissance, and with the creative endeavors of his own era, attempting to determine general regularities obtaining in the field of art history. However, these constructs were limited in scope and nature; in their light, art either thrived or atrophied. It was only with the advent of Hegel that those phenomena could be properly described.

Generally, Hegel's concept is seen as a historical system with metaphysical foundations. Ernst Gombrich ventures further, indicating its frequent allusions to theological traditions. He argues that Hegel's theology must be classified as heretical because it omits the Christian doctrine of creation as a single act as well as the doctrine of the incarnation of Christ as a unique temporal phenomenon. Thus, Gombrich asserts, the history of the world was to Hegel a history of God creating himself, whereas the history of humanity was, by the same token, seen as an endless incarnation of the Spirit<sup>27</sup>. The suggestion is significant for the present purpose because by imagining historical change as manifesting consecutive self-realizations not of the Spirit, but of God – perceived, one should add, in accordance with the Christian tradition as incarnate – we arrive at the supertemporal foundation of history. Thus, topical aspects prove less important in comparison to the permanent substrate of the historical process.

Continuing his reflections, Gombrich avows that the blasphemous and heretical interpretation expands, or perhaps distorts, the Christian notion of history, based on Divine Providence. Both in the Jewish and the Christian tradition history was seen as part of God's plan, in which the actions of nations as well as individuals were imagined as revelations of the divine will. Gombrich draws on the notion developed by the medieval abbot Blessed Joachim of Fiore, who saw history as tripartite: the Old Testament represented the Kingdom of the Father, the Christian era corresponded to the Kingdom of the Son, which would in turn yield to the third kingdom – referred to by Gombrich as "*das dritte Reich*" – namely the Age of the Holy Spirit<sup>28</sup>. Thus, it seems that history, including the history of art, reveals the workings of a secular providence, which operates according to a certain law. Therefore, it is an illusion that art develops in response to the current context; in fact, it is a realization of a predetermined plan, which nevertheless remains veiled to those who make history. Consequently, the sense of topicality in particular actions is erroneous: topicality is merely a fulfillment of yet another stage of a complex premise scored in time.

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<sup>27</sup> E.H. Gombrich, *In Search of Cultural History*, Oxford 1969.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century art scholars adopted the above notion, although they quickly abandoned Hegelian idealism. Rudolf Zeitler observes that although by mid-19<sup>th</sup> century nobody wanted to hear of the “Spirit of the World” any more, seeking the principles of artistic change remained an important task. However, this activity assumed the form of scientific research, invoking the principles derived from political economy, sociology, psychology and the natural sciences. For the purposes of analyzing art, numerous terms were borrowed from anthropological thought, e.g. “strength”, “the organ”, “growth”, “exhaustion”, “desire and fulfillment”, “increase” or “fertilization”. Nevertheless, Zeitler believes, the above notions did not eliminate the influence of Hegel, but merely brought his ideas a bit closer down to earth. Simultaneously, it was maintained that certain elements of art – particularly those of style and form – “develop over the centuries according to a certain psychological law, in an irreversible sequence”<sup>29</sup>.

The views presented above reveal, on the one hand, a rejection of timelessness as regards works of art and, on the other, a conviction that a frame of reference contemporary to the work is insufficient. Works of art are not so much elements of a certain contemporaneity as a fragment of a temporal archipelago, in whose context their interrelations should be considered. Although a work does express a certain moment in history, it also – as Hegel emphasized, and numerous art critics repeated – constitutes a fragment of a general process. Therefore, more insight may be gained from situating it within that process than from analyzing the connections between the work and other contemporaneous phenomena. Such an approach allows one to determine the universal meaning of a creative accomplishment.

Although some scholars (e.g. the aforesaid Ettliger) wrote about the “paralyzing influence of the Hegelian legacy”<sup>30</sup> and postulated tightening the ties between art history and broadly understood history by acknowledging the diversity of the contexts in which works of art emerge and function, at the same time there was an observable need to situate artifacts in universal frameworks rather than temporally localized ones. While it was possible to separate these two perspectives, assuming that the former was appropriate for science and the latter for art criticism, such suggestions did not garner wide approval. On the contrary, art historians saw the future development of their domain in emphasizing its singularity, which – generally speaking – meant determining the artistic “shapes of time” that acknowledged the temporal

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<sup>29</sup> R. Zeitler, “Kunstgeschichte als historische Wissenschaft”, in: Per Bjurström (ed.) *Contributions to the History and Theory of Art* (Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis), N.S. vol. 6, Uppsala 1967.

<sup>30</sup> L. Ettliger, *ibid.*



sequence of artifacts, but were simultaneously treated as isolable and permanent wholes.

The American art historian George Kubler described the situation thus: “the shapes of time are the prey we want to capture. The time of history is too coarse and brief to be an evenly granular duration such as the physicists suppose for natural time; it is more like a sea occupied by innumerable forms of a finite number of types. A net of another mesh is required, different from any now in use”<sup>31</sup>. This declaration is uncommonly condensed in terms of content. First and foremost, Kubler differentiates between natural time and the time of history. Artistic time cannot be identified with either of the two; its capturing requires a unique “net”. The notion of style, which from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards was believed to enable the discussion of art history, is revealed here to be of little use. Employing metaphorical formulations, Kubler argues that this notion “has no more mesh than wrapping paper or storage boxes”<sup>32</sup>. This may suggest that the category of style either fails to capture many crucial issues (because it lacks the necessary “mesh”) or that it captures far too much to be useful. Hence, Kubler has decided to create a properly ordered system founded on the distinction between two perspectives on artifacts. According to the former, they are historical events, whereas the latter allows us to perceive them as hard-won solutions to particular problems. While the former view leads to including a given artifact in the framework of broadly understood history, the latter results in its becoming a part of a connected chain. Kubler argues further that “the important clue is that any solution points to the existence of some problem to which there have been other solutions, and that other solutions to this same problem will most likely be invented to follow the one now in view”<sup>33</sup>.

Thus, history of art is a locus of successive artistic problems. While the manner and place in which they appear are temporally determined, the problems themselves turn out to be excluded from immediate relativization. Although they emerge at a particular historical moment, they cannot be connected exclusively with it. It is always possible that a certain artistic problem will return, regaining currency, and new links will be added to its inherent chain of solutions. Thus, an art historian should not focus entirely on individual historical manifestations of a given problem, but should endeavor to describe the problem itself in terms of a chain of solutions. He can also, as Kubler emphasizes, attempt to capture its mental form: “the problem disclosed by any

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<sup>31</sup> G. Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*, New Haven 2008, p. 29.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

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

sequence of artifacts may be regarded as its mental form, and the linked solutions as its class of being. The entity composed by the problem and its solutions constitutes a form-class<sup>34</sup>. In this way an art historian may aspire to describe that which in fact transcends particular historical contexts. Therefore, history will enable form-classes to reveal themselves.

Thus formulated, the object of inquiry invites two possible approaches. Firstly, one may present the artistic problem itself, reconstructed on the basis of its historical manifestations. The second idea, to which Kubler devotes more attention, consists in observing the manner of the problem's functioning. The research categories Kubler has developed and illustrated with carefully chosen examples, are supposed primarily to create an opportunity to describe historical manifestations of artistic problems. For this reason, Kubler introduces the notion of closed and open sequences; in the case of the former, the problem requires no new solutions and is temporarily inoperative. It is against this background that the scholar discusses the phenomenon of fashion – “the projection of a single image of outward being, resistant to change during its brief life, ephemeral, expendable, receptive only to copying but not to fundamental variation”<sup>35</sup>. Kubler believes that fashion in each of its consecutive phases constitutes a separate class containing only one model solution. It is thus “a duration without substantial change”<sup>36</sup>. This lack of a temporal dimension marks the difference between the phenomena existing only at the current moment, typical of fashion, and the mode of existence characteristic for outstanding works of art, which contain a discernible temporal perspective.

It is precisely this ability to initiate varied, temporally extended transformations of a problem that may in this case be considered as an equivalent of timelessness. A masterpiece does not exist individually, in isolation, retaining its value despite the changes occurring in its vicinity. Quite the opposite, it consists in opening the way for artistic experimentation within the framework of a given form-class. Its characteristic “timelessness” manifests itself in the continuation of the problem, i.e. a sequence of works in which that problem is addressed. Thus, it consists in the emergence of – to use Kubler's formulation – replicas and mutants. Replicas are simple repetitions, reproductions, copies, reductions, transfers and derivations. Mutants, on the other hand, emerge as a result of making small changes to an object, with significant consequences for its entire posterity. A new period in art begins when the altered circumstances “impose upon the mass of replicas a new scheme manifested by

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

a prime object not categorically different from the preceding prime object, yet historically different”<sup>37</sup>.

The notion of the “prime object” is fundamental to Kubler’s conception. The American scholar uses it to describe the works which appear at a certain moment in time, but which do not necessarily respond to the present or express the particular historical moment. Constituting a culmination of prior tendencies, these works simultaneously inaugurate a series of objects to follow. Kubler emphasizes that “the number of prime objects is distressingly small [...] Many sorts of replicas reproduce the prime object so completely that the most sensitive historical method cannot separate them”<sup>38</sup>. Therefore, doubts may at times arise as to whether the existence of a given prime object was indeed the cause of the analyzed consequences. Kubler asks further: “Have prime objects any real existence? Or are we simply conferring upon some leading examples of their class an additional symbolic distinction of imaginary priority?”<sup>39</sup> After all, this reality is constituted by ordered developmental sequences.

It is within this framework that we may observe the long or short life of artifacts. No particular works are truly timeless: the possibility of a long life as well as of rebirth depends on the emergence of new objects. These may indicate the topicality of a given problem or constitute evidence of an “aesthetic fatigue” with the features of the prime object. This is not a consequence of its physical exhaustion but rather of its descent into banality. According to Kubler, this may occur in two different ways. One is referred to as coarseness and consists in a surplus of copies being executed by talentless successors, whereas the other is tawdriness, i.e. industrialized reproduction of the model. Different strategies calculated to prolong an artifact’s life are also possible, such as extended series (e.g. the so-called colonial series, in which case the continuation transpires elsewhere) or simultaneous series. When it is the form of the artifact that evokes fatigue, interest in the work may be prolonged because of its content. Through new meanings – detected, for example, by ingenious critics – a work may keep the recipients’ attention focused on itself. Hence, the persistence of artifacts manifests itself not in the form of timelessness understood as immutability, but as life entangled in diverse strategies and series of mutations. As Kubler argues, “topicality concerns their instantaneous arrangement, and history treats of their successive

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., pp. 42–43.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

positions and relationships”<sup>40</sup>. Thus, the actual state is merely a temporary indicator of a tendency developing over time.

Kubler’s claims discussed above visibly correspond to certain features of the notion of art typical of the avant-garde. Although some scholars, when examining the output of the avant-garde, tend to emphasize predominantly (or even exclusively) the role of the actual moment and the forward-looking attitude<sup>41</sup>, a more neutral analysis reveals a deep entanglement in temporal progression. Lucjan Krukowski argues that “much of avant-garde theory is self-consciously historical. Works are understood as exemplars of particular historical trends and developments, and are judged for their ‘internal’ aesthetic qualities”<sup>42</sup>. The scholar emphasizes the movement’s evident rootedness in the Hegelian system. This means that artistic endeavors must be analyzed in the context of problems, manifestations of which are variously positioned in time. The representatives of the avant-garde endeavored to recognize the principles according to which such artistic chains developed. If we subject the manifestos and other theoretical texts from late 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards to careful scrutiny, it will be revealed that their authors attempted to determine their place within particular artistic trends, and were also aware of the past sources in which their own work was rooted. Moreover, they emphasized the indispensability of such awareness to an avant-garde artist<sup>43</sup>. Thus, it may be argued, on the basis of the above-quoted ideas of Kubler, that the representatives of the avant-garde visualized topicality as an “instantaneous arrangement”, whereas history – the “successive positions and relationships” in which a particular artistic problem manifested itself – allowed them to determine the origin and predict the future.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

<sup>41</sup> An example of this tendency is Jean-François Lyotard, who emphasized that, from the modern perspective, “everything that is received must be suspected, even if it is only a day old (*modo, modo*, wrote Petronius)” (“Answering the question: what is the postmodern?” in: *The Postmodern Explained to Children*, Sydney 1992). In defense of his thesis, the author provides the examples of Cézanne abandoning the space inherited from the impressionists, Picasso and Braque rejecting Cézanne’s concept of the object, Duchamp parting with the cubist notion of the painting in 1912 and Buren contesting the artistic premises emerging intact from Duchamp’s work.

<sup>42</sup> L. Krukowski, “Hegel, „Progress”, and the Avant-Garde”, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Spring 1986, p. 279.

<sup>43</sup> In his article, Krukowski both underlines the connections of avant-garde theories with the Hegelian notion of history and indicates the dissimilarities between them. Taking into account the subject of the present discussion, the ability of a person involved in historical processes to develop an awareness of the laws governing them seems significant. This subject is expanded upon in my article “Historia a kontemporaryzm. Problem wartości sztuki w świecie dowolnych powiązań” (“History and Contemporaryism: The Problem of the Value of Art in a World of Random Connections”) in: H. Szabała et al. (eds.) *Wobec świata wartości. Księga Pamiątkowa w 45-lecie Pracy Profesora Bohdana Dziemidoka*, Gdańsk 2001, pp. 246–252.

It was from this perspective, assuming the significance of history, that the avant-garde artists evaluated their current achievements<sup>44</sup>. This perspective also allowed them to mark the routes of progress and transcend the past<sup>45</sup>. Thus, what mattered was not only the ingenuity of the artistic solution, but also its fertility, understood as an ability to pave the way for new propositions which were not mere replicas or mutations. In this view, a genius artist is someone ahead of his time, who can therefore boast of numerous offspring. For the ranks of the avant-garde, current importance was not enough; therefore, a radicalization of previous solutions was initiated by invoking historicist thought.

### ACTUALISM AND ALLERGY TO TIMELESSNESS

Historical presentation of artistic phenomena may be twofold. If what is accentuated is the role of the developmental sequences or series – such as those described by Kubler – then individual creative acts and works are incorporated into broader processes developing over segments of time. In this case, it is not so much the current moment or the particular decision that matters but the temporal context, the connection with prior facts and estimated consequences. Thus, topicality is subordinated to a process developing in an ordered manner, which can be presented as an artistic problem. Consequently, particular actions and their results are described and evaluated with regard to the role which they play in it. An artifact may be considered a “prime object”, “replica”, “mutation”, and so forth. The artist’s actions may be labeled as pioneering, premature or belated. In this way, particular artistic events are

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<sup>44</sup> Early examples of this attitude are the theoretical works of Paul Signac (*D'Eugene Delacroix au néo-impressionisme [From Eugene Delacroix to Neo-Impressionism]*, Paris 1899) and Maurice Denis (*Du symbolisme et de Gauguin vers un nouvel ordre classique*, Paris 1912). An analogous approach, albeit of a more limited scope, can be found in *Du cubism (On Cubism)* by A. Gleizes and J. Metzinger (Paris 1912), where the genesis of the movement, traced from the work of Courbet, is outlined. Other examples include the articles of A. Breton collected in *Le surréalisme et la peinture (Surrealism and Painting)*, Paris–New York 1945) or in W. Kandinsky’s essays. Among Polish artists, the role of history in modern reflection on art was most emphatically indicated by Władysław Strzemiński. An exception among avant-garde movements in this respect was Dadaism, whose representatives accentuated the role of the present, liberated from references to the past or the future. This attitude is elaborated on in the subsequent section of the present article.

<sup>45</sup> In the above-quoted article, L. Krukowski proposes that in reflections on art a distinction should be made between “progress” as a collective function, measured by means of “objective” indicators of “revision” and “resolution” and as an individual function, described as “transcendence”, which can be measured by “awareness” and “fulfillment”. Cf. Krukowski, *ibid.*, p. 281.

subsumed under a historical system and constitute the fulfillment or unfulfillment of a certain order which transcends these events. This is precisely the sort of reasoning which actualism questions. According to this perspective, the artifact is topicality apprehended *hic et nunc*. It is determined neither by the past nor by a futuristic project; the present is the only frame of reference. The work of art is not perceived as meeting the conditions of a certain notion of art assumed for a given segment of time. Artistic essentialism in all forms is thus rejected. Both the general idea of art and the descriptions of particular types or genres lose their validity. Can a situation regarded as fulfilling the idea of actualism arise?

Among the avant-garde tendencies in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Dadaism was in certain ways unique. First of all, the name suggested neither the preferred art forms (which was the case e.g. with cubism or constructivism) nor the sources of inspiration (as with expressionism or surrealism) – instead, it was neutral and noncommittal. It did not define the essence of creative activity, it signaled no particular agenda. It resisted inclusion among previous stylistic trends. It was sheer anti-essentialist actuality.

This was the mode in which the artists embracing the concept of “dada” wished to work. In numerous manifestos and programmatic statements they championed radical actualism, exhibiting emphatic allergy to timelessness. In the 1918 *Dadaist manifesto*, most likely authored by Richard Huelsenbeck (with the possible aid of Raoul Hausmann) and signed by numerous sympathizers from various countries, one can find the following words: “the highest art will be that which in its conscious content presents the thousand-fold problems of the day, the art which has been visibly shattered by the explosions of last week, which is forever trying to collect its limbs after yesterday’s crash”<sup>46</sup>. What is quite telling is the progressive temporal narrowing: from the epoch through recent weeks to the previous day. As regards the Dadaists, topicality is not a vague slogan denoting inclusion of general qualities considered typical of one’s time – i.e. the period during which the artist lives – or of a broader, unspecified temporal unit treated as relatively homogeneous in terms of the possibilities of conceptual apperception. For them topicality is a recent day or a passing moment. Topicality thus understood may not be subjected to analysis or evaluation. As argued further in the manifesto, “the word Dada symbolizes the most primitive relation to the reality of the environment; with Dadaism a new reality comes into its own. Life appears as a simultaneous muddle of noises, colors and spiritual rhythms,

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<sup>46</sup> “First German Dada Manifesto”, in: Ch. Harrison & P. Wood (eds.) *Art in Theory. 1900–1990*, Cambridge, Mass. 1993, p. 253.

which is taken unmodified into Dadaist art, with all the sensational screams and fevers of its reckless everyday psyche and with all its brutal reality”<sup>47</sup>.

Analyses and evaluations subsume the actual and the individual under pre-determined general categories. This act of subsumption enables one to establish a permanent intellectual net so as to orient oneself in the world, master it and be effective in achieving one’s goals. In this way, the “muddle” is transformed into order which, though reductive, has beneficial impact on the organization of one’s actions. However, within this order individual features of objects are lost. The differences between them are blurred so as to emphasize shared qualities, on which categorization is founded. Temporal issues undergo a similar ordering. Appropriate temporal categories enable one to isolate the elements which follow one another, to differentiate between the present, the past and the future – to create sequences of events between which causal links are established. Dadaists wished to abandon all of the above operations. Therefore, they postulated limiting the role of intelligence. Tristan Tzara wrote: “intelligence is an organization like any other, the organization of society, the organization of a bank, the organization of chit-chat. At a society tea. It serves to create order and clarity where there is none. It serves to create a state hierarchy. To set up classifications for rational work. To separate questions of a material order from those of a cerebral order, but to take the former very seriously. Intelligence is the triumph of sound education and pragmatism. Fortunately life is something else and its pleasures are innumerable. They are not paid for in the coin of liquid intelligence”<sup>48</sup>.

If we reject the intellectual concept of a temporal order, we begin to live in constant topicality, which is described in the above-quoted excerpt from the *Manifesto* as “simultaneous”. Acknowledging the muddle and the simultaneity determines the “new reality” which is to “come into its own,” having formerly been thwarted by education and upbringing. The paragraph culminates in the following way: “Dadaism for the first time has ceased to take an aesthetic attitude toward life, and this it accomplishes by tearing all the slogans of ethics, culture and inwardness, which are merely cloaks for weak muscles, into their components”<sup>49</sup>. “Weak muscles”, resulting from the domination of ethics, culture and the cult of spirituality, bring to mind Friedrich Nietzsche’s metaphors: he also championed the idea that on account of overemphasizing history “life becomes stunted and degenerate”<sup>50</sup>. This, however, pertained

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 254.

<sup>48</sup> T. Tzara, “Lecture on Dada” in: R. Motherwell (ed.), *The Dada Painters and Poets*, Cambridge, Mass. 1989, p. 247.

<sup>49</sup> “First German Dada Manifesto”, pp. 254–255.

<sup>50</sup> F. Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, Cambridge 1997, p. 59.

only to “monumental” and “antiquarian” approaches to history, whereas the philosopher postulated a “critical” attitude, which consisted in creating a certain past *a posteriori* – a past to which we wish to trace our origin. History thus understood “belongs above all to the man of deeds and power, to him who fights a great fight, who needs models, teachers, comforters and cannot find them among his contemporaries”<sup>51</sup>.

The Dadaists did not wish to “fight a great fight” perhaps because they were all too aware of the painful consequences of genuine combat conducted in the name of lofty slogans during the Great War. Therefore, even the prospect of a critical approach to history, adopted by the representatives of other avant-garde tendencies, failed to convince them<sup>52</sup>. They preferred to eradicate the notion of history altogether, regarding it as a source of potential danger. In their concept, the “strong muscles” represent the strength necessary in everyday life, which enables one to traverse the world in search of actual experience. The last section of the *Manifesto* features the following fragment: “affirmation – negation: the gigantic hocuspocus of existence fires the nerves of the true Dadaist – and there he is, reclining, hunting, cycling – half Pantagruel, half St Francis, laughing and laughing”<sup>53</sup>. Categorical, temporal and axiological oppositions are to be overcome, the hierarchy of objects and actions is to be questioned. Time becomes the domain of actualistic, spontaneous experiencing. As for art, it ceases to be a conscious effort with calculated results, and is transformed into an adventure. Marcel Janco explained it thus: “it was an adventure even to find a stone, a clock-movement, a tram ticket, a pretty leg, an insect, the corner of one’s own room; all these things could inspire pure and direct feeling. When art is brought into line with everyday life and individual experience it is exposed to the same risks, the same unforeseeable laws of chance, the same interplay of living forces. Art is no longer a ‘serious weighty’ emotional stimulus, not a sentimental tragedy, but the fruit of experience and joy in life”<sup>54</sup>.

Dadaist actualism was connected with an individualist perspective. The artists who advocated it took their own existence as an experiential starting point. This points to certain affinities with existentialism<sup>55</sup>. Nevertheless, in contrast

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>52</sup> This was why the above-cited *Manifesto* contained such severe criticism of the expressionist and futurist concepts.

<sup>53</sup> “First German Dada Manifesto”, p. 255.

<sup>54</sup> H. Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*, New York 1997, p. 45.

<sup>55</sup> Similarities between the premises of Dadaism and existentialism were indicated by Huelsenbeck, who emphasized that in one of his essays on existentialism Sartre wrote “I am the new dada” (R. Huelsenbeck, “Dada and Existentialism” in: W. Verkauf (ed.), *Dada. Monograph of the Movement*, London–New York 1975, p. 31). The connections were also pointed out by



to 20<sup>th</sup> century existentialist philosophers who underscored man's projectional attitude towards his own being and the transcending of the factual, Dadaists placed much greater emphasis on topicality and situationality. In addition, they did not insist on the importance of liminal experiences (such as death and nothingness) which are inevitable and thus universal, independent of the moment of their occurrence. What the Dada artists accentuated instead was the openness and unpredictability of life. From this perspective, freedom was not associated with responsibility or with being forced to make decisions in the absence of any certainties. Thus, their spontaneity and freedom were not limited by the dilemmas which according to existentialist concepts filled human existence with care and diffidence. Rejecting the "bad faith" that assumed the necessity of subordinating oneself to existing ethical codes (the value of which was frequently derived from their supertemporal legitimacy) led not to the drama of hesitation but to delight in the unrestricted freedom of potential action. Freedom consisted first and foremost in liberating oneself from restrictions and in adopting a perspective of actual practice based on rationalism, imaginative living, wit and ironic self-discipline. It was crucial to resist the unconscious addiction to social stereotypes, so as to protect one's freedom and confirm it in actual action.

The Dadaist concept was established in opposition to extant socio-cultural structures and moral norms which restricted personal freedom; however, the movement did not strive to accomplish a total rearrangement of the above structures and norms. The Dadaists ridiculed the naïve belief in the possibility of "improving the world", present in the other avant-garde movements. They neither developed a vision of a new order to be realized in the future nor eulogized any of the previous epochs. They believed that freedom could be accomplished in contemporary conditions, provided that one cultivated an individually liberated lifestyle. They argued that "hatred of the press, hatred of advertising, hatred of sensations are typical of people who prefer their armchair to the noise of the street, and who even make it a point of pride to be swindled by every smalltime profiteer. That sentimental resistance to the times, which are neither better nor worse, neither more reactionary nor more revolutionary than other times, that weak-kneed resistance, flirting with prayers and incense when it does not prefer to load its cardboard cannon with Attic iambics – is the quality of a youth which never knew how to be young"<sup>56</sup>. Contemporary postmodernist actualism abandons even more emphatically any attempts to formulate totalizing, utopian postulates regarding socio-cultural problems. The critique found in art pertains to particular issues, such as

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Hans Richter, who invoked the concepts of Heidegger and Camus (cf. H. Richter, *ibid.*, pp. 158–159).

<sup>56</sup> "First German Dada Manifesto", p. 257.

restricting minority rights, religious traditionalism or unjust distribution of wealth. The artist does not wish to function in an eternity of any sort or to address timeless issues. On the contrary – he feels attached to the moment in which he lives and perceives worthwhile subjects in the surrounding world. If he desires freedom, he can find it in the perspective of social liberalism, the scope of which he wishes to expand. Liberalism, in its diverse forms, is typified by an actualist notion of man. Its adherents recognize only the existence of the subject that gives rise to any objective factors, forming and altering them for the purposes of topicality. Thus, the idea of perennial significance ascribed to the notion of humanity is subverted. Consequently, topicality is treated as the only valid frame of reference.

In the realm of art, allergy to timelessness may manifest itself in various ways. It consists in conscious rejection of subjects perceived as supertemporal. At the turn of the 1980s it may have seemed that a new historicism would emerge as a reaction to the futuristic stance of the majority of avant-garde movements. Some art critics even saw this tendency as evidence that postmodernism is in fact an epoch which follows modernism<sup>57</sup>. It was supposed to manifest itself in a return to ancient themes and allegorical motifs; this was accompanied by an interest in traditional artistic techniques, such as oil painting and sculpture set in stone or cast in bronze. Some believed this to be a rebirth of the faith in the supertemporal significance of certain themes and devices<sup>58</sup>. However, more perceptive art critics indicated the flippancy with which postmodernists approached traditional motifs and noted the juxtapositions of the latter with elements of current reality, derived from popular culture<sup>59</sup>. In a liberal society there is no possibility of perpetuating a hierarchy of importance which could be perceived as timeless. As previously indicated, this fact manifested itself in connection with new ideas as early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century, i.e. when the liberal society was only beginning to take shape. The concept of one consistent worldview had fallen apart and the new content had to be expressed in works of art. Simultaneously, the power structure was gradually losing both its

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<sup>57</sup> In the catalogue of *La Nouvelle Biennale de Paris* in 1985, Marie Luise-Syring wrote that “contemporary historicism is a consequence of two events: firstly, the discussion surrounding postmodernism and secondly, the end of the avant-gardes” (“De quelques aspects de l’historicisme contemporain”, in *Nouvelle Biennale de Paris 1985*, Paris 1985, p. 64).

<sup>58</sup> “Today, structures are once again filled with themes, images and symbols. The signified has recovered its validity” claimed Louise-Syring, declaring the demise of the influence that structuralist thought and psychoanalysis had exerted on art, and predicting the end of unconventional artistic techniques, typical of the avant-garde (ibid.).

<sup>59</sup> “Returning incessantly to the past, but without hierarchies – this is precisely what the artists of the transavantgarde are doing, adopting the perspective of the present moment, without forgetting that they exist in a mass society and feed on images produced by the media,” wrote Achille Bonito Oliva (“Points d’histoire récente” in: *Nouvelle Biennale de Paris 1985*, p. 54).

homogeneity and its hierarchicality. Diverse centers of power were appearing, as a result of which paintings or sculptures were susceptible to an array of actualizing interpretations, which were often in stark contrast to the initially assumed denotations. In postmodernist art this tendency intensified, simultaneously becoming an element of a consciously adopted artistic strategy. Artifacts suggest certain meanings, but at the same time they contain ingredients designed to subvert the possibility of an unambiguous interpretation. Consequently, reception of art was no longer based on perpetuating the predetermined, familiar and timeless ideological structure, but consisted instead in an actual realization of one of the meanings made possible by the work. The artifact does not convey meanings, but becomes the viewer's or reader's opportunity to constitute them at a given time and place, based on the ingredients of an open semantic structure, which enables a variety of possible arrangements of the existing elements. Although in most cases the form remains unchanged, its role is that of a stimulus initiating open semantic play, the results of which even the creator himself cannot predict. Thus, the work becomes a starting point for a potentially endless number of actual "performances" on the part of the recipient<sup>60</sup>.

Moderate actualism is an attempt to reconcile that which pertains to the present moment with a broader perspective, connected with the inevitability of transience. Seen from this perspective, art expresses the actual, but is simultaneously subject to certain laws which become evident only when the past and the future are taken into account. Extreme actualism can be defined as turning "the present into an absolute frame of reference, an indisputable truth, whose revelation can be defined and demonstrated"<sup>61</sup>. Germano Celant notices that this occurs when we wish to define the "spirit of the era" from within. Such definitions are usually made from an external perspective and are analyses of the past: in such cases an artistic formation or a broader cultural context may be seen as a whole, which allows classification and evaluation. Experienced actuality, on the other hand, does not as a rule allow such procedures because the current formation is "concealed" from the researcher's view. Therefore, it is usually assumed that the results of such efforts are distorted on account of the subjective viewpoint of the observer, who is involved in the current debates on ideology, axiology, and so forth. Similar

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<sup>60</sup> The above description, based on Umberto Eco's concept of the open work, ought not – according to the Italian author – be restricted to postmodernist art. Eco believes that each work of art is characterized by openness, although this quality is present to varying degrees and in a variety of ways. I have discussed the different types of openness in the article "Koncepcja »dzieła otwartego« Umberta Eco a problem wartości" ("Umberto Eco's Concept of the „Open Work” and the Problem of Value”), *Studia Estetyczne*, vol. XVII, 1980, pp. 296–298.

<sup>61</sup> G. Celant, *Unexpressionism. Art Beyond the Contemporary*, Genova 1988, p. 5.

difficulties arise when one endeavors to place the current actuality in a historical sequence: it soon becomes clear that the options are numerous but no criteria will help one determine which procedure is correct. This leads to the familiar type of debate which inevitably arises between politicians of opposing fractions. Furthermore, given such procedures, the directions of history may prove to be mutable<sup>62</sup>. For the above reasons, scholars usually agree that one must wait until a given form of life passes: in keeping with Hegel's view, the owl of Minerva spreads its wings at dusk.

Nevertheless, our epoch is characterized by a certain impatience, which may be seen as one of the symptoms of an allergy to transcending the present. Celant describes this condition as "contemporaryism" and sees it as riddled with a "pathological and conformist anxiety"; in art, it manifests itself as rapturous delight with novelty and a rush to define that which is "more present than the present"<sup>63</sup>. As a result, time is compressed and reduced to an almost metaphysical aspect of the contemporary, while the future is – pathologically – associated strictly with the present. There is no vision of things to come, perceived as opportunity or hope; all that exists is an extension of current debates and evaluations. This expanded contemporaneity – the "hyper-contemporary" – becomes a mode of being and determines the artist's path. As a result, he develops the qualities of a showman, for whom the effect of actuality and the accentuation of the corporal are of paramount importance. Spirituality – the significance of which defined ancient art – consisted in transcending the present, whereas the Body exists here and now. As a result, artistic endeavors seen as static and producing permanent (i.e. forward-looking) effects, are abandoned. Attention is drawn to the occasional and the contextual, fed on the magic of the moment and sudden illumination. The ensuing art is based on ideas and actions which bring instantaneous results. As Celant argues, "what counts is the act of acting and of crossing a space without leaving any traces, except perhaps ephemeral ones"<sup>64</sup>. Creative endeavors thus assume a singularly performative character, consisting in endless experimentation, the traces of which ought to be left only in human memory. Art becomes a cult of topicality, in which the ritual of the contemporary is celebrated. In this way, it may be argued, the "infinite present"<sup>65</sup> is sacralized.

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<sup>62</sup> For instance, after 1990, capitalism – already treated elsewhere as belonging to the past – appeared in political slogans formulated in post-communist states as a future to be constructed.

<sup>63</sup> G. Celant, *ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>65</sup> In his book, Celant presents a group of artists whom he sees as opposed to contemporaryist attitudes. These artists (e.g. Haim Steinbach, Sherrie Levine, Jeff Wall, Tony Cragg, Joseph Kosuth, Jenny Holzer or Jeff Koons) are associated with what Celant describes as "unexpressionism" – a distanced attitude towards the contemporary and a distrust of its

This notion of creativity questions procedures shaped by art history and criticism. In the case of the latter, it was the “prime objects” that were of special importance – original works, valued much higher than replicas or mutations. If artistic endeavors are ephemeral, if the trace remains chiefly in human memory, then determining the contents of sequences becomes difficult, if not downright impossible, because no incontestable point of reference exists to enable classification. Thus, instead of attempting to determine the truth, art criticism and history have developed a variety of procedures based on discussion which does not culminate in a conclusion. As regards artists, their memory is short: they quickly “forget” having seen something at a particular time. They believe that since what matters is topicality, then a replica or mutation executed at the given moment – i.e. not the prime object’s originary moment – gains value precisely on account of the difference in time and context. In the eyes of the critics this contextual value is frequently decisive in evaluating the artifact.

Another important consequence of actualism is pluralism. In social life it is regarded as a value towards which we ought to strive so as to maintain justice. In reflection on art it has usually been perceived as a consequence of acknowledging the plurality of artistic endeavors characteristic for a given epoch or culture. From the actualist perspective, pluralism is the inevitable consequence of any action. Its only opposition is sustaining the rules or replicating certain models in subsequent temporal moments, or else the conviction, appearing at certain historical periods, that logical connections and causal chains exist between prior occurrences and later developments. In all of the above cases, however, the role of the actual and the plural is restricted for the sake of variously understood timelessness and homogenization.

Artistic pluralism is associated with a vast diversity of creative endeavors and is therefore often identified with art’s vitality. Periods characterized by strict rules are seen as static or dead, even if the accomplishment of perfect execution is frequently associated with them. Conversely, diversity of achievements – even of doubtful value – is praised as proof of unpredictability and multidimensionality. Thus, pluralism eradicates the categories of universal space and universal time in the development of art either by questioning their existence or by way of the pragmatic assumption that embracing any homogeneous criterion must prove reductive and must lead to sacrificing a broad perspective for the sake of a selected and often imaginary viewpoint which in fact restricts the existing diversity.

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ritualized simplifications. This view, at least as regards some of the above artists, seems debatable.

However, actualism associated with emphasizing pluralism leads to a series of difficulties. One of them is the inevitable loss of validity. Even if diversity can be considered a value, it is not particularly satisfactory to consider all objects as equally valuable. How to determine a hierarchy of importance without limiting the pluralist principle that ascribes difference and specificity to everything that, emerging at a given moment, is perceived as characteristic thereof? Donald Kuspit argues: “clearly, pluralism is an anti-authoritarian attitude, and in a profounder way than one might imagine: it speaks not only against the emergence of any one art as authoritative in the present, but against the authority of tradition, based on a supposed consensus of values which, while not predictive, stabilizes and unconsciously sets the limits for the scene of current production”<sup>66</sup>. It may be argued however that, simultaneously, new values – previously underappreciated – are discovered. Each style and tradition leads to placing everything alien to it outside the scope of its perspective. The actualist attention to particular moments allows us to appreciate that which is connected with them. As Kuspit argues further, “overturning the essentialism which establishes orthodoxy – a canonical body of work – with a new pragmatism, pluralism allows no art to become superordinate to the total field of artistic production. It denies heroic models, constant forms of production, ideal methods of inquiry into art and determination of artistic value. It is in effect a Jacobin revolution against any pretensions to aristocracy, perhaps anarchistic in ultimate import but certainly immediately salutary in a situation where unqualified claims of absolute significance are regularly made, even if only part of what has become routine hype”<sup>67</sup>. Thus, the problem concerns the “free-for-all” and freedom at all times.

Contrary to appearances, the situation described by Kuspit is not too remote from the reality of the contemporary art world. The latter, however, is characterized by one more factor, which the American critic also takes into account: namely, the criterion of youth. Only a young artist, it seems, can be truly actual. The value of youth was already emphasized as early as the avant-garde manifestos, which were also addressed to the young, by dint of associating all that needs to be subverted with old, ossified social forces. Nevertheless, this was first and foremost a metaphor through which the movements endeavored to communicate the significance of the new ideas. As addressees, the young were seen as more open and more likely to embrace the new<sup>68</sup>. In

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<sup>66</sup> D. Kuspit, *The New Subjectivism. Art in the 1980s*, New York 1993, p. 522.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 522–523.

<sup>68</sup> However, the metaphorical meaning of “youth” was not always prevalent. Claude Mauriac described the aging André Breton as exhibiting truly inordinate understanding towards talentless youth, whom he was inclined to pardon for the sake of their assumed revolutionary qualities (cf. D. Kuspit, p. 525).

essence, then, it was spiritual rather than physical youth that was at stake. As previously emphasized, contemporary actualism consists in questioning the vectors that allow one to determine whether artistic tendencies are progressive or regressive. All that remains is the possibility of sequencing artifacts in terms of temporal precedence. Thus, the metaphorical meaning of “youth” proves uncertain; it may be more beneficial to take into account the criterion of biological age. From such perspective, “new” art is that produced by the biologically young, regardless of its actual qualities, i.e. whether the works themselves are innovative or imitative. Terminological games are employed in attempts to prove that even repeating what has been done previously is actual and innovative. Furthermore, youth in the physical sense is a clear and legible criterion for a critic who is supposed to act as qualifier.

However, perhaps associating youth with topicality ought to be considered more carefully. In both cases one is faced with the temporariness and transience of the preferred age and of the present moment. In addition, an individual desire to stop time arises. As regards physical youth, a classic example is the fate of the protagonist of Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, whereas the longing to preserve a beautiful moment is best captured in Goethe’s *Faust*. In both cases, the attempt to perpetuate the desired circumstances is associated with overcoming the passing of time. One may observe here the emergence of an allergy to the actual moment, which will soon vanish and become the past. The proposed solution is to render youth and the positively evaluated moment immortal and eternal, to relocate them to a supertemporal order. This method of dealing with the allergy to transience was characteristic for traditional solutions; however, in the art of the avant-garde, and to an even greater extent in postmodernist art, another possibility emerged. Youth and the current moment ought not to (or cannot) be brought to a halt, which is why one must become involved in the course of events, and even outstrip their customary sequence – overtake that which is currently becoming actual. In art this may be accomplished through accelerated rejection of everything that is obsolescent.

As regards the output of the 1960s and 1970s neo-avant-garde, it was frequently emphasized that the complex principle of succession was replaced by acceleration. Subsequent movements overlapped; artists proceeded to realize new ideas without fully developing previous ones. The rush with which the new avant-garde eradicated and replaced the old one has intensified in postmodern art. Biologically older artists try to prove that they are essentially younger than those ascending to the stage. This is certainly a means of defense against the transient nature of topicality. Transience is canceled when one becomes

intellectually and emotionally attached to what is yet to approach. In this way, youth is replaced with superyouth, while topicality becomes hyper-topicality<sup>69</sup>.

Dorian Gray came to a tragic end: is the contemporary overvaluation of youth and topicality equally dangerous? Writing about the avant-garde, Kuspit emphasized that its inherent quality is a short life, connected with the desire to remain young – “its refusal to grow old and mature”<sup>70</sup>. This remark is sound: it is enough to consider particular tendencies within the avant-garde. Their lifespan was indeed short. There was even less vitality to the neo-avant-garde movements, which were established in full expectation that they would soon be superseded by others. In addition, no logical consequence was observed with regard to particular propositions, nor did the artists exhibit personal identification with subsequently formulated ideas. These were propositions outlining what art could become, frequently based merely on logical reasoning, without taking into account situational conditions or axiological consequences<sup>71</sup>. In the postmodern era artists no longer write manifestos or indicate the names of particular tendencies, assuming the temporariness of actions which consist in ceaseless transcending that which is actual and, by definition, transient. Inevitably then, the rejection of maturity – which is determined by the sum of previous experience – and the refusal to age have both become more pronounced. Nevertheless, there are consequences of such behavior. Kuspit formulates them by invoking diagnoses given by psychologists dealing with similar situations in their patients’ lives. Namely, adolescence is marked by a tendency towards aggression which may escalate to a murderous wish; with maturity, these instincts weaken. In art, the prevalence of youth over maturity equals “the victory of death and murder over life and love”<sup>72</sup>. This is why the avant-garde exhibited a tendency towards dehumanization and the infringement of law. Naturally, these proclivities were enclosed within the realm of art: they were limited to such actions as have been discussed above (i.e. overcoming topicality for the sake of remaining young) and consequently were not socially dangerous. Potential threats

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<sup>69</sup> In stark contrast to the avant-garde, the direction of movement is of no consequence. The avant-garde knew only one way, i.e. forward; moving in other directions (e.g. to the side) was seen as stagnation or even retreat because this increased the distance between the artist and the forces of modernity. Postmodernist art values transcending topicality in whichever direction because movement is a manifestation of vitality and testifies to liberation from the inescapable transience of the present moment.

<sup>70</sup> D. Kuspit, L. Gamwell, *Health and Happiness. 20-Century Avant-Garde Art*, New York 1996, p. 12.

<sup>71</sup> A characteristic instance is Joseph Kosuth’s concept of “art after philosophy” and the resulting formulation that “art is the definition of art” (cf. J. Kosuth, “Art After Philosophy”. *Art After Philosophy and After. Collected Writings 1966–1990*, Cambridge, Mass. 1993, p. 24).

<sup>72</sup> D. Kuspit, L. Gamwell, p. 12.



concerned only the person or the domain in which such tendencies manifested themselves. If the present is constantly negated and transcended, no maturity is possible; and it is from maturity that health – understood as correct, balanced development – and a sense of happiness both stem. Therefore, as Kuspit argues, the avant-garde was “subtly unhealthy”<sup>73</sup>; this description is even more appropriate to contemporary art, with its desire for the hyperactual. As has been demonstrated, the avant-garde featured numerous additional factors that alleviated the tendency towards hypertopicality; in current art this tendency has become the foremost problem.

*Translated by Krzysztof Majer*

### **AKTUALNOŚĆ I PONADZASOWOŚĆ JAKO ALERGIE ARTYSTYCZNE (streszczenie)**

Pojęcia „aktualność” i „ponadczasowość” wywołują pozytywne lub negatywne reakcje emocjonalne. Tematem artykułu jest rozważenie ich roli w przypadku sztuki. W sposobach jej pojmowania, zarówno przez artystów jak teoretyków, odnaleźć można ślady podskórnych akceptacji lub negacji. Pochwała ponadczasowej doniosłości dzieł prowadziła do rodzaju negatywnego uczulenia na to, co związane z aktualnością i odwrotnie (choć sytuacje takie występowały w przeszłości znacznie rzadziej), podkreślenie bieżącego znaczenia łączone jest z podważaniem roli wiecznotrwałości. Sytuacje te uznać można za objawy alergii artystycznych powodujących, że reaguje się podskórnym strachem, nienawiścią lub nieufnością na występowanie pewnych cech i zmierza do poszukiwania takich sposobów teoretycznych ujęć sztuki, które doprowadzą do ograniczenia roli, czy nawet eliminacji tego, co przekracza zakres czynników pozytywnie wartościowanych w sposób świadomy lub nieświadomiony.

Artykuł składa się z trzech części. W pierwszej, alergia na aktualność przedstawiona została na przykładzie ukształtowanej w XVII wieku koncepcji arcydzieła (które cechować miała „strategia przypuszczalnej nieśmiertelności”), koncepcji ponadczasowych treści w sztuce oraz idei autonomicznej formy, jako niezależnej od zmiennych kontekstów kulturowych. Druga część artykułu stanowi omówienie sposobów wprowadzania elementów ponadczasowości do historii sztuki. W trzeciej przedstawiona jest alergia na to, co rzekomo wieczne w nawiązaniu do dwudziestowiecznych koncepcji artystycznych. Analizowane są przykłady aktualizmu charakteryzującego dadaizm oraz kontemporaryzm, jako strategii współczesnego sposobu pojmowania sztuki istniejącej w społeczeństwie demokratycznym i pluralistycznym.

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid.



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## **IDLENESS AND CONTEMPORARY ART ON TAKING ONE'S TIME**

**Abstract:** In this article I propose a close examination of the notion of “idleness” that can be of relevance to some contemporary works of art. Those “phenomena-producers”, to use Olafur Eliasson’s phrase, impose on the beholder a passive attitude that leads him to reflect upon the conditions of perception, and upon the conditions of the phenomenal presence that cannot be reduced to the viewers’ place in the symbolic order. Such reduction, however, is performed in the critical writings on the minimalist tradition, mainly inspired by the poststructuralist turn, from which these works derive. The phenomenon that I propose to call “idleness”, by its connection to the Greek notion of *skhole* and its Latin equivalent *otium*, appears as the other, *allos*, of the critical, socially and politically engaged discourse. By referring to the works of Hannah Arendt, Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger I try to show that re-evaluation of the notion of idleness is possible and that it should be performed together with the re-examination of the role of the notion of disinterestedness in contemporary art discourse.

**Keywords:** idleness – aesthetic experience – disinterestedness – site-specificity – minimalism – critical discourse

Olafur Eliasson’s exhibition presented in 2008 at the New York Museum of Modern Art was entitled “Take Your Time”<sup>1</sup>. It would be a great mistake to interpret this title and the works presented as some kind of melancholic meditation on the condition of modern societies that are governed by the increasing speed of productivity and consumption. The main concern here is neither the nature of the immersive environment which the work of art has become, nor the sensory experience of the beholder which is exclusively stimulated. The main subject is “our ability to see ourselves seeing, or to see ourselves in a third person, or actually step out of ourselves and see the whole set-up with the artifact, the subject and the object – that particular quality also gives us ability to criticize ourselves... [and gives] the subject a critical

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.moma.org/visit/calendar/exhibitions/31> also <http://www.olafureliasson.net/exhibitions.html>.

position, or the ability to criticize one's own position in this perspective"<sup>2</sup>. The works of art that exist as "phenomena-producers", to use the artist's description, give us a chance to reflect upon the conditions of phenomenal presence that cannot be reduced to the viewers' place in the symbolic order. Such reduction, however, is performed in the critical writings, mainly inspired by the poststructuralist turn, on the minimalist tradition from which these works derive. The phenomenon that I propose to call "idleness", by its connection to the Greek notion of *skhole* and its Latin equivalent *otium*, appears as the other, *allos*, of the critical, socially and politically engaged discourse. I will try to show that re-evaluation of the notion of idleness is possible and that it should be performed together with the re-examination of the role of the notion of disinterestedness in contemporary art discourse.

### EXPERIENCE AND SUBJECT'S PLACE

If the sculptor Tony Smith had known that his description of a night car ride would serve as a main argument against minimal art, probably he would have put a little less stress on the subjective, idiomatic, autobiographical aspect just to avoid Michael Fried's accusations of destroying the tradition of modernist art by a ludic or rather "theatrical" distraction. The relevant fragment quoted in Fried's book reads:

It was a dark night and there were no lights or shoulder markers, lines, railings, or anything at all except the dark pavement moving through the landscape of that flats, rimmed by hills in the distance, but punctuated by stacks, towers, fumes, and colored light. This drive was a revealing experience. The road and much of the landscape was artificial and yet it couldn't be called a work of art. On the other hand it did something for me that art had never done. At first I didn't know what it was, but its affect was to liberate me from many of the views I had had about art. *It seemed that there had been a reality that had not had any expression in art. The experience on the road was something mapped out but not socially recognized.*<sup>3</sup>

I have emphasized the last section of this fragment because I think that it could somehow defend Smith's experience as being, in spite of all, "artistic" against Fried's accusation. The author of *Art and Objecthood* stresses the fact that Smith is writing about some kind of experience that did not have any counterpart in the realm of art – of art that is close to Fried himself, art that is

<sup>2</sup> O. Eliasson, *The Weather Project*, ed. S. May, Tate Publishing, London 2003, p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted after M. Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1998, pp.157–158.

“present”, whose experience does not unfold in time<sup>4</sup>. If such experience is not part of any individual kind of art, any artistic genre, it lies between the arts, and according to Fried “What lies between the arts is theatre”<sup>5</sup>. From this point there is a straightforward road to artistic “degeneration”, as Fried puts it. However, if we would focus on the second part of the emphasized section, a different kind of hermeneutical reading may be presented.

Smith is writing about the experience that was “mapped out”, which means that it was “there”, it was somehow “inscribed” into the industrial landscape, it had been created – “it was artificial” – but it has not been “socially recognized”. And after these words we should add: “not yet”.

Despite everything that follows in this fragment, in which Smith later writes about “the end of art”, the inability of painting to “frame” this kind of experience, I would like to defend the interpretation in which the stress is put on the very fact of *artistic* recognition of something which was hidden, and now through a certain mode of experience is being revealed to become art, to achieve certain kind of artistic expression. In other words: because this experience has been revealed (in Smith’s mind *then* and *there* and in his text and in his works), and because it was identified not as common experience, but as something that could be opposed not to art “as such”, but to a certain preceding artistic tradition, this night ride on the New Jersey Turnpike has become an impulse for the recognition of objective (and not objectless, as Fried would like) potential hidden in this situation, and more precisely in this very *site*.

What Fried stresses in his essay is the temporal and spatial nature of so-called “literalist” art which he opposes to the “continuous and perpetual present”<sup>6</sup>. “Theatrical”, “literalist” art imposes a certain attitude on the viewer: firstly, it shapes his perception as a member of a certain “audience”, constantly confronting him, and gives him no space to distance himself from it. Secondly, it makes him focus on the specificity of the materials used, which “do not represent, signify, or allude to anything; they are what they are and nothing more”<sup>7</sup>. However, this kind of attitude corresponds in a certain way to these features of modernist art which are praised by Michael Fried, i.e. “the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of

<sup>4</sup> See M. Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, pp. 166–167.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.

<sup>6</sup> M. Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, p. 167.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165.

competence”<sup>8</sup>. The only difference here is that now we are not talking about a supposedly “pure” discipline, but about the *experience* itself. To put it differently, there is some kind of art that uses an experience to criticize the experience itself (however broad the definition of this term would be, I will later try to show that one can speak in this case about specifically phenomenological understanding), not in order to subvert it and not in order to entrench it but to reveal its area of competence. The attitude that is being provoked by such art corresponds neither to speculative reflection nor to practical or consumerist attitude<sup>9</sup>. There are certain kinds of works that provoke the attitude which the Greeks defined as *skhole* – idleness, which only later has been identified (unjustly) with laziness, *aergia*. To generalize this statement, the attitude that is being provoked by the works of art belonging to the minimalist tradition is very close to the original understanding of the Greek *skhole* and Roman *otium*. And as we will see further, because *otium* is always somehow connected to *nec-otium*, from which the verb *to negotiate* derives, idleness, as a mode of artistic experience, always provokes some kind of allergic reaction by introducing what is individual into the public, by confronting the subjective with the objective, by juxtaposing some theoretical attitude with a practical one.

The reason to choose the history of minimal art as an example of introducing the notion of idleness into theoretical discourse can be easily shown if we refer to Miwon Kwon’s article on site-specific art:

The space of art was no longer perceived as a blank slate, a *tabula rasa*, but a *real* place. The art object or event in this context was to be singularly *experienced* in the here-and-now through the bodily presence of each viewing subject, in a sensorial immediacy of spatial extension and temporal duration (what Michael Fried derisively characterized as *theatricality*), rather than

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<sup>8</sup> C. Greenberg, “Modernist Painting”, in: *Art in Theory 1900–2000. An anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Ch. Harrison, P. Wood, Blackwell Publishing, 2003, p. 774.

<sup>9</sup> In Rosalind Krauss’ analysis Fried’s argument is being reduced to simple binary logic according to which of the pair of opposite notions: “theatricality” and “nontheatricality” one is criticized in order to ontologically validate the other. Hence “theatricality” is described in terms of the “void”, “emptiness”, “amorphous” space that is waiting to be filled with the beholder’s thoughts, needs and emotions which brings it closer to the notion of the consumer society as defined in Greenberg’s famous essay: “Losing their taste for the folk culture whose background was the countryside, and discovering a new capacity for boredom at the same time, the new urban masses set up a pressure on society to provide them with a kind of culture fit for their own consumption. To fill the demand of the new market, a new commodity was devised: ersatz culture, kitsch, destined for those who, insensible to the values of genuine culture, are hungry nevertheless for the diversion that only culture of some sort can provide.” C. Greenberg, *Kitsch and Avant-Garde*, See R. Krauss, “Theories of Art after Minimalism and Pop”, in: *Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, ed. H. Foster, Seattle 1987, pp. 62–63.

instantaneously “perceived” in a visual epiphany by a disembodied eye. Site-specific work in its earliest formation, then, focused on establishing an inextricable, indivisible relationship between the work and its site, and demanded the physical presence of the viewer for the work's completion.<sup>10</sup>

What is described in this fragment is a set-up of the conditions imposed by the “indivisible relationship between the work and its site” on a viewer that transforms or even transfigures an ordinary perceptual experience into a certain kind of experiential mode which would not have arisen if it were not for that discovered and sensed relation between the work and its site. We are talking here about a *specific* mode of experiencing an object and its time-space matter, because in a way each empirical experience can be described in terms of the “here-and-now”, “bodily presence”, and “sensory immediacy”. We need something more, some kind of *differentiam specificam* that would allow us to distinguish the physical presence required by the particular works of art from ordinary physical presence when we are for example sitting on a chair by a table. In Kwon's article, this mode of experience is described as “phenomenological”, but in fact it serves only as a first step to developing an “institutional” and “discursive” analysis of site-specificity: “the site comes to encompass a relay of several interrelated but different spaces and economies, including the studio, gallery, museum, art criticism, art history, the art market, that together constitute a system of practices that is not separate from but open to social, economic, and political pressures. To be “specific” to such a site, in turn, is to decode and/or recode the institutional conventions so as to expose their hidden yet motivated operations...”<sup>11</sup>. The so-called “phenomenological” analysis is quickly abandoned in favor of a meticulous interpretation of the institutional and discursive field. What needs more attentive analysis is the kind of the specific mode of experience revealed by site-specific sculptures. I would like to argue that with the reference to the post-minimalist tradition, which “begins where minimalism stops”<sup>12</sup> to use Hal Foster's phrase, some kind of *allos*, “otherness” is being revealed. This “otherness”, as any “other”, is relative to something given – a specific system of values, rules of communication that are taken for granted. I would like to call this “otherness” by the ancient name of *skhole – otium* and investigate the origins of a certain conflict or dilemma in contemporary art discourse which oscillates between two interpretative options: putting a work of art in a social, political, techno-

<sup>10</sup> Miwon Kwon, “One Place After Another: Notes on the Site Specificity”, *October*, Spring 1997, vol. 80, p. 86. See also B.H.D. Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions”, *October*, Winter 1990, vol. 55, pp. 105–143.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88, 95.

<sup>12</sup> H. Foster, “Dan Flavin and the Catastrophe of Minimalism”, in: *Dan Flavin. New Light*, ed. J. Weiss, Yale University 2006, p. 145.

logical context of the postmodern condition or focusing on “what is given” and risking regression to a mere concept of art as “beautiful illusion”. As Pierre Bourdieu puts it: “There is nothing that ‘pure’ thought finds it harder to think than *skhole*, the first and most determinant of all the social conditions of possibility of ‘pure’ thought, and also the scholastic disposition which inclines its possessors to suspend the demands of the situation, the constraints of economic and social necessity, and the urgencies it imposes or the ends it proposes”<sup>13</sup>.

### **OTIUM AND NEGOTIUM – THE NATURE OF DISENGAGEMENT**

This specific mode which enables human beings to discover phenomena by assuming a completely passive stance has been long forgotten in the capitalist society, by the society governed by the laws of production and consumption (it has degenerated into the concept of mere leisure), but it was praised by Aristotle, Seneca and Michel de Montaigne. In one of his essays, Montaigne writes: “When I dance, I dance; when I sleep, I sleep. Nay, when I walk alone in a beautiful orchard, if my thoughts are some part of the time taken up with external occurrences, I some part of the time call them back again to my walk, to the orchard, to the sweetness of that solitude, and to myself”<sup>14</sup>. The essay is entitled “On the Experience” and is devoted to the somewhat “melancholic” reflection on the limits of human knowledge confronted with the mighty powers of Nature: “We exchange one word for another, and often for one less understood. I better know what man is than I know what Animal is, or Mortal, or Rational”<sup>15</sup>. What plays the decisive role here, as well as in Montaigne’s whole *oeuvre*, is the unique human ability to free oneself from the constraints of everyday life and let one’s thoughts and feelings wander aimlessly in the surrounding world. Montaigne would see a prototypical example of this voluntary leisure at a library. We may sit there reading books not in order to find some specific information that could be used to achieve some advantage, but casually “flipping through” pages – the activity that could not be defined as either an ordinary pastime or “serious” work. This mode of experience is defined by Montaigne as “idleness” (*oisiveté*) and is derived from the Roman concept of *otium*, which is a translation of Greek *skhole*. Aristotle described it as one of the noblest human pleasures, besides theoretical reflection and aesthetic experience.

<sup>13</sup> P. Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, transl. by R. Nice, Stanford University Press, Stanford California 1997, p. 12.

<sup>14</sup> M. de Montaigne, *The Essays*, transl. by Ch. Cotton, ed. W.C. Hazlitt, Project Gutenberg, 1877, p. 612.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 588.



Hannah Arendt explains that “The Greek word *skhole*, like the Latin *otium*, means primarily freedom from political activity and not simply leisure time, although both words are also used to indicate freedom from labor and life's necessities. In any event, they always indicate a condition free from worries and cares”<sup>16</sup>. For Aristotle, for example, being able to spend the time that is free from political and practical activity joyfully and happily was the condition *sine qua non* of being a noble citizen: “...the first principle of all action is leisure. Both are required, but leisure is better than occupation and is its end; and therefore the question must be asked, what ought we to do when at leisure? [...] Leisure of itself gives pleasure and happiness and enjoyment of life, which are experienced, not by the busy man, but by those who have leisure. For he who is occupied has in view some end which he has not attained; but happiness is an end, since all men deem it to be accompanied with pleasure and not with pain”<sup>17</sup>. The contemporary notion of “leisure” has nothing in common with the idleness understood as *skhole* – *otium* of antiquity. The former is strongly associated with the concept of labor – which for ancient Greeks required the sacrifice of one's own human existence (*bios*) to the needs of biological life (*dzoe*) in order to remain alive – to work, produce and consume: *Omnium vita servitium est*. Labor is part of biological life which is the fate of animals and slaves. Idleness, on the other hand, which only later became one of the vices as mere “laziness”, was not connected with the concept of “spare time” saved from labor, in which one can consume the produced goods. It was conceived as a “conscious ‘abstention’ from all activities connected with mere being alive”<sup>18</sup>. Such different authors as Thorstein Veblen<sup>19</sup>, Georges Bataille<sup>20</sup>, Pierre Bourdieu<sup>21</sup> and Jean Baudrillard<sup>22</sup> have shown that the way in which a class or a specific culture treats idleness can reveal its ideology and attitude toward material resources and social responsibility.

<sup>16</sup> H. Arendt, *Human Condition*, p. 14.

<sup>17</sup> Aristotle, *Politics* 1338 a, transl. by B. Jowett, Project Gutenberg, pp. 326–327.

<sup>18</sup> H. Arendt, *Human Condition*, p. 131. On the distinction between biological, “bare life” and individual or social life (existence) that possesses certain quality see G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and the Bare Life*, transl. by D. Heller-Roazen, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1998.

<sup>19</sup> T. Veblen, *The Theory of Leisure Class*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007.

<sup>20</sup> G. Bataille, *Accursed Share: Vol. 1 Consumption*, transl. by R. Hurley, Zone Books, New York 1998.

<sup>21</sup> P. Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, transl. by R. Nice Routledge, London 1984.

<sup>22</sup> J. Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, transl. by Ch. Turner, Sage Publications, London 2004.

In contrast, the concept of idleness as *skhole* – *otium* opens a definite space of freedom, of indecision in which human beings can master the art of good living. This requires certain exercises to show children in the process of education (*paideia*) how to properly spend a life by taking one's time in order to achieve its highest form and its *telos*: happiness. That is why Aristotle devotes the last book of his *Politics* to the question of art's (especially music's) place in the realm of social life. Aesthetic experience serves as an example of this idle life, truly free from biological and practical constraints. Existence itself is pleasurable, and what is pleasurable in terms of sensuous experience is also deeply connected to the theoretical, intellectual pleasure:

If then the fact of living is in itself good and pleasant (and this appears from the fact that all desire it, and specially those who are good and in high happiness; their course of life being most choice worthy and their existence most choice worthy likewise), then also he that sees perceives that he sees; and he that hears perceives that he hears; and he that walks perceives that he walks; and in all the other instances in like manner there is a faculty which reflects upon and perceives the fact that we are working, so that we can perceive that we perceive and intellectually know that we intellectually know: but to perceive that we perceive or that we intellectually know is to perceive that we exist, since existence was defined to be perceiving or intellectually knowing. Now to perceive that one lives is a thing pleasant in itself, life being a thing naturally good, and the perceiving of the presence in ourselves of things naturally good being pleasant.<sup>23</sup>

*Skhole* – idleness – not only requires a certain amount of time and space “removed from immediate necessity, such as sport, play, the production and contemplation of works of art and all forms of gratuitous speculation with no other end than themselves”<sup>24</sup>, but it is also closely bound with a certain attitude towards the surrounding world. This attitude, described by Plato as “serious play”, assumes a kind of dialectical relation with the rules governing everyday social and political life. On the one hand it liberates the individual and opens a space of “free play” for the intellectual and imaginative faculties, on the other hand every “liberation”, however conventional it might be (as in the case of academic studies), is also a disconnection, a separation from something given. One can trace an oscillatory movement from *otium* to *nec-otium*, that is the movement from the space of suspension and distancing oneself from what is common to the sphere of negotiation, “un-quietness” that requires the

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<sup>23</sup> Aristotle, *The Ethics of Aristotle* 1170 a, transl. by J.A. Smith, A Penn State Electronic Classics Series Publication, The Pennsylvania State University 2004, p. 216.

<sup>24</sup> P. Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, transl. by R. Nice, Stanford University Press, Stanford California 1997, p. 13.

individual to assume a particular position<sup>25</sup>. To introduce the phenomenon of *skhole – otium* into the theoretical discourse on art would not mean to assume some “reactionist” position that would favour the formal or illusionistic strategies of art over the need of interpretation and description of art’s conditions. It would rather stress the need for reflection upon this very borderline that separates and connects the *otium* and *negotium* – aesthetics as *aisthesis* and politics as *vita activa*. How difficult and allergic this task is can be shown if one recalls the history of *L’Internationale situationniste* of Guy Debord and others. In this case one can easily trace the tension between subversive, “ludic”, disengaged strategies of *derivé* or “psychogeography” and strong anti-artistic, political engagement. As Mario Perniola writes: “...anti-artistic choice of Debord has an aesthetic meaning and that precisely from this aspect derives the present interest in his thinking. At first sight it may seem that for Debord the after of art is the critical theory of society. Radical philosophy would be the heir of the artistic avantgarde, which tends, precisely, to disappear and to dissolve in revolutionary theory. [...] Situationist International takes its name, that is, from the situation. It assumes its full meaning in opposition to the spectacle. While the spectacle is a ‘social relation among individuals, mediated by images’, the situation is, rather, an event, a dimension of the happening which implies a strong experience of the present and entails a certain coincidence of freedom and destiny.”<sup>26</sup>

To put it more concisely: there is a tension between the Lyotardian post-modern sublime which possesses a certain critical power with respect to politics and the *otium* which, in the case of art, can be described as the aesthetic condition of all serious political engagement<sup>27</sup>. The sublime is usually described

<sup>25</sup> See H. Arendt, *Human Condition*, p. 15.

<sup>26</sup> M. Perniola, *Art and its Shadow*, trans. M. Verdicchio, Continuum, London–New York, 2004, pp. 56–57. See also L. Andreotti, “Architecture at Play”, in: *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, ed. T. McDonough, The MIT Press, Cambridge Mass. 2002.

<sup>27</sup> “Thanks to the ‘crisis of overcapitalization’ that most of today’s so-called highly developed societies are going through, another attack on the avant-gardes is coming to light. The threat exerted against avant-garde search for the artwork event, against attempts to welcome *now*, no longer requires Party-states to be effective. It proceeds directly out of market economics. The correlation between this and the aesthetics of sublime is ambiguous, even perverse. The latter, no doubt, has been and continues to be a reaction against matter-of-fact positivism and the calculated realism that governs the former [...] The occurrence, the *Ereignis*, has nothing to do with *petit frisson*, the cheap thrill, the profitable pathos, that accompanies innovation. [...] Through innovation, the will affirms its hegemony over time. It thus conforms to the metaphysics of capital, which is a technology of time. The innovation works. The question mark of the *Is it happening?* stops. With the occurrence, the will is defeated. The avant-gardist task remains that of undoing the presumption of the mind with respect to time. The sublime feeling is the name of this privation.” See J.-F. Lyotard, “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde” in: J.-F.

as an event marking the limits of the intellect's conceptual powers, not in order to expand them, but rather to point at something that remains always ungraspable, something that is radically outside the limits of discourse. That is why the avant-garde sublime possesses a special prescriptive value: it can "accompany metaphysics in its fall", as Lyotard writes quoting Adorno<sup>28</sup>, be the last ethical instance in relation to "the Other" of Western reason in the time of its dawn. In comparison with the sublime, *otium*, at first glance, seems to perfectly match everything that the avant-garde sublime is against. Idleness can be easily inscribed into the closed circle of production and consumption where, as the time free from work – that is the time required to regain the ability to work – it can be used to legitimize the *status quo* of the market. In this case any artistic attempt to use technology to provoke some kind of phenomenological experience of pure (that is unconditional) phenomenal presence seems suspicious as a product of false consciousness. This is, I believe, the position of Hal Foster, who insists on the necessity to demystify the technological conditions of any phenomenological experience brought by the works of art<sup>29</sup> and who emphasizes the need for some radical critique of the tradition of idealistic consciousness and humanistic history<sup>30</sup> – the two main conditions of the creation of illusionistic representation. In this respect, according to Foster, the poststructuralist heritage is much more futile than the phenomenological one: "Minimalism does announce a new interest in the body – again, not in the form of the anthropomorphic image or in a suggestion of illusionist space of consciousness, but rather in the presence of its objects, unitary and symmetrical as they often are (as Fried saw it), just like people. And this implication of presence does lead to new concern with perception, that is, to a new concern with the subject. Yet a problem emerges here too, for minimalism considers perception in the phenomenological terms, as somehow outside of history, language, sexuality and power. In other words, it doesn't regard the subject as the sexed body positioned in a symbolic order..."<sup>31</sup>. This refutation of the critical potential hidden in the phenomenological experience is based on the presumed weakness of this mode of experience that one could call idleness.

We can show the inadequacy of this presumption with respect to contemporary art by comparing two excerpts: one, taken from Arendt's book on political

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Lyotard, *The Inhuman. Reflections on Time*, transl. G. Bennington R. Bowlby, Polity Press, Cambridge 1991, pp.104–105, 106–107.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. p. 103.

<sup>29</sup> See H. Foster, "Dan Flavin and the Catastrophe of Minimalism", *op.cit.*, p. 145.

<sup>30</sup> H. Foster, *The Return of the Real*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge Mass. 1996, p. 43.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

philosophy, where she stresses the role of art in the domain of human actions and deeds – *pragmata*, and another, taken from Robert Morris' "Notes on Sculpture". Arendt writes:

...any discussion of culture must somehow take as its starting point the phenomenon of art. While the thingness of all things by which we surround ourselves lies in their having a shape through which they appear, only works of art are made for the sole purpose of appearance. The proper criterion by which to judge appearances is beauty; if we wanted to judge objects, even ordinary use-objects, by their use-value alone and not also by their appearance that is, by whether they are beautiful or ugly or something in between, we would have to pluck out our eyes. But in order to become aware of appearances we first must be free to establish a certain distance between ourselves and the object, and the more important the sheer appearance of a thing is, the more distance it requires for its proper appreciation. This distance cannot arise unless we are in a position to forget ourselves, the cares and interests and urges of our lives, so that we will not seize what we admire but let it be as it is, in its appearance. This attitude of disinterested joy (to use the Kantian term, *urinteressiertes Wohlgefallen*) can be experienced only after the needs of the living organism have been provided for, so that, released from life's necessity, men may be free for the world".<sup>32</sup>

In order to act and to point out some definite goals for the action that would appear during the performance, one has to assume some attitude towards the phenomenon of appearance as such. This would not be possible if not for the existence of the objects of art – their only purpose is to appear as they are, in a totally disinterested manner. The notion of "disinterest" is crucial here. I think that a large part of the criticism of idleness in contemporary art is based on some historical misunderstanding of the Kantian concept. Hence the radical opposition between modernist formalism and the essence of the artistic medium on the one hand and the viewer's interest and social function of art on the other. However, if we recall Morris' words on sculpture, this opposition will become blurred. Morris writes:

The notion that the work of art is an irreversible process ending in a static icon-object no longer has much relevance. The detachment of art's energy from the craft of tedious object production has further implications. This reclamation of process refocuses art as an energy driving to change perception. ... The attention given both to matter and its inseparableness from the process of change is not an emphasis on the phenomenon of means. What is revealed is that art itself is an activity of change, of disorientation and shift,

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<sup>32</sup> H. Arendt, *Between Past and Future. Six Exercises in the Political Thought*, The Viking Press, New York 1961, p. 210.

of violent discontinuity and mutability, of the willingness for confusion even in the service of discovering new perceptual modes<sup>33</sup>.

One can trace here an effort to return to the original concept of *poiesis* – as activity belonging to the domain distanced from human action-*praxis*, which does not possess as its goal the production of a specific object. There is an implicit difference between this original sense and the common usage of the word *production*, which nowadays means rather “manufacturing”, “creating something during the course of action”. In contrast, the original meaning of *poiesis* was based on the assumption that this mode of action does not have its end in itself. The work of art is something radically different from the process of its creation. Read literally, the word *production* comes from *pro-ducere*, i.e. “bringing something forth” or “drawing something out”. An artistic, poetic act consists in the proper knowledge or principle according to which something can be brought forth into the world, something can be made present in its phenomenal being. The title of Walter Benjamin’s essay “Der Autor als Produzent” [“The Author as Producer”]<sup>34</sup> can be interpreted not as an apology for the industrialization of artistic creation, but as an indication of how artistic creation functions in a given social context. The author makes certain objects present, his ability to bring them forth depends on the social and cultural conditions, but the manner in which he accomplishes this task is not determined by social or technological factors. *Poiesis*, production is the original principle of something other than itself, contrary to *praxis*, which places its principle and its goal within itself. Hence, however the work of art, when it is produced, enters the sphere of social or technological relationships, the artist, as a producer, is able to distance himself from it and freely proceed with his work.

James Turrell’s claims are at a first glance very similar to those of Morris. The important difference is that in the latter case we are dealing with conscious artistic meditation upon a reflexive act performed no longer by the self-sufficient work, but by the poetic act of the work’s apprehension:

First, I am dealing with no object. Perception is the object. Secondly, I am dealing with no image because I want to avoid associative, symbolic thought. Thirdly, I am dealing with no focus on a particular place to look for. With no object, no image, no focus, what are you looking at? You are looking at your looking. This is in response to yours seeing and the self-reflexive act of

<sup>33</sup> R. Morris, “Notes on Sculpture 4: Beyond Objects”, in: *Art in Theory 1900–2000. An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Ch. Harrison, P. Wood, Blackwell Publishing 2003, p. 885.

<sup>34</sup> W. Benjamin, “The Author as Producer”, transl. by J. Heckman, in: “New Left Review”, 1/62, July–August 1970.

seeing yourself see. You can extend feeling out through the eyes to touch with seeing.<sup>35</sup>

What is stressed in a large part of contemporary art is the mode of production, of *poiesis* that cannot be reduced to the ordinary neglect of the object. By focusing attention on the sphere of *skhole*, of idleness that can be understood as laziness, or complete lack of activity only in the context of labor, the conditions of phenomenal being are disclosed in the manner that Rosalind Krauss described in the case of sculpture as the “expanded field” of the objects that are both architecture and landscape<sup>36</sup>. If we focus not on the negative aspect of minimalism, i.e. the negation of the object that would lead from art to non-art but on its aspect that is exposed by such neglect, a certain field of experience will appear:

[...] the minimalist sculptors produced a work that appeared to be aspiring toward the condition of non-art, to be breaking down any distinction between the world of art and the world of everyday objects. Whatever the work seemed to share with those objects was a fundamental property that went deeper than mere fact of banality of the materials used. The property one might describe as *inarticulate existence of the object: the way the object seems merely to perpetuate itself in space and time in terms of repeated occasions of its use*. So that we might say of a chair on the table that, beyond its function, one has no other way to ‘get the meaning’ of it.<sup>37</sup>

To sum up what has been said here: the critical response to minimalism has neglected some of its aspects due to the refusal to return to the notion of art as illusionistic representation or art based solely on its immanent formal qualities<sup>38</sup>. The possibility of fully investigating the potential hidden in the works of art to impose upon the viewer the attitude of idleness, of disinterested experience is thrown away as reactionary and obsolete. However, in the critical writings of contemporary theoreticians one can find a link that would allow us to connect the experience elicited by contemporary works of art with the original meaning of idleness as *otium* – the pre-condition of every theoretical enterprise. This happens because the notion of idleness is closely connected with the notion of disinterestedness, the product of the traditional

<sup>35</sup> J. Turrell, *Air Mass*, The South Bank Centre, London 1993), p. 26.

<sup>36</sup> R. Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field”, in: *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, The MIT Press, Cambridge 1986, pp. 276–290.

<sup>37</sup> R. Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, MIT Press, Cambridge 1981, p. 198.

<sup>38</sup> This is the attempt to overcome Greenberg’s recognition that “art, that aesthetic experience no longer needs to be justified in other terms than its own, that art is an end in itself and that the aesthetic is an autonomous value.” Clement Greenberg “Modern and Postmodern” William Dobell Memorial Lecture, Sydney, Australia, Oct 31, 1979 in: *Arts* 54/6, Feb. 1980.

aesthetics of Enlightenment, whose heritage is the object of constant attack of postmodernism.

### THE OSCILLATORY CHARACTER OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

I will now try to argue that the disinterestedness of the aesthetic attitude cannot be reduced to its contemplative, passive and purely occulocentric character which distances us from the world in the Cartesian manner. Some clue can be found in the phenomenological formulation of the problem concerning the specificity of the aesthetic attitude as opposed to that in everyday life. According to Husserl, the investigative stress should be put in this case on the mode of existence of the perceived object. According to Kant, as one may recall, the judgment of taste is contemplative because it is “indifferent as regards the being of an object”.<sup>39</sup> One can find a very similar description in the letter that Husserl wrote to Hugo von Hofmannsthal: “The intuition of a purely aesthetic work of art is enacted under a strict suspension of all existential attitudes of the intellect and of all attitudes relating to emotions and the will which presuppose such an existential attitude. Or more precisely: the work of art places us in (almost forces us into) a state of aesthetic intuition that excludes these attitudes. The more of the existential world that resounds or is brought to attention, and the more the work of art demands an existential attitude of us out of itself (for instance a naturalistic sensuous appearance: the natural truth of photography), the less aesthetically pure the work is”.<sup>40</sup> Our natural attitude, Husserl explains, causing us to assume that the things to which we refer really exist is the exact opposite of the aesthetic attitude. The artist is like a phenomenologist in that he relates to the world “[...] not as an observing natural scientist and psychologist, not as a practical observer of man, as if it were an issue of knowledge of man and nature. When he observes the world, it becomes a phenomenon for him, its existence is indifferent [...]”<sup>41</sup> Usually mainly the negative character of this type of attitude is emphasized, that is “the suspension of all existential attitudes”. This may lead one back to the tradition of idealist, “self sufficient” consciousness that Hal Foster wrote about. We need more precise description of this type of attitude in order to grasp its specificity. In his notes on the aesthetic perception of the fictive

<sup>39</sup> I. Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, transl. by J.H. Bernard, The Online Library of Liberty 2005, p. 53.

<sup>40</sup> E. Husserl, *Letter to Hofmannsthal*, transl. by S.-O. Wallenstein, in: *Site Magazine*, 26–27 2009, p. 2.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*



Husserl emphasizes the fact that fiction is apprehended in a special manner: there is some kind of the consciousness of being that could be described, according to Eliane Escoubas, as experience “without assuming the attitude of experience”<sup>42</sup>. When the *fictum* – that is the product of imagination – enters into a relation with the real world, it provokes the conflict called by Husserl “double conflictual apperception”<sup>43</sup>. It becomes explicit when one is looking for example at an illusionistic painting hanging on the wall, on which a window is represented. We are fully aware that in this case there is only a bare wall behind the canvas. We are seeing not “through” the object, as in the case of a symbol or a sign, but in a way we are seeing “into” what is material in the image and what makes public something that is ideal, that is the image’s subject. The dialectic “suppression” of the necessary materiality of the image sets up a complex dialectic between the canvas as a real existing object, the physical image, its subject, which can be purely fictional, and the object, i.e. what is really perceived. The same is true of the theatre: looking at the people wearing the magnificent costumes, we are simultaneously aware that these are actors who are *disguised* and who will take off their costumes backstage. Thus in the aesthetic attitude reality becomes a play, according to Husserl, objects appear to us in an “as if” mode. It should be stressed however, that this does not mean that we are dealing in this case with the traditional disembodied, ahistorical idealist consciousness that exists everywhere and nowhere. In order for the “double conflictual apperception” to appear, it needs to be related not only to the inner life of perceiving consciousness, but also to the objects of culture, the shared tradition, the intersubjective meanings of natural language and other artistic objects. A conflict appears between something given, that is perceived in the natural or “existential” attitude, and something “fictive”. In the case of theatre I have to be aware that the people I am looking at are actors, while looking at a painting I have to know somehow that this object is art. The subject of representation is given as the “object in appearance”<sup>44</sup>. The aesthetic consciousness does not conceal itself in the autonomic reflection of the pure transcendental ego. Rather it constantly

<sup>42</sup> E. Escoubas, “Bild, Fiktum et esprit de la communauté chez Husserl”, *Alter* 1996 (4), p. 286.

<sup>43</sup> According to Husserl „the apperception” is a peculiar mode of experiencing and apprehending through which the consciousness becomes the part of physical, natural world. See E. Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy*, transl. F. Kersten, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, Hague 1983, p. 125, also E. Husserl, p. 402.

<sup>44</sup> See E. Husserl, *Phantasie, Bildbewusstsein, Erinnerung. Zur Phänomenologie der anschaulichen Vergegenwärtigungen. Texte aus dem Nachlass (1898–1925)*, in: *Husserliana*, vol. XXIII, ed. E. Marbach, The Hague, Nijhoff, 1980. Eng. transl. by J.B. Brough, *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory (1898–1925)*, in: E. Husserl, *Collected Works*, vol. 11, Dordrecht: Springer, 2005. I am referring here to a Polish translation E. Husserl, *Fenomenologia świadomości estetycznej*, transl. K. Najdek, *Sztuka i Filozofia*, nr 21, 2002, pp. 5–11.

oscillates between the reflection that distances one from life and is a way to grasp the mode in which the object is given, the manner in which it appears (for example: as natural, ideal, imaginary, as remembered, etc.) and the appearance itself. That is how, according to Husserl, the aesthetic feeling originates: “The appearance is the appearance of the object; the object is the object in the appearance. From living in the appearing I must go back to the appearance, and *vice versa*. And then the feeling is awakened: The object, however displeasing it may be in itself, however negatively I may value it, receives an aesthetic coloration, *because of its manner of appearing*; and turning back to the appearance brings the original feeling to life.”<sup>45</sup>

We can now see that there is a conspicuous affinity between the tradition of minimalism and its critical response and the kind of phenomenological experience that goes beyond the reference to Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*.<sup>46</sup> What can be shown by the example of minimalism and the history of its critical reception is the inability to fully discursively apprehend and appreciate the mode of experience that I propose to call idleness. As an example one can think about the recent project of Mirosław Bałka in the Turbine Hall at the London Tate Gallery<sup>47</sup>, the project based on constant oscillation between explicit political or historical engagement (the huge metal box resembled a cattle-truck from World War II, its entrance was similar to a ghetto ramp, the title of the work itself referred to Beckett’s bitter diagnosis etc.) and idleness understood as the mode of disengagement that allows us to reflect upon the phenomenal nature of the world that lets us “show seeing”. Confronted with this original phenomenon, critical discourse is usually left helpless and usually chooses some political, historical, social or gender strategy to interpret the work and absorb it into its structure. The lack of serious reflection upon this idle experience when one is confronted with the object in its full phenomenal being is somehow provoked by the reception of the traditional notion of “disinterested pleasure”. “Disinterestedness” is usually reduced to its Schopenhauerian meaning, as mere contemplation, detached from any material or factual aspect of the world. In order to introduce the notion of idleness which plays a crucial role in the works of such artists as Robert Irwin, James Turrell or Olafur Eliasson we have to try to reveal the other, more original sense of the aesthetic disinterestedness.

<sup>45</sup> E. Husserl, *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory (1898–1925)*, p. 462.

<sup>46</sup> M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, transl. by C. Smith, Routledge Classics, London 2002.

<sup>47</sup> <http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/unilevermiroslawbalka/>.

**DISINTERESTED INTEREST AND INTERESTED DISINTERESTEDNESS**

It was Nietzsche who first formulated the accusation against the disinterested Kantian pleasure, understood in terms of disengaged, disembodied contemplation: "...Kant, just like other philosophers, instead of envisaging the aesthetic problem from the standpoint of the experiences of the artist (the creator), has only considered art and beauty from the standpoint of the spectator, and has thereby imperceptibly imported the spectator himself into the idea of the "beautiful"! [...] So we get from our philosophers, from the very beginning, definitions on which the lack of a subtler personal experience squats like a fat worm of crass error, as it does on Kant's famous definition of the beautiful. "That is beautiful," says Kant, "which pleases without interesting." Without interesting!<sup>48</sup> The conjunction of the disinterested "fat worm of crass error" and the notion of aesthetic experience in its free, distanced, idle mode prevents many theoreticians from any serious attempt to fully investigate the role of the *otium* in contemporary art without the fear of being accused of some idealist, reactionary positions. It is this interpretation that makes us view disinterestedness as a peculiar mode of experience in which, as Martin Jay puts it. "We enjoy an aesthetic meal as it were, without having to taste and swallow the food, as in the case of certain variants of nouvelle cuisine in which visual more than gustatory pleasure, let alone nutrition, seems the main purpose of what is on the plate. It is the same disinterestedness that permits the transformation of lust-arousing naked human form into the idealized, marmoreal nude and allows us to distinguish between pornography and high art..."<sup>49</sup> In order to fully understand the role of disinterestedness in the aesthetic experience we have to recall Heidegger's analysis of this notion presented in his book on Nietzsche<sup>50</sup>.

According to Terry Eagleton, Heidegger tries to show that "human existence is [...] 'aesthetic' in its most fundamental structures"<sup>51</sup> In his work on Kant and the problem of metaphysics, Heidegger has shown the crucial role of transcendental imagination that mediates between sensibility and understanding. "Imagination is the common source of sensibility and understanding, and the root of practical reason as well. Kant has thus aestheticized the very grounds of knowledge, undermining the foundation of pure reason."<sup>52</sup> Heidegger

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<sup>48</sup> F. Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, transl. by H.B. Samuel, Boni and Liveright, New York, p.103.

<sup>49</sup> M. Jay, *Songs of Experience*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2005, p. 142.

<sup>50</sup> See M. Heidegger, *Nietzsche. Volumes One and Two*, transl. by D. Farrell Krell, Harper, San Francisco 1991.

<sup>51</sup> T. Eagleton, *The Ideology of Aesthetic*, Blackwell Publishing, London 1990, p. 292.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

transfers Kantian themes from the realm of epistemology into the ontology of Dasein. This means that the question concerning the nature of aesthetic is no longer related to the problem of the possible objectification of our cognitive capacities, but rather constantly reveals itself within the horizon of Being. The question of the essence of disinterestedness opens up the field of investigation on idleness as a special kind of passive activity.

For Heidegger there are two different types of “interest”, so respectively one can talk about two different aspects of disinterestedness. In his book *What is Called Thinking?*<sup>53</sup> Heidegger investigates the notion of interest in the sense of engagement, of involvement in the realization of some kind of task, some common cause. In that case two different modes of “being interested” may be discerned: one that is shallow, that only skims over a surface, and the other authentic, deeply rooted in the essence of language. The former can be derived from Latin *inter-esse*, which means “to be absorbed in things, to stand in the middle of the case”.<sup>54</sup> This authentic meaning of “interest” as being literally *in medias res* in Heidegger’s text is opposed to the attitude of a “tourist”, a disengaged observer who looks at everything but is not able to truly see. For such a type of person what is interesting is novelty, something that can be related to what is “well-known”, but after some time will become boring and indifferent. Today, what is interesting is „moved away to the sphere of the neutral”<sup>55</sup> – this diagnosis is very similar to those presented by Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin. We can say that we are dealing here with two meanings of *interest*: a “profound” one, which points to “interest” as “being-in-between” or as J.D. Caputo explains this term, “firmly placing oneself in and amidst the strife of temporal becoming”<sup>56</sup> and “shallow” one according to which interest belongs to the semantic field of “distraction”. We can see now that there is a distinct border between two possible ways of interpreting “interest”.

If we now reach for the most inspiring contemporary defense of the notion of “disinterestedness”, presented by Heidegger in the first volume of his book on Nietzsche, the origins of its contemporary understanding in the field of art will become clear. Heidegger tries to point out that Nietzschean radical resistance against Kant’s aesthetic disinterestedness results not from a close reading of the *Critique of Judgment*, but from its misinterpretation presented by Schopen-

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<sup>53</sup> See M. Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, transl. by J. Glenn Gray, Harper Torchbook, New York 1968. I will refer to the Polish translation M. Heidegger, *Co zwię się myśleniem*, in: *Odczyty i rozprawy*, transl. by J. Mizera, Baran i Suszczyński, Kraków 2002.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> J. D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project*, Indiana University Press 1987, p. 33.

hauer as something that stands in no interest to our will. Here the distinction presented in *What is Called Thinking?* returns, but in a contrasting manner. The notion of “interest”, Heidegger explains, derives from Latin *mihi interest*, that is “to be anxious about something”. Accordingly, to be interested in something, means to want something for oneself in order to use it. When we are interested in something we are situating the thing in the specific context of our intention. The thing itself is always represented in the context of our intention, that is something else<sup>57</sup>.

Nietzsche, like all the formalists, understands disinterestedness as opposed to interest in the sense of *inter-esse*, “being-in-between”. That leads to the explanation that disinterestedness is an attitude in which one situates oneself outside the world and human affairs, that one is completely detached from the world in its factuality and contingency. That is why Nietzsche accuses philosophy of imposing the attitude of a spectator who is viewing the work from purely spiritual, disembodied position. This is the common understanding of Kant’s notion.

On the other hand, if we oppose disinterestedness and mere interest described as above, that is some kind of Hobbesian egoistic “self-interest”, which places one’s intention above everything else and treats everything else as a means, then, according to Heidegger, “there occurs essential reference to the object”<sup>58</sup>. What is left from the aesthetic attitude when the interest in the object disappears? John Zammito wrote that “While Kant stresses the degree to which the subject is affected in the experience, nevertheless it is striking how not merely the object but even the representation of the object shifts far into the background. Its form serves as the occasion, becomes at most a catalyst, for a complex subjective response.”<sup>59</sup> Contrary to this view, which seems to be shared both by Kant’s opponents and his followers such as Clement Greenberg, there is another possible understanding of the notion of disinterestedness presented in Heidegger’s text. If it were not for disinterestedness, Heidegger concludes, it would not be possible to make a fundamental reference to the object, because only if we assume the attitude in which all practical intentions are put aside, only then the pure setting forth of the object becomes explicit.<sup>60</sup> In other words, a truly disinterested attitude occurs not when we deny our desires and feelings, but when we exert ourselves in order to let the object

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<sup>57</sup> I refer to Polish translation of this book: M. Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. I, transl. by C. Wodziński, PWN, Warszawa 1998, p. 122.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>59</sup> J. Zammito, *The Genesis of Kant’s Critique of Pure Judgment*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1992, p. 113, after M. Jay, *The Songs of Experience*, p. 144.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

appear in its purest sense. This strain, however, cannot be observed in normal, everyday, practical attitude, because it would be then easily transformed into mere "interest", the intention would serve as a screen that would occlude the object itself. Because of that idleness, as the *otium*, serves action without acting, causes beings to appear without any particular intention and should become the object of critical attention. *Otium sine litteris mors est.*

**BEZCZYNNOŚĆ I SZTUKA WSPÓŁCZESNA.  
O PROBLEMACH ZWIĄZANYCH Z NIESPIESZNOŚCIĄ  
(streszczenie)**

W artykule skupiam się na analizie pojęcia „bezczywności” oraz roli, jaką może ono odgrywać w krytycznym opisie niektórych współczesnych dzieł sztuki. Dzieła te, jako „producenci fenomenów”, by przywołać sformułowanie Olafura Eliassona, narzucają odbiorcy całkowicie pasywną postawę, która w konsekwencji prowadzi do pogłębionej refleksji na temat uwarunkowań percepcji jako takiej i daje również szansę na dokonanie refleksji nad fenomenalną obecnością, której zagadnienia nie można zredukować do pytania o miejsce widza w ramach porządku symbolicznego. Redukcja taka jest jednak zazwyczaj dokonywana w tekstach krytycznych, poświęconych tradycji minimalistycznej, które inspirowane są silnie tradycją poststrukturalistyczną. Zjawisko, które proponuję określić jako „bezczywność”, nawiązując w ten sposób do greckiego pojęcia *skhole* oraz jego łacińskiego odpowiednika *otium*, okazuje się być „tym co inne”, *allos* dla silnie zaangażowanego politycznie i społecznie dyskursu krytycznego. Odwołując się do prac Hanny Arendt, Edmunda Husserla, Martina Heideggera staram się pokazać, że możliwe jest ponowne dowartościowanie pojęcia bezczynności oraz, że powinno się ono dokonać wraz z ponownym zbadaniem funkcji pojęcia bezinteresowności we współczesnym dyskursie krytycznym.

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## THE MINIMALIST ALLERGY TO ART

**Abstract:** In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, negation of art appeared frequently as an issue in avant-garde tendencies, assuming a different form in each case. In the present article, this phenomenon is considered as a type of artistic allergy. The author begins with a short description of the notion of anti-art, focusing on the work of Marcel Duchamp: among other characteristics, the author discusses the questioning of the significance of artifacts, the rejection of originality and the subversion of the role of formal procedures. The second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw various continuations of Duchamp's seditious actions; however, the work of the representatives of minimal art is not customarily situated in this context. Reflecting on the validity of this approach, the author subjects to analysis the selected works and theoretical essays by the principal minimalists (Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Carl Andre, Dan Flavin and Sol LeWitt). As it turns out, despite its typically objectivist and constructionist character, their work essentially negates the fundamental qualities ascribed to traditional works of art. Paradoxically, however, while performing anti-artistic actions, the representatives of this movement referred to their works as "art". Considering this problem, the author suggests that minimalism ought to be viewed in the context of its successor, i.e. conceptual art, especially in the light of Joseph Kosuth's opinions, formulated in his essay "Art after Philosophy". Seen from this perspective, the minimalist project reveals its affinities not with anti-art but with the notion of art as an open concept. Thus, the aforementioned allergy is in fact recognized as pertaining to extant forms of art and is seen to suggest an infinite process of its redefinition.

**Keywords:** minimal art – negation of art – anti-art

Negation of art appeared frequently as an issue in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, assuming a different form in each case. At times it even approximated an allergy of sorts, a negative sensitivity to certain features perceived as central to artistic practice. Grzegorz Sztabiński discusses the issue in relation to the output of the avant-garde in his article entitled "Art, anti-art, non-art: On the negation of art in avant-garde tendencies". Generally speaking, negation was either considered the main objective (at least during the periods in which anti-art tendencies were particularly prominent) or was seen as a starting point for establishing

something else beyond art (the non-art movement)<sup>1</sup>. It was of crucial importance to the supporters of anti-art to eradicate the importance of the artifact: the recipient's attempts to discover the reasons behind the particular choice of elements within an art object were futile. Among the most famous examples were the works of Marcel Duchamp. For instance, in his famous *Fountain* (1917) – a urinal signed “R. Mutt” and sent to the Independents' exhibition in New York – and in his other ready-mades, Duchamp undermined the traditional relationship between objects of everyday use and art objects. Anti-art also consist in questioning the validity of formal operations, the role of the meanings conveyed by art and the category of originality. Significantly, the latter was considered by the majority of modernist movements as one of the central markers of value. Indeed, the development of art was traditionally connected with the notion of progress and innovation. Sztabiński claims that “while an artist's originality was believed to manifest itself in a distinct style, an individualized array of artistic means and content typical of his oeuvre, the proponents of anti-art offered anonymous and styleless objects, or else they frequently changed their artistic means”<sup>2</sup>. As a result, anti-artworks were supposed to lack any market value and to be excluded from the commercial circuit. Their creators also wished to demystify the creative process. Thus, as Stefan Morawski notes, even if an anti-artist “defends his individuality, even if he considers authenticity as a fundamental and sacrosanct value, he does so in full awareness of the utter modesty of his potential. He is authentic as counterweight, an anti-prophet, shattering the myth of the artist as law-giver or inventor of eternal beauty”<sup>3</sup>.

Thus, principally, the strategy typical of anti-art consisted in negating art along with its social context and the institutions which harbored it. The aim was to contest, ridicule and reject the features of art traditionally regarded as determining its value. Such actions can thus be perceived as symptoms of an allergy. They emerged as unfounded negative reactions, leading to an unconscious or only semi-conscious rejection of the features associated with the aesthetic values or the assumed meaning of the artifact. Thus, one may ask whether the output of the representatives of minimalism may be regarded as a variety of anti-art. Can it be analyzed in terms of a singular artistic allergy? Is this an allergy similar to that observed in the Dada movement or does it perhaps pertain only to certain artistic actions, whereas others are embraced? If such doubts arise, it is predominantly because, while radically negating certain

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<sup>1</sup> G. Sztabiński, “Sztuka, antysztuka, niesztuka – z problemów negacji sztuki w tendencjach awangardowych”, *Studia Filozoficzne* 1989, no. 1 (278), p. 95.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>3</sup> S. Morawski, “Awangardy XX wieku – stara i nowa”, *Miesięcznik Literacki* 1975, no. 3, p. 72.



features which seemed inextricable from artistic practice, the minimalists consistently referred to their output as “art”.

The connection between minimalism and anti-art manifests itself in the rejection of the category of originality. Such artists as Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Carl Andre, Dan Flavin or Sol LeWitt made no endeavors to invent new forms or compositional solutions which could be described as unique. On the contrary, they employed existing, easily obtainable elements resulting from industrial production. These were referred to as prefabricated materials. Those used most frequently included industrial objects made of metal (Judd), steel (LeWitt), plywood (Morris), aluminum (LeWitt), perspex (Judd), metal plates, brick (Andre), glow discharge tubes (Flavin), engineered on commission and according to the artists’ specifications or bought directly from the manufacturer in standardized size, prepared for mass production. The role of the artist consisted in selecting and arranging the elements in a particular manner<sup>4</sup>. As a result, numerous works prepared by the minimalists blend into their surroundings and may be even overlooked by a casual recipient. This is well illustrated by Carl Andre’s object entitled *Steel-Magnesium Plain*, a variant of a realization frequently repeated in various arrangements. Employing plates of metal laid flat, the artist created a sculpture which is deceptively similar to the pavement. The surface resembles a chessboard, where bright and dark squares have been distributed equally. Producing this work the artist assumed that the recipients would walk on it and view it from a variety of vantage points. Frequently, Andre used the same plates for various displays in different configurations, depending on the size of the area at his disposal. Thus, the re-used elements became parts of different realizations. This approach is related to the notion of sculpture as place. In the artist’s view, the particular plates are merely objects which assume the character of an artistic realization – a work of art – through their appropriate arrangement at a specific site. Inherently, however, they are a set of ordinary objects, potential material for an artifact (similarly to paint or canvas in traditional painting).

Similarly, Dan Flavin did not insist on the originality of the objects which he employed or the manual production of his artifacts. His first realizations, featuring artificial light, appeared in the beginning of 1961, when he was working on a series of wall objects which he referred to as “icons”. These were some boxes affixed to the wall, usually painted one color, to which the artist

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<sup>4</sup> This rejection of originality meant that artifacts were not considered as different from other objects. The minimalists emphasized that, similarly to a product of an artist’s manual work, an industrial product may become an art object or its element. Furthermore, they argued that the same elements may form parts of different works. This suggested a new notion of originality, in which the dominant quality was the concept.

attached various light bulbs and fluorescent tubes. From 1963 onwards, Flavin regularly used standardized, commercially produced, 8-foot long glow discharge tubes positioned diagonally along the wall. The technique was predominantly intended to make the artist's task easier and to facilitate the desired effects. Flavin himself admitted that "[his] own proposal has become mainly an indoor routine of placing strips of fluorescent light. It has been mislabeled sculpture by people who should know better"<sup>5</sup>. It is interesting that Flavin used the term "strip of fluorescent light": this suggests that he situated his output closer to painting than to sculpture because in traditional classifications the interest in light is ascribed to painters. However, instead of creating an illusion of light in the painting, the artist used beams generated by existing elements, i.e. prefabricated fluorescent tubes. The accusation occasionally leveled at Flavin, and also at Andre, was that their actions had little to do with art. The exhibitions of Flavin's works were frequently compared to shop windows displaying light bulbs and other similar fixtures, while Andre's "pavement" realizations were likened to situations encountered daily in the street<sup>6</sup>. In consequence, the artistic character of these objects was hotly contested. One may therefore ask whether their realizations may be described as anti-art (deliberate negation of artistic qualities) or perhaps as non-art (something intentionally situated outside the limits of art and directed towards other objectives).

The minimalists' output also transcended the boundaries of artistic activity in other respects. At the time, it was considered an important element of artistic identification to clearly side with a rational or emotional approach to creativity. In non-figurative art this resulted in objects being classified as examples of "geometrical abstract art" or "non-geometrical abstract art". Almost immediately after the emergence of abstract art, its practitioners formed groups which supported one of the above varieties and combated the other. The issue was highlighted in 1936 by Alfred H. Barr, Jr., who designed a special diagram depicting the development of modern art<sup>7</sup>. The critic identified two major tendencies within the avant-garde. The former, described by Barr as emotional, was linked to the output of Vincent van Gogh, the Fauvists, the Expressionists and the Surrealists, which resulted in the formation of non-geometrical ("hot") abstract art. The latter – cerebral, structural or rational – stemmed from the oeuvre of the neo-impressionists and Paul Cézanne, leading through Cubism to geometrical ("cold") abstract art. Barr predicted that art

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<sup>5</sup> Cited in: D. Marzona, *Minimal Art*, Köln 2004, p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 13–16.

<sup>7</sup> A.H. Barr, Jr., "The Development of Abstract Art" – the inside cover of the catalogue *Cubism and Abstract Art*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1936, reprinted in: F. Francina & J. Harris (eds.), *Art in Modern Culture. An Anthology of Critical Texts*, London 1999, p. 123.

would proceed further in these two directions. The conception presented (and necessarily abbreviated) here is typically modernist in nature. It consists in arranging art in certain ordered historical and problem-related sequences, assuming the possibility of a dualist ordering. Initially, Barr's theory was indeed reflected in the creative attitudes of the practitioners of abstract art. The 1940s and 1950s were the time of intense competition between "cold" and "hot" art. Especially the latter decade seemed a triumph of informel painting and Abstract Expressionism; as a result, it was assumed that the future development of the visual arts would involve similar rivalry. Thus, the emergence of minimalism was at first regarded as a return to "cold", geometrical abstract art, a singular revenge of rationalism on the art based on emotions and gestures. However, with time, minimal art's return to geometry proved to be illusory; it was an attempt to transcend the dichotomy established by Barr and to demonstrate its limitations. Minimal works are characterized by free combinations of geometric and non-geometric forms, which may also be interchanged in a manner that is unstructured and resists theoretical classifications.

In his cycle entitled *Anti-Forms*, Robert Morris indicates very clearly the futility of identifying with a particular form. Here, the artist used a rectangular piece of felt, with incisions running through its middle, parallel to the edge of the fabric. The form was undoubtedly geometrical, but on account of the elasticity and softness of the material it was inevitably deformed when hanged on the wall. Thus, it became expressive, evoking associations with some elements of the organic world rather than with stern geometry. The effect was additionally enhanced by the color. Because the felt was multicolored (yellow, beige, red, black), after being placed on the wall with the beige side to the front, the red, yellow and black elements appeared on the incisions, which hung formlessly, distorting the initial geometry even further. In this way, Morris defied the homogeneity of form and the necessity of choosing it; he subverted the artistic importance of identifying with a particular form. The geometric merged with the organic, thus dissolving the binary opposition. The work was compared with those by Jackson Pollock and Morris Louis because, as it was described, the felt "dribbled" down the wall like the paint on the canvases of those artists<sup>8</sup>.

Minimal art is sometimes referred to as post-abstractionism. Maria Hussakowska argues that "the system within which the art described by Morris as 'post-abstract' emerged became more legible thanks to Derrida, and specifically on account of his disclosure of the system's constant mutability. With a fierceness

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<sup>8</sup> W. Włodarczyk (ed.), *Sztuka świata*, vol. 10, Warszawa 1996, p. 154.

comparable to that which accompanied Derrida's decoding of the models of modernity, this new art provisionally referred to as minimalism penetrates the territory of modernist abstraction. Equal analytical attention is paid to visual and to linguistic facts. The necessity of subverting the categories once perceived as crucial – i.e. 'originality' and 'certainty' – now seems clear"<sup>9</sup>.

The ambiguity of employed forms is also an issue in Judd's work. This is particularly visible in his artifacts constructed from cuboid units situated equidistantly on top of one another, referred to as *Stacks*. What is foregrounded in the works employing stainless steel and perspex (*Untitled – one unit*, 1968) or polished copper (e.g. *Untitled – 10 units*, 1969) is "mirror" reflection. In the former of those works, the artist used only one element (unit) which was placed more or less in front of the recipient's eyes. The cuboid's three visible narrower sides, seemingly constituting a frame, were made of polished steel, which produced the effect of a mirror reflection. The upper and the lower plane, on the other hand, were made of orange perspex. The arrangement forced the viewer to enter into a relation with the object. The shiny surface reflected the surrounding space and the elements which it contained, while the orange gleam of the upper and lower facet alleviated the cold effect of the steel framing and infused the artifact with delicate gentleness. A similar reflex and reflection effect also appears in other realizations by Judd, for instance in the 1969 work mentioned above, in which the artist employed ten brightly polished copper units: they reflected the objects surrounding them but simultaneously were themselves subject to illusory transformations as a result of the changing light, the shadows generated by other elements of the structure and the reflections of the circulating recipients.

The reflection and reflex effect is an exceedingly important element of minimal artworks. It is what differentiates them from the output of the representatives of geometrical abstract art in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, for whom the univocality of the employed shapes was of crucial significance. Although Judd's works are undoubtedly geometrical and radically simplified, they seem visually rich, mutable and ambiguous. By reflecting light and their environment they are distorted and their shape ceases to resemble raw cuboid blocks. They become subtle and organic, almost to the point of resembling natural creations – singular chameleons which adapt to their spatial context by changing their color. Although Judd employs geometric forms, he avoids their determinedness, even intentionally striving to distort and hybridize them, thus infracting the rules of Euclidean geometry.

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<sup>9</sup> M. Hussakowska, *Minimalizm*, Kraków 2003, p. 97.

As the above examples indicate, the minimalists' use of geometric forms was not tantamount to adopting the attendant artistic ideologies. These artists did not believe that such forms were connected with particular, determined messages or meanings. Their use was a result of selecting industrial elements, which are usually geometricalized. Frequently, the use of a particular shape was motivated by its convenience or the availability of the given prefabricated materials in the shops (e.g. Flavin's fluorescent lamps). The artist admitted that using neon lamps would have been too expensive, which is why he chose glow discharge tubes instead. Furthermore, the shape, length and color of the lamps did not result from any previously adopted premises concerning compositional arrangement, but were determined by the sizes currently obtainable on the market (they were 2, 3, 4 and 8 feet long respectively and their color scheme was limited)<sup>10</sup>. Thus, the forms employed by the artist had nothing to do with the credo of "philosophical faith" (as in the case of Malevich<sup>11</sup>); they were not his means of identifying with certain universalist principles of harmony (such as, for instance, the hidden structure of the world which Mondrian had sought to discover), but stemmed directly from the artist's circumstances and the technical possibilities available in the 1960s. The geometric quality of forms was not supposed to distance the recipient from the mundane image of reality (as was the case with the representatives of Suprematism and neo-plasticism) but to bring him closer to it. In the 1960s Euclidean shapes no longer evoked associations with transcendence or the veiled structure of being; they were forms usually given to industrial products.

In the case of other minimalists the situation was analogous. Hussakowska notes that "the perceptive chaos of LeWitt's installations results partly from the room's geometrical tricks and the superimposition of ink drawings on the walls, but it is also a consequence of the minimalist reflection on the condition of geometry itself, seen as incapable of offering a total description of the world. After all, it is a well-known fact that "it is not form itself – in its essential purity, in its geometric evidence – that defines new meaning, but the context". After the experience of minimalism, it is impossible to recover the faith in the normative nature of geometry. After this minimalist refusal, we ought not to perceive the elegance and illusory confidence of these works as evidence of the failure to fulfill the declared promise of rejecting the language of geometry, or as a victory that came too easily". Hence, form can become an object of play. The offhand approach proposed by LeWitt may sensitize the

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<sup>10</sup> Cited in: J. Meyer, *Minimalism. Art and Polemics in the Sixties*, London 2004, p. 104.

<sup>11</sup> Malevich's belief in the power of suprematism, based on basic geometric shapes, was so strong that he requested a black square and circle on his gravestone in lieu of the traditional cross.

recipient to geometry in these “new times” and to unsentimental beauty which is acutely aware of its roots”<sup>12</sup>.

This insignificance of form – or perhaps the sheer allergic reluctance to identify with its particular type – stems from the diversity of inspirations behind the emergence and development of minimal art. The minimalists regarded Jackson Pollock as their main precursor, even though their output was universally perceived as abandoning and negating the ideas of abstract expressionism<sup>13</sup>. If they evoked any representatives of European art (which they did very seldom) it was usually Constantine Brâncuși or the Surrealists, who also created art oversaturated with meanings and remote from geometric concretism. The work of some Surrealists (e.g. Roberto Matta or Juan Miró) is at times classified as abstract art, but of a magical, metaphorical, expressive variety. This indicates that minimalism defies Barr’s aforementioned speculation concerning the dichotomous development of abstract art. The appearance of this tendency indicates the rejection of the modernist notion of art history, based on duality, and signals a move towards postmodernism, with its ambiguity and absence of clearly defined divisions. The form of the work no longer attests to an affinity with a particular movement or to identification with a certain ideology: it is merely an instrument used in a game with the recipient.

Consequently, attempts to determine the ultimate objective of the minimalists’ works also seem unsubstantiated. Frank Stella, regarded as one of the precursors of minimal art, described his paintings, uniformly covered with black stripes of equal width, in the following way: “everything you can see is here” or “what you see is what you see”<sup>14</sup>. These remarks indicate that, unlike the representatives of the European avant-garde, the minimalists did not seek to create vast artistic ideologies, bordering on utopia. They had no sense of mission, which had been such an important element of art at least since the Romantic era. Carl Andre argued that “art excludes the unnecessary. Frank Stella has found it necessary to paint stripes. There is nothing else in his painting. [...] Frank Stella’s painting is not symbolic. His stripes are the paths of brush on canvas. These paths lead only into painting”<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> M. Hussakowska, p. 219.

<sup>13</sup> What the minimalists appreciated in Pollock’s art was subverting the European artistic tradition by means of replacing previous rules of composition with the ‘all-over’ principle; they also praised the large scale and non-figurative character of his works.

<sup>14</sup> B. Glaser, “Questions to Stella and Judd” (1966), in: G. Battcock (ed.), *Minimal Art. A Critical Anthology*, New York, 1968, p. 158.

<sup>15</sup> C. Andre, “Preface to Stripe Painting”, in: D.C. Miller (ed.), *Sixteen Americans*, exhibition catalogue, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1959, p. 76 (cited in: K. Selez [ed.], *Theories*

Discussing his own work, Carl Andre also emphasized its anti-ideological nature, stating that “the meaning of art is not to transfer a message like a telegraph. There is no idea behind the artwork; the artwork itself is the idea”<sup>16</sup>. In his realizations, the artist achieved maximum simplicity by means of reduction. As already emphasized, he usually employed flat metal plates of the same size or other prefabricated elements, such as briquettes or burnt bricks. In his work called *Lever*, Andre constructed a single line consisting of 139 bricks, unconnected but positioned close to one another, running across the floor over 40 square yards and terminating just next to the door. The work was designed with a particular space in mind and thus the number of bricks depended on the size of the room. Commenting on his work, Andre stated: “my work is atheistic, materialistic and communistic. It is atheistic because it is without transcendent form, without spiritual or intellectual quality. Materialistic because it is made out of its own materials. And communistic because the form is equally accessible to all men”<sup>17</sup>. Hence, the artifact does not allude to any hidden content, demands no specific knowledge on the viewer’s part, exists in and of itself, for its own sake. The only element which influences the reception is the space and the perspective from which it is viewed. What then is the difference between this artifact and ordinary objects or constructions erected for mundane purposes? The only dissimilarity is that the work has no practical use. While it shares the autotelic nature of some achievements of the avant-garde, it evokes no metaphysical associations.

The last issue connected with minimal art to be discussed in the present paper is individualism. In the theory and history of art this problem is often analyzed in the context of the transformations of the notion of creativity across successive epochs. In ancient Greece artistic activity was associated with craftsmanship, i.e. the best possible execution of an artifact in keeping with the current canons. The individuality of the artist was not taken into account; what was important were appropriate skills and sophisticated execution. Subsequently, in the Middle Ages the term “creator” was reserved for God, who had created the world. The artists’ actions were thus imitative because they were supposed merely to reproduce and transform what was already in existence and which was God’s creation. This approach to art stemmed from the ancient concept of art which was rational and objective. Similar qualities also characterized the perception of art in the Renaissance. Władysław

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*and Documents of Contemporary Art. A Sourcebook of Artists’ Writings*, Los Angeles, London 1996, p. 124).

<sup>16</sup> C. Andre, cited in: *Minimal/Maximal. Minimal Art and its Influence on International Art of the 1990s*, exhibition catalogue, curated by P. Friese, Neues Museum Weserburg Bremen, Kunsthalle Baden-Baden, Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea, Santiago de Compostela, 1994, pp. 72–73.

<sup>17</sup> Cited in: D. Burdon, “The Razed Sites of Carl Andre”, in: G. Battcock (ed.), p. 107.

Tatarkiewicz argued that “the artists of the Renaissance sought an objectively perfect form, whereas subjective expression was relegated to the background. The shapes of Brunelleschi’s churches seem somehow necessary, with the architect remaining invisible, as if he had no personal preferences and merely executed the necessary. According to Alberti, architecture ought to be characterized by *necessità*”<sup>18</sup>.

Parallel to the objectivism described by Tatarkiewicz, the art of the Renaissance gave rise to individualism, which then gradually gained increasing importance. Although the objective notion of art did not disappear, its application was limited and subsequently it mostly pertained to proportions<sup>19</sup>. Nevertheless, even the objectivity of the latter began to be questioned from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards. It was then that the debate on the principles of proportions took place. Tatarkiewicz described the problem as follows: “the proportions of Doric or Ionian columns had been uniformly accepted for two and a half thousand years, which is why they may have seemed objective and necessary. Indeed, the majority of contemporary experts supported the objective notion of architecture and its proportions”<sup>20</sup>. However, other views emerged as well, for instance those championed by Claude Perrault, who – as Tatarkiewicz claims – believed that “no proportion is in itself beautiful or ugly. He expressed this idea by means of a variety of adjectives: he stated that proportions believed to be perfect are not “natural”, not “real”, not “positive”, “not necessary”, “not convincing”. If they have any appeal, it is not on account of their nature or value”<sup>21</sup>.

Along with the increased emphasis on individual preferences and progressive relativization of proportions, recognition was also being given to invention, i.e. the notion that artists were independent and free in their choices. Although Renaissance artists did not employ the term “creation”, which appeared somewhat later, yet in the complex manner of describing their activity they in fact came close to the present understanding of the term. In his *History of Six Ideas*, Tatarkiewicz wrote: “the philosopher Ficino believed that the artist ‘thinks up’ his works [...] Alberti – that he preordains it; Raphael – that he shapes a painting according to his idea; Leonardo – that he employs shapes that do not exist in nature; Michelangelo – that the artist realizes his vision rather than imitating nature; Vasari – that nature is conquered by art”<sup>22</sup>. How-

<sup>18</sup> W. Tatarkiewicz, *Estetyka nowożytna*, vol. III, Wrocław–Warszawa–Kraków 1967, p. 138.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 481–482.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 482.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 483–484.

<sup>22</sup> W. Tatarkiewicz, *A History of Six Ideas: an Essay in Aesthetics*, The Hague–Boston–Hingham, M.A. 1980, pp. 247–248.



ever, regardless of the employed terminology, in most of these views one may notice the emphasis on individualism and the role of individual experimentation. Also Jacob Burckhardt – whose books Tatarkiewicz considers to be the cornerstone of all knowledge about the Renaissance – listed individualism and naturalism as the key features of that period, which he described as “the era of individualism”<sup>23</sup>. A strong tendency to seek individuality may be observed more or less since the Renaissance, in most periods distinguished by art history. Creation began to be associated with the need for personal expression, concerning both private and universal issues.

The objectivist tendencies, which consisted in eradicating individual qualities from the artifact and which were current in the classical tradition of European art, reappeared within the avant-garde movements, especially in geometric painting. However, this reappearance was of a rather unusual nature. In his theoretical writings, Piet Mondrian argued that individuality ought to be abandoned altogether. However, he did not associate this rejection with striving towards beauty, but rather with the discovery of hidden cosmic laws. Apprehending the latter, according to the neo-plasticist approach, demanded rejecting the personal and the subjective in artistic actions. Mondrian considered the laws of reason to be universal and therefore believed that artistic creation should result from them. The role of emotions was to be limited or ignored altogether because they were connected to the private, the personal, the accidental.

A similar attitude was championed by the Russian Constructivists, who rejected individualism as alien to the new society and the art created for its sake; instead, they emphasized collectivity. The work was supposed to be concrete, a genuine structure, and not the expression of individual emotions<sup>24</sup>.

Jean Arp, a Dadaist-turned-Surrealist, also evinced a negative attitude towards individualism and rationalism, although the logic of his argument was different. In his essay entitled “Abstract Art, Concrete Art”, he claimed that “man must once again become part of nature. These artists should work communally as did the artists of the Middle Ages [...] the Renaissance taught men how proudly to exalt their reason. The science and technology of modern times has dedicated men to megalomania. That reason has been overvalued,

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<sup>23</sup> W. Tatarkiewicz, *History of Aesthetics*, London 2006, p. 33.

<sup>24</sup> The issue is discussed further in Grzegorz Sztabiński's book *Problemy intelektualizacji sztuki w tendencjach awangardowych (Intellectualization of Art in the Avant-Garde Movements)*, Łódź 1991, pp. 62–63.

this has caused the confusion of our era”<sup>25</sup>. Thus, he questioned the role of the intellect, which was so important to Mondrian, believing instead that it formed the basis for the realization of private objectives. Arp saw the tendency towards individualization and originality as the source of crisis in European culture.

Although the above artists rejected individualism, in practice their proposals were – paradoxically – individualist in nature, or at most small groups of like-minded artists identified with them. This was also why these concepts were valued by art critics. The notion of creativity that underlies all evaluation, still current today, naturally stems from the high regard for individualism. Most modernists, in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and afterwards, saw their primary objective in creating something original, unique, characteristic only for the particular individual.

One may therefore wonder about the nature of the minimal artists’ allergy to individualism. The objectivist, anti-individualist notion of art typical of minimalism stemmed on the one hand from the endeavors to bring creative activities closer to industrial production, and on the other from attempts to accentuate conceptual factors. Similar tendencies had appeared, as already emphasized, in Russian constructivism. However, the constructivists, in contrast to the representatives of minimal art, assumed a practical application of the rules which they invented. The minimalists emphatically rejected any such application: the minimal artwork was not supposed to serve any practical purposes. Thus, minimal art proves to be an attempt at verifying the possibilities of theorizing and practicing art. It radicalizes previously existing tendencies and is motivated by a wish to examine art by means of art, employing particular solutions.

The minimalist anti-individualism ought to be associated with complete objectivity of form and of the creative process. The execution of artifacts bore no traces of individual expression: the minimalists used a variety of mechanical appliances which allowed them to eliminate the direct involvement of the artist’s hand. Frequently, they commissioned craftsmen or industrial plants to engineer the work. They also used prefabricated objects clearly defined and uncomplicated in terms of form, such as chests, sacks, metal objects, lamps, and so forth. This practice stemmed from the conviction that the artist should not interfere with the material but employ available products instead: in this way, he became the originator of the work without necessarily

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<sup>25</sup> J. Arp, “Abstract Art, Concrete Art” in: H.B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art*, Berkeley 1968, p. 390.

executing it in the physical sense. Frequently, artists wanted no direct involvement in the production of their works so as to refrain from making alterations to the original concept. The ability to influence the process of production may have led to a desire for corrections so as to enhance the aesthetic value of the artifact. The minimalists were quite emphatic in eradicating such “embellishments”. They also eliminated their personal aesthetic preferences from the planning stage. Similarly, the emotions accompanying the invention and realization of the concept were seen as hindering, or even disrupting the creative process. Furthermore, chance – considered an important source of information on the subjective since the Baroque era – here became the artist’s enemy. This may be illustrated with the example of Sol LeWitt’s 1970s works, which were initially designed on paper to depict the possible permutations of the several selected elements (e.g. straight lines at different angles, four basic colors, the possibilities of removing one side of a cube model)<sup>26</sup>. The selected ingredients and rules of procedure strictly determined the logic of the artist’s actions, leaving no space for new ideas during the process. Every departure from the plan, even the most beneficial from the perspective of aesthetics, was considered as a mistake. In this respect, the artist’s *modus operandi* became almost mathematical.

It is worthwhile to consider also the particular methods applied by other minimalists. On his canvases Frank Stella painted stripes the width of the stretcher. The concept dramatically narrowed the array of decisions made while working on each painting, because no compositional changes were allowed during the process. Thus, the resulting artifacts are marked by intense precision, diligence and consistency. The case of Donald Judd’s realizations is analogous. In his *Stacks* cycle the height of particular works depended on the size of the room in which the particular units were situated. They were suspended equidistantly one above the other. In their simplicity, earnestness, detachment and monumentality, the works were at times associated with the impersonal rhetoric of power and dominance<sup>27</sup>; they also seemed to echo the ideals of contemporary technology. This was the crux of the accusation leveled by Greenberg, who stated that there was no difference between objects of minimal art and elements of contemporary design, which meant that the former were completely de-individualized and already situated outside the boundaries of art. In Dan Flavin’s work a similar limitation was imposed on individual changes, resulting from the industrial restrictions on the size and color scheme of fluorescent tubes. To a great extent, the artist’s works were

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. *Sol LeWitt*, exhibition catalogue, The Museum of Modern Art, New York 1978, p. 81.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. A.C. Chave, “Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power”, in: F. Frascina & J. Harris (eds.), *Art in Modern Culture. An Anthology of Critical Texts*, London 1999, pp. 264–281.

subordinated to the standards specified in the manufacturer's offer. It was as a result of such limitations that his objects and installations came into being.

It ought to be emphasized that in all of the above cases the constraints on the freedom to decide were accompanied by the originality of the concept. Thus, the individuality of the artist did not disappear, but was transferred to the sphere of planning. In this respect, minimalism heralded the advent of conceptual art.

Hussakowska notes that "the programmatic essays and numerous remarks of the representatives of this movement indicate that the quest for the most universal language of art which would eradicate individual expression altogether was accompanied by the conviction that the habits connected with the reception of the artifact ought to be revised"<sup>28</sup>. Thus, the artists' endeavors were motivated by a desire to alter previous ideas and attitudes. As regards the reception of works of art, the minimalists opposed traditional concepts which imposed limitations on the freedom of response. In ancient art it was necessary to consider the work of art from a particular viewing point; in the Renaissance, this allowed one to apprehend perspective and the illusion of depth. During the Baroque era, Rembrandt demanded that his paintings be viewed from a larger distance. In order to perceive allegorical works, a certain amount of knowledge was necessary. The minimalists abandoned not only the restrictions of the above sort, but also questioned the particular aesthetic attitude developed since the Enlightenment. Instead, they offered their viewers freedom in the reception of their objects<sup>29</sup>. In Andre's works, the reception is not limited to a visual response. The viewers may, or even should traverse the plates laid by the artist, retaining complete freedom in negotiating their relation to the object. Thus, the kinesthetic factors become significant. Judd, Morris and Flavin also recognized that the reception of their works may be connected with movement and with assuming varied perspectives towards the objects. This resembles the previously considered possibilities afforded by works of architecture. Thus, the differences between various domains of art are surmounted and blurred even in terms of reception.

An analysis of the minimalists' output reveals many affinities with anti-art, initiated by Duchamp. For instance, Donald Judd said about his own realiza-

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<sup>28</sup> M. Hussakowska – Szyszko, *Spadkobiercy Duchampa?*, Kraków 1984, p. 105.

<sup>29</sup> The issue of the reception of art in the modernist and postmodernist eras was analyzed in depth by G. Sztabiński in his article "Nowa sztuka, krytyka artystyczna a odbiór kwalifikowany" ("New Art, Art Criticism and Qualified Reception"). *Przegląd Socjologiczny* 2006, vol. LV, no. 2, pp. 25–40.

tions: “everything sculpture has, my work doesn’t”<sup>30</sup>. Clearly, the artist did not intend to contrast sculpture with other domains of art, but to exclude it and its attendant mindset from his own work, which is nevertheless rooted in the sculptural tradition. The artist also stated: “half or more of the best new work in the last few years has been neither painting nor sculpture”<sup>31</sup>. Therefore, he suggested that the term ‘object’ or ‘three-dimensional work’ ought to be used instead<sup>32</sup>. The principal characteristics of such realizations were, in his opinion, the interest in space and a new manner of presentation<sup>33</sup>. Obviously, Judd realized that the surroundings always constituted an important element of sculpture. However, he argued that this element had not thus far found proper use. According to Judd, the breakthrough occurred in the 1960s, when artists such as Richard Serra, Dan Flavin and naturally Judd himself began inscribing their works into the directly available space, annexing it as an integral part of the realization. Therefore, in the course of time the artists subordinated their works to the size of the exhibition room, taking into account the context in which it functioned. Thus, the works were not so much exhibited as installed in the available locations, which gave rise to various interrelations between the space and the objects<sup>34</sup>. This was a rather unusual situation because on the one hand the artist accepted the notion of art and created realizations that passed for artistic objects, and on the other hand he evinced a negative attitude towards painting or sculpture, which are after all principal artistic genres.

In contrast to Judd – in fact clearly rejecting any associations with artistic “objects” – Morris, in his essay entitled “Notes on Sculpture,” used the traditional term “sculpture”<sup>35</sup>. According to the artist, the crucial aspect of such realizations was shape. The fundamental task which he ascribed to sculpture was the attempt to reveal and alter its form in the process of perception. Moreover, the author claimed that this quality was typical only of sculpture and could not be translated into any other medium<sup>36</sup>. In contradistinction to Judd, Morris believed that an overall impression was possible only as a result of three-dimensionality and was empirical, not intellectual, in nature. Hence, he rejected the relief as too close to the painting and incapable of demonstrating the full possibilities of objects.

<sup>30</sup> Cited in: J. Kosuth, “Art after Philosophy”, in: C. Harrison & P. Wood (eds.), *Art in Theory 1900–1990. An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Oxford 1992, p. 841.

<sup>31</sup> D. Judd, “Specific Objects” (1965) in: K. Stiles, P. Selez (eds.), *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art. A Sourcebook of Artists’ Writings*, Los Angeles 1996, p. 114.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> D. Judd, “Some Aspects of Color in General and Red and Black in Particular”, in: N. Serota (ed.), *Donald Judd*, New York 2004, p. 146.

<sup>35</sup> R. Morris, “Notes on Sculpture”, in: G. Battcock (ed.), pp. 222–235.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 226.

In his book entitled *Minimalism*, James Meyer emphasizes that the differences in the two artist's approach stem from the dissimilar origins of their oeuvre. Morris began his activity as a performer and therefore he treated the entire work as something that the viewer could perceive, experience and feel, whereas Judd, whose point of departure was painting, prioritized the impact of the work's formal aspects, without paying attention to the viewers' potential response to the realization<sup>37</sup>. This divergence of artistic sources also manifested itself in "Notes on Sculpture," where Morris offered an in-depth theory of experience which included elements of psychology and phenomenology. Focusing on the perception of shape, he relegated to the background the role of color, which was another point of disagreement with the author of "Specific Objects". According to Judd, however, Morris's art with its "plain shapes and bland colors"<sup>38</sup> was a perfect example of 'minimalist' art which in fact offered nothing whatsoever to look at<sup>39</sup>.

The above examples demonstrate, on the one hand, the minimalists' allergic reluctance towards certain artistic problems, which indicates their affinities with anti-art, and on the other hand a set of symptoms testifying to their acceptance of art. These symptoms were variously distributed among the particular representatives of the movement. Hence, it is impossible to consider minimalism an anti-artistic tendency; simultaneously, the aforementioned evidence complicates the matter of determining the notion of art to which these practitioners subscribed. I believe that this situation can be most profitably viewed in the light of Joseph Kosuth's essay "Art after Philosophy". In his deliberations, the author repeatedly invoked various remarks made by the minimalists, especially Judd; it is also worth remembering that his own early realizations were in the spirit of minimal art. According to Kosuth, the notion of art does not apply to a catalogue of created works, but – in keeping with Wittgenstein's ideas – is in fact open in character. Kosuth is not interested in determining what art is or was, but what it may become. Thus, he does not endorse formal analysis of art, according to which the concept is relatively stable and it is only the form that changes. Instead, he posits that the work should always be treated as a reinterpretation of the term "art". As Kosuth states, "art's only claim is for art. Art is the definition of art"<sup>40</sup>. If one takes this idea into consideration, the minimalists' allergies become clear. Producing art of a distinctly objective nature, they did not wish to draw attention to such aesthetic qualities as originality, formal preference or artistic individualism. This does not mean, however, that they abandoned art altogether and embraced

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. J. Meyer, p. 158.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 160.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> J. Kosuth, p. 849.

the production of non-artistic objects. The artifacts which they engineered were the attempts at redefining the notion of art. Hence, if it is possible to speak of the minimalist output in terms of an allergy to art, it pertained only to the traditional meaning of the term – i.e. to the qualities evoked by the identification of art with painting or sculpture. Consequently, the allergy disappears when artistic practice is construed as open, when the starting point is a *tabula rasa* of sorts<sup>41</sup>. As Judd wrote, “if someone calls it art, it’s art”<sup>42</sup>.

*Translated by Krzysztof Majer*

### **MINIMALISTYCZNA ALERGIA WOBEC SZTUKI (streszczenie)**

Problem negacji sztuki w XX wieku pojawiał się wielokrotnie w ramach tendencji awangardowych, przybierając każdorazowo nieco inną postać. W niniejszym artykule rozważany jest jako rodzaj alergii artystycznej. Autorka wychodzi od krótkiego omówienia antysztuki, biorąc pod uwagę przede wszystkim działalność Marcela Duchampa. Zwraca w niej uwagę między innymi na zakwestionowanie sensu dzieł artystycznych, rezygnację z kategorii oryginalności i podważenie roli operacji formalnych. W sztuce drugiej połowy XX wieku pojawiły się różnego rodzaju kontynuacje kontestatorskich działań Duchampa. Twórczość przedstawicieli *minimal art* nie jest jednak zwykle do nich włączana. Chcąc rozważyć słuszność tego przekonania autorka poddaje analizie wybrane dzieła głównych przedstawicieli minimalizmu (Donalda Judda, Roberta Morrisa, Carla Andre, Dana Flavina i Sol LeWitta) oraz ich wypowiedzi teoretyczne. Okazuje się, że pomimo wyraźnie przedmiotowego i konstrukcyjnego charakteru twórczość minimalistów w istocie stanowi negację podstawowych cech przypisywanych tradycyjnie dziełom sztuki. Zastanawiające jest jednak, że dokonując działań antyartystycznych przedstawiciele tego kierunku używali w odniesieniu do swych dzieł słowa „sztuka”. Rozważając ten problem autorka proponuje spojrzeć na minimalizm przez pryzmat następującego po nim konceptualizmu, zwłaszcza poglądów Josepha Kosutha sformułowanych w tekście *Sztuka po filozofii*. Twórczości minimalistów okazuje się wówczas bliższa nie antysztuce, a koncepcji sztuki rozumianej jako pojęcie otwarte. Alergia na sztukę odnosi się wtedy do istniejących jej postaci i zawiera propozycję nieskończonego procesu jej redefiniowania.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 843.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.





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## 20<sup>TH</sup>-CENTURY ALLERGY TO CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY AND ATTEMPTS TO OVERCOME IT

**Abstract:** A non-existence of references to the classical era in 20<sup>th</sup>-century culture is very noticeable. A revival of classical antiquity is not to be expected in the general sense, but it can be a conscious and important choice made by particular artists. Looking for ancient influences (or talking about the period's reception) in the 20<sup>th</sup> century means searching for isolated plots, short-lived fascinations or conscious exceptions. This article will try to suggest the reasons for this allergy to classical antiquity. In its second part, it will present those artistic views and activities where ancient Greece has remained an inspiration and a significant reference point, above all as a source of the "Dionysian element". Finally, focusing on the example of an acting technique modelled on ancient chorea, it will present the possibility of achieving a modern effect with the use of a past source.

**Keywords:** Modernism – neoclassicism – classical antiquity – reception of antiquity in 20<sup>th</sup> century

Classical antiquity does not play any role in contemporary culture; it exists in the form of relics, not a living source. Although there have been some attempts to return to classicism, particularly in literature<sup>1</sup>, the non-existence of classical antiquity in artistic endeavours is symptomatic<sup>2</sup>. Does this neglect or rejection of antiquity result from an allergy? I would not really like to use that term, as it would mean admitting that 20<sup>th</sup> century culture suffered from a bad illness caused by a malfunction of its own body<sup>3</sup>. Should we present the last century

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<sup>1</sup> See: A. Kaliszewski, *Nostalgia stylu. Neoklasycyzm liryki polskiej w XX wieku w krytyce, badaniach i poetykach immanentnych (w kontekście tradycji poetologicznej klasycyzmu)*, Kraków 2007.

<sup>2</sup> In contrast to the interesting research by philologists, religion theorists, or anthropologists. Meanwhile, ancient Greece fascinates researchers (for example Karl Kerényi, Walter Burkert, Leszek Kolankiewicz – anthropologist of theatre).

<sup>3</sup> On the illnesses that modernism suffered from – neurosis and hysteria, and about contemporary depression, see D. Sajewska, "Chore sztuki", in: *Choroba/ tożsamość/ dramat*, Kraków 2005.

without sentiment, the classical era would appear to be only one of its several allergens. So if I was to use medical language, I would opt for the term “intolerance”. It is a lighter form of reaction to an ingredient, often due to a psychological repulsion and, unlike allergies, it does not lead to the organism’s self-destruction<sup>4</sup>. Thus, the question “why are there hardly any references to the classical period in 20<sup>th</sup> century art?” finds an easy answer: “because art could not tolerate it, and an allergen should be avoided”.

An early diagnosis has been made, but I suggest a detailed examination of the reasons for this intolerance.

### “CLASSICAL” INTOLERANCE

In modern times, antiquity was mainly identified with the classical period of ancient Greece (5<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> century BC), which became a model for the European culture since the Renaissance. The classicist interpretation of ancient Greece became the only accepted one. The Romantics were the first to defy classicism. Their anticlassicist views were formed mainly in reaction to Winckelmann’s idealistic cult of classical antiquity. Interestingly, the rejection of classicism did not mean that they opposed philhellenism, a popular movement at the time. However, Greece did not represent to them a timeless ideal, a utopian Arcadia; they saw it as a particular place affected by time and history to such an extent that it became a place of pilgrimage. The Romantics, in contrast to the classicists, dared face the reality of decline, ruin and abandonment, as they visited Greece, then under Turkish occupation. What they found there was not only evidence of a past glory, but also modern Greek people, fighting for their independence. As Maria Kalinowska writing on Byron, points out, “It is not in the beauty of marble or classical stone that Hellas has survived. For Byron, Greece is not a static, utopian, Winckelmann’s statuesque beauty, not even a myth of peaceful Arcadic harmony. [...] Greece is freedom. It is the spark of freedom that has endured in the Greeks, living or mythical. [...] It is in the eyes of the living Greeks, not marble statues, that the “fire of liberty” is burning, the liberating fire of freedom. The freedom worshipped, or overworshipped by Byron. It is there that the spark of eternity has survived, not in the statues. The embers are still glowing or have to be rekindled in the heirs to past Hellenic freedom, and it is them – the enslaved Greeks – that Byron addresses”<sup>5</sup>. The

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<sup>4</sup> Although we have to admit that the phenomenon of self-destruction is present in 20<sup>th</sup> century art. It did not, however, result from the contact with antiquity or classicism.

<sup>5</sup> M. Kalinowska, *Grecja romantyków: studia nad obrazem Grecji w literaturze romantycznej*, Toruń 1994, p. 35.

Romantics travelled to Greece not to seek an aesthetic model in the past, but in order to plan the future. “We need a new mythology”, Friedrich von Schlegel stated; “once a spark of enthusiasm has blasted the works of old art, new phenomena, alive and surrounded by the magnificent glory of light and love, will appear in front of us”<sup>6</sup>. Classicism, turning back to the past, stands in the way of creating a new vision of the world; this is why the Romantics’ programme was largely based on anticlassicism.

It was in fact thanks to the Romantics that all the allegations against classicism were explained. The modernists and the avant-garde could start anew from that point. Maybe that is why the writings of modern theorists and artists hardly ever mention Greece. “We will: 1. Destroy the cult of the past, the **obsession with the ancients**, pedantry and academic formalism, 2. Totally invalidate all kinds of imitation [...], 7. Sweep the whole field of art clean of all themes and subjects which have been used in the past”<sup>7</sup> – declared the Manifesto of Futurist Painters (1910). It is one of the few texts where the ancients appear at all. Ancient Greece, the pillar of all modern tradition, has disappeared from the reflection on art. Again, the analogy with allergy becomes relevant here. The majority of allergens are either common substances, essential ingredients of our food, or particles that surround us, floating about in the air. A very common type of allergy is allergy to proteins, mainly milk. The essential – and for some time, the only – element that should build up a young body from its birth is being rejected. It has to be replaced by some artificial substance. This brings us back to our analogy: we can say that classicism was such an artificial substitute for art. The Romantics used it as a negative model, but the members of the avant-garde ignored it completely, as they fed themselves only on what was modern.

Let us ask ourselves, using a genuinely classicist, sophisticated metaphor: “Which element of the classical ‘milk’ that the mother-tradition fed to her children was the most responsible for triggering this allergic reaction?” The answer is – all of the elements, but everyone was allergic to a different one. Nowadays, thanks to our knowledge of avant-garde theory and practice, we can single out and classify according to the particular modern movements the “allergens” deriving either from the aesthetics of classical antiquity, or from classicism modelled on it.

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<sup>6</sup> K.W.F. von Schlegel, „Rozmowa o poezji”, in: *Pisma teoretyczne niemieckich romantyków*, ed. T. Namowicz, Wrocław 2000, p. 155.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in: K.E. Silver, *Esprit de Corps. The Art of the Parisian Avant-Garde and the First World War, 1914–1925*, Princeton University Press, p. 155.

The first feature of traditional art that at first sight distinguishes it from modern art is mimesis. Although traces of the external reality may be found in the works of many avant-garde artists, it is not imitation that they care about. “The impossibility and, in art, the uselessness of attempting to copy an object exactly, the desire to give the object full expression, are the impulses which drive the artist away from ‘literal’ colouring to purely artistic aims. And that brings us to the question of composition”<sup>8</sup>, wrote Wassily Kandinsky in his book *Concerning The Spiritual In Art*. Art was then trying to free itself from superfluous reality, external to its essence, so that it could progress towards abstraction and non-objectivity<sup>9</sup>. In such movements as Cubism, Expressionism, or Surrealism, the represented world was clearly deformed, dehumanised, defamiliarised<sup>10</sup>. It was, however, not only the result of mad imagination, but a symptom of real change in the surrounding world. The phenomenon is probably best described by R. Sheppard: “Many of the modernists had, during their youth, been imbued by their liberal humanist background with the [classical A.G.-T.] Enlightenment belief that it was possible for Man increasingly to understand, rise above, dominate and utilize the external world by means of his *logos* – understood either as a purely secular faculty or as one which was grounded in the divine *logos*. But, paradoxically, that very generation which had grown up amid the triumphant achievements of increasingly confident nineteenth-century science, technology and economics, now felt that these systems were becoming dysfunctional and potentially totalitarian”<sup>11</sup>.

From there began the rejection of other elements of the classical tradition: belief in absolute truth, in reason and logic, in clear rules governing reality and art. For art, the most vital was probably the rejection of the belief in the existence of absolute, objective, ideal beauty. The Greek understanding of beauty as harmony, order, and proportion had provided the basis for the whole aesthetics of classicism. A proper measure, when found in nature and used in

<sup>8</sup> W. Kandinsky, “Concerning the Spiritual in Art”, transl. by Michael T.H. Sadler, retrieved from <http://www.semantikon.com/art/kandinskyspiritualinart.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> The majority of the researchers attempting to distinguish between the concepts of abstraction and non-objectivity claim that the former concerns the kind of art that, even if it does not permit the recognition of an object, has issued from it in the process of production; whereas the latter comes from nonfigurative forms. See: J. Ashmore “Some Differences between Abstract and Non-objective Painting.” *Journal of Aesthetic*, 1954–5, vol. XIII, pp. 486–495 and A. Kotula, P. Krakowski, *Sztuka abstrakcyjna*, Warszawa 1973.

<sup>10</sup> The term *dehumanisation* in art was introduced by Ortega y Gasset in his essay “The Dehumanization of Art and Ideas about the Novel”, and the term *defamiliarisation* appears in R. Sheppard, who borrowed it from V. Shklovsky. R. Sheppard, “The Problematics of European Modernism”, in: *Theorizing Modernism. Essays in critical theory*, ed. S. Giles, Routledge, London 1993, p. 18; W. Szklowski, “Sztuka jako chwyt”, in: W. Skwarczyńska, *Teoria badań literackich za granicą*, vol. II, Kraków 1986, pp. 10–28.

<sup>11</sup> R. Sheppard, op.cit., pp. 8–9.

art, was to guarantee a perfect work of art, based on the model of beauty and representing beauty. The avant-garde, in contrast, confirming previous doubts, raised already in the 18<sup>th</sup> century<sup>12</sup>, and perceiving that the classicist idea was no longer valid, saw beauty as a consequence of aesthetic speculations, not as the essence of art. The movement rejects beauty as such, together with the whole aesthetic of a work of art<sup>13</sup>. And although Marcel Duchamp was the most anti-aesthetic artist, it is Barnett Newman who expresses most clearly his protest against beauty, as born in Greece: “Greek fanaticism, like all fanaticisms that are built on the concrete, became a fanaticism of refinement. And that is why we have rejected it, for an art of refinement must in the end lead to an art of self-conscious sensibility, to the love of ideal sensations, to an economy of beauty. We now know because of our wider knowledge of comparative art forms that the notion of beauty is a fiction. But what is more serious, beauty – that is the love of ideal sensations – creates in us today sheer physical embarrassment”<sup>14</sup>. All whole modern art was for Newman a rebellion against the ancient heritage<sup>15</sup> because “it was the Greeks who invented the idea of beauty”<sup>16</sup>.

If the avant-garde rejects the allergen of beauty, consequently it has to discard any superfluous and distracting rules that served to attain beauty. The perfection of craft, precision, a finish that removes all traces of human work, the whole classical *techne* may inhibit, or even block individual expression. There is no sense in invoking the authority of the ancient masters, either; the avant-garde creates its own tradition and rarely looks back further than to Cezanne. Neither does it care about decorum or correctness. On the contrary, the neo-avant-garde uses scandal as one of its principal strategies. While a classical work of art is a finished organic entity, an avant-garde work may be open, unfinished, ephemeral, glued together by the process of montage<sup>17</sup>. Actually, it is hard to call it a work of art or a masterpiece, as it is above all an experiment, a trace of the artist’s thought and boldness, rather than a polished perfect product. If we admit, as Władysław Tatarkiewicz has done, that the art of perfection is the art of conscious “self-limitation”, then avant-garde art is its

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<sup>12</sup> See W. Tatarkiewicz, *Dzieje sześciu pojęć*, Warszawa 1982, pp. 159–163.

<sup>13</sup> See W. Kazimierska-Jerzyk, „Strategia rewaloryzacji” we współczesnej refleksji nad sztuką. Piękno, eklektycyzm, epigonizm, infantylizm, Kraków 2008, p. 22.

<sup>14</sup> B. Newman, “The New Sense of Fate”, in: *Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. S.J.P. O’Neill; Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1990, p. 167.

<sup>15</sup> See: A. Rejniak- Majewska, “Obraz jako sytuacja. Tragizm, podmiotowość i malarstwo według Barnetta Newmanna”, *Teksty drugie*, no. 5 (119) 2009, p. 180.

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

<sup>17</sup> About organic and montage artwork, see P. Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde*, Frankfurt am Main 1974.

reverse, a constant attempt at transgression<sup>18</sup>. While classical art avoids personal experience and an individual is for it only a representative of mankind as a whole, modern art relies on the individual, untypical, extreme, deeply experienced, or even improbable.

Transgressive avant-garde art does not tolerate classical rigours of genre, it constantly crosses boundaries, not only of genres, but also between art and life. It creates non-art and anti-art<sup>19</sup>. As Tadeusz Szkołut observes, “radical neo-avant-garde artists’ aim is not art and its constitutional aesthetic values but looking for one’s own identity, developing intimate community ties, discovering new areas of sensitivity, breaking social stereotypes, suggesting new forms of interpersonal communication, developing one’s cultural knowledge etc. Briefly, the sense of the activity that we sometimes, inconsistently and from habit, still tend to call ‘artistic creation’ should be sought outside art, in the real life”<sup>20</sup>.

One more feature of classicism that modernists can hardly bear is its self-confidence. This self-assurance resulted mainly from the sense of superiority. Andrzej Kaliszewski points out that “Classicism and Neo-classicism are almost model examples of an evaluative understanding of culture, which assumes that culture has reached the highest degree of evolution in the European-American (Greco-Romano-Judeo-Christian) civilisation. This civilisation was characterised by a belief in its power of diffusion, or spreading around the world, and acculturation (its mission to “convert” less civilised societies)”<sup>21</sup>. 20<sup>th</sup> century artists did not enjoy such a sense of well-being, such certainty of the importance and grandeur of their own civilisation, that is why they began to seek inspiration in other cultures. “No-one else but Picasso, raised in the Mediterranean culture, blasted in a fury the forms that this very culture had created, the forms that appeared immortal”, observes Mieczysław Jastrun in his essay “Mit śródziemnomorski” [“The myth of the Mediterranean”], far from glorifying the European civilisation, with its inglorious 20<sup>th</sup> century, and yet astonished at the avant-garde’s fascination with the primitive<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> W. Tatarkiewicz, „Doskonałość estetyczna”, in: *Wybór pism estetycznych*, Kraków 2004, p. 167.

<sup>19</sup> See G. Sztabiński, „Sztuka, antysztuka, niesztuka – z problemów negacji sztuki w tendencjach awangardowych”. *Studia Filozoficzne*, no. 1, 1989, pp. 95–104.

<sup>20</sup> T. Szkołut, *Nowość jako wartość artystyczna*, „*Studia etyczne i Estetyczne*”, vol. 5, *Wartości i antywartości w kontekście przeobrażeń kultury współczesnej*, ed. T. Szkołut, Lublin 1999, p. 180.

<sup>21</sup> A. Kaliszewski, op.cit., p. 77.

<sup>22</sup> This is the final sentence of a longer fragment concerning this problem, „But the fascination of contemporary art with primitive forms or abstraction shows that it is turning away from classicism as the expression of Mediterranean humanism. The black influence and the traditions

A critical examination of the present caused despair in some artists, who then lapsed into pathos; others chose to distance themselves from it and they employed irony and humour. Stendhal mocked the boredom of academic paintings, which “are admired because the public feels obliged to admire them, being asked ‘Do they not conform to antiquity?’ And the poor public does not know what to say to that, They remain confused and leave yawning.”<sup>23</sup> The antiquity itself seems boring to Stendhal; he writes that “Leonidas, who is so powerful when saying ‘Passerby, tell Sparta...’ etc., was maybe, or even certainly, a very boring lover, friend and husband. One should be a charming man in the evening, and the next day win a battle or know how to die.”<sup>24</sup>

Not only the Romantics, but also, in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the avant-garde artists dreamed of victories in battles. Many of them tragically lost their lives on the battlefields of World War I. And then classicism took its revenge. Traditional artists came to the fore, while the younger generation merely tried to modernise tradition. What is astounding, though, and still hard to understand, is a sudden turn in the creative activity of some avant-garde artists. The 1920s and 1930s were a period of considerable uncertainty about the conception of art. For some, it was a short break from the parade of modernity, for others though, the only right reaction to the “Cubist pranks”. From the perspective of the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when the time of the avant-garde is considered to have ended, nothing is sure any more, because any comebacks seem spurious and crafty today. Nevertheless, it can be said that the period witnessed a reappearance of a strong neo-classical current. The mention of some movements, groups and names suffices to show the new longing for figuration, perfection, and order. We could add to this list the avant-garde artists “converted” to classicism. Already in 1917, when asked about the German invasion on the French culture (in the times of war propaganda the avant-garde was always considered as a sick invention introduced by the enemy, a treacherous coup to overthrow the national tradition)<sup>25</sup>, Auguste Rodin answered: “we will do well to abandon all the chimera dreaming from a sick mind and return to the true ancient tradition, old as the centuries, instead of making things without value. For a while now, the cities of Europe have been ravaged by these barbarians. We don’t need

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of Eastern art play a significant role in the development of avant-garde forms; contemporary music displaced Mozart’s and Chopin’s harmonies. Greek harmony and naturalistic character of Greek sculpture do not evoke admiration” M. Jastrun, “Mit śródziemnomorski”, in: *Eseje*, Warszawa 1973, p. 170.

<sup>23</sup> Stendhal, „Historia malarstwa we Włoszech”, in: *Teoretycy, artyści i krytycy o sztuce 1700–1870*, ed. E. Grabska, M. Poprzęcka, Warszawa 1974, p. 371.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 370.

<sup>25</sup> In France, Cubism was at times written with a capital K to emphasise its German origin!

German influence, but rather that of our most beautiful classic traditions”<sup>26</sup>. Greece regained, at least in declarations, its position as a source of beauty and order, an allegory of the triumph of reason over the enemy’s barbaric power. Ozenfant and Jeanneret in *Après le Cubisme* (1918) praised classical aesthetics, beauty deriving from proportion and harmony. They wrote: “If the Greek triumphed over the barbarian, if Europe, inheritor of Greek thought, dominates the world, it is because the savages like loud colours and the noisy sound of tambourines which engage only the senses, while the Greeks loved intellectual beauty which hides beneath sensory beauty”<sup>27</sup>. The most astounding, however, was the speech delivered by the Futurist Gino Severini in 1921. “We find ourselves today, after an interval of several centuries, in an identical situation. Today one speaks a great deal about the great Greek civilization, we claim it as our own, and we declare ourselves Hellenists, but it is not recognized that it is generally of an Ionian Hellenism, of paganism and of Epicurianism, that we are speaking... Will we have a new Pythagoras capable of reuniting and ordering all the good forces that we feel around us and which truly tend toward a new renaissance ?”<sup>28</sup>.

Thus, the new order was to be recreated according to the old rules that regained their label of universal ones. It is hard to judge whether these declarations were truthful or not, as the course of events did not let the artists to follow them. Some, like Picasso, treated such attitude as another experiment. Barnett Newman even claimed that “Picasso’s Greek period was an expression of his conceit, his will to dominate all art, history, and cannot be considered a continuation of that style”<sup>29</sup>. K.E. Silver, describing *Three Women at the Spring*, of 1921, seems enchanted with the “Greekness” of this work, comparing it to the metope of the Parthenon<sup>30</sup>. Was it not only stylization, though? According to Newman, if anyone got close to Greek sensitivity and visual thought, it was the Surrealists, and mostly de Chirico. He did not revive Greece, though, in spite of the fact that he missed it. “De Chirico himself, to express even his nostalgia, had to destroy the very thing he wanted, and was compelled to transform the sterile Grecian form – the ancient notion of the perfect man, which had lost all meaning – into solitary and empty mannequins.

<sup>26</sup> Cited in K.E. Silver, op.cit., p. 100.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 229.

<sup>28</sup> Cited in K.E. Silver, op.cit., p. 266.

<sup>29</sup> B. Newman, op.cit., p. 165.

<sup>30</sup> “This grouping looks as if it could have been designed for a metope of the Parthenon and this is not surprising since the forms all derive from sculpted prototypes... the figures are draped in the Antique style, the falling pleats of their white chitons like so many flutings in a Doric column. The colours too are ‘Greek’: flesh tones and terra-cotta; brown, black and white, and a residual grey, K.E. Silver, op.cit., p. 274.



He had to come back to the heroes of our modern world”<sup>31</sup>. Antiquity, to all the neo-classicists of that time, was more of a melancholic memory displaying exhaustion and creative impotence than a spark bringing about creativity. Delaunay was well aware of this, when he was said: ”Who cares about the word *classical* with all the Cubists labels, neo-Greek and neo-Platonist... Unable to bring about a new construction, the opportunists, in a rush to produce, ask Antiquity to give them a backbone, but even the marbles are broken !!!”<sup>32</sup>. Delaunay obviously emphasized the need to construct art (and reality) anew, but he was aware that the antique model is inadequate for the modern world, that within it one cannot find a solution to the problems that 20<sup>th</sup>-century man has to tackle.

Totalitarian systems, first National Socialism in Germany, then Communism, having parted from constructivism, brought classicism into disrepute. Realism with a classical background was to give the authorities a guarantee of their durability and righteousness. It was also meant to legitimise them, being universal and comprehensible. Hitler in particular made references to antiquity, believing himself an heir to emperors, not only German, but also Roman. As J. Nelis writes, “Adolf Hitler’s interest in antiquity was an integral, if not a central, part of his world view [...] from the vast reservoir of antiquity, he chose two model civilisations: Sparta and Rome. Sparta was seen as the example of how militarist physical education could support a strong, disciplined state. Rome and the Roman Empire stood for agrarian roots, the spirit of which also left its imprint on Roman state architecture”<sup>33</sup>.

The universal character of classicism turned out to be the final nail in its coffin. From that point on, any realism aspiring to the universal was associated not only with conservatism, but also with authoritarianism. In the 1980s, in his “Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression”, Benjamin Buchloch asked: “How is it that we are nearly forced to believe that the return to traditional modes of representation in painting around 1915, two years after the Readymade and Black Square, was a shift of great historical or aesthetic import? And how did this shift come to be understood as an autonomous achievement of the masters, who were in fact the servants of an audience craving for the restoration of the visual codes of recognisability, for the reinstatement of figuration? [...] Does the brutal increase of restrictions in socioeconomic and political life unavoidably result in the bleak anonymity and

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<sup>31</sup> B. Newman, op.cit., p. 166.

<sup>32</sup> Cited in: B. Silver, op.cit., p. 332.

<sup>33</sup> J. Nelis, *Modernist Neo-classicism and Antiquity in the Political Religion of Nazism: Adolf Hitler as Poietes of the Third Reich, Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*. 2008, vol. 9, no. 4, p. 483.

passivity of the compulsively mimetic modes that we witness, for example, in European painting of the mid-1920s and early 1930s?.”<sup>34</sup> According to Buchloch, artists came under pressure from ideology, from authorities and society, and the example of neo-classicism from before World War II, adopted by the totalitarian governments, served as a warning to postmodernists who were returning to figuration<sup>35</sup>. All classicisms, especially the ones adopted by artists with a claim to avant-garde background, may only result from escapist or opportunistic attitudes and serve the conservative reaction. “The mock avant-garde of contemporary European painters now benefits from the ignorance and arrogance of a racket of cultural parvenus who perceive it as their mission to reaffirm the politics of a rigid conservatism through cultural legitimation”<sup>36</sup>. In Buchloch’s view, antiquity, as well as any other type of figurative or mimetic art, is not merely an allergen, but a dangerous virus that attacks the fragile immune system of contemporary art.

### THE TWO FACES OF GREECE – DESENSITIZATION

“While the thunderclap of the Battle of Wörth was reverberating across Europe, the meditative lover of enigmas... sat..., extremely reflective and perplexed, thus simultaneously very distressed and carefree, and wrote down his thoughts about the Greeks... until, in that month of the deepest tension, as peace was being negotiated in Versailles, he finally came to peace with himself and... finished composing *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*”<sup>37</sup>. And not yet aware of the significance of his discovery, he led his descendants down a previously overgrown path to the passionate, severe and wild Greece. It was Friedrich Nietzsche who found a remedy for the allergy to antiquity, an illness that he had diagnosed himself. “Almost every era and cultural stage has at

<sup>34</sup> B.H.D. Buchloh, “Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression”, in: *Art after Modernism. Rethinking Representation*; New York 1989, p. 107.

<sup>35</sup> Just before World War II, at the World Exhibition in Paris, there was the most intense competition between the Soviet Union and Germany, both represented in largest halls. France, meanwhile, clearly withdrew from the “classicist” rhetoric, highlighting instead the positives of the avant-garde movement, centred around its capital, Paris. “The real French painting for at least three hundred years now [has been] nonconformist or rebel painting... by groups who care not about honours, [but] about cherishing their ideas, and where everyone fulfils the need for development in his own way”, wrote Louis Gillet (L. Gillet, “Chefs-d’œuvre de l’art. Français: La peinture”, *Revue des Mondes*, 15 Sept. 1937, Cited in: K. Kangaslathi, “Wystawa paryska w roku 1937: sztuka a walka o tożsamość we Francji”, in: *Naród. Styl. Modernizm*, ed. J. Purchla, W. Tegethoff, Kraków/Monachium 2006, p. 279).

<sup>36</sup> B.H.D. Buchloh, op.cit., p.131.

<sup>37</sup> F. Nietzsche, “An Attempt at Self-Criticism”, in: *The Birth of Tragedy*, transl. by Ian Johnston, p. 1, [http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/nietzsche/tragedy\\_all.htm](http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/nietzsche/tragedy_all.htm).

some point sought in a profoundly ill-tempered frame of mind to free itself of the Greeks, because in comparison with the Greeks, all their own achievements, apparently fully original and admired in all sincerity, suddenly appeared to lose their colour and life and shrivelled to unsuccessful copies, in fact, to caricatures”<sup>38</sup>. Instead of fleeing antiquity, he was the first to use the therapy of desensitization, consisting in injecting a Dionysian element into the organism of modern culture. And though this medical metaphor may seem slightly artificial, it is true that, thanks to this new perspective on Greece, Nietzsche pointed to the unique Dionysian movement, fascinating researchers and artists alike, hidden up to then behind the veil of classicism (the Apollonian movement).

“The most successful, most beautiful, most envied people, those with the most encouraging style of life so far – the Greeks? How can this be? Did they of all people need tragedy?”<sup>39</sup>, asked Nietzsche ironically and provocatively. It is tragedy, showing the Greeks as the subjects to the inevitability of fate, entangled in insoluble conflicts, suffering, doomed to catastrophe, that is closer to the 20<sup>th</sup> century man than the Apollonian optimistic art of illusion. The Dionysian element entails intoxication, union with nature, enchantment, self-oblivion, and thus it makes one penetrate into the darkness of the truth about suffering being the only certain destination of human life. When linked with the Apollonian element, or artistic drive, it engenders myth and tragedy, which relieve the pain related to individual understanding. The modern man, deprived of these two medicines, despite all his knowledge and worldliness is doomed to the “homeless wandering around, a greedy thronging at foreign tables, a reckless idolizing of the present, or an apathetic, numbed turning away, with everything *sub specie saeculi...*”<sup>40</sup>. Nietzsche tells us “to keep hold of those leaders who illuminate the way for us, the Greeks [for whom] necessarily and closely art and people, myth and custom, tragedy and the state are fundamentally intertwined... even the most recent present had to appear to them at once *sub specie aeterni*”<sup>41</sup>. And in fact, the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as if inspired by Nietzsche, begins taking an interest in myth, folklore, and the primitive. The development of such areas of study as ethnography and ethnology, religious studies, anthropology is, on the one hand, a shining example of the hunger described by the author of *The Birth of Tragedy*, and on the other, a proof that the modern man has constantly to cheat this hunger with the working of his brain, his quest of knowledge.

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<sup>38</sup> F. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 15.

<sup>39</sup> F. Nietzsche, *An Attempt...*, p. 1.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

Meanwhile, numerous artists, their Apollonian (classicist) dream being over, followed the path laid out by Nietzsche, without necessarily admitting it. Those who turn their back on modernity as constructed according to the rules of reason and technology, look into themselves, into their human and at the same time animal nature, for some hidden powers. Exploring human psyche and subconscious, relying on individual experience and intuition rather than knowledge, transgressing cultural and social limitations (imposed e.g. by morality, aesthetics) as well as the limits of human body (inflicting physical and emotional pain on oneself) are among the various kinds of avant-garde activity, whose sources may be sought in the Dionysian element. We can actually find this element in most activities directed against reason, proliferating in modernism. R. Sheppard observes that, "Apollonian reason is attacked by disciples of Nietzsche in the name of Dionysian vitality; by the Futurists in the name of energy; by the Expressionists in the name of ecstasy; by the Dadaists [...] in the name of spontaneity, intuition and the imagination; and by the Surrealists in the name of dream and the unconscious"<sup>42</sup>.

The contrast between the Dionysian and Apollonian elements caused a further exacerbation of the symptoms of allergy to classical antiquity, as an apparently positive vision of the world. Apollo is above all a patron of visual arts, whose form is closed, logical, comprehensible, easily acceptable, but at the same time misleading. Those then who distrust images have to have recourse to other arts and human activities that express better the Dionysian element.<sup>43</sup> Dionysus is a god of mystery plays, dance and music, from where tragedy was born. It is not surprising then that the 20<sup>th</sup> century is a period of dramatic changes in theatre, dance, and music, and above all, it is a period that has brought most earnest attempts at combining all these kinds of art, at blurring the boundaries between them. Undoubtedly, it was under Nietzsche's inspiration that many artists returned to the archaic Greece. As A. Motycka puts it, in times of crisis, and beyond doubt, the 20<sup>th</sup> century abounded in crises, artists fled into the past, though not to imitate it, or to seek a model, but to find there some hidden creative energy. "It is not a quest for ready contents, new forms or tools, but for imagination. It is to renew one's creative imagination, to light the archetypal imagination. This is why a return to the past, to the Greek myths, to the ancient sources of culture is a journey into one's inner core, into the archaic layer, present in each of us, into the beginnings of the world. Creation of the

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<sup>42</sup> R. Sheppard, *op.cit.*, p. 26.

<sup>43</sup> Of course, we have to remember that Nietzsche gives the example of tragedy as a perfect unity of the two elements, Apollonian and Dionysian. In tragedy, the form (*techne*) is Apollonian, and it is thanks to this form that the Dionysian element may be expressed and presented. Whenever we view a product or activity as art, there is always an Apollonian element involved.

new involves the exploration of the archaic content. A regressive journey is what Eliade calls ‘the soul’s withdrawal into itself.’<sup>44</sup> The journey to the archaic, Dionysian Greece was the most efficient desensitization therapy: the antiquity was no longer only classical. The problem, however, lay with the fact that the journey was mostly imaginary, as there exists scant material evidence of the primitive, illiterate culture. Motycka rightly remarked that the journey is into one’s inner self, not in time or space. When Isadora Duncan was ‘freeing’ the dance, she looked for a model in ancient relics. What she found there, though, was not only costume and specific gestures, but above all the rule of the natural. “Greek art is neither national, nor characteristic, but it is and will always remain the art of humanity. Thus, while dancing naked upon the earth, I naturally fall into Greek positions, for Greek positions are only earth positions”<sup>45</sup>, wrote the dancer. In contrast, what Vatslav Nizhynsky found in the ancient relics was not fluidity or harmony, but the nervous pulse of primitivism, or even of animality, which he recreated in *The Afternoon of a Faun*<sup>46</sup>. The neo-avant-garde theatre and performance go even further, turning mostly towards the archaic ritual, the latter becoming much more attractive (dynamic, open) than a myth-text<sup>47</sup>. In 1960s, Herman Nitsch’s Orgien-Mysterien-Theater, Richard Schechner’s Performance Group or Einar Schlee’s performances alluded with their form and content to Dionysian rituals that involved bloody sacrifices made by the community of actors and spectators<sup>48</sup>.

The discovery of the two faces of Greece: Dionysian and Apollonian, or archaic and classical, enabled the artists to view it again as a source of inspirations. However, it does not follow from this that the Greek tradition was revived. It is safer to talk about the reception, inspiration, and interpretation. It is worth quoting Josif Brodsky, who observed that “In reality each era, each

<sup>44</sup> A. Motycka, „Postmodernizm a kryzys kulturowy”, in: *Postmodernizm a filozofia. Wybór tekstów*, ed. P. Czerniak, A. Szahaj, Warsaw 1996, p. 335.

<sup>45</sup> Isadora Duncan, *The Dance of the Future*, cited in: A. Iwańska, “Taniec Dionizosa. Próba opisu wpływu nietzscheańskiej koncepcji sztuki na twórczość choreograficzną Isadory Duncan, Waclawa Niżyńskiego i Mary Wigman”, in: *Dionizos i dionizyjskość. Mit–sztuka–filozofia–nauka*, ed. T. Drewniak, A. Dittmann, Nysa 2009, p. 283.

<sup>46</sup> Nizhynsky, dressed in a tricot imitating leopard skin, made dynamic animal movements, sometimes clumsy, sometimes fluid, with his knees bent, his head in profile, as on Greek reliefs. Rodin described his dance as follows ‘There are no more trunk bends, no jumps, only poses and gestures of a half-conscious animal... There is an absolute harmony of facial expression and body shape, the body expresses anything the reason wants... [He] embodies, the beauty of a fresco and of an ancient statue’. Cited in: T. Nasierowski, *Gdy rozum śpi a w mięśniach rodzi się obłąd.. O życiu i chorobie Waclawa Niżyńskiego*, Warszawa 2000, p. 159.

<sup>47</sup> E. Fischer-Lichte associates the development of research on ritual and theatre, especially in the circle of philologists “ritualists” from Cambridge, with the first performative turn in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Cf. E. Fischer-Lichte, *Estetyka performatywności*, Kraków 2008, p. 45.

<sup>48</sup> The particular performances are described in E. Fisher-Lichte, op.cit.

century, not to mention each culture, has its own Greece, its own Christianity, its own Orient, its own mythology. Each century simply offers its own interpretation, like a magnifying glass, in a sense. We're just yet another lens. And it simply indicates the distance that grows between us and myths, and I think the attempt to interpret is essentially proportionate to the distance."<sup>49</sup> It can be added that everybody needs a different Greece, and it is not knowledge but artistic alibi that is important. The Greece of the 19<sup>th</sup> and that of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries are projections of allergies, aversions, phobias, but also of needs, longings, and desires.

What is and what will be the image of the Greece of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? It is hard to determine as yet, but the previous analysis of postmodernism may bring us closer to the answer. Certainly, there is no evidence of an allergic reaction, whose main symptom would be either strong protests or dead silence. The exploitation of the past, characteristic of postmodernism, does not involve real engagement, either affirmative or critical. Postmodernism keeps its distance, finding freedom in utopian, modernist metanarration, in fluidity and pluralism. Greece is no longer exceptional as a cradle, a source, a spark. It belongs to the past, like Egypt, the Middle Ages or the Baroque; it has been placed in store, with ready-to-use motifs, fragments, and costumes. From time to time, various artists make use of elements from this store. In 1980s some Arcadian and neo-classical motifs, characteristically nostalgic and sentimental, appeared in American painting (Thomas Cornell, Edwin Dickinson, Alan Feltus). In Italy, Carlo M. Mariani creates paintings with classicist form and ironic content. In St. Petersburg, Timur Novikov and his disciples have declared the comeback of neo-classicism. Their works, mainly photographs going back to the Russian philhellenism of the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century rather than to the ancient Greece itself, show nostalgia, a longing for what will never come back, rather than attempting to restore the state of primary human happiness. Muriel Castanis created sculptures modelled on the antique ones, but they were just empty robes, draped fabrics fixed with resins, with no one wearing them any more. Igor Mitoraj's sculptures, despite the author's declared love for classical beauty, are also usually empty inside, deprived of heads or limbs. And this emptiness is painful; it is a vision of Greece as an empty shell of a painted egg, a pleasant form but void of any content. Many 21<sup>st</sup> century artists may also be attached not to the ancient or classical, but rather Asiatic (Alexandrian) Greece: sophisticated, homoerotic, ironic – I dare say camp. Actually, it is no longer Greece, but rather the declining Rome.

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<sup>49</sup> An Interview with Joseph Brodsky, in: *Points of Departure: International Writers on Writing* p.136, retrieved from: <http://books.google.pl/books?ei=T7ybTKPZKI6uOPP5u MYP&ct=result&id=cNxZAAAAMAAJ&dq=Josif+Brodski+David+Montenegro&q=orient>.

## CHOREA, OR THE ENERGY OF THE ANTIQUITY

Dariusz Kosiński called the type of interest in antiquity which was born at the Gardzienice Centre of Theatrical Practice “Polish antique movement”<sup>50</sup>. The play *Metamorphosis or a Golden Donkey* based on Apuleius exemplified a recent turn to ancient masterpieces, but also a quest for the relation between the distant past and the present. These activities, however, do not involve “bringing things up to date”, a process that is superficial and usually unfair to the past; they focus rather on looking for energy, life, spark in the past. Therefore, apart from a detailed analysis of the relics and the research on antiquity aimed at recovering its gestures, melody, and language, artists have mainly attempted to discover the common ground between their lives and the past. “Authenticity and fidelity to the prototype were never the most important or only considerations in my work on a new project”, wrote the actor Tomasz Rodowicz. “Theatre must be born not in a glass display case, under a magnifying glass, in the thinker’s head, but in an auditorium, among people, in a process whose point of departure is the only known element, where what is alive in us meets what may have been alive in the past”<sup>51</sup>.

The performance of *Metamorphosis* triggered the formation of two groups: “The Ancient Orchestra”, reconstructing ancient music, or rather speculating on its possible nature, and “The Labyrinth Dance Formation”, working on the reconstruction of Greek movement and dance on the basis of ancient iconography. With time, these two groups parted from Gardzienice theatre and formed a CHOREA Theatre Association, which implements the idea of trinity of the Greek chorea<sup>52</sup>.

Chorea, as described by Polish philologist Edward Zwolski, is the unity of word, music and gesture, a ritual form that accompanied the ancient people throughout their whole life, performed collectively, taking various forms depending on the reason for the performance (war, lamentation, or worship of particular gods)<sup>53</sup>. The singing, dance and music were performed simultaneously

<sup>50</sup> “I am convinced that in several years’ time there will be no doubts about its [the movement’s] value, and such masterpieces as *Dziady. Teatr święta zmarłych* by Leszek Kolaniewicz, *Realność bogów* by Wiesław Juszczak, *Metamorfozy* by Gardzienice Centre of Theatrical Practice, or the concerts of The Ancient Orchestra will constitute landmarks and turns in the development of what is important and alive in the long term in Polish culture”, D. Kosiński, “Ch/mury“ *Konteksty. Polska Sztuka Ludowa*, 2006, no. 2, p. 60.

<sup>51</sup> T. Rodowicz, „Onon orchesis – Taniec Osła. O pracy nad ‘Metamorfozami’”, *Konteksty. Polska Sztuka Ludowa*, 2001, vol. 55, p. 49.

<sup>52</sup> Of course, Gardzienice did not give up antiquity, including work on music and gesture (inter alia cheironomy, or the art of gesture) in their important projects.. It seems, though, that in this case gesture and music complement the text and plot.

<sup>53</sup> See: E. Zwolski, *Choreia. Muza i bóstwo w religii greckiej*, Warszawa 1978.

and, most likely, by the same people; the triunity presented a formidable challenge to the actors and formed the basis of their work. The actors had to be dancers, singers, and musicians at the same time. The crucial and essential part of the whole work was the rhythm, which enabled the CHOREA group to reconstruct the dance, to fill in the missing elements between the particular gestures presented on Greek vases; finally, rhythm as the metre of Greek poetry, together with tonic accent, made it possible to sing the Greek text. Nonetheless, the result is less a reconstruction and more an interpretation of the Greek chorea. Its most creative part are actually the filled-in fragments. Thus, the work on the ancient chorea developed into an impulse to consolidate an acting method. Dorota Porowska, actress and choreographer, author of the performance *Dances from a labyrinth* observes: "By calling our choreography 'dances from a labyrinth', we wished to imply a mystery and draw attention to the ritual character of Greek dance. Today, such an understanding of this dance may only have consequences of a technical nature – prompting us to make good use of our energy and means of artistic expression – as its religious dimension had been lost. We can at most emphasise the ethical dimension of the process itself"<sup>54</sup>. Chorea has thus become a working method on the one hand, and on the other, a principle, a structure around which subsequent performances are built, either inspired by antiquity, like *Theseus in a labyrinth*, *Antigone*, *The chants of Euripides*, or contemporary, like *Playing Mr Cogito*<sup>55</sup>. It has to state clearly that neither gesture nor music plays an illustrative or mimetic role here; they are both equal, principal elements, which is very clear, also to the spectator. Moreover, the text is no longer the most important part, as the songs are often performed in ancient Greek. The unity of chorea demands from actors great flexibility and almost acrobatic fitness, the ability to perform several activities simultaneously, musicality. What is the most important in it, however, is cooperation, mutual trust within the troupe, openness to others. The unity is an impulse for communal effort, lost in the present era, theatre included. It is also a call for all the parts of the human body, that our culture has separated and often marginalized to unite. The spectator, too, is willy-nilly exposed to the impact of music, and particularly of rhythm, which is felt as penetrating one's body. The impossibility of interpreting the performance in a purely rational way makes us realize the role of the body, which engages us in the reception, this time not only via the sense of sight.

Antiquity is then not a mirror that the actors use, and into which we can look today to see the differences and similarities between the ancients and our-

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<sup>54</sup> D. Porowska, „Tezeusz i Tańce Labiryntu”. *Konteksty. Polska Sztuka Ludowa*, 2006, no. 2, p. 67.

<sup>55</sup> Retrieved from [www.chorea.com.pl](http://www.chorea.com.pl).



selves. Antiquity is a deeply hidden source, in which one can hear the pulsing rhythm of the human life from two thousand years ago. This rhythm may be remembered and can become helpful in our reading of the present. As D. Kosiński writes, “Increasingly lost in the world that we have arranged for ourselves, we try to return to this threshold, recovering the primary meanings of words, conjuring shapes and sounds from non-existence, following barely visible tracks of experiential reality. Looking at one’s reflection in the Greek sources allows us to see our reality in a different light, and via comparison, refreshes the understanding of our own identity”<sup>56</sup>.

The above-mentioned “cases” of allergy to antiquity that has been cured do not yet prove that the “illness” has been eliminated. On the contrary, this illness is so common that any involvement and earnest attempt at desensitization evoke surprise and a condescending sneer. What I finally want to point out, however, is that it is not only artists who are to blame for this state of affairs, but also those who are primarily responsible for the presence of antiquity in our lives. Jerzy Axer’s words are significant in this regard: “Classical philology has lost its place of honour among the humanities. It can hardly endure such degradation. The common symptoms of frustration include sticking to outdated methods of research, and an obstinate habit of asking questions that do not bring any answers of current relevance. And all this under the pretext of emphasizing the antiquity’s educational role and timeless character. A better reaction than this particular allergy would be giving voice to the anxieties of contemporary humanities, and the acceptance of the tools worked out by such fields of study as narrative theory, linguistics, anthropology, historical research.”<sup>57</sup> Note the significant use of the term “allergy” in the quote: it is the allergy to the present in those who have fled into antiquity. The researchers – willy-nilly interpreters – should probably reconsider listening more carefully to the artists hitherto looked down upon.<sup>58</sup> Sensitivity, perspicacity and empathy may prove as useful here as knowledge.

*Translated by Joanna Urbanowicz*

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<sup>56</sup> D. Kosiński, op.cit., p. 60.

<sup>57</sup> „Teatr-widz, tekst-czytelnik. Rozmowa z prof. Jerzym Axerem”, in: Jerzy Ciechanowicz, *Medea i czereśnie. Rozmowy o starożytności*, Warszawa 1994, p. 77.

<sup>58</sup> Mieczysław Jastrun notes that the activity of the philologists has led to a false vision of humanity. “Ancient Greece, the paradise of philologists, the promised land of poets, owes its outstanding popularity throughout the history of the human spirit not only to its great values, but also to the ‘blaze of falsehood’ blinding those who saw in it their dream of the marble, if not golden, age of humanity come true. It is enough to read Homer’s epics with conscious awareness to notice in them all the crimes of our times in the bud, told in the seductive language of poetry”. A poet may be someone who deceives, but also someone who sees and dares to say more than the others. M. Jastrun, op.cit. 161.

**O DWUDZIESTOWIECZNEJ ALERGII NA ANTYK I PRÓBACH  
JEJ PRZEZWYCIĘŻENIA  
(streszczenie)**

Nieobecność odniesień do antyku w kulturze XX wieku jest bardzo wyraźna. Odnowienie antyku raczej nie nastąpi w świadomości zbiorowej, może natomiast być świadomym i ważnym wyborem poszczególnych twórców. Odszukiwanie wpływów antyku (czy mówienie o jego recepcji) w wieku XX jest więc wyluskiwaniem fragmentów, pojedynczych wątków, krótkotrwałych fascynacji i świadomych wyjątków. Niniejszy artykuł jest próbą ukazania przyczyn owej alergii na antyk, zwłaszcza utożsamiany z klasycyzmem. W drugiej części artykuł jest krótkim przeglądem postaw i praktyk artystycznych, w których starożytna Grecja pozostała inspiracją i ważnym punktem odniesienia, przede wszystkim jako źródło „żywołu dionizyjского”. Na koniec zaś w omówieniu techniki aktorskiej wzorowanej na antycznej chorei pokazuje, jak nowoczesny efekt może stworzyć czerpanie z przeszłości.

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## **THE UNKNOWN MASTERPIECE BY HONORÉ BALZAC, OR THE PRACTICAL TRAP OF THEORY**

**Abstract:** The author analyzes Honoré Balzac's story *The Unknown Masterpiece*, arguing that one of the main questions raised by the writer concerns the relationship between artistic theory and practice. He refers to such thinkers as Martin Heidegger, Giorgio Agamben, and a variety of different interpretations of the story in order to show that insofar as art is concerned, theory has a double effect, resembling a *pharmakon*, a substance which, as pointed out by Jacques Derrida, may have positive and negative influence: it is a positive element, for it actually turns mere objects into artworks, but at the same time it can put limits on artistic practice. The author claims that the feedback between theory and practice can be observed very clearly in Master Frenhofer's art, which justifies a great interest in this story shared by 20<sup>th</sup> century artists, philosophers, historians of literature and art historians.

**Key words:** Balzac – Agamben – Heidegger – masterpiece – artistic theory – artistic practice – *pharmakon*

Martin Heidegger opens his essay “The origin of the work of art” with the famous passage in which he indissolubly associates art, the work of art and the artist in such a way that none of them can be conceived without the other two. The “origin” means – as we are told – “the source of something's nature”. A work of art is made by an artist. And what makes someone an artist? The art that he creates. Hence,

[n]either is without the other. Nevertheless, neither is the sole support of the other. In themselves and in their interrelations artist and work are each of them by virtue of a third thing which is prior to both, namely that which also gives artist and work of art their names – art.<sup>1</sup>

However, it does not follow from the quotation that art as such – i.e. as the origin of both works of art and artists – depends in any way on what it

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<sup>1</sup> M. Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, transl. by A. Hofstadter, qtd after: C. Cazeaux (ed.), *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*, Routledge, London 2000, p. 80.

originates. Therefore, it may seem that it is enough to simply define art to understand the nature of the works of art and the artists. Yet for Heidegger the problem is not so clear, as we cannot really know for sure whether art can be the origin of anything.

Where and how does art occur? – he asks – Art – this is nothing more than a word to which nothing really any longer corresponds. It may pass for a collective idea under which we find a place for that which alone is real in art: works and artists. Even if the word ‘art’ were taken to signify more than a collective notion, what is meant by the word could exist only on the basis of actuality of works and artists. Or is the converse the case? Do works and artists exist because art exists as their origin?<sup>2</sup>

Whatever art may be, one thing is beyond any doubt, namely that thanks to artists it “occurs” in artworks. Thus if we set out to find the essence of art, we should look for it nowhere but in the works themselves, since – as Heidegger claims – it is where the answer to the question concerning the essence of art is hidden and where it can be revealed to us. It is only now that we can see we are moving in a circle: we literally cannot infer what art is without artworks as premises, but at the same time it is impossible to be sure whether we have selected the correct premises not knowing how to define the criterion, namely art. The first conclusion Heidegger arrives at is that although all artworks are material objects, they are something more than that. This is why an art work is an allegory (*allos egorein*); it makes public something other than itself.<sup>3</sup> As something combining two elements – itself and “the other” – an art work is a symbol (*syn-ballein*) as well.

A much longer elaboration of this allegorical dimension of the artwork can be found in Giorgio Agamben’s explicitly Heideggerian essay, *The Man Without Content*:

That the work of art is something other than what is simple in it is almost too obvious. This is what the Greeks expressed with the concept of allegory: the work of art communicates something else, is something other than the material that contains it. But there are objects – for example, a block of stone, a drop of water, and generally all natural objects – in which form seems to be determined and almost canceled out by matter, and other objects – a vase, a spade, or any other man-made object – in which form seems to be what determines matter<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 81.

<sup>4</sup> G. Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, transl. by G. Albert, The Stanford University Press, Stanford 1999, pp. 8–9.

According to Agamben, artists may assume contrasting attitudes toward the works that they are creating and their inherent allegorical dimension – they can be either rhetoricians or terrorists. Rhetoric and terror, to follow his nomenclature, are thus two different philosophies or theories of art.

There are the Rhetoricians, who dissolve all meaning into form and make form into the sole law of literature, and the Terrorists, who refuse to bend to this law and instead pursue the opposite dream of a language that would be nothing but meaning, of a thought in whose flame the sign would be fully consumed, putting the writer face to face with the Absolute.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, a rhetorician is interested solely in the forms of representation, no matter what they represent, while a terrorist wants to create something which is not a mere resemblance, but the thing itself.

If we were to extrapolate this distinction to the field of visual arts and to think of a paradigmatic example of a visual terrorist, the person that comes to mind – Pygmalion – is known ironically only through literature. So, consequently, an exemplary visual rhetorician would be an anti-Pygmalion. Pygmalion's familiar story tells of a man who created a sculpture of a woman and found himself in love with her. Thanks to divine help, the marble sculpture became alive and [...] Pygmalion and Galatea lived happily ever after. If the above is Pygmalion's story, then the story of anti-Pygmalion should be its reverse; the happy ending should be replaced by an unhappy one.

The myth of Pygmalion – as a story about a piece of art coming alive in some sense or another, not necessarily with a happy ending – served as model for early modern and modern descriptions (*ekphrases*) of works of art and for a literary *genre*, popular especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Probably the best known and commented on “pygmalionesque” short story is one with an unhappy ending. There is no other literary protagonist who would deserve to be called “anti-Pygmalion” more than Master Frenhofer, one of the main characters in Honoré Balzac's story *The Unknown Masterpiece*. Agamben – interested in modern art – regards him as a paradigmatic terrorist. However, in contrast to Pygmalion (also a terrorist), Frenhofer ends up as a rhetorician – and there is probably nothing more disappointing for such person than to see that the terror (even if only artistic, as is the case here) he was trying to spread turns out to be only vain rhetoric.

The plot of the story is quite simple: on one winter morning in 1612 young Nicolas Poussin, craving knowledge and experience, goes to the *atelier* of

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 8.

a renowned painter, Frans Porbus, to see his paintings. There, he meets another artist, Master Frenhofer, who acknowledges the great value of the host's works, but at the same time criticizes them for lack of life. At this point, he decides to correct them by adding some *pentimenti*. In the meantime he perorates on the ideal of art, developing his own theory and claiming to have discovered the secret of the pictures true to life. He mentions that he has been working for years on a portrait of a lady, Catherine Lescault, *la belle noiseuse* – the beautiful troublemaker, and he has almost finished it. However, until it remains uncompleted, he will not show it to anyone. The real problem, he states, is that his picture represents such a beautiful woman that he could not find a real one, equally beautiful, to whom he could compare his creation. Poussin, fervently eager to see this mysterious and genial image, decides to “trade” his young and handsome girlfriend (despite obvious hesitation on her part): Frenhofer will have her in order to compare the real woman with the painted one, and in exchange Poussin and Porbus will see the picture. So it happens, but when these two are shown Frenhofer's masterpiece, they cannot see anything but chaotic scribbles covering the whole canvas, except for one fragment where a woman's feet of an incomparable finesse can be seen.

Balzac's text, in spite of its apparent simplicity, is far from obvious, which largely accounts for the great interest it generated. To show its enigmatic character it is enough to point to three elements: the dedication *to a lord* followed by almost a hundred of asterisks; the date *1832* with which the text ends, which is neither the date when the story was written, nor the date when it was published; the fact that between 1831 and 1847 in successive editions the piece changed its character – ceasing to be a mainly fantastic love story *a la E.T.A. Hoffmann* and becoming an *étude philosophique* – and what is even more important here, having its ending radically altered<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, it must

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<sup>6</sup> General information can be found in: P. Laubriet, *Un catéchisme esthétique. Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu de Balzac*, Didier, Paris 1961, pp. 11–51; H. Balzac, *La Comédie humaine*, vol. X, *Études philosophiques sous la direction de P. Castex*, Gallimard, Paris 1979, pp. 393–412, 1401–1409; R. Guise, “Lire le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu” in: *Autour du “Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu” de Balzac*, École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs, Paris 1985, pp. 9–13; T. Kashigawi, “‘Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu’. Conte d'amour ou conte de peinture?”, *Equinoxe*, no. 11, printemps 1994: pp. 43–53; H. Balzac, *Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu*, présentation, notes, chronologie et dossier par F.-X. Hervouët, Flammarion, Paris 2004; idem, *Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu. Gambara. Massimila Doni*, présentation par M. Eigeldinger, M. Milner, Flammarion, Paris 2008; on artistic themes see: M. Wingfield Scott, *Art and Artists in Balzac's “Comédie humaine”*, The University of Chicago Libraries, Chicago 1937, pp. 29–42; J. Adhémar, “Balzac et les peintres” in *Arts. Beaux-Arts, littérature, spectacle*, 1951, p. 4; idem, “Balzac et la peinture”, *Revue des sciences humaines*, no. 69/1953, pp. 149–162; W. Conner, “Balzac's Frenhofer”, *Modern Language Notes*, vol. 69, no. 5, 1954, pp. 335–338; A. Goetz, “Frenhofer et les maîtres d'autrefois”, *L'Année balzacienne*, no. 14/1994, pp. 69–89; P. Whyte, “Le Chef-

have been the character of Frenhofer who – especially in the last edition, which became the canonical one for posterity – is tragic and suggestive that inspired such artists as Paul Cézanne, who exclaimed *Frenhofer c'est moi!*, or Pablo Picasso, who not only illustrated the Vollard edition of the novel in 1931 (for the centenary of its publication), but rented an atelier in the same street in which Porbus had had his own<sup>7</sup>. Even Karl Marx is said to have identified himself with the old master<sup>8</sup>.

*The Unknown Masterpiece*, together with *Gambara* and *Massimila Doni* form a triptych about – as Balzac stated himself – *l'oeuvre et l'exécution tuées par la trop grande abondance du principe créateur*; these are stories about *la pensée arrivée à tout son développement produit dans l'âme de l'artiste*<sup>9</sup>. Balzac's general interest in art – as a theoretician and collector – is well known. The role of the artist in *La Comédie humaine* as well as its author's taste and aesthetic creed has been thoroughly analyzed<sup>10</sup>. However, although in this *cathéchisme esthétique*, as one of the interpreters called *The Unknown Masterpiece*, we can find motifs present in other works (e.g. a misunderstood, almost insane genius can be found in *Gambara* or *The Quest of the Absolute*), it seems to crystallize Balzac's ideas in the most concise way and Balzac

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d'oeuvre inconnu' de Balzac: esthétique et image", *Text(e)image*, no. 7/1999, pp. 109–110. In 1991 Jacques Rivette made his *La belle noiseuse*.

<sup>7</sup> In general see: C. Coeuré, Ch. Massol, "Postérité du 'Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu'", in: *Balzac et la peinture*, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Tours 1999, pp. 153–169; on Cézanne see: M. Eigeldinger, *La philosophie de l'art chez Balzac*, Pierre Cailler, Genève 1957, pp. 69–70; B. Vouiloux, "Frenhofer c'est moi". Postérité cézannienne du récit balzacienne", *Eidolon*, no. 52/1999, pp. 187–233; J. Kear, "Frenhofer, c'est moi": Cézanne's Nudes and Balzac's *Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu*", *The Cambridge Quarterly*, vol. 35/2006, pp. 345–360; on Picasso see: T. Chabanne, "Picasso illustre... Illustre Picasso", in: *Autour du Chef-d'oeuvre*, op.cit., pp. 99–126; B. Léal, "Ces Balzac de Picasso", in: *L'Artiste selon Balzac, Entre la toise du savant et le vertige du fou*, Éditions des musées de la Ville de Paris, Paris 1999. In his film Rivette shows the contemporary Frenhofer as a Picasso-like artist (L. Nead, "Seductive Canvases: Visual Mythologies of the Artist and Artistic Creativity", *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 18/1995, pp. 59–69).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 171, footnote 28.

<sup>9</sup> Balzac's letter to Mme Hanska (24.05.1837) quoted after H. Balzac, *La Comédie humaine*, op.cit., pp. 393–394;

<sup>10</sup> See footnote 6 and: M. Gilman, "Balzac and Diderot", *PMLA*, vol. 65/1950, pp. 644–648; M. Eigeldinger, op.cit.; P. Laubriet, *L'intelligence de l'art chez Balzac. D'une esthétique balzacienne*, Slatkin Reprints, Genève–Paris–Gex 1961/1980; Stephen J. Gendzier, "Art Criticism and the Novel: Diderot and Balzac", *The French Review*, vol. 35/1962, pp. 302–310; O. Bonard, *La peinture dans la création balzacienne*, Librairie Droz, Genève 1969; H.O. Borowitz, "Balzac's Unknown Masters", *Romanic Review*, vol. LXXII/1981, pp. 425–441; F. Pitt-Rivers, *Balzac et l'art*, Chêne, Paris 1993; *L'Artiste selon Balzac*, op.cit.; *Balzac et la peinture*, op.cit.; P.-A. Castanet, *Balzac et la musique, textes réunis et annotés*, Michel de Maule, Paris 2000; D. Knight, "Balzac and the model of painting: artist stories in 'La Comédie humaine'", *Legenda*, London 2007.

probably tended to identify himself with Frenhofer whom he conceived as a genial, norm-breaking artist<sup>11</sup>.

Depending on how we treat Frenhofer, i.e. whether we look at him and his fate through Balzac's eyes or from the standpoint of Cézanne or Picasso, we can get as a result two different interpretations of the story. This duplicity is enhanced by the changes that the text underwent in 16 years.

The successive editions differ – apart from the amount of theoretical discourse, which grows to finally become almost the core of the story – in the last words exchanged between Frenhofer and the artists, and in what happens to Frenhofer. In the earlier versions, Porbus and Poussin maintain that they can see nothing on the canvas, while Frenhofer – throwing them out, accuses them of being artistically blind. In a word, both he and his opponents remain convinced that the truth is on their side. In the final version, Frenhofer throws them out, too, but then we find out that the following night he burned his paintings and died, which suggests – as we may infer – that he finally did share his fellows' opinion and ceased to see anything but *une multitude de ligne bizarres qui forment une muraille de peinture*. The canvas revealed to him that what he had been pursuing was only the Pygmalion myth, and that, in fact, he had reduced himself to a pitiable anti-Pygmalion<sup>12</sup>.

If we decide to remain within the artistic horizon of Balzac's times, we can see that the theoretical debate over the essence of art conducted by the three 17<sup>th</sup> century artists is actually a projection of the problems heatedly discussed in France in the 1820s and 1830s.<sup>13</sup> Frenhofer, thus, turns out to be a representative of a Romantic aesthetics: the artist has to be a genius, art does not have to imitate reality<sup>14</sup>. Art must not copy life, it must express it. So “The

<sup>11</sup> See W. Paulson, “Pour une analyse dynamique de la variation textuelle: Le Chef-d'oeuvre trop connu”, *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, vol. 19/1991, pp. 404–416.

<sup>12</sup> However, we may note that it is Sarrasine (see below) that is closer to Pygmalion than Frenhofer, see: H. Schillony, “En marge du ‘Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu’: Frenhofer, Apelle et David”, *L'Année balzacienne*, no. 3/1983, pp. 288–290.

<sup>13</sup> N. Heinrich, “Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu ou l'artiste investi”, in: *Autour du Chef-d'oeuvre*, op.cit., p. 75–83; J. Labarthe-Postel, *Littérature et peinture dans le roman moderne. Une rhétorique de la vision*, L'Harmattan, Paris 2002, pp. 158–187.

<sup>14</sup> A.-M. Baron, “Fondements métaphysique de l'image balzacienne”, *L'Année balzacienne*, no. 5, 2004, p. 24; P. Collini, “Iconolatrie et iconoclastie: ‘Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu’ et le romantisme allemand”, *L'Année balzacienne*, no. 5/2004, pp. 75–85; D. Gleizes, “‘Copier c'est vivre’. Des valeurs de l'oeuvre d'art dans le roman balzacien”, *L'Année balzacienne*, no. 5/2004, pp. 151–167; A. Bresnick, “Absolute fetishism: genius and identification in Balzac's ‘Unknown Masterpiece’”, *Paragraph*, vol. 17/1994, pp. 134–152; M. Brix, “Frenhofer et les chefs-d'oeuvre qui restent inconnus”, in: *Ecrire la peinture entre XVIII<sup>e</sup> et XIX<sup>e</sup> siècles*, ed. P. Auraix-Jonchière, Presses Universitaires Blaise Pascal, Clermont-Ferrand 2003, pp. 241–252.



Unknown Masterpiece” appears to be a story about the conflict between Classicism and Romanticism, and Frenhofer – albeit very eclectic in his theory<sup>15</sup> – is an incarnation of a Romantic artist, or to be precise, is a classical artist in the process of becoming a Romantic one<sup>16</sup>. This is how we can understand Frenhofer’s totalizing aspiration to combine *dessin* (i.e. Dominique Ingres’s style) and *couleur* (i.e. Eugène Delacroix’s style).

On the other hand, we can follow Cézanne’s and Picasso’s example and look at Frenhofer and his work “preposterously”<sup>17</sup>, i.e. from the perspective of 20<sup>th</sup> century art. We may quote here at some length a paragraph from Jean Paulhan’s book *L’art informel* as it seems paradigmatic for such a preposterous art-historical interpretation (incidentally it can be said that it is from his book *Les Fleurs des Tarbes* that Agamben borrows the rhetorician/terrorist distinction):

La peinture informelle apparaît certain jour de l’année 1910: c’est lorsque Braque et Picasso se mettent à composer des portraits, ou pas un homme de bon sens ne saurait distinguer des yeux, un nez ni une tête. [...] Il s’est produit, avec les Informels, un renversement du sens courant de la Peinture. Ce renversement peut tenir en quelques mots: les peintres, jusqu’à nos jours, avaient des idées, et puis ils en faisaient des tableaux. Ils formaient la pensée [...], ensuite ils reportaient sur leurs toiles de signes – lignes, pointes, traits et le rest [...] Ils ajoutaient des couleurs. Mais c’est aujourd’hui tout le contraire qui arrive [...] Bref, les anciens peintres commençaient par le sens, et lui trouvaient des signes. Mais les nouveaux commencent par des signes, auxquels il ne reste plus qu’à trouver un sens. [...] Il ne semble pas qu’une telle peinture ait jamais connu la fortune, qui lui vient aujourd’hui. [...] Il est une autre toile célèbre qui a fait la hantise de plus d’un peintre: c’était, vers l’année 1612, le portrait de Catherine Lescault la belle courtisane; ce portrait n’offrait à l’œil que [...] chaos de couleurs, brouillard sans formes [...] A proprement parler, ce portrait n’avait pas été exposé en son temps. Il l’est depuis cinquante ans à mille et mille exemplaires.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, the unknown masterpiece painted by Frenhofer appears to be the first abstract painting and the painter himself turns out to be a genius who can, as it were, foresee Abstract Expressionism, but cannot provide its full articulation. He creates a work which is not understood by anyone, but which nevertheless lays the foundations for 20<sup>th</sup> century art at the same time. In other words, the

<sup>15</sup> See footnotes 6, 10.

<sup>16</sup> S. Petrey, *Catherine Lescault and Louis-Philippe: Performative Representation in and around Balzac*, “The French Review”, vol. 65, no. 5, 1992, pp. 733–745.

<sup>17</sup> On “preposterous” interpretation see my article “The Space of Art History. Mieke Bal’s ‘preposterousness’”, *Art Inquiry. Recherches sur les arts*, vol. XX/ 2009, pp.159–173.

<sup>18</sup> J. Paulhan, *L’art informel*, Gallimard, Paris 1962, pp. 7, 10–12.

painting evidences a crisis of representation<sup>19</sup>, but concurrently we can witness here a deep change in the very idea of art as representation: it is no longer justified by what is represented, its role is not solely to transmit a sense, some content; on the contrary, representation is fully justified by the simple fact that it is a representation. In other words, art and its forms can now support themselves, they become autonomous, just as is stated by the maxim “art for art’s sake”.<sup>20</sup> In the 1830 version Frenhofer says: *cette femme n’est pas une création, c’est une créature*, while in 1837 he says instead: *cette femme n’est pas une créature, c’est une création*. Whereas the former statement corresponds to the *trompe-l’oeil* aesthetics (we believe we are looking at an object, and not at its image), the latter completely ignores reality – there is nothing but art that counts<sup>21</sup>. Paradoxically, from this point of view it is Poussin who acts in an “avant-garde” way, sacrificing his girlfriend on the altar of art, and not Frenhofer, who submits his art to reality at the very moment when he agrees to compare his work with a real woman<sup>22</sup>. It is possible to see in Frenhofer’s canvas not so much a fictitious archetype of an abstract painting or, as it were, a negation of art, but an account of how modern artists conceive artistic creation, namely, as extracting forms from chaos.<sup>23</sup> The French title *La belle noiseuse* derives from the word *noise*, and it is from such noise that Catherine Lescault emerges like Aphrodite from sea foam<sup>24</sup>. Once again we go back to *art informel*, now conceived as an open work, being no more than a maelstrom of possibilities, which at first sight mean (almost) nothing.

In other words, if we assume that, as we can legitimately, Pygmalion’s myth established a “terrorist” *trompe-l’oeil* tradition in which the supreme goal was to create a work in which representation is supposed to turn into presentation<sup>25</sup> (Frenhofer warns his friends not to seek an image but a model), then Balzac’s story appears as an anti-Pygmalion myth – situated to some extent outside history: when is the old tradition reversed, in 1612, 1831 or 1832?<sup>26</sup> – commencing the tradition of “rhetorical” modernist painting reaching its peak in Pollock’s dripping technique. Frenhofer’s aim remains unfulfilled, which

<sup>19</sup> J. Kear, op.cit., p. 345.

<sup>20</sup> N. Heinrich, op.cit., p. 81.

<sup>21</sup> S. Petrey, op.cit., p. 733; E. Gans, “Balzac’s Unknowable Masterpiece and the Limits of the Classical Esthetic”, *Modern Language Notes*, vol. 90/1975, pp. 504–516.

<sup>22</sup> N. Heinrich, op.cit., p. 80.

<sup>23</sup> F. Pitt-Rivers, op.cit., p. 86; J. Labarthe-Postel, op. cit, p. 159.

<sup>24</sup> M. Serres, *Genèse*, Éditions Grasset et Fasquelle, Paris 1982, pp. 25–52.

<sup>25</sup> L. Marin, “Des noms et des corps dans la peinture: marginalia au ‘Chef-d’oeuvre inconnu’”, in: *Autour du Chef-d’oeuvre*, op.cit., pp. 45–58.

<sup>26</sup> See: V. Stoichita, “Le ‘Chef-d’oeuvre inconnu’ et la présentation du pictural”, in: *La Présentation*, ed. R. Passeron, Éditions CNO.S, Paris 1985, p. 88.

unfortunately for everyone (including Poussin's lover), makes the real woman's body for painted woman's body transaction senseless<sup>27</sup>. The missed goal makes the old master – who according to early modern requirements tried to emulate his venerable Greek mythological ancestor – a rhetorician (all that he said before about his exquisite, unrivaled painting proves to be rhetoric, and the terror he as the inimitable master used to inflict turns out to be a vein menace).

Almost from the first words – describing Frenhofer climbing up the stairs leading to Porbus's *atelier* – the reader is struck by the painterly value of the descriptions in “The Unknown Masterpiece”. The story consists, as it were, of a series of more or less complex *ekphrases*: the writer wants either to describe the settings and the protagonists of the story as if they were painted by a skilful hand (e.g. descriptions of the painters' studios) or to give an account of the paintings (Porbus's *Mary the Egyptian*, Poussin's drawing, Frenhofer's Catherine Lescault)<sup>28</sup>. Balzac appears then to be both a writer and a painter, so Frenhofer's *idée fixe* is to some extent his own. However, if this is the case, then is Balzac not doomed to the same fate? Will his short story not turn out to be a series of asterisks: either totally devoid of meaning for all receivers or enigmatic, even verging on nonsense only for those who do not know how to decode them? Does the peculiar dedication in the form (contrary to usual custom) of an abnormally long series of asterisks not resemble Frenhofer's canvas? <sup>29</sup> Only a fragment (*to a lord*) can be understood by everyone – as everybody could see the beautiful feet – the rest is nothing – as Poussin and Porbus see *rien* on the canvas<sup>30</sup>. The dedication – if we can look at it “preposterously”, too – closely resembles a log-in field in computer programs, so if a reader does not know the password she cannot get all the “options” offered by the story. Now, the question is whether Balzac is the only person who knows how to fill in this field or not. In any case, this trick does divide the readers into two categories: the initiates (even if there is only one such person,

<sup>27</sup> Many interpretations go in this direction, see e.g.: J-L. Filoche, “‘Le Chef-d’oeuvre inconnu’: peinture et connaissance”, *L’Année balzacienne*, no. 1/1980, pp. 47–59; C.E. Bernard, “La problématique de l’‘échange’ dans ‘Le Chef-d’oeuvre inconnu’ d’Honoré de Balzac”, in: *L’Année balzacienne*, no. 4/1984, pp. 201–213; H. Damisch, *La fenêtre jeune cadmium, ou, les dessous de la peinture*, Le seuil, Paris 1984, chapter I; G. Didi-Huberman, *La peinture incarnée*, Éditions de Minuit, Paris 1985; M.D. Houston, “L’artiste prostituée dans ‘Le Chef-d’oeuvre inconnu’ d’Honoré de Balzac”, *Romance Notes*, vol. XXXVII/1996, pp. 89–95.

<sup>28</sup> B. Vannier, “Scriptural et Pictural”, *Modern Language Notes*, vol. 84/1969, pp. 627–645; Y. Went-Daoust, “Le Chef-d’oeuvre inconnu de Balzac ou l’écriture picturale”, in: *Description-écriture-peinture*, textes réunis par Y. Went-Daoust, C.R.I.N., no. 17, 1987, pp. 48–64.

<sup>29</sup> S. Le Men, “L’indicible et l’irreprésentable: les éditions illustrées du ‘Chef-d’oeuvre inconnu’”, in: *Autour du ‘Chef-d’oeuvre’*, op.cit., p. 27.

<sup>30</sup> K. Bongiorno, “Balzac, Frenhofer, ‘Le Chef-d’oeuvre inconnu’: Ut Poesis Pictura”, *Mosaic*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2000, pp. 92–93.

namely, the author) and the non-initiates. Frenhofer pretends to possess the secret almost throughout the whole story, and when – in the earlier versions of the text – he throws Poussin and Porbus out of his personal temple of art, it is because they did not succeed in the initiatory ritual consequent on their entering the atelier: as non-initiates they cannot see the correct object which they regard as hidden beneath the “wall of paint”. Nevertheless, in the later versions, Frenhofer realizes that he, too, is not really initiated and finds that what he had revered for so long as an ideal of painting is a false idol. While painting, he was not in fact looking at the canvas before him, but rather at a specter of something that he himself had created through his theory<sup>31</sup>. “What happens to Frenhofer?” – asks Agamben:

So long as no other eye contemplated his masterpiece, he did not doubt his success for one moment; but one look at the canvas through the eyes of his two spectators is enough for him to appropriate Porbus’s and Poussin’s opinion [...] Frenhofer becomes double. He moves from the point of view of the artist to that of the spectator, from the interested *promesse de bonheur* to disinterested aesthetics. In this transition, the integrity of his work dissolves. For it is not only Frenhofer that becomes double, but his work as well; just as in some combinations of geometric figures, which, if observed for a long time, acquire a different arrangement, from which one cannot return to the previous one except by closing one’s eyes, so his work alternately presents two sides that cannot be put back together into a unity. The side that faces the artist is the living reality in which he reads his promise of happiness; but the other side, which faces the spectator, is an assemblage of lifeless elements that can only mirror itself in the aesthetic judgment’s reflection of it. This doubling between art as it is lived by the spectator, on the one hand, and art as it is lived by the artist on the other is indeed Terror, and thus the opposition between Terror and Rhetoric brings us back to the opposition between artists and spectators [...]<sup>32</sup>.

In other words, Frenhofer becomes a rhetorician when in respect to his own work he assumes a beholder’s perspective and sees not a *creature*, but a *creation*. And this happens because

The quest for absolute meaning has devoured all meaning, allowing only signs, meaningless forms, to survive. But, then, isn’t the unknown masterpiece instead the masterpiece of Rhetoric? Has the meaning erased the sign, or has the sign abolished the meaning? And here the Terrorist comes face to face with the paradox of the Terror. In order to leave the evanescent world of forms, he has no other means than form itself, and the more he wants to erase

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<sup>31</sup> See V. Bartoli-Anglard, “L’art et l’idéal dans ‘Le Chef-d’oeuvre inconnu’ de Balzac”, *L’Ecole des lettres*, 15.04.1994, pp. 21–44.

<sup>32</sup> G. Agamben, *op.cit.*, p. 11.

it, the more he has to concentrate on it to render it permeable to the inexpressible content he wants to express. But in the attempt, he ends up with nothing in his hands but signs-signs that, although they have traversed the limbo of non-meaning, are no less extraneous to the meaning he was pursuing. Fleeing from Rhetoric has led him to the Terror, but the Terror brings him back to its opposite, Rhetoric.<sup>33</sup>

Frenhofer's defeat is double: he does not succeed as a painter in creating a work that would leave everyone speechless for its beauty and not for its bizarreness, and he fails to give a convincing description of his canvas which would open the eyes of the incredulous spectators. The two artists treat him as hallucinating not because they cannot find what they expected to see, but because of how he describes these fancy scribbles. When trying to describe what is ("is" not in the figurative, but in the literal or ontological sense) in the painting, Frenhofer is once again subject to the fatal "terror/rhetoric" paradox: he tries to use words to convey what "is" in the picture; he tries to make it visible (the canvas makes a *noise* in which words identify meaningful elements), but because he cannot persuade his listeners, what he is saying remains senseless – instead of directly leading to their referent and revealing its sense, his words are *signifiés* without *signifiant*, at least for Porbus and Poussin. Frenhofer acts like an art critic, i.e. someone between the artist and the beholder, using a meta-language: he talks about the language of painting using traditional theoretical terms, but at the same time he changes them into an idiolect comprehensible for no one but himself<sup>34</sup>.

For Poussin and Porbus he is less a painter, and more a poet inventing a new language, which, artistically speaking, is able not so much to represent reality as to create it, and then – art-critically speaking, is able to describe such a *creation* in a generally accepted manner. The main problem with Frenhofer's description of his *La belle noiseuse* is that he has to use conventional means of expression which are obviously sufficient in reference to Porbus's painting, but which prove useless when they are supposed to express a theory – and at the same time describe the painting incarnating this theory – that goes far

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>34</sup> V.I. Stoichita, op.cit., p. 89; K. Bongiorni, op.cit. 96; P. Marot, "Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu' ou l'irreprésentable de la representation", in: *De la Palette à l'écritoire*, vol. 1, ed. by M. Chefdor, Éditions Joca seria, Nantes 1997, pp. 142–143; J. Guichardet, "Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu': Sphinx et Chimère", in: *De la Palette à l'écritoire*, op.cit., pp. 151–165; Ch. Massol-Bédoin, L'artiste ou l'imposture: le secret du 'Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu' de Balzac, *Romantisme*, no. 54/ 1986, pp. 44–57; on art as a secret see: A-Ph. Durand, "Grassou et Frenhofer: Chef-d'oeuvre connu ou inconnu?", *Romance Quarterly*, vol. 44/1997, pp. 131–142; M. Gotlieb, "The Painter's Secret: Invention and Rivalry from Vasari to Balzac The Painter's Secret: Invention and Rivalry from Vasari to Balzac", *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 84/2002, pp. 469–490.

beyond its traditional precedents. When Frenhofer presents his own theory, mainly through the criticism addressed at Porbus's otherwise perfect work, he does not say what his own masterpiece is (or will finally be), but rather he acts in an apophatic way by stating what the picture will not be or rather what it will not lack. Obviously, in consequence it will not lack anything, it will combine all the aspects that have ever been mentioned as characterizing a perfect work of art. Frenhofer's theory is, thus, a sort of *coincidentia oppositorum*, which as a theory sounds very attractive, but in practical terms may be impossible to realize.

Now, if we assume that without theory we are practically blind, *scilicet*, that if we do not know what to look for, and we cannot find it, then we arrive at the core of all the preposterous interpretations claiming that Balzac foresaw the future of art in a flash of genius (and he did so not long after Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel announced its death!). Moreover, this is where the somewhat oxymoronic phrase "the unknown masterpiece" may come into play<sup>35</sup>.

First of all, the term "masterpiece" can be used in an ironic way and then it means its opposite, a rather mediocre art work – but is this really the meaning intended by Balzac? In all likelihood, if Poussin and Porbus were to call Frenhofer's work a masterpiece, they would have in mind this sense, but, on the other hand, the old master really believes he has created a masterpiece. Of course, we can treat him as a pretentious, slightly mad, rather pathetic dauber – this is how we could interpret this protagonist, were we to focus on the earlier versions of the story. However, the fact that in the latter versions Frenhofer burns his canvases makes him a tragic personage, which suggests that the term "masterpiece" in the title is not meant to be ironic.

Secondly, one may wonder in what sense we are allowed to speak of an unknown masterpiece. Is a masterpiece not a work which must be *per se* generally and highly appreciated, because this is what in the ultimate analysis being a *chef-d'oeuvre* means? At least in terms of the Kantian judgments of taste postulating – with no good reasons but common sense – that all people share our aesthetic opinion. What is more, in order to decide whether a work of art is a masterpiece we have to have some criteria, i.e. a theory saying why we – and everybody else – should so highly appreciate a particular artwork as to call it a "masterpiece". However, the same theory more modestly delineates what is a work of art and what is not. At first, *La belle noiseuse* is a masterpiece for everyone – because Frenhofer believes this and makes everyone believe so – but then after Poussin's and Porbus's visit it is no longer a master-

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<sup>35</sup> P. Whyte, *op.cit.*, p. 111.

piece to anyone, including its maker. Now, the question that arises is whether the two painters simply did not find the portrait of Catherine Lescault to be a masterpiece or whether they were of a far more critical opinion and divested it of the status of an artwork altogether.

It is beyond any discussion that Frenhofer suffered a failure: in his fellow artists' opinion because he had not succeeded in achieving in practice what he had predicted in theory; in his own – because he had not managed to give life (even metaphorically) to his painted mistress<sup>36</sup>. Balzac also points out his failure on another count: he did create a real, indisputable masterpiece (Balzac shares Frenhofer's position), but nonetheless – ironically and unfortunately – no one recognized it.

For Arthur Danto *La Belle noiseuse* or – as he translates the title – *A Beautiful Pain in the Ass*, had to remain unknown. No one in 1612 could know that they were looking at a work of art, not to mention a masterpiece, because they did not possess an adequate theory which would have enabled them to recognize it as such. Poussin and Porbus literally could not see it as art, and had they been able to, they would have probably not painted in the manner they actually did and for which they were recognized as masters, but they would have begun to create “walls of paint” as Jackson Pollock or Willem de Kooning did in the 1940s and 1950s. But this would mean that they could not live in 1612, because a theory recognizing art in Frenhofer's canvas was not developed until mid 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>37</sup> Even if we assume, Danto says, that Frenhofer somehow prefigured modernist painting, we cannot assume that he was happy because of that – he was not looking for a flat painting, he was looking for a woman! The problem is that Frenhofer does not want to accept the obvious limitations of the painting of the period<sup>38</sup>. What is more, even if Balzac had intended to write a fictional work about the first “proto-modernist”, whether appreciated or not, he could not have assumed that his contemporary reader would see in Frenhofer's painting anything more than a fancy of an old painter who totally destroyed his work by an excess of theory with which he was obsessed<sup>39</sup>. So Balzac condemns his hero to failure not only in the fictional 17<sup>th</sup> century world, but in the actual 19<sup>th</sup> century as well. Frenhofer had to wait until the turn of the century, until the emergence of *art informel* (Incidentally, one may add that this is more or less Cézanne's fate).

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<sup>36</sup> A.C. Danto, “The Unknown Masterpiece”, in: E. Frank (ed.), *Unknown masterpieces. Writers rediscover literature's hidden classics*, New York Review Books, New York 2003, p. 30.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 31–32.

<sup>38</sup> M. Brix, *op.cit.*, pp. 249–250.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 243.

In other words, we can state – staying within Danto’s paradigm – that Frenhofer’s case is an excellent illustration of the “artworld” theory: the old master wants to create art which is in no way compatible with the existing theory, is in fact contradictory to it (thence it is unthinkable from the “traditional” point of view), but at the same time he wants to be acknowledged; and how he copes with the lack of recognition differs in the earlier versions of the story and the later ones. However, this does not exhaust the issue of the artistic theory-practice relation which interested Balzac so much. There is another aspect to it: if we conceive artistic theory as a general, normative set of rules defining some objects as artworks, and artistic practice as action which has not had to follow any rules since Romanticism, then the question is: how can we subject something which is particular and unrepeatable, and thus alien to any sort of normativity and generalization to general norms (the concept of art – *a collective notion*, as Heidegger claims)? So, if we wish to use the term “art” in its modern sense, how can we avoid suppressing the non-normative character of – as Heidegger writes – *actuality of works*, and maintain the normative dimension of our thinking? Or to put it differently: how can we reconcile the generally accepted language (used by viewers and art critics) with the idiolect (invented by artists)? And it seems that without this synergy art in the modern sense cannot exist. *The Unknown masterpiece* can thus be read as a sort of parable revealing in a somewhat prophetic way the problem to which 20<sup>th</sup> century definitions of art tried to find an answer.

Frenhofer, in trying to surpass all the precedent masters, violates the norm governing the relationship between art and life. Art mirrors life, but even when it is true to life to the point of being deceptive, it is a fiction, an aesthetic illusion (this classical attitude naturally has its roots in Aristotle’s *Poetic*, but it was codified only in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, particularly by German aesthetics and Friedrich Schiller). So, a work of art can be said to equal life, only if we assume a certain convention, which tells us to perform – to use Samuel T. Coleridge’s formula – “the willing suspension of disbelief”. We look at a picture as if it were not a picture, although we are perfectly aware that it is one. Frenhofer violates this general rule, because he is convinced that thanks to his theory he can achieve a work that does not require the Coleridgean trick. According to him, we should rather “wishfully suspend our belief” in what is represented, if we want to look at it as an artwork. In other words, while “classical aesthetics” suggests we look at art literally in artistic, fictitious terms and only metaphorically in terms of reality, the author of *La belle noiseuse* wants us to literally treat his masterpiece in terms of life, and metaphorically – in terms of art. This problem lies at the heart of another story by Balzac – *Sarrasine*, in which a sculptor is looking at life through the prism of his art: the protagonist falls in love with a *prima donna* not realizing that she is



a *castrato*<sup>40</sup>. At first he falls prey to a theatrical illusion, but then against all the indices he continues to believe (s)he is a woman, mainly because he has started to sculpt her figure and as a result it is not the clay figurine that resembles the singer Zambinella, but it is the *castrato* that in Sarrasine's eyes resembles his sculpted image. This violation of the "art-life" relationship cannot remain unchaste – Sarrasin gets killed by the thugs hired by Zambinella's patron who was weary of the young sculptor's importunate behavior. Although in *Sarrasine* it is the man that loses and in *The Unknown Masterpiece* – the artist, the moral stemming from the two stories is the same: one cannot break the rules with impunity, but one cannot refrain from breaking them, or else one would not be a genial artist.

To conclude: if the term "masterpiece" in the title *The Unknown Masterpiece* was not used by Balzac in an ironic way, this means that insofar as the judgment on Frenhofer's painting is concerned, he assumed an absolute position, insensitive to any possible changes in or of the artworld. As the author controlling the world he created in his fiction, he does not even have to postulate that everyone agree with him, it is enough that he simply states as an indisputable fact that the old master's work is a masterpiece (no matter whether it was thinkable in the "artworld" Balzac lived in – it is always possible to perform a thought experiment). Now, as readers thus know that it is a masterpiece that unfortunately remained unknown, we may once again ask about the relationship between artistic theory and practice. Balzac opts for practice – we cannot have any doubts about this if we take into consideration another of his protagonists, Gambarà, a genial composer and musician, whose musical theory is bizarre and mad, but when he sits completely drunk at his *panharmonicum*, an instrument of his invention, he plays celestial music. If so, then any theory seems to be alien to art, it seems to be *allos*, other than the work, *ergon*. As a result the relationship between them seems to be "allergic": theory is harmful, as it defines art by setting limits to it. However, if we think of a work of art as an allegory, namely, if we think that "the wall of paint" communicates something else, is something other than the material form (even if all *une muraille de peinture* says is "I am only *une muraille de peinture* and not Catherine Lescault"; a normal wall of paint does not have to say it as this

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<sup>40</sup> Obviously the book which is to be mentioned as first is: R. Barthes *S/Z*, Seuil, Paris 1970; see also C. Bremond, Th. Pavel, *De Barthes a Balzac, fictions d'une critique, critiques d'une fiction*, Albin Michel, Paris 1999; for historical information see: H. Balzac, *La Comédie humaine*, Gallimard, Paris 1977, pp. 1035–1041, 1543–1544; H. Balzac, *Sarrasine. Gambarà. Massimilla Doni*, Gallimard, Paris 1995; H. Balzac, *Sarrasine*, Librairie Générale Française, Paris 2001; for Sarrasine as Frenhofer's counterpart see M. Serres, *L'Hermaphrodite. Sarrasine sculpteur. Précède de Sarrasine par Balzac*, Flammarion, Paris 1987 and L.-J. Lemaistre, *La sculpture et Balzac*, in: *L'artiste selon Balzac*, op.cit., pp. 150–164.

is what it is), it is the theory that makes a mere object a work of art. It is thanks to the assumption that there is something more than what is simply present before us, that we can grasp this “something other”. We can now paraphrase Heidegger’s idea that a work of art is not only an allegory, but a symbol as well, because *something other is brought together with the thing that is made*. A work of art is a symbol for it brings together “the thing that is made” and the theory. Thence, the theory appears to be a Derridean *parergon* – something external to the *ergon*, but at the same time situated within it.

In other words, the *something other (allos)* in *allergy* and *allegory*, in the case of art is the same, and its name is “theory”. But there is another term that we can use in this case: *pharmakon*, which, as Jacques Derrida has shown, is a substance salutary and nocuous at the same time. Frenhofer was subject to this double influence: at first, his unprecedented theory allowed him to see a beautiful woman in his “wall of paint”, but when it proved to be futile and made him go back to the theory he had tried to overcome, the theory made him see nothing. It is because of the *pharmakon*-like character of theory that the rhetorician replaced the terrorist in the old master.

As a genial artist who does not follow any rules but creates them for others, Frenhofer wanted to paint in a manner that would become a general convention for everyone. This was not possible in 1612 or in 1831, but it did happen in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, to the extent that Paulhan was right in stating that “Catherine Lescaults” had been painted *depuis cinquante ans a mille et mille exemplaires*. Frenhofer’s idiolect finally became a generally used language which later on had to be overcome.

**NIEZNANE ARCYDZIEŁO HONORÉ BALZAKA,  
CZYLI PRAKTYCZNA PUŁAPKA TEORII  
(streszczenie)**

Autor analizuje opowiadanie Honoré Balzaka *Nieznane arcydzieło* i wysuwa tezę, że jednym z podstawowych problemów poruszonych przez pisarza jest kwestia relacji między artystyczną teorią i praktyką. Odwołując się do takich myślicieli, jak Martin Heidegger czy Giorgio Agamben, jak również do licznych interpretacji tego utworu, stara się wykazać, że teoria wywiera dwojaki wpływ na sztukę, jest swoistym *farmakonem*, czyli – jak podkreślał to Jacques Derrida – ma działanie pozytywne i negatywne: pozytywne o tyle, że przekształca zwykłe przedmioty w dzieła sztuki, lecz jednocześnie negatywne, ponieważ wytycza granice praktyki artystycznej. Autor twierdzi, że owo sprzężenie zwrotne między teorią i praktyką można bardzo dobrze zaobserwować na przykładzie sztuki mistrza Frenhofera, co wyjaśnia ogromne zainteresowanie, jakim cieszyło się to opowiadanie wśród XX-wiecznych artystów, filozofów, historyków literatury i sztuki.

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## THE TRAUMA OF SENSE THE DECLARATIONS, MANIFESTATIONS AND INSTITUTIONS OF ANDRZEJ PARTUM

**Abstract:** The trauma of sense is not only a trend of modernism inspired by the spirit of nihilistic culture, and especially by the impact of Nietzsche's philosophy on modern thinking, but this condition reaches beyond the economy of modernity and the present post-human, postmodern mentality, since it also characterizes human condition. If we are searching for some more profound motives of the founding allergy in European culture, aesthetics, and art history, we cannot ignore the allergic reactions to religion, metaphysics, morals and ideology, especially in totalitarian regimes. In this study of cultural allergy I attempt to present the case of Andrzej Partum. In my opinion Partum (1938-2002) was *the first accomplished nihilist* in Polish culture and art. His declarations, manifestos and institutions show that he saw the 1970s as a state of increasing abnormality. It is therefore understandable that he either could not or did not want to accept this burdensome state. In Partum's case we are dealing with the attacks on artistic criticism and institutions of art in the totalitarian society. Partum deliberately undermined all attempts to socialise art. Both his poetry and his other artistic activities should be called, in accordance with his terminology, *antibodies* (poetic, artistic, theoretical allergens). The point is not in being avant-garde, but in being a-social and cynical in the positive sense. The Polish art of the 1980s joined in the postmodern reevaluation of nihilism. The neo-avant-garde was quite simply tired of fighting. It is not surprising therefore that Partum reached in 1980–82 for the nihilist economics of relaxation, similarly to postmodern philosophy. Partum's *positive nihilism of art* – an anomaly in relation to the ordinary understanding of the term – was not an attempt at negation, but rather an attempt at provoking the pathological decay of one of the concepts of the Great Avant-garde which Renato Poggioli called *radical and totalitarian, integral and meta-physical nihilism*. The difference between modernist nihilism and Partum's *positive nihilism* is the difference between repressive nihilism and ironic nihilism, as it desires to degenerate into comic nihilism. Partum's positive nihilism is important for our study of allergy in culture, because it implies an ironic agreement to the irreducibility of anomalies, a tension which we experience when we face a conflict between the "abnormal" context of art and the "normal" context of theory, between art and religion, morals, politics, science or ideology. Partum's allergy is not an example of an obscure natural disease, but it is a symptom of social relations. His allergic reactions to all sense, like other socially constructed disturbances (for example hysteria, anorexia or agoraphobia), are from an etiological point of view a disease of dependence, of social subordination.

**Keywords:** anomaly (anomalies) – error – medicalisation of allergy – trauma of sense – nihilism

The trauma of sense is not only a trend of modernism inspired by the spirit of nihilistic culture, and especially by the impact of Nietzsche's philosophy on modern thinking, but this condition reaches beyond the economy of modernity and the present post-human, postmodern mentality, since it also characterizes human condition. If we are searching for some more profound motives of the founding allergy in European culture, aesthetics, and art history, we cannot ignore the allergic reactions to religion, metaphysics, morals and ideology, especially in totalitarian regimes. This kind of modern allergy as a nihilistic irreligion *in statu nascendi* may be an expression of natural human haughtiness, recognized by religious, orthodox, and classic philosophical anthropology as a weakness of the human spirit. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, nihilism as a negation of sense was a symptom of the decadence, illness, or dissolution of the late bourgeois culture. But at the end of this period we can observe the transformation of this destructive nihilism into positive nihilism through its radicalization or accomplishment. According to Gianni Vattimo<sup>1</sup>, Nietzsche has pushed nihilism to its extreme consequences. Vattimo does not explain the etiology of his allergic reaction to religious, metaphysical, moral, and political senses, but he shows a way of re-examining the possible meaning of the concept of nihilism as a theoretical proposal for today's philosophy. In this perspective, nothingness forms the basis of meaning and values – it also produces and creates new interpretations and values. This reevaluation also concerns the reinterpretation of allergy which is not only a human defect (a form of hypersensitivity), but a positive motif of our culture.

Most of all, it was inspired by the critique of the 19<sup>th</sup> century conceptions of Spencer and Darwin. Evolutionism was a new conception of progress, different from the classic one, Aristotle's act and possibility theory, or Hegel's dialectics. Nietzsche negates the general value of the struggle for existence and natural selection theories, which state that evolution is possible if stronger organisms win the fight. The essence of this critique is given in the passage entitled "Ennoblement through degeneration" in his work *Human, All Too Human* (1878), in which he asks about the meaning of evolutionism as the definition of progress, especially the progress in social life and in the spiritual and cultural sphere. Spiritual progress is founded on the members of a community professing independent rules, norms and habits. Those individuals are less certain about their purpose in action, so many of them vanish in a crowd, but some, especially if they have children, finally loosen up the rules of the community. Nietzsche regarded this loosening up process as the main

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<sup>1</sup> G. Vattimo, "Nihilism: Reactive and Active", in: *Nietzsche and the Rhetoric of Nihilism. Essays on Interpretation Language and Politics*, ed. by T. Darby, B. Eged, B. Jones, Carleton University Press Inc., Toronto 1989.

condition of progress. It is like delivering a wound to the community, through which the common body is inoculated with something new. However, this wound cannot be too big; the community has to be able to withstand the aggression and assimilate the new ideas. That is why it is weaker natures, born with less power, that are more conducive to progress and development. According to Nietzsche, progress has to be based on earlier attenuation. In the society, there are two classes of people, depending on their power resources. Stronger individuals work to preserve the organization of the society, and the weaker ones create the progress. Nietzsche supports this observation with an example: "seldom is any degeneration, any mutilation, even a vice or any physical or moral damage whatsoever without an advantage in some other respect. For instance, a more sickly individual who lives among a warlike and restless tribe will perhaps have more occasion to be by himself and thereby become calmer and wiser; someone with one eye will have 'one' stronger eye; a blind person will see more deeply within and will in any case have sharper hearing."<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche also used the observations of the functioning of human organism, in which the muscles and senses are in cooperation. He put in doubt the theory of the struggle for existence assumed as the only point of view that explains the progress of the human race. He saw the necessity of two opposable values in society, of power disproportion between them, of – on the one hand – a strong connection between the citizens, on the other the usefulness of damaged organisms, which diminish the power of the former group, its faith in a common purpose. Those deformed organisms, weaker, more delicate, and more independent at the same time, create the possibility of progress. The community damaged in some sphere, but strong and healthy in others, may assimilate the damage and use it as an advantage on its road to progress. To put a positive label on the damaged organisms, Nietzsche calls them *free spirits*.

Similarly, allergy and others illnesses are organizing factors. The postmodern society, influenced by Nietzsche's above-mentioned aphorism *Veredelung durch Entartung*, is a *somatic society*. Like Nietzsche, the postmodern sociology of the body opens a new perspective on our understanding of allergy. First of all, there exists a tension between scientific and social medicine which makes any diagnosis problematic.<sup>3</sup> An inter-disciplinary examination of the disease and any disturbances, which have many causes – not only biochemical or located in the physiology of the organism, but also in the culture or in social

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<sup>2</sup> F. Nietzsche, *Human, All To Human* (I). *A Book for Free Spirits*, transl. by G. Handwerk, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California 1997, p. 154.

<sup>3</sup> B.S. Turner, *Regulating Bodies. Essay in Medical Sociology*, Routledge, London and New York 1994, p. 124–174.

relations is standard in medicine. This practice is limited economically and institutionally. A subjective element cannot be eliminated from the doctor/patient relationship. Medicine, fighting the disturbances common to a given society, loses from its field of vision other diseases which the society produces at that time. In medical practice we have to deal not only with the fight against diseases, but also with their production. We live in a world which is totally medicalized, since the question 'What is a disease?' in the sociology of medicine is the question 'What is religion?' in the sociology of religion. As Bryan S. Turner has pointed out, this is a question about the ontological status of a disease to which we do not possess a satisfactory answer. We have to explain why religion can be understood in the sociology of religion as a source of disturbances. We cannot however forget that religion as a source of social diseases can play a positive role. We know that Protestant asceticism (Puritanism), as Max Weber once showed, played a significant role in the construction of capitalist relations. Weber was aware of this ambivalence of asceticism, being able to serve equally the accumulation of good and of evil. This thought of Weber's was later developed by Talcott Parsons, who recognized religion as the source of creative motivation. Turner clearly continues their thought, denying that the term 'disease' has an exclusively negative, destructive meaning. Because of this we must accept that all diagnosing is problematic. There no longer exists an indisputable and cohesive valuation of allergy or trauma of sense, nor a coherent valuation of nihilism as a sense intolerance (or a form of sense hypersensitivity).

Vattimo writes that this new nihilism has the courage to accept that God is dead. We can add that the postmodern philosophy has the boldness to claim that no sense exists or that sense is a non-existent entity, and it provides for special relations with nonsense<sup>4</sup>. In this study of cultural allergy I will attempt to present the case of Andrzej Partum. In my opinion – *si parva magnis comparare licet* – Partum was *the first accomplished nihilist* in Polish culture and art (Vattimo says so about Nietzsche; this phrase comes from his autobiography, the story of the first active nihilist). Partum's re-reading of nihilism is not a closed reading, and it resembles Nietzsche's or Vattimo's interpretation. I will show that Partum is an oversensitive artist and Polish master of allergic reaction to all and every sense, also to the sense inherent in nihilism.

Partum (born in 1938, and died in 2002 in Warsaw) belongs to the group of artists who differ from others in that they not only provoke critical reactions, but also metacritical interventions. In his article "Andrzej Partum – in the Whirlpool of Changes", Grzegorz Dziamski asks about the causes of the

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<sup>4</sup> See G. Deleuze, *Logique de sens*, Les Éditions de Minuit, Paris 1969.

frequent allergic reactions to Partum: “How did it happen and what does it mean that Partum was pushed by our literary critics into the regions of artistic madness and, being located there, found himself in the centre of the international avant-garde, and if he was still errant – then it was together with the radically disposed artists of the last quarter of our century?”<sup>5</sup> This fragment shows Partum in a favourable light; it is literary and art critics who are not fulfilling their task.<sup>6</sup> It seems, however, that the situation is a lot more complicated. In the case of Partum we are dealing with some obstinate attacks or rather allergic counter-attacks on artistic criticism as an institution irrespective of whether it shows its paralysis in the sentences it passes. Partum was wary not only of negative assessments, but also of favourable texts. The problem did not consist in his being avant-garde, but in his being asocial and cynical in the positive sense. Partum deliberately undermined all attempts at socialization. Another critic, this time a literary one, Jan Marx, despite his generally positive opinion of Partum, makes the following reservation: “Partum’s poems provoke unconventional interpretations, at the same time the borderline between authentic poetry (because Partum can be an authentic poet) and poetic mystification is often rather intangible – here there arises the danger of over-interpreting and over-estimating the poet. [...] I realise that I am not quite objective, because I have succumbed to the fascination of the spectacular nature of Partum’s poetic-artistic-typographical-editorial initiatives.”<sup>7</sup> This reservation is not necessary, because there is no need to be ashamed of the lack of acceptance of Partum’s work. The lack of acceptance was simply inscribed into Partum’s strategy. It was his most awaited success, since his goal was realised the moment he created a disturbance in the normal course of social events. Both his poetry and his other artistic activities should be, in accordance with our terminology, called *antibodies* (poetic, artistic, theoretical allergens). That is why I am tempted to locate Partum – the Last of the Bohemians<sup>8</sup> – and his works as some sort of allergens rather outside the traditionally understood relation between art and art criticism, in the area of broadly understood culture, or anti-culture, or even on its margins, as *poète maudit*. Which does not mean that it is not interesting to observe how this very singular poet managed to join in the neo-avant-garde or *pseudo-avant-garde* (so-called by Wiesław Borowski from the Foksal Gallery) discourse of the 1970s (Paweł Freisler, Zofia Kulik and Przemysław Kwiek, Marek Konieczny, Ewa Partum, Leszek Przyjemski, Zdzisław Sosnowski, Jan Świdziński, Zbigniew Warpechowski,

<sup>5</sup> G. Dziamski, „Andrzej Partum – w wirze przemian”, in: *Partum z wypożyczalni ludzi (historia bycia twórcy)*, Wydawnictwo Dom Słowa Polskiego, Warszawa 1991 [np].

<sup>6</sup> P. Piotrowski, *Dekada*, Wydawnictwo Obserwator, Poznań 1991, pp. 41–42.

<sup>7</sup> J. Marx, «Bureau de la Poésie», *Poezja* 1980 (10), pp. 73–83, p. 82.

<sup>8</sup> L. Brogowski, *Sztuka i człowiek*, Wydawnictwa Szkolne i Pedagogiczne, Warszawa 1990, pp. 204–207.

Wojciech Bruszewski, Antoni Mikołajczyk, Józef Robakowski, Andrzej Różycki, Ryszard Waśko, Anastazy B. Wiśniewski, Jan Stanisław Wojciechowski, Krzysztof Zarębski and others), whose main problem was to adopt a position *vis-à-vis* the revolution of conceptualism. It has to be observed how Partum – the great Polish provocateur and an antigen of the bureaucratic system – crystallises himself as an abnormal phenomenon in our art and culture. The significance and at the same time the paradox of Partum’s work depends on the fact that without tolerating inspiration in art he became an inspiration to others, specially to Jerzy Truszkowski and his nihilistic work (SSS)<sup>9</sup>, and to the anarchistic art of Jacek Kryszkowski<sup>10</sup> – the former collaborator of the anti-social and anti-clerical Łódź Kaliska group (Marek Janiak, Andrzej Kwietniewski, Adam Rzepecki, Andrzej Świetlik, Andrzej Wielogórski) or to Ryszard Woźniak – the painter who in 1982–92 co-created the artistic formation Gruppa. Because Partum once again remains a question mark in our most recent post-totalitarian history, at the same time it is not possible to forget about him, since like an illness his post-modern and quasi-irreligious thought has penetrated to many places and is quietly doing its work there (cf. the aestheticism of Zbigniew Libera’s *Mistrzowie* [*The Masters*, (2003/4)]).

Partum’s answer to conceptualism came relatively early, if we look at this in the Polish context. It was, however, quite singular, because it was a kind of extension of his work as a poet.<sup>11</sup> To the critics’ allergic disgust, which lasts even to this day<sup>12</sup>, the borderline between a poetic work and a theoretical statement was completely obliterated. For Partum this was quite easy because from the 1960s onwards he had been cultivating a particular field of poetry in which he had devoted a lot of space to the parody of academic language and of all descriptions usurping the right to objectivity. In the first volume of his works *Frekwencje z opisu* [Frequencies from Description] published in 1961, we only seemingly cannot find lyricism, emotional and personal moods, because under the surface of the parody of materialistic or physical attitudes to the world hides a revolutionary poet who will later concede that art compromises science. These poems contain many genuine mental short cuts, which will bear fruit later in Partum’s manifestos. Let me just mention here the poem *Liczebność liczenia* [The Number of Numbering]. Partum happily used this kind of tautological expressions, and this one appeared in one of Partum’s most important theoretical texts *Sztuka Pro/La* [Art Pro/La 1971]. His poem

<sup>9</sup> J. Truszkowski, *Andrzej Partum 1938–2002*, Galeria Zachęta, Warszawa 2002.

<sup>10</sup> J. Kryszkowski, „Partum”, in: *Partum z wypożyczalni ludzi*, op.cit.

<sup>11</sup> Z. Bieńkowski, „Partum”, *Poezja* 1974 (3), pp. 94–95.

<sup>12</sup> P. Piotrowski, „Zbigniew Libera: anarchia i krytyka”, in: *Zbigniew Libera. Prace z lat 1982–2008*, ed. by D. Monkiewicz, Zachęta – Narodowa Galeria Sztuki, BWA Wrocław – Galeria Sztuki Współczesnej, Warszawa 2009, pp. 14–15.



*Omyłka literacka* [A Literary Mistake] anticipates the manifesto *Lichwa poezji anomalii modyfikujących w sztuce konceptualnej* [The Usury of the Poetry of Modifying Anomalies in Conceptual Art, 1972]. Partum's pleasure in abstracts, in their humorous sterility, harmonised well with the tautologies of conceptualism. Partum, however, formulated this tautology with distance and a sense of humour, and therefore was far from the seriousness of conceptual art. He formulated a series of declarations and manifestos, whose importance we are only discovering years later.

### THE POETRY BUREAU (WARSAW 1971–84)

Biuro Poezji [The Poetry Bureau] located in Poznańska Street 38/14, Warsaw, established as early as the 1960s, was Partum's private institution. It was only truly active at the beginning of the 1970s (Partum gives the years 1971–84 as the true period of the Bureau's activity; however, in 1997, he began some further exploitation of the name, which was by then firmly established on the international art scene). Koji Kamoji recalled in 1990 that "at the very top of the Polonia Hotel – in Poznańska Street was 'The Poetry Bureau' of Andrzej Partum. To reach it you went up wooden stairs. In the room, or rather in the tiny room there was a pianoforte on which he played and slept, ordered disorder in suitcases – documentation – mail art and a bit of floor, where, among other things, I gave my show."<sup>13</sup> In this way Partum transformed his flat into the Bureau. This was not, however, a comfortable situation for him, because at the same time he performed his own symbolic eviction. He got rid of the bed and slept only on an air-bed, which he had to inflate every day, in order not to compromise the importance of the institution. The Bureau's activity could be seen in its own editions of Partum's publications and those of other artists, critics, and friends, in gathering information about current art scene, in its correspondence with the representatives of the neo-avant-garde in the 1970s and in the organisation of varnishing-days, shows, actions and discussions devoted to the chosen aspects of art. Bureau de la Poésie was an important part of the Net designed in 1971 by Jarosław Kozłowski and Andrzej Kostołowski<sup>14</sup>. The Poetry Bureau was not simply yet another institution dealing with art, but it was – as Kostołowski wrote to me in 1997 – itself an artistic phenomenon like the institutions of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, Maciunas, Cavellini, Carrion or Köpke. Partum wrote: "The Poetry Bureau has a creative and authoritative character. It has its own exhibition gallery. It does

<sup>13</sup> Partum z wypożyczalni ludzi, op.cit.

<sup>14</sup> G. Dziamski, *Szkice o nowej sztuce*, Młodzieżowa Agencja Wydawnicza, Warszawa 1984, p. 125–126.

not arrange things, neither does it buy anything or intervene. [...] It registers creative facts within 48 hours of their announcement [...] At the request of the author it may issue an opinion about a conception, a work.”<sup>15</sup> In his article about the Poetry Bureau Jan Marx accurately divined the allergic intention behind the formation of the Bureau, which was directed against the excessive institutionalisation of art. Partum was creating a diversion against the forms of administering and manipulating art. In the cards sent out by the Bureau he informed bureaucrats, full-time critics, and people otherwise involved with art that their competence, or their belief in the excellence of art are somewhat doubtful. Sending out communiqués, manifestos or declarations became an integral part of the provocative activity of the Poetry Bureau. In addition, it was not enough to receive the publications of the Bureau. One also had to obtain an agreement to read these publications, which meant one had to obtain a card (with a photograph) issued by Partum. As noted by Alicja Kępińska, the reactions of the receivers of this kind of creativity became metafacts constituting Partum as an artist<sup>16</sup>.

#### “THE CRITICO-SYSTEM OF ART” (1970)

This manifesto, according to Jan Marx, was issued in 1970 (in one of Partum’s publications the date was given as 1971, so there may have been more than one version). The manifesto was published in the form of a brochure by the Poetry Bureau, together with a fragment of a longer text by Andrzej Kostolowski (with Zbigniew Warpechowski and Yukio Kudo as co-authors), called *O wartościowaniu [On Valuation]*.<sup>17</sup> In the first few sentences Partum sketched a certain provisional ontology, which did not allow for the formulation of partial conclusions during analysis for fear of disturbing the general harmony of the whole. He differentiates between *feeling* and the *interest of recognition*, which is in fact the disturbance of this harmony. He believes, however, in the possibility of the *self-regulation* of this system, which restores the harmony disturbed by recognition into the reality of feeling. The self-regulation is performed by art – the art of the critico-system, which causes the disintegration of all logical sequences of actions undertaken during the analysis. “The Critico-System of Art” points to the difficulties of analysing any kind of artwork. Partum considers here among other things the difference between the registering and the sense. The difference is elusive and, as Partum puts it,

<sup>15</sup> Partum z wypożyczalni ludzi, op.cit.

<sup>16</sup> A. Kępińska, *Nowa sztuka: sztuka polska w latach 1945–1978*, Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe Auriga, Warszawa 1981, pp. 220–222.

<sup>17</sup> A. Partum, *Krytykosystem Sztuki*, Biuro Poezji, Warszawa [1972 or after].

*probably ethereal*. That is why we should talk not about the semantic relation between sense and its registering, but rather about the traces of the past sense in the registering. The trace is never something complete, but it only mediates between the act of creating sense (imagination and conceptualisation) and the act of its registering. Thanks to the trace as something physical, it is possible to control the process of the objectivization of sense, at the same time this objectivization, as has been mentioned, is never complete and cannot be reduced to simple representation. These remarks clearly emphasize the physical at the cost of the artistic aspect of the poetic work, which made visual poetry relatively concrete. The questioning of the sufficiency of the semantic conception of a literary work is a fundamental critical element in Partum's explanation of the theory of poetry or art in general. That is why he uses the expression *the critico-system of art*. And so the relation between the theory of art and the creative act itself is a problematic one. The key element in every registering, including the theoretical one, is the trace. The registering of art is therefore not given as something objective, but always in the form of a trace, which transcends sense as a certain primary, historical fact. That is why, according to Partum, *the critico-system of art* excludes history. Asked many years later what the manifesto means, Partum refused to answer, saying he was tired. On another occasion, struck by the ingeniousness of a new interpretation, he agreed to give a provisional explanation. This manifesto allows us to come to terms with the structure of Partum's later allergic statements, which sometimes should, and sometimes should not, be read literally. We can notice that in this decade, *unreadability* has become the main strategy of deconstructivism (Paul de Man).

#### **“ART PRO/LA” (1971)**

In “Art Pro/La”<sup>18</sup>, presented during the Dreamers' Convention Biennale in Elbląg in 1971, Partum states that his conception of art, despite great differences, is undoubtedly close to conceptualism. He adds that this conception came about through a revision of conceptualism. Let us try therefore to find the similarities, then the differences. Just as in conceptualism, Partum shows a distaste for a formalist understanding of art. That is why he does not use the concept of the work of art, but rather provisionally (“out of courtesy”) the term *fact Pro/La*, claiming that his aim is to eliminate all inspiration from art because inspiration is just a depressing and derivative state in relation to *facts Pro/La*. This would be an analogy to the elimination, characteristic of

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<sup>18</sup> A. Partum “L' Art Pro/La”, Warszawa 1973; see note 23.

conceptualists, of the synthetic functions in art and the replacement of the concept of a work of art with the concept of a function of art, modelled on the analytical sentence in logic or mathematics. But here the analogies end and the differences begin, because Partum cannot accept the idea that the analytical kind of knowledge should be the model for an understanding of the discourse of art. As has been mentioned above, in his poems Partum showed the paralysis of analytical knowledge, attaining in his poetic intuitions the limits of abstraction and communicativeness. It is therefore understandable that his statements have to be critical and allergic towards conceptualism, which perceived the self-determination of art modelling artistic discourse to resemble the discourse of a priori sciences. In Partum's opinion neither inductive (based on experience) nor deductive (based on axioms) knowledge is capable of embracing art. This fundamental fact about art is expressed in the title "Art Pro/La" (*pro* standing for positive artistic activity, *la* – from Polish *dlaczego*, "why, what for" – for its inspiration, or purpose) in which Partum continues to use the complement which is so burdensome for the reader. The question inherent in this complement is unsatisfied. We are constantly facing the possibility of further complementation or else we find substitutes for such a complement in the shape of a self-reflexive sentence, which like a loop tries to grasp at an elusive sense. The question now arises – in what does Partum therefore see the self-determination of art, if we give up the formalism of linguistic conceptualism, which – as Jan Świdziński rightly observed – has replaced aesthetic formalism?

From today's perspective the answer to this question is particularly favourable for Partum and shows him in a very positive light against the background of the then current theoretical thinking. While others still accepted the understanding of art imposed by Kosuth and based on a logical-semantic analysis of language (as did Jan Świdziński, who replaced the extensional functor with an intensional one in the propositions of art and in this way arrived at contextualism), Partum concentrated on those linguistic facts which were entirely unnecessary for logical discourse and which were left out of focus. Partum was probably the first Polish artist to attend to the whole extensive area of linguistic errors and anomalies, seeing in their existence a kind of reserve in which one could find singular, individual and unique aspects of art. The problem was, however, that this area of linguistic mistakes and disturbances could not be used to promote some socially useful version of individualism or subjectivism. Culture must therefore bear this loss in his case if it wishes to have an area of art regarded as an inexhaustible source of un-uniformised culture. Partum asked a fundamental question about the mechanism of the creation of these anomalies, whose troublesome character precludes any kind

of criticism. What determines the occurrence of the anomalies, their systematic appearance, what makes them worthy of systematic reflection and treatment?

According to Partum, some light is thrown on the genesis of nonsense or senselessness as a global phenomenon by the distinction between *need* and *want*. A need is always particular and is directed concretely as the desire for a specific thing. It is a need which is the source of all sense, or at least all common sense. The trouble is that needs are only particular, and being particular and directed towards the possession of a specific thing, they often become non-sensible, since they cannot all be satisfied. An unsatisfied need must be defined as a *want*. In the global perspective it is not important that some need has remained unsatisfied and therefore has become non-sensible, but it is essential that some needs have to be perceived as not sensible. It is not important that in a situation of conflict one side is on top and constitutes sense, placing the other side beyond sense, but it is important that it ever got to a conflict. Partum indicates the disproportion between needs and the number of things which can satisfy them, seeing in this disproportion the basic cause of anomalies. In a global perspective according to him we should talk about want as the sum of needs which do not find satisfaction in the universe. A need in the specific perspective appears as something not sensible and not moral, as an unsatisfied want, and is therefore directed finally towards unreality. An unsatisfied want is the domain of the non-sensible, nonsensical, not directed towards a sensually available thing. Partum perceives it as a basis for distancing oneself to sense. Sense is only a short-term satisfaction of some need. What is more fundamental here is the *fact Pro/La*, which Partum defines as “the pain preceding discovery”. In his opinion it is not possible to reduce or exclude the pain which accompanies all desire or longing. This pain does not serve any purpose, it is not composed into the structure of volitional acts which can end in success. That is why Partum develops the concept of artistic language as being deprived of the aim of wanting and he states that Pro/La reminds him of the idiom of sense freeing itself by virtue of unnecessaryness<sup>19</sup>. He seeks the confirmation of this concept of language in the Biblical description of the creation of man: “This description does not mention anything about his education, but only mentions the warning connected with the forbidden tree. The first homo, endowed from the beginning with the miraculous knowledge of his existence on earth, in the end has to lose everything because of his pride. Pride is then probably the cause of the freeing of man from God Himself, and is therefore the primary fact Pro/La, because there is no inspiration, but the self-determination of an originally perfect reflex, given to man by

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<sup>19</sup> A. Partum, *L'Art Pro/La*, op.cit.

a perfect consciousness.”<sup>20</sup> Art Pro/La is therefore a loosening of the spiritual connection with the sacrum, being a purposeless action. The source of art is not any kind of need, because it is happy with non-existence (fiction) as a sufficient form of “healthy reality”. It does not arise from a sensible union of needs and things, but from the nonsensical disproportion of the sum of needs and the universe. The nonsense of this disproportion divides reality into real and unreal when the unsatisfied and nonsensical need makes an imagined object the object of its gratification, and therefore the object is no longer a sensually available thing. Such is the source of anomalies caused by the above-mentioned disproportion between the sum of needs and the universe, and therefore a fundamental error. This error has no further cause and is not inspired by anything. It is rather itself an inspiration, since it is the cause of antagonism, leading to the creation of various areas of sense. Partum has the grounds therefore for saying that this inclines him to “accepting unreality as a proof of the truth”. Partum’s ‘self’, which sets itself up against the inflicting of pain in the world, is hedonistic. It attempts to free itself from repressive, realistic, existentialist presuppositions in language. It is perverse, because it draws pleasure from the nonsensical nature of this allergy, which becomes an artistic game.

What is therefore Partum’s proposal in “Art Pro/La”? Is it creativity which promises to eliminate the imbalance of needs in the universe? This elimination can be brought about when we have alleviated de-territorialized pain, i.e. the existence of the nonsense of needs which cannot be satisfied. Partum does not accept the methods of alleviating this pain offered by various educational systems. Educational systems – ethically and ideologically varied – as tools of socialisation disperse the latent pain by turning it into patience. Ethics is nothing more than learned patience dispersing de-territorialised pain in time. Man is promised satisfaction under certain conditions, but it is forgotten that at the same time he is given a new burden – the new need to be an ethical individual. Partum does not intend to proceed along the road of multiplying needs. In his opinion this is a road to nowhere, since it only deepens the already enormous disproportion between the sum of needs and the things capable of satisfying them.

Sol LeWitt has suggested that “Conceptual Artists are mystics rather than rationalists.”<sup>21</sup> Partum is a mystic, but is also irreligious in the positive sense.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> S. LeWitt, “Sentences on Conceptual Art”, in: *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art. A Sourcebook of Artists’ Writings*, University of California Press, Ltd., ed. by K. Stiles and P. Selz, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1996, p. 826.

He proposes the opposite direction – not adding new needs, but taking away existing ones: “In any case Art Pro/La involves mostly subtraction. This comes about because one remembers mostly the schema of the image, and not the image itself ... this subtraction brings each sum to homogeneity, which in “Art Pro/La” has been called the causal fact”<sup>23</sup>. In Partum’s opinion one should therefore turn to the primary *fact of Pro/La*, to the disproportion between needs and things, to the phenomenon of *pain preceding discovery*, in order to eliminate these disproportions and this pain by taking away one’s needs, and not by adding new ones. It is understandable therefore that the things which one could give up first are the artificial needs created by culture. They are inspired by a fundamental error, which instead of repairing, simply repeats them. Partum therefore proposes, even in this early text, something in the way of a positive nihilist revolution, which does not aim to oppose social institutions in a dogmatic way, but only to pragmatically take from these institutions their excessive importance. As Partum writes, the premise of this art is that there must appear a lack of respect for such fundamental systems as ethics, knowledge and ideology; this leads the author of Pro/La to accept unreality as an exclusive proof of the truth.<sup>24</sup> Thus he is suggesting that all ideological systems which refer to reality and build on this their expression of the truth, have to be short of the truth, since they only deepen the disproportion between the human needs and the things which can satisfy them. The disciplining of man by his natural needs is here duplicated in the form of the needs of social education in the conviction that this is conducive to the fulfilment of human desires. Each social system proposes a certain kind of external discipline, imposing on us the need to be disciplined in a particular way. Partum proposes reversing this direction by limiting the construction of sense and creating in so doing new needs – in particular the need for reasoning. Even his statement is such that it does not impose on us the need of being completely understood.

In “Art Pro/La 2” (1980) the author writes about *the trauma of text analysis*.<sup>25</sup> Text analysis introduces subsidiary directions of analysis, which means that the analysis is becoming pointless. This useful anti-functionality also affects

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<sup>22</sup> See the positive sense of irreligion (anomy) – J.-M. Guyau, *L'Irréligion de l'avenir: étude sociologique*, Félix Alcan, Paris 1887; K. Piotrowski, “Zagadnienie anomii w religii i w sztuce”, *Rzeźba Polska*, vol. XII: *Sztuka w przestrzeni duchowej*, CRP Orońsko 2006, pp. 83–87; „Prawda prowokacji (o dziejowej misji irreligii)”, in: *Artystów gry z kulturą*, ed. by A. Kisielewski, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu w Białymstoku, Białystok 2009, pp. 91–109.

<sup>23</sup> A. Partum, *L'Art PRO/LA*, op.cit.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> A. Partum, „Sztuka Pro/La 2”, in: *Andrzej Partum*, Biuro Wystaw Artystycznych in Lublin, Lublin 1982.

the formation of personality, while making use of the strict divisions of irrationally ordered reality is a destruction of this personality. All ideological systems, within which personality is interpreted, are simply a duplication of the mechanisms of nature which destroy personality. That is why Art Pro/La postulates the elimination of nature from consciousness and all ideologies as derivative-depressing when compared to art. Partum's proposal strikes a note of noble cynicism, whose tone must then have sounded very false and sad, but today it is no longer so solitary and eccentric. Partum's allergic strategy of subtraction in "Art Pro/La" resembles an act of subtraction in Jean Baudrillard's *De la séduction* (1979), where he writes about the opposition between primitive and overpowering *seduction* (with a subtraction of visibility or sense) and civilized *production* (also semiotic production) in which everything has to be visible and sensible and therefore unreal, because reality does not have any sense.

#### **"THE USURY OF THE POETRY OF MODIFYING ANOMALIES IN CONCEPTUAL ART" (1972)**

According to Sol Le Witt, "Conceptual art is not necessarily logical. The logic of a piece or series of pieces is a device that is used at times only to be ruined. Logic may be used to camouflage the real intent of the artist, to lull the viewer into the belief that he understand the work, or to infer a paradoxical situation (such as logic vs illogic)."<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Partum justifies the invasion of illogical poetry into the field of conceptualism as the art of defining art. In his text "Lichwa poezji anomalii modyfikujących w sztuce konceptualnej" [The usury of the poetry of modifying anomalies in conceptual art] (1972) he continues the direction proposed in "Art Pro/La", still opposing the rationality of conceptualism. If there is no difference between the theory (definition) of art and its practice<sup>27</sup>, then we can accept poetry as an indefatigable factor modifying the conceptual discourse. Similarly, later on, Jan Świdziński criticised the weakness of Kosuth's tautological model of art, stating that art as an "empty sign" gains significance only after taking into account the social context, and therefore the ideological (rhetorical) strata of language. Partum, feeling a distaste for all ideologies, stopped at the irreducibility of poetry. Conceptualism encouraged this infiltration since the sense of art was beginning to be determined arbitrarily. Art – after the revolution of the ready-made and in

<sup>26</sup> S. LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art", in: *Theories and Documents of Contemporary*, op.cit., p. 822.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. *teoretism* – a term proposed by G. Sztabiński, *Problemy intelektualizacji sztuki w tendencjach awangardowych*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź 1991, p. 7.



accordance with Wittgenstein's non-denotational concept of meaning – is a method of using the term *art*. Partum noticed in this conceptual model the bankruptcy of the mind, which in trying to overcome the variety of art in the cumulative (vertical) act of understanding, reached the conclusion that art is a tautology. Although the aim of conceptualism was the reduction of the enormous complex of synthetic opinions about art (*material paradigm* – mimesis, expressionism or formalism, etc.), the result was another affirmation of the sensuality of language itself. The meaning of art is not situated in the extra-linguistic reality, but is constituted by linguistic behaviour. In this situation conceptualism could not be left to itself, because it denaturalised itself in a barren, sterile linguistic game – in artistic nihilism contemplating the tautology “art is art”. That is why poetry, according to Partum, has to engage in “usury”, being the source of creative anomalies modifying the conceptual discourse. The metaphor of usury suggests that in this exchange the greater benefit will come to poetry, but at the same time it pays for this profit with a moral loss. Conceptualism, subordinated to the new norms of poetry, shaping its future, has to take into account the dictates of the imagination, so that “the effects of consciousness do not depart too far from the sensory impression, or at best in their complexity create feeling, even though they are a nonsensical undertaking.”<sup>28</sup> Poetry also loses in this exchange, because it opposes moral sensibility. It loses the purity of its genre – its joyous, a-theoretical sensuality of the imagination existing only for itself, giving tautological support, censured by the nihilism of the intellect. Poetry remains polluted by the practicality of conceptualism, striving towards theory: “in this it not only overtakes old metaphysicality, but it progresses further through its ‘immobile movement’.” Partum regards the theoretical synthesis of conceptualism ironically as “immobile movement”, since its expertness is of the kind which destroys itself, as its theoretical obviousness is constantly disturbed by the poetic anomaly allowed by tautology. The lyrical ego as an absolute will always escape from the logic of full induction, will always bring in something different, drawing not so much from its properties and the properties of its surroundings, but as the result of error. The symbolic truth of language or the practical nature of correctness (common sense) are constantly disturbed by the egotistical sadness recalling its own anomalies, which burden the conceptual discourse. Thus a “literary mistake” becomes a positive creative factor. Similarly Sol LeWitt writes that “illogical judgments lead to new experience.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> A. Partum, „Lichwa poezji anomalii modyfikujących w sztuce konceptualnej”; „Sztuka Pro/La”, in: *Aspekty nowoczesnej sztuki polskiej*, Galeria Współczesna, Warszawa 1975, pp. 68–71.

<sup>29</sup> S. LeWitt, “Sentences on Conceptual Art”, in: *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art*, op.cit., p. 826.

**“THE MANIFESTO OF INSOLENT ART” (1975/76)**

Sol LeWitt claims that “Irrational thoughts should be followed absolutely and logically.”<sup>30</sup> Partum’s “Manifest Sztuki Bezczelnej” [The manifesto of insolent art] (1975/76)<sup>31</sup> – repeats many of his previous allergic declarations: above all the postulate, consistent with “Art Pro/La”, of eliminating inspiration in art; next, the acceptance of the irreducible perspective of nonsense and untranslatability (as opposed to precise communicativeness), eliminating nature from consciousness and specially the illogical diversion of art in the face of politics and science. Its new accent is the scorning of critics and of the receivers mythologizing social values. Jim Hart has written about the opposition between “Insolence (the artist as ‘unacknowledged’ legislator)” and “Orthodoxy (the politics of bureaucracy, official, legitimizing criticism, etc.)”<sup>32</sup> Partum attacks mail art (even though he himself was a member of this movement and his addressees were László Beke, Daniel Buren, Guglielmo Achille Cavellini, Robin Crozier, Robert Filliou, Hervé Fischer, Antonio Ferró, Fred Forest, Klaus Groh, Jorge Glusberg, Dick Higgins, Adriano Spatola, Gabor Toth, Ben Vautrier, Jiří Valoch and others), saying that he is against “the philatelic concept of art”. What is most important for him is to preserve the asocial moments in art, and therefore the non-understanding and the accumulation of mistakes or anomalies, which are for him the conditions of the self-determination of art – of its development and its potential of entering into a creative dialogue with its environment. Partum’s claim that the non-understanding of art creates a chance for the artist to make further statements is very accurate in the context of ubiquitous censorship. Partum clearly opposes the elements of monologue present in art (the aesthetic of sensitivity) and repression, noting that art may be a means for crime, like any other. At this time Partum is clearly engaging in some asocial work by sending such declarations by post to well-known people and art institutions. On being told that he was “an ignoramus in art and culture”, Dick Higgins replied: “This is correct. I am merely another lover of such things. DH.” Partum’s allergic “Pogarda” [“Contempt”] (1976) – directed against Tadeusz Kantor, Wiesław Borowski, Andrzej Turowski, and others from the Foksal Gallery – turned out to be a more aggressive but also poetic asteism.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 826.

<sup>31</sup> A. Partum, „Manifest Sztuki Bezczelnej”, in: *Galeria Pro/La*, 1978; „Manifest Sztuki Bezczelnej”, in: *Nowe zjawiska w sztuce polskiej lat siedemdziesiątych: teksty, koncepcje*, ed. J. Robakowski, Sopot 1981, p. 175–176.

<sup>32</sup> J. Hart, “Art is A Means for Crime like Any Other (A Decoding of A Manifesto of Insolent Art)”, *Detroit-Artists Montly* 1977, p. 10, in: *Partum z wypożyczalni ludzi*, op.cit.

**AVANT-GARDE SILENCE (1974–78)**

Between 1974 and 1978 Partum formulated the postulate of “avant-garde silence”. This was his reaction to the trivialisation of modern art, which occurred as a result of its dissemination among the masses. Avant-garde art became cheap entertainment and a telegenic quotation. Partum rebelled against the manipulations of bureaucrats who lived off art. Silence is an act of self-defence against the reduction of art to an element of uniformized culture. Avant-garde silence is a shelter “from the premature tearing of the artist to pieces by public madness demanding the intoxication of its souls with fire-works.” This is explained during the interview given by Partum to Jan Marx, in which avant-garde silence appears as an antidote to the semantic chaos of the 1970s. In addition, avant-garde silence is the consequence of Art Pro/La. If art, as an undefined passion, cannot be reduced to creativity within closed grammars (essentialism), or to ideologized creativity (contextualism), then the way out of this modern obsession ensuring the self-determination of art, or its safeguarding against essentialist stagnation and ideological (opportunist) destabilization, might be the acknowledgement of linguistic anomalies. On account of its inevitable and persistent character they would be a substitute for and an erosion of essentialism and could be accepted by society without ideological coercion as a necessary innovation.

**“THE MANIFESTO OF THE POSITIVE NIHILISM OF ART” (1980/82)**

Partum’s declarations and manifestos hitherto show that he saw the 1970s as a state of increasing abnormality. It is therefore understandable that he either could not or did not want to accept this burdensome state. The Polish art of the 1980s also began to join in the postmodern revaluation of nihilism. This process was accompanied by the expectation of an imminent demise of the monocentric culture founded on the only correct ideology. In Polish conditions, this was a particularly important process, since it offered hope for the disintegration of the Communist system, created not so much by a spontaneous revolution as imposed from the outside. Polish artists, involved in the socio-political crisis inaugurated by the strikes in August 1980 and intensified by the proclamation of martial law in December 1981, were compelled to assume a critical attitude – a Polish version of *Pastoral* – towards the totalitarian system and state-propagated world view.<sup>33</sup> This breakthrough took place

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<sup>33</sup> See the article of Th. Crowe, “Versions of Pastoral in Some Recent American Art”, in: D.A. Ross and J. Harten, *The Binational. American Art of the Late 80s*, The Institute of

within the framework of anti-art and manifested itself in various types of allergenic undertakings: gesture, action, performance, pastiche and provocation (Jacek Krzykowski from Warsaw and the so-called Pitch-in-Culture – Kultura Zrzuty) or became involved in a revival of painting and its illogical experience (the Warsaw-based Gruppa). These were the extreme possibilities of expressing an existentialist stand. The differentiation of worldviews and opinions in the art of the period was manifested by two extreme attitudes: Christian metaphysics, strongly rooted in Polish culture and Catholic theology on the one hand, and nihilism stemming from counter-culture on the other. Not everyone was satisfied with the religious vision of the world. The unorthodox, or rather irreligious rebellion was intensified by the neo-Dada activity of Krzykowski and the artists gathered around the *Tango* magazine in Łódź. The Pitch-in-Culture, perceived as an epitome of self-destruction, a nihilistic riddance of existential anxiety in group drunkenness, met with disapproval or distancing among the artists who saw the need for constructive work<sup>34</sup>.

That is why Partum began to see the hope of salvation in the nihilistic economics of relaxation.<sup>35</sup> This return did not depend of course on a freshening-up of the negativism of the avant-garde, i.e. the love of allergenic regress, infantilism, destruction and aimless aggression, sometimes evident in the *Idiotic Art* of Łódź Kaliska group. The whole thing would be totally ineffective in the liberal conditions of the western world (but not the Communist one), which in no way resembled the *murderous collective* rebelled against by Tzara and Hülsenbeck. In the West nihilistic thought had undergone a far-reaching modification. This was pragmatic nihilism, which had nothing to do, for example, with the existentialist nihilism of Sartre or Camus, astounding the post-war public with the repressive metaphysics of rebellion, atheism and the absurd. Nihilistic thought was developing in a different context, freeing itself from the depressing image of the dramatic battle between the individual and the society, in which – as Georg Simmel once wrote in “Die Grosstädte und das Geistesleben” (1902/3) – individual sensitivity is massacred by the metropolis, while the capital desubstantializes everything and everyone. The uncomfortable opposition which György Lukács had described in 1957 was no longer there. He wrote that modern literature had falsified the truth about man

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Contemporary Art and Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts, Du Mont Buchverlag, Köln 1988, pp. 20–41.

<sup>34</sup> K. Piotrowski, “A propos the Exhibition ‘American Art’ of Late 1980’s”, *Polish Art Studies* 1992 (XIV), pp. 371–376.

<sup>35</sup> Partum. *The Short Document of High Biography*, ed. by Partum School of the Positive Nihilism of Art, Copenhagen 1989; K. Piotrowski, “Pozytywny nihilizm Andrzeja Partuma”, *Magazyn Sztuki* 1995 (5), pp. 112–124 (*The Positive Nihilism of Andrzej Partum’s Art*, transl. by M. B. Guzowska, pp. 299–305).

as being solitary, asocial and incapable of making contacts with other people. Lukacs's mistake is obviously not in the description of this allergosis, but in the fact that he identified this vision of man one-sidedly with the ideology of modernism, forgetting that his pro-social criticism was also an important component of this ideology, and that he himself contributed to the alienation, nihilistic delusion, and exclusion of the artist. In the 1970s this unnecessary battle was already almost over, and its spoils turned out to be a trivialisation both of the importance of institutions and of the dignity of the individual; therefore there was a willingness not only to narrow the field of institutional violence, but also to make the respected ideology of liberalism get rid of its illusion of the *natural right* to private ownership. The neo-avant-garde was quite simply tired of the fight. It is not surprising therefore that Partum reached for an economics of nihilism, similarly to postmodern philosophy, just to mention the essay by Gianni Vattimo, "Nihilism and Postmodernism in Philosophy" from 1985<sup>36</sup>. Partum's manifesto had been released five years earlier by the Poetry Bureau in Warsaw and published in 1982 by BWA in Lublin and the Studio Gallery in Warsaw.

The basic postulate of the manifesto states that "everything that contains an error is an intellectual good." The conviction of the inevitability of error conditions the a-theoretical (artificial) recognition of art, ensuring its self-determination as fiction; it warns against all illusions in art and life, which become authoritarian truth; it squanders the spiritual and material human capital, neutralising the danger of social conflicts; it calms the dilemmas of conscience, because error as a synonym of sin satisfies God's need for the mercy of absolution. Error – the trauma of sense – is a principle of the deepest economics. Partum understood that deviation is unavoidable; it may even turn out to be productive, if we can manage to use it against other social pathologies. This is the sense of Partum's recourse to nihilism, which became a tool in the ideological struggle for many artists at the time. It is not difficult, however, to fight Communism in the name of opportunistic nihilism, but one then has to cope with this nihilism when its venom no longer has anyone to poison. The difference between art and politics consists of course in the fact that politics, as an ethic of communal life, fights social pathology in the name of some correct ideology, while art, which does not possess a ready system of values or any clear ethical aim, fights social anomalies most eagerly with the help of another anomaly, quite simply defending its self-determination. According to Partum, the artist who can use political manipulation is

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<sup>36</sup> G. Vattimo, „Nihilismus und Postmoderne in der Philosophie“, in: *Wege aus der Moderne. Schlüsseltexte der Postmoderne-Diskussion*, übers. von W. Welsch (ed.) und B. Hesse, VCH, Acta Humaniora, Weinheim 1988, pp. 233–246.

something more than a politician, because he is not one. From the point of view of the interests of the politician, an artist is working the hardest when he is sleeping.

### THE PARTUM SCHOOL OF THE POSITIVE NIHILISM OF ART (1986, COPENHAGEN)

The conviction about the opposition of politics and art was laid to rest in the foundations of Partum's new institutional solution. In May 1986 Partum – since 1984 an immigrant in Copenhagen – founded a private institution. The Partum School of the Positive Nihilism of Art, as we can read in one of Partum's texts, was the result of the evolution of the Manifesto of the Positive Nihilism of Art. It was to give its founders the comfort of thought – “cast like ‘a die’ towards the world of existential poverty – most often proposed by various ideological dogmas of suicidal regimes and societies.”<sup>37</sup> The school was to maintain a certain solemn character, like a temple, defending itself in so doing from trivialisation by mass culture. The school therefore continued the programme begun by the Poetry Bureau (1971–1984) and developed by the Gallery Pro/La (1978–1983). Founding the School, Partum was not interested in the dialectical neo-avant-garde refutation of the avant-garde (that is how this gesture would be interpreted by Peter Bürger, according to whom the neo-avant-garde institutionalises the avant-garde as art and in so doing negates the intentions of the avant-garde).<sup>38</sup> Partum did not intend the modernist conquering or destruction of the avant-garde, but in this paradoxical institutionalisation, where art is an institution calling into question the basis of its own socialisation, he wanted to combine productive irony with the useless theory of nihilism, and at the same time to weaken and loosen up the nihilist doctrine as an ideology of rebellion, atheism and the absurd. Partum's positive nihilism – an anomaly in relation to the ordinary understanding of the term – was not an attempt at negation, but rather an attempt at provoking the pathological decay of one of the concepts of the Great Avant-garde, which Renato Poggioli calls “radical and totalitarian, integral and metaphysical nihilism.”<sup>39</sup> The difference between modernist nihilism and Partum's positive nihilism is the difference between repressive nihilism and ironic nihilism, which desires to degenerate into comic nihilism despite the dissimilarity of the ironic self-annihilation of

<sup>37</sup> Typescript of Partum School of the Positive Nihilism of Art, Copenhagen [not dated]; see Partum. *The Short Document of High Biography*, op.cit.

<sup>38</sup> P. Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1974, p. 67.

<sup>39</sup> R. Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, transl. by G. Fitzgerald, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge–London 1982, pp. 62–63.

nihilist sublimity and the related principles of comicality. In order to understand this difference I reach for the Hegelian distinction between irony and comicality: "This form [ironic], taken abstractly, borders nearly on the principle of the comic; yet in this kinship the comic must be essentially distinguished from the ironic. For the comic must be restricted to showing that what destroys itself is something inherently null, a false and contradictory phenomenon, a whim, e.g., an oddity, a particular caprice in comparison with a mighty passion, or even a 'supposedly' tenable principle and firm maxim."<sup>40</sup> Modernist nihilism was too powerful an emotion to laugh at, which is why as something repressive (unproductive) it had to undergo ironic modification. Partum was able to get out of this nihilistic oppression by promoting the socialisation of nihilism, which was to last only five years, and therefore foretold the speedy and comic (according to Hegel) discarding of this social deviation. He showed us the advantages of not declaring ourselves either for or against nihilism in a boring political polemic. We should rather strive for such a modification of nihilistic thought that in accordance with the programme of the *usury of poetry* will be an anomaly of nihilism, and at the same time will suppress the negative (literal, grammatical) meaning and enable the consumption of its positive (rhetorical, performative) sense. We can talk here about *reactive* and *active nihilism*<sup>41</sup>. Nihilism constantly deprives itself of content because it is a negativism. In negating the form it has to negate the content and at the same time annul its negative intention. If the literally understood nihilism is the total lack of enthusiasm for reality or an allergic reaction to all sense (a negative, metaphysical moment), then let it be a certain positive economics leading to the comfort of forgetting, calming down, as in Leopardi's poem quoted by Nietzsche in his *Untimely Considerations*.

Partum's institutions – the Poetry Bureau, the Gallery Pro/La and the School of the Positive Nihilism of Art – were understood as competitive, creating a diversion from social institutions – as their *anti-bodies* or allergens. The School of the Positive Nihilism of Art proposed a model of art which calls into question the basis of its own socialisation. This School was a kind of crowning of all of Partum's allergic declarations and manifestos hitherto. However,

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<sup>40</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures of Fine Art*, transl. by T.M. Knox, vol. I, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1998, p. 67.

<sup>41</sup> Vattimo shows that "the difficulty of clearly distinguishing reactive from active nihilism is a real one, but far from reducing Nietzsche's notion of nihilism to a symptom, this difficulty is the very basis of the 'positive' meaning of his theoretical proposal. The most general characterization of the distinction between reactive – or passive – and active nihilism seems to be in terms of strength of spirit. Nihilism, according to Nietzsche, is 'zweideutig', i.e. ambiguous. Nihilism can be a sign (Zeichen) of the strengthened power of the spirit or a sign of the spirit's fall." – G. Vattimo, *Nihilism: Reactive and Active*, op.cit., pp. 15–21.

many years have passed since that time. The postmodern processes of loosening up and weakening the norms of culture have gone so far, societies have become so different and have undergone such pluralization that further continuation of this tendency is no longer so obvious. There is no leading anti-totalitarian ethos, and it is not so easy to imagine a rebellion against the violence of the state, unless it were to be an anti-democratic rebellion. But is it the done thing to have a rebellion against democracy? So what to offer in its place? Obviously one can think about the broadening of democratic liberties and about a liberal revolution (perhaps the neo-pragmatic rebellion of *liberal irony* of Rorty?) but for Partum it would be just one more form of social organisation. The allergic experience of the positive nihilism of art anaesthetises one even against liberal agitation or a *messianism without messianism* (pro-democratic?) of Derrida<sup>42</sup>. What use do we have, let us ask in the end in the style of Nietzsche (and in accord with Partum's allergic trauma of sense), for contemporary liberalism with its principle of the free market and democracy, if it is not a kind of defensive wall of a medieval town, which in time became an anachronism?

Partum's positive nihilism is important for our study of allergy in culture, aesthetics, and history of art, because it implied an ironic agreement to the irreducibility of anomalies, a tension that we experience when faced with a conflict between the "abnormal" context of art and the "normal" context of theory, between art and religion, morals, politics, science or ideology... According to Partum – who never graduated from any college, though he became a founder of a school – to be somebody does not mean to be subservient to social regimentation, but to retain strong unregulated animalism useful in striving for dominance over the herd. In most cases this dominance does not find social legitimization, whether by a religious or lay doctrine, supported by the authority of religion, science or art criticism, avoiding the danger of being reborn as a criminal ideology; but nevertheless it may be a dominance of, for example, a hypersensitive poet who gives to poetry the usury modifying the anomalies (allergens) of our discourse. Partum's popularity among some artistic groups shows that the diagnosis which regards the allergy as a disease does not unfortunately testify to its own social well-being. We know that not all diseases or deviations are natural, obscure or ominous<sup>43</sup>. There are disturbances which do not fully deserve the description

<sup>42</sup> J. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1997.

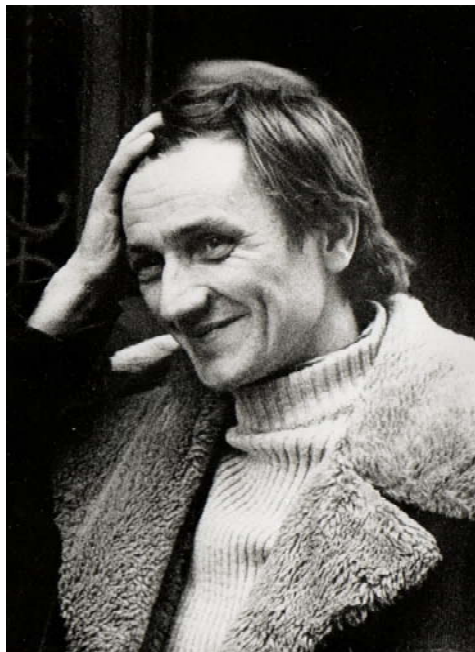
<sup>43</sup> K. Piotrowski, „Na lewej dłoni wycinam swastykę, odbijam jej ślad na swym czole. Truskowskiego wkład w destrukcję epistemologii ręki”, *Magazyn Sztuki*, 1996 (10), pp. 37–54 (*On My Left Palm I Cut A Swastika, and Leave Its Imprint on My Forehead. Truskowski's Part in the Destruction of the Epistemology of the Hand*, transl. by T.Z. Wolański, pp. 56–68);



in terms of “disease”, since they are socially constructed, and anomalies in the social order serve a useful and constructive (in this order) function. Partum’s allergy is not an example of an obscure natural disease, but it is a symptom of social relations. Partum’s allergic reactions to all sense, like other disturbances (for example hysteria, anorexia or agoraphobia), is from an etiological point of view a disease of dependence, of social subordination. Any attempt to eliminate these disturbances would result in the destruction of the social system defining current relations between people, between artists and bureaucratic or commercial system of the art world; it would be the negation of the “bodily order” reigning within it and determining the location of the personified self in the socially-constructed space-time. We have to remember that some of these disturbances strengthen the socially desired relationship between partners. When we are talking about dominance, it is worth noticing that the trauma of sense developed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century together with the modern expansion of urban civilization (the commercialization of art industry, totalitarian regimes), which deepened the divide between artists and the axiology of society, intimacy and anonymity, the alienation of the great metropolis. We have to highlight the relation between disease and social space, which is the foundation of the “bodily order” of society, as was pointed out by the above-mentioned author Bryan S. Turner.<sup>44</sup> Perhaps the time has come to inscribe even Partum’s allergy into the complicated mechanism of the economy of our postmodern society? Predisposition to this allergy seems to be a labile one, appearing in life irregularly and socially constructed in relation to the dominant religions, politics, economic, and even to the domination of the art world, to which artists like Partum can react like allergic patients.

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<sup>44</sup> B.S. Turner, *The Body and Society. Explorations in Social Theory*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1984.



Fot. 1. Andrzej Partum, 1974,  
photo by Zygmunt Rytka



Fot. 2. Andrzej Partum, 1974,  
photo by Zygmunt Rytka



Fot. 3. Zygmunt Rytka, *Private Collection* (*The Poetry Bureau of Andrzej Partum*, Poznańska Street 38/14, Warsaw; Left to Right: Hanna Ptaszkowska, Daniel Buren, UP, Zygmunt Rytka, Zofia Kulik, Paweł Kwiek, Krzysztof Zareński, Przemysław Kwiek, Andrzej Partum, UP), 1974, photo by Zygmunt Rytka



Fot. 4. *Partum School of the Positive Nihilism of Art*, Copenhagen, 1988, photo by Zygmunt Rytka

**URAZ SENSU. DEKLARACJE, MANIFESTY I INSTYTUCJE ANDRZEJA PARTUMA (streszczenie)**

Uraz sensu jest nie tylko modernistyczną tendencją, inspirowaną przez ducha nihilistycznej kultury, a szczególnie przez wpływ filozofii Nietzschego na modernistyczne myślenie, lecz zagadnienie to wykracza poza ekonomię nowoczesności i posthumanistycznej, postmodernistycznej mentalności, ponieważ charakteryzuje ludzką kondycję. Jeśli poszukujemy jakichś głębszych motywów fundujących zjawisko alergii w europejskiej kulturze, estetyce i historii sztuki, nie możemy zignorować alergicznych reakcji na religię, metafizykę, moralność i ideologię, a szczególnie na totalitarne reżimy. W tym studium kulturowej alergii próbuję ukazać przypadek Andrzeja Partuma (1938–2002). W mojej opinii Partum był *pierwszym spełnionym nihilistą* w polskiej kulturze i sztuce. Deklaracje, manifesty i instytucje Partuma wskazują, że postrzegał on lata 70. jako stan narastającej anormalności. Zrozumiałe więc, że nie mógł on, czy nie chciał w tym uciążliwym stanie trwać. W przypadku Partuma mamy do czynienia z uporczywym atakowaniem krytyki artystycznej i instytucji sztuki w totalitarnym społeczeństwie. Partum z premedytacją podważał wszelkie próby socjalizacji sztuki. Zarówno poezję, jak i inne manifestacje artystyczne Partuma należy zgodnie z jego terminologią uznać za *a n t y c i a ł o* (poetyckie, artystyczne, teoretyczne alergeny). Problem nie polega na byciu awangardowym, lecz na byciu aspołecznym i cynicznym w pozytywnym sensie. W polskiej sztuce lat 80. możemy obserwować postmodernistyczne dowartościowanie nihilizmu. Neoawangarda była po prostu zmęczona walką. Nie dziwi więc sięgnięcie przez Partuma po nihilistyczną ekonomię relaksu, co czyniła również ponowoczesna filozofia, by wspomnieć tu esej Gianniego Vattimo *Nihilizm i postmodernizm w filozofii* z 1985 roku. *Pozytywny Nihilizm Sztuki* Partuma – anomalia w stosunku do potocznego rozumienia terminu – nie był próbą negacji, lecz raczej wywołania patologicznego rozkładu jednego z momentów Wielkiej Awangardy, który Renato Poggioli nazwał *radykalnym i totalitarnym, integralnym i metafizycznym nihilizmem*. Różnica pomiędzy nihilizmem modernistycznym a *pozytywnym nihilizmem* Partuma jest różnicą pomiędzy nihilizmem represyjnym oraz nihilizmem ironicznym, ponieważ pragnącym zdegenerować się w nihilizm komiczny. Pozytywny nihilizm Partuma jest ważny dla naszego studium alergii w kulturze, ponieważ implikuje ironiczną zgodę na nieredukowalność anomalii, napięcia, którego doświadczamy, gdy pojawia się konflikt między ‘anormalnym’ kontekstem sztuki i ‘normalnym’ kontekstem teorii, między sztuką i religią, polityką, moralnością czy ideologią... Alergia Partuma nie jest przykładem nieprzejrzystej choroby, lecz symptomem społecznych relacji. Jego alergiczne reakcje na każdy sens, jak inne społecznie konstruowane zaburzenia (na przykład histeria, anoreksja czy agorafobia) są z etiologicznego punktu widzenia chorobą zależności, społecznego podporządkowania.

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## **A KURGAN GRAVE OR AN ORANGE SQUEEZER? A MATTER OF PERSONAL PREFERENCE**

**Abstract:** The National Temple of Divine Providence in Poland has been a source of fierce arguments, even though it was meant to become a symbol of freedom, harmony, reconciliation and solidarity among the Polish people; a votive offering of the nation for the resumption of Polish independence and the pontificate of John Paul II.<sup>1</sup> The idea of erecting the building was originally conceived after the signing of the Polish Constitution of 3 May 1791, but for the next 200 years it was not possible to implement the project. It was only in 1999 that a committee supported by the Union of Polish Architects invited tenders for the design of the shrine. The jury selected three winning works from over 100 proposals. Of those three, in May 2000, the Primate of Poland, Cardinal Józef Glemp, who was also the originator of the competition, selected the design by Professor Marek Budzyński. The work was viewed as a very interesting concept, complying with international standards. However, the Management Board of the Foundation for the Building of the National Temple of Divine Providence took a surprising decision to reject the design and announced another, closed tender, inviting only selected architectural teams to participate and thus excluding many distinguished architects, among others one of the previous three winners.

**Keywords:** modern architecture, architectural design competitions, sacred architecture, the National Temple of Divine Providence

The National Temple of Divine Providence in Poland has been, and most probably will continue to be a source of fierce arguments and heated discussion, even though it was meant to become a symbol of freedom, harmony, reconciliation and solidarity among the Polish people; a votive offering of the nation for the resumption of Polish independence and the pontificate of John Paul II. The idea of erecting the building was originally conceived after the signing of the Polish Constitution of 3 May 1791. However, for the next 200 years it was not possible to fulfill the vows and build the votive temple.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. "Świątynia będzie własnością historyczną narodu" (an interview for the Catholic Information Agency, conducted by Bogumił Łoziński, Warsaw 27 Feb. 2006), [www.spp.episkopat.pl/kazania/060227a.htm](http://www.spp.episkopat.pl/kazania/060227a.htm) (accessed on 14 July 2010).

At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century an attempt was made to implement this project. In 1999 a committee supported by the Union of Polish Architects invited tenders for the design of the shrine. The jury selected three winning works from over 100 proposals. On 22 May 2000, the Primate of Poland, Cardinal Józef Glemp, who was also the originator of the competition, selected the design by Professor Marek Budzyński. The work was viewed as a very interesting concept, complying with international standards, also according to professional architects. However, the Management Board of the Foundation for the Building of the National Temple of Divine Providence took a surprising decision to reject the design that had previously been accepted.

The Management Board, this time without the Union of Polish Architects, announced another, closed tender, inviting only selected architectural teams to participate and thus excluding many distinguished architects, among others one of the previous three winners, Jerzy Szczepanik-Dzikowski. A non-innovative design by Wojciech Szymborski and Lech Szymborski was chosen and is now being implemented, though not without problems. The new proposal has not been appreciated by artists and professionals, and has become known among the Internet users as “an orange squeezer”.

The almost allergic reaction of certain representatives of the Church to the innovative proposal of Professor Marek Budzyński is astonishing. What is more, the decision has never been followed by a thorough discussion and objective criticism based on the specific aspects of the proposal. “The burial mound” turned out not to be sacred enough, and lost against a project “fulfilling the standards appropriate for a Christian temple”.

## A BRIEF BUT NECESSARY HISTORICAL OUTLINE

On 5 May 1791<sup>2</sup>, that is two days after the signing of the Polish Third of May Constitution, the second modern codified national constitution in the world, the assembled estates issued a Declaration.<sup>3</sup> Its role was to regulate many issues related directly to the constitution, e.g. to abolish all laws contradicting it and to order public officials and soldiers to pledge an oath of allegiance to the constitution. One very important point in this document concerned the

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<sup>2</sup> Some historians claim that the Declaration of the Assembled Estates was enacted on the very same day as the Constitution, cf. A. Grześkowiak-Krwawicz, “Deklaracja Stanów Zgromadzonych” z 5 czy z 3 maja 1791 roku?”, *Kwartalnik Historyczny*, XCIX/1992, no. 1, pp. 105–111.

<sup>3</sup> Generally treated as an integral part of the Constitution of 3 May.

decision to build a votive church of Divine Providence. According to the Declaration of the Assembled Estates, “So that the posterity would know that such a truly desired work may overcome all possible obstacles and impediments, and that we, as a nation, have not wasted such a fortunate occasion, we resolve to construct a church, *ex voto* of all states, and we dedicate it to the highest Providence.”<sup>4</sup>

The tender for the design of the National Temple of Divine Providence was the first architectural design competition in Poland.<sup>5</sup> Many well-known architects of the time decided to participate: Jakub Kubicki, Jan Chrystian Kamsetzer, Wawrzyniec Gucewicz, Jan Grismayer, and Piotr Aigner. Some amateur designers (but well-known artists) who also decided to take part in the tender, included the sculptor Antoni Ogiński, and the painter Antoni Smuglewicz. The proposals were very varied: from the oblong churches drawing on the antiquity (Gucewicz, Smuglewicz), to various centered layouts.

Regardless of the competition, the final decision belonged to the king, who liked best the spectacular design by Jakub Kubicki. The central part of his layout was a church on an octagonal plan, covered with a dome on a drum. The building was also supposed to have four annexes, each of them with a triangular gable crowning the portico. The only element of Jakub Kubicki’s monumental design which actually saw the light of day was an octagonal pillar of the lower church. By the order of the king it was transformed into a chapel, which was supposed to be a temporary solution, but has survived until the present.<sup>6</sup>

A site in the old Kalwaria Ujazdowska area, between Ujazdów Castle and Belweder Palace, was chosen as an appropriate location. The cornerstone of the planned shrine was festively laid on the first anniversary of the Constitution, on 3 May 1792. And then, for the first – but not the last – time, the sin of pride cast a shadow over the whole undertaking. A medal was minted to commemorate the event, with a portrait of the king and the inscription: “Stanislaus Augustus D.G. Rex Poloniae M.D. Litua”, and on the reverse: “S.A.R. /Et Comitiae/ Reipublicae /Polon: voverunt/ III. Maji. MDCCXCI /Divinae Providentiae/ Templum cujus /Primus lapidem/ Posuerunt. /III. Maji./ MDCCXCII.” Another memento of the celebration was a gilded trowel and

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<sup>4</sup> “‘Deklaracja Stanów Zgromadzonych’ z 5 maja 1791”, [http://dziedzictwo.polska.pl/katalog/skarb/Deklaracja\\_Stanow\\_Zgromadzonych\\_z\\_5\\_V\\_1791\\_roku.gid,269569,cid,2335.htm](http://dziedzictwo.polska.pl/katalog/skarb/Deklaracja_Stanow_Zgromadzonych_z_5_V_1791_roku.gid,269569,cid,2335.htm) (visited on 10 September 2010).

<sup>5</sup> E. Jasieńko, “Świątynia Opatrzności Bożej”, *Kwartalnik Architektury i Urbanistyki*, 2000, issue 1, p. 271.

<sup>6</sup> It is located in the area of the present Botanical Garden of Warsaw.

hammer<sup>7</sup> (a discreet – because of its ambiguity – reference to Masonic symbolism), with the monogram “SAR” – Stanislaus Augustus Rex, and the date “3 Maja 1792”. With these tools king Stanisław August Poniatowski symbolically launched the construction – though not without any problem. “A sudden and unexpected storm interrupted the celebrations, and superstitious people regarded it as bad omen.”<sup>8</sup>

The construction work lasted for a very short time, just over one month. In June 1792, when the tsar’s army crossed the Polish borders and the war between Poland and Russia broke out, the work was discontinued. After the third partition, which took place in 1795, the independent Polish state ceased to exist and for the next century it was not possible to resume the construction work.

However, when Poland regained independence in 1918, after more than a hundred years, the idea of building the National Temple of Divine Providence as a thanksgiving offering was revived. In the act from 17 March 1921, the Sejm [i.e. the lower chamber of Parliament] of the Polish Republic announced that “In order to fulfill the vows taken by the Four-Year Sejm in 1791 [...] the National Temple of Divine Providence will be built in Warsaw at the cost of the state.”<sup>9</sup>

The jury of the architectural design competition comprised some important personages: politicians, artists and representatives of the Church. The appointed committee included “His Eminence Cardinal Archbishop of Warsaw, the Bishop of Kraków, the Marshal and Vice-Marshals of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland, the presidium of the city council and the Mayor of the city of Warsaw, chaired by the Marshal”.<sup>10</sup> This time the temple was to be located in a new area, the fields of Mokotów. For the second time in the history of the shrine of Divine Providence the sin of pride influenced the construction – the committee’s ambition was to erect an impressive monument which was supposed to fulfill a number of functions. According to the conditions of the new tender, the National Temple of Divine Providence in Warsaw was expected “to be a thanksgiving monument of the nation, commemorating the

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<sup>7</sup> Today in the collection of the National Museum in Kraków.

<sup>8</sup> W. Fiszerowa, *Dzieje moje własne i osób postronnych. Wiązanka spraw poważnych, ciekawych i błahych*, Warszawa 1998, p. 174.

<sup>9</sup> *Ustawa z dnia 17 marca 1921 roku o wykonaniu ślubu, uczynionego przez Sejm Czteroletni, wzniesienia w Warszawie świątyni pod wezwaniem “Opatrzności Bożej”*, in: “Konkurs zamknięty na projekt świątyni pod wezwaniem Opatrzności Bożej w Warszawie”, *Architektura i Budownictwo*, 1932, p. 65.

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



regaining of independence, and to have a ceremonial function for the purposes of the state. Next to the shrine should be the tombs of the Catholic people who rendered great service to the country, thus giving the shrine the character of a national temple, a memorial to all those deemed worthy of this honour by the Sejm of the Polish Republic”<sup>11</sup>. The chancel of the church was to hold the “thrones for the President of the Polish Republic and the Archbishop, choir stalls for the episcopate, seats for the marshals of the Sejm and Senate, for the government, members of parliament, generals and representatives of the army, etc.”<sup>12</sup>

Such a strong presence of lay authorities in a church building required an appropriate architectural design. The description of the conditions for the design emphasized that “Apart from its monumental character, the shrine should fulfill all the practical requirements of the Church and its traditions.”<sup>13</sup> It was also necessary to produce a careful design of the area around the temple and find a solution that would “guarantee an appropriate organization of the pedestrian traffic, routes for the army and vehicles, a special area for people participating in ceremonies outside the church, a separate area for the army, parking spaces for automobiles and vehicles, and a residential area for the clergy and church servants.”<sup>14</sup> The extensive project as well as the “monument-like” character of the shrine were a great challenge for architects. As Franciszek Siedlecki said, “the temple of Divine Providence was supposed to be a church and a tomb, and a location for national ceremonies.”<sup>15</sup>

More than fifty designs were submitted after the tender announced in 1929, but no winner was selected and the tender was inconclusive. The jury gave three main prizes to Bohdan Pniewski, Zdzisław Mączyński and Jan Koszyc-Witkiewicz. The designs were appreciated because of their “monument-like character” and “monumental form”. What is more, the proposals were perceived as original and modern, fitting into the architectural trends of the inter-war period.

The highly modern shape of the church designed by Bohdan Pniewski, constructed as if from geometrized elements, was appreciated by the jury

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<sup>11</sup> *Program i warunki konkursu na projekt Świątyni Opatrzności Bożej w Warszawie*, Warsaw 1929.

<sup>12</sup> “Konkurs na projekt świątyni Opatrzności Bożej w Warszawie”, *Architektura i Budownictwo* 1929, no.7, p. 277.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> After: O. Czerner, “Niespełnione ślubowanie”, in: *Świątynia Opatrzności Bożej*, ed. by I. Juszkiewicz, Wrocław 1999, p. 7.

because “The design is a successful combination of a monument and a sacred building [...]”.<sup>16</sup> Some elements of the interior, however, were criticized, as well as the modest size of the building, which “may have an unfavorable impact on the ceremonial function of the church [...]”.<sup>17</sup>

Zdzisław Mączyński proposed a basilican church with a strongly accented, monumental central part, since – as claimed by the architect himself – “The church of Divine Providence is a church-monument, a church-mausoleum, a ceremonial church, and thus it should be visible against the skyline of the city.”<sup>18</sup>

The design by Jan Koszyc-Witkiewicz was deemed as the most original one. The jury decided that “The design is undoubtedly unique: thanks to the original concept – which is fully justified by the exceptional subject of the competition – the building is not only different from the existing church types, but also – thanks to its idealism – it goes far beyond the framework of modern architecture. It is a fully monumental and exceptionally inspiring design.”<sup>19</sup>

In 1930, after a thorough review and clarification of the conditions for the designs, another tender was announced. This time, invited architects submitted 15 designs. The proposal of Bohdan Pniewski won with a vast majority of the votes. In the technical specification from 1931, Bohdan Pniewski claimed that the new design “is a free interpretation of the previous concept [...]”<sup>20</sup>. This time the body of the building took a much more compact form. The main highlight of the exterior was a monumental tower consisting of geometrized elements which decreased in size towards the top. An important part of the façade was a huge, centrally located rose window. Its presence, as well as the dominance of vertical lines, was a subtle reference to gothic cathedrals. Regardless of its historical references, however, the design was still highly modern. According to the jury, the accumulation of forms gave the building its monumental character.<sup>21</sup> During the session of the jury on 18 December 1931, when the results of the tender were announced, the chair of the jury, the Vice-Marshall of the Sejm, Waław Makowski, gave a significant speech: “We are

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<sup>16</sup> “Ocena Sądu konkursowego”, in: *Świątynia Opatrzności Bożej*, ed. by I. Juskiewicz, Wrocław 1999, p. 22.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Opis techniczny projektu, in: *Świątynia Opatrzności Bożej*, ed. by I. Juskiewicz, Wrocław 1999, p. 24.

<sup>19</sup> Ocena Sądu konkursowego, in: *Świątynia Opatrzności Bożej*, ed. by I. Juskiewicz, Wrocław 1999, p. 26.

<sup>20</sup> Opis techniczny projektu, in: *ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>21</sup> Protokół Sądu Konkursowego, powołanego do rozstrzygnięcia konkursu zamkniętego na projekt szkicowy świątyni “Opatrzności Bożej”, *Architektura i Budownictwo*, 1932, p. 71.

now going to implement a project of great historical value. The monument, which will be built according to the plan we will select today, will be preserved for ages and will reflect the religious feelings of the nation, its culture and its greatness.”<sup>22</sup>

When Marshal Józef Piłsudski died in 1935, a decision was made to create a special district – an urban monument to commemorate this great man. The Temple of National Providence was supposed to be its main highlight.

Bohdan Pniewski presented the final design of the shrine in 1938. The construction started in the summer of 1939, but it was violently stopped by the outbreak of World War II.

### THE MODERN TIMES

After World War II there were several attempts to resume the vows and go back to the idea of building the church of Divine Providence, but during the Communist regime such actions were doomed to failure. Any attempt provoked an immediate negative reaction from the authorities.

New opportunities became available after 1989 when Poland was again a fully independent country. The Primate of Poland, Cardinal Józef Glemp, put forward a proposal to build the temple. In 1991, during the celebrations of the 200 anniversary of the Third of May Constitution, the Constitution Committee of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland officially reconfirmed the vows taken two hundred years earlier by the Polish king and nation. Five years later Cardinal Józef Glemp suggested a transformation of the Church of St Alexander in the Three Crosses Square in Warsaw into the church of Divine Providence. However, no action was taken to realize this concept.

A breakthrough took place in 1998 when the initiative to build the church of Divine Providence was supported by the City Council of Warsaw and the Polish Episcopal Conference; the Senate<sup>23</sup> and Sejm<sup>24</sup> of the Polish Republic also issued special resolutions concerning the project. The resolution of the Sejm emphasized that “The National Temple of Divine Providence will be a symbol of our thankfulness for the resumption of independence in 1989,

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<sup>22</sup> The speech of Professor Waclaw Makowski during the 2<sup>nd</sup> Plenary Session, 18 December 1931, in: *ibid.*, pp. 70–71.

<sup>23</sup> Resolution of the Senate from 18 June 1998, *Monitor Polski*, 1998, no. 21, item 313.

<sup>24</sup> Resolution of the Sejm from 23 October 1998, *Monitor Polski*, 1998, no. 38, item 519.

twenty years of the pontificate of the Holy Father John Paul II, and the celebration of the 2000 years of Christianity.” In 1999 Pope John Paul II consecrated the cornerstone. This time the Fields of Wilanów were chosen as a location. The architectural design competition was very popular and the Jury<sup>25</sup> was able to select the winner from the 101 works submitted to the competition. The three main prizes were given to the designs by Marek Budzyński, by the architectural team including Andrzej Jurkiewicz, Piotr Migalski, Marek Moskal, Izabela Leple, Paweł Paradowski, Marcin Sadowski and Jerzy Szczepanik-Dzikowski, and to the architectural team consisting of Wojciech Szymborski, Lech Szymborski (student), and Jacek Zielonka. The final (or so it seemed) word rested, as in the past, with one man: this time it was the Primate of Poland, Cardinal Józef Glemp. On 22 May 2000 he selected the design which seemed most interesting and worthy of implementation – the proposal of Professor Marek Budzyński. And this is when problems started.

The highly original and innovative design evoked a very emotional response. The concept of a symbolic mountain topped with a crystal, spatial skylight in its center was enthusiastically embraced by those who hoped that it could become a unique work, up to the standards of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. On the other hand, however, it caused an almost allergic reaction and extreme fear of desacralization. There were also opinions criticizing the excessive and sometimes unclear symbolism.

The Reverend Professor Andrzej Luft, the diocesan conservation officer, thought that the design was simply unacceptable because “The external part of the building takes the form of a mound, which in the European culture is known as a kurgan grave [...] The impression is that within the mound there is a burial chamber and not a sacral building with a liturgical function. Covering a church with a kurgan is its degradation and an unfortunate misalliance of two forms: a pagan grave and a Christian temple.”<sup>26</sup> In a letter to the professional journal *Architektura – Murator*, Andrzej Luft also claimed that Budzyński’s design was negatively assessed by many priests from the Warsaw archdiocese.<sup>27</sup> However, some priests disagreed with this view, e.g. the Reverend

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<sup>25</sup> The jury was composed of Bishop Marian Duś, architects Szczepan Baum, Witold Cęckiewicz, Marian Fikus, Ryszard Girtler, Zbigniew Paradowski; civil engineers Teresa Nitkiewicz, Michał Strulak, Andrzej Krzyśpiak, and the secretary of the committee, Reverend Bohdan Leszczewicz.

<sup>26</sup> After: E. Rozwadowska “Świątynia Opatrzności Bożej życie po życiu”, *Architektura – murator*, 2001, no. 3, p. 69. cf. *Zmarł ks. prof. Andrzej Luft*, <http://www.niedziela.pl/wiad.php?p=200803&idw=314> (visited on 2 September 2010).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

Professor Czesław Bartnik, who wrote that “the design is in perfect unison with the ideas of general and Polish theology [...] it does not violate any aspects of faith, contrary to some narrow-minded and unjustified accusations.”<sup>28</sup>

A discussion about church architecture in Poland is much needed, but it must take place in appropriate circumstances and in an appropriate form. And such strong accusations of the lack of sacred character, aimed at the design chosen by the Primate of Poland himself, suggest that the clergy does not seem to have a common vision of a modern church, since the discussion revolves around the very basic issue of whether a church is “filled with sacred spirit” or involves a “degradation” of the idea of a Christian temple. Justifying their decision, the Jury emphasized that the ideological basis of Budzyński’s design was the conviction that the temple of Divine Providence was an exceptional building which should not be another monumental church but “a unique work whose form is filled with inner meaning” and “abounds in universal and modern symbolism.”<sup>29</sup> These assumptions, as all members of the Jury believed, fully fit the purpose of the competition.<sup>30</sup> There were also no doubts about the highly spiritual and symbolic meaning of the mountain. The opinion of the Jury states that: “The symbol and the archetype of a sacred place – a place of contact between man and God – is a mountain. [...] A mountain is inextricably linked with the Christian tradition, and at the same time the form of a mound goes back to the roots of the Slavic and Polish traditions.”<sup>31</sup> The Jury also strongly appreciated the unique character of the work and its universal connotations, emphasizing several times that it was a building “filled with the sacred spirit in each of its elements.”<sup>32</sup>

It is also worth noting that, apart from well-known architects, the Jury included the Suffragan Bishop of the Warsaw Archdiocese, Marian Duś, head of the Department of Church Construction and Sacramental Affairs. According to the official website of the Warsaw Archdiocese, the bishop “rendered considerable services to the construction of many churches within the archdiocese<sup>33</sup> and is also “a trusted partner of the Primate of Poland and all the priests of the Warsaw Archdiocese.”<sup>34</sup> It is hard to imagine that such a person

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. p. 69.

<sup>29</sup> “Opinia jury”, in: “Nagroda główna równorzędna – projekt wskazany o realizacji”, *Architektura – Murator*, 2000, no. 7, p. 14.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> <http://www.archidiecezja.warszawa.pl/archidiecezja/pasterze/biskupi/?a=262> (visited on 2 September 2010).

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

would simply commit a mistake and find the sacred spirit where – according to the opponents of the design – it cannot be found.

Justifying his decision to chose “a highly interesting and inspiring design”<sup>35</sup>, Cardinal Józef Glemp also emphasized that the proposal of Marek Budzyński “contains many theological observations regarding the presence of God in the World, that is Divine Providence [...]” and that “the prevailing features of the design are Catholic symbols and signs.” He also rejected the argument of the pagan character of the “mound” and pointed out numerous references to “a mountain” in the Holy Bible. But, as he observed, “it is always possible to produce a favorable or an unfairly negative interpretation.”<sup>36</sup> However, according to the first version of “Post-competition recommendations to the author of design number 50”, “The architectural design of such building as the Temple of Divine Providence [...] must define its sacred character beyond any doubt. The proposed architectural solution, i.e. four spatial trusses filled with crystal glass and topped with small crosses, does not fulfill this requirement. The solution needs to be corrected so as to convey a clear symbolic message of Divine Providence; there must be three spatial trusses corresponding to the three divine persons – the Holy Trinity – and in the middle there should be a much taller and luminous Cross of Victory.”<sup>37</sup>

Such an attempt to intervene in an architectural project comes as a great surprise, and even more so considering the fact that the very same finial of the temple was very positively, even enthusiastically, assessed by the jury. There were no suspicions regarding the “wrong” symbolism, and the lack of simplistic literalism was considered a forte. “Completely modern, light and at the same time strong form of the finial of the mound may have various symbolic interpretations depending on the distance, the time of year or day, the weather and the lighting conditions. It may be perceived as a tent, a pair of wings, a cloud, a burning bush or a candle at night; a crown or a crystal full of iridescent reflections against the sky. This form is an ample but also spectacular source of light falling from the sky into the interior of the Temple. The light clears up the dark spaces full of unique expressiveness and

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<sup>35</sup> “Wybrałem rozwiązanie nowatorskie. Rozmowa z księdzem Kardynałem Józefem Glem-  
pem Prymasem Polski”, *Architektura – Murator*, 2000, no. 7, p. 10.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* p. 11.

<sup>37</sup> Cit. in: “Wierzę, że prawda obiektywna istnieje. Bóg jest Bogiem. Drzewo jest drzewem. Kłamstwo jest kłamstwem” – List Marka Budzyńskiego, <http://www.bbk.v-net.pl/fides/prasa/marek02.htm> (visited on 15 June 2010).

atmosphere of sacred mystery, which at the same time are fully functional and well-organized.<sup>38</sup>

Even after the Foundation ostracized the design, Cardinal Glemp did not criticize the finial and explained that it could be interpreted in various ways.<sup>39</sup> The idea of the sign of Divine Providence was also convincingly defended by the author himself. Marek Budzyński responded to the “Recommendations...”, by referring to the encyclical of John Paul II and *Dogmatyka Katolicka* [*Catholic Dogma*] by Professor Czesław Bartnik, which clearly states (p. 6) that “The linguistic models which aim to make the mystery of the Trinity more understandable, presenting it as e.g. a triangle, a three-wheeled vehicle, a three-headed shape, are rather confusing”, “the number ‘three’ cannot be directly linked to the Trinity” because “Divine Persons are not ‘next to one another’ but they are united in an inseparable way.” Summing up, Budzyński writes: “Having reconsidered such statements, I have come to the conclusion that in modern architecture the concept of the Holy Trinity can only be represented in terms of time and space. [...] To my mind, changing a truss into a symbol of a Divine Person and three trusses into a symbol of the Holy Trinity is simply a sin.”<sup>40</sup> Unfortunately, no substantial discussion followed.

In November 2000, i.e. six months after the favorable decision of Primate Józef Glemp, the Management Board of the Foundation for the Building of the National Temple of Divine Providence (appointed by the Primate himself) decided to withdraw from cooperation with Marek Budzyński. The reason was formulated in the following way: “During our negotiations with Professor Marek Budzyński we did not manage to agree on any changes to the technical specifications of the project, and the financial demands of Professor Budzyński were unacceptable. In view of these facts and the increasing doubts about the lack of sacred character of the designed work, the Management Board of the Foundation, with the approval of the Primate of Poland, has decided to abandon the project.”<sup>41</sup> It was a very surprising step, quite unexpected to

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<sup>38</sup> “Opinia jury, in: Nagroda główna równorzędna – projekt wskazany do realizacji”, *Architektura – Murator*, 2000, no. 7, p. 14.

<sup>39</sup> *Świątynia Opatrzności Bożej – wczorajszy zamysł i dzisiejsza treść*, (Interview for the radio program “Kościół Warszawski – mówią: Prymas i biskupi” on Channel Plus – Józef, Warszawa, 15 April 2001), <http://www.spp.episkopat.pl/kazania/010415a.htm> (visited on 3 September 2010).

<sup>40</sup> *Wierzę, że prawda obiektywna istnieje. Bóg jest Bogiem. Drzewo jest drzewem. Kłamstwo jest kłamstwem. – List Marka Budzyńskiego*, <http://www.bbk.v-net.pl/fides/prasa/marek02.htm> (visited on 15 June 2010).

<sup>41</sup> “Schody do nieba – rozmowa z księdzem Bohdan Leszczewiczem, członkiem Fundacji Budowy Świątyni Opatrzność Bożej”, *Architektura – Murator*, 2002, no. 2, p. 41.

the Primate himself, and it took another six months for him to officially acknowledge this decision.

In July 2001 the Management Board of the Foundation announced the second tender for the design of the National Temple of Divine Providence. This time it was a closed tender. No representatives of the Union of Polish Architects were invited to cooperate; the names of the specialists assessing the proposals were not revealed. Two out of the nine designs were selected, and Primate Józef Glemp finally chose the proposal by Wojciech and Lech Szymborski.

Announcing his decision, however, the Primate referred to the previously selected design by Marek Budzyński, saying that “I have always regarded it as the most interesting proposal and I have not changed my mind. Professor Budzyński strived to organize nature, especially the plants and water, so that the concrete, brick and wooden constructions embedded in it could become a perfect place to worship God – the Divine Providence – intended for a wise Christian man. Nonetheless, the body of the temple, covered with shrubbery, and the crystal crest growing out of it, met with strong opposition from the congregation and from engineers who were not certain about the technical parameters of the building. As a result, this concept had to be abandoned.”<sup>42</sup> It is a natural response to quote here the famous words of John Paul II – “Have no fear”, especially that the jury, comprised of specialists, clearly stated that the design was “a professional and well-thought-out technical and functional solution”<sup>43</sup>

Another surprising fact is that the president of the Management Board of the Foundation was Bishop Marian Duś – the same person who, as a member of the jury during the first tender, strongly supported the proposal of Marek Budzyński. The same applied to Teresa Nitkiewicz, a civil engineer, and Reverend Bohdan Leszczewicz, the secretary of the committee, a severe critic of Budzyński’s design in the press.

The decision of the Foundation met with a lot of criticism. Many architects refused to take part in the second tender. The architect Andrzej Kaliszewski (2<sup>nd</sup> prize in the first tender) wrote a letter to the Foundation, saying that “further involvement in the design work concerning this exceptional sacred building, a votive offering of the nation, cannot and should not increase the rift between various architectural teams. After Professor Marek Budzyński’s

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<sup>42</sup> *Prymas wybrał nowy projekt Świątyni Opatrzności*, <http://ekai.pl/wydarzenia/x1392/prymas-wybrał-nowy-projekt-swiatyni-opatrzności/?print=1> (visited on 3 September 2010).

<sup>43</sup> “Opinia jury”, in: “Nagroda główna równorzędna – projekt wskazany o realizacji”, *Architektura – Murator*, 2000, no. 7, p. 14.



proposal was rejected [...] [entering the new competition] would be a harmful decision, incompatible with the idea behind the building of this temple.”<sup>44</sup> The architect Jerzy Szczepanik-Dzikowski, co-author of one of the three winning projects from the first tender, commented on the decision to abandon the realization of the project, saying “You cannot do such things. An architectural design competition is in a sense an agreement and it should be treated as an agreement. Any objections to Professor Budzyński’s work should have been clearly stated before the final decision of the jury. This did not happen. This means that the founder was not ready to make the decision, both from the organizational and from the emotional point of view.”<sup>45</sup> The Management Board of the Union of Polish Architects wrote a letter to Primate Józef Glemp, expressing their dissatisfaction about the conduct of the organizers, which “belittles the very idea of the temple”.<sup>46</sup> Some representatives of the Congress of Polish Culture also expressed their opinions. A series of articles defending the original conception was published by *Gazeta Wyborcza*. Nonetheless, the decision of the members of the Foundation did not change.

The selected design by Wojciech Szymborski and Lech Szymborski arouses no emotions and inspires no deep reflections – in this respect it is a very safe solution. The monumental building of reinforced concrete, built on the Greek-cross plan and covered with a dome, uses very clear symbols which do not require a complex interpretation. Wojciech Szymborski and Jacek Zielonka found the initial decision of Cardinal Józef Glemp outrageous. Jacek Zielonka stated that “Both in art and in architecture we need a logical continuity, we need harmony. There is no place there for New Age experiments”<sup>47</sup> – and in his opinion Marek Budzyński’s design was clearly such an experiment.

Reverend Andrzej Luft, the fiercest opponent of Budzyński’s project, was satisfied with the proposal of Szymborski and Szymborski since, as he said, “it is a design for a church. It has clear features indicating that the building is a temple.”<sup>48</sup> This opinion is probably based on the presence of the slightly old-fashioned dome topped with a cross and the huge “gothic” rose windows.

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<sup>44</sup> “Schody do nieba – rozmowa z księdzem Bohdan Leszczewiczem, członkiem Fundacji Budowy Świątyni Opatrzność Bożej”, *Architektura – murator*, 2002, no. 2, p. 42.

<sup>45</sup> Statement in *Życie Warszawy*, 19 January 2001, after “Schody do nieba – rozmowa z księdzem Bohdanem Leszczewiczem, członkiem Fundacji Budowy Świątyni Opatrzność Bożej”, *Architektura – Murator*, 2002, no. 2, p. 41.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. *Schody do nieba...*, op.cit., p. 45.

<sup>47</sup> After: Żebrowska Joanna, “Z wiarą i rozumem w nowy wiek”, *Życie*, 24 May 2000, p. 9.

<sup>48</sup> “Zachwyca i rozczarowuje”, *Rzeczpospolita*, 11 January 2002, p. A4.

Interestingly enough, the designs that the team of Wojciech and Lech Szymborski submitted for the open tender, and then for the first and second stage of the closed tender, are three completely different works, clearly evolving from simple but modern solutions to historical forms. As Wojciech Szymborski explained in his interview for KAI, this was the result of more precise requirements formulated for the purpose of the second competition.<sup>49</sup> The winning design was also modified, though the changes were rather superficial. This team of designers is also exceptionally open to cooperation; on the web page of the Foundation for the Building of the National Temple of Divine Providence (unavailable at the moment – September 2010) the architects state that “the construction of the National Temple of Divine Providence is based on the working design prepared by the architectural studio “Szymborski & Szymborski” and “the spatial design, its spatial – symbolic – form is the result of cooperation between the architects and the investor.”<sup>50</sup>

Therefore, the members of the Foundation, rejecting the design by Marek Budzyński, may have also rejected the architect with passion who created a work which was a complete vision, perhaps controversial and thought-provoking, but very consistent in its symbolism, a work that the investors could not so easily change and “improve” in their own way without destroying the whole concept.

Marek Budzyński has implied that the members of the Foundation refused to discuss their doubts with him, or even talk about the design. This unwillingness was so obvious that, as the architect claims, “the vice-president of the Foundation, Reverend Doctor Janusz Bodzon, after the decision of the Primate [...] was announced, [...] when I approached him, saying ‘Now we are going to cooperate’, simply turned his back on me.”<sup>51</sup> The architect wrote in an open letter: “As a Catholic and a Pole I am deeply shocked that three priests [...] can repudiate a decision taken by the Primate and the Jury, question the beautiful theological interpretations of the Primate, disregard *Dogmatyka Katolicka* (the letter by Professor Czesław Bartnik) and the opinions of the Pope. [...] I know I am probably getting hysterical [...], but after all the tensions of this competition I have now experienced an utterly surreal, one-year gap between the positive evaluation of the design by the highest representative of the Catholic Church in Poland, officially appointed to take the final decision regarding the construction of the Temple, and the informal actions aimed at destroying that decision, taken by the Management Board of

<sup>49</sup> “Autorzy świątyni Opatrzności Bożej: ład ułatwia modlitwę” (Interview for KAI).

<sup>50</sup> <http://www.swiatynia.pl/projekt.html> (visited on 7 June 2010).

<sup>51</sup> *Wierzę, że prawda obiektywna istnieje...*, <http://www.bbk.v-net.pl/fides/prasamarek02.htm>.

the Foundation, created for the purpose of building this Temple according to the architectural design selected by the Jury and the Primate.”<sup>52</sup>

The crisis in Polish sacred architecture has been discussed for years. As can be seen, the priests sending out such inconsistent and self-contradictory signals do not help architects in their efforts to create designs for a modern church. Chaos ensues when “specialists” treat the very same design first as a heresy, then as a masterpiece. As Primate Józef Glemp has observed, since the design by Marek Budzyński “is modern and uses forms, materials and techniques which have not been used before in our sacred architecture, it provokes reflections on whether to choose modernity, which is always a bit risky as far as functionality, maintenance and aesthetics are concerned, or to support classic forms, which have already proved appropriate for pastoral work.”<sup>53</sup>

In April 2001 he still supported modernity – because, as he said, “It is only fitting [...] not to repeat existing architectural forms but to create new ones, especially that the purpose of the votive temple is untypical as regards the theological premises and ideological layering, created around the original thanksgiving offering for more than two centuries.”<sup>54</sup>

Four months later (12 August 2001) the Primate concluded that “it seems a good idea to hold on to the outline of the first temple, known as the design by Jakub Kubicki. The Greek-cross plan of the church would comply with the requirements of current liturgy and state functions. One of the entrances to the temple complex should be the Triumphal Arch topped with the monuments of John II and John Paul II [...]”<sup>55</sup> (a printout of the whole statement was attached to the list of conditions for the closed tender).<sup>56</sup>

Innovation has lost against safe mediocrity. In 2007 the Primate again commented on the design by Marek Budzyński: “It was a completely original design, unique and amazing in its simplicity. [...] The Divine Providence approached people through nature [...]”<sup>57</sup>. However, various “frictions” led to the selection of the design by Szymborski and Szymborski, and “the new

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> “Świątynia Opatrzności Bożej – wczorajszy zamysł i dzisiejsza treść” (radio interview, program “Kościół Warszawski – mówią: Prymas i biskupi” on channel Plus – Józef, 15 April 2001), <http://www.spp.episkopat.pl/kazania/010415a.htm> (visited on 3 September 2010).

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> “Myślmy o Świętej Opatrzności Bożej” (radio interview on channel Plus – Józef, 12 August 2001), after: *Architektura – Murator*, 2002, no. 2, p. 27.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> The Primate of Poland, Józef Glemp, *Opatrzność Boża i jej świątynia w Polsce*, Warsaw 2007, pp. 37–38.

design was not bad, it was inspired by the concept of Jakub Kubicki.”<sup>58</sup> Nonetheless, for such an important temple “not bad” seems a bit too little. And here, on the margin of the whole story of the competition, new questions arise: Is the clergy dangerously biased against the modern language of forms? Does that mean that the sacred can only be expressed by borrowings from the past? Does modernity equal lack of sacredness?

The construction work is progressing slowly – it was stopped several times because of insufficient funding. The press has often published articles claiming that the fundraising process is not well-organized and the decision to build the temple has not been appropriately promoted. Very soon the discussion about the National Temple of Divine Providence melted down to the information on how many million Polish zlotys are being donated to the construction, and the most heatedly discussed aspect of the problem was whether the state budget should be involved in the financing of the temple.

These are not the subjects that should be inspired by the most important temple built by the nation as a votive offering to God. The great idea is slowly getting lost among unclear conflicts and constant struggles. It is also difficult to treat the building as “a votive offering of the whole Polish nation” if at the very beginning some doubtful decisions and surprising actions have divided the nation so strongly. It also seems that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century it is a mistake to equate the prestige of a building with its monumental size. Such a criterion was included in the “Conditions of the closed tender for the architectural design on the National Temple of Divine Providence.” A very quick overview of Polish architecture, even limited to sacred buildings, clearly shows that monumentalism loses against “more humble” solutions, which are also more unique in their form and atmosphere. Cardinal Glemp’s remark that “Right now the idea of the temple belongs more to the national culture and social traditions than to worship in the parochial sense”<sup>59</sup> also gives cause for concern.

For a little while there was a chance to create a masterpiece and a unique object complying with international standards, remarkable, though-provoking and inspiring, encouraging discussion, also with God. But the allergic reaction of some people has prevented its construction. A monumental church is being built; it seems correct – since no one would be able to question the function of this building – but also conservative, dull and lacking in character.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

**KURHAN CZY WYCISKARKA DO POMARAŃCZY?  
CZYLI KTO MA NA CO ALERGIE I CO SIĘ KOMU PODOBA...  
(streszczenie)**

Świątynia Opatrzności Bożej budziła, budzi i z pewnością będzie jeszcze przez wiele lat budziła zaciekle spory i dyskusje... A przecież miał to być symbol wolności, zgody, pojednania, a współcześnie także i solidarności rodaków – wotum wdzięczności narodu za odzyskaną wolność oraz pontyfikat Jana Pawła II.<sup>60</sup>

Koncepcja wzniesienia budowli narodziła się tuż po uchwaleniu Konstytucji 3 maja jako wotum dziękczynne narodu. Jednak przez ponad 200 lat nie udało się zrealizować złożonych wówczas ślubów.

Pod koniec XX w. podjęto kolejną próbę. W 1999 r. został ogłoszony konkurs przygotowany przy współudziale Stowarzyszenia Architektów Polskich. Spośród ponad stu prac jury za najlepsze uznało trzy projekty przyznając im pierwsze nagrody. 22 maja 2000 roku Ksiądz Prymas Józef Glemp, pomysłodawca przedsięwzięcia, wybrał propozycję prof. Marka Budzyńskiego. Projekt ten uznany został również przez środowisko architektów za bardzo interesującą propozycję, na światowym poziomie. Jednak Zarząd Fundacji Budowy Świątyni Opatrzności Bożej „wraz z gronem ekspertów” podjął zaskakującą decyzję o odrzuceniu przeznaczonego już do realizacji projektu. Zarząd Fundacji, tym razem już bez współudziału SARP, ogłosił kolejny, zamknięty konkurs, do którego zaproszono jedynie wybrane zespoły architektoniczne. Wśród nich zabrakło wielu znanych architektów, między innymi laureata nagrody głównej równorzędnej arch. Jerzego Szczepanika-Dzikowskiego. Zwyciężył zachowawczy projekt zespołu „Szymborski & Szymborski” i to on jest dzisiaj, zresztą z wielkimi problemami, realizowany. Nowa propozycja nie zdobyła uznania środowisk artystycznych, a przez internautów bardzo szybko okrzyknięta została „wyciskarką do pomarańczy”.

Zastanawia alergiczna wręcz reakcja niektórych środowisk kościelnych i odrzucenie idei zawartych w nowatorskim projekcie prof. arch. Marka Budzyńskiego. Zabrakło przy tym rzeczowej dyskusji i merytorycznej krytyki. „Kurhan” okazał się zbyt mało sakralny i przegrał z projektem wypełniającym „standardy właściwe dla budowli sakralnych”.

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<sup>60</sup> Por. *Świątynia będzie własnością historyczną narodu*, (Wywiad dla Katolickiej Agencji Informacyjnej przeprowadzony przez Bogumiła Łozińskiego, Warszawa, rezydencja Prymasa Polski, 27 lutego 2006), [www.spp.episkopat.pl/kazania/060227a.htm](http://www.spp.episkopat.pl/kazania/060227a.htm) (14.07.2010).



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## **THE HIDDEN OTHER CLOTHING AS AN ART OBJECT**

**Abstract:** The theme of this article is contemporary sculpture which refers to clothing. This includes objects shown in galleries, performers' costumes, as well as film or photographic documentation of ephemeral "packaging" of the human body. The artists discussed here, whose art fits this description were once marginalized because of their gender, skin color or sexual identity. In the postmodern age, they occupy the position in the mainstream of art, determined by the status of the Other. However, I am looking for a different type of otherness. Interpreting the selected works, I refer to the familiar discourses (of power, body, etc.) as well as search for other hidden meanings. The hidden other may be only suggested. His/her ethereal nature can manifest itself in allusions, distortion, or an order based on oppositions. Balaclavas decorated with symbols of power made by Rosemarie Trockel provide a curtain for a sensed different order. Costumes from the action by Rebecca Horn question the habits of the subject-object relationship. Like the miniature installations by Charles LeDray, they reverse the vectors of power. Confrontation with something infinite, beyond rational comprehension, also creates an opportunity to sense the hidden Other. Helen Chadwick's action *In The Kitchen* can be interpreted as a confrontation with the infinity of space. *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for Albino Anorectic* by Jana Sterbak is an encounter with the mystery of death. Sometimes it is questions and concerns which arise upon viewing the work that are helpful in finding the hidden Other. The excessive details in Shonibare's installations do not reveal the identity of the headless hero presented by the artist. Many associations and interpretative paths are hidden behind the simple description of the works of Dorothy Cross. The hidden Other avoids being captured once and for all in a definition. To describe him, to define him would destroy his essence.

**Keywords:** Contemporary sculpture – gender – postmodernism

Theories and conceptual networks operating within art and aesthetics are not just useful for organizing reality. The mechanisms of aesthetic power are constructing the dominant discourse along with the corresponding rejected sphere, suppressed, for example, on the grounds of gender, race or sexual preference. The second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw a gradual shift in focus towards the artists representing the marginalized sphere. Trends in art inspired by feminism and gay-rights and ethnic-rights movements came to the forefront

of interest. They developed their own theories and conceptual schemata relating to the discourses emerging in social, political, and media life. Thus, we obtained an easily accessible interpretative apparatus, which, however, may turn out to be a trap limiting the understanding of artworks. For example, in the 1970s, female artists began to provoke by introducing the techniques and materials identified with femininity and the domestic sphere into the world of art. Sewing, embroidery and weaving, that is crafts with some utilitarian functions had not been traditionally regarded as high art. On the one hand, the strategy used by those artists led to the expansion of the frontiers of art, on the other – it prompted the critics to talk of “female aesthetics”<sup>1</sup>. Pointing out the different nature of female sensitivity, they confined themselves to interpreting their work in the context of gender.

Practices involving rejection, dismissal and victimization can be interpreted as signs of an allergy to anything that is different. However, I think that nowadays the issue is particularly complex and cannot be reduced to the simple equation: negative allergy = rejection. Complications also occur in biological allergies. Under the influence of anti-allergens, an organism’s allergies mutate. In this article, I intend to look at some artists from the marginalized sphere who, however, are currently the focus of interest of the critics. This does not mean that they are no longer treated as Others but that this otherness has been incorporated into the system of contemporary culture. Discourses associated with it have become somewhat institutionalized. The Other has been described, becoming a participant in the social dialogue. Has he not, however, consequently been reduced to a set of identifiable features?

In this article, I will discuss a specific artistic example – the works of the authors treated as Others; I will focus on a particular type of creative activities – the objects originating in clothing, which was considered an inferior, utilitarian field of art. Currently, this type of work has the status of sculpture. The valorization of this kind of artistic expression was associated with the appreciation of the artists whose voice had long been suppressed. They were designated as the Others of the official culture. This difference was identified and gave direction to the comments of critics. However, does this kind of interpretation exhaust the semantic content of their work? Analyzing selected works of this type, I will try to extract some meanings going beyond the central focus of the current critical discourses. I do not intend to ignore the well-known theories of the Other. I suggest, however, that a different kind of otherness should be also investigated through the problematization of the

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<sup>1</sup> S. Bovenschen, “Czy istnieje estetyka kobieca?”, in: *Zmierzch estetyki – rzekomy czy autentyczny?*, ed. S. Morawski, Warsaw 1987, p.153.



themes of the works. This otherness, in contrast to the defined, recognized Other (woman, homosexual, person from outside the Euro-American cultural circle), is not obvious and cannot be reduced to a specific ideology.

The first group of artists deliberately using clothes as a medium of art were women. Rosemarie Trockel had been using different means of expression for many years, but it was her *Knit Pictures* that gained her recognition in 1985 – “coloured woolen rectangles that she hung on the wall so that they looked like colour-filed paintings.”<sup>2</sup> Both the paintings and the later knitted items of clothing were regarded on many occasions as a commentary on women’s handicraft activities. Peter Weibel wrote in 1988 in the artist’s exhibition catalog: “As Rosemarie Trockel introduces this artistically inferior material and this aesthetically inferior art form, we become aware of the extent to which the feminine is excluded from culture. For wool as a material, knitting as a method, and knitted motifs as a theme are signifiers of feminine. If these signifiers are seen as culturally inferior, then the feminine itself must be seen as inferior too.”<sup>3</sup>

The author of these words, like many other commentators, identifies the employed technique with femininity. Trockel, however, hoped that her work would not be confined to the female ghetto. Identifying her work with women’s activity seems to be even more doubtful since the artist never used any hand-knitted material. Judith Collins observed that “All of Trockel’s knitted works are professionally made by a computer-controlled knitting machine.”<sup>4</sup> They are not, therefore, a handicraft activity regarded as feminine and are associated with “masculine” work using modern technology. Another disruption in the image of femininity – marginalized but tranquil – is the introduction by the artist of the symbols of power, violence, totalitarianism and discrimination. Trockel adorned her objects (both paintings and clothing) with the recurring motifs of swastikas, hammers and sickles, Playboy bunnies, etc. These are not random decorative motifs. Her works have a broad intellectual background. Trockel studied anthropology, sociology, theology, mathematics and painting. The signs incorporated in the knitted objects are infused with political and social meanings. Works of this type include, for example, the *Balakovas* series (1986–1990). Balaclavas are associated with terrorists, bank robberies, and masked murderers. The symbols of power and violence placed on the balaclavas are associated with some actions aimed at controlling reality by means of dualist and hierarchical divisions. The swastika reminds us of the fascist regime and the division of humankind into the master race and the

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<sup>2</sup> J. Collins, *Sculpture Today*, New York 2007, p. 304.

<sup>3</sup> Cited after S. Black, *Knitwear in Fashion*, London 2005, p. 134.

<sup>4</sup> J. Collins, op.cit., p. 304.

subhumans. The hammer and sickle refer to the Cold War and the division of the world into East and West. The Playboy bunny reminds us of the clichés of femininity and masculinity, the observed object and the observing subject. Each time we are dealing with a model constructed out of two opposing elements. A balaclava, whose main use as a garment is to protect one against cold, in the artist's vision serves to shield the system from the possibility of an alternative solution. It suggests the simultaneous existence of a mysterious third element, which could expose the artificiality of the above-mentioned opposing divisions. It draws attention to the injustice of the subordination of complex relationships to political and social categories. Depriving the balaclava of the hole for the mouth enhances the impression of a limited air supply and restriction. It gives the impression that no communication with the Other hiding underneath it is possible. The Other also has no possibility to express himself in the form of a socially comprehensible discourse.

Yinka Shonibare is a British artist of Nigerian origin. His output is also commonly linked with the discourse of power. The artist refers to himself as a "postcolonial hybrid." This definition can also be applied to his art. Shonibare's trademark is a brightly colored cotton batik fabric, which is a major feature in his collages, installations, costumes, films and photographs. Batik is marked by a mixture of meanings, influences of ethnic, political and historical nature. It is perceived as a traditional African cloth, while in fact it comes from Indonesia. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, it was brought from there to Europe where it was not overly appreciated, although it did start to be mass-produced and exported to Africa. In the 1960s, when many African countries gained independence, the brightly colored clothes decorated with traditional prints (such as crescents or patterns inspired by ancient Egypt) became a manifestation of African national pride.

Batik as a symbol of authentic, yet false "Africanism" is inspiring to Shonibare. It serves him to create costumes which are then modeled by human-size mannequins. These costumes precisely imitate the form of European clothing from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The mannequins are presented in a large-scale installations with narrative structure, sometimes borrowed from old paintings, e.g. those of William Hogarth, Jean-Honoré Fragonard and Thomas Gainsborough (*Mr. and Mrs. Andrew without Their Heads*). Sometimes the artist arranges them in explicitly sexual poses, during games (*Girl on Flying Machine*), feasts (*Party Time. Re-imagine America*), duels (*How To Blow Up Two Heads at Once*), or even the conquest of space (*Vacation*). Critics emphasize the political and cultural implications of his work. "Shonibare may not have been the first artist to transpose this fabrics into Western forms, but he was the first

to see how they could be used to tell a twisting story of globalization,”<sup>5</sup> Dan Bischoff wrote.

It is noteworthy that the mannequins the artist uses are headless. We are aware of the presence of the cultural symbols of Asia, Europe and Africa. We are even overwhelmed by the multiplicity of references to colonialism, slavery, the wealth of European culture generated from exploitation, from the tangled history of conquests, but the identity of the characters, featured in these fascinating arrangements is impossible to read. This situation opens the viewer to a metaphysical mystery, exceeding the level of discussion about racial differences. We are faced with an unsolvable puzzle of the identity of human beings which we recognize on the basis of the sensory observation of their characteristics. Despite the sheer volume of detail referencing too many discourses, however, we have a vague impression that what matters the most eludes us.

Clothes as art objects played a special role in the actionist movement. Helen Chadwick, at the very beginning of her artistic career, made costumes which constituted a critical dialogue with fashion and gender stereotypes. These works can be also easily included in the context of the discourse of power in feminist interpretation. This type of action includes, for example *In the Kitchen* – a performance from 1973. The models featured in this show appeared in elaborate costumes assembled out of kitchen appliances: sinks, refrigerators, dryers, ovens. Imprisoned in those objects and integrated with them by means of sophisticated harnesses, they attempted to move, to rearrange the absurd packages of their bodies. Describing the action, Paweł Leszkowicz notes the obvious “literal feminist appeal, criticizing the confinement of women within the stereotypical patterns of existence”<sup>6</sup>. The artist herself, however, pointed to the broader meaning of the relationship between people and objects. These observations may be a starting point for a different perspective on work, helping to find wording from outside of the feminist vocabulary. Models are not so much restricted within household objects, as they are inscribed in geometric forms, like characters from the Renaissance drawings used to study human proportions. In shows of such type, numerous lines intersect the bodies, enclosing them in geometric figures. In Chadwick’s work, the drawing lines are replaced by belts binding objects to people. These objects determined their movement and space. Chadwick’s work also brings to mind the theatrical costumes of Oscar Schlemmer. The Bauhaus teacher, creating an experimental theater scene of the university also referred to geometric perspective,

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<sup>5</sup> D. Bischoff, “Post-Colonial Party Time”, *Fiberarts* 2010, no. 1, p. 42.

<sup>6</sup> P. Leszkowicz, *Helen Chadwick: ikonografia podmiotowości*, Kraków 2001, p. 84.

proportion and form of the human body. The lines drawn on the stage were supposed to build a spatial grid because – as the German artist claimed – “this way, geometry and stereometry of the scene are *revealed* and a sense of dimension is aroused [...], the actor, dancer or performer is *fascinated by* the spatial system of which he would otherwise be unaware and moves within it differently than in the undefined fluidity of space.”<sup>7</sup> The description of Schlemmer’s theatrical space presented by Arnd Wesemann shows unexpected kinship with Chadwick’s kitchen staging: “Schlemmer’s idea of deriving types of movement from the coordinates of the stage space looks like the fitted *Frankfurt kitchen* brought to life. The linear organization of space gives a mechanical quality to the housewife’s movements. The actor’s physical postures are subordinated to the linear organization of an imaginary architecture.”<sup>8</sup> Such association may seem humorous but it should not obscure the fact that the artists who explored human proportions in drawing projects or on the experimental stage were looking for the general laws of existence. The mystics saw the correspondence between man’s body and the cosmos. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Luca Pacioli argued that “the human body gives rise to all measurements [...] through which God reveals the greatest mysteries of nature.”<sup>9</sup> Schlemmer translated these ideas into the artistic language of abstraction. This perspective can also be applied to *In The Kitchen*. Going beyond the framework of everyday contexts, in which the work of the British artist is considered, we can discover a broader reference to an open, infinite space. This confrontation makes us aware of the limits of a human mind. Carolyn Korsmeyer writes: “contemplating infinity, we see that [...] the universe extends far beyond the human mind’s ability to grasp it, [...] it remains unknown, beyond the reach of human imagination and the ability to comprehend.”<sup>10</sup> The characters from Chadwick’s action can therefore be described as both women entangled in kitchen duties, as well as the functions of spatial possibilities, the functions of infinity, evoking the possibility of meeting with something unknown, beyond comprehension, beyond words.

The problem of the combination of body and object has also been tackled in the work of Rebecca Horn. Justyna Balisz writes: “The starting point is the artist’s own body, which seems to be the first and only instance in the understanding and perception of reality.”<sup>11</sup> In the 1970s, Horn created performances

<sup>7</sup> Quoted after A. Nowicka, “Bauhausbühne – eksperyment teatralny”, *Didaskalia* 2007, no. 82, p. 51.

<sup>8</sup> A. Wesemann, “The Bauhaus Theatre Group”, in: *Bauhaus*, ed. J. Fiedler, P. Feierabend, Cologne 2000, p. 541.

<sup>9</sup> W. Tatarkiewicz, *Historia estetyki*, vol. III, *Estetyka nowożytna*, Warsaw 2009, p. 76.

<sup>10</sup> C. Korsmeyer, *Gender w estetyce*, Kraków 2008, p. 162.

<sup>11</sup> J. Balisz, “Rebeci Horn mechanika duszy”, *Arteon* 2007, no.1 (81), p. 16.

without the participation of an audience, which she recorded on video and film. The script of these performances was based on the idea of a costume-object integrated with the body. One such performance is *Unicorn*<sup>12</sup> filmed in 1970. The eponymous unicorn is a woman in an absurd costume: a huge wooden pole was attached to her head and held in place by some tapes framing her entire body. The woman wearing this strange harness “performed a *trans journey* through a backdrop of woods and fields.”<sup>13</sup> The legendary unicorn – a symbol of virginity – would flee so quickly that it was impossible to hunt it. It could only be tamed by a virgin, or at least a pretty maiden. Because of the phallic head decoration, the unicorn was identified with masculine activity. The figure created by Horn was a blend of a male element (the horn), a female element (the body of the half-naked model), purity (the white of the costume, symbolic of the mythical animal) and fertility (the phallic attribute of the unicorn, corn fields forming the backdrop of the action). Therefore, the Other conjured by the artist is not obvious. It is neither human nor animal. It is also impossible to determine whether it represents the real world or the fairy-tale one.

*Lead Pencil Mask* is another video by the same author from 1972. It features the artist’s face in a mask. The mask is constructed out of black tapes making a flexible cage of sorts, to which protruding pencils are attached. Moving her head, Horn creates a tangle of lines on a sheet of paper placed in front of her. “While the mask is associated with assuming an alien identity, in this case, the movements – even though violent and mechanical – convey the image of individual expression, a determination to create; they are full of energy, unrestrained and brutal.”<sup>14</sup> By uniting the artist and the object, the whole body is involved in the act of creation. The automatic drawing evokes the spirit of surrealism with its desire to reach the subconscious. The creative act triggered by the joint action of human and object blurs the boundary between them. The body becomes a battery for the object, a tool for the communication it performs. Or to put it differently – the objects connected with the body reveal the mechanics of the soul. In the artist’s later works, objects become liberated from the human battery, living their own secret life. This leads to the blurring of the divisions made on the basis of existential anthropology, which distinguishes between man – determined by existence and object as a being “in itself.”

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<sup>12</sup> The German title of the film, *Einhorn*, alludes to the artist’s surname (*horn* meaning ‘horn’ in German).

<sup>13</sup> U. Lehman, “A journey into the interior of the body”, in: *Women Artists in the 20th and 21st Century*, ed. U. Grosenick, Köln 2001, p. 240.

<sup>14</sup> J. Balisz, op.cit., p. 16.

Horn's filmed performances are part of the discourse of the body, which in a more drastic form can be seen in the work of such artists as Jana Sterbak and Dorothy Cross. Jana Sterbak, a Canadian artist born in the Czech Republic, in 1987 created the work *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for Albino Anorectic*. It is a dress made of 60 pounds of raw beef draped around the model. During the exhibition, the salted meat went dry and shrank, imitating the aging of the human skin. The concept of "vanitas" appearing in the title refers us to the European artistic tradition, where it meant a vision based on the confrontation of conflicting qualities: depictions of opulence, of pleasures of life vs. transience and decay. For example, the vanitative motifs in still lifes included skulls, rotting food, hourglasses, broken instruments, etc. They were designed to make the audience aware of "the ephemerality of everything in this world that is sensual and beautiful"<sup>15</sup>. Linking Sterbak's work with the tradition of still life of the vanitative type seems to be justified, though the elements used by the artist are startling. She made raw beef her artistic material. The connotations of death are reinforced by the word "anorexia" appearing in the title, as this disease is often fatal. In addition, we are dealing with the confrontation of opposing qualities typical of the vanitas category. The beauty of a young woman is juxtaposed with the processes of decomposition and decay. Opulence, surplus of food is shown next to anorexia. Mortification by starvation is confronted with a desire to satisfy the vanity associated with fashionable appearance. Anorexia is, after all, a disease affecting many women seeking to attain an attractive appearance. In accordance with the feminist discourse, the work is interpreted as a commentary on the values assigned to a woman's body. In the artistic tradition, the female body, especially the nude, has been used to shape the ideal of beauty. The convention of showing a woman as a passive object of contemplation has been accepted by the contemporary media. Baroque plumpness, however, has been replaced with anorexic appearance; the beauty of today risks a brush with death.

Sterbak's work falls back on and at the same time challenges the artistic tradition. It shocks us with the drastic literal character of the vanitative presentation. The work rotted before the eyes of the spectators releasing unpleasant smells, emanating moisture. The artist appealed to the senses of smell and touch, the physical experience considered unworthy of the aesthetic sphere. To say that this was a violation of the aesthetic distance seems too mild for the repulsive sensations. The featured woman appeared to be stripped of her skin. The flesh that we see is moist, runny. We know that it covers the body, but we perceive it rather as an unveiling of what lies beneath the skin.

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<sup>15</sup>A.C. Krauße, *Historia malarstwa. Od renesansu do czasów współczesnych*, Köln 2000, p. 44.

The work makes a disturbing impression. The awareness of the rotting process is disgusting. *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for Albino Anorectic* vibrates with sensory energy. The strong sensations and emotions make for the subversive impact of the work, which attempts to convey the inexpressible. Sterbak's work confronts us with a disturbing experience of corporeality, of the mortality of body. These experiences are produced by the rotting dress. We are confronted with the mystery of death, which escapes our imagination and reason, because Sterbak's work questions the division between the external and the internal, between nature and culture. Its perverse strength lies in the fact that the presented "dress" made of meat, instead of protecting the body in accordance with the purpose of clothing, reveals its corporeality. In consequence, the nature-culture relation is put into question. Clothing represents culture, but in the form of garments made of meat it demonstrates its chthonic power demanding a return to nature.

In the 1990s, the Irish artist Dorothy Cross created several works in which she used prepared cow hide and udders. One of these realizations, entitled *Virgin Shroud*, is a combination of a granny's silk dress and a cow hide. The title of the work is no less surprising than the material from which the object was made. A virgin in many cultures is the personification of the ideal of purity, the innocence worthy of preservation. It therefore seems inappropriate to juxtapose this positive symbol firstly with the shroud covering the dead, and secondly with the skin torn off an animal. According to the feminist interpretation, we might speak here of being buried alive in purity. In this work by Cross, the dress is connected to the mask fitted with udders, surrounding the head like a halo. This attribute of holiness and the purity of the body evoke vague associations with the Virgin Mary. However, Judith Collins notes that "the cow skin covers the figure's head, preventing communication and making it seem like a dumb animal,"<sup>16</sup> – which points to another possible way of perceiving this work. Paradoxically, the *Virgin Shroud* conveys radically different messages: of purity, disintegration and death, holiness, animalism. However, we may be dealing with an overall metaphor, whose analytical interpretation is impossible.

Leather is one of the oldest materials used to make clothing. The skin stripped from a dead animal provided not only protection against the weather, but evidenced the hunter's courage. In primitive cultures, it was also believed that by wearing the skin of the killed animal, man magically gained its power. For example, the Inuit attach caribou ears to their hoods, believing that through them the hunter will better hear the voice of nature. An outfit made of animal

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<sup>16</sup> J. Collins, op.cit., p. 315.

leather is therefore “four-dimensional”<sup>17</sup>, with an added spiritual dimension. This interpretation of clothing makes us wonder what Cross means by using cow skin. In many cultures the cow is considered a sacred animal. In ancient Egypt, it was associated with the mother-goddess. The Sumerian mother-goddess Ninut is depicted in the form of a cow nursing a calf. In India, the cow is not identified with any deity but considered a sacred animal, and it is forbidden to kill it or eat its meat. The association of the divine or sacred with cow skin does not therefore seem inappropriate if we abandon the Catholic perspective.

Contemporary artists often draw from ancient sources, looking for positive female symbols. In *Virgin Shroud*, pre-Christian symbols are imposed on the Christian figure of Mary. A multitude of interpretative paths, multiple threads, and the accumulation of allusions make us lose our way. What we are looking for is obscured by a multitude of signs.

*Bust* – another work by the Irish artist – is a cow’s udder tailored to the shape of the dummy. Describing this work, Marysia Lewandowska drew attention to the ironic depiction of men’s desires: “glorifying the milkiest of milk glands (cow’s udder) with a caricature exaggeration, [Cross] exposes the stereotype of male desire. To some extent this amplification is reminiscent of inflatable female dolls, available in adult toy shops.”<sup>18</sup> Whitney Chadwick comments on the artist in a similar way, claiming that she uses “humor and irony to challenge the social constructions of gender.”<sup>19</sup> However, this appears to be an oversimplification, reducing the work to a sexist joke. If the garment were to be put on a human, even though it would cover nudity, it would also expose animal sexuality. Like a strange hybrid of many breasts, the work evokes associations with Artemis of Ephesus – the Greek goddess of fertility and harvest. In Roman mythology, her counterpart, Diana, was a virgin hunter. She was depicted with such attributes as a bow, arrows and quiver. In this work by Cross, the cow’s udder, sticks out toward the viewer like a set of pointed arrows. The strange costume designed by the artist combines Greco-Roman features. The udder-adorned *Bust* instantiates the archetype of protectiveness and destruction. The goddesses of the ancient world were often given contrasting attributes. Another association derives from the meaning ascribed to a cow’s udder by Freud. He situated it between the nipple and the penis, which gave it an intersexual identity. Thus once again, the interpreter is entangled in a network of meanings, none of which seems to be definitive.

<sup>17</sup> The phrase used by Maguelonne Toussaint-Samat in *Historia stroju*, Warsaw 2002, p. 68.

<sup>18</sup> M. Lewandowska, “Bad Girls. Instytut Sztuki Współczesnej (ICA) Londyn 7.10.–5.12. 1993”, *Obieg* 1994, no. 59–60, p. 27.

<sup>19</sup> W. Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society*, London 1996, p. 411.



In her assemblage entitled *Spurs*, Cross attached cow's udder to the heel cup of men's shoes, together with some fragments of scalp. Here, the eponymous spurs are not sharp, metallic objects designed to discipline horses. They are pieces of animal flesh themselves. In addition, they are glands producing food, soft and delicate. Men's footwear enriched with milk-giving female attributes is on the borderline between genders and related connotations. Masculinity with its attributed domination (in this case of a rider over an animal) has been called into question. What is being questioned is the autonomy of the male authority. Men's shoes are equipped with an instrument of power, but it has a female character. The female element of the assemblage is not womanly helpless since it has become a spur. It is not clear what is being disciplined by what; the hierarchy of the female, male and animal has become blurred.

Cross' assemblage brings us to the subject of crossing the borderline of gender and sexual diversity, the issue relevant for homosexual artists and their interest in dress as a medium allowed to overcome the cliché combining the penchant for fashion and dress-making with femininity. The American artist Charlers LeDray learned to sew when he was four years old. Today he is known as the creator of miniature garments, which he uses to build installations evocative of the scenery for *Alice in Wonderland*. Seen from above, they give the viewer the illusion of dominance, of control over the miniature world. However, these seemingly innocent, small objects have a surprising ability to attract attention and hypnotize the viewer. The details made by the artist by hand appear to be a trap set on the audience. Yielding to the charm of the miniature reality, they cannot really explain why they have surrendered to its authority.

Dress is obviously one of the methods of manifesting one's gender identity. This theme is problematized in the works of gay artists. LeDray's dress sculptures are often self-portraits, which the artist enhances by embroidering his name on them. This group of works includes the object entitled *Charles*. It is a jacket typical for the 1970s gay milieu, which is shedding tiny clothes and underwear of both sexes. The nature of the work may encourage us to look at it as the image of many potential subjects building the polyphonic self of the author. This construction may be interpreted as overcoming the restrictions of sexual excess, the phantasmal idea of transgender. Jacek Kochanowski, describing the subversive potential of being gay observes that "from the perspective of culture gays have no gender because their experience goes beyond the definition of masculinity, the constitutive element of which is the desire of women. Also, the normatively recognized femininity is not available

to them for purely biological reasons [...] What is therefore left, is the shift of an open objection to sexual norms [...] in the direction of post-gender.”<sup>20</sup>

The new way of constructing one's self is defined by Julia Kristeva as “the subject in progress.” The French psychoanalyst also recommended similar openness in the analysis of such texts of culture as works of art. The rejection of doctrine, in her view, allows us to create a polyphonic structure of the semantic spaces of the work. My text is an attempt to expand the semantic space of the selected works. Analyzing them I have considered their function in the current cultural discourses, but I have also been interested in other possible associations. Thus, I have striven to overcome allergies and to demonstrate that art, both in the approved and the critical activities, is characterized by ambiguity. This strategy meant that the discussed works lost their direct appeal, convenient in terms of current ideology. They have become puzzling. The strategy of subordinating the artist to a particular ideology reduces the Other to a model. I believe that the issue of the Other is more complex. The hidden other is still elusive. My interpretation is not in conflict with the findings of the critics whom I have referenced. Rather, it complements their analysis, indicating that in addition to the overt Other, significant in terms of ideological polemics, there is also the hidden Other. He reaches the concealed areas, disturbing our beaten tracks of the perception of reality.

*Translated by Katarzyna Gucio*

#### **UKRYTY INNY. UBIÓR JAKO OBIEKT ARTYSTYCZNY (streszczenie)**

Tematem artykułu jest rodzaj współczesnej rzeźby odwołującej się do ubioru. Są to obiekty prezentowane w salach galerijnych, kostiumy performerów, dokumentacja fotograficzna bądź filmowa ulotnych “opakowań” ludzkiego ciała. Wybrani przez autorkę tekstu artyści zajmujący się tego rodzaju twórczością byli niegdyś marginalizowani ze względu na płeć, kolor skóry lub tożsamość seksualną. W dobie postmodernizmu zajęli pozycję *main stream*’u sztuki, którą określa status Innego. Autorka poszukuje jednak odmiennego rodzaju inności. Interpretując wybrane prace odwołuje się do znanych dyskursów (władzy, ciała itd.) jak też szuka innych, ukrytych znaczeń. Ukryty inny może być jedynie zasugerowany. Jego eteryczna natura może przejawiać się poprzez niedopowiedzenia, zakłócenie porządku opartego na opozycjach. Kominiarki zdobione symbolami władzy autorstwa Rosemarie Trockel stanowią zasłonę dla przeczuwanego innego porządku. Kostiumy z akcji Rebeci Horn kwestionują przyzwyczajenia dotyczące relacji podmiot–przedmiot. Podobnie jak miniaturowe instalacje Charlesa LeDray’a odwracające

<sup>20</sup> J. Kochanowski, “Czy gej jest mężczyzną? Przyczynki do teorii postpłciowości”, *Gender. Konteksty*, ed. M. Radkiewicz, Kraków 2004, p. 115.

wektory władzy. Konfrontacja z czymś nieskończonym, nie do objęcia rozumem, również stwarza możliwość przecucia ukrytego Innego. Akcja *In the Kitchen* Helen Chadwick może być zinterpretowana jako konfrontacja z nieskończonością przestrzeni. *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for Albino Anorectic* Jany Sterbak stanowi spotkanie z tajemnicą śmierci. Niekiedy pomocne w odnalezieniu ukrytego innego są pytania i wątpliwości, jakie budzą się przy oglądaniu prac. Nadmiar detali w instalacjach Shonibare nie wyjaśnia, kim jest przedstawiany przez artystę bezgłowy bohater. Wiele skojarzeń i tropów interpretacyjnych ukrywa jednoznaczny opis prac Dorothy Cross. Ukryty Inny umyka przed ostatecznym zamknięciem w definicji. Opisanie, określenie go, zniweczyłoby jego istotę.



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## **ART AND TERRORISM AS CATALYSTS OF SOCIAL TENSIONS**

**Abstract:** The present times provide us with events provoking a multitude of social reactions – from callous indifference to oversensitivity towards various phenomena. In the last decade most of the allergic social reactions were caused by terrorists rather than artists. The key issue is the attention of the media as well as the production of images determined by media logic and preserved in the collective imagination. In this field even critical art is not able to compete with the terrorists, but at the same time it does not wish to remain indifferent. Therefore it tries to find an adequate language for actively commenting on the reality after the 11th September 2001.

**Keywords:** visual culture – terrorism – contemporary art – aesthetics of terror

The present times provide us with events provoking a multitude of social reactions – from callous indifference to oversensitivity towards various phenomena. It is the intensity, quality, and uniqueness of the stimulus that ultimately determine the type of reaction. Both indifference, also defined as torpor, numbness and anomy, and allergic oversensitivity are abnormal states, however, of a different kind. In the former case we have to do with pathological passivity, in the latter – triggering an immunological reaction, an inflammatory condition – with pathological overactivity. One could risk saying that even though the ability to control both of those social reactions is valuable (from the point of view of society and art), it is the knowledge of how the various inflammatory conditions may be triggered and counteracted that is truly worth pursuing.

The ability to control our reactions is one of the most important human traits. Sticking to the use of medical metaphors, the matter is quite complex, as some people may be indifferent to a given stimulus, whereas for others the same stimulus may turn out to be an allergen. What matters is the context in which the immune system becomes a field of activity and manipulation. The systematic poisoning of the social atmosphere, antagonising people lower the

threshold of sensitivity to the triggering stimulus. This may be something that Ulrich Beck diagnosed as increased social mistrust<sup>1</sup>. The repertoire of means is broad-ranging: from the techniques of social engineering to psychodrama. It was already during the peak of counterculture that the Situationists defined reality as an accumulation of spectacles. The world is still a great show; the phraseology taken from the theatre has been adapted in talking about the political scene, a war theatre, but also the art scene, dominated in turn by military terminology including *strategy*, *tactics* or the *avant-garde*.

In the dominating media culture, there is a clash between the desire for repetitiveness and predictability, and the demand for innovative originality. We have managed to adapt to this paradox – for ages the directors of mass imagination have used a relatively limited repertoire of patterns, templates and roles. However, to keep up emotions and tension, those patterns are combined and recombined. Hence today we can observe such shifts as politicians taking over the roles of artists-performers, artists who are envious of terrorists' effectiveness and publicity, terrorists in the role of actors and celebrities (or PR specialists), worried about the aesthetic quality of the media show<sup>2</sup>.

To illustrate this type of shift, let us observe several examples where the domains of art and terrorism overlap. One could observe a growing “allergic reaction” or even “anaphylactic shock” following the ill-timed remark of Karlheinz Stockhausen a few days after the 9/11 attack. The composer stated “That characters can bring about in one act what we in music cannot dream of, that people practice madly for 10 years, completely fanatically, for a concert and then die. That is the greatest work of art for the whole cosmos.”<sup>3</sup> One year after the attack on the New York twin towers, in an interview for BBC Damien Hirst (a representative of Young British Artists) considered the event to be “visually stunning”, and added that the architects of the attack “need congratulating because they’ve achieved something which nobody would have thought possible”<sup>4</sup>. At the same time a New Zealand artist Gail Haffern described the destruction of the twin towers in a press interview as “wonderful because it was a new idea.” On account of public outrage, providing further explanations she asked (surprisingly and kind of helplessly): “I thought what if this had been a performance piece and Osama bin Laden had declared himself an artist, how would the world have seen it then?”<sup>5</sup> A question emerges

<sup>1</sup> U. Beck, *Spoleczeństwo ryzyka*, Warszawa 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, although both politicians and artists often perform in clown's masks, humour has not become Al Qaeda's weapon as yet.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Charles Paul Freund, “The art of terror”, *San Francisco Chronicle*, <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/2002/10/06/IN225021.DTL#ixzz0wJGpVN44>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

immediately: why would he do that – to flatter the aesthetic whims of the West? To weaken his position in the Arabic world?

As we can see, the aforementioned terrorist attack turned out to be extremely fascinating for many artists (in the sense given to this term by Jean Baudrillard<sup>6</sup>). The quoted statements performatively transfer this act to the area of aesthetics. However, one could consider them to be rather unhappy speech acts (this time in the sense of John L. Austin).

Extreme feelings and opinions were also evoked by the performance of Laurie Anderson entitled *Happiness* in 2002. One of the conservative critics reminded the artist that in 1995 in the performance called *Stories From the Nerve Bible*, she wondered if terrorists weren't "the only true avant-garde artists left, because they are the only ones still capable of surprising people"<sup>7</sup>. It was then easy for him to call artists potential enemies of the state, as "in an atmosphere where the flag is freedom, and not just its symbol, some artists must feel guilty that they share with terrorists a zealous desire to change the world"<sup>8</sup>.

Do artists really envy terrorists? Do they want to identify with them? Or do they only envy them publicity? If we take into account the tactics of both groups, one can find many similarities, e.g. the tendency to radicalize their language. The second similarity is the lack of a single definition of both art and terrorism. In the latter case, the dozens of existing definitions focus on the spectacle and the fear (or more generally strong emotion) that it evokes as a means to achieve political goals. On the other hand, the spectacle and the evoked emotions are classical prerequisites of aesthetic/ artistic communication. As far as political goals of contemporary art are concerned, their character is reflected in the considerable size of such exhibitions as *Documenta* or the Venice Biennial. Where should we search for the differences between the two domains? To my mind, many misunderstandings and scandals derive from people's inability to see that an artist wants to work on discourse, whereas a terrorist wants to use raw reality.

Coming back to the use of medical metaphors: a terrorist has an advantage from the very beginning – he initiates the "contamination" of the organism – the rest is carried out for him by the immune system, which imposes an extreme regime, eliminates its own suspicious cells and paralyses the remaining ones. As a result we receive a limitation of civil liberties which

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. *Gra resztkami – wywiad z J. Baudrillardem*, w: *Filozofia a postmodernizm*, eds. S. Czerniak, A. Szahaj, Warszawa 1996.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. J. Hannaham, "Disaster Areas", [www.villagevoice.com/2002-07-30/theater/disaster-areas/](http://www.villagevoice.com/2002-07-30/theater/disaster-areas/).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

stem from the regulations of the Patriot Act kind<sup>9</sup>. Terror gains success not by means of what it does, but by means of what it promises to do – in an atmosphere of fear any report or even rumour of plane hijacking will suffice to seriously disorganise civil aviation. Anyway terror as a show would be rather ineffective without media and visual enhancement. As an old African proverb says, “you will not knock down the house of your Lord with his tools”. Meanwhile Al Qaeda’s terror has won the fight with the very help of the enemy’s arsenal, i.e. the infrastructure of civil aviation and the image-based media.

Baudrillard claims that an image enhances an event, but at the same makes it its hostage. The image consumes the event in the sense that it devours it and gives it away for consumption. Thus one can assume that it undergoes amplification on the one hand and neutralisation on the other. Consequently, reality is envious of the image.<sup>10</sup> The TV reports following the 9/11 attack hypnotized us with the shots of the planes crashing into the buildings. Slavoy Žižek talked about “compulsive repetitions”<sup>11</sup>, as well as the pleasure derived from finding new shots from amateur camcorders. The consecutive sequences of the collapsing twin towers were becoming peculiar hypostases and symbols at the very moment of collapsing. They were more suitable for that purpose than any act of terror filmed so far – they were immediately devoid of “unnecessary details” such as the scared faces of the victims, blood, human remains indexing individual tragedies. We were at a safe distance, the horror was made unreal. Žižek points out: “The same ‘de-realization’ of the horror went on after the WTC bombings: while the number of 6000 victims is repeated all the time, it is surprising how little of the actual carnage we see – no dismembered bodies, no blood, no desperate faces of the dying people [...] in clear contrast to the reporting from the Third World catastrophes, where the whole point was to produce a scoop of some gruesome detail: Somalis dying of hunger, raped Bosnian women, men with their throats cut. These shots were always accompanied with the advance-warning that ‘some of the images you will see are extremely graphic and may hurt children’ – a warning which we NEVER heard in the reports on the WTC collapse. Is this not yet another proof of how, even in this tragic moment, the distance which separates Us from Them, from their reality, is maintained: the real horror happens THERE, not HERE?”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism – a law of 26<sup>th</sup> October 2001.

<sup>10</sup> J. Baudrillard, *Duch terroryzmu*, Warszawa 2005, pp. 31–32.

<sup>11</sup> After: <http://www.sparwasserhq.de/Index/HTMLjan3/paper.htm>.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.



Due to the emotional and patriotic “pornography” of the American media, the events of 9/11 became inviolably sacred. The threshold of sensitivity went down significantly; that is why whenever art tried to add its footnote to terrorism, reactions were allergic. The decision was made to cancel the show at the Chelsea Art Museum, *The Aesthetics of Terror* (renamed *The Dialectics of Terror*) shortly before its opening in November 2008. Justifying this decision, Dorothea Keeser (the director of the museum) claimed that the show glorified terrorism and showed disrespect for its victims: “there were several elements of the exhibition which glorified terrorism and showed lack of respect for human beings. [...] I do not think that an artist should show children and women torn apart by bombs. That is not the subject for an artist. An artist has to take one step back, and find the causes of terrorism and how one can fight against terrorism, and not just show very banal photos which we see every day on television. That’s not art”<sup>13</sup> It was a strange stance in view of the fact that the description of the exhibition pointed to its totally different character:

Terror is, in and of itself, an image-making machine. The very point of terror is a spectacle that plays endlessly in the media. In 9/11, thousands may have died, but billions of people watched the attack and the falling towers endlessly until those images were etched into the global psyche. While terrorism and its representations have been widely discussed ever since 9/11, very few of these contemplations have tackled the issue of specific formal qualities and pictorial strategies of terrorism. The exhibition *The Dialectics of Terror* tries to do exactly that; namely, it investigates certain visual characteristics of the spectacle of Terror and its echoes in contemporary art. The exhibition employs the distinction made by artist Roe Rosen on the principal gap between representations of underground terrorism, produced by terrorist groups, and images of State Terror – this is the gap between figuration and abstraction. The representational apparatus of State Terror, says Rosen, is based on the blurring or erasure of central figures, exchanging it for abstraction: Smart Bombs’ aerial views of bombardments, for example, or the blocking of visibility by grids or satellite-type images that obscure rather than illuminate. On the other end, representations of underground terrorism strive for a central, powerful figure or symbol – the portrait of a suicide bomber, collapsing skyscrapers and the icon of bearded Bin Laden with his golden gown and triangular composition – “this is an icon in the religious sense: a human, semi-divine person whose very appearance defies the divide of life and death”, Rosen claims. What happens when an image of war or terrorism moves from the newspaper or news networks, to the gallery or museum? What causes the shift from an image having “documentary” relevance to it

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<sup>13</sup> More about the chief curator’s conflict Manon Slome with management of CAM: <http://www.artfagcity.com/2008/09/26/chelsea-art-museum-president-dorothea-keeser-and-curator-manom-slome-respond/>.

becoming an aesthetic object circulating in the art system? As artists navigate these boundaries, either through direct translation or through appropriation, does violence retain its power to inspire fear and dread, or does this contextual transposition fetishize violence, stripping it of meaning through aestheticization? *The Dialectics of Terror* explores the juxtaposition/integration of the traumas of the daily news with art and question the nature and purport of this integration. *The Dialectics of Terror* maps the relationship between abstraction and technology; color and violence, pixilated images and sovereignty, saturation and contour, authenticity and resolution. Much of the work in the exhibition deals less with direct depiction of violence and terror than with its media representations or perceptions of war as filtered through the media – itself a corporate entity whose failure to lay bare the species of evil that is being enacted under the rubric of a war on terror is also very much the point. *The Dialectics of Terror* strives to suggest the emergence of an artistic sensibility which has been informed by the imagery and politics of terrorism in the current common culture as they have been formulated and conveyed through the popular media. Artworks might imitate or mirror this media rhetoric, identify its mechanisms to the viewer, critique it, push back or protest against it.<sup>14</sup>



Josh Azzarella's *Untitled #23 (Lynndied)* displays a well-known photograph of former Army reservist Lynndie England, who was convicted of abusing prisoners at Abu Ghraib in Iraq. But Azzarella's work alters the image. In the original photograph, England points at the genitals of the naked prisoners with one hand, while giving a thumbs-up with the other. Azzarella's work removes the prisoners, leaving England posing and pointing in front of an empty wall [for other works see: <http://joshazzarella.com>]

<sup>14</sup> Cf. <http://blogs.walkerart.org/offcenter/2008/09/25/chelsea-art-museum-pulls-plug/>.

*The Dialectics of Terror* artists include: Josh Azzarella, Daniel Bejar, William Betts, Blue Noses, Chris Burden, Zoya Cherkassky, Chapman Bros., Jeanette Doyle, Harun Farocki, Johan Grimonprez, Jenny Holzer, Coco Fusco, Kent Henricksen, Jon Kessler, Yitzik Livneh, Naeem Mohaiemen, Claude Moller, Richard Mosse, Yves Netzhammer, Miguel Palma, Cristi Pogacean, Roe Rosen, Martha Rosler, Ivana Spinelli, Stephen Shanabrook, Avdey Ter-Oganian, Jan Tichy, Sharif Waked, Catherine Yass.

Eventually in 2009 the exhibition found shelter in the Berlin Akademie der Künste. The Germans had already learned that censoring exhibitions on terrorism does more harm than good. As far as local allergies are concerned, due to denial or concealment it is hard to track down visual representations of the activity of the Rote Armee Fraktion. “Regarding Terror: the RAF Exhibition”, which took place in Berlin in 2005, despite various controversies (among other things, they concerned financing the exhibition from public money<sup>15</sup>), pointed to the difference in the “atmosphere” of radicalisms then and today. It is known that in the 1970s the issue appeared more ambivalent, as the terrorism of that time was much different. Despite the media crusade, the Baader-Meinhof group had numerous supporters – apart from the epigones of counterculture, they included such intellectuals as Jean-Paul Sartre, Heinrich Böll or Günter Grass. The exhibition, apart from the archive press documentation, showed the works of such classics as Joseph Beuys, Volf Vostell, Sigmar Polke, or Gerhard Richter. The contemporary perspective was also present – note the symptomatic title of Christoph Draeger’s work *Black and White Room. Memories of Terror from Safe Perspective* (1999–2003). This work consists of three projections depicting the death of the terrorists in Stammheim Prison. Instead of clearing the doubts around the controversial issue, the viewer has an opportunity to see only some blurred shades from the perspective of a guard’s peephole. A whiff of sensation (and distaste for some) accompanied the exhibition also because one of the curators was Felix Ensslin – the son of Gudrun Ensslin, a co-founder of RAF, who according to official reports hanged herself in her cell on 18 December 1977.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> A huge political debate over whether the exhibition was legitimately publicly fundable occupied the German press throughout the summer and autumn of 2003. The exhibition was financed through an e-bay auction which took place in December 2004 and in the end brought about 324,800 USD. Twelve international artists, who are not included in the exhibition itself, donated important pieces that were all sold in this auction: Marina Abramovic, Doug Aitken, Francis Alys, Monica Bonvicini, Dinos and Jake Chapman, Thomas Demand, Andreas Gursky, Carsten Holler, Paul Pfeiffer, Ugo Rondinone, Lawrence Weiner, and Jane and Louise Wilson.

*Regarding Terror: the RAF Exhibition*, List of Artists: Franz Ackermann, Dennis Adams, Bettina Allamoda, Eleanor Antin, Thomas Bayrle, Sue de Beer, Ulrich Bernhardt, Joseph Beuys, Dara Birnbaum, Klaus vom Bruch, Erin Cosgrove, Lutz Dammbeck, Christoph Draeger, Felix Droese, Heinz Emigholz, Hans-Peter Feldmann, Peter Friedl, Johan Grimontprez, Rudolf Herz, Jorg Immendorff, Johannes Kahrs, Scott King, Scott King/Matt Worley, Martin Kippenberger, Rainer Kirberg, Astrid Klein, Andree Korpys/Markus Löffler, Bruce LaBruce, Claude Leveque, Theo Ligthart, Jonathan Meese, Michaela Meise, Michaela Melian, Klaus Mettig, Olaf Metzel, Rob Moonen/Olaf Arndt, Hans Niehus, Marcel Odenbach, Sigmar Polke, Yvonne Rainer, Gerhard Richter, Thomas Ruff, Thomas Schutte, Katharina Sieverding, K.R.H. Sonderborg, Klaus Staeck, Stih & Schnock, Frank Thiel, Wolf Vostell, Peter Weibel, Willem (Bernhard Holtrop), Johannes Wohnseifer; <http://www.e-flux.com/shows/view/1767>.

<sup>16</sup> The supporters of the ideas propagated by RAF claim that the deaths of Andras Baader, Gudrun Ensslin and Jan Carla Raspe in Stammheim prison were an execution rather than suicide.



Gerhard Richter, *October 18, 1977, 1988*

Despite the fact that three generations of artists took part in the project, the curators were criticized for not opening up a new perspective in the discourse about RAF<sup>17</sup>. This perspective appears only in a slightly broader context, i.e. when one takes into account, for example, the attitude of the authorities and the media to terrorism today and three or four decades ago. At some point the authorities realized that the real danger consisted in the Baader-Meinhof group being mythologized, perceived like the legendary Robin Hood. Thus it was necessary to censor the publications on the group more or less formally. Similar solutions were used while implementing the plan of Margaret Thatcher, who claimed that the IRA terrorists needed the oxygen of publicity – thus it will suffice if it is cut off<sup>18</sup>. One can say that it was a very ostentatious intervention in the opinion-forming media, and in consequence in the “immune system” of the society. Today the media, commonly accused of unintentional support for terrorism, either censor themselves (e.g. they avoid shocking the audience with the beheadings of hostages) or act more or less discreetly as a propaganda tube of the authorities (like the pro-Bush channel FOX News).

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<sup>17</sup> Cf.: Isabelle Graw, *Regarding Terror: the RAF Exhibition*, Artforum International Magazine, after: <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/%22Regarding+Terror%3A+the+RAF+Exhibition%22%3B+KW+Institute+for+Contemporary...-a0131433296>.

<sup>18</sup> “Democratic nations must try to find ways to starve the terrorist and the hijacker of the oxygen of publicity on which they depend”. [http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Margaret\\_Thatcher](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Margaret_Thatcher).



Claude Moller, *If Vietnam Were Now*, 2004

It is hard to tell whether Thatcher's policy of cutting off the oxygen was successful. The bomb attacks intensified and moved from Belfast to London. IRA volunteers changed their strategy and evolved like anaerobic bacteria. The specificity of the contemporary media does not allow for such a cut-off from publicity. If the traditional media are more careful in their broadcasts, the gap is filled by the Internet. A weird paradox can be observed then – on the one hand, there is a stereotype of an invisible and masked terrorist, on the other hand, some terrorists are media celebrities, e.g. Carlos, Bobby Sands, Andreas Baader, Ulrika Meinhof, Patty Hearst, Leila Khaled, or Osama bin Laden. Strange as it may sound, stigmatization and popularization of terrorists are parallel processes. Interestingly they are based on the combination of charisma and visual attractiveness and slick PR. Slightly different mechanisms operate in the Arab world, where suicide bombers become celebrities (even if for one moment). Films with their farewell speeches and filmed attacks spread through informal distribution channels. Khaled Ramadan explains that they have a double meaning: on the one hand, they tell of the martyrs and provide instructional material for future attacks, and on the other hand, they are a kind of light reality-show, entertainment<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> K. Ramadan, "Berlin seminar 2003"; [http://www.sparwasserhq.de/Index/HTML\\_jan3/paper.htm](http://www.sparwasserhq.de/Index/HTML_jan3/paper.htm).

The most important task for a pop culture product is to provide emotions. However, the threshold of sensitivity has been on the rise for some time. In the past, catastrophic films with Godzilla sufficed. Then Hollywood fantasized about the destruction of cities by meteors. At present even reality shows are insufficient. What fascinates people is war, fought live in front of the lens. The thrill-seeking viewers search for it outside the official news channels – on the Internet, where bloody amateur recordings made by the direct participants in the conflict gain the greatest credibility.

The codes of pop culture with reference to terrorism are also adopted by artists. The exhibition *Art in the Age of Terrorism*<sup>20</sup> only confirms that. One of the artists in that exhibition was an American of Palestinian origin, Jacqueline Salloum. Her most famous works include *Katerrorpilar* (a bulldozer toy with an Israeli flag, accompanied by a box featuring the photos of the liquidation of Palestinian housing estates), *Who's the terrorist?* (an important video piece on Arabic hip-hop), *Planet of the Arabs* (a film composed from the fragments of Hollywood pictures featuring a stereotypical Arab as a fanatic murderer); the title and the logo of this film paraphrase the famous *Planet of the Apes*<sup>21</sup>. During another exhibition entitled *ATTACK! Kunst und Krieg in den Zeiten der Medien*<sup>22</sup> Antonio Riello presented models of attractively painted machine handguns, trimmed with fashionable fabrics and partly gold-plated. Additionally, the artist set hand grenades with diamonds, creating something like women's jewellery, and gave them feminine names in the titles (in this way the Israeli rifle UZI became a violet and golden *Maria Theresa*). Another participant in this project, Reiner Ganahl, photographed the screens of Internet news websites, and then asked painters (recruited by announcements in the press) to transfer them onto canvas. As a result, a new series of *News Paintings* (2003-04) was created, which the artist defines as contemporary historical paintings. However, in his commentaries on these works he points to the dynamic changes in the language used in the media, e.g. a pro-Bush channel Fox News stopped using the expression "suicide bombers" in favour of "homicide bombers" – it was surmised that "suicide bombers" might evoke associations with martyrs (and accompanying admiration or compassion) in the audience. The use of an explicit label of murderer excludes such an option.

Artists also frequently use pop culture strategies inspired by design. One can encounter garden gnomes and Lego blocks representing the Taliban with Kalashnikovs; Simon Tyszko has created a *Suicide Bomber Barbie*, in the

<sup>20</sup> *Art in the Age of Terrorism*. Southampton Solent University, Millais Gallery 11 November 2004 – 29th January 2005; curators: Maurice Owen i Graham Coulter-Smith.

<sup>21</sup> Fragments of *Planet of the Arabs* and other works: <http://www.jsalloum.org>.

<sup>22</sup> *ATTACK! Kunst und Krieg in den Zeiten der Medien*, Wien, KunstHalle 2003.

series *America The Gift Shop* Phillip Toledano constructs furniture on the pattern of Allen Jones, but with naked characters of hooded prisoners from Abu Ghraib, Stephen Shanabrook offers boxes of dark chocolates presenting the remains of a suicide bomber.



Phillip Toledano,  
*Abu Ghraib coffee table*, 2008



Stephen Shanabrook, *On the road to heaven  
the highway to Hell*, 2008



Simon Tyszko, *Suicide Bomber Barbie*, 2002

Mocking pop culture is not enough for art. The artists keep looking for some adequate means of talking about war and terror. For fear of the aestheticization of evil it is more and more common to display aloofness in using any artistic interventions. The artists often limit themselves to reproducing documentary and reported materials, and their only creative activity is selecting them and putting them in a gallery context as a video-loop projection. In his work of 2003 Runa Islam uses BBC news footage of the collapse of the World Trade Center, slowed down and shown in reverse. What can such an action give the viewer except for passive fascination? Is it meant to suggest majesty, beauty, banal reversal of time or a more provocative consideration of the logic of contemporary representation strategies? Or maybe the helplessness of the viewer confronted with the media and artistic representations? In filtering reality, today's television invests in short-term emotions, thus gaining higher audience ratings. The messages are simple, unambiguous, with a ready interpretation or compilation of interpretations provided by full-time experts: those in kerchiefs à la Yasser Arafat are bad guys, whereas those in uniforms and suits are good guys. On the other hand, art allows for a quieter reflection ("reflection" in both senses – as re-thinking and mirroring) on things; the world is more complex, the message is more difficult to grasp. For some it may be an advantage and a challenge, but it may also evoke an allergic reaction and irritation. That is why contemporary terrorists with respect for the media go for flash and sudden events rather than long-lasting ones. From the point of view of terrorists, media crisis marathons are rather uneconomical – prolonging the anticipation of a result, e.g. in the case of Aldo Moro (abducted by Brigate Rosse), or the abduction by FARC<sup>23</sup> – after a few months, perforce they are moved to farther pages of newspapers. What follows is anaesthesia, desensitization of public opinion. That is why the schema of abductions has changed slightly – mainly owing to a shortened ultimatum, the tension of the media is possible to maintain from the moment of abduction to the moment of release, rescue or execution.

Documentary character of a different kind can be exemplified by an X-ray project of Diane Covert, *Inside terrorism*. She obtained materials for this work from the two largest hospitals in Jerusalem. This is a kind of documentary on the survivors of terrorism. As she said: "The exhibit is another form of 'straight' photography – that is photographs made with an unaltered spectrum of light. With that technology, we are able to look inside terrorism. [...] The X-rays and CT scans in this exhibit are new ways to make figurative images

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<sup>23</sup> *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* – Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia. Ingrid Betancourt, former Colombian presidential candidate, was kidnapped on 23 February 2002 and was rescued by Colombian security forces six and a half years later on 2 July 2008.



and portraits. [...] All of these images are the by-products of terrorism, which is a war on a civilian population. Terrorists pack their bombs with common objects – hex nuts, bolts, nails, watches – all meant for peaceful, utilitarian purposes. By blasting them into human beings, they create the madness of our times”<sup>24</sup>. This looks good as a concept; however, the exhibition was shown mainly on university campuses, that is why it was formatted with a considerable dose of didacticism, which always leads to simplification.

Pia Lindman’s video performance *Lakonikon* of 2004 went beyond the schema of artistic document. It consisted of mimed reconstructions of some *New York Times* newspaper photographs of grief associated with the terrorist attacks in Israel, Palestine and on the World Trade Center. She provides a counterpoint to the violence we have witnessed on television. The artist decontextualizes, isolates the faces of the victims or terrorists, Jews or Palestinians. Peripherally this work prompts Graham Couler Smith and Maurice Owen to ask how to visualize the unspeakable: ”the unspeakable has many facets: trauma, denial, political mendacity, irreconcilable disputes (Israel/Palestine), the construction of barriers both visible and invisible around the affluent world to keep those less fortunate a bay, and the erosion of freedom of speech and expression promulgated by a post 9/11 politics of fear”<sup>25</sup>.

While considering allergens, one should mention the works of intervention artists, whose character makes them similar to terrorist actions. Three artists – Frederic Eyl, Gunnar Green and Richard The created a *Parasite* project in 2005/06.<sup>26</sup> The work is shown as a film in a DIY (Do It Yourself) style. In order to become a participant, it is enough to have a suitcase, suction pads, a mirror, power supply, a voltage converter, a notebook and a projector. This is how the authors describe the action: “Parasite is an independent projection-system that can be attached to subways and other trains with suction pads. Using the speed of the train as parameter for the projected content, the projection starts with the train moving inside a tunnel. These tunnels bear something mystic – most people usually have never made a step inside any of those tunnels. Confusing the routine of your train-travelling-journey, your habits and perception, the projections Parallel Worlds – making use of Parasite – allow you a glimpse into a different world full of surrealist imagery”.<sup>27</sup> In this way the passengers traveling on the underground, instead of the black walls of the tunnel, unexpectedly see some parallelly rushing sharks, or

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<sup>24</sup> <http://www.x-rayproject.org>.

<sup>25</sup> Maurice Owen i Graham Coulter-Smith, “Visualising the unspeakable”, introduction to the catalogue *Art in the Age of Terrorism*, London 2005, p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.fredericeyl.de>; see also: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gwmyd94uv0U>.

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.fredericeyl.de>.

inscriptions asking e.g. *Quo Vadis?* However, we are dealing here with a double audience. The authors themselves do not mention the reaction of the people on the platform observing the installation of the device. We can only gain some insight into it indirectly, reading the comments of the Internet users, e.g. "If I saw some dude sticking a box on the side of a train, I would beat him down. He should put a sticker on it that says 'Not a Bomb!' and wear a T-Shirt that says 'Not a Terrorist'. Then I would leave him alone"<sup>28</sup>. And no wonder – the action took place in Berlin, where "Ordnung muss sein" – as the Pope used to say.

Adopting a similar strategy, though devoid of digital tricks, was the action of the street-artist Banksy in Disneyland (Anaheim, California). On 11 September 2006 families and children saw a life-size replica of a Guantanamo Bay detainee standing inside the Rocky Mountain Railroad ride. The hooded figure dressed in an orange jumpsuit with cuffed hands, who remained there for about half an hour, evoked much anxiety and was removed by the security (let us bear in mind the date – the fifth anniversary of the WTC attack).

It only remains to ask how long such actions will continue to make an impression. Presumably not too long – the allergen has already initiated an "immunological reaction". Similar subversive tricks have been employed in advertising. In January 2007 Boston was paralysed by the reports of people who were worried about some suspicious-looking electronic devices with flickering lights and sticking-out cables found at bus stops and underground stations. After a police bomb-squad has looked into the matter, it turned out to be an outdoor marketing campaign promoting a new cartoon produced by the Turner Broadcasting company.<sup>29</sup>

The practitioners of contemporary art pay less attention to techniques; some of them use the traditional medium of paint, whereas others speak the language of design, graffiti, film, new media, or medicine. What does matter is the more or less active role taken by the artist: that of an observer, analyst, commentator or activist. Whether an artist should attempt to resemble a terrorist is disputed. Kendell Geers (South African/Belgian artist) writes:

[...] there can be no better role model for the contemporary artist because terrorist needs to, by definition, study and perfectly understand the structure of power and the logic of the social, political and economic classes of the society of its enemy. The artist I have attempted to define as TerroRealist would refute such a definition, for they would be suspicious of the power and

<sup>28</sup> [http://37signals.com/svn/archives2/sharks\\_on\\_the\\_subway\\_walls.php](http://37signals.com/svn/archives2/sharks_on_the_subway_walls.php).

<sup>29</sup> T. Goban-Klas, *Media I terroryści. Czy zastraszą nas na śmierć?*, Kraków 2009, p. 64.

control that follows the process of naming. Their work is difficult to define because it concerns itself more with the social fabric than the objects of images that are external expression of that fabric. Their work is performative and disruptive, anti-social and yet at the same time they can sometimes use fashion as a vehicle. Most importantly the TerroRealist distrusts power whether it is in form of language or history, the logic of the institution or an individual. Power is defused with humour, contradiction, disavowal and history is thrown back into the dustbin from whence it came. Perhaps the most important aspect of such an artist is that they begin every project from the perspective of the self. Unlike the PCMC<sup>30</sup> artist the TerroRealist does not speak on behalf of others or create victims by imprisoning either the viewer or their subject<sup>31</sup>.

Looking at the problem from the perspective of art history one may indeed observe some strategic similarities between terrorists and avant-garde artists (such as active nihilism). It is enough to note the innovation and transgression crucial to the art of the time – similar mechanisms were developed later on by the media market, and terrorists amazingly fluently adapted to its logic. From this perspective a bomb on the bus seems to be a relict with a small range of news resonance. In order to dominate social imagination on a global scale one needs sublime (in Kant's and Lyotard's sense) spectacles, like the one of 9/11. As far as transgression is concerned, we need not expect the terrorists to escalate the bloody spectacles. If, together with the media, they produce such brutal images that they overstep the threshold of the viewers' sensitivity, they do not have a chance to be broadcast.

The attack on the controversial film-maker Theo van Gogh was supposed to be spectacular and shocking: an Islamic fanatic fired eight shots at him in broad daylight, cut his throat with a machete and stuck a message of several pages to his body. An accidental witness's first "civic" impulse was to use his mobile phone to photograph the corpse on the pavement – but the photo did not become a media icon. Strategy-wise it is better for the terrorists to employ sublime measures, to combine fear and fascination and to go for the symbolic as well as photogenic and medial goals. A similar effect can be achieved both by artists and by terrorists by using the tactics of an allergen and consequently scandal and provoking media resonance, which was the case with the anthrax scare. Alarm was then raised even by some samples of washing powder distributed by its producer.

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<sup>30</sup> 'Politically-Correct-Multi-Cultural-Geers': an ironic description of the artists from the margins that become mainstream after Documenta XI, see: Kendell Geers, *TerroRealist*, *Art in the Age of Terrorism*, op.cit., p. 122.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

Boris Groys does not share the enthusiasm for the comparisons between art and terror. He analyses the earlier relation of artist – warrior. The latter needed the former to commemorate his heroic deeds on the battlefield, with particular emphasis on the historical idealisation of his image. Today, war is covered life-size by the journalists employed by news agencies, who provide both fresh images and the ready interpretations of these images. “This machine of media coverage works almost automatically. It requires no individual artistic intervention, no individual artistic decision to be put into motion. By pushing a button that explodes a bomb a contemporary warrior or terrorist pushes a button that starts a media machine”<sup>32</sup> A paradox emerges here: both artistic avant-garde and Islam are iconoclastic in spirit; but neither a contemporary artist nor a terrorist are allergic to images – they are zealous iconophiles<sup>33</sup>.

The traditional critique of representation driven by suspicion got us into the habit of looking for something “hidden” in images and performance conventions (deception, fiction, disfigurement or filth). A contemporary artist throws us off this habit – ostentatiously showing in obscene detail what we previously had to figure out ourselves: the ugliness, cruelty, the whole evil of the war. What happens later? Our worst suspicions are confirmed: reality turns out to be as ugly as we expected. Thus we gain a dull satisfaction from the sense of accomplishing a critical or deconstructive mission. As Groys says, this is the gist of contemporary political teleology: the lack of the need to follow this critical way; inquiries no longer make sense when something is so obvious. In this respect, an artist cannot compete with a contemporary terrorist, who is more radical in his actions (something which many artists are envious of), and whose point of reference are media images. That is why, among other things, “return to the real” is mentioned more and more often. What is characteristic of the media is that they are oriented at the present, the temporary, the shimmering of both images and their meanings. In this respect an artist functions better at a long distance (in a historical perspective). Moreover, together with critics, curators, and art institutions, he creates more stable frames of critical discourse, provides a comparative basis, as well as indispensable interpretation tools. By the same token, art is becoming a very good place for distanced observation and critique of the media spirit of the times. Groys points out that “During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the massive depoliticization of the sublime took place. Now we experience the return of the Real but of the political sublime – in the form of the repoliticization of the sublime. Contemporary politics no longer represents itself as beautiful –

<sup>32</sup> B. Groys, “Art at War”, in: *Art and Terrorism*, Brumaria 12/2008, Madrid, p. 273.

<sup>33</sup> [...] of course with the exception of the scandal around Muhammad’s caricature published on the 30th September 2005 in the Danish journal *Jyllands-Posten*, (J. Zydorowicz, *Eurojihad i kultura wizualna, Przegląd Religioznawczy* 1/2009).

as even the totalitarian states of the twentieth century still did. Instead, contemporary politics represents itself as sublime again – that is, as ugly, repelling, unbearable, terrifying<sup>34</sup>, i.e. medially more attractive, seducing, arousing fascination and respect (cf. Bush's doctrine of shock and awe or Putin's displays of fitness in sports or at the rudder of a plane while extinguishing the fire around Moscow).

As we can see, independently of our likes or dislikes, individual thresholds of sensitivity etc., due to the emotions provided by the media and art we witness the fetishization, mythologization, trivialization and familiarization of the images of terror. Gradually we have got used to the pattern of desensitization: after traumatic events comes patriotic pathos, which in the course of time changes into its own parody as it must be relieved by means of humour, such as that in *South Park* or hundreds of amateur productions on You Tube. It is important not to multiply (at least in art) simplifying narratives treating terrorism as a battle between good and evil.

#### **SZTUKA I TERRORYZM JAKO KATALIZATORY NAPIĘĆ SPOŁECZNYCH (streszczenie)**

Współczesność przynosi bardzo różne diagnozy społeczeństwa – od znieczulicy do nadwrażliwości w odniesieniu do rozmaitych zjawisk. Jeśli chodzi o społeczne reakcje alergiczne i stany zapalne, to w ostatnim dziesięcioleciu zdecydowanie więcej spowodowali ich terroryści niż artyści. Kluczową sprawą jest tu oczywiście uwaga mediów i zdeterminowana ich logiką produkcja obrazów utrwalanych w kolektywnej wyobraźni. Na tym polu nawet sztuka krytyczna nie jest obecnie w stanie konkurować z terrorystami, ale i nie chce pozostać obojętna – dlatego usilnie poszukuje adekwatnego języka do aktywnego komentowania rzeczywistości po 11 września 2001.

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<sup>34</sup> B. Groys, op.cit., pp. 274–278.



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## **POSTCOLONIAL DISCOURSE, OR HOW TO READ GLOBAL ART**

**Abstract:** Some years ago, we wondered what would emerge from the demise of modern art. Today we know that it is global art. It makes us change our way of thinking about art, about what we are ready to perceive as art, place in the context of art and view in terms of art. Global art should be distinguished from world art and Weltkunst. World art and Weltkunst fall back on the concept of universal art, which global art does not believe in. Instead of looking for one, universal definition of art, global art accepts multiplicity and variety of art definitions, which allows it to freely combine high art with low art, elitist art with popular and mass art. This is possible because global art introduces an ethnographic understanding of art and uses geo-aesthetics, where aesthetic categories gain meaning depending on a geographic context.

**Keywords:** Central Asia, global art, global art scene, globalization, modern art, modernity, postcolonial discourse, United Arab Emirates, Weltkunst, world art

Some years ago, we wondered what would emerge from the demise of modern art. The term *postmodernism* did not bring a satisfactory answer; it only suggested that something happened, something came after modern art and allowed us to demonstrate a certain distance towards modern art and its goals, ideals, values – showing that they were no longer our goals, that they were ideals and values we were no longer identifying with, because we were already somewhere else, in a post-modern era, which some authors, e.g. Marc Auge, called *supermodernity*.<sup>1</sup> Today we know that the art emerging from the fall of modern art is global art.

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<sup>1</sup> M. Auge, *Non-places. Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, London – New York 1995.

## GLOBAL ART

As global art is still a new phenomenon, we do not know how to read it, how to interpret it, in what terms it should be described. We do not even know how to name it correctly; should we speak of global art or rather of a global art scene? Global art makes us change our way of thinking about art, and maybe that is its most important contribution. It makes us change our way of thinking about what we are ready to perceive as art, place in the context of art and view in terms of art. These issues are very important because global art frequently and willingly applies the strategy of relocation, moving, displacement.

Global art is art involved in the process of globalization, but this involvement can assume different forms, so it is difficult to provide a clear definition of global art. Hans Belting says that global art should be distinguished from world art and from so-called *Weltkunst*, both falling back on the concept of universal art, which global art does not assume.<sup>2</sup> World art is the artistic heritage of other cultures, different than ours, or to be precise, all that that the Western world – with its universal aesthetics – is ready to view as the artistic achievements of other cultures and place in art museums rather than ethnographic museums or move from ethnographic museums to art museums. World art stands for the artistic tradition of the non-Western world, whereas *Weltkunst* comprises the outstanding works created in different cultures, including non-Western ones, which deserve to become the common good of humanity, *Gemeingut der Menschheit*, to use a phrase by Goethe, who coined the term. Global art breaks with this universal rhetoric – universalism is being replaced with variety. Global art, as Belting points out, is global in the same way as the World Wide Web and the Internet; this art is aware of the fact that it is made in the time of globalization, but it does not have any common form, style or content or – to put it in a different way – all that is not the most important.

Global art challenges such values dear to European modernity as universalism, rationalism, progress, and it subjects them to deconstruction, disclosing their part in modernism's tendency for hegemony, violence, its aspiration for subordinating other cultures. Yet, the most important thing is that global art abandons one universal definition of art. Instead of looking for one universal and therefore hegemonic definition of art, it accepts the multiplicity and variety of art definitions, which allows it to freely cross the existing borders and combine high with low art, elitist with popular art, mass and ethnic art. This is possible because global art introduces an ethnographic understanding

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<sup>2</sup> H. Belting, "Contemporary Art as Global Art. A Critical Estimate", in: *The Global Art World*, eds H. Belting, A. Buddensieg, Ostfildern 2009.



of art and uses geo-aesthetics, where aesthetic categories gain meaning depending on a geographical context. The acceptance of many, often contradictory, definitions of art and viewing them as equivalent leads to the situation in which art becomes something ungraspable, difficult to pinpoint, and in which the concept of art seems to be losing its significance – art is what other people in different places and for different reasons believe is art.<sup>3</sup>

This broad understanding of art enhances its attractiveness for the discourses previously situated outside the area of art, e.g. the feminist, postcolonial, psychoanalytical, gay discourse. These discourses do not aspire to annex all art, instead they focus on the aspects that are important for them. This is understandable if we accept that, as Hans Belting sees it, global art means a global means of communication, like the Internet, which can be used for the transmission of any information.

Nonetheless, the comparison with the Internet has its limits. Undoubtedly, the Internet is a model for global art, but global art is not limited to the Internet, it is not Internet art, or net art, though it seems that global art assumes its purest, most idealized and disinterested form online. Global art also assumes other institutional forms. The most popular forms of today's institutional contextualization of global art are art festivals and international art biennials organized in different parts of the world by renowned art curators. Other institutionalized forms of global art include temporary exhibitions of the private collections of Chinese, African or Russian contemporary art in important museums, or the foundation of private museums of contemporary art by big art collectors in the cities which did not have such museums before. All such initiatives are supported by the market, the local financial elites and the authorities caring for the position and branding of their city or region on the global art scene. Establishing connections between global art and the market is perceived in many parts of the world not only in economic terms, but primarily as an ideology of freedom, emancipation from the omnipotence of the state, as it was and still is perceived in the former Soviet block.

Global art is post-modern art that breaks with modernist meta-narrative and modernist language. It does not involve mastering some formal idiom, Belting writes, but a selection of contemporary subject and contemporary forms of its presentation. The originality of artistic expression is replaced by an original position taken by an artist in contemporary debates. Certain formal similarities, if any, are of a secondary importance and stem from the tradition that global

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<sup>3</sup> This resembles Jan Świdziński's definition of art as contextual art: "Art 'a' in time 't', in the place 'p', in the situation 's', in relation to the person/persons 'o'". J. Świdziński, *Art as Contextual Art*, Galeria Remont, Warsaw 1977, p. 11.

art stems from – the tradition of the new media and pop art. Today, global art adopts the language of the new media comprehensible for the global public, the language of cinema and television – following pop art – it strives to combine the local and vernacular languages with the language of the global media.

The question of the tradition inspiring global art is the subject of many disputes. Belting considers it to be post-modern and post-ethnic, leaving behind the history of modern art and the tradition of ethnic art. But does leaving behind modern art mean rejecting the Western artistic tradition? Was it not Western art that had questioned modern art and modern narrative, laying the foundations for the artistic strategies of global art? Was it not conceptual art that worked out such strategies by allowing non-Western artists to overcome the dichotomy between locality (ethnic art) and universalism (modern art)? Did it not provide the means allowing them to make their local problems part of the global information flow? To talk about the current problems of their cultures using contemporary language? According to authors of the exhibition *Authentic/Ex-Centric. Conceptualism in Contemporary African Art* (2001), conceptual art has never been a monolithic artistic practice or a unified theory – instead, it was an area of theoretical and practical disputes on art, also involving African artists. Hence it is not true that conceptual art was imported to Africa from outside.<sup>4</sup> Thomas Fillitz notes, however, that almost all African artists invited to participate in the exhibition had African origins, but were trained in European or North American art schools, where they could get familiar with and explore their knowledge of the history and theory of conceptual art.<sup>5</sup>

## TWO MODELS OF GLOBALIZATION

The recent Venice Biennale, in 2009, clearly showed two models of globalization of contemporary art. One was exemplified by the countries of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan) and the other by the United Arab Emirates. The artists from Central Asia had already participated in the Venice Biennale before – four years earlier, they showed their works at the exhibition *Central Asian Academy of Art* (2005) prepared by the Russian curator Viktor Missiano. The exhibition met with moderate interest. Yet, the

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<sup>4</sup> S. Hassan, O. Oguibe, “Authentic/Ex-Centric. African Conceptualism in Global Context”, in: *Authentic/Ex-Centric. Conceptualism in Contemporary African Art*, Venice 2001.

<sup>5</sup> T. Fillitz, “Contemporary Art of Africa: Coevalness in the Global World”, in: *The Global Art World ...*, p. 122.

work of the Kyrgyz couple Gulnara Kasmalieva and Muratbek Djumaliev, “Transsiberian Amazons” (2005), whose theme was the women earning their living from trading expeditions made a strong impression. Kasmalieva and Djumaliev are the best-known contemporary Kyrgyz artists. For years, they have run the Art East association in Bishek which used to organize international exhibitions of contemporary art. The 2009 Venice Biennale showed some other interesting artists from Central Asia. This time the exhibition’s curator was the Turkish critic, curator of the First Biennial in Istanbul, Beral Madra. Jamshed Kholov from Tajikistan showed a series of photographs (over 100) presenting rural bus stops in Central Asia, with unique architecture combining national elements with ideological symbols. Those stops, today partly devastated, abandoned, deprived of their original function, have become dumb witnesses of transformation in the post-Soviet Asia (“Ostanovki”, 2008). Anzor Salidjanov from Uzbekistan presented a photographic portrait of an artist from Buchara modeled after “The Last Supper” of Leonardo da Vinci (“The Last Supper”, 2008). Salidjanov first came onto the art scene creating photographic pastiches of some icons of Western European painting which he put on the Internet. The interest with which these pastiches were received, encouraged the artist to further develop this idea and to present more bravely the Western pictures in Oriental settings. “The Last Supper” may serve as an example – the story has been taken from the Western tradition, but the clothes and the food on the table are Oriental. Boris Chukovich calls it “a setting without action” – as Salidjanov reconstructs the scene rather than the action. One woman, the artist’s wife, takes part in the Supper – this can be an allusion to Dan Brown, another intertextual reference, but there is no narrative resembling that in Leonardo da Vinci’s work. There is no action whatsoever – just a group portrait; and the “The Last Supper” is an amusing scenographic joke. Salidjanov shows how he constructed “The Last Supper” painting, how he introduced the successive figures, how he fitted them into the composition, how he created the image using Photoshop. The artists from Central Asia seem to be treating the world they live in as a theatre without a text, as abandoned stage props; they extract theatricality from the reality that surrounds them. For example, Oksana Shatalova, dressed as a worker, waves a red flag with white dots (“Red Flag”, 2008), dances a tango to a sad Russian song in devastated, post-industrial scenery (“Open-air Tango”, 2008), or takes a milk bath, covered with rose petals (“SPA Mummification”, 2009).<sup>6</sup>

In contrast, the artists from the United Arab Emirates had their debut at the Venice Biennale. They debuted with an exhibition prepared by the ADACH (Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage) foundation headed by

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<sup>6</sup> *Making Interstices. Central Asia Pavilion*, ed. B. Madra, Venice 2009.

Catherine David, a curator of X Documenta in Kassel. The ADACH foundation focused less on the local artists, and more on showing Arabic art. The Emirates' presentation prompted the questions of how the Middle East and its money will change contemporary art and how contemporary art, opposing authoritarian rules, will change the Middle East? For the Emirates, art is a business project which involves launching the art market, art galleries (in fact, entire gallery districts), art fairs, auction houses, and museums of contemporary art. The objective of the ADACH foundation is to create artistic infrastructure in the Emirates, one of the richest regions in the world (where the annual income per capita is close to 50 thousand dollars, and in the richest Abu Dhabi even 63 thousand dollars).<sup>7</sup> By 2012, the Emirates will open the branches of the largest world museums: the Guggenheim and the Louvre, as well as some other museums of contemporary art.

The countries of the Middle East and of Central Asia represent two models of globalization. Globalization allows the artists from the post-Soviet Central Asia to participate in the global artistic exchange, to show their work not only in Venice but also in Berlin (2002), Geneva (2002), Paris (2006), Warsaw (*Contemporary Art from Central Asia*, 2006), Moscow, Thessaloniki, Karlsruhe, Helsinki, and New York. In the case of the United Arab Emirates, globalization serves the promotion of the region and helps to put the Persian Gulf countries on the global art scene. These two examples show how differently art can be incorporated in the globalization process and what different issues we have to consider when discussing global art. In addition, these two examples show the importance of the selection of language that would be used to talk about global art.

## POSTCOLONIAL DISCOURSE

Postcolonial discourse is often considered, quite rightly, to be one of the main currents in the post-modernist criticism of European modernity, and precisely, its aspiration to universal and common importance.

Leela Gandhi, in her brilliant analysis of Kant's essay "Was ist Aufklärung" (1784) highlights the similarity between the Enlightenment and maturity pointed out by the German philosopher. The Enlightenment brings humanity to maturity. A mature human being is the one who is able to take responsibility for his life and decide about his fate. But what about those who did not mature,

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<sup>7</sup> ADACH. *Platform for Visual Arts*, Venice 2009.

who did not graduate from the Enlightenment's school?<sup>8</sup> Kant's essay introduces the figure of the immature or a subaltern. Who is that immature individual, the one whose mind did not benefit from the Enlightenment? What is his role? Should he voluntarily subordinate to the mature, confidently entrust himself to his care? Does not Kant lead us to conclude that those who have matured should take responsibility not only for their own life, but also for the life of those who have stayed immature?

Kant's essay is one of the few texts which provide the grounds for the philosophical discourse of modernity, or more broadly speaking – for the modern discourse of the humanities. Post-colonial discourse, with its question “Can the subaltern speak?” gets to the very point of the modernity debate held in Europe. Can the immature speak? Can they say something that the mature did not know earlier? Are they capable of defining their situation?

Where do these questions and doubts come from? They come from the fact that the split into the mature and the immature is related to the split into the definers and the defined ones, into those who have been granted a right to define and those who have been refused such a right, which means that the immature must struggle with their images created by the discourse of the mature. Hence, the immature must refer not only to their own identity, but also to the identity imposed upon them – they are trapped in a double narrative.

Postcolonial discourse is a discourse developed for the needs of postcolonial studies, originally part of literary studies.<sup>9</sup> But the most important book, highly influential in postcolonial studies, was *Orientalism* (1978) by Edward Said. Said's work was often criticized because it is based on several controversial assumptions: a) the research of the European orientalists served a political purpose – the development of the narrative justifying the colonial conquest of the East; b) the European orientalists created a distorted view of the Orient, Oriental culture and the Oriental people; c) the West constructed the concept of the Orient as the Other, which was to facilitate the development of its own identity based on the belief in the essential difference of the European culture. The conviction about the uniqueness of the European culture and its difference from all other cultures emerged in the Enlightenment and at this point, Said, paradoxically, agrees with Kant.

The key concept for Said is the narrative that constructs the image of the Other. The special nature of the postcolonial subject stems from the fact that it

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<sup>8</sup> L. Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, Melbourne 1998.

<sup>9</sup> See *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literature*, eds B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, H. Tiffin, London 1989.

is trapped between two narratives – the narrative of the colonizers and that of the colonized. One is a dominating narrative, the other a dominated one. One represents the narrative of the mature, the other – of the immature. This distinction is the heritage of colonialism, as it was the colonizers who imposed it upon the local people. At the time of colonization, this opposition was veiled by the universal ideology of modernity. This fueled the debates in the non-Western world on whether modernity was merely an instrument of colonization, or a factor in emancipation. Was this an attempt to separate the Western modernism from some more universal form of modernism, in search for non-European sources of modernism? A rejection of the Marxist vision of historical progress, where colonization is a means of modernizing non-Western societies and liberating them from the oppressiveness of their traditional culture?

### **POSTCOLONIAL DISCOURSE AND GLOBAL ART – THESES**

Globalization changes the relations between Western art and non-Western art, as well as the related discourse – the discourse of modernity. Art becomes global, which means that it is made in different parts of the world and its characteristic features are regional in nature – we speak of Chinese, African, Asian, Latin American, Arab art, or of geographically closer Balkan art. Geo-aesthetics, i.e. changing categories and criteria of aesthetic assessment depending on geographical location, is playing an increasingly big role in this art.

Global art employs the means of expression that have challenged the dominance of modern art – photography, video and film. By using a language typical for today's media communication, it undermines the autonomy of art and its independence from popular, ethnic and local culture. This art can be presented in a variety of ways: on TV as a documentary film, in magazines as a report – hence, the vital role of contextualization, i.e. placing those works in the context of art.

Global art disturbs the aspirations of modern art and the related discourse to universality by posing the question asked by Roger Buergel at the last Documenta: what do we have to learn in order to face up to globalization, both intellectually and spiritually? What knowledge should we expand to deprive the globalization discourse of violence and save it from complete subordination to economy?

Postcolonial discourse is a way of looking at the globalization of art which involves a departure from the perception of the non-Western art in terms of the Other, or better to say, the expression of otherness.

Postcolonial discourse supports the art of the countries which were on the fringes of the art world, such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan or Uzbekistan, and thus contributes to the expansion of the contemporary art scene, giving it genuinely global character.

Postcolonial discourse goes beyond the ideology of multiculturalism. It is not focused on the question of local identity and the destruction of traditional identity in the time of globalization. By promoting the equality of all cultures, multiculturalism encloses the representatives of non-Western cultures in their ethnicity. It replaces former biological racism with cultural racism, and the postulate of authenticity unexpectedly reveals its racist character – non-Western artists can become part of today's art scene only as non-Western artists, i.e. only when they remain in the world assigned to them by the prevailing discourse.

Postcolonial discourse focuses on the contemporary non-European art, i.e. post-historic art that does not fit within the art history developed by the Western world and at the same time is post-ethnic, does not continue any local, ethnic artistic tradition. This is the art of the so-called third culture or third space – as Homi Bhabha described it – suspended between the local and the global culture, referring to the experience of immigrants. Each immigrant brings with him part of the culture he comes from and tries to match it with the new culture he found himself in. This gives rise to some hybrid identity, combining elements from different cultures. One can of course ask whether this experience is universal. Is it characteristic or typical for today's culture? Are we all immigrants? If so, then in what sense? However, Bhabha is not interested in such questions, instead he is searching for some space in which new, postcolonial culture can be born and finds such a space in between the older cultures.<sup>10</sup> Hence, this is a proposal for the artists who live up cultures by introducing elements of other cultures to them; the artists-immigrants operating in-between cultures, between their own, local culture and global culture. However, today, the experience of living in-between cultures is increasingly more common and does not concern only artists or immigrants, but also those who – without leaving their homes – live in-between their native culture and the culture of the global village: they watch the football matches of Manchester United or Real Madrid, visit sushi bars, eat kebab and buy cheap products from China or Malaysia.

Postcolonial discourse poses the question about the ways of going beyond Western art history in today's global world, the question regarding museums,

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<sup>10</sup> H. Bhabha, "Cultures in between", *Artforum*, Sept. 1993.

i.e. a change from large exhibitions (such as the Venice biennial) to museum collections. What art history are we to write in the time of global art?

And the last question – about the scope of postcolonial discourse. Does this discourse pertain only to the former colonies in Asia and Africa, or also to Poland and Central Europe, which for 50 years represented the Second World and were thus excluded from active co-creation of Western art?

The Arab scholar Salma Khadra Jayyusi, describing the richness of the old and contemporary Arab literature, which is not appreciated enough in the Western world, wrote at the close of her paper: “I instinctively avoided becoming directly involved with the three major themes that have been most popular in Western studies of the Middle East: politics, religion and the status of women.”<sup>11</sup> Global art does not prevent us from taking up these issues; on the contrary, it gives them special attention.

*Translated by Maria Śpik-Dziamska*

#### **DYSKURS POST-KOLONIALNY, CZYLI JAK CZYTAĆ SZTUKĘ CZASÓW GLOBALIZACJI (streszczenie)**

Jeszcze kilka lat temu zastanawialiśmy się jak będzie wyglądała sztuka po upadku sztuki nowoczesnej. Dzisiaj już wiemy; sztuką, która wyłoniła się po upadku sztuki nowoczesnej jest sztuka globalna. Sztuka globalna zmusza nas do zmiany myślenia o sztuce, do zmiany myślenia o tym, co skłonni jesteśmy uznawać za sztukę, umieszczać w kontekście sztuki i rozpatrywać w kategoriach sztuki. Sztuką globalną należy odróżnić od sztuki świata i sztuki światowej. Sztuka świata i sztuka światowa odwołują się bowiem do uniwersalnego pojęcia sztuki, z którym sztuka globalna zrywa. Zamiast szukać jednej, uniwersalnej, czyli hegemonicznej definicji sztuki, sztuka globalna akceptuje wielość i różnorodność definicji sztuki, co pozwala jej łączyć sztukę wysoką i niską, elitarną i popularną, dzięki temu, że wprowadza etnograficzne rozumienie sztuki i posługuje się geoestetyką, w której kategorie estetyczne nabierają znaczenia w zależności od geograficznego kontekstu. Akceptacja wielu, często wzajemnie sprzecznych definicji sztuki prowadzi do sytuacji, w której sztuka staje się czymś nieogarnialnym, wymykającym się poznaniu, a samo pojęcie sztuki traci sens – sztuką jest to, co różni ludzi w różnych miejscach i z różnych powodów uważają za sztukę.

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<sup>11</sup> S. Jayyusi, *Globar Culture: An Arab View*, in: *Contemporary Art and Museum*, eds P. Weibel, A. Buddensieg, Ostfildern 2007, p. 211.



## NOTES ON THE CONTRIBUTORS

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**Magdalena Samborska** – graduate of the Władysław Strzemiński Academy of Fine Arts in Łódź. Her first projects in art grew out of her critical attitude towards fashion (living sculptures, mock fashion shows). Her current projects include installations, objects and assemblages confronting the surrounding iconosphere. She uses her knowledge of philosophy, art history, and the history of costume to construct a multi-layered system of references. She also creates paintings and collages, studying the relations between traditional visual media and mass culture.

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