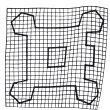


**NEW
PHENOMENA
IN
POLISH
ART
AFTER
2000**



Centre for Contemporary Art
Ujazdowski Castle Warsaw

NEW PHENOMENA IN POLISH ART AFTER 2000



EDITED BY:

Grzegorz Borkowski, Adam Mazur, Monika Branicka



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Lukasz Ronduda

Jarostaw Suchan

Magdalena Ujma

A LEXICON, ESSAYS, AND A MAP

Without succumbing to the magic of numbers, one nonetheless has to admit that the image of Polish contemporary art after 2000 is so different from that of the 90s that it demands a new diagnosis, a kind of inventory, and a guide through the new territories. Besides the already established artists, who have successfully continued their practices, numerous new, intriguing phenomena have emerged.

Initiated by Jarosław Suchan, a few-month project *At the Very Centre of Attention*, realised in the Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle, from the very beginning included the concept of the publication, which in the form of the lexicon of the personalities of the Polish art scene (complemented with the thematic essays) would capture the newest and the most interesting phenomena in Polish visual art of the recent years. The formula of the book including a register – or rather a dictionary – of artistic strategies will, in the most practical and least biased manner, fill the gap on the market of publications devoted to Polish contemporary art. It will, at the same time, respect an exquisite diversity and polymorphous character of this field. Surely, it was necessary to extend the range of the phenomena presented in this book, because even such an extensive exhibition project as *At the Very Centre of Attention* had its spatial and temporal limitations. As the result, we present 71 artistic strategies and we tried to reflect their diversity in the manner of description and interpretation. We managed to collect essays from 38 authors presenting various perspectives and styles of writing on art. At the same time, we kept in mind that what was needed was a book not only for professionals but also for the growing audience interested in the visual culture in its diverse manifestations. Thus we tried to make sure that the material was presented in an easily accessible manner, and that as much relevant data as possible was offered.

Attesting to the richness of the artistic life in Poland after 2000 is the sense of dissatisfaction (and discomfort) we feel, being unable to include even more artist profiles in this book. It needs to be stressed that the selection made for the purposes of this publication was not determined generationally but was dictated by the specificity of the artists' activity and the emergence of new themes and perspectives in their work.

These issues are discussed in the thematic essays preceding *the Lexicon*. Not only do they construct narratives and conceptual structures encompassing the material contained therein, but also often go beyond it. In a way, *Essays* are a fruit of the work of a team which would not have been formed were it not for the experience gathered in publishing the art magazine *Obieg*.

Irrespective of how convincing the approaches to the new phenomena in Polish art presented in the *Essays* prove for the readers, they can, using the data contained in the *Lexicon*, pursue their own interpretative tropes. This gives the book a flexible, open structure.

We ourselves failed to resist the temptation and we introduced in the *Lexicon* a structure listing categories, or rather keywords. These are the result of the discussions carried out by the curators who worked on the consecutive parts of the project *At the Very Centre of Attention*, and of witnessing how certain adopted categories proved incompatible with the actual exhibitions. This was a consequence not only of the evolution of the strategies of certain artists, but also of the specificity of the presented works, which often belong to numerous representational orders at once, and cannot be totally contained in none of them. Later, virtually on every stage of the editing process, we had to admit that some, seemingly well grounded, categories were, after all, flawed. Despite that, we still tried to define the main components of the conceptual and emotional space of Polish contemporary art. We subscribe fully to the division into four categories adopted here, though we are aware that the delimitations it offers are neither sharp nor absolute.

I

The key concept for the first section is painting, though no longer understood as a specific means of expression but rather as a stimulating factor for activity that is not exclusively painting. That is why we have called this space the sphere of the influence of the **painting hormone**. Hormone regulates the activity and modifies the structural characteristics of tissue. Today, painting has perhaps lost its position as the most important of the visual arts, but over the course of its history it has established the high rank of the image, and, now as a

hormone, it continues to influence the vast space of image-making, where, besides painted images (*pictura*), we also have *images* (imago) – produced mechanically, imagined, or spotted. In this sphere, the most important activity is that of looking, intermingled with reading, analysing, synthesising, and reflecting on the perception and production of representations.

II

The second sphere is defined by the kind of game with the non-artistic reality that is based on trust in imagination, dream, simulation, and apparitions. The title of Katarzyna Kozyra's performance series *In Art Dreams Come True* aptly reflects this sense of the power and ability of art, which, seemingly questioning the existing (social, cultural, personal) realities, in fact, by introducing imaginary elements, performs an acute vivisection thereof. It is an art that, in its artificiality, finds reason for turning reality inside out. It discovers that reality itself is a kind of phantasm that can be treated as a means of expression and a springboard for uncompromising creativity.

III

By accepting the establishment-funded Paszport Polityki award, the Twożywo collective – which descends from the underground – perversely sent its **Greetings to the System**, against which it fights its guerilla war. This gesture of a counter-culture subject can serve as a sign / symbol of an artistic attitude concentrated on simultaneous interaction with the dominant culture system and its transformation from within.

The political potential of this art can adopt various forms and have various intensities but it doubtless points to those spheres of social life where oppression or absurdity have been present and calling for change.

IV

An interesting phenomenon of the last few years is an art that initiates dialogue with history. This art explores history's presence in the cultural consciousness and to what extent it is shaped by pop-culture, with its tendency to mix fiction with reality. Analogically to the

concept of 'deconstruction,' this trend can be defined as the **art of dehistoricisation**. It is a form of historical reinterpretation, but also of healing historical traumas through an art that is ready to reach even for fiction in order to expose the mechanisms of manipulation. This art penetrates the collective memory and representations of history, striving to discuss the process of their formation, and seeking answers to the question about the nature of history.

The space of the new phenomena in Polish art is formed by interpenetrating constellations of artistic activities. They are depicted by the schematic map featured between the *Essays* and the *Lexicon*. If it is at least partly helpful in the reader's navigation through art, the task we set for ourselves will be fulfilled. We wish you an interesting journey.

A FEW NOTES ON A FEW CONCEPTS. INSTEAD OF AN INTRODUCTION

This book is the crowning of the project *At the Very Centre of Attention*, carried out by the CCA Ujazdowski Castle between November 2005 and August 2006. This project comprised several dozen exhibitions and shows, during which the work of close to thirty most outstanding, according to the CCA curators, individualities on the Polish artistic scene was presented to the public. The purpose of that enterprise of an unprecedented scale was clear: to manifest the potential of contemporary Polish art and to prove that it is an important part of contemporary culture; that it represents a space in which the crucial issues of our times are discussed. In short, the goal was to appreciate this field of contemporary artistic production that, in Poland, unfortunately, remains perceived as marginal a phenomenon, if not outright suspicious, then, at least, meaningless. Besides, the project had an educational goal, aiming to chart a map that would help the contemporary art audience move throughout its meanders. The purpose of this publication is alike.

At the same time, it is not a catalogue documenting the exhibitions shown as part of *At the Very Centre of Attention*. The list of the featured artists is far more extensive, and the publication's structure does not match the structure of the project. Still, the experience gathered and the conclusions drawn in the course of the project have doubtless determined the picture of contemporary Polish art emerging from its pages. A picture that is, let us admit, incomplete, certainly not objective, and yet – it is my hope – not entirely arbitrary.

This text attempts to outline the conceptual framework of this picture. Or, should I rather say, to list the problems such an attempt creates. What *At the Very Centre of Attention* starkly revealed has been a fundamental incompatibility of the descriptions in use to the phenomenon of contemporary Polish art. The existing instruments, terms and criteria used to define and categorise the domestic contemporary art scene, have been unable to capture either the diversity of positions, concepts and ideologies, or, much less, the dynamics of how the work of different artists has been changing. This impossibility emerged when we were working on the assumptions of *At the Very Centre of Attention*.

From the very beginning, the project was based on the assumption that individual exhibitions included in it, at the same time, would be combined on the basis of ideological or formal similarity – so that these combinations created significant higher-order entities. That way the project was supposed to present a panorama of the dominant trends and tendencies. That objective was met, and yet probably no one was satisfied with the results. We realised that the categorisations conducted not entirely matched reality and that they failed to capture that which has fundamentally differentiated and defined the art in question. One can, of course, assume that the criteria on the basis of which different artistic phenomena were juxtaposed were wrong. Perhaps, however, the very expectation that reality would yield submissively to such classification was wrong.

We all realise, of course, that classifications simplify things. Such is their nature. In practice, however, we keep using them, often forgetting that they are solely (subjective) interpretations, and allowing them to replace in our consciousness the phenomena they interpret. Today, this is happening with the category of critical art – and that which it refers to, or rather what it obscures – so crucial for our reflection.

As we know, the term started to be applied in the 1990s to denote art that, with unprecedented openness and vigour, began calling into question and challenging the legitimacy of the commonly accepted cultural, social, and religious norms, revealing their hypocritical and repressive nature. Articulated with very powerful, often drastic, means of expression, that art deliberately violated social taboos in order to shock the viewer, shake him out of his mental routine, to show that the obvious was not obvious at all and the allegedly natural was a cultural construct. The fundamental point of reference for that critical practice – and, to an extent, also its medium – was the body as the area where the oppressiveness and ideologisation of our culture are most evident. In this context, the issues were raised of the repressive character of the dominant ideals of health and beauty, the commodification of the female body, the legitimacy of the religious regulations concerning the individual's intimate experiences, the discrimination of non-normative forms of sexual and bodily expression, and so on.

The artists usually associated with the critical art movement included Katarzyna Kozyra, Artur Żmijewski, Robert Rumaś, and, of the slightly older generation, Grzegorz Klaman, Alicja Żebrowska or Zbigniew Libera. These names came to be identified with the term 'critical art' to the point where the two seemed interchangeable – and that caused far-reaching consequences. Firstly, becoming the main interpretative key for describing that art, the term 'critical art' started obscuring its other aspects. Secondly, identifying criticality only with the above-mentioned artists, it suggested others were less or not at all, critical. An additional effect, connected with the two mentioned above, was a narrowing of the term itself, as one of the many possible modes of conducting criticism in art was identified with critical art, thus pushing other critical strategies out of the discourse.

For the description of the post-1989 Polish artistic scene, the above identification seemed to be of fundamental significance. As the most powerful critical concept that emerged at the time, the term 'critical art' became the positioning point for other phenomena. Above all, it seems to have determined the reception and critical definition of the trends that manifested themselves in the late 1990s, as a new generation stepped in. When in 2000, the CCA organised the survey exhibition *Scene 2000*, the picture it produced provoked many critics to claim that the paradigm of Polish art had changed. A shift had supposedly occurred from heroic criticism and opposition against the cultural *status quo* towards a more ambiguous, ironic and distanced play with the dominant culture. Critics were writing of artists' reconciling themselves with reality, pulling in their horns, being wary of assuming ideologically clear-cut positions. Recognised as emblematic for the new situation was the work of the group Ładnie, characterised by highlighting its turn towards painting, fascination with pop culture and pictorial civilisation, petty realism, interest in banal and everyday reality. Emphasised were chiefly those qualities that made that art a phenomenon diametrically different from what had earlier been recognised as critical art.

What were the consequences? On the one hand, the focus on criticality – and one very specifically defined – as the main differentiating criterion resulted in the marginalisation of those moments where the art of the 2000s could appear as a continuation of that of the previous decade. On the other, the identification of critical art with the work of Kozyra, Żebrowska or Klaman made it difficult to recognise as critical the practices of many young-generation artists.

And yet the art that came to the fore at the end of the 1990s not so much abandoned critical aspirations as started to voice its opposition against the *status quo* in a different way. The central point of reference was no longer the body and the repression it was subjected to in normative culture, but the world of mass communication and consumption, the symbolic systems as instruments of social manipulation, and finally the mechanisms of the artist's, and his work's, institutional entanglement. The means of criticism also changed, becoming usually less direct, less emotional and less emphatic.

It needs to be remembered, though, that also in the critical art of the previous generation there appeared, besides Katarzyna Kozyra's highly personal and dramatic *Animal Pyramid*, works like Zbigniew Libera's *Universal Penis Expander*, speaking of oppressive norms imposed by culture in a very ironic and distanced manner. And similarly, among the young generation's achievements, besides simple, seemingly light gestures in the vein of Julita Wójcik's *Potato Peeling*, one can find Dorota Nieznalska's famous *Passion*, in which an issue, close to the one dealt with by Libera in his *Expander*, is evoked with a gesture that is virtually blasphemous. So, all the differences notwithstanding, it seems relevant to consider the work of the two generations as a whole, which, understandably, has its lines of division, among which the generational one – stigmatised by the division of critical art vs. pop banalism and a return to painting – is not necessarily one that matters the most.

So how to describe that whole if greater narratives such as 'critical art' or 'return to painting' seem to lead us astray? The simplest – and safest – way to do it is, undoubtedly, by listing its key components. This is, to an extent, what this book does, presenting the profiles of close to seventy of the currently most active and significant artists on the Polish scene. It does not, however, limit itself to just this simple counting out. Instead of it, and instead of strict categories pigeonholing artists once and for all, it proposes a kind of map of issues, themes, strands and problems around which Polish contemporary art revolves today. As an instrument, such a map is probably less useful than this or that master narrative – as it does not draw clear demarcation lines between artistic territories – but it seems to adhere more closely to the reality described. A reality in which the artist can be both critical and pop, committed and distanced, self-centred and open to the world...

JUST WHAT IS IT THAT MAKES TODAY'S POLISH ART SO DIFFERENT, SO APPEALING?

Many Western curators and contemporary art collectors, especially those from the US, are surprised that Wilhelm Sasnal, one of the most successful painters of the last couple of seasons, was born and is based in Poland rather than in Germany. Besides the obvious source of the mistake – the artist's non-Slavic last name – one should also note another aspect here. The symptomatic shift that has taken place in recent years in art from Poland, and whose most evident expression is the 'Sasnal effect' – the situation where an artist from the back of beyond wins a leading position on the international art scene – can be described as a move away from the local context of art made in the region of Central and Eastern Europe or in the former Soviet bloc countries, and towards production not different in either formal or semantic terms from the standards of cosmopolitan Western art. At the same time, the phenomenon does not consist in the imitation, typical for peripheral cultures (including the Polish one), of models provided by the centre, but rather in the fact that there exists a group of highly sophisticated artists who belong to the avant-garde that defines the language of contemporary art. Besides Sasnal, those celebrities who operate in the global art world include Artur Żmijewski, Katarzyna Kozyra, Paweł Althamer, Monika Sosnowska, Paulina Ołowska, Jarosław Kozakiewicz, Marcin Maciejowski, Zbigniew Rogalski, Aneta Grzeszykowska and Jan Smaga, Piotr Uklański, and others well known to international experts.

The phenomenon of Young Polish Art (YPA) was noticed for the first time a year ago by Paweł Leszkowicz, who coined the term in a deliberate, and somewhat provocative, reference to the phenomenon, so powerful in the 1990s, of Young British Art (YBA). "Great art is being made in Poland and ever better exhibitions are being organised," Leszkowicz wrote in the magazine *Obieg*, adding that, "for the first time in my own history of being involved with art, I think, read, write and teach about Polish art with the same pleasure that I have about foreign art. I see a genuine explosion, finally the artists' and curators' eyes and minds have opened." Though not all the YPA artists are young (there is hardly a more relative term than 'youth'), the term is still useful in describing an extremely diverse phenomenon (it is enough to compare Paweł Althamer's socially committed art and

Wilhelm Sasnal's formally appealing painting to realise the sheer breadth of the YPA phenomenon). Leszkowicz, a Poznań-based art historian, critic and curator, rightly noted the strong local foundations of the YPA. The rise in interest in contemporary art and the emergence of a new generation of artists, critics and curators have transformed Polish art, which until now could have been interesting for the Western audience almost solely because of its, to use a term introduced by Boris Groys, post-communist condition. The handful of 'classic' artists from Poland functioning in the international circulation – Zofia Kulik, Magdalena Abakanowicz, Mirosław Balka – have now been joined by a group of new powerful personalities for whom – like for Sasnal – the 'post-communist condition', or, more broadly, Polish historical specificity, can, but does not have to, be a point of reference (and it is certainly not the only interpretation key to their work). The YPA surely has more to say about human condition in general than about the post-communist condition, which, after all, was a form of marginalisation.

The YPA is also attractive and fresh because of being firmly established in an institutional framework created by the ever more mature domestic art community, whose experts do not have to lean on Western criteria but can successfully create their own hierarchies and formulate propositions. Among the institutions that have established a strong presence on the art scene following the introduction of the free-market democracy are the CCA Ujazdowski Castle in Warsaw, CCA Łaźnia and Art Instiute Wyspa in Gdańsk, Raster Gallery and Foksal Gallery Foundation, as well as some of the already existing institutions, such as Zderzak Gallery, the 'old' Foksal, or the Zachęta National Gallery of Art which, under first Anda Rottenberg and now Agnieszka Morawińska, has been developing highly inspiring programme. The new era brought about sweeping changes also in other urban centres in Poland, to mention Cracow (Komisariat, F.A.I.T., Bunkier Sztuki, Otwarta Pracownia), Łódź (Atlas Sztuki, Manhattan), Lublin (Biała Gallery) or Poznań (ON Gallery, Pies, Ego or Stary Browar), though on a proportionately smaller, local scale. We are dealing, on the one hand, with more efficient institutional channels and better experts' choices, and, on the other, with more interesting propositions from

young, better educated artists of highly developed sensitivity and original imagination.

The emergence of YPA has been accompanied, among critics, curators and, which is more obvious, art historians, by a growing interest in the 'archaeology' of contemporary art, which has not only helped to restore some crucial names to the common consciousness but, above all, has built continuity and a historical context for today's art. YPA would not have been what it is without the retrospective exhibitions of Oskar Hansen, the Enthusiasts (shown also at Kunstwerke in Berlin, Whitechapel in London, and Tapies Foundation in Barcelona), Edward Krasiński (Generali Foundation, Vienna), or Tadeusz Kantor (the exhibition *Impossible Theatre* which also featured the leading YPA artists, including Paweł Althamer, Robert Kuśmirowski, Artur Żmijewski and Katarzyna Kozyra).

An important aspect of the popularity of Young Polish Art among Western institutions and buyers is the question to what degree this is a seasonal fad, just another 'Polish season', and to what the result of a process of normalisation as Polish art moves away from the communist reality and towards active participation in the global circulation of contemporary art. Whereas fads pass quickly in the capricious art world (barring special cases like the fascination with the charmingly 'alien' art of the centres of power, like Russia or China), what is important for the YPA is that at least several artists of the generation have developed a lasting presence in the international art world. The Polish art community drew a lesson from rapidly growing and then equally rapidly waning interest in Polish art related to political changes (the rise of Solidarity, the martial law, the fall of communism). The YPA artists build their careers consciously, step by step, supported by the most renowned domestic and foreign institutions, carefully selecting their exhibition venues, publishing catalogues, working together with international curators and critics. It is difficult to say, of course, to what extent these efforts will produce long-term results and whether the names at the core of the YPA phenomenon will still be the focus of attention several years from now. Interestingly, a similar process has also been taking place with selected artists from the former Soviet bloc countries who have managed to

transcend the framework defined by Groys's theory of the post-communist condition, which, in itself, was certainly an important attempt to work through the trauma of communism and Soviet domination. Artists like Nedko Solakov from Bulgaria or Anri Sala from Albania have managed to establish themselves firmly in the international art circulation. As the EU expands eastwards and the old Yalta division between Eastern and Western Europe becomes a thing of the past, the preferential treatment characteristic for the transitional stage of 'post-communism' is also ending. A natural waning of Western cultural experts' interest in the local specificity, not to say exoticism, has coincided with a growing activity on the local art scenes of the former Soviet bloc countries, which, unable to match the traditional centres of culture, can, on possibly equal terms, co-create a common, heterogeneous space of European culture, an important part of which is contemporary art. What is crucial is to make sure this participation does not entail an alienation from the local context, whereas the 'universalisation' of one's artistic message does not sever one's ties with the domestic audience. For prestigious and financial reasons, Polish artists have been working more and more with Western institutions and less and less with domestic ones. The CCA Ujazdowski Castle's whole-year project called *At the Very Centre of Attention* was an attempt to reverse this trend. Popularly referred to as the 'Polish season in Poland', it aimed at strengthening the weakened ties between popular artists and the audience, which until then had to go to Basel or Hamburg to see an Żmijewski's or Kuśmirowski's exhibition. This 'brain drain' would be easier to plug if our metropolitan centres had more money, so that artists could function through a system of domestic commercial galleries. As it is, the lack of (chiefly financial) prospects for the future means many young artists are simply forced to earn their living abroad. Many face a rather radical alternative: success or professional death, which usually means a reorientation to a more profitable line of activity, such as advertising. In this context, one can only hope that the international successes of Polish art will eventually perk up the interest of domestic institutions, viewers and buyers, boosting the dynamism of the local scene.

STYROFOAM, CARDBOARD, AND GLASS WOOL

Who would dare to assign to art the sterile function of imitating Nature? Maquillage has no need to hide itself or to shrink from being suspected; on the contrary, let it display itself, at least if it does so with frankness and honesty.

Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*¹

The borderline between imitation and lie is highly flexible. In his 18th century book on iconology, Cesare Ripa presented imitation as a woman with a bunch of brushes in her hand and a mask lying at her feet, “because in Comedies” – and elsewhere – “she imitates the appearance and behaviour of various figures.” The personification of falsehood, in turn, was depicted as an ugly but elegantly dressed figure: “the colourful dress, painted in masks and tongues, indicates the volatility of the nature of the liar who, deviating from truth in his speech, changes the appearance of all things.”² In the first case, therefore, the mask is a symbol of laudable imitation, whereas in the second one, it is a symbol of hideous distortion. However, the fact that the two diametrically different personifications both have the mask as their attribute proves there is a close affinity between them.

In the last couple of years, Polish contemporary artists have been more and more interested in analysing the relationship between the two, and the line of division has been pushed in either direction. As a result, the critical texts have more and more often included terms such as ‘imitation’, ‘copy’, ‘dummy’, or finally, *simulacrum*. Virtually every Polish contemporary art critic will correctly spell the name of the author of this last term. And no wonder, since it provides access to extremely inspiring and useful interpretative tools. It has been of little significance though that these tools have become heavily worn out, and that a few critics bother to read the manual closely enough before applying them. After all, you can try driving the nail with a brick instead of a hammer.

Still, the impetus with which the term, proposed by Jean Baudrillard, rolled in the 1980s through the minds of European intellectuals was unparalleled.

The main proposition of Baudrillard’s theory can be paraphrased for the purposes of this essay in a following way: the imitating has become more real than the imitated. Though, on the other hand, according to the author, “it is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real.”³

At the beginning of the 20th century, René Magritte perversely wrote under his painted depiction of a pipe: “This is not a pipe.”⁴ “This is not a spoon,” the protagonist of *The Matrix*, the hit film by the Wachowski brothers, commented, fixing his eyes on an object that was digitalised information.⁵ “Reality does not exist,” claimed Baudrillard⁶. The resonance that such statements evoke in the field of art is immense. And even if we accuse the critics of overinterpreting its manifestations by nonchalantly juggling the names of popular philosophers, it is hard to deny that they represent one of the links through which this resonance is amplified.

And so more and more artists have been making imitations, copies, dummies, and, whether they wanted it or not, *simulacra*, more and more often posing questions about the status of reality. After all, as Wolfgang Welsch claims, “all worlds are in fact artificial worlds.”⁷ Imitation is perceived as an all-encompassing process, and another important word – reality – is inflected for every possible case. What is reality? Does it exist at all? Is there one or infinitely many? Echoes of these questions can be found today both in art and in pop culture.

It is actually hard to believe that as recently as in the 1990s few critics cared about such abstract deliberations, and instead of Baudrillard, the philosopher that reigned supreme in the reviews and critical analyses was Michel Foucault. Reality, or rather its specific manifestations in the shape of the relationships between power and body, were subject to criticism, but not to doubt. Today, however, everyone is more interested in what Dorota Masłowska wrote about in *Snow White and Russian Red*: “Styrofoam, cardboard, and fibreglass insulation, that’s what this town’s built out of, you were imagining it, Andrzej,

¹ Charles Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life,” *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. J. Mayne, London 1995, p. 34.

² Cesare Ripa, *Iconology* [selected by] G. Richardson; introductory notes by S. Orgel, New York 1979, p. 88.

³ Jean Baudrillard, “The Precession of Simulacra,” *Simulacra and simulation*, trans. S. Faria Glaser, Ann Arbor Michigan 1994, p. 67.

⁴ See: Michel Foucault, *This is not a pipe*, trans. ed. J. Harkness, Berkeley 1983.

⁵ “... Baudelaire’s dream, (...) and humanity’s dream of paradise on earth, appear to be being fulfilled, now and in the future. In the artificial paradises of electronic media,” Welsch noted. In fact, the introduction to his *Artificial Paradises?* essay as a whole sounds as if it inspired *The Matrix*. But where Welsch senses the bright future of civilisation, the film-makers saw only the delusion of the senses. Wolfgang Welsch, “Artificial Paradises?: Considering the World of Electronic Media – and Other Worlds,” *Undoing Aesthetics*, trans. A. Inkpin, London, California 1997, p. 170.

⁶ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations*, op. cit., p. 68.

⁷ Welsch, *Artificial Paradises?*, op. cit., p. 171.

my mother says to me (...), after all, this town's made of paper, I myself am made out of cardboard and go to work in a make-believe car, and when you look out the window while I'm driving away, you don't get that it's a Matchbox car purchased at a kiosk."⁸

Perhaps even more tempting today is to *get* what is a dummy. After all, between the lines describing the personifications proposed by Ripa there hides the delicate suggestion for the work of imitation to contain an element of demystification, subtle enough not to spoil the effect of imitation but clear enough to confirm its status. That is why one of the most popular artistic strategies today is exploring the flexible border separating imitation from falsehood. With sympathy usually offered to the latter, of course.

1.

The world of Masłowska's novel has been made out of the same materials used by an artist whose works have been interpreted through Baudrillard's theories more often than anyone else's. Robert Kuśmirowski can build perfect copies of even the most complex objects with Styrofoam, cardboard, plaster, and wood. Using this skill, he suggestively fabricated the atelier of a hypothetical Renaissance alchemist, visionary, librarian, and scientist, Cesare Ripa's peer – Doctor Vernier. The only reason why someone could doubt his existence is because he was in the possession of many instruments and books coming from a later period in history than himself, or even originating in the present. The hypothetical Vernier, among whose many areas of interest was urine therapy⁹, possessed an extensive library featuring a substantial number of volumes from various fields of science and literature.

The thick, leather-bound alleged manuscript purported to be Vernier's opus magnum bears the same title as Kuśmirowski's exhibition: *The Ornaments of Anatomy*¹⁰. Like a mediaeval incunabulum, it is locked up, but a close observer will notice that its yellowed pages are in fact properly trimmed stacks of 19th century magazines. They form its entrails, and, at the same time, its content. The

work can be viewed as a synthesis of the whole exhibition, because it subtly demystifies the process of its creation, revealing that it is not history that stands behind the doctor but only its contemporary image formed with scraps of memory, signs of the past, and memories. The figure of Doctor Vernier, therefore, is a product of the knowledge contained in the publications laboriously collected by Kuśmirowski, and his identity is a conglomerate of museum reconstructions, costume dramas, as well as representations of literary characters and historical figures filtered through the artist's imagination. One can say that Vernier is a product of his own library. "I feel like a composer of a selected fragment of history," Kuśmirowski said once.¹¹ And indeed, his exhibition is like an intricate postmodern music piece, composed wholly with borrowings, pastiches, and interpretations.

2.

The characters, in turn, borrowed by Robert Maciejuk from the visual sphere of pop culture are quite different from the respectable figure of Doctor Vernier. Miś Uszatek, Bob the Builder, and Colargol are children's cartoon characters. Until recently, Maciejuk represented them in his paintings, but now only deserted backgrounds are left: empty sceneries of fairytale lands in which they used to live their puppet lives.

Examining one of those, at first sight we can notice but a blurry desert landscape with a fragment of a cactus in the foreground. The representation seems to have just one designate: a barren landscape somewhere deep in the Mexican interior. If, however, we were to reconstruct its origins, we would encounter a multi-level structure. A precise description of the painting would mention a layer of paint arranged on canvas, imitating a photograph taken out of a postcard, imitating the model of a cartoon scenery, in itself a reconstruction of the common representation of the desert landscape, being in turn an attempt to imitate actual landscapes mediated by popular magazines or television. So, in this seemingly simple painting, there exist – between the Ma-



Dorota Masłowska, *Snow White and Russian Red*, trans. B. Paloff, New York 2005, p. 257.



"Human urine is an antidote for various poisons, cures eye problems, regulates metabolism and the bitter taste in the mouth caused by poor metabolism, kills bacteria, stimulates appetite, controls ailments, cures eczema, and, when properly used, gives new life" – a quote from Doctor Vernier's fictional treatise, from the folder accompanying the *Ornaments of Anatomy, Vol. III* exhibition, CCA Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw 2006.



Robert Kuśmirowski, *Ornaments of Anatomy*, Kunstverein, Hamburg 2005.



My interview with Robert Kuśmirowski, conducted in 2005 on the occasion of the CCA Ujazdowski Castle Warsaw exhibition, unpublished.

tissean arrangement of pigments and the Mexican desert – as many as five levels of image mediation, and each of those distorts the original a step further. This resembles the children’s game of Chinese whispers, where a sentence is secretly passed from one player to another. The original usually has little to do with the sentence that the last player utters out loud. Likewise, Maciejuk’s paintings, in the process of borrowing and filtering their original image through the consecutive styles – such as colourism – lose their alleged designate. Thus the worlds they represent are always artificial, almost abstract, worlds. But, as the already mentioned Welsch wrote, “what’s called ‘artificial’ is often quite simply the new in contrast to the old – but this, in its turn, was already something artificial compared with its predecessor. Our woods and meadows, for example, seem natural to us, but they are highly artificial compared with the primeval forest of the Tertiary – whereas they do look natural compared with the Manhattan skyscraper-jungle, which will of course in turn appear natural in comparison to an artificial computer simulation of the city of tomorrow.”¹² Every representation, therefore, is a chain of consecutive, ever more modified, imitations. It seems that the German philosopher’s theory finds a perfect complement in the work of the Polish artist.

Maciejuk has so far painted many sceneries and characters from children’s cartoons. The protagonists, cubs built with geometric figures, resemble teddy bears, that is, poor imitations of real animals. In his paintings, in addition, they adopt an artificial, demonic character, becoming monsters, hybrids composed of many different representations, living in grotesque worlds of distorted scale. They are an effect of imitation degenerated in the process of consecutive repetitions, each time repeating an ever more unnatural image.

3.

A very similar procedure is conducted by Karol Radziszewski, who used the image of God himself. Radziszewski, a young artist, meticulously copied on several dozen canvases different versions of the Divine Mercy, the image of Christ, with an open heart, blessing his people, originating with a vision of Saint Faustina, a pre-war Polish nun. Due to its immense popularity, the representation exists in a surprising multitude of versions, which the artist long collected. Each of the canvases is based on a different version, and each differs significantly from the

others. When all the versions were confronted in a single series, it turned out that an image of immense significance for millions of Catholics had blurred in hundreds of different representations, each of which lays a claim to being the authentic one. “This is precisely what was feared by Iconoclasts, whose millennial quarrel is still with us today. This is precisely because they predicted this omnipotence of *simulacra*, the faculty *simulacra* have of effacing God from the conscience of man, and the destructive, annihilating truth that they allow to appear – that deep down God never existed, that only the *simulacrum* ever existed, even that God himself was never anything but his own simulacrum – from this came their urge to destroy the images,” Baudrillard wrote.¹³ Overproduction of images can result in the devaluation of the object or idea that these images attempt to address.

4.

One can hardly write about the multiplication of images without mentioning Oskar Dawicki’s project *Street Portraits* (2003). Dawicki asked twelve street portraitists working in tourist areas in twelve different European cities to make his portrait, as a result of which he obtained twelve drawings apparently depicting twelve different people. As we know, artists who eagerly try to reproduce reality do not constitute something that could be called a great machine mass-producing universalised references. That is why each of the street artists hired by Dawicki unconsciously confirmed Leon Chwistek’s proposition that “there is nothing that we commonly refer to as reality, instead, there exist various, quite different, realities with which different people are dealing, and even the same person in different moments. (...) [Therefore] (...) the work of art has to be consistent with a certain reality.”¹⁴ In Dawicki’s case, this would be the reality of each of the portraitists. Perhaps that is why the portraits speak more of their authors than of the model depicted.

Portraits are usually perceived as constructs of identity in opposition to a strong subject, but, it has been noticed, “this conclusion is as banal as it is fruitless today to bring up such issues at all.”¹⁵ It is likely, though, that Dawicki’s project pertains to the problem of representation rather than to the very construction of the figure to which all these images refer.

5.

It is worth comparing Dawicki’s project with a project by Rafał Bujnowski, who has been putting painting’s

¹² Welsch, op. cit., p. 172.

¹³ Baudrillard, “The Precession of Simulacra,” op. cit., p. 65.

¹⁴ Leon Chwistek, *Wielość rzeczywistości w sztuce i inne eseje*, Warsaw 1960.

¹⁵ Jarosław Suchan, in: folder accompanying O. Dawicki’s exhibition ?, CCA Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw 2006.

imitative pretences to ever more severe tests. The most perfidious of those took place during Bujnowski's preparations for a trip to the US in 2004. Instead of a proper photo, Bujnowski attached to his visa form the reproduction of a self-portrait painted from a passport photograph. No immigration officer noticed anything unusual, and Bujnowski arrived in the US safely. Painting's referential values were thus put to a perfect test, in which an unwitting jury composed of professionally suspicious officials issued a favourable verdict. Favourable, of course, for the painted representation. Imitation thus became a lie, because the first recipients of Bujnowski's work were deceived in the same manner as the birds that came to pick at the grapes painted by Zeuxis.

6.

Alluding to a similar tradition of subjecting references to the credibility test is another, less known artist. In his canvases, reality is rendered on a 1:1 scale. That is why, when he hangs them in the places they are supposed to imitate, it is hard to notice anything is wrong. Wojciech Gilewicz's paintings, therefore, resemble a chameleon: they perfectly blend in with the surroundings, imitating them in a masterly manner. One can easily imagine a world where everything, every single element of reality, turns out to be an artificial construct. If you press down on it, its surface will deform, and if you press harder, you will break it, getting to... well, probably to nothing. Extreme imitation would have nothing to refer to, nothing to imitate, if no originals existed any more. That is probably why Gilewicz's paintings imitate only selected fragments of reality, in order to all the more powerfully manifest their artificiality. In fact, the artist loves to demystify their real nature. His hyper-realistic works are often accompanied by films or photographs showing the places where he made the swap.

Like the author of *The Ornaments of Anatomy*, Gilewicz makes sure falsehood, with all its duplicity, reveals its own structure. He does not, however, do this discreetly, like Kuśmirowski, who in his earlier works winked at the viewer, leaving apparent errors for the viewer to spot. Like in the installation *Double V*, where the room he arranged had its almost exact false equivalent on the other side of a window pretending to be a mirror.¹⁶ Almost, because the artist 'forgot' about a spoon in the coffee glass. "There is no spoon" one could feel tempted to repeat after Neo the protagonist of *Matrix*. In the subsequent

work *D.O.M.*, the reconstruction of an old cemetery discreetly showed its Styrofoam back in the windows of the Foksal Gallery Foundation, in which it was presented.¹⁷

Gilewicz's works, in turn, have more to do with René Magritte's self-referential paintings from the *La condition humaine* series of the mid-1930s. The Belgian surrealist painted easel pictures in which the motifs represented were indiscernible from the surrounding world – blending in with it perfectly. But, of course, we should repeat after Magritte that *ceci n'est pas une pipe*.

7.

At the end of this count out, we could ask a seemingly absurd question: can a pipe be an imitation of itself? Examining one of Jan Mioduszewski's works closely, we have to admit that objects imitating themselves could potentially exist. In one of his exhibitions, Mioduszewski placed, next to each other, several elements resembling wooden furniture parts.¹⁸ Some of those were indeed that, others only resembled the originals, imitating the tree rings with layers of paint. There were also such that combined the two categories. They were, therefore, both imitated and imitating objects: wooden panels glaze-painted in a pattern resembling their wooden structure. In their description, one can hardly use such obsolete categories as 'natural' and 'artificial'. The dialectic based on the image-original dichotomy loses its reason to exist here. When the difference between the imitating and the imitated disappears, both qualities become functions of the same object.

One could actually venture to look for similar tautologies in the non-artistic world. Are reconstructions of historical buildings carried out in keeping with the hypothetical spirit of the time of their original construction not such reverse imitations – imitating themselves?¹⁹ The same could actually be said of the practice of reconstructing missing fragments of old frescoes, but also of adding colour to black-and-white films, adding new scenes to them²⁰, or adding new endings to old music pieces²¹. With the hierarchy of artificiality being as complicated as Welsch describes it, all it takes is a small impulse for the imitating to become the imitated.

One could mention at this point many other works reflecting their authors' fascination with the concepts of imitation, emulation, or copy. One would

16

Robert Kuśmirowski, *Double V*, CCA Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw 2003.

17

Robert Kuśmirowski, *D.O.M.*, Foksal Gallery Foundation, Warsaw 2004.

18

Jan Mioduszewski, *Usine de Meubles*, part of *Nova Polska 70-80*, Lille 2004.

19

The restoration method developed in mid-19th century by Eugène Villet-le-Duc followed a 'creative', as we would put it today, restoration philosophy. Villet-le-Duc restored mediaeval buildings in such a manner so as to achieve 'perfect' examples of mediaeval architecture, thus removing all the layers of history the buildings had accrued so far. As a result, did the buildings not imitate themselves?

20

The new version of the *Star Wars* has improved sound and some digitally remastered scenes.

21

Requiem in D minor, Mozart's last piece, was finished by his disciple, F.X. Süssmayr.

then have to mention Bujnowski's *Paintings-Objects* from 1999-2002, such as *The Plank*, *The Brick*, *The Pilot*, or *The VHS Tape*, or Dawicki's paintings simulating their own mouldiness from the *Decade of Painting* exhibition,²² or of painting students carried by the wave of fascination with veristic representations of reality. The list could be long. Many of such works evoke the reflection as that of Welsch: "Modern philosophy (...) speaks of a multitude of worlds. This is a consequence of the fact that a direct, an interpretation-free, access to reality doesn't exist. (...) Put briefly: not rationalism but interpretationism is the principle of our cognition. (...) today's philosophy considers complete worlds – be it everyday world, or physical world, or literary world – to be constructions, and, to this extent, at least in part to be artefacts."²³ One can recognise as such constructs the space of Doctor Vernier's potential activity, but also the collection of Dawicki's portraits or Radziszewski's Divine Mercy representations, and many other works...

And would Jean Baudrillard say to this? "I believe that, generally, art (...) is present to hide the fact that the existing reality is trans-aestheticised,"²⁴ he said in an interview. This resembles a conspiracy theory: the sole purpose the art of imitation serves is for no one to notice that in fact everything around us is but a fake: Styrofoam, cardboard, and fibreglass insulation, as Masłowska would have it.

22

Oskar Dawicki, *The Decade of Painting*, Bunkier Sztuki Contemporary Art Gallery, Cracow 2005.

23

Welsch, *Artificial Paradises?*, op. cit., p. 171.

24

Nie ma już rzeczywistości na horyzoncie. Z Jeanem Baudrillardem rozmawia Ewa Izabela Nowak, "Obieg" no. 1 (73), 2006.

BOYS, GIRLS, AND THOSE WHO TREAT IT SERIOUSLY

Seen from the gender perspective, which can be defined as the mapping of the social and cultural (re)construction of gender, the Polish artistic scene appears in the recent years as an arena turned into a playground. Even the most perfunctory analysis of the recent art will show that the main lines of division run not between genders or sexual orientations but between the attitudes adopted towards gender or sexual issues. The title of this essay aims at pointing precisely to that division. The word 'serious' refers not so much to the importance attached by artists to gender issues, though it is doubtless part of it too, as to the manner in which those issues are approached.

One of the most important trends has been a visible rise in the number of statements that make the impression of not being made entirely seriously. The beginnings of such an attitude towards reality, including gender issues, among artists should probably be sought in the superseding, in the late 1990s, of critical art by a new trend, known as pop-banalism. A better starting point for these reflections, however, will be a discourse that is being carried out outside the field of art, namely between feminists. Those that can be regarded as the veterans of the movement in Poland – whether younger or older in age – several years ago started raising doubts about the direction in which it was developing. They were worried by a rise in egocentric attitudes among feminists and the resulting refusal to participate in the social and political reality. Agnieszka Graff described it as an "ironic, arrogant refusal, full of narcissistic certainty that the world does not concern us and the era of radical slogans has ended."¹ The recent years have shown that the development of post-feminism in Poland does not mean the end of the women rights movement, but rather a change in its participants' attitude towards themselves and their relations with the world: the affirmation of oneself and one's life has gained greatly in importance. As Agata Araszkiwicz noted, commenting on the fact that one of the Manifa² marches was led by a girl with a diadem on her forehead, "instead of the fighters we now get the princesses."³ The author

stressed that the attitude involved both narcissism and, at least potentially, a revolutionary spirit, and added that 'this game was very much for girls. And to be played quite seriously'.

Looking at the art of young women artists one can get a similar impression – that it is a form of girl-ish play. One that is of subversive nature because, among other things, it rejects the "monsters of politeness."⁴ The best example of this attitude in Polish art is the work of Basia Bańda (the very use of the diminutive form of the name is telling). Bańda makes paintings that with both their scale (small formats) and pastel colour range (a frequent use of pink) raise associations with the so-called female aesthetics. Bańda sews dresses, sweaters, lace on her paintings, as if she was tucking in a small creature. The sense of innocence is countered, however, with bold erotic motifs and comments – from sweet nothings to vulgarisms (*kiss me, honey: kiss my mouth, kiss my neck, kiss my breasts, kiss my pussy, kiss my belly, even the bathtub is no longer for fucking*). This is a kind of an intimate painted diary, in which the main point is not a young woman exposing herself but rather the presentation of a self-contradictory attitude. Because, from the point of view of second-wave feminism, it is difficult to reconcile a manifestation of one's sexuality with an almost obsessive search for a man. The artist, however, busy doing her thing, cares nothing about this incompatibility. She is a bad girl who goes where she wants.⁵

Bańda's works are often exhibited alongside those of an artist several years older than her, Małgorzata Markiewicz. This combination results, for instance, from the fact that both (just like Julita Wójcik) gladly employ techniques regarded as typically feminine, such as sewing, crocheting or embroidering, but use them in an unconventional manner.⁶ Markiewicz makes pieces of clothing or clothing compositions that are so beautiful one gets the impression of they were produced by a woman fascinated with handicraft. And yet they always contain some element pointing to the artist's condition: a beautiful crocheted dress is a spider web inside which she

A. Graff, *Świat bez kobiet. Pleć w polskim życiu publicznym*, Warsaw 2001, p. 251.

Manifa is an annual demonstration, organised by feminist organisations, in on the streets of Warsaw, on the Woman's Day (March 8th).

A. Araszkiwicz, *Ogrodniczki, szwaczki, tniaczki i księżniczki...*, http://www.obieg.pl/text/aa_ostik.php

N. Wolf, after: I. Kowalczyk, E. Zierkiewicz, Introduction, [in:] *W poszukiwaniu małej dziewczynki*, eds. I. Kowalczyk, E. Zierkiewicz, Poznań 2003, pp. 17-18.

An allusion to the title of Ute Ehrhardt's book *Good girls go to heaven, bad girls go everywhere*.

Attesting to the theme's popularity is the fact that it has returned again and again in publications and exhibitions, such as the show *Embroideries, Laces, Flowers...* organised at end of 2006 in the Gdańsk Shipyard by PGR_ART, which featured, besides the artists mentioned in the essay, also Magdalena Samborska and Małgorzata Niespodziewana (curator Sylwia Serafinowicz).

is trapped (*Spider Web*, 2003), and the intertwined pieces of clothing sewn on a skirt form a rope preventing her from breaking out of the straitjacket of convention (*Time of Culture*, 2005). The *Flowers* (2004) are pieces of clothing arranged into concentric forms in the semblance of open flower petals, which can be interpreted as a commentary to the ways female sexuality is perceived.

Both artists' works were shown, among other things, in an exhibition of women's art whose patron-ess, significantly, was Fraggie Rock's Marjory the Trash Heap⁷. Curators Ewa Małgorzata Tatar and Dominik Kuryłek wrote that the exhibition spoke also about "not growing up, about a girl's fear of formatted personality and definite identity."⁸ On the one hand, the most recent women's art often uses the girl figure to adopt the subversive position of a 'rascal'. On the other, this is connected with immaturity, allowing distance towards gender issues. Artists often make works addressing important issues but a mask of girlishness or boyishness allows them to turn everything into a joke at any moment. Usually, in fact, it is to protect them from becoming part of any political movement, to which, at best, they 'stick' for a moment, on the occasion of some exhibition (the subtitle of the above-mentioned exhibition was *Post-feminist Travesties of That-Which-Is-Feminine*).

This dissociation is more characteristic of some woman artists than of others, of course (far more for Bańda than for Markiewicz, for example) but it does not mean that women artists making critical statements have disappeared altogether from the Polish scene. Two names that can be mentioned in this regard are Anna Baumgart and Dorota Nieznalska.

Anna Baumgart is the author of the film *Women Ecstasies, Hysterics and Other Saints* (2004) which explored the issue of female self-aggression. Showing attractive young women in scenes of self-inflicted injury, Baumgart exposes the tragedies hidden under the surface of successfully performed social roles. Another of her protagonists, the *Fighter* (2004), reacts to the enslaving conventions by directing aggression outside: this naked, upright, pregnant woman, wearing a swine mask symbolising the impure, debauched femininity, is a personification of pride that holds social values in contempt. There is no second-bottom innocence in Baumgart's works. Those are powerful expressions of artistic statement whose author fights instead of playing.

An artist adopting a similarly relentless attitude is Dorota Nieznalska who concentrates above all on the problem of male – physical and symbolic – domination in relationships with women and with other men. What sets her apart from Baumgart is her focus on the 'tug of war' between the dominating and the dominated, as well as, besides stigmatisation, a fascination with power. Her works, like the series *Perversion Implantation* (2004-2005), contain a dose of irony, but the fact that their author faces a criminal sentence for offending religious feelings,⁹ adds a great deal of seriousness to them. Take for instance the photographic series *Faithfulness PL*, showing the torso of a naked man with a spike collar on a leather leash on his neck.

Nieznalska's works prove that, in Polish art, these are women artists, rather than heterosexual men, who explore the issue of masculinity. Paweł Leszkowicz noted that woman artists are bolder in showing the male body, in a sense reinvesting it with eroticism.¹⁰ However, works devoted to the physical male identity can rarely be encountered outside the homoerotic context. Barring few exceptions (Nieznalska and, for instance, Hanna Nowicka), this is related to their being shown in homosexual relations.

One of the rare attempts to explore masculinity without paying attention to sexuality was the exhibition *Boys*, organised, significantly, by women – the ex-girls curatorial duo of Magdalena Ujma and Joanna Zielińska.¹¹ The show was dominated by a light, slightly ironic tone, present above all in the works of men artists, which should be, however, interpreted differently than in the case of Bańda's or Markiewicz's works. This ironic aspect, evident in the projects of, for example, the Azorro group (*Let It Be*, 2004), Kuba Bąkowski (*Competition Collaboration, Agata Wróbel/Kuba Bąkowski*, 2005) or Łukasz Skapski (...), 2000-2005), is a gesture of defence against exposing oneself and it also reflects an unwillingness to explore the issue of masculinity. Perhaps this is actually incapacity, as we are not having to do here with a rejection of serious artistic reflection, as is the case with the 'girls'; given the lack of any tradition of artistic reflection on masculinity, the 'boys' have nothing to reject.

In this context, one of the more interesting statements of other nature are the works of Daniel Rumiancew, such as the film *Autoerotique* (2002). If only because the joke played by the artist, who dresses up as hard-to-describe male and female

Wiedźma Ple Ple. Pofeministyczne trawestacje tego-co-kobiece (*Marjory the Trash Heap. Post-feminist Travesties of That-Which-Is-Feminine*), Klima Bocheńska Gallery, Warsaw, September 2006.

E. M. Tatar, D. Kuryłek, a leaflet accompanying the exhibition *Wiedźma Ple, Ple...*

More detailed information on charges against and trials of Dorota Nieznalska can be found online www.spam.art.pl

P. Leszkowicz, *Miłość i demokracja/ Love and Democracy*, exhibition catalogue, CCA Łaźnia, Gdańsk 2006, p. 65. Leszkowicz names among others Katarzyna Kozyra, Joanna Nowek and Eliza Ciborowska and writes that they „homosexualise men in Polish art in a revolutionary way.”

For yet another, and not the last, time I mention not only artists but also exhibitions, convinced that it is them, and the debates accompanying them, that define the framework within which the individual works function and together with them build the artistic scene. *Boys*, Bunkier Sztuki Contemporary Art Gallery, Cracow 2005.

characters (whom he calls the 'office workers') is lined with embarrassment rather than mockery. Nor does Rumiancew make use of the camp aesthetics, which would constitute an easy escape into the well familiar postmodern discourse; instead, he speaks of sexual identity in a tone of grotesque. A completely different approach is offered by Maciej Osika, the author of photographic self-portraits in which he appears in female roles inspired by film and fashion history. This is phantasmal identification with the opposite sex which in Polish art stands out with its glamour.

Osika's pictures were shown at, among others, the exhibition *Love and Democracy*, an important event for the gender discourse in Polish art, whose two editions took place at the Stary Browar gallery in Poznań (2005) and the Łaźnia Centre for Contemporary Art in Gdańsk (2006). The curator, Paweł Leszkowicz, gave the show a political edge, writing that "with the fields of culture, sex and love saturated with all kinds of ideologies, relationship images are entering the arena of social interactions, even against the intention of artists and couples."¹² This does not rule out aesthetic significance, because it is art's task to bring about social change, but the political context means that the works become unambiguous. Despite Leszkowicz's assurances that he was intent to present love in all its aspects, not only in its homosexual dimension, the exhibition was hardly anything but a manifestation of the latter.

One of the important works shown in the exhibition were Karolina Breguła's photographs of the *Let Them See Us* series (2003), initially meant as a public project: the portraits of hand-holding homosexual couples were to hang on billboards in public space. Yet the posters were regularly destroyed and the works were eventually shown in closed exhibitions in several places across Poland. The photographs showed a Poland that does not exist, one where gays and lesbians hold hands on streets, which is why the vision had to be repressed to the field of art.

This project, especially in the context of Breguła's more recent work, *Married Women* (2006), realised together with Aleksandra Buczkowska, concerns the problem of double life, the necessity of hiding one's sexual orientation, or the act of coming out. The *Let Them See Us* pictures, showing authentic homosexual couples, are, as Leszkowicz notes, "portraits above all" and that is where their power lies.¹³ That is missing in *Married Women*, which more strongly

emphasise the ambiguity of the protagonists' situation. The photos show close physical and emotional contact between two women, whereas the film distorts the resulting image, making us realise that each functions in a relationship with a man. The photographs, combined with the video, intrigue and provoke questions about the status of the two women's relationship, which at first sight seemed obvious.

A similar kind of tension concerning relationships between women and how they are perceived is present in the work *Mothers* (2005) by the Zorka Project duo, even though it explores a completely different area. Monika Bereżecka and Monika Redzisz photographed women: tramway drivers, bodybuilders, nuns, as well as homeless mothers living in the Bajka shelter. The photographs of the latter were featured in *Gazeta Wyborcza's* weekend supplement for women, *Wysokie Obcasy*, as the illustration of a story in which the women spoke about their difficult existential situation. Some of them took part in the project's second part, shown in a gallery, where the women appear anonymously and either naked or in lingerie. The kind of transparency of the representations of women with children in the newspaper part of the project was then questioned and exposed in the gallery part. And not because the women had been undressed. Their nakedness can be misleading because it suggests that it is the crux of the matter, whereas these are poses and relations they reveal that are essential here.

Adam Mazur stresses that the new documentalists (among whom he counts the Zorka Project duo) can be viewed as agents of change in the media sphere in which they function.¹⁴ The change would be effected by reviving the tradition of humanistic photography whose purpose is opening the viewer to the experience of others. And indeed, in both projects, *Let Them See Us* and *Mothers*, more important than taboo-breaking is the act of showing that which had so far been hidden, tracing and recording the protagonists' emotions.

These components come together in Karol Radziszewski's film *Plus/Minus* (2006). The camera shows the artist waiting for the results of his HIV test. This is a kind of novelty in Polish art, which generally has not explored the AIDS-related issues so far, but it is not taboo-breaking that matters here. What is important instead is the revealing of one's anxieties and fears, a confession that cannot leave anyone indifferent and which becomes cathartic for both the author

¹² P. Leszkowicz, *Love...*, op. cit., p. 37.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 28.

¹⁴ A. Mazur, [in:] *Nowi dokumentaliści/ New Documentalists*, exhibition catalogue, CCA Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw 2006, p. 9.

and the viewers. Radziszewski is also the author of the exhibition *Faggots* (2005) which was organised, and received, as an act of resistance against the politicisation of homosexuality's image. A mural shown in a private apartment depicted homosexual sex. The characters, drawn with thick black lines, closely filled the composition, causing the representation to lose its realistic nature and become less obvious, turning it into a kind of ornament, as a result of which its obscenity was muted. The work offered a more hardcore version of the tension between obscenity and decorativeness than can also be found in Basia Bańda's work.

While neither Bańda and Radziszewski are interested in politics, Radziszewski, acting in the currently hottest field of gay culture, simply fails to escape the political. He stresses that, like Michał Witkowski, author of the gay novel *Lubiewo*, which Radziszewski illustrated, he is not interested in the presence of homosexual men in public space, or their rights, but in capturing and expressing the essence of homosexual desire. Still, *Faggots* is a significant title that can be seen as an example of the strategy of exaggerating and ridiculing the qualities projected on the minority by the dominant culture. "The use of the word 'faggot' is an attempt to make the recipient familiar with the term, and an attempt to appropriate the word by one against whom it is used," Radziszewski said in an interview.¹⁵

Writing about homosexual literature (though one can also apply it to the visual arts), Ewa Majewska notes that the desire for homosexual representations not to become political is impossible to fulfil because "any form of public representation will naturally become a point of reference for actions, strategies and notions on the possibility of repression and emancipation."¹⁶ Artists functioning outside the field of gay and lesbian culture are not as strongly entangled in this politicisation, and yet, when they explore the issues of gender or sexuality, they inevitably encounter it. It is hard to believe that even those who distance themselves from the serious matters could not be aware of this. However, the playground mood present on the Polish artistic scene that I mentioned at the beginning of this text is the result of dominant attitudes of immaturity, playfulness, irony. Those sharing similar, generational or social, experiences with the young artists, feel well with it. Others would prefer them to return to the arena or agora, or, at least, to admit that the games they play are not innocent. Because they are not.

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Odpolitycznienie tematu homo. Z Karolem Radziszewskim na jego wystawie „Peđały” rozmawia Marcin Różyc / The Depoliticisation of the Homo-theme. Marcin Różyc Speaks to Karol Radziszewski on the Occasion of „Faggots” exhibition, http://www.obieg.pl/roz05/mr_oth.php

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E. Majewska, *Homoseksualny dyskurs nowoczesności / Homosexual Discourse of Modernity* www.obieg.pl/book/em_dysk_homo.php

HISTORY IN CONTEMPORARY ART


Polish art after 2000 has shown clear interest in history, and especially the issues related with WWII, the Holocaust¹, Polish-German² and Polish-Jewish relations, but also in the most recent history: the communist period and revolts against it³.


As such, interest in history is nothing new in Polish art. Post-war artists referred to the wartime traumas (e.g. Andrzej Wróblewski, Tadeusz Kantor, Alina Szapocznikow). In the 1990s, the memory of the Holocaust was referred to in Mirosław Balka's *Soap Corridor* (1993)⁴, whereas Zbigniew Libera's *Lego. Concentration Camp* (1996) spoke of the commercialisation of the Holocaust as a "source of entertainment." Libera also asked about the memory of the Holocaust: what does this inconceivable event mean for young people for whom it is but a distant past. The Lego bricks raise associations with safety, carelessness, play and, importantly, home (playing at home), appearing as a universal symbol of a good and creative childhood. Lego, therefore, is one of universal symbols of contemporary culture, just like the Holocaust is, its meaning being diametrically different – it is a symbol of evil, violence, destruction and death. Confronting these opposite symbols, Libera shakes us out of the rut of indifference and schematic thinking. The work significantly preceded other artists' interest in the subject.


A new phenomenon can be noticed in Polish art after 2000: the interest in specific historical facts appears to be less important than questions about history itself, about how it is constructed, for what purposes it is used, how it is exploited, and also how it is mixed with fiction and how both of them function in our imagination. This trend can be referred to as the "dehistoricisation art" (through an analogy to the term deconstruction). As Jacques Derrida pointed out, the prefix de- could indicate a reference to the origins rather than negation⁵. This is the case with dehistoricisation art, which traces repressed historical narratives, as well as the process of the construction of history itself. This art reverses traditional thinking about history. What exists today (a work of art, an exhibition) is the source, and what existed in the past: (mythologised, transformed, conveyed) historical facts, is the result.


Dehistoricisation art stands in contrast to what dominated the Polish art scene of the 1990s. Critical art focused on exploring the individual's entanglements, on bodily experiences, on the problem of the Other or the omnipresence of power (in the Foucaultian sense). At the turn of the 21st century, one could get the impression that art was losing its radicalism and its sharp critical edge was getting softer. Artists such as Zbigniew Libera, Artur Żmijewski or Katarzyna Kozyra did not stop exploring reality and the simulations present in it. Only they moved away from analysing the situation of the individual subject (and his/her problems such as disease, disability, gender issues) and turned instead towards more general issues, connected with the problem of imagination (Libera), dreams (Kozyra) or national memory and identity (Żmijewski). Artists, then centred on the individual, today have turned towards the community (collective imagination and memory); for that reason, their art started asking questions concerning the realm of the collective: memory, history, the way it is constructed and its meaning for the present. A more precise term to define this trend would perhaps be "postmemory art." The term was coined by Marianne Hirsch who writes that postmemory is a "characteristic of the experience of those who grew up in the shadow of stories about events that had taken place before they were born. Their own memories had to give way to the past generations' narratives, shaped in traumatic circumstances, and which had never been properly understood or recreated."⁶ Postmemory manifests itself in another place and much later than the events it refers to, and the factor that triggers it is the gradual passing away of the original trauma's 'actual' victims. This is, therefore, "surrogate and appropriated memory, an out of place memory."⁷ The term appears fitting for contemporary art which explores the historical traumas, rubbing salt in the old wounds.


One of the issues present in this art is how history is constructed by pop culture, how fiction is mixed with reality, and how history itself becomes simulation. The problem was referred to by Piotr Uklański's 2000 exhibition *The Nazis* in the Zachęta National Art


 *Images of the Holocaust in Polish film and video*, film review, CCA Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw, February 24th, 2006; *Próżna Street*, September 6th–10th, 2006, Warsaw.


 E.g. the film *Memories from the City L.*, Monika Kowalska, Grzegorz Kowalski, Zbigniew Sejwa, 2004.

 E.g. *The Dockwatchers*, September 2nd–October 30th, 2005, Art Institute Wyspa, Gdańsk; the exhibition *The Stigma of History*, June 14th–July 15th, 2006, CK Zamek, Poznań.

 Presented at the Venice Biennial in 1993, and then in the 1995 exhibition *Where Is Your Brother, Abel?* at the Zachęta National Art Gallery, Warsaw.

 J. Derrida, "Letter to a Japanese Friend", in: *Derrida and différance*, eds. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood.

 M. Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*, Cambridge 1997, p. 22.

 J. Tokarska-Bakir, „Historia jako fetysz”, in: *Rzeczy mgliste. Eseje i studia*, introduction M. Janion, Sejny 2004, p. 97

Gallery in Warsaw. The artist put together film stills of Nazi characters. By focusing our attention on portraits, he demonstrated the potential of those images. The Nazis are depicted in mass culture as strong, handsome men of clear, regular facial features. Their very powerful images seduce and fascinate, at the same time reproducing the discourse of power and authority. If you were born after the war and never seen archival photos, you basically do not know how the Nazis actually looked like. Or, you do know, but this is knowledge derived from pop culture. It conveys the image of a criminal, a beast, a man devoid of any feelings, degenerate, but at the same time – in visual terms – handsome and seductive. Selecting the images, Uklański wanted us to reflect on the extent to which pop culture reproduces certain clichés (such as those about a strong, healthy body), clichés that were already present in the Third Reich's discourse.

The blending of truth and fiction together with pop culture's impact on our thinking about history are addressed in Zbigniew Libera and Dariusz Foks's project *Co robi łączniczka* (2006). It is a small book containing sixty-three short pieces of poetic prose accompanied by photographs, selected and modified by Libera, who pasted the images of film stars from the past into the scenery of the Warsaw Uprising. The tragedy of war is juxtaposed with the actresses' beauty and their seductive poses. The work addresses also the question of how history is constructed. As critic Sebastian Cichocki wrote, "History does not have to be believed in any more. It is enough if it is used, nursed, fed with images and desires. Questions about "how it really was" and "why did it happen" are improper and indecent; truth is an extra, an unnecessary luxury."⁶ We know the history of WWII or the Warsaw Uprising less from documents and more from fictionalised accounts. That is why the project asks questions above all about what we believe in or what we allow to be seduced by. Because everything can be constructed and everything can be made credible. Zbigniew Libera says the work speaks of the merging of seemingly incompatible images and contexts, a merging that has already been embedded in our imagination. What is left in it are memories of war movies or paintings where tragedy neighbours eroticism and death coexists with sex. *Co robi łączniczka* speaks above all of the seductive power of images and of the blurring of the border between reality (history) and fiction (culture).

Faced with a flight towards fiction and simulation, with distortions appearing in our imagination, art-

ists started searching for truth by asking questions about the place, or, more precisely, about the memory of specific places, about the 'scars of history' and the 'ghosts of the past'.

The problem of the 'scars of history' or the 'memory of the place' is referred to in the project *Dialog Loci* in Kostrzyn on the Oder⁹, a large town on the Polish-German border. Formerly known as Küstrin, the town was a fortress during WWII that, in 1945, Hitler ordered to be defended 'to the last man'. Finally, on March 30, 1945, Soviet forces razed the town to the ground with massive artillery fire and air strikes. Thus the place turned into a "wound that, with time, started healing – being overgrown with grass."¹⁰ The project *Dialog Loci* brought together a dozen artists from Poland and Germany who initiated a dialogue with the place and its history, searched for traces of the past, uncovered the town's symbolic scars and exhibited their works in the ruined fortifications. The term 'scar of history' was often used in critical texts discussing the project. Janek Sowa wrote, "There exist places where the 'scars of history' are still tangible and, though forgotten and pushed to the margins of our geographical consciousness, they still exist, attesting to man's destructive power."¹¹ An important question arises, therefore: what are the 'scars of history' to us, and why art decides to – metaphorically – rub salt in them, preventing memories from healing?

The lack of the 'scars of history', the fact that they have been hidden or forgotten, can mean that certain historical narratives have been sentenced to oblivion. French artist Christian Boltanski was shocked during his visit to Warsaw in 2001 to discover the almost complete absence of the memory of the ghetto in the city's structure. As Piotr Piotrowski writes, "Can anyone coming to this city today reconstruct its past from its present architectural structure: can they, walking the streets of this large city, reconstruct in space the tragedy of its several hundred thousand pre-war inhabitants?"¹² Piotrowski points out that the 'credit' for forgetting the memory of the ghetto goes to the Poles. Rebuilding the city from the war ruins, the planners destroyed its traditional spatial, cultural and political patterns, "violating the history recorded in the city space, eliminating any traces of the ghetto from its architectural memory."¹³ The author points out to a difference between the memory of the past present in (or absent from) the city's structure and the memory preserved in the form of monuments, commemorative

⁶ S. Cichocki, *Foreword*, in: *Co robiła łączniczka*. Bytom 2006, p. 13.

⁷ June 19-August 31, 2004.

⁸ A. Rayzacher, *Dialog z bliźnią*, „Exit” 4 (60) 2004, <http://kwartalnik.exit.art.pl/article/?edition=6&id=111>

⁹ J. Sowa, *Dialog Loci* – sztuka, historia i polityka http://www.bunkier.com.pl/index.php?section=teksty_bunkier&sub=8more=140

¹⁰ P. Piotrowski, *O „sztuce dziś”, a więc „tu i teraz”*, [in:] *Sztuka dzisiaj. Materiały Sesji Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki*, Warszawa, listopad 2001, M. Poprzęcka, ed., Warsaw 2002, p. 24.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid; see also Frank Ankersmit, *Remembering the Holocaust: Mourning and Melancholia*, Stanford 2001.

¹³ Warsaw, September 6th–10th, 2006. The works of thirteen artists were presented: Ewa Kuryluk, Joanna Rajkowska, Rafał Jakubowicz, Krystiana Robb-Narbutt, Katarzyna Krakowiak, Krystyna Piotrowska, Piotr Lachmann, Waldemar Petryk, Janusz Marciniak, Dr Mutto, Zenial – Łukasz Szalankiewicz, Nelly Agassi and Artur Zmijewski.

¹⁴ K. Bojarska, *Ulica Prózna* – nieoczywiste spotkania z historią, „Obieg” http://www.obieg.pl/calendar2006/kb_prozna.php

plaques and so on. In this context, he mentions the art of Christian Boltanski, whose project *The Witness* (the photograph of a child's eyes, presented on billboards throughout the area of the former Warsaw ghetto, 2001) restored the memory of the place and the conjunct melancholia. Piotrowski refers here to the interpretation of the memory of the Holocaust suggested by Frank Ankersmit, who, in as reference to the Freudian division between melancholia and mourning, says that the memory of the Holocaust is a kind of necessity of a "sickness, a psychological ailment that we can never stop suffering from, and therefore, precisely of 'melancholia'."¹⁴

I point out to this interpretation in order to mention another artistic project that took place on the site of the former Warsaw ghetto – *Próżna Street*¹⁵, which took place as part of the Singer's Warsaw 3rd Festival of Jewish Culture and referred precisely to the problem of memory. As Katarzyna Bojarska wrote, "an encounter with the history of this house is painful and non-obvious. What is revived is not so much a world as the fact that this world has disappeared from the surface of the earth and that its traces are also gradually disappearing."¹⁶ It is, therefore, a question about how memory is stored, whether it can be preserved, whether art can serve as something of a 'memory bank'¹⁷.

The art we are talking about is a part of the memory preservation project. It does not, however, glorify the past or allegorise history: rather, it turns in another direction – reinterpreting history, searching for the traces of the unspoken and the ignored. Above all, it poses questions – how does history manifest itself today, what traces does it leave in our cultural consciousness, how does it affect the shaping of our present reality? Art tries to deal with history, and at the same time with the problem of 'how to make art after the Holocaust'.

Miroslaw Balka's art also deals with those issues. In his video *Winterreise* (2003), he asks about the memory of a place and the significance of the traces of the Holocaust. The work consists of three videos: *The Pond*, *Bambi 1* and *Bambi 2*, shot during a winter trip to the site of the former Birkenau camp. The films show the pond into which the ashes of the victims were unloaded, and roe deer walking up to the barbed wire fence surrounding the camp. During the opening at Galeria Starmach, Franz Schubert's songs from the *Winterreise* cycle were sung, their subject matter being loneliness. The title, meaning

'winter trip', is significant too, of course. Balka said in an interview that he wanted to confront the two worlds to reflect on what the individual meant in the face of the Holocaust experience. "The individual meant nothing. The Holocaust is converted into numbers."¹⁸ The artist speaks of the Holocaust not directly but by showing just a fragment of the death camp's scenery. The nature is much of what we see. It is worth quoting again the reflections of Frank Ankersmit who points to the importance in Holocaust history of the memory discourse which "draws attention, or points, to the past, surrounds it, but never tries to infiltrate it."¹⁹ Ankersmit mentions the Dutch poet Armando who spoke about the Holocaust not by referring to the crimes committed in the camps but by blaming the landscape, the trees and the earth around the camp sites, which witnessed the atrocities, thus, in a way, becoming accomplices in evil. One can wonder whether Balka also blames the landscape, the nature and the roe deer coming up to the barbed wire fence. Rather, he shows the landscape's imperturbability towards the traces of the crime present in it (the pond, the fence). Also here, like in Ankersmit's interpretation of Armando's poetry, we are having to do here with designation, with metonymy that is the opposite of metaphor. As Ankersmit writes, "Metonymy favours ordinary closeness, respects all unpredictable randomness of our memories and, as such, is a decisive opposite of the proud, metaphorical appropriation of history."²⁰

Elzbieta Janicka's series *Odd Places*²¹ also referred to the impossibility of representing the Holocaust. These are photographs (as suggested by film-like frames stating the number of the picture, the ISO value and so on) signed with the names of the places where death camps were located. The photographs, however, are white, empty, devoid of any representation. We know (from the artist's declarations) that her intention was to show the air, but, visually, the works evoke associations with void and nothingness, and also with Kazimir Malevich's *White Square on White*. Just like that painting was the symbolic wall that painting reached, these pictures are the symbolic wall that photography faces, any representation in this case being impossible. Facing us with this nothingness, the artist confronts us with our knowledge and the potential of our imagination. "Every one has to fill the spaces of these photos with the remnants of [images] they carry in themselves, all that they associate with death camps."²² Another project that spoke about the

¹⁴ I make a reference here to a term that emerged in connection with the staging of the opera *Rat's Laughter* by the Tel Aviv theatre group Cameri at Dramatyczny Theatre in Warsaw, May 8th, 2006. The opera is based on a book by Nava Semel, in which a "Jewish girl without a name or identity finds shelter with a peasant family in Poland during the war. She lives in the basement where potatoes are kept, and her only companion is rat she calls 'Steve'. After a year of misery in the darkness, she is saved by a rural priest, Father Stanislaw, who tries to teach her how to laugh. In the opera, the story travels through the successive generations. After 60 years, it is a dim memory the protagonist shares with her granddaughter, and by 2099 – a myth discovered by an anthropologist in a 'memory bank'." Pawel Sawicki, *Śmiech szczura w Teatrze Dramatycznym*, http://www.reporter.edu.pl/europa_wg_auschwitz/wyklady_spotkania_zaproszenia/smiech_szczura_w_teatrze_dramatycznym

¹⁵ Miroslaw Balka in the interview: *Wśród cieni i...sarenek (Miroslaw Balka Talks to Rafal Jakubowicz)*, in: Miroslaw Balka, *Winterreise*, exh. cat., Starmach Gallery, Cracow 2003, p. 27.

¹⁶ F. Ankersmit, *Remembering the Holocaust*, op. cit., p. 406.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 408.

¹⁸ September 1-October 8, 2006, Atlas Sztuki, Łódź.

¹⁹ A. Cichowicz, *Uobecnianie nieobecnego „Obieg”* http://www.obieg.pl/calendar2006/ac_janicka.php

memory of a place was Rafał Jakubowicz's *Swimming Pool*²³. Jakubowicz projected the image of the Hebrew word 'swimming pool' on the front wall of the former Poznań synagogue, turned by the Nazis into a swimming pool and functioning as one to this day. The project brought attention to the 'incompatibility' of two realities – the former synagogue and the present-day swimming pool. Jakubowicz's work can be interpreted as an intervention: the action's alternative title, *Temporary Monument*, indicated that the 'incompatibility' was revealed only momentarily, for a short time (one evening) and was aimed at provoking a debate on the place's significance. The notion of 'temporariness' can also be referred to the swimming pool itself. It could seem that a swimming pool built by the Nazis in a former temple should be something definitely 'temporary' and yet it turns out the Poles are happy to use the 'gift'. The work's title and the form of wall projection raise associations with Krzysztof Wodiczko's public projections whose aim is to 'expose' or 'uncover' the relationships of power, hidden violence or individual suffering. Piotr Kowalik wrote of Jakubowicz's work: "A mysterious inscription, incomprehensible for most of the viewers, in a language that evokes multiple (usually tragic) associations, and its fleetingness, in which there is something of urban guerrilla tactics, suggest a desire to evoke something from the past, an incomprehensible history of people who are no longer here."²⁴


All these works speak of absence, of the repression of traumatic facts from our consciousness. This art points to the repressed and forgotten, and, according to psychoanalysis, the repressed defines our personality and affects the present. An unhealed trauma casts a shadow over our whole life. That is why art is becoming a kind of therapy.

The interest art is showing in history can also be a consequence of broader cultural change. We live in a different world today – the world after September 11, 2001, which made us realise that everything, even the greatest tragedy, could become a television spectacle. At the same time, this is a world in which new forms of fear of the Other are emerging (suffice to mention the late Oriana Fallaci and her diatribes against Islam). Europe was also transformed when a number of post-communist countries (including Poland) joined the European Union in 2004. The fact had a significant impact on culture, chiefly because of the inflow of EU funds for integrative cultural projects. Many projects have been


created that seek the possibility of across border integration precisely through art, building on that which brings closer and connects, on the common places and their memory. Important in this context are Polish-German projects, such as those created within the framework of the Büro Kopernikus programme financed by the Kulturstiftung des Bundes (prepared chiefly for the Polish Year in Germany in 2006), or individual projects exploring the problems of border regions, such as the aforementioned *Dialog Loci* in Kostrzyn on the Oder. Europe's new shape raised questions about identity – not so much in the national aspect as in the local one, and also the infra-state one. "The goal today is to create a pan-human community," Zygmunt Bauman says²⁵. The questions of 'who are we now?' and 'what are our affiliations?' will likely accompany us for some time yet, as we remain torn between our European, national, local and individual identities. Moreover, the definition of those identities is determined ideologically, which increases the need for reflection on self-identification issues. Lively political disputes are being led today over history-related issues such as historical policy, the appropriation or distortion of history or its ideological exploitation.

The problem of the need for exploring the most recent history has arisen in connection, among other things, with the studying of the communist secret police files archived in the National Remembrance Institute. There also exists the delicate issue of Polish-German relations, exacerbated by Erika Steinbach and her planned Centre Against Deportations. The opening of borders and change of tradition have also triggered right-wing sentiments. Xenophobic, anti-Semitic, racist and homophobic attitudes have been on the rise in Poland. Participants of 'equality parades' or 'tolerance marches' have been verbally abused by skinheads chanting Nazi slogans. The problem therefore arises of the 'returning ghosts of the past' and the question: can history repeat itself, does fascism remain a valid threat?

In the context of the historical disputes, art is an important voice in the debate on what history is. Art views our reality and history from utterly different perspectives, proposes ways of working through traumas, and even of rubbing salt in the wounds, and thus – can be a form of therapy. A view of history radically different from that dominating in the political discourse can open the viewers to consensus, empathy, co-suffering.

 Alternative name: *Temporary Monument*, April 4, 2003, Poznań.

 P. Kowalik, Rafał Jakubowicz – w służbie pamięci i zdrowia, in: „Sekcja” http://www.sekcja.org/miesiecznik.php?id_artykulu=79

 Zygmunt Bauman, *Europe, an Unfinished Adventure*, Polity, Cambridge 2004, p. 60.

THE AESTHETICS OF SIMILARITY. ART TOWARDS THE CONSTANCY OF TASTES

On January 28th, 2006, at a press conference following the tragic collapse of the roof of a supermarket in Katowice, President Lech Kaczyński said it was the greatest building catastrophe of the III Republic, even though the construction of the IV Republic had been well advanced by then, following the September elections. In May 2006, the daily *Dziennik* published a 1998 photograph showing recently nominated Minister of Maritime Economy Rafał Wiechecki as a fan of the Widzew Łódź football club. Wiechecki is leaning out of a train window with his face twisted aggressively, shaking a threatening fist at the photographer. The picture, published earlier on the cover of the opinion weekly *Polityka* as an illustration for a report on hooligan wars, was so commented on by Wiechecki's party boss, the League of Polish Families' (LPR) Roman Giertych: "[The photo] shows three things: firstly, that [Wiechecki] travels by train – which is not forbidden in Poland, secondly, that he is leaning out of a window – which is not forbidden either, and thirdly, that his neighbours have no teeth. Well... Mr. Wiechecki is not a dentist. I see no least reason to believe that he did anything wrong. Is anyone responsible for the quality of his fellow passengers' teeth?"¹

Each of those statements demonstrates perfectly well the specific context in which it was uttered. Firstly, because an attempt is made here to manage the meanings of something that has become visible. Secondly, because an attempt is made here to control the visual in a way that is destructive for our sense of reality. The essence of the new context lies, therefore, in a renewed attempt to destroy reality by tactically switching its interpretative framework, changing the rules on which it is based, consistently eliminating all stable points of reference for experiencing and acting. Reality has never been as perfectly well visible as it is today, but, at the same time, it has disappeared as a basic, stable, and, most importantly, intersubjective, framework for our deeds. As a result, we look at the same thing today but perceive it differently. Reality has not disappeared because it was replaced by an ideological construction, a façade which obscures

the real, and whose artificiality can be revealed, exposing what is hidden behind it. It has disappeared because what we treat as real is the stake in a game for control over the society. Showing and obscuring, the recontextualisation of images, broadcasting them at a rate so fast you can only see them rather than watch them properly, the visualisation of the abstract and complex, and image control are the basic means of producing the social, and completely change the nature of the latter – the common, intersubjective world.

This vanishing of reality is not, of course, a phenomenon characteristic solely for the Polish context, but, paradoxically, it represents one of the more precise gauges of civilisation development, one of the more important measures of the progress of modernisation. The process has taken a peculiar course in Poland, and its specificity needs to be analysed if only to identify the context in which art finds itself today.

The culture war being fought in Poland is not a war 'over' values nor for or against certain values, it is not a conflict of political views or positions, but, above all, it is a war of aesthetics and styles, an 'imagological' war² in which different forms of the visual compete with each other. The point of this war is not to convince but to show, to monopolise and control the visible. The fact that it is aesthetics, imagologies, that wrestle here, rather than ideologies, should not prompt us to conclude that this war is only superficial, nor should it blur the fact that it has had some very tangible effects. The objective, after all, is a fundamental value: being at the centre of the voters', (consumers', viewers', citizens' etc.) field of view. Ultimately, the point is also to exclude, or negate the existence of, one's rivals, and to sentence to oblivion and non-existence his/her ways of perceiving and showing the world.

So wrong are all those who believe that the main factor defining the shape of social, cultural and political life in Poland is the tension between right and left, between social and liberal, traditional and modern, patriotic and cosmopolitan, secular and religious. In my view, such diagnoses miss the point



"Dziennik" 8th May, 2006, quoted after "Polityka. Ogólnopolski Portal Polityczny" <http://www.polityka.mbpps.pl/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=1801>



Like ideology, the term imagology has a double meaning: the first one can be found in the writings of authors such as Saarinen, Taylor or Karvonen, and it is simply media philosophy, the study of images (as such, it is the postmodern equivalent of the study of ideas, an equivalent signalling the necessary, in this new civilisation context, change of the subject of humanistic reflection), and under the second one, suggested, for instance, by Kundera in *Immortality*, imagology is a category that describes a change in the instruments of power in media societies (instead of the manipulation of ideas – the manipulation of visual culture), a change in the subject of this power (it is the imagologists: journalists, PR men, spin doctors, advertising agency employees) and a change in its mechanism (instead of the manipulation of views – the manipulation of emotions and sensations, instead of the manipulation of ways of thinking – the manipulation of the ways of looking). See E. Saarinen, M.C. Taylor, *Imagologies. Media Philosophy*, London 1994; E. Karvonen, *Imagology. Some Theories of the Public Image Presented, Analysed and Criticized*, 1997; M. Kundera, *Immortality*, London 1992.

because the cultural war we are experiencing today is not a war of ideologies or value systems but rather a war of tastes and preferences: an aesthetic war. Only such a conflict is possible when a total imagology³ constitutes the existential context.

When we attempt to identify the codified aesthetics defining the visible in Poland in 2006, it will turn out that those aesthetics follow neither the socio-demographic nor the environmental lines of division, and that they have no reference in what we traditionally perceived as the instruments of understanding reality. They are defined instead by two basic factors: firstly, the attitude towards the other, and secondly, by the degree of acceptance for cultural transgression. The junction of the conceivable positions on the above scores gives us a typology of the positions that the participants of the 'play' for the visual can adopt.

The dominant, politically, institutionally and, increasingly often, legally sanctioned aesthetic is one marked by a preference for homogeneity and similarity. The only accepted change here is that which actually deepens the homogeneity. This is a position professed certainly by the supporters of the LPR, the All-Polish Youth, the Law and Justice (PiS), the wearers of striped white-and-red ties⁴, the members of the Radio Maryja Family and the readers of the *Nasz Dziennik*, but also by football fans, skinheads and hoodies. Though all these subjects differ in terms of ideology and style of action, they share a desire to make everyone similar to them, as they celebrate the aesthetics of non-diversity as the paradigm of that which should be visible.

Opposite to the extreme of the aesthetics of homogeneity are those who not only relish in diversity but also in experimentation, for whom the ideal social order is a process of change devoid of any clear direction, any mainstream, and free of those trying to control it. What matters for the supporters of this position are new experiences, sensations and appearances, learning and discovery, penetrating the forbidden. Such a position, thought by no means marginal, is virtually absent from the public sphere, and it is presented only as a curiosity and a deviation that is either not treated seriously or depicted as a threat to social order. This side is represented by the supporters of the new left, by anarchists and liberals, sexual minorities and feminist activists, some artistic circles, as well as transgressors in the field of fashion, cuisine, customs, hobbies. Also interesting

are intermediate positions: on the one hand, those where xenophobia coexists with passion for experimentation and transgression ("I support change and novelty provided I'm among people like me and it is only with them I try out the new," an aesthetic followed above all by the upper middle classes, by closed and elite professional groups)⁵, and, on the other, those characteristic for the connoisseurs of difference, relativism and diversity, but not of experimentation or transgression (an attitude practised by conservative liberals, academic circles or the old intelligentsia⁶).

This typological description could go on but it is far more important to point out that the relations between different positions have consequences on both the social level and the individual one. Very real and often painful, these consequences stem, above all, from the fact that the positions are, by definition, conflicted, but also from the fact that they are defined by preferences of taste, and, as such, are not based on rational, and thus also negotiated, premises. *De gustibus non est disputandum*, not only because it is impolite, but also because our judgments are never free of our personal preferences and cannot be objectively justified, compared with or structured. In itself, a conflict of positions would not be that bad, if not for the fact that their confrontation shapes public life. Imagological disputes thus do not differ in their consequences from ideological ones, but are more difficult to contain because not only do the opposite sides live in different worlds, they are also, in keeping with the logic of image economy, it is impossible to look at two things at once with equal attention.

Art, especially that practised by the supporters of diversity and experimentation⁷, and on their behalf, is doomed to fail in this battle. Though it has an immense potential to produce eye-catching images, it controls the terms neither of their production nor of their distribution, and it is those terms that determine what is visible. Artists can and should create images, thanks to which we can see things we have not seen before, as well those that cannot or must not be seen, but this freedom applies to the private sphere and becomes greatly reduced when the image enters the institutional, public sphere. Here it clashes with a preference structure whose boundaries are defined by the dominant or common tastes. In the course of these attempts, made over the last two decades, to go beyond that structure,



A total imagology is a type of visual ideology which is based, not so much on the production of false images, as on an attempt to make the process of viewing pictorial representations the most important source of knowledge about the world. In this sense, imagology means, above all, the creation of consent to a reality in which people think through images, make decisions on their basis, in which images are a source of pleasure, and in which one has to view them to be a normal member of one's community, correctly adapting to reality.



The striped white-and-red tie is a trademark of the Samoobrona (Self-Defence) party.



Good examples include fenced housing estates, elite clubs, the voluntary isolation of the socially, financially and culturally privileged, or the lifestyle of the cognariat - market researchers, the advertising community, financial advisers, analysts and programmers.



Good examples of the public presence of this stance are the editorial policies of "Gazeta Wyborcza" or "Tygodnik Powszechny."



For many, that is actually the only imaginable art, a synonym of the word, which in itself establishes a rather important ambiguity because it means reducing the art world to actions undertaken from a single position.

undertaken by artists, curators and managers of artistic institutions, an unspoken but legible canon has established itself of what can be shown in the art world. Any transgression thereof, even if not resulting in administrative or penal responsibility, provokes at least threatening finger-shaking and questions of “why the taxpayer should pay for this.” Transgressions do happen, of course, but usually on the internet, in the course of, almost underground and often unavailable to the broad public, exhibitions, or in low-circulation press. Public places, especially those financed by the state and local governments, are virtually transgression-free. Those institutions are guarded by the sentinels of visual homogeneity; professional representatives of ordinary citizens translating that which is shown into that which is visible: right wing politicians, activists and journalists. Their tracking down of visual transgressions attracts public attention and sanctions the aesthetics they prefer as normal, proper, appropriate. Therefore, the transgression hunters need transgressions like doctors need diseases and policemen need thefts. What is more important, however, is that even if they do not fully control that which is shown, they have almost absolute control over that which is visible.

Paradoxically, and contrary to the conviction that a radical systemic change has taken place, established a couple of years ago, contemporary context of art's functioning in Poland does not differ much from that of the 1970s. Artists won then a conditional freedom of creation: their experiments could not criticise the socio-political sphere and had to take place solely in the isolated artistic enclave. Like today, art was in the very centre of attention, but, above all, as a reservoir of types of the visual potentially dangerous for the dominant aesthetics. The obvious differences in the contexts of art's functioning then and now, though they represent a central aspect of our identity, should not turn our attention away from the similarities. Like in the 1970s, so today the tone is set by the supporters of non-diversity, fans of similarity and continuation, opponents of experimentation. It is not enough changing institutions to change the mentality, preferences, and transform that which we perceive as normal. At first sight, those similarities can seem surprising because the post-1989 transformation created a series of mechanisms protecting us against the aesthetics of homogeneity: the free media and market, freedom of speech, religion and assembly, independent courts, meritocracy, freedom to travel,

lack of barriers for mobility and communication. The impression, however, is misleading because it prevents us from noticing the dependence of tastes and preferences on the trail⁹, that is the fact that our tastes not only change more slowly than our views but also represent a more durable aspect of our identity. Our views evolve under the influence of experiences, arguments, new friends and education, whereas aesthetic tastes and preferences usually change only their object but in themselves remain the same. Their stability is a result, above all, of their unconscious nature, of the fact that they are intangible, hard to self-analyse, automatic. The design of TV sets changes but television remains the hearth of family life; we read something else than in the past but we still do, we used to hate the punks, today we hate the hip-hop boys, we used to like Duda-Gracz, today we like Mitoraj, once it was long hair that unnerved us, today it is short hair. The object that expresses the taste changes, but the taste itself does not. Even spectacular conversions from far-left to far-right views are not a deviation from this principle because it is still about experiencing the extreme. Today, our choices are influenced far more heavily by marketing, advertising and the mass media, but the choice-making mechanism remains unchanged. Some trust only themselves and their intuition, others only their milieu, still others believe only in what is commonly known and defined by the media/political/church authority as valuable and worthy of attention. So while the immediate basis of a choice, judgement or action can change, their mechanism cannot.

Why is this so important? Because the marginalisation of art and the aversion towards the aesthetics it prefers cannot be changed solely by educating the citizens, by arguing that free artistic activity is socially useful and artists care for common good. That is not enough because the problem lies not only in the lack of knowledge about art history or the fact that many do not understand the language of art, but in the far deeper problem of the dominant aesthetics being so different from, and so hostile towards, those preferred by art. To inspire love of art in people it is not enough to introduce art classes in schools, organise art workshops or produce TV programs on art. This is important but insufficient because the lack of love for art is a function instead of the preference for the non-differentiated, homogeneous and similar, and which is not expressed with clichés like “this is not art,” “such things belong in the



The category of the ‘dependence on the trail’ borrowed from Robert Putnam, (see: R.D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work*, Princeton 1994).

gallery,” “degenerate and immoral,” “I could do this too.” The lack of love for art is but a manifestation of a more universal philosophy that also includes the tendency for harsh repression, aversion towards minorities and those going against the grain, the need for a strong authority, a paternal figure, a patron making decisions for us, uncertainty in the face of novelty, the sense that young people are immoral today and that everybody steals, faith in objective values and meanings and one proper, universal hierarchy thereof, the need for security, the strong arm, law and order etc. For those preferring similarity and a cognitive and moral legibility of the world, art (especially transgression-based) will always be dangerous because it challenges the necessity to “be like us.” It is not only xenophobia that makes people aversive towards art but also their sense of insecurity and lack of certainty of who they are, their fear of tomorrow. The Other, whether is it the object of anti-Semitism, nationalism, homophobia or UFO-phobia, is always defined as a threat for what is ours, as that is how we uphold the sense that what is ours is precious and must be defended.

An aversive attitude towards art is, therefore, a complex position that cannot be cured by presenting the positive aspects of art, by highlighting the artist’s socially important functions, his/her contribution to the building of the democratic order and the promotion of the public debate. It can be changed not so much by transforming the way artistic phenomena are perceived as by modifying the aesthetic preferences.

The marginality of art is specific because neither is art something Poles pay special attention to nor is it perceived as an important social praxis. It is needed, however, as a convenient, because safe, field of demonstrating the superiority of the dominant aesthetics. Normally, art does not interest anyone except connoisseurs, art managers, art students and the artists themselves. From time to time, however, it is put under the spotlight as a paradigmatic example of a degenerate minority culture threatening homogeneity. Located at the very centre of attention, art always loses because it is forced to play a different

game than it intended, and it lacks the instruments to explain why it exists and why is so different from every day visual sphere. It becomes a fragment of someone else’s show, of a spectacle in which it is used as a prop to demonstrate what is wrong, whose presence is revealed to objectify the evil, destructive, demoralised. The price that art pays for finding itself in the focus of attention is that it loses control over what it wanted to be, as intended by artists, curators and managers of artistic institutions. The price, therefore, is becoming an integral part of an aesthetic with which it is conflicted, and on terms and in a role defined by that antagonistic aesthetic.

So is it worth striving to make art more visible and accepted? Certainly not, because its marginal position is what gives it its power and it is only from this position that it can actualise other, similarly invisible, aesthetics. It is not worth fighting for everyone to love and accept art, not only because the very word should evoke fear but also because it would then become part of the aesthetics of non-diversity, official, courtly, national, decorative.

It is worth striving, however, to broaden the control artists have over the visible. Not to give them the ability to manage reality and shape consciousness but to equip them with the ability to co-create the visual culture, give them the right to show images and discuss them, to speak and be heard. This, however, will take more than just good, critical, suggestive images – it requires a diversity of institutions, the translating media and, above all, tastes.

ART IN POLAND: BETWEEN THE PHANTOM BODY AND THE PHANTASMAL LANDSCAPE

... and what more could one want at a time when prosthetics' technology has turned people into cyborgs, when telecommunications reduces the expanse of space and the sequence of time to the level of creases or folders of contemporaneity, when the electronic media has turned everything into a simulation and spectacle? When the, to use a word coined by Derrida, tele-techno-media¹ depersonify, dematerialise and phantomise, what more could one want?²

One can and should want more. More depersonification, more dematerialisation and more phantomisation, until they reach a critical point at which reversal takes place – return: phantom incarnation, phantasmal rematerialisation, phenomenal possession. One can and should want even more – for contemporary art to use, take advantage of and locate various modes of that which, after Derrida, should be called hauntology³ – the science of haunting, its laws and logic; a science of disappearing and returning, of the conditions of their possibility and necessity⁴.

Let us, therefore, try to outline the hauntology of art as that which tries to resist the violence of spectacle and simulation; let us try to travel through the ghostly spectrum stretching from phantom bodies and their uncanny pleasures to haunted places and their incredible spatialities; let us try to recognise some of the figures through which the hauntology of art manifests itself.

Mannequins Living or Dead

The exhibition that stirred perhaps the greatest controversy in the recent years, that is, *Das unmögliche Theater. Performativität im Werk von Paweł Althamer, Tadeusz Kantor, Katarzyna Kozyra, Robert Kuśmirowski und Artur Żmijewski*, establishes a surprising link between Kantor's work and a younger generation of artists, the majority of them former disciples of Grzegorz Kowalski. According to Sabine Folie (the exhibition's curator), all those artists explore the question of the possibility of performativity in the theatre of life. This in fact is the very problematisation of the deepest metaphysical conviction that the body is a mechanical prosthesis – a materialisation of which is the artificial man: the mannequin

– revived with the breath of the spirit or animated with the elixir of life. Whereas, in Kantor's case, people become dummies, entering into symbiotic relationships with objects or undergoing materialisation (becoming prostheses of things?) at a time of dehumanisation as despiritualisation, extinguishing of spirit, Althamer, Kozyra and Żmijewski try to revive not so much spirit as ghosts; they try to animate prostheses (Althamer, *Dolls*, 1994-1995); to reanimate prosthetic bodies (Żmijewski, *Eye for an Eye*, 1998) or actually try to bring a breath of spirituality out of the guts of physicality (Żmijewski, *Singing Lesson II*, 2003; Kozyra, *In Art Dreams Come True*, 2003-2006). The spirit returns as its own spectre in the shape of what Derrida referred to as the ventriloquist figure – because the spirit always talks in the voice of the other⁶; and therefore, the spirit returns in art as impossible, incomplete, handicapped singing.

The Invisibles

Disappearing, but only such that can be noticed, seems to tempt artists; succumbing to this temptation, they create perhaps the possibly most paradoxical figure for the visual arts – invisibility. In the action *Unsichtbar* (2002), Paweł Althamer was invisible for two hours on the Alexanderplatz in Berlin⁷. After that time, he showed up, with an ice cream in his hand, among the crowd populating the square and in front of the gallery owners, curators and critics experiencing his invisibility. Whereas Althamer, fully in keeping with the logic and laws of spectrality, disappears to reappear, and both spectral acts form a single artistic event, Aneta Grzeszykowska not only prepares her disappearance more laboriously but also avoids automatism in returning or reappearing. An unusual document of invisibility is her *Album* (2005) in which the artist laboriously erased herself from all the photographs, which were to form an archive, a document of her life from childhood to this day. The photos from which she is missing have now become a documentation of absence. Grzeszykowska uses computer graphics not only to demonstrate her absence, to produce a spectral disappearance that leaves a trace or makes a sign, but she also uses the technology to summon the spectre of

¹ J. Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning & the New International*, transl. P. Kamuf, New York-London 1994.

² See also P. Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, transl. P. Beitchman, New York 1991; *Disappearing Architecture: From Real to Virtual to Quantum*, Georg Flachbart, Peter Weibel, eds., Birkhäuser, Basel – Boston – Berlin 2005; Gray Kochbar-Lindgren, *TechnoLogics: Ghosts, the Incalculable, and the Suspension of Animation*, Albany 2005.

³ The term 'hauntology' (fr. *hauntologie*) derives from French *hanter*, to haunt, to scare, to visit frequently, to harass, to plague, to disturb, and from *hantise*, haunting, but also obsession, obsessive thought, mania, and, formerly, visiting someone, meeting someone, spending time with someone; among the word's synonyms is 'idée fixe'. Derrida says of *hauntologie*: "We assume this category to be irreducible, above all to what it facilitates: ontology, theology, positive or negative ontotheology" (Derrida, *Spectres...*, p. 51). It appears, therefore, to be a possibility condition for everything that exists, or rather that appears and has to disappear. Being such a transcendental possibility condition, hauntology was repressed and stifled throughout the history of metaphysics and ontology as something that undermines the certainty of being. At the same time, as the fact that in French *hauntologie* sounds the same as *ontologie* (ontology) suggests, the former, in line with its logic, kept harassing the latter. That is why "...ontology opposes [hauntology] only in conjuring movement. Ontology is conjuration" (ibid., p. 161).

⁴ J. Derrida, *Spectres...*, op. cit.

the absent to make visible that which does not – or rather those who do not – exist. Her *Portraits* series (2005–2006) offers digitally rendered images of non-existent persons who make the impression of being alive. These seemingly living apparitions sustain the promise of prosthetic revival made, as we saw a moment ago, also by mannequins.

Phantom Physicality

Little distinguishes the mannequin from a medical phantom, with the latter, being an anatomical model, recreating the human body with utmost precision. Phantom physicality would be an analogical repetition through which that which has disappeared would return. Ghosts would incarnate again in it. For Magdalena Moskwa, traditional canvas painting becomes a medium through which phantoms manifest themselves. She has mastered the painterly technique and now uses it to give their ghosts an almost tangible physicality. Phantom corporeality serves to vivisection psychological life, becoming something of an *anatomical model*, through which the psychological experience can manifest itself. The fragmentation of contemporary subjectivity incarnates fragmented images. Obsessively painting portraits, Moskwa moves from classic half-figures (head and torso) towards portraits showing fragments of the face, legs in shoes, the shoes alone, or hands. The latest works are no longer portraits but rather reliquaries for the remnants of disintegrated personalities. One could say that phantom images of the lost subjectivity (which was manifested in the complete image) are produced by the same token as a missing limb can cause physical pain. Phantom physicality in painting, like phantom pain, would appear to be the result of that which has ceased to be present, which has disappeared. In the work of Aleksandra Ska work, unlike in Moskwa's painful phantoms, the disintegration of bodies and subjects causes not so much pain as phantom pleasures. In Ska's case, organs that have become free because of the disintegration of bodies, establish intimate relations not only with other organs but also with objects or instruments. These organic-instrumental intercourses reach their peak in the installation *Pin* (2006), where everyday articles become phantoms, receiving a mutated physicality. A strange incarnation takes place here, as certain banal instruments are given unusual bodies. Onto the strings of a larger-than-life necklace, beads of various sizes have been threaded: from tiny globules to spheres resembling small, combed heads, because these beads

are made of *hair*. This devilish rosary of temptation, of sensual seduction, is juxtaposed with exuberant pendants, with an ostentatiously obscene bunch of deformed penises – elongated, twisted or bent, or unnaturally swollen. At first sight, they resemble soft rubber toys, very sensual, almost cuddly. The beads and the pendants become phantoms of both instruments and organs. Their physicality, however, is neither instrumental nor organic – it is a physicality freed from mechanical or biological morphology. This free physicality creates the promise of pleasures we have not yet had a chance to learn, evokes a spectre of that which is only to come.

Double Somersault and Haunted Objects

In the final part of *Spectres of Marx*, Derrida returns to an obsessive motif from *Das Kapital*, namely, the transformation of the (useful) object into a (sellable) commodity, that is to what Marx called the “double somersault”⁸ of the commodity. In Derrida's interpretation, this “double somersault” is nothing but the object's transformation into its own phantom⁹. According to Guy Debord, this commodity phantomisation stretches to encompass the whole of the social reality, at a time when “everything that until now was experienced directly has receded into the spectacle.”¹⁰ Art proposes an ironic reversal: the representation's spectral incarnation into the object, a phantom incorporation. Rafał Bujnowski, seemingly returning to the classic practice of *mimesis*, makes paintings deceptively similar to everyday articles, the imitation being so perfect the painting assumes the shape of the imitated object, like in the series *Paintings – Objects* (2001–2002) where a three-dimensional stretcher assumes the shape and size of a video tape, a brick or a plank. Mimesis is superseded by mimicry, paintings become objects, without losing any of their pictorial incompatibility with the sphere of things practical (their utter uselessness). Whereas, in Bujnowski's case, mimicry means the picture's absurd reification, Kamil Kuskowski transforms the picture into a sign. The major series *Team Colours* (2003–2004) is comprised of paintings that assume the elongated, rectangular or triangular shape of scarves or pennants, symbols of Polish football clubs. At first sight they look like refined compositions under the banner of geometric abstraction, and it is only the revealing of their actual function of identification signs that opens them to violence. In Kuskowski's art, mimicry causes the painting to assume the shape of an object – one playing a key role in the distribution of violence and aggression in the

⁸ *The Impossible Theatre. Performativity in the Art of Paweł Althamer, Tadeusz Kantor, Katarzyna Kozyra, Robert Kuśmirowski and Artur Zmijewski* – I refer to the title the exhibition had at Kunsthalle Wien because of important differences between its Viennese and Warsaw versions. *Das unmögliche Theater. Performativität im Werk von Paweł Althamer, Tadeusz Kantor, Katarzyna Kozyra, Robert Kuśmirowski und Artur Zmijewski*, exh. cat., Kunsthalle Wien, Zachęta National Gallery of Art, Nürnberg 2005.

⁹ J. Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, transl. G. Bennington, R. Bowlby, Chicago-London 1991, p. 40.

¹⁰ A. Przywara, *Althamer Has Disappeared*, in: http://raster.art.pl/archiwa/archiwum_II_2002.htm. See also Paweł Althamer *Encourages*, exh. cat., Warsaw 2005, p. 162–163.

¹¹ K. Marx, *Capital, the Communist manifesto and other writings*, transl. M. Eastman, New York 1959, p. 112.

¹² J. Derrida, *Spectres...*, op. cit., p. 161.

¹³ G. Debord, *The society of the spectacle*, transl. D. Nicholson-Smith, New York 1995, p. 11.

football hooligan subculture. Each of the paintings of the *Team Colours* series makes a sign. It does so by repeating a gesture belonging to a certain subculture. It repeats the gesture of identification with the team's colours – an identification whose token is a fetishised object: scarf or pennant (for which you can be beaten up or which you can win as trophy). So both Bujnowski and Kuskowski dislocate painting into the object or a reified sign – paintings are shifted from a system of representation into a system of objects. In reality, however, this means an even greater phantomisation, but this time of the objects themselves – because the depictive power, which at this point becomes spectral, persistently haunts the objects under whose physical shape paintings have hidden, more – it haunts and disturbs the whole system of objects which it has infiltrated with them.

Immateriality

If Bujnowski and Kuskowski offer a perverse re-materialisation of the painting in phantom objects, Tatiana Czekalska and Leszek Golec propose an even more radical de-materialisation of art which would make it possible to re-materialise the added value with which it is financed back in the social sphere. The disappearance of art is to cause extra funds to appear in the place where they are most needed. For the exhibition *Under the White-Red Flag* in Moscow, Czekalska and Golec prepared the *Favourite Performance*¹¹. It consisted in donating the fee paid by the Russians – “money from Moscow” – to the victims of the war in Chechnya, via the International Red Cross. Malevich's cross, coupled up with the IRC symbol, became a background for the account number and an explanation of the action. The disappearance of art, the immateriality of artistic work, mean that the production of at least visible images is abandoned on behalf of genuine influence on the social reality. As part of the presentation of Galeria non-profit at Art Poznań 2005, Czekalska and Golec presented a performance called *New Work*. It was a request faxed to the organisers and later shown in the exhibition. The artists asked the organisers to discriminate in favour of vegetarians in hiring temporary staff, including assigning them “lighter work,” signing “more favourable contracts” with them and paying them “higher salaries.” The idea of the work, therefore, was to improve the working conditions of a certain social group – the fax was but what was to provoke that invisible, but tangible, change: the visible factor of an invisible intervention.

Memory as Haunting

Spectral summoning, causing something to appear or to make a sign, can resemble the photographic process in which the developer is used to manifest images recorded on film. While resembling this process, spectral summoning helps manifest in psychosocial memory something whose recording is carefully avoided, which is laboriously repressed from that memory. Opposed to the work of repression is the work of memory, meant as an opening to the manifestation of something that was supposed to irreversibly disappear. Zbigniew Libera's *Positives* is a good example of this. The artist chooses images with which history has been written or through which it has been communicated, manifested to us; he chooses icons that, duplicated many times, have become symbols defining the content of the collective consciousness. He points that their very composition has been tied so closely to certain notions charged with historical meaning or even emotional sentiment that it would be difficult to imagine them connected today to other meaning or mood. The outline of certain photographic images has become an ideological fetish. Libera starts a game with those *negatives*, embedded in the collective memory, with his *Positives*. The famous image of Auschwitz prisoners behind a barbed wire fence is transformed into an idyllic picture, with a group of content people replacing the anguished prisoners (*Residents*, 2002). The napalm-burned Vietnamese girl running with other children away from US soldiers is replaced in Libera's *positive* by a smiling naked woman running among children and parachutists (*Nepal*, 2003). This ironic reconstruction in the *positive* evokes the *negative* like a ghost, forcing it to endlessly haunt memory and imagination; harassed by this negative apparition, the *positive* cannot transform into an image of happiness. At the same time, however, the *negative* will never return to the purity of its original meaning and mood, it will never free itself from the ambivalence it has been polluted with by the *positive*. The double haunting undermines the fetishism of the pictures which is to forever structure the collective memory. What Libera proposes, therefore, is a kind of psychosocial memory work – work that would enable memories to return differently, as phantoms of the other. The complex mechanics of productive memory is revealed by Oskar Dawicki's *untitled (An Attempt to Break Into Memory Using a Flower Vase)*, 2006, in which institutional memory is confronted with the individual one, memories with



Under the White-Red Flag. New Art from Poland, curator Magdalena Kardasz, National Centre for Contemporary Arts, Moscow 2004. See also: Kazimierz Piotrowski, Inc, Galeria XX1, Warsaw 2004, p. 112-113.

conceptions, fantasies with reality. The offices of Łódź's Muzeum Sztuki, once the private apartment of Urszula Czartoryska and Ryszard Stanisławski, become the arena of a genuine haunting, centred on the daughter of the two, Olga Stanisławska. The scene arranged by Dawicki is presented in the form of an installation whose main components include a video with commentary, six photos and a vase with artificial flowers. The photos made available by Olga Stanisławska come from the period when the premises still served as a private apartment, and the video precisely recreates the scenes from archival photos, with the difference being that everything happens in an actual office space. Serving as background for the photos is the protagonist's narrative in which she tries to evoke images of the life once lived in those interiors, and the artist himself appears in the video, led by the same external voice of memories, he is trying to find the elements of the distant past in the contemporary office setting. If the photos preserve an image of the past as a spectre of something that is irrevocably gone, the video attempts to evoke that spectre, cause it to visit the spaces in which those past events once unfolded; if Olga's voice is what summons this apparition, the external factor incarnating the incantation is the figure of the performer – as he, dressed in his characteristic jacket, literally haunts the space, with his presence making a visible sign for that which is invisible and being described by the voice. The flower vase that appears on the archival photos plays its role in the video and is presented as a key component of Dawicki's installation. The vase, a mute witness and material relict of the past long lost, makes a false promise of return to it, and yet the lost time cannot be regained, and the performer wanders through the museum's offices, trying to locate traces of the world whose existence is attested to by the vase. The past, however, never returns the same, always as its own phantom, and the museum, as a collection of objects from the past, can be nothing but a scene of ghost-raising, so instead of presenting itself as a guardian and guarantor of the preservation of the past, it should perhaps become instead a phantasmal haunting scene, a phantasmal landscape through which the lost, instead of causing phantom pain in the individual or collective consciousness, will be able to return and make a sign. Such *alternative* museum could become the place of the re-materialisation of phantom art.

After-images of Space

The *alternative* museum would open up new spaces, materialising the phantasmal landscape of art. Is Zbigniew Rogalski and Michał Budny's *Projection* precisely a phantasmal projection transforming everyday articles into a phantom of the planned Warsaw Museum of Modern Art? Even though space, as the exhibition *In Poland, That Is Where?*² showed, has become one of the key media of contemporary art, only few works attempt to design phantoms of the approaching future. Instead, they create spatial after-images in which space undergoes a metonymic dislocation, a phobic deformation, a schizophrenic fragmentation and sometimes even a metaphoric condensation in accordance with various, discovered *ad hoc*, topologies. Monika Sosnowska's and Michał Budny's works define the two opposite poles of spatial deformations. Budny folds cardboard³ to create phantoms of objects (such as the plinth and projector in the *Projection*) or phantoms of concrete spaces (*Empty Room*, 2005), or sometimes pleats cardboard to create an equally phantom contour of Poland (*untitled*, 2006). Monika Sosnowska, in her project *Hole* (2006) for the New York Museum of Modern Art, performs a doubly perverse act⁴. She violates the purist perfection of Yoshio Taniguchi's architecture – knocking out a hole in the ceiling so that rubble falls on the floor. This violation rematerialises architecture that was supposed to disappear on behalf of a pure experience of spatiality (devoid of an *architectural body*, and thus a phantom one). The act of highlighting its architectural materiality paradoxically opens the museum space to a different (than the perceptual phantom) dimension: where else can the hole in the ceiling possibly lead if not to some sensorily imperceptible parallel reality? What else would be supposed to filter in through that hole if not the very possibility of being haunted by the other?

The above several figures of the hauntology of art form only a sample of how art tries to respond to the tele-techno-medial dehumanisation, dematerialisation and phantomsation. So what more could one want? Following the rhythm of Witkacy's insatiability or the flow of Lacan's *jouissance*⁵, one can and should want more, and more, and more...

Certainly the exhibition's central idea expressed in its name determined a domination of works about space, still, the scale of this domination is striking and symptomatic. In *Poland, That Is Where?*, Bożena Czubak, ed., exh. cat., CCA Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw 2006.

Budny develops his own version of Deleuze's *plier* – to pleat, to fold, to crease.

Extending the phrase "art in Poland" used in the title of this essay, I refer to the phantom geography of Foucault's 'in Poland, or, everywhere' transforming Jarry's nihilism into affirmative phantom universality.

One can say that Jacques Lacan elaborates on the intuitions of Witkacy, who, in *Insatiability*, raises the question of a desire that cannot be satisfied. Guided by a similar sense of the insatiability of desire, Lacan replaces Freud's homeostatic dialectics of the pleasure principle and reality principle with a principle of the infinite escalation of pleasure (*jouissance*), an escalation that eventually turns pleasure into a painful and unpleasant experience.

TOWARDS AN ART OF INTIMATE DEMOCRACY IN POLAND. ART, POLITICS AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

Intimate Democracy

The classics of democratic thought – Alexis de Tocqueville, John Stuart Mill and, today, Claude Lefort – believe that the tyranny of the majority is irreconcilable with democracy and that it is necessary to protect minority rights. In contemporary Poland, the thought sounds idealistically, even if it hides a certain trap. The true intellectual and political challenge is in the question of how to go beyond thinking in terms of majorities and minorities and achieve a fully democratic state of mind and society. How to transform the grace of awarding rights to people into a common possession of those rights?

For the democratic ideal to get closer to reality, it should be manifested by people and become a foundation of subjectivity, of the subject's inner constitution. The democratic ideal should be born in the psyche and radiate from there to the social field and carry out a revolt in normative and repressive politics.

A phenomenon responding to that need is an attitude I refer to as the *intimate democracy*, a democracy that begins in the psyche. Examples of it can already be found in contemporary art in Poland, and psychoanalysis can justify it. These two disciplines, seemingly marginal for politics, are important here. I am inspired by the philosophy of Julia Kristeva. Contemporary art is teaching us today a lesson in intimate democracy in Poland.

Thinking of intimate democracy, I use a subjective notion of politics in which people are not confined to their private lives, as was the case in totalitarian systems. The first component of the name "intimate democracy" refers to inner, psychological activity, and the second one to social, public life. Their combination produces a subjective notion of democracy, which is a basis of social change. It is the politics of democracy on micro-scale, the scale of the individual, leading towards a psychological, erotic and artistic open system.

The politics of democracy cannot be considered solely on the collective level, the discovery and affirmation of the complexity of psychological, erotic and sexual life, that is, the multiplicity of inner life, the multiplicity of subjectivity, works against individual and collective fundamentalisms. It is necessary to start with the funda-

mental factors that constitute the human being, among them eroticism and love. Art offers a unique insight into their complexity. Love deepens and personalises the democratic idea, and democracy complements various amorous and erotic narratives. The phenomenon of intimate democracy can be found in inner life but also in culture. In the face of social intolerance and political homophobia, it is precisely contemporary art in Poland, more than any other field, that offers a precognition of intimate democracy, which begins with an acceptance of the diversity of love.

Art

What I call intimate democracy is practically present in the art of Polish women artists: Izabella Gustowska, Katarzyna Korzeniecka and Karolina Breguła. Their works manifest the psychic and political state resulting from internalised democracy. In their open identity visions, the artists transgress their own gender and sexuality and reach, through visibility, diverse experiences of eroticism and love. Art thus goes beyond the hetero-normative social model that contradicts intimate democracy.

Izabella Gustowska's video installation *L'Amour Passion* (2000) immerses the viewers in depths of tenderness, in the erotic unconscious. The artist uses the electronic media to practice the art of intimacy, imbuing the virtual world with emotions, transforming the electronic impulses into loving caresses. In her exhibition *Passions and Other Cases* (2001), in a dimly lit gallery, in green glow, stood three machines, large, shell-shaped, opening and closing steel-and-plastic constructions, with video projections playing inside. The first of those showed the faces of two men about to kiss, the second one, of two women, and the third one, of a woman and a man. Another version of this video installation consists of three oval lightboxes presenting the three pairs, with monitors underneath playing films showing the caresses and kisses of women and men embracing each other, immersed in a colourful, abstract abyss. It is an underwater world, a world of dreams, and, at the same time, a virtual web space. The bodies seem to glisten with pixels – the molecular stream shifts us into a reality of dreams about erotic fulfilment and, at the same time, into a future of the body. Visualising plural love

narratives, Izabella Gustowska humanises the image technology.

This strategy of an affirmative humanisation of the image of homosexual and heterosexual relationships is crucial for the concept of intimate democracy where art puts us back in touch with humanistic and multiple sexuality. Pluralistic models of love and sexuality fill the cultural void and routine resulting from sexophobia and homophobia. The virtual and dreamy world of *L'Amour Passion* shifts the viewer into a new kind of matrix, beyond the hetero-matrix, where the old dualisms and conflicts melt in a stream of ecstasy. It is the entrance to a futuristic world of erotic non-differentiation and, at the same time, a descent into primordial, all-sexuality. The combination of sexuality and love with the unconscious, conveyed so perfectly in the twinkling of Izabella Gustowska's virtual fantasies, translates into a philosophy of eroticism.

Sexuality is associated with love, the unconscious, imagination and intellect. Sexuality is like an endless space, all sexual orientations, as well as genders, are but small islets in the boundless sea of sexuality. In this fluid world there is room for individuality but there are no boundaries.

Art of the intimate democracy is also practiced by another Polish woman artist, who rejects nationalistic sexual totalitarianism of one model of relationship. Katarzyna Korzeniecka makes photographs of couples of various races, ethnicities and genders. She portrays lovers on sheets, letting the viewer into their private 'bedrooms'. The models are identified by the titles: *Dominique and Piotr, Magda and Tomoho, Magda and Rafal, Szymon and Kasia, Krzysztof and Suppie, Leon and Suppie, Rachel and Sylwia* (2000-2004). Natural-size figures of women and men are deep in loving ecstasy, caressing or fondling each other, or they pose cuddling each other. The strongly emotional nature of these photographs makes their eroticism intense and yet almost ideal; it is devoid of any sense of guilt or shame. As a result, Korzeniecka's pictures have an almost therapeutic effect on the viewer. Gay and lesbian couples pose next to straight ones, each presented in equally tender, sweet and sentimental manner. This removes the stigma of shame and repulsion through which male and female homoerotic sexuality is perceived in Poland.

Gustowska's and Korzeniecka's art derives directly from the pleasure principle. Lesbian motifs, present here, are particularly important and unique in Polish art. Even though the representations of female homoeroticism are less controversial than scenes involving men, they are subject to particularly dangerous appropriation. This

is because lesbian eroticism is situated within the patriarchal culture's sexist imaginary, so it is more difficult to escape and create autonomous, separate visions. This makes the sensual and intimate art of Gustowska and Korzeniecka all the more valuable.

The artists have reached in their sensual art the essence of intimate democracy. The transgression beyond the solely hetero-normative view has emancipating and enriching potential, putting relationships in a liberal perspective. The sense of the freedom of erotic choices has great existential value, representing an important element of democratic human rights. In the field of intimate democracy, Poland's contemporary art has spoken loudly in opposition to the discriminatory social, legal and political system.

Discrimination on sexual orientation grounds remains an unsolved social and legal issue in Poland, which is why the turbulent bashed equality parades of 2005 and 2006 are connected with the earlier public art awareness campaign called *Let Them See Us*. A new form of dissidence emerged in Poland of the turn of the centuries – love dissidence! It is precisely because of it that it is so important that a new stage of change, that associated with intimate democracy and the accompanying culture, has begun.

Let Them See Us (2003) was a photographic series authored by Karolina Bregula, addressing the question of non-discrimination and civic rights of non-heterosexuals. The portraits of 30 authentic same-sex couples standing on the street and holding hands, pasted on billboards across Poland, were part of an awareness-raising campaign launched by the non-governmental organisation Campaign Against Homophobia. The project, however, did not get the chance to make much of a public presence because the billboards were quickly destroyed or censored by the local authorities. Turned into a travelling exhibition shown in galleries, it proved highly popular and had strong medial and artistic impact. Photographs spoke on behalf of gays and lesbians rights. It is contemporary art, the most marginalised field of culture, that offers a testimony of both revolt and humanism. Victory has been won in the artistic sphere. It is by no accident that it is precisely contemporary art that has proved the main platform of sexual equality, as it itself has been the target of aggression in the Polish culture war, attacked by censors and the far right. In art the emancipating function of aesthetics and visibility has blossomed.

In a winter scenery of streets and parks, he and he, she and she, stand up straight, holding hands, some smiling. Their figures are in the foreground, brightly lit, their

faces well visible. The out-of-focus background exposes the artificiality of the representation. The space of a photograph as a space of safety, colours and illusion. An image painted with the photographic lens and with good intentions. Some advertising, some photojournalism. A postcard image of a relationship, and yet no one has seen such postcards in Poland so far. Postcards from the future. You will not see any hand-holding same-sex couples on the streets of Poland or in the media, but they exist in the art of photography. Photography is a reality but also a construction. These pictures show it better than anything else: genuine couples and at the same time a world that does not exist. Above all, however, these are portraits and that is where their power to touch and move lies.

Let Them See Us combined performance and public art. The exhibition was like a collective performance of 30 couples, intervening in the sphere of social prejudices and phobias. The project was a Polish example of an action simultaneously social and artistic, associated with the performance of civic and human rights – an action focusing on human and minority rights that in the Poland of today are marginalised.

Karolina Bregula shifted the strategy of making photographic portraits of couples to the field of her own life, exposing herself and thus legitimating the *Let Them See Us* project. Aesthetics and privacy are also connected in Karolina Bregula and Aleksandra Buczkowska's photography and video installation self-portrait series *Married Women* (2005). The women artists picture the areas of intimacy and poetry hidden in their everyday contacts. The photographs show their physical and emotional relations, whereas the video places them in the context of their relationships with men. The photographs exude femininity, suggesting intimate ties between the artists. The video surprises because it shatters the feminine world, as it turns out that the 'wives' are attached to their men, present chiefly through their voices. They are, therefore, 'wed' to each other and to their male partners. In this sense, this is an autobiographical work about love and friendship that are increasingly difficult to tell apart. It is also an image of the safety and comfort of intimate life in various kinds of relationships.

The photographs concentrate on fragments of female bodies and faces, separate or in mutual relations. The subtle physicality of colour means that the pictures have almost the texture of skin, creating a highly sensual effect. Viewing them, we almost touch, enter into a private female world. Instead of showing their men in the video, the artists just suggest their presence, film-

ing only half of the room. The imaging strategy, like the subject matter, is very delicate. The scenes, shown from surprising angles and with a lot of empty space in the frame, leave much to be filled in the viewer's imagination. The authors uncover and cover at the same time, and the whole is like a mix of film scenes with which different narratives can be created.

In the video, the partner of one of the protagonists leaves, and the two women are left alone. In the photograph, we see them sitting at the table, deep in conversation, their eyes fixed on each other. In these double relationship they have found not only their aesthetics but also the warmth of a physical and private space, and, above all, a protection against loneliness and an affirmation of their own intimacy. They have freed themselves from the cold public sphere in which we still all have to live.

Given that Karolina Bregula is the author of the portraits of gay and lesbian couples in *Let Them See Us* and, together with Aleksandra Buczkowska, of *Married Women*, one can describe this art as directed against loneliness and alienation, devoted to an apology of closeness and intimacy.

Art of the intimate democracy, which has flourished in Poland in the recent years, and whose main representatives are woman artists – Izabella Gustowska, Katarzyna Korzeniecka and Karolina Bregula – stems from a liberal, secular, non-homophobic and humanist tradition, opposed to the official patriarchal national and heteronormative culture and placing erotic subjectivity in its multiplicity at the centre. The act of confronting the images of different amorous orientations broadens the dominant model of life, liberates people. It is an approach that heals the repressive social politics of sexuality.

Art of the intimate democracy, combining human rights, eroticism and aesthetics, is the example of a new trend in Polish art, going beyond the naturalism of body art, identified with the so called critical art of the 1990s. The dissident approach to power structures, especially those repressing sexuality, is retained, but the effects of physicality and transgression are mitigated. After 2000, besides criticism, there also emerges an ambition to build a new reality, both existential and artistic. Image strategies, in turn, have gotten closer to the visuality of pop culture. The counterculture factor is realised through decorative and, at the same time, subversive (in Poland) sexual pluralism rather than a semi-documentary emotional shock. Moreover, art of the intimate democracy is filled with non-ironic optimism and fulfilment, there is hope and joy in it.

Intimate democracy and the art that finds it remain in the opposition and on the margins. Despite the street protests and a broad public debate, neither Polish pop culture, nor education, nor legislation have followed the path. The Polish political and legal context prevents the fulfilment of intimate democracy, equal rights for everyone irrespective of their gender or sexual orientation remain a fiction, same-sex couples remain a legislative taboo. Only the heterosexual couples presented in the works discussed here could legalise their relationship, the same-sex ones could become the subject of negative discrimination. Only men can freely dispose of their bodies, a restrictive anti-abortion law deprives women of their autonomy. Inequality in the public sphere continues.

The searching for hope in the private sphere and in art is not a flight from reality but rather a recognition of the field from which it can grow. The political starts here in the private. The artistic statement is a voice coming from the starting point that psychoanalysis describes.

Psychoanalysis

To see love and sexuality in new light, as befits a new era, it is necessary to go back to the repressed individual beginnings. The notion of intimate democracy refers to the bisexual prehistory in the subject, to the fluidity between masculinity and femininity, between hetero- and homosexuality. The premonition of bisexuality existed in culture for ages and was pronounced forcefully in the early 20th century in Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis. For Freud, bisexuality is a primal enigmatic stage in every human being's psychosexual development. All people initially have both masculine and feminine sexual dispositions and it is only when monosexuality emerges that the dominant gender represses the psychological components of the conquered one to the unconscious.

Significantly, Freud believed that artistic genius had its roots precisely in the earlier, bisexual, phase. In their creative act, man and woman artists have to get in touch with their primal bisexual energy to see the human being and the world anew. There exists an energetic relationship between bisexuality and creativity, both derive from the same root.

Intimate democracy, tantamount to a multiplicity and equality of identities, stems not only from the idea of social justice but above all from a primal bisexual erotic fullness, where heterosexuality coexisted with homosexuality, just as they should coexist in a democratic state.

The path towards intimate democracy leads through the bisexual view which shifts bisexual desire onto the way of perception in visual culture and existence in society. In this sense, bisexuality is meant above all as the quality of reception that can connect the viewer to the unconscious side of his or her own gender and sexuality. The bisexual view communicates with that which is unconscious and at the same time omnipresent. Bisexuality, a space of erotic and sexual diversity, can lead to art equally well as to intimate democracy. The system begins in each one of us, so one enters into the politics of democracy in sexuality and love through an introspection of the repressed bisexual fullness.

It is at this point that the bisexual view becomes social, and the psychological conflict turns into a political issue. This is the tragedy of identity and love we are facing today in Poland, where democracy is only superficial, external. It has not been internalised as a system of multiplicity and connected to the richness of primal bisexual fantasies.

Art of the intimate democracy tries to integrate the private with the public, tries to create a space of communication and to provoke the viewer to return to the primal bisexual potentiality of desire and gaze that in the social sense translate into a coexistence of many sexual orientations. In this sense, this is an art that healingly touches upon the Polish democracy's deepest ailment, transgresses discrimination and creates hope for a better future. It is an art in which aesthetics, eroticism, ethics and politics combine. That is why art of the intimate democracy might lead the art of democracy as a praxis of self-governing the pluralistic society.

PUBLIC STRATEGIES FROM OUTDOOR GALLERIES TO PUBLIC RELATIONS

The fundamental change that occurred in the balance of power in the Polish public sphere of the recent years, defined as a transition “from monument to market,”¹ emphasises the illusoriness of constitutive for democracy neutral public sphere, whose openness and availability remains limited and controlled in Poland. Market pressures, though doubtless present, are not the only force at play here. The public reception of the visual codes encompassing space and the body, public space and private space, the scope of power and the area of individual identity, reflects the more general processes of social transformation.

The contemporary public space has been detaching itself more and more from the physical space of the city, becoming dispersed and fragmented, and partly disappearing to reactivate itself in the virtual dimension and build new structures of social relationships there. The blurring of the cohesive and unchanging image of the world provokes attempts to grasp fragments of it – ‘discovering’ specific places, revealing various temporal layers and the historical and local narratives associated therewith, even if relating to no longer existent maps. In the face of the neurotic flow of information and images, the intensified, unique event, in which one participates with others, returns almost obsessively as a guarantee of existence. According to James Lingwood of the London-based agency Artangel, which deals solely with public projects, what matters in them is precisely the “intensity of experience in a very specific place, at a very specific time – an experience that can be reproduced, but not replicated.”² The “social turn,” to use a term coined by Claire Bishop³, is taking place not only in contemporary art but also in literature, theatre and dance. Instead of public art, we now speak of “art in the public domain” and “public relations,” and “site-specific” has been replaced by “community-specific.”

The current artistic strategies deal with the negotiation of access to the public sphere and one’s visible presence in it through the instruments of mass communication and advertising, the exploration of,

and playing with, the identity of a place, the arranging of events, experiences or social relations. Their purpose is seldom limited to institutional critique or the desire to make a presence in the non-gallery urban context. Other polarisations present in the contemporary world become more interesting, and the intersecting paths between reality and fiction, between common and one’s own territory.

In 2002, the pioneering AMS Outdoor Gallery, referred to on many occasions in the context of art in the public realm, discontinued its operations. During the four years of its existence, through the 19 projects it presented on billboards across Poland, it above all ‘publicised’ art in the city’s visual sphere and in the consciousness of accidental recipients, presenting, in many cases, works of artists for whom poster or billboard was not the primary medium. Besides the AMS Gallery, there operated, and partly still operates, a number of individual ‘outdoor galleries’, such as Rafal Bujnowski’s Open Gallery in Cracow, the Toruń-based Rósz Gallery, the Open Gallery in Sopot and Poznań, or the Outdoor Gallery of the City of Gdańsk. By provoking often controversial reactions to some individual works, the AMS Gallery clearly contributed to stimulating the discourse on contemporary art in the non-institutional sphere. An important context for it was also provided by outdoor advertising itself as a new, intense phenomenon in the Polish public sphere – with whose language of textual-pictorial persuasion artists often interacted.

Cosmonauts in the Earth’s Orbit

In the context of the ‘social turn’ or Artur Żmijewski’s recently unveiled strategy proclaiming “applied social arts”⁴ and artists’ active participation in the field of politics, the work of Pawel Althamer represents a separate phenomenon. His strategy is based on entering deep into reality and exploiting its mechanisms, which the artist reverses, manipulates or orchestrates. The effect often proves far more surprising and radical than that of the fiction. Cutting through the wall, as part of an exhibition on bureaucracy, to an office space adjoining the gallery, arranging an illegal entrance to an art fair in London,

¹ P. Krajewski, “Od monumetu do marketu. Świat przekodowany,” in: *Działania artystyczne w przestrzeni publicznej. Aspekty estetyczne i społeczne*, conference materials, CCA Łaźnia, Gdańsk 2006, and *From Monument to Market*, P. Krajewski, V. Kutlubasis-Krajewska, eds., Wrocław 2005.

² J. Lingwood during the debate “Art in Public,” in: *Frieze Projects: Artists’ Commissions and Talks*, London 2006, p.180.

³ C. Bishop, *The Social Turn. Collaboration and its Discontents*, “Artforum” 2/2006.

⁴ A. Żmijewski, *Stosowane nauki społeczne*, „Krytyka Polityczna” 11/12, winter 2007, p. 14-24.

or opening a gallery's emergency exit out to the garden, are examples of actions that create informal sluice gates between spaces and conventions and the reality on the other side of a mirror, relations far more complex than the public/private division. Moving in them means drifting between various layers of perception, hallucination, imagination, deepening one's own unique experience and confronting it with the experience of others.

Althamer creates and orchestrates the reality spectacle, like during the *Walk* at the CCA Warsaw (2001) when he took the audience for an excursion, highlighted with discreetly arranged scenes – a bit like a historical improver, only not of gardens but of urban landscapes; introduces his own events to the reality stage – like in the non-camera films *Motion Picture Film* (2000) and *Real Time Movie* (2004); blurs the line between that perceived as genuine/artificial. His most pro-community action, *Bródno 2000*, engaged the tenants of a tower block to create a community that unselfishly carried out a short-term event. However, Althamer would not be able to say, as Jeremy Deller did, that his actions were a result of the simple fact that he no longer wanted to make objects but simply cause things to happen. Community activism or pure performativity are not the point here – the group excursions into reality are an attempt to share one's experience of oneself in the world, an experience impossible to express in any conventional manner. The artist so spoke in a 2003 interview: "... I feel a sense of alienation. That is probably why I once did a project called *The Cosmonaut*. I walked down the streets in a costume resembling a spacesuit. I still feel as if I have landed on a strange planet ... the sense never leaves me that I am a man without a place."⁵

Althamer's actions subscribe to the trend, mentioned on many occasions in reference to the art of the late 1990s, of Nicolas Bourriaud's relational aesthetics, which, in turn, builds on the strategies of the 1960s and 1970s, especially the concepts of the Situationists – though aesthetics is by no means the most important thing here. Cezary Bodzianowski, in turn, refers to urban-space actions (resembling the tradition of performers such as Jiri Kovanda) based on reversal, absurdity, pure nonsense. Their starting point is an arranged artist-reality relation, as part of which the artist transposes into the real world gestures and poses evoking surprising associations, and giving reality the character of spectacle. The relation is usually based on an expressive image or action

that can be developed into a mini-narrative (functioning post-fact as the event compressed into a photograph or a film). Whereas Paweł Althamer, for instance, was significantly invisible during his action *Unsichtbar* in Berlin (2002), Bodzianowski's carefully stylised and highly recognisable figure becomes the protagonist of any event, appropriating reality as a context and a stage set into which the artist introduces dissonance and situational humour; this is conceptualism of the everyday life. The fundamental difference between the two artists lies elsewhere, though: it is the belief in the actual possibility of entering a different reality, of achieving lasting change as the result of a common experience (Althamer), and the use of the available everyday setting to arrange against its background a situation of a subversive logic but not representing a proposition to experience reality seriously and not leaving any illusions as to the possibility and rationale of staying in it for longer (Bodzianowski). In contrast to the latter philosophy is the strategy of Julita Wójcik who, in an almost absurd gesture, strenuously cultivates a vegetable garden between the busy traffic lanes in Gdynia or in New York (*My Garden*, 2002, 2003), stubbornly promoting everyday life in its non-virtual dimension – that of physical work, routine activities, direct interpersonal relations. For Wójcik, it is everyday life that is exotic; the process of its restoration becomes, paradoxically, an avant-garde gesture.

Expanding the Field of Art

An expansion into the realm of everyday life is also undertaken by artistic institutions and independent curators, striving to establish as direct as possible communication with the recipient outside the exclusive mechanisms of artistic circulation. Examples include *Actions*, part of the *TR/PL* project by Warsaw's *Rozmaitości Theatre* (2005–2006), *Villa Warsaw*, a summer-season branch of Raster Gallery (2006), or the exhibition *Hidden in Daylight* organised by the Foksal Gallery Foundation in a historic hotel during a film festival in Cieszyn (2003). Another version of this expansion are site-specific exhibitions, appropriating public and private spaces as a context for concepts and narratives. Such strategies draw on performance, film and theatre strategies, appropriating and reversing fragments of reality rather than building artificial worlds. *Hidden Treasure* (2005), an "exhibition about sex and pleasure," presenting chiefly films by 1970s' and contemporary artists, lasted for just one evening, annexing one floor in Warsaw's Forum hotel. Its curators declared,



A. Żmijewski, *Drżące ciała. Rozmowy z artystami*, Bytom-Kraków 2006, p. 54–55.

“Art does not have to develop solely in repressed places, places ‘abandoned by capitalism’. We are interested in the dynamic, intense, erotic energy of contemporary capitalism.” *Down With the Pimps of Art!*, a show linking the punk phenomenon in Polish music and art, organised in the building of the Warsaw Stock Exchange, neighbouring the former communist party headquarters building, was not, despite its meaningful location, “aimed at effecting a naïve and self-deconstructing critique of the system. The point was to go against the grain, to evoke the punk nonchalance and anti-authoritarian arrogance.” A still different strategy was adopted by the authors of *Fear Not!* (2006), a show exploring links between religion and art, presented in several private apartments in Warsaw, and representing above all a manifestation in the face of the risk of censorship in official circulation and an alternative in the shape of a closed, limited private circulation as a space of individual freedom.

One can hardly avoid the impression that the strategies mentioned above do not open the art circulation but rather dislocate it beyond institutional space. A different approach is represented by the Flying szu szu Gallery, established by three artists, Piotr Kopik, Ivo Nikić and Karol Radziszewski, which materialises itself in actions and exhibitions in various urban-space settings, without interfering in their nature or orchestrating them in any particular way. As a result, the noise and static of reality is deliberately made part of the show as a rightful component, equally interesting as the works on display.

Exhibition as a Network on City Map

An even more radical strategy activates the city as a playing field, a space of interaction not only between the individual artefacts and the public but also, in the form of an ‘expanded exhibition’, creating a new physical and mental map. Of such nature were the dispersed site-specific actions carried out as part of the *Dialog Loci* festival in Kostrzyn (2004), the events accompanying the Cieszyn film festival, or the exhibition *Ideal Cities - Invisible Cities* in Zamość (2006).

Another approach to the self-differentiating public space is offered by the group Twożywo which, basing on street-art strategies and using clear combinations of graphics and typography, consistently throws one slogan after another into the accidental crowd of passers-by, newspaper readers or web surfers. Twożywo treat public space as a field of

communication and social activity and art as their effective and flexible instrument. The group practices intellectual propaganda as a kind of parallel counter-advertising, not so much referring to the abstract image of the system-as-a-monster but rather appealing to individual responsibility and human capabilities. The goal here is not so much the critique of any specific socio-economic system as a reflection on the condition of the contemporary individual, escaping from his/her own weaknesses into all kinds of simulations, voluntarily exchanging the capital of individual freedom for the tokens of various conventions. Through the available paths-rhizomes in public space – street, Internet, daily newspaper – the guerilla strategy of isolated confrontations is transformed into an ambiguous message permanently present in the stream of media images and the iconosphere of information, laconically forcing an alternative regime of vigilant consciousness upon us.

Referring to the past and the specificity of a place, artists do not speak in the name of an unspecified majority (and, in reality, the system) – instead, they question ideologies and the superior unified discourse shaping the given community’s collective memory. They bring to light the hidden, that which creates an uncomfortable dissonance in public space and its participants’ consciousness. Joanna Rajkowska’s Warsaw projects, *Greetings from Jerusalem Avenue* (2003) and the planned *Oxygenator* (2007) – a pond with aerated water on Plac Grzybowski, where the past returns like a phantom – fit precisely the context of the place. At the same time, they are open enough to evolve alongside their location and remain a valid gesture interpreted in the present. The expressive form of a palm tree, at first sight paradoxically disturbing the predictable urban iconosphere, has in itself such a rare light humour of a pop-art ‘drop sculpture’, whereas the public debate, that has accompanied the project since its inception, represents an aspect as important as the work itself.

Anna Niesterowicz, in turn, mounting a neon sign saying *Polska część Śląska* (whose ambiguous meaning can be translated as either “Poland part of Silesia” or “the Polish part of Silesia”) on the spire of the former Schützenhaus building in Bytom, introduced an ambiguous message referring to the specific place and its complex socio-cultural identity, as disturbing as the issues of the region’s Polish-German past. The very possibility of the inscription being interpreted in various ways represents a provocation

here. A similar trope is followed by Rafał Jakubowicz who projects the Hebrew word for 'swimming pool', an after-image, a phantom image from the past, on the front wall of a public swimming pool in Poznań – formerly (pre-1945) a synagogue, or placing on billboards across Cracow a slightly blurred, typed inscription *Seuchensperrgebiet* (2002), with all the vaguely disturbing associations it evokes.

The open nature of the above-mentioned artists' work, permitting a polyphonic public debate, the recipient's individual activity and new interpretations, becomes even more evident in the context of the new, officially backed, public monuments – ultra-conservative in their realistic form and embodying the rigid statement of the ruling political option.

Return of modernism

A debate on the legacy of late modernism, provoked by the devastation or demolition of its successive examples – like the Supersam building in Warsaw – has only begun in Poland, pertaining to not only the aesthetic but also political context. Part of this debate are the works of two women artists exploiting modernistic forms of advertising: the neon and the mural. Paulina Ołowska recreated the *Volleyball Player*, a highly characteristic 1960s' neon sign on the Constitution Square in Warsaw, reversing the traditional function of advertising as a consumerist mystification and transforming the object into a purely aesthetic, abstract installation – an altruistic urban decoration, a visual surprise. The *Volleyball Player* reappears as a gesture of repetition, of reactivating in the living urban tissue an image from a bygone era, of distorting the seemingly inevitable sequence of transience. Monika Sosnowska, in turn, transposed to the wall of an old tenement in Cieszyn the image, borrowed from a street signboard, of the old Soviet-made *Rubin* TV set (2004), a gesture received far less enthusiastically than the *Volleyball Player* in Warsaw's socialist-realistic MDM quarter, deliberately spoiling the town's intended historicizing image.

New Activism?

Public art of the recent years in Poland has seldom utilised the elements of play or interaction with the viewer. Socio-political activism manifests itself almost solely in the context of a field of tension and conflict, where means such as absurdity, pure-nonsense humour or reversal – characteristic for the Orange Alternative's happenings of the 1980s – are a rare occurrence. "The fledgling street parades are a fascinating example of an activist public art emerging in Poland, a phenomenon characteristic for democratic culture, which should be an expression of the multitude and diversity of the individual voices making up the community," Paweł Leszkowicz wrote in 2001, deliberately, though a bit too hastily, creating a link between political activism and public art. When in 2003 the photographic project *Let Them See Us*, depicting thirty male and female homosexual couples (in keeping with the principle "to see and be seen is the essence of being a citizen"⁶), was presented on billboards – not those of the AMS Outdoor Gallery, as it refused to take part in the Campaign Against Homophobia – a community campaign deliberately and literally reversing the stereotype of obscenity into a friendly reality of everyday life, local authorities got all riled up and the far-right went amok and started destroying the posters, and the only way to keep showing the project was, paradoxically, to take it back to the gallery. This strategy of public, almost educational, co-opting of difference was the opposite of the approach adopted by artist Karol Radziszewski when he presented the project *Faggots* (2005) in a private apartment, and founded the magazine *DIK* which exploits niche exclusivity and the international circulation, thus skipping the "fight for your rights" stage and moving directly to the issue of unique artistic production, seen by no means solely in the context of gay art.

Art, which has already experienced rejection by the community, and, at the same time, can still exploit its status of an unselfish voice of protest and subversion, is becoming an attractive field for politics. It remains an open question to what extent artists will be aware of the possibilities arising from this fact – but also its ramifications.



L. Olszewski, „Polis: widzieć i być widzianym,” in: *Sztuka w mieście. Zewnętrzna galeria AMS 1998-2002* (exh. cat.), 2003, p. 11.

SHUNTING REALITY INTO A SIDETRACK. THE CATEGORY OF IMAGINATION IN THE STRATEGIES OF POLISH CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS

Following critical art's risky attempt to prove that art can speak as persuasively as more powerful, non-artistic languages used for describing reality, today many artists are more interested in discovering art's power in qualities hitherto considered to be its faults: in laboratory phantasm or imaginarieness. Whereas, for critical art, the key concept was that of reality-veiling illusion which needed to be laboriously deconstructed, today the focus has been on the diametrically opposed concept of fantasy, enabling artists to play a far more sophisticated and perverse game with reality. A clear shift has been taking place in art away from the symbolic and towards the imaginary.

Art (stereotypically unfaithful and volatile) often disowned imagination – just as it disowned beauty, eroticism, enthusiasm, or love. It considered them part of the mass-scale, stupefying cultural industries creating standardised images that it itself (and particularly art of critical provenance) tried arduously to deconstruct. Moreover, imagination was being excluded from the field of art by avant-garde materialism, iconoclasm, fear of emotions, figuration, narration, the irrational or the spiritual. The situation has been changing lately: artists have been starting to perceive imagination as a category crucial for our life and condition, one that needs to be regained from the contemporary phantasmal consumer culture (or at least to create an alternative for it) and rooted again in everyday, common existence.


According to Freud, it is fantasies that define our psychic reality, different from the reality of the world, it is only them that give us our sense of individuality and uniqueness. Maria Janion, in turn, expounding on Freud's theses in her *Project of Phantasmal Critique*, writes about the subject fantasising as the result of a permanent (usually lifelong) conflict with the *reality principle*. According to Agata Bielik-Robson, fantasy not only refuses to make compromises with reality, it openly opposes the real-world conditions preventing the subject from fulfilling its desires. Fantasy does not deny the realness of the outside world, it simply opposes it in

the field of the subject's own imaginary activity, in the field of imagination. It is there that fantasy, in its rebellious zeal, allows itself sometimes to suspend the laws governing reality, or draws visualisations, figures, or identifications to which it tries to 'bend' reality. Fantasy zigzags, negotiates, strikes alliances, surrenders, but it never ceases to look for gaps in reality, seeking moments enabling it to cancel the tough laws of the world. One of such cracks, the constantly burning phantasmal wounds in the healthy body of the 'usual' reality is art – a powerful fantasy opposing the real.

Paulina Otowska, Wilhelm Sasnal, Piotr Uklański, Paweł Althamer, Cezary Bodzianowski, Robert Kuśmirowski, Katarzyna Kozyra, Christian Tomaszewski, Janek Simon, Oskar Dawicki, Tomasz Kozak belong to a new wave of Polish artists perceiving art as an intensification of imagination. This attitude determines these artists' intense flirt with the whole phantasmal background of art, its paradigmatic media (painting, sculpture), and its postulated autonomy. However, they exploit these qualities consciously, as part of their tactics. These artists perform today a peculiar revitalisation of the concept of imagination, so powerfully present in the Polish conceptual art of the 1960s (impossible art) and 1970s¹. On the one hand, they strive to make imagination part of the everyday experience again, while, on the other, analysing various aspects of art's imaginary dimension. The practice of these artists places itself on the border, postulated by Vincent Crapanzano², between the "insistent reality of the here and now" and the "optative space-time of the imaginary." According to Jean Starobinski, imagination and art make it possible to narrate and design stories that do not have to be consistent with the "evident universe;"³ they not only enable us to evoke "images which double the world of our direct perceptions: it is a distancing power thanks to which we represent to ourselves distant objects and we distance ourselves from present realities."⁴

Imagination anticipates, projects, zooms in and out, allows fiction, figuration, pure fascination, consent

 E.g. Natalia LL and her strategy of art as an artificial reality, Marek Konieczny and his Think Crazy strategy, Wiktor Gutt and Waldemar Raniszewski and their anthropological, marked by a fascination with primitive cultures, approach to imagination.

 V. Crapanzano, *Imaginative Horizons, an Essay in Literary-Philosophical Anthropology*, Chicago 2003, p. 14.

 Ibid., p. 19.

 Ibid.

to lie against reality, it is the field of a potential revolt against the standard emotional, intellectual, spiritual solutions – solutions offered to us by the imagination-appropriating and infantile consumerist reality.

Wilhelm Sasnal

The specificity of Wilhelm Sasnal's work is defined by a tension between painting and film. The artist, on the one hand, creates highly autonomous paintings, while, on the other, makes films that are very strongly rooted in his private life. In Sasnal's painting and films, rationalised artistic discourses (with their views about what is outmoded, impossible, unseemly, long deconstructed, and so on), but also national-martyrologic⁵ or pop-culture ones, manifest themselves in the context of the Lacanian-Žižkian question "Che vuoi?" – "you are telling me something, but what do you really want to tell me, what are you driving at? (...) You require, expect something from me, but what do you really want, what do you expect to achieve with this requirement?"¹⁶. Thus the artist adopts an arrogant and anarchistic stance going counter to the obvious truths of the symbolic order, which is opposed with the subject's desire and fantasy (the "irrational phantasmal desire of resistance"). Žižek wrote, "You can say, therefore, that if, on the one hand, it is the human subject's natural tendency to subscribe to a certain worldview, to devote itself fully to some idea and so on, then, on the other, there is also a countertendency in it, stemming from the very nature of the reference to the symbolic order, to deny it, to add a question mark to that reference."¹⁸ Sasnal, as is clearly evident in his paintings and films, sides decisively with this anarchistic countertendency. His critique uses non-textual, non-symbolic – deliberately 'non-sensical' – qualities connected with imagination – he couples them with the visual (the picture and its 'muteness'). No wonder, therefore, that Sasnal calls his art "luxury-version punk."

Paulina Ołowska

Paulina Ołowska's projects reactivate, replay, appropriated aesthetic codes and strategies of the avant-garde and neo-avant-garde art (e.g. in the work *Alphabet*, 2005, based on Karel Teige's alphabet from the 1920s). The artist is more interested in the desires at the root of these aesthetic codes than in the codes themselves or their purpose. That is why, when referring to modernist projects (e.g. Esperanto in *Do You Speak Esperanto?*, 2002), the avant-garde

modular constructions and gratings, exploring the interface of modern aesthetics and contemporary design, and so on, she clearly separates the imaginary from the symbolic, emphasising her interest in the irreproducible vital optimism, the constant hope for the better, the energy of the perverse-vital striving towards the ecstasy of transforming oneself and the world (more in the essay on Ołowska in this book).

Robert Kuśmirowski

Through perfect imitations, faux objects⁹ or spaces¹⁰, situations in which we are unable to discern between a created object and a genuine document from the past, Kuśmirowski shows how much our perceptions and knowledge of the surrounding reality are but products of our psyche's and imagination's interpretative work. In this aspect, his practice represents a contemporary, baroque and decadent, version of the analytical art of the 1960s and 1970s, and in particular, the current which dealt with the analysis of the 'intelligence' of our perception ("it is impossible for us to see something that we cannot fit to a proper concept in our mind")¹¹. But whereas the conceptualists wanted to educate us, to teach our eyes (and, simultaneously, our minds) to perceive ever new things and phenomena, to deconstruct illusions and get through to the 'truth about reality' and so on, Kuśmirowski stresses that in experiencing the world we have to rely on representations, fantasies (e.g. about the past), which are more real for us than reality and historical truth¹². As Stach Szablowski writes about Kuśmirowski, "the avant-garde dreamed of art becoming part of 'real life'. Kuśmirowski, to the contrary, attempts to infect 'real life' with the fiction and artificiality of art."¹³ Kuśmirowski's aesthetic and emotional attitude towards the revitalisation of the past makes him significantly different from other contemporary artistic strategies focused on a critical interpretation and rewriting of the history of Polish culture and art of the recent years¹⁴. The artist tries to materialise his childhood memories and dreams, to revive the emotions that accompanied them, the sense of an intense, direct, imaginary, or, in fact, metaphysical, contact with the world. Of a similar function are his attempts to impersonate pioneers¹⁵, inventors from the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. This is connected with a longing for a world that would be less modern, less rational and less disenchanting. This is an attempt to return to a time when the world was full of passion, mystery, intense imaginative work. Says Kuśmirowski, "This is a matter of getting some

⁹ E.g. the paintings *Narutowicz* or *Mościce*.

¹⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London & New York, 1989, p. 120.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ E.g. the perfect copy of a railway car (Berlin Biennial, 2006), or the *Bicycle Marching Out*, Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst, Leipzig, 2003.

¹⁴ E.g. the installation *Double V* (CCA Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw 2003).

¹⁵ Such experiments were particularly characteristic for the Workshop of Film Form and Krzysztof Wodiczko (his earliest projects at the Foksal Gallery).

¹⁶ E.g. his latest project about Łódź's sewers (*Sewer*, Łódź, 2006).

¹⁷ S. Szablowski, *Zakazić życie sztucznością*, in: "Kultura," weekly supplement to the daily "Dziennik," July 14, 2006, p. 92-93.

¹⁸ Present in the work of Zbigniew Libera, Anna Niesterowicz, or Marysia Lewandowska and Neil Cummings.

¹⁹ Pilots, cyclists, photographers, and so on.

new, pure energy. Something that has its source in the most interesting period of my life. The time when the fascination with life, science, everything happening around us, was so immense I was creating my own unique spaces. [It was a period in my life, Ł.R.] when I was roughly between 10 and 20 years of age. So about 10 years ago this 'fairytale' quality in my life ended. Something changed. I became involved with, let's call it, physical creations. I was writing music pieces, making installations. The 'fairytale' was being packaged in concrete form. But I remembered that earlier I was able to build ever more complex worlds, concepts of the Universe's infinity – a great power of thought itself. Today I want to return to it, to feel that power again. I'd like to fulfil my dreams of that time, such as walking on the bottom of the sea in an old scuba diver suit. (...) This walking on the bottom is to restore the power of feeling that was characteristic for a child. Even bringing it back in memory is difficult. (...) It is the same case with the various old spaces I've been building – it is a means of experiencing something that seemed long lost. The idea alone that I can create something like this gives me nothing, but when the dream is fulfilled, it's a feeling of great power."¹⁶

Mentally enacting an invented figure, identifying with an imaginary character, are crucial for the development of our identity, especially in childhood. Kuśmirowski touches upon this when he creates the figure of Doctor Vernier, his personal history, his studio. The activity of the demiurge-like, Faustian doctor, who dreams of bringing into life or creating a new man, in itself becomes a figure of "becoming, creating yourself anew." On the one hand, Kuśmirowski's project is a return to the kitschy, extremely intense fantasies of childhood, while, on the other, becoming an important metaphor of the working of our imagination, its ability to create identifications, model them, enact thousands of roles, discard them and choose new ones, all in an endless process of 'becoming'. As Anselm Franke writes, "identity in itself is a kind of becoming. Identity: a phantasm, a solidified hallucination."¹⁷

Katarzyna Kozyra

Like Kuśmirowski, Katarzyna Kozyra points to art as a field where dreams can be fulfilled. Nevertheless, the artist uses it to impersonate until now only imagined roles. In her latest project, tellingly entitled *In Art Dreams Come True* (2003-2007), Kozyra tries to fulfil her childhood dream of becoming a

'real woman' and a 'star'. She realises her project of confronting her dream in a radical existential experience: a professional singing teacher and a drag queen teach her new skills, as the artist strives to identify fully with the dream ideal. At the same time, Kozyra stresses the impossibility of her project's full success, shows the failure inherent in it, perversely emphasising the imperfectness of reality vis-à-vis the perfection of a dream.

Pawel Althamer

Pawel Althamer rejects rational instruments and works to develop non-verbal, ritual, shamanistic, direct means of communication with the other or the world¹⁸. He uses very contemporary means to express the primal desire to contact other realities¹⁹. He rejects, in various ways, the order of the visible world – he believes in the redemptive power of the gesture, and, referring to existential categories such as spirituality, vigorousness, intensity of experience he proposes another imaginary revolt against the symbolic order. Althamer's practice lacks any sense of tragedy or decadence. It is marked instead by optimism (more characteristic for modernists than for postmodernists), vitality, unswerving faith in the possibility of transforming the world, in communication between its material and immaterial, symbolic and spiritual, dimensions, even if it was to be confined to his own experience.

Like Sasnal, Althamer pursues the Žižkian-Lacanian "Che vuoi?" pattern, but in a far more radical manner. Not in the metaphorical space of the work of art (as is the case with Sasnal's films or paintings) but in the space of his own existential experience. Althamer 'leaves' the order of reality in many ways: by using mind-altering substances (hallucinogens and other), stating that reality is a film, yet another spectacle, showing that reality is in itself a product of our imagination, is a phantasm. In the action *The Cosmonaut*, Althamer played the role of an extraterrestrial acquainting himself with the living conditions of an 'alien civilisation', that is, the inhabitants of Bydgoszcz and Praga, Warsaw. Of *Hallucinogens*, Anselm Franke wrote, "In many of the eight trips he undertakes in this fantastic work, Althamer speaks of the fear of being recognised by the world, projecting the notion of his own social form as a defensive camouflage technique which, after taking a drug or entering the state of hypnosis, he is unable to sustain. Perhaps that is why Walter Benjamin claims (in the defence of his hashish experiments) that



Robert Kuśmirowski interviewed by Sebastian Cichocki, *Białe ściany mnie przynębiają*, http://www.bunkier.com.pl/index.php?section=teksty_bunkier&sub=artysta&more=11



A. Franke, *Architektura polityczna, napięcia pomiędzy patologią i delirium*, "Piktogram" no. 2, 2005.



In this aspect, he appears as a continuator of the experiments, stemming from the same tradition, of Gutt and Raniszewski.



Developing and continuing, in a highly original fashion, the teaching method of Grzegorz Kowalski, with its openness towards the irrational and spiritual aspects of the human psyche, he also communicates with the strategies of the spiritually-minded faction of the modern avant-garde, e.g. artists such as Kazimir Malevich, but less so with the rational 'builders of a new, better world' such as Oskar Hansen.

the worst drug we stupefy ourselves with are we ourselves.”²⁰ In his actions, Althamer points to reality as the most powerful drug, taken everyday and from birth to death, replaces drug-induced narcosis with self-induced narcosis, replaces the everyday enacting of social roles with space travel and a visit to an ‘alien’ planet, and, finally, erases the distinction between the symbolic and the imaginary.

Cezary Bodzianowski

In Cezary Bodzianowski’s art, like in Pawel Althamer’s, reality is a medium. The artist works to reveal its phantasmal and spectacular dimensions²¹. Critics often use the ‘cinematographic metaphor’ to analyse Bodzianowski’s practice. Joanna Mytkowska writes, “Bodzianowski enters the world like one would enter the screen, behaves as if he were on set, and offers the accidental viewers the opportunity to view life as one views a film.”²² The purpose of Bodzianowski’s actions is to alter our perception of everyday life to create a situation where imagination can flourish in the most poetic, wildest variations, rather than remaining unconditionally subjugated to reality. The incredible bestiary of characters, figures, events, and situations that Bodzianowski creates and uses as vehicles to escape reality, is truly delightful. The way he subordinates reality to imagination with a few simple gestures caused the Foksal Gallery Foundation to identify him as a follower of Edward Krasiński’s strategy²³. Bodzianowski appears to be a heir to 1960s conceptual art, which tried to be an area where fantasy can come into existence without having to make compromises with the *reality principle*, and where it becomes an art that transforms, or *re-deems*, reality, an art that strives to become autonomous of reality. For Bodzianowski himself, however, a far more important point of reference, it seems, is the work of Marek Konieczny, his professor at the Warsaw Academy of Art. In the 1970s, Konieczny continued the 1960s modernist avant-garde revolt against the overly repressive and rationalised reality, attempting, at the same time, to root his art more deeply in reality. He viewed art as a component as natural for man’s existence as the imaginary, unpredictable, emotional, spiritual elements. Another thing Bodzianowski shares with Konieczny is the wealth and diversity of the means and methodologies employed in the process of poeticising reality.

In his very interesting interpretation based on the category of imagination, Jaroslaw Lubiak, starting with a Lacanian reversal of the real-phantasmal category²⁴, concludes that Bodzianowski “dispels the

mirage of reality,” trying to wake us up from reality and to tear off the illusion of the surrounding world²⁵.

Piotr Uklański

Piotr Uklański experiments with categories that govern the type of imagination characteristic for pop culture, and which are more connected with direct communication than with contemporary art, which in itself requires familiarity with a certain discourse. Paradoxically, Uklański’s works try to reconcile these two seemingly antagonistic worlds. The artist not so much attempts to deconstruct the visual phantasms of the beauty- and desire-based consumerist culture (as in the *Nazis* series) as rather tries to appropriate some of its elements, thus expanding the field of artistic expression. This is particularly evident in the 2006 work *Summer Love*²⁶. In this seemingly conventional feature film, Uklański treats love and violence, for instance, as yet another ‘formal element’ that art, busy exploring other areas, forgot about. He is interested in reinvesting art with the most primal, immersive experiences connected with the traditional narrative about life, death, desire, and so on, or, rather, in situating them on an equal footing with the seemingly more sophisticated codes of artistic communication²⁷.

Christian Tomaszewski

Tomaszewski initiates negotiations between various imaginary realities. He has often appropriated the works of other artists, performing various kinds of interventions into the space of the exhibition, into other people’s materialised fantasies (e.g. *Made in USA*, Prague Biennial, 2005, *Palimpsest Museum*, Łódź, 2004). His most recent work, *Of Chapels, Caves, and Erotic Hopelessness* (2006), in which the artist recreated, in gallery space, a corridor set from David Lynch’s *Blue Velvet*, continues in this ‘parasitic’ vein, taking the problem of mimesis into a wholly new dimension. Tomaszewski’s strategy is well described by what Michael Taussing wrote about archaic mimesis as an alternative science helping us, by physically and imaginatively reflecting the Other, to maintain the cohesion of social life, an empathic culture of life with others and nature (which was the function of mimesis in shamanism). Replacing the traditional truth-fiction relation with the fantasy-fantasy doublet, Tomaszewski revitalises the primal, pre-Enlightenment notion of mimesis. It no longer supports the modern ideologies dividing our experiences into the real and unreal, true and false, valuable (observation, cognition, analysis, science)

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A. Franke, op. cit.

21

E.g. in actions such as *Blind Man’s Buff*, when he walked Łódź’s streets with his hands handcuffed and a jacket thrown over his head, or *Świtezianka*, where, using a hydraulic ramp, he knocked at the windows of a top-floor apartment and talked to the inhabitants so roused from their sleep.

22

J. Mytkowska, *Zatrzymać się to poruszyć ziemię*, “Opcje” no. 3 (44), 2002.

23

Foksal Gallery Foundation, *The End of an Exotic Journey*, press release, Warsaw 2006.

24

“Reality is a phantasmal construction enabling us to mask the real of our desires.”

25

J. Lubiak, *Marzyciele i ich sny na jawie*, “Obieg” no. 1 (73), 2006, p. 22.

26

As well as in the *Joy of Photography* series.

27

Ukłański said, “Contemporary artist is ashamed of content, especially the elementary content. Just like once I became interested in designing those naïve little sun patterns, so today I’m interested in content. It is the last bastion in the contemporary art discourse that still hasn’t been integrated. Painting a narrative picture is, after all, kind of embarrassing. Unless the narration is extremely shallow and banal, and becomes a formal element. Which is precisely the way I used it. It’s a bit like in *Summer Love*: the characters enter the stage, enter the frame, deliver their lines, and leave the frame. (...) This is in fact what I find attractive - narration, content: a story unfolding between two people, of love, of impossibility.” Piotr Uklański, *Miłość jako element formalny*, “Piktogram” no. 4, 2006, p. 84.

and invaluable (intuition, imagination, dream). In his attempt to restore the sensual dimension of mimesis, Tomaszewski performs a risky transposition from one imaginary reality into another one, materialising in the space of the gallery a space previously existing in film. This enables the viewer to transgress the cinematographic “fantasy framework.”²⁸ Passing through a space originally conceived in David Lynch’s fantasy and then processed by Christian Tomaszewski’s imagination enables us to experience a temptation to abandon the structural network of the linguistic and social relationships of the symbolic order by which we are bound outside the gallery space. As a result, we can take a break from ourselves and find ourselves in a place (inside a film, in fact) that, sitting in the cinema, we travelled across many times in our imagination (abandoning our bodies and the problems connected with the terror of reality), identifying with the on-screen characters.

The above-mentioned strategies of Polish artists evidence how ethereal (artistic, for instance) imagination is becoming an avant-garde of the symbolic order; it is crucial in the forging of our individual future and the future of social life. According to Crapanzano, imagination offers us a foreboding of that which lies beyond our present experience and conditioning. The imaginary exists as a half-shadow of the symbolic, an aura capable of constantly redefining it, eluding its norms, fantasising about a wholly different, available only intuitively, order.

The work of these artists offers a chance for fulfilling Maurizio Catellan’s proposition (presented in the context of the very traditional Berlin Art Biennial) that the “transformation of reality can be effected only through far more complex processes than by directly connecting art with reality.”²⁹ The artists discussed above prove that art can transform reality by persistently establishing an alternative reality, one designing a different order, a different experience of the world. Such art becomes a handy tool facilitating the process of which Anselm Franke writes as of a “radical transgression in one’s imagination beyond the existing system of democratic capitalism, the intellectual Thatcherism of the lack of alternatives.. What a horror if you imagine a group of people (artists, curators, activists) trying together to imagine things differently.”³⁰



Just as Woody Allen enabled his characters to do in the *Purple Rose of Cairo*, and Poland’s Wojciech Marczewski in *Escape from ‘Freedom’ Cinema*.



M. Catellan, catalogue, 4. Berlin Biennial, Berlin 2006.



Anselm Franke, op. cit.

NEITHER REVOLUTION NOR CONSUMPTION

A Couple of Trends of Post-2000 Art


The Polish art of the first years of the 21st century shows a clear influence of its recent introduction to pop culture and consumer culture, to the free media market and rapidly changing lifestyles, where the ability to mobilise matters more than the celebration of community. Poland was modernising itself, forging, in the political disputes and social turmoil, its own democratic formula.


The dominant trend of the 1990s was critical art, that is, art that analysed the subject in the context of its susceptibility to the manipulations of power systems; an art investigating those systems' oppressive influence on the individual in a society redefining itself. It referred, therefore, to the dilemmas of early capitalism, speaking on behalf of the excluded. The representatives of critical art did not work together, but they nonetheless exerted influence as a formation. It was a small but highly diverse group of artists, among whom were, for instance, Paweł Althamer, Grzegorz Klaman, Katarzyna Kozyra, Zbigniew Libera, Robert Rumas, Alicja Żebrowska, or Artur Żmijewski. It is those artists that managed to most fully express the dilemmas of the Polish reality and who to this day remain significant figures on the Polish scene, in many cases enjoying international recognition as well. Critical art introduced a new formula of the artist's participation in the social reality, be it the reality of an experiment arranged for artistic purposes, or the real world in which the artist 'immerses' himself or herself. The latter model is one of co-participation, common experience, and self-experimentation. At the same time, it entails a problem well known to anthropologists: it is ambiguous, assuming both participation and observation at the same time.

In the new century, a symptomatic change occurred. The issue of the body lost its dominating role, and each of the above-mentioned artists went in a different direction. Klaman started investigating the problem of nationalism and analysing art institutions or the strategies of collecting and exhibiting art; Libera deals with the pop culture clichés present in the collective consciousness, defining the common

space of the common imagination, a memory modified by pop culture; Kozyra became involved with the *loci communi* of culture, such as beauty or the role of the artist, in the process venturing into fields previously inaccessible for her – opera and theatre – and the performativity that came to the fore in this decade represents an extremely important streak of her art; Althamer, in turn, began exploring, in an utterly non-sentimental manner, the phenomenon of art as a social space, art as community-building, accompanying that with an anti-institutional element. Only Robert Rumas and Artur Żmijewski seem to have remained faithful to the ideology of critical art established in the previous decade. Rumas has been an outsider by choice, judging, without nursing any illusions, the condition of the Polish democracy. Żmijewski, in turn, dealing with memory and the oppressiveness of power, perceived and accepted by individuals as the inevitable course of things, appeals for art that would have the power to stir up conflicts and the competence to 'study' the patterns of social behaviour¹. Żmijewski's art provoked a number of commentaries and polemics in the recent years, the most important of which came from critic Paweł Leszkowicz, who accused Żmijewski of making non-humanitarian and immoral art, of ignoring human rights. The debate represents, in fact, an attempt to summarise the achievements of critical art².

A new phenomenon in the first part of the present decade was the culmination of a women artists boom. For the first time in the history of Polish art, there were so many women artists on the scene and they were clearly visible. While they surely did not constitute a single formation just because of their gender, their art, to an extent at least, played a function similar to that played in the past by critical art. In the new reality, woman artists were bringing into focus that which was previously excluded from it, invisible, or permitted only as a margin. Woman art accompanied the maturation of the feminist discourse in Poland, was a commentary on it. Little remained after 2000 of distinguishing woman artists simply because they speak 'in their own voice' – they were assimilated by mainstream culture.

 A. Żmijewski, *Stosowane sztuki społeczne*, „Krytyka Polityczna” no. 11/12, 2007, p. 14-24.

 P. Leszkowicz, *Sztuka wobec rewolucji moralnej*, „Obieg” no. 2(72), 2005, p. 30-33, see also www.obieg.pl/text/pl_rewolucja_moralna.php

The phenomenon is well described by a term borrowed from the title of Piotr Gruszczyński's book: *Patricides*³. The book is about a new generation of theatre directors, but the women visual artists similarly performed a 'patricide', a killing of the dominant authority complex that defined artistic values. After 1989, the situation in this regard became pluralistic and women artists in order to be noticed no longer had to lean on male authority – that of their professor, partner, or other patron.⁴ Numerous exhibitions of women's art, of various ranks, official and independent, from Bielska Gallery cyclical *Women About the Woman* (1996, 2000, 2007), through the *White Mazurka*, curated by Anda Rottenberg⁵, to the independent *Woman's Day*, organised since 2004 by the ex-girls duo, all confirmed that woman artists speaking in a language not adapted to the dominant model entered the field of mainstream culture. Another thing that could be noticed after 2000 is the fact that the youngest generation women artists use the feminist discourse as something already entrenched, conscious. Some use it to tell their own, intimate, stories without exploiting its subversive potential (Basia Bańda, Eliza Galey). Others, however, such Anna Okrasko or Anna Maria Kaczmarska, continue the emancipating campaign. Those who had gained recognition earlier now reaffirmed their position. Zofia Kulik became a classic of modernity, Elżbieta Jabłońska won the Deutsche Bank Foundation award for the best young artist⁶, Julita Wójcik had a retrospective exhibition at, among other things, the Arsenal in Białystok (2005), while Jadwiga Sawicka had exhibitions at, among other things, the Zachęta National Art Gallery and Bunkier Sztuki Contemporary Art Gallery (2003) or at the CCA Ujazdowski Castle (2006).

It is worth taking a closer look at the changes that Elżbieta Jabłońska's art underwent. Initially her works consisted in imbuing modern forms of art with previously marginalised content – there was a lot of intimacy there, maternity, kitchen, family. It was a play in which the artist assumed a role and maintained a distance towards both herself and towards the artist's role as a creator. Gradually, Jabłońska ever more clearly addressed her work at different

excluded and needy groups. The action *Helping* provided for a wholly equal relationship between the artist-caregiver and her 'patients'. In 2005, Jabłońska made a neon inscription *Is Your Mind Full of Goodness?* that in itself represents a perfect commentary to the forms of contemporary art. Jabłońska's practice involves a certain humanitarian formula that, besides solidarity, the notion of community and the artist's place in it, is becoming an important issue in the Polish art of today.

In the reflection on the changes in woman art it is worth mentioning one of the most sensational artistic events of the last decade: in 2003, Zuzanna Janin staged her own funeral⁷. Though it provoked a lot of controversy, the event reflects a participation in the great artistic narratives. The project involves motifs such as an obsession with death, mourning, and memory, that is, themes that have dominated in Polish art in the second half of the decade. Also present in this work is an element of female masochism.

Attempting to capture and name the changes in artists' approach to reality were two exhibitions designed at the Ujazdowski Castle by Ewa Gorządęk and Stach Szablowski: *Scene 2000*⁸ and *Really, the Young Are Realists*⁹ (2002). The two shows laid emphasis on artists' attitude towards reality, showed their opening towards everyday life, their experience, common to everyone, of life's ordinariness on the level of both visual sensitivity and the themes explored. The probing, initiated by the two exhibitions, of the condition of Polish art continues to this day. Preparations for the creation of various institutional collections or exhibitions of already existing collections have been part of this trend; providing an opportunity for taking a fresh look on the tradition of the avant-garde and modernism, but also attempting to notice new elements in it. One can mention here the great anniversary exhibition *Beware of Exiting Your Own Dreams. You May Find Yourself in Someone Else's* at Zachęta National Art Gallery in Warsaw (important if only because of the fact that it was curated by Harald Szeemann¹⁰), which offered an unorthodox view of the Polish tradition. What was acclaimed is not so much the selection of the works made by



P. Gruszczyński, *Ojcobójcy. Młodzi zdolniejsi w teatrze polskim*, Warsaw 2003.



What is more, they actually started opposing those authority figures, one example being Anna Okrasko's exhibition about her professor, Leon Tarasewicz: *She-painter. A Wife for the He-painter*, Art Academy, Warsaw, 2003, or her graduation work, *My Professor Paints Stripes, and I Paint Polka Dots Because It's More Feminine This Way*, Wizytująca Gallery, Warsaw, 2004.



White Mazurka, Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, Berlin, 2003; Bunkier Sztuki Contemporary Art Gallery, Cracow, 2004, curator: Anda Rottenberg.



Views, Deutsche Bank Foundation Award, 1st edition, 2004.



Zuzanna Janin, *I've Seen My Own Death*, 2003.



CCA Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw, 2000.



CCA Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw, 2002.



Zachęta National Art Gallery, Warsaw, 2000-2001.

the renowned Swiss curator as his a-historical juxtapositions, e.g. Paweł Althamer's self-portrait next to those of Jacek Malczewski¹¹. However, it was not an altogether surprising proposition because it was based on the Polish romantic stereotype. It was caricatured sometime later when the well-known movie actor Daniel Olbrychski stormed into the Zachęta with a sabre in his hand to destroy his own image as a Nazi in Piotr Uklański's famous exhibition¹².

The history of most recent art was also being revised in numerous presentations of the collections founded under the Sign of the Times National Culture programme initiated by then-culture minister Waldemar Dąbrowski in 2004. The programme, run by local governments, render great services to the local art communities. For the first time after 1989, the government introduced a long-term, 2004-2013, programme for supporting and stimulating artistic life by founding local collections and museums. Despite initial doubts, concerning chiefly the very rationale of founding so many (16) collections which, if only because of their number, have to be similar to each other, the present shape of those collections suggests the funds spent on them have not been wasted¹³. Their focus is usually on locality, though always in reference to the main trends of Polish art in general. One of the programme's aims was also to encourage the main cities to develop a network of museums that would have the custody of the newly founded collections. This idea has so far not been fulfilled.

The fascination with banal life and the everyday reality emerged with the début, in the late 1990s, of the generation born in the 1970s. The exhibition *Dream of a Provincial Girl*, organised in a private apartment in Sopot in 2000 by Julita Wójcik, Paulina Ołowska, and Lucy McKenzie, has come to be recognised as the first powerful manifestation of that which became the trademark of the artists of that generation¹⁴. The trend has also been dubbed neo-banalism. The term, coined by the milieu of the *Lampa* and *Raster* art zines, was broad but hardly precise. The kind of art that stemmed from the acceptance of everyday life and modest means of expression, e.g. the painting practice of the members of the former group Ładnie, or even Oskar Dawicki's, was promoted by *Raster*. Neo-banalism encompassed art that at the time seemed anti-metaphysical and confined itself to that which is visible on the surface. In this context, one can also mention the work of Agata Bogacka or Zbigniew Rogalski. Though new banalism did not completely shun the analysis of art institu-

tions, consumerist lifestyles, or the influence of the mass media and advertising on the image of the world, it generally emphasised artists' individuality and alienation from society.

Emerging concurrently was self-centred and ironic art that dealt with the artist's role and position in society. Without hiding its scepticism about the significance of this role, that art focused on a humorous analysis of the mechanisms according to which art institutions and their officers function. Groups such as Azorro¹⁵, Wunderteam¹⁶, or the duo Magisters¹⁷ became specialised in the ironic approach. Important inspirations for it came surely from the boredom, repetitiveness, and certain ritualism of Polish artistic life; the three groups also shared a similar strategy that consisted in circling around art rather than making it. The groups did away with the conviction, strongly rooted in Poland, that art has to be serious and the artist cannot demonstrate a sense of humour and distance towards himself. Wunderteam and Magisters especially presented themselves in embarrassing situations, creating a kind of timid, art-world Jackass-type performances. Today, however, this ironic and irreverent model has become somewhat worn.

The opposite model seems more important and more widespread. Art is no longer treated as a game or source of entertainment, artists again think about it seriously. Irony has lost its significance, and things that seemed trifle reveal their second face: Oskar Dawicki turns out to be not only a lampooner but also a profoundly tragic artist¹⁸ grappling with a sense of existential void, and Agata Bogacka's paintings reveal autobiographical, depressive content¹⁹.

The most recent years saw a triumphant return of the themes of history and memory, which have always existed in Poland as an important point of reference for artistic activity understood as a result of social experiences, which have also shaped the collective unconscious. Following the 1990s, when artists took a divorce with history and busied themselves instead with the emerging young Polish democracy, memory as a theme started regaining its place thanks to the work of several milieus. One of those is the circle of Grzegorz Klaman and the Gdańsk-based Wyspa Art Institute. Aneta Szyłak organised there, among other things, the exhibitions *BHP*²⁰ and *Dockwatchers*²¹, with especially the last one directly exploring the theme of "cultural memory, its aberrations, repetitions, and shifts."²² A slightly different, but related, strategy was adopted by the

¹¹ A. Pieńkos, *Czy mamy własne sny? Po jubileuszu Zachęty*, „ResPublica Nowa” no. 6/2001, p. 67-71.

¹² P. Uklański, *The Nazis*, curator: Adam Szymczyk, Zachęta, 2000. Szeemann's exhibition became famous in Poland because of another scandal, caused by deputies of the far-right League of Polish Families, who physically attacked Maurizio Cattelan's sculpture representing pope John Paul II (*La Nona Ora*, 1999) for being allegedly blasphemous.

¹³ P. Kosiewski, *Dwa lata szesnastki*, „Tygodnik Powszechny” no. 18/2006.

¹⁴ Among the exhibition's Polish participants was also Rafał Bujnowski.

¹⁵ Founded 2001, line-up: Oskar Dawicki, Igor Krenz, Wojciech Niedzielko, Łukasz Skąpski.

¹⁶ Founded 2004, line-up: Wojciech Duda, Rafał Jakubowicz, Paweł Kaszczyński, Maciej Kurak.

¹⁷ Existed 2000-2002, line-up: Hubert Czerepok, Zbigniew Rogalski.

¹⁸ As shown by the exhibitions *A Decade of Painting*, Bunkier Sztuki, Cracow, 2005, and *At the Very Centre of Attention*, Part 2, CCA Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw 2005-2006.

¹⁹ Agata Bogacka, *Heart*, Raster, Warsaw, 2006.

²⁰ Instytut Sztuki Wyspa, Gdańsk, 2004, curator: Aneta Szyłak.

²¹ Instytut Sztuki Wyspa, Gdańsk, 2005, curator: Aneta Szyłak.

²² More on that exhibition at www.wyspa.art.pl

Foksal Gallery Foundation in their important publications redefining – in the contemporary context – the work of modern artists such as Edward Krasiński, Henryk Stażewski, or Oskar Hansen.

In this context, one should also mention Mirosław Bałka, whose art started to be interpreted in relation to the memory of the Holocaust only when Bałka made a series of minimalist videos about Auschwitz (2003). Similar themes were explored by Rafał Jakubowicz, and one cannot but mention here Robert Kuśmirowski and his endless throwing together, DIY-ing, and recreating – or rather creating – of fake historical objects, very much in the spirit of Tadeusz Kantor. The distortions of history and the mass media's influence on its image were the main theme of Zbigniew Libera's widely commented *Co robi łączniczka*²³. The themes of history and memory are also being discovered in works where no one noticed them before. Jadwiga Sawicka's exhibition *Problems with Memory*²⁴ revealed a whole new level of meaning in her work, especially that the paintings and text installations were shown next to a documentary video by Joan Grossman who searched for traces of her Jewish ancestors in eastern Poland.

The newly found interest in history resulted also in exhibitions reinterpreting historical phenomena, restoring to public consciousness forgotten periods in art and underestimated artists. There are still many blank pages and ignored aspects in Polish art. Part of this trend were Ewa Partum's exhibitions organised by Aneta Szytak in Gdańsk, and Dorota Monkiewicz in Warsaw²⁵. One should also mention here curator Łukasz Ronduda at the CCA Ujazdowski Castle in Warsaw and his work bringing the Polish neo-avant-garde of the 1970s back into the circulation²⁶, as well as the exhibitions of Andrzej Szewczyk²⁷ or Andrzej Pawłowski – with a monumental catalogue²⁸.

Criticism, Censorship, and Art Institutions

The Polish artistic life after 2000 has been characterised, on the one hand, by significant impetus, reflected in a large number of participants and events, and, on the other, by minute, though growing, public interest. Despite its high quality and active participation in the social and political reality, art has suffered from the lack of a genuine dialogue with the intellectual elites. It is plagued by a kind of alienation: a huge, but dauntful, longing for exerting social influence.

Contemporary art in Poland has been the domain of, above all, young people. In the 1990s, besides pro-

fessional periodicals, art appeared also in pop culture magazines such as *Machina* or *Fluid*, and after 2000, also in the Cracow-based *Przekrój*. A new generation of critics and writers emerged, and their collaboration with the glossy magazines was driven by a desire to part with tradition and go with the spirit of the times. The decade brought a change here. The discourse moved again to specialist art periodicals. Neither mass-audience writing, attractive for the reader but trivialising the subject, nor academic writing inspired by the post-structuralisms, resulted in Poland in a pluralism of critical views and styles; many themes, initiatives or artists remained 'invisible', outside criticism's scope of interest. All that produced a temporary stagnation that was overcome by the arrival of the Internet. The new medium was pioneered in Poland by *Fototapeta*, which was established on-line as early as in 1997. One of the first on-line magazines was *Raster*, with a web presence since 2000. Others soon followed suit, such as *artmix* (since 2001), a magazine on art and feminism. *Magazyn Sztuki* also moved on-line, creating a kind of database, an archive of texts. In 2004, the spam. art.pl portal was launched, run by Łukasz Guzek, and *Obieg* was reactivated, and in 2003 Bunkier Sztuki Contemporary Art Gallery launched its new website which, among other things, features an art zine. The internet 'revolution', the short response time, the ease of discussion offered by the internet, all meant that paper magazines, read in the previous decade, such as *Exit* or *Format*, lost in significance. Today, the most popular paper magazines are *Obieg* and *Piktogram*, as well as, aimed at a broader audience, *Arteon*. One emerging force is a revamped *Czas Kultury*, a magazine on culture and anthropology. Still, much of today's critical ferment owes to the re-activation of *Obieg*. In its on-line version (www.obieg.pl), the periodical, published by the CCA Ujazdowski Castle, plays the role of the debate's moderator and initiator. Its variety of texts, authors, and writing and interpretation styles, its open discussions of important subjects not ignoring the conflict areas, its polemical spirit – are doubtless to the credit of its editors, Grzegorz Borkowski and Adam Mazur. The issue most pivotal for them is surely a reevaluation of the Polish avant-garde tradition, art's involvement, its political dimension, and ethical issues.

The last couple of years saw the emergence of a wholly new phenomenon in the shape of critics' blogs, adding a boost to the individual critics' position. Above all, the blogs show the personality of



A collaboration with a writer Darek Foks.



A joint exhibition with Joan Grossman. *Problems with Memory*, Zachęta National Art Gallery, Warsaw 2002.



E. Partum. *The Legality of Space*, Art Institute Wyspa, Gdańsk, 2006, curator: Aneta Szytak; E. Partum, *Self-identification*, Królikarnia, Warsaw, 2006, curator: Dorota Monkiewicz.



E.g. 1, 2, 3... *Avant-gardes*, CCA Ujazdowski Castle, 2006-2007, curators: Łukasz Ronduda, Florian Zeyfang.



I Carry a Mirror in Front of Myself. Homage to Andrzej Szewczyk, Galeria Sektor 1, Katowice, 2004; Galeria Szara, Cieszyn 2004, curators: Roman Lewandowski, Joanna Wówrzeczka.



Andrzej Pawłowski 1925-1986, BWA Katowice, National Museum in Wrocław, Bunkier Sztuki Contemporary Art Gallery, Cracow 2002.

their authors, previously hidden behind their texts, accompanying those texts with less official views, riskier statements, facilitating rapid communication. Blogs are run by, among others, Iza Kowalczyk, Kuba Banasiak, Piotr Stremski, Piotr Bazyłko, or Krzysztof Masiewicz²⁹.

Art in Poland has grappled with its typical alienation, additionally exacerbated by the rapid changes in culture, heading towards the neo-liberal model³⁰, and by the Polish tradition with its deeply rooted mistrust in the visual arts³¹. The Polish mass media are often prepared to attack art viciously, seeing its post-avant-garde mutation as a pretext for sensational stories. On the other hand, the media can also successfully promote artists, as evidenced by the attention-drawing *Polityka's* Passports award³².

Casting a dark shadow on Polish art after 2000 has been the case of Dorota Nieznalska, brought to court in 2002 for allegedly 'offending religious feelings' (art. 196 of the Penal Code) with her work *Passion*. The liberal elites, mistrustful of cutting-edge contemporary art, faced a dilemma – clearly reflecting their inconsistency – of how to defend the freedom of speech on the example of a work they did not like. As a result, Nieznalska's case was dismissed as just a scandal – neither the intellectual elites nor the art community managed to stand firmly in the artist's defence, obviously not realising the far-reaching consequences of what happens when art is manipulated for political purposes. That was not the only case of political or cultural censorship in Poland. The public's immaturity and mental instability, skilfully exploited by the politicians- and the media – resulted in a number of cases where artistic events were censored, which was accompanied by a certain over-eagerness on the part of the prosecuting authorities. As a result, many galleries and curators started self-censoring themselves, especially when it came to works violating the cultural taboos or tickling with religious issues. Instances of censorship in the field of art are collected by spam.art.pl, and the Polish section of the AICA set up in 2004 a team for studying the issue. Still, the Polish art community remains

divided and helpless towards the problem. At play are the Polish law, the artistic community's overwhelming a-political character, and the issue of the art institutions' responsibility for their programmes. A clear answer to the question of whether a "cultural war is under way in Poland"³³ has never been given.

In the first years of the 21st century, contemporary art exhibitions often aspired to the entertaining function. Institutions have been changing the way they formulate their programmes, paying more and more attention to marketing. At the same time, the sense has returned that a sound, well thought-out programme, rather than one based on popular but often cheap exhibitions imported from abroad (package shows'), is the foundation of success.

Institutionally, there has been little change after 2000. Newly founded public institutions³⁴ have still not become fully operative, whereas several new commercial galleries, notably Grażyna Kulczyk's Old Brewery in Poznań, and Atlas Sztuki in Łódź, have successfully competed with their public counterparts. Thanks to Aneta Szyłak's and Grzegorz Kłaman's efforts, a non-commercial institution with the ambition of becoming an arts centre was founded during the time – the Instytut Sztuki Wyspa³⁵.

*

Art in Poland has been haunted by the myths of revolution and consumption. 'Revolution' is the artists' desire to be politically involved and to actively change the social reality, whereas 'consumption' stands for the desire to attain a standard of living and to be successful. These conflicting dreams, though they seem typical for late capitalism, stem in Poland rather from the experience of living until 1989 under communism. But in reality the two myths are only seemingly conflicting. They reveal the presence of a complex that is often reflected in art. It is a profound sense of being different from the Western standards, a sense of otherness stemming from the uniqueness of Polish, or Central European, experience. It seems that Polish art has already learned how to express this separateness of experience in the language of contemporary forms of artistic expression.

29

These blogs and many others can be found at www.obieg.pl

30

Typical for this system is a stalemate between thinking about art as a field of socially aware action and confining it to galleries. The fact that art's social influence is a 'fable' is ignored.

31

A recurring motif in the post-2000 discourse was the question why the Polish intellectual elites ignore contemporary art – see, for instance, a survey in the "Kresy" quarterly: Magdalena Ujma, *Dlaczego polscy intelektualisci nie lubią sztuki współczesnej? Próba diagnozy stanu rzeczy*, "Kresy" no. 4(56)/2003, Piotr Bernatowicz, entries in the Notes Krytyka blog, www.piotrbernatowicz.blox.pl/html/obieg.pl

32

First awarded in 1993. By the way, artist awards are still a rare thing in Poland, and Poland lacks an award as significant and able to identify important new artists as Czech Republic's Chalupcecky Award, or Slovakia's Oskar Čepan Award.

33

"Zeszyty Artystyczne," Art Academy Poznań, June 2004. The publication features materials from a panel discussion under the above title, carried out at the Poznań Art Academy in January 2004.

34

The collections created under the Sign of the Times programme have no official seats yet; the Warsaw Museum of Modern Art, formally founded, is in organisation, and the Rondo Sztuki in Katowice remains in project phase.

35

Exists since 2004.