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The Demeaned Avant-Garde and the Art of Cognition¹

Attori pittori

In 1979, at the exhibition *L'avanguardia polacca 1910–1978. S.I. Witkiewicz, costruttivismo. artisti contemporanei* [Polish Avant-Garde 1910–1978. S.I. Witkiewicz, Constructivists, Contemporary Artists] staged at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome, Tadeusz Kantor's works were displayed alongside pieces by Stanisław Witkiewicz (also known as Witkacy), constructivists, and young Polish avant-garde. On being juxtaposed with the latter, the artist decided on an addition to his part of the show with the aim of “completing” it (*L'avanguardia*, 1979) – the adjoining rooms were to host an exposition of artworks by Cricot 2 Theatre actors (*Le opere*, 1979: 94–95). Upset about the limited space in the Palazzo put at his disposal by curator Ryszard Stanisławski (The transcription, 2013: 1), he still managed to provide a selection of avant-garde works that were bold, numerous and manifold, while demonstrating a distinctive style that tended to be odd, pitiful and astounding. A visit to the sections arranged by Kantor encouraged reflection on the role he himself, as well as the circles gathered around the Krakow Group and the Foksal Gallery in Warsaw occupied in the Polish world of art.

The white walls and grid panels were brimming with paintings, drawings and photographs delineating Kantor's artistic career; here and there they were grouped in dense clusters. Displayed in close proximity to each other were emballages, “emballaged” figures from the 1960s and 70s, umbrellas dating from the poetic period attached to uniformly painted stretchers, works from the *Multipart* cycle related to Kantor's campaign that involved “lending” his pieces to friends who were then supposed to creatively contribute to them, held at the Foksal Gallery in 1970 (the exhibited pieces were not original), a “wrapped” board or wheelbarrow in a painting or next to it, from the cycle *Everything Hangs by a Thread* (1973) – a series that adopted an ironic approach to minimalism and conceptual art. Accumulated works turned the exposition into a peculiar assemblage, an aggregation, bringing to mind the Popular Exhibition of 1963 (or, according to Kantor, the *Anti-Exhibition*). This

1 The text was previously published in the exhibition catalog: *Biel kolorem śniegu. Tadeusz Kantor i artyści z kręgu Cricot 2. Rzym 1979 / Art as the Colour of Snow. Tadeusz Kantor and the Artists from the Cricot 2 Circle. Rome 1979*), Cricoteka, Kraków 2017, ISBN 978-83-61213-02-4, p. 119–138.

model of exposition connoted the question of the imposed and covert world order, presumably consistent with the artist's intention. Ubiquitous drawings transformed the place into a studio of the director who continued sketching ongoing ideas, designs, rehearsals and performances. Theatrical objects – a coalescence of a wanderer and his luggage from the happening-based production of *The Water Hen* (1967) or a boy at a desk from *The Dead Class* (1975) – visualised the final results of the sketches. They elucidated the process in which the artist's creative will, operating in the "poor small room of the imagination," overstepped the boundary between drawing, painting, theatre, literature and his own memory. They showed that "poor" matter could be of service to paradoxes and the kind of art that upheld Dadaist and Surrealist tradition as well as that which disregarded the principles of irony, akin to the wit of Fluxus founders. Photographs were hung in rows, secured to cords with clothes pegs like a line of washing, across the central room, reminiscent of Rauschenberg's or Oldenburg's pop-art pieces, like "memory negative" drying in the darkroom. Or, perhaps, Craig's theatrical screens? It was indeed the theatre that was immortalised in those photographs, ever true to its poor Kantorian condition – at once violating the static nature of the photo and exhibited as a work of art. Theatricality, irony-stricken poetic mood and features typical of art installation pervaded one another.

Kantor's work was obviously overrepresented and yet, by a curious paradox, the abundance of exhibits only consolidated the impression that the viewer was confronted with destitution of the "lowest rank," disguising the artist's mastery of diverse experiences. This included traumatic episodes related to the absence of the artist's father and the wartime, evoked in a fashion that affirmed degradation, humiliation and deprivation, but also episodes that fostered freedom and thus enabled boundless art to appropriate and utilise the potential of degradation and poverty². Finally, there was also the joy of travelling and learning, both inspiring and provoking ironic distance. Noise, impermanence, constructed illusion (seemingly measurable, orderable and packable), futile effort, oscillation between laughter and sadness, the simplicity of whiteness, the randomness of daily life, and tragic fate in the cricotage *Where are the Snows of Yesteryear*,³ performed at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni as an accompanying event, united the sense of confusion and destructive nonsense occurring in the world with the mysterious suggestion of the unimaginable. Alluding to Surrealism and, slightly ironically, evoking the Bauhaus and constructivism, the

2 Dating from the 1960s, works from the cycle titled *Realność najniższej rangi* [Reality of the Lowest Rank], were listed at the beginning of the index of artworks as the earliest in terms of chronology, which was possibly also meant to indicate the origins of Kantor's style, cf. *Le opere*, 1979: p. 94)

3 There were three performances of the ca. 30 min cricotage in Rome (27–29 Jan 1979). The title originated from François Villon's *Ballad of the Ladies of Bygone Times*. The spectacle featured figures clad in white who pulled on a rope separating life from death. They included Geometrician metamorphosing into Rabbi, Big-Bellied Man wrapping a box, Individual with Newspapers commenting on headlines, This Well-Known Man wearing a uniform and the Last Judgment Machine. Bridegroom was "dragging" Bride, the tune of the Song of the Warsaw Ghetto was blending into a tango to which Cardinals danced, the sound of ripping a sheet of white paper turned out to be the sound of marching soldiers (Work – Where Are the Snows of Yesteryear, 2016).

play spotlighted the peculiar otherness of Kantor's avant-garde, determined by the force of its creator's personality. The avant-garde that was both Polish and Central European – strange, poor, extraordinary, and employed its own symbols to explore the notions of cognition, liberty, order and system in its own fashion, one that was truly unique and influenced by its history and experience.

An alternative and original approach to crucial avant-garde concepts manifested itself as a distinctive trait when Kantorian accumulation and the appearance of triviality gave way to *attori pittori*, or “actors-painters” as they were referred to by the maestro (*Kantor racconta*, 1979). In a detailed plan prepared by Tadeusz Kantor, works by the artists associated with the Cricot 2 Theatre were to be exhibited in rooms immediately adjacent to the one housing his own oeuvre, connected by a separate passage as though one “entered them from Kantor” (eventually the viewers stepped from one room directly into another)⁴. The *Le opere di Tadeusz Kantor. I pittori di Cricot 2. Il teatro Cricot 2* [The Work of Tadeusz Kantor. Cricot 2 Painters. Cricot 2 Theatre] exhibition, which took place within the framework of the *Polish Avant-Garde 1910–1978* show, was curated by Konstanty Węgrzyn and Achille Perilli. It was intended to be presented in Milan later that same year.

Our stifled revolution

Maria Jarema always occupied an important position in Tadeusz Kantor's memory and it was only natural that her pieces were included in the show⁵. Deceased long before 1979, Jarema nevertheless continued to be seen by Kantor as an intelligent, critical, uncompromising and vigorous artist with an inclination to flout conventions and well acquainted with the French Avant-Garde, highly skilled in creative techniques, and quite ingenious in developing them. Represented by monotypes and a theatre costume, her work distinctly marked its presence at the show (*Le opere*, 1979: 95; Blum, 1965).

In the exhibition catalogue published for the Milan display, the reproduction of a grinning multi-eyed head from the *Ekspresje* [Expressions] cycle (1955) serves as a visual introduction to Jaremińska's (as she was called) oeuvre (Eventually the work was only featured in the catalogue, *Le opere*, 1979: 35). Although it is drawn with thick, bold lines, the head seems to be quivering and thus multiplying itself in the Cubist fashion, to be seen at different times, from various perspectives, and on diverse planes. Is this caused by the memory of the omnipresence of soldiers and the related,

4 This is the most probable version, according to what can be seen in the mentioned film. It may be that Kantor successfully insisted on separate rooms for the artists from his circle, which would be inconsistent with curator Stanisławski's intentions (in exhibition plans, stored in Achille Perilli's archive, rooms adjacent to those devoted to Kantor's work bear the names of the artists participating in the show *L'avanguardia polacca 1910–1978*). The artists recall that Maria Stangret-Kantor, Maria Jarema and Kazimierz Mikulski had separate rooms or room sections at their disposal (Kantor racconta, 1979; The transcription, 2013: 3).

5 Maria Jarema (1908–1958) graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków, a sculptor and painter employing the techniques of tempera, gouache, watercolour, and monotyping in her work; she also designed theatre costumes. She co-created the Cricot 2 Theatre from the very beginning in 1955 (The transcription, 2013: 3; Blum, 1965)

not only wartime, circumstances? Or might this be the head of Henryk Wiciński who suffered from tuberculosis and died in pain, like many friends of the artist, during the occupation? (Blum, 1965:13) Or is this a manifestation of the “spirit of the age” as a similar head can be seen, for instance, in one of Henry Moore’s sculptures from the 1950s (e.g. *Openwork Head No. 2*, 1950)? Or, perhaps, an expression of the uncompromising nature of the artist and all the things she had lived through that provided her with sufficient reason to feel frustration and humiliation, pain, loneliness, strain, aggression and anger? Perhaps they converted into an assault on motion, lines and matter, forcing the grinning into a dance of forms, splitting identity into a multitude of roles and images interpretable in countless ways?

In a photograph taken at the exhibition, stored in Achille Perille’s archive, there are five other works visible on the wall. Are these more soldiers? The small figures proliferated in *Kompozycja nieokreślona II* [Indefinite Composition II] (1958) as five “tentacle-like” heads upon spindly torsos/stems? They are striding, jumping and dancing on a slanting plinth that looks like a black building with an opening where the door should be. Or is this a stage? The background takes the form of a yellow rectangle... Light, perhaps? So, could this be a theatre or dance performance? After all, there are also small “tulle” screens/veils/skirts that somehow appear mobile... Or, perhaps, the whole thing is a biting mouth once again? Ambiguous symbols or abstraction? There will be more heads, for instance in the *Wyrazy* [Demonstrations] cycle, similar to splayed trees.

Already at that time, similarly to *Rytm I* [Rhythm I] (1957) and *Rytm II* [Rhythm II] (1957), the artist is increasingly keen on multiplying and uniting un-expected figures only to dismantle them again and create mosaic- or cutout-like fragments, incorporated into the background or extracted from it. She investigates shapes, replicating and piling them, moving them around in a variety of ways to finally cut through a form in an attempt to avert the danger of exaggeration. She recreates it anew and opens the space upon a plane with a rhythmical gesture. She breaks space-time like a composer, a choreographer or a conductor dictating dance-like fluid spatial relations between shapes. She juxtaposes, overlays, grades or leaves space empty and examines its relationships with an object. This is why in *Rytm* [Rhythms] blots shiver, vibrate and hollow the surface of the background. Perhaps, this is the unceasing turmoil of the revolution Jaremińska sympathised with? Even though she was not able to give it proper expression in her work? In a way that would resolve all established orders?

The motif of taking or tearing apart will reappear in costumes designed by Maria Jarema as she applied her experimental technique to the theatrical/sculptural realm, for instance in the work prepared for the play titled *Circus* (1957)⁶, displayed on a frame. Costume was meant to impose discipline on the actor – to direct gestures and behaviour on stage, and abolish everyday order or to imitate it.

Colour was another instrument for breaking a shape. Initially, colour was scarcely present in the artist’s work: in the form of two yellow patches against a black-and-white figure, or disconnected red, yellow, blue or grey excerpts/planes placed

⁶ A play by Kazimierz Mikulski, directed by Tadeusz Kantor, costumes and make-up by Maria Jarema. The production was a continuation of Kantor’s concept of emballages, first introduced in the 1956 production of *Cuttle-Fish*, (T. Kantor, 2005: p. 295)

against a white background. The painting in question is *Penetracje VII* [Penetrations VII] (1958), a study of colour, motion and space but, to search deeper, perhaps also a sign of the revolution which, although stifled, was still smouldering, or certain erotic associations. At the same time, Jarema continued to experiment with lying monotypes, transferred onto the back of the pressed surface with a drawing gesture from above, from the outside (Blum, 1965: 87). The final result was unpredictable. In the synthetic perfection for which the artist was known, a play with uncertainty was going on, testing the border between symbolism and abstraction.

Maria Jarema's strongly accentuated presence at the exhibition was not only the result of Kantor's predilection for the artist or the fact that she had been a co-founder of the Cricot 2 Theatre. According to Helena Blum, "her work was the centre of attraction for two generations" of Polish artists, and she stood out from the global art world by being "distinctly Polish" (Blum, 1965: 90, 98) Tadeusz Kantor intuited that Maria Jarema was in fact a co-creator of the individual Kantorian landscape of the Polish Avant-Garde. An avant-garde whose energy, just like Maria Jarema's, was repeatedly stifled, suppressed and subjected to rules which twisted its essence; it was demeaned and pushed even below the status of the "lowest rank."

What a beautiful degradation...

A scene in the film *Kantor racconta Kantor* shows the actors/painters and Tadeusz Kantor sitting at a table and conversing under *Niebieskie niebo* [Blue Skies] (1970) and *Szare niebo* [Grey Skies] (1970) by Maria Stangret-Kantor (Stangret-Kantor, 2016: 105; Le opere 1979: 38–43)⁷, two paintings alternatively called *Niebo z rynną I* [Skies with Gutter I] and *Niebo z rynną II* [Skies with Gutter II]. Gutters filled with paints consistent with the colours named in the titles have been placed below the canvases on which pigments of matter are blurred by patches of light into an illusion of space in the Informel or Pictorialist style. As though clouds were penetrated by sunlight dispersing the mist and parting the filters of seeing applied to spatiality. This could be the culmination of the period devoted to *Pejzaże kontynentalne* [Continental Landscapes], created by the artist in the 1960s. Could it be them, once "confronted with a painted and a real wall," (M. Stangret-Kantor, 2016: 91, 105) that have evolved and – united with the matter of paint that is a means of creating illusion – seek ways to explore reality and inquire how reliable these ways are?

⁷ Maria Stangret was Tadeusz Kantor's wife from 1961. She participated in the following Cricot 2 Theatre productions: *Studnia, czyli głębia myśli* [Well, or the Depth of Thought] (pantomime, 1956), *W małym dworku* [Country House] (1961), *Wariat i zakonnica* [The Madman and the Nun] (1963), *Kurka wodna* [The Water Hen] (1967), *Szewcy* [The Shoemakers] (1972), *Nadobnisie i koczokodany* [Lovelies and Dowdies] (1973), *Umarta klasa* [The Dead Class] (1975), *Gdzie są niegdyśjsze śniegi* [Where are the Snows of Yesteryear] (1979), *Wielopole*, *Wielopole* (1980), *Niech szczeną artyści* [Let the Artists Die] (1985), as well as in all happenings staged by Tadeusz Kantor: *Cricotage* (1965), *Linia podziału* [The Dividing Line] (1966), *Wielki Ambalaż* [La Grand Emballage] (1966), *List* [The Letter] (1967), *Panoramiczny happening morski* [Panoramic Sea Happening] (1968), *Rozmowa z nosorożcem* [Conversation with a Rhinoceros] (1968), *Hommage à Maria Jarema* (1968), *Lekcja anatomii wedle Rembrandta* [Rembrandt's Anatomy Lesson] (1968, 1969, 1970, 1971).

Filters that control seeing may also be seen as imposed orders that seem to present a challenge to the creator's "artistic and research" paintings from the 1970s. A hopscotch diagram (*Gra w klasy* [Hopscotch], 1970), drawn in black upon a white surface and descending from the vertical picture to the horizontal floor, or lines setting even rows to organise a picture reminiscent of a magnified concertinaed page from a notebook (*Kartka z zeszytu [składana]* [Page from a Notebook (folded)], 1976) wanted to know the rules and whether they were conventional, violable, suspensible... Was there a possibility of formulating new ones? "When I set out to paint new *Pages from a Notebook*, when I face an empty canvas, I always have the feeling that this time I have to start anew and do everything with better care as though I were about to re-write in calligraphy the content of an old notebook in a new one" (Gorzadek, 2007) – the artist later commented.

The question about what hides behind reality with its ordering regulations kept reappearing in her work. This mysterious space that cannot be fathomed, presumably of the "lowest rank" (as Kantor would put it). This is the rank of the pawn positioned on a fragment of a chessboard, also sinking – on folded and broken steps – from a vertical plane to the floor (*Szachy* [Chess], 1974).

In Maria Stangret-Kantor's oeuvre truth is sought constantly. This is the kind of truth that falls beyond all rules, bright and pure, that may turn out to be nothing but an illusion when it chances upon human cognitive apparatus (in the reproduction published in the catalogue, a naked boy jumps through the spaces of a hopscotch diagram in a symbolic gesture; this, however, is merely a photograph...) (*Le opere*, 1979: 39). The tone she uses to ask about truth suggests simultaneously how it should be reached and uncovered. It was perhaps guaranteed by the poetic nature of her pieces, present not only in ambiguous and potential symbols, but also in Maria Jarema's output. By using ironic metaphors (broken rules, a pawn escaping power, measuring the infinity of a white plane with the finite metre [*Metr* (Metre), ca. 1974]), Stangret-Kantor applied zeugma amongst others. She also employed hyperbole, plainly pointing at the order governing everyday life. She violated, broke and bent it with the intention of battling and relativising. But she did all this gently, or even beautifully, dressing irony in a poetic and painter's costume. This girly/pupil's attire and its childlike tenderness often masked the tendency to cross boundaries. A wave may delicately flow around the frame – the threshold connecting the surface of the picture with the gallery floor – but it may also hijack and sink... Nevertheless, ambiguous symbols were unavoidable in visual poetry.

The symbolic/metaphoric type of sensitivity will be developed by the artist in her later work. A rolled up piece of paper with smudged letters will reappear in the future as a torn, crumpled, stained and partly burnt sheet in *Kartki zapisane gestem* [Pages Written by Gesture]. It will take the form of a new painter's homage (presumably containing traces of *Landscapes* "blurring" into *Skies*?) to figures whose lives were cruelly interrupted by history such as, for instance, Sergei Yesenin (Stangret-Kantor, 2016: 147, 189). Degraded, humiliated and eliminated, their artwork will nonetheless remain as a poetic reminder of beauty which was always present in their lives regardless of externally imposed orders.

A ceaselessly undermined system

The investigation of artistic orders and meanings, though less poetical and more science-related, also proved appealing to Zbigniew Gostomski, a pioneer of conceptual art in Poland and a Cricot 2 actor⁸. Invited to take part in the Rome show and perform in the cricotage, he contributed to the exposition a cycle titled *10 obrazów* [10 Paintings] (also known as *1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 /10/*), dating back to 1974, as well as a series of ten slightly smaller drawings. Gostomski created the cycle in response to the extremely strict principles of “mixing and applying paint to achieve colour harmony in the painting,” taught at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw” (Stangret L., 2012: 12). Using acrylic paints, the artist blended eight pigments which he then spread on equally-sized canvases (100 × 100 cm); in the middle of each painting he added a square contour in a pure colour, the ninth pigment that was not included in the mixture. The final result revealed a red square outline on a green background, a yellow one on a brown background, or a blue one on a different shade of brown. The tenth painting was covered by all pigments mixed in equal proportions; its dark green was turning into black. The rule, which could come across as obscure at times (for instance, reproductions printed in catalogues may fail to provide an adequate representation of colours), was explained by plates of the same size as the paintings, bearing numbers. “In plates divided into 360 small squares,” the artist “rendered the colour system into a numeral system where the numbers 1–9 corresponded with particular pigments” (Stangret L., 2012: 12). The repetition of a number formed a square contour on the surface of small squares bearing the other numbers in the decimal system with the exception of the number in the contour. The catalogue from the 1979 Milan exhibition contained only the plates with numbers (the Rome show comprised both paintings and drawings), along with the list of colours correlated with the digits, translated into Italian (“1. lemon yellow, 2. cadmium yellow, 3. lemon orange, [...] 8. Coeruleum, 9. ultramarine”), and the following note: “The choice of pigments in a given case has no particular meaning” (Stangret L., 2012: 12; *Le opere*, 1979: 45–47). All the plates were reproduced, including *10* in which the row of 1–6 repeated above the row of 7–9 connects with the next one starting with 1 and eventually causes confusion in the order of numbers. *Rozprawa o kolorze* [Treatise on Colour], as the artist referred to this practice (Matuszkiewicz, 2008), provides conclusive proof that painting with all its colours defies any systematic/linguistic rules. Its mystery, like the mystery of art itself, cannot be captured in a closed and finite system. Philosophical, logical and mathematical attempts have proven insufficient to explain the mysterious order of the world. Consecutive endeavours and discoveries reveal nothing but infinity.

After all, this was what Gostomski’s artistic experiments were about, including the numeral/logical/harmonious Fibonacci sequence increasing *ad infinitum*,

⁸ Zbigniew Gostomski co-created the Foksal Gallery circle and worked together with Tadeusz Kantor in the 1960s, taking part in *Cricotage* as well as the happenings *The Letter and Panoramic Sea Happening*. From 1971 Gostomski was a Cricot 2 actor (Repeater and Woman in the Window in the *Dead Class*; Grand Geometrician and Rabbi in *Where are the Snows of Yesteryear*; Soldier in *Wielopole, Wielopole*; General, Card Player, Kantor’s Mother in *Let the Artists Die*; Priest in *Nigdy tu już nie powrócę* [I Shall Never Return] (Stangret L., 2012: 13, 198)

seemingly “reduced” by Pascal’s triangle, but also musical references or allusions to James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (Stangret L., 2012: 10-12).

Infinity is almost directly indicated by Gostomski when he questions post-modern concept of the “end of the text” or, perhaps, comments on the experiment displayed in Rome and Milan: “I don’t think painting will come to an end as long as there is pigment” (*Nie przewiduję*, 2004: 150). The phenomenon of art extends beyond scientific logic, and the poetic quality (after all!) in the painter’s paradox reveals, beneath the strict order, what escapes it with its limitlessness.

Stripped mystery

The theatrical and poetic aspect was brought up again by Kazimierz Mikulski, another Cricot 2 actor,⁹ whose presence at the exhibition had already been denoted by the costume designed by Maria Jarema for his play *Circus*. Yet Mikulski was principally a painter and the exhibition featured works from his cycle *Wizje końca świata przy czarnej kawie* [Visions of the End of the World over Black Coffee], created in the 1970s. With a few straight, horizontal and vertical lines drawn with various degrees of delicacy on flat backgrounds – uniform (white, emerald green) or divided into several basic planes (e.g. black and yellow applied upon a surface painted over with alizarin crimson) – the artist hinted at a vague stage space. It is upon this stage – or rather in it as interpreters saw it as a space of imagination or surreal consciousness (Such suggestions can be found in numerous texts in the bibliography to this article) – that various objects appeared in a diverse range of positions: upright, horizontal, mounted on stands or suspended, as though they had been pasted like a collage onto the flat picture of the stage, although they also brought theatrical props to mind. There was a cross section of a cow with a distinctly marked skeleton in the middle, against a black and yellow background. There was also the horizontal line of a counter atop the back of the animal; both its ends were adorned with male busts “cut out” from prints. Were those scientists? The corners of the painting reveal sketched mechanisms, also “cut out”. Above the counter/stage was the triangle of the Eye of Providence, not without irony inquiring about the actual power of rational models of cognition and modern (avant-garde?) inventions. Was this “dream logic” typical of Mikulski’s work (Kitowska-Łysiak, 2002)? Or a metaphor of the powerlessness of scientific understanding? The powerlessness that becomes perfectly evident in the face of romantic imagination, surreal consciousness or, last but not least, metaphysics.

Birds and beetles shimmer with hues of yellow, red, brown, grey and sepia against a green background. Although they appear to be stuffed or cut out from an encyclopedia of biology, their lives are more intense, multicoloured, extreme and genuine than the life of high art represented by classic paintings. The type of art that imposes on space the geometry of linear perspective camouflaged by architecture, also employing a modern mechanism... Yet it is precisely in art – although not before Kazimierz Mikulski’s work – that the vanitas perspective, the skull, finally

9 In Cricot 2 productions Kazimierz Mikulski, the actor, appeared as an “obsessive trumpet player conjoined with his prop” and a “chronic suicide” in *The Water Hen* and *Loves and Dowdies* (Czartoryska, 2004 (1976): 15)

overshadows Florence or even the *Miracles of Saint Zenobius*.¹⁰ Poetic imagination triggers surreal, paradoxical and astonishing associations and it is these kinds of associations that open the subconscious mind. Is it this imagination that has been depicted metaphorically and almost directly in the painting of the torn and parted head from the portrait of Giuliano de' Medici, whose face has been replaced by the image of a bee? Is this a surrealist zeugma according to Mikulski? Others will call it appropriation art or Postmodernism with its tendency to combine all kinds of order in an unrestricted fashion...(*Sztuka zawłaszczania*, 2015)

Or perhaps Mikulski's universe of collage paintings is emblematic of the will to break free of any kind of order, of a hidden system (e.g. social roles which tend to be exposed in theatre and in painting) by means of naïve dreams, melancholic fantasies, merciful grotesques, quiet and subtle poetising (Żakiewicz, 2004: 8) The term "emblematic" entails ambiguity as the world of "free" birds and insects can equally turn out to be predatory. Is this not another attempt to show the impossibility of unravelling the Mystery the paintings venture to talk about – works displayed on-stage or pinned up onto something like on a school bulletin board; and yet the "surprises and riddles" expressed in painting draw from the remarkably rich "artistic and literary refinement of the creator." (Czartoryska, 2004 [1976]: 13)

Although highly specific, this "distinctly Polish version of allusive abstraction appreciative of Surrealism and showing a unique sense of space and poetic quality," (Czartoryska, 2004 [1976]: 14) which features made it akin to Maria Jarema's work, proves to be a separate phenomenon also as regards theoretical reflection.

Perhaps, all these lofty and scientific associations will be obscured by the very sensual woman that is so often found in Mikulski's work? Her figure is present here as well as in the work reproduced in the catalogue from the Milan exhibition; she has large naked breasts and a suspender belt on, her classic head has been "cut out" and "pasted" (*Le opere*, 1979: 53). Is she the allegory of liberty? She is charming and titillating, and equally dangerous; her pose is not so much triumphant in relation to mechanical devices (once again!) placed in the picture as outright triumphal in all her glory. Dominating the centre and pointed to by all arrows, she is the focus of attention. Or maybe this scene provides a setting for the emergence of the Mystery itself, emancipated from all rules, orders, costumes and roles, "stripped" of them and bare? The beautiful and terrible, liberated and naked truth?

Powerlessness of the painting...

Representing the younger generation of artists, Roman Siwulak¹¹ is known for his explorations of the weakness of seeing and image, as well as cognitive reliance on

¹⁰ In Mikulski's work a fragment of the reproduction of Sandro Botticelli's *Three Miracles of Saint Zenobius* (ca. 1500–1510) was used. The next work described here contains elements of Giuliano de' Medici's portrait by the same artist, 1478.

¹¹ Roman Siwulak graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków; a Cricot 2 actor, from 1970 he participated in all of its productions, a painter and director. Thanks to Kantor he was an honorary laureate of the Rembrandt Award (when Kantor received the

conventions. In future, he is to write that these features of painting become uncovered when a picture turns out to be a work of art. It is this type of painting that Siwulak “knocks from its pedestal” and compromises by “manipulating” it and using “poor materials” or the sort of art that deliberately shuns “paltry perfection” (Siwulak, 2010).

The fact that the “picture is not really what it should be,” (Siwulak, 2010) stimulated discussion and inspired in-depth interpretations already during the Rome and Milan shows, despite the seeming simplicity of representation or even against it. It was a paradox that the simpler a work appeared the more it called for intellectual effort on the part of the interpreting individual. As a matter of fact, paradox was to become one of the key elements in Siwulak’s work. For instance, the work titled *Obraz i obraz* [Painting with Painting] (1978) consisted of frames filled in by an indefinite plane as though there had been nothing on or in the painting. However, other frames “forced” their way into the bend of the rectangle of imagined frames. They were smaller but thick and, above all, they contained a small picture made up of shapes reminiscent of hills against overcast skies – a landscape, some sort of content which is, after all, expected in a painting. Satisfying viewers’ expectations, the smaller picture deformed the contours, frames and surface of the larger one, presumably seeking information as to how far conventions of representation and display define the picture as a work of art, and whether this definition is in keeping with the actual operation of the senses and mind.

Frames could also be disfigured by a “real window” – again, framed glass “forced” its way into the upper part of the frame of the painting; it revealed a view while the space enclosed in the larger deformed frame was filled with a black-painted surface, literally nothing (*Obraz i okno* [Painting with Window], 1978). Resembling a cuboidal chimney from a distance, a segment of wall made from concrete, “real,” yellowish-brown bricks brought from Poland, this time “clipping” a bottom corner of the painting with an empty grey and white back-ground in *Obraz i cegły* [Painting with Bricks] (1978). Although the wall was conspicuously present at the exposition as a tangible piece of reality, the work as a whole was still a painting. Not only because the artwork annexed and used reality but also because all objects were perceived with the power of sight and passed through the filter of the viewers’ knowledge of the world, always producing images/texts in their mind.

Thus Siwulak’s works intuitively generated reflections that tend to be identified nowadays with the so-called visual turn in the theory of art (Zeidler, 2006). However, in *Obraz i cegły* it was the artwork itself, which we would today categorise as an installation, rather than the theory that investigated the limits of cognition, illusions of perception, reliance on conventions (especially in relation to the reception of the painting) and yielding to visual delusions.

The collage/installation-like compositions and painted/constructed multiplications outlined above contained poetical tautologies, repetitions and gradations. Consequently, the works also seemed to revolve around the secret

Rembrandt Award in 1978 he chose Roman Siwulak and Andrzej Wełmiński to be the honorary laureates of the award) (Roman Siwulak’s bio).

logic of paradox, which may bring the cognitive machinery to a halt to expose its limitations and search for poetic ways of reaching both the subconscious and metaphysics.

All these interpretations were plausible although the artist was to say later on: "My intentions are rather unclear. As if I were trying to hide my true designs and, by lending this kind of form to my paintings, saying: »what is this about?«" (Siwulak, 2010). Suspending authorial interpretation could simply be another poetical retardant means used with hindsight. After all, within the context of the mystery of things "bared by belittling transformation into an image" the philosophical, conceptual question "what is this about?" essentially ruled out the "omission of the painting." This provided space for the return of more precise philosophical questions: does transformation into an image entail loss of the features of being? Can this apply only to some of them or to the complete "act" of being, when all that remains is its exhibited potential? Is this the kind of question the painting is asking? One containing the representation of an ordinary object found in the painting, a regular piece of wall made present as an object built from transported bricks that cast light on various perspectives of existence, diverse approaches to "being" and examine its many meanings, ultimately reducing everything to the metaphysical "Is" (Krąpiec)? Confronted with metaphysics the picture appears weak, while the "Is" is strong. Even though it cannot be ultimately known and is always obscured by Mystery.

...and the weakness of cognition

Another artwork, jointly created by Roman Siwulak and Andrzej Wełmiński,¹² features a door painted/installed by the entrance to the room that also "is". Is it to hide something, for example a broom in a box according to the drawing called *Za drzwiami* [Behind the Door] (1973)? Or, perhaps, its chief purpose is to lead to the "small room of the imagination," stimulating the cognitive process with poetry and theatre? In this process the door, the wall fragment and the picture turn out to be the symbolic objects Tadeusz Kantor liked so much.

Kantor also "liked" windows. The emblematic *Okno* [Window] (1971), also by the Siwulak–Wełmiński duo, was displayed at the exhibition in Rome. An authentic wooden frame with glass panes was mounted on a special construction; it was white and divided into four sections. Next to it there was a painting of the same size with a black-painted frame and a "view" of buildings on the corner of a square and street. To some extent, the piece dispelled the notion that, behind the window there is a picture of the real world. What there is the truth about how the cognitive processes we use are influenced by the abilities of our senses, our habits and expectations;

¹² Andrzej Wełmiński – graduated in graphic arts from the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow, an actor who performed in all Cricot 2 productions from 1970, a painter, photographer and installation artist. Selected by Tadeusz Kantor to be the laureate of the Rembrandt Award – together with Roman Siwulak. A collector of the maestro's drawings (*Teresa + Andrzej Wełmińscy*; *Tadeusz Kantor. Rysunki*, 2007: 8–14; *Le opere*, 1979: 57–60 and sketches in the Cricoteka Archive.

the painted image provides an almost direct comment on this. In fact, we have no knowledge as to what is real and what is merely viewed. There is no way of knowing whether the broom behind the wardrobe, visible in the reproduction published in the catalogue, is a real object, a painting, or a photo (*Za szafą* [Behind the Wardrobe], 1973). There is no way of finding out what is *behind the door* or under an ordinary but torn straw doormat.

What is behind, underneath, inside...? What is the real purpose? Or perhaps the question once again was this: "what is a subject of cognition, and what simply Is?" Conspicuously positioned in the middle of the room at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni was a box of unseasoned boards nailed together, with a walking stick stuck in an opening (a joint work of the two artists, also presented in the form of a sketch). Might it be that the stick is carrying out a reconnaissance of the inside for security reasons, so it can later use this limited and ever so dubious knowledge to gain "support"? In the photograph depicting the *Pielgrzym* [Pilgrim] installation (Siwulak-Wełmiński, 1975) that seems to be dominating the exposition, a "bowed" figure, "down on its knees" in an elegant suit, with its head in a box (the original box with the opening for the head was placed underneath the photograph) sees whatever can be seen in the confined space. It might be willing to see a lot but it cannot; it cannot see anything but the box, incapable of accessing vaster space... Its face remains unknown; he can neither see nor be seen. In a humiliating fashion his status was lowered accordingly – "down to its knees" into anonymity.

Again, the cognitive impotence of the picture is almost like philosophical phenomenology here, testing the limits and habits of perception. And, perhaps, it is another suggestion that a metaphor (even of a "being hiding in humiliation, in a humble rank" or the "cognitive impotence of the picture" itself) implies questions of metaphysical cognition. Anyway, are we truly "strong" enough to be part of such cognition? Would it not be better to shed our illusion of power and accept humiliation just to be able to learn as much as we can about ourselves and the world as we see it from an individual perspective?

The reflective quality of art continued as Andrzej Wełmiński presented his solo work from the 1970s in Rome and Milan. That had been a period corresponding with Kantor's "lowest rank" by its scarcity and economy; the artist himself referred to those works as "temporary" (Baranowa, 1992). He had worked with pre-existing packaging, found objects, cardboard, craft paper, wooden boxes... Boxes in Wełmiński's drawings tend to have a life of their own, jumping or belching out smoke. A cigarette or tube may be sticking out of them. They are annoyed by walking sticks that go through peculiar variations, e.g. attached to a wheel or dividing themselves into pieces... *Pudełka* [Boxes], 1972, and numerous untitled drawings dating from 1972–1975). Why the sticks are there actually remains to be revealed. To act as instruments of support and testing, or to trigger indecent associations when combined with a female nude...?

Wełmiński's drawings can be specific. Often, from underneath a seemingly dull, petty and impermanent surface a drop of dark pigment arises, rubbing the surface and metamorphosing into a simple line – wobbly, uncertain, providing merely the appearance of shape, pretending and hiding, fading away. The sketches

show a creative process that can be described as full of mistrust, characterised by predation disguised in the soft lines of drawn contours, reminiscent of Kantor's theatrical designs and so affected by the maestro... But they carry on along the path of riddles springing from the very process of looking, seeing and remembering, cognitive errors and the loneliness of figures and persons that experience the world, unexpectedly united from time to time. It was already at that time that the mixed collage-based technique allowed for the combination of an outlined male profile and a tube/telescope arising from cardboard matter, leading to an optical/mirror/periscope mechanism concealed under the surface of the work, making it possible to "secretly view" Tadeusz Kantor's output. Wełmiński called himself a "peeper" (Baranowa, 1992).

Inherent in peeping is the acceptance of the role of a viewer separated by the threshold of the picture frame or stage (Wełmiński would never give up the notion that "theatre and painting are complementary, performing mutual permeation and confirmation") (Baranowa, 1992). It is also a metaphor of observation from a hidden place, from beneath, from an inferior position (an idea already present in *Pielgrzym*), while at once paradoxically elevated by the exclusivity of secrecy. Besides, it evokes the figure of the student who learns as he looks but also learns to look, becoming aware of the imperfection of the sense of sight and the multitude of secrets inaccessible to senses. It was surely no accident that the series of "ontological paintings," possibly dedicated to the search for the essence of things, for instance by means of exposing the craft of woven matter (*Kunst*, 1972), was created in the 1970s. A craft that, nevertheless, fails to guarantee indestructibility; the matter is easily unravelled, unfastened and unrolled; it is so easy to stick something into it... So perhaps this is only an illusion of essence? Impossible to capture?

Still, what could be captured were metaphors and symbols. They made it clear that even though uncertainty, mystery, appearances, illusion, convention and weakness, inferiority and impotency, appeared to be the key words in the work of Roman Siwulak and Andrzej Wełmiński, the poetic nature of their outputs hinted at another way of cognition that went beyond looking and understanding. Characteristically, in the film Tadeusz Kantor talks openly about "poetic quality" in the room housing pieces by the two artists (*Kantor racconta*, 1979). Perhaps, it is this quality that is the "permanent revolution" that pushes one off the regular path of habits and simplifications, allowing a discovery of something more in "reality"? And a transgression of the reality of theatrical roles and illusory spaces to reach for the Mystery?

The avant-garde theatre...

The Exhibition by the Cricot 2 artists was part of the show called *L'avanguardia polacca 1910-1978*. In his studies on the avant-garde, Stefan Morawski named Tadeusz Kantor in the section devoted to the aleatoric-ludic trend (Morawski, 1975: 63). When he explored the tendency that consisted in "initiating accidental events" or "the interrupted spectacle," he also analysed the possibility of overcoming alienation and returning to oneself, both of which reached beyond enjoyment and

entertainment. It was indeed in the “Cricot 2 circle,” which could at first seem “derivative” as it continued the Dada and Surrealist traditions, where “going beyond” could happen, a phenomenon constantly encouraged by the transdisciplinary character of the Cricot 2 Theatre.

The most obvious thought triggered by the exhibition is that Tadeusz Kantor invited the co-creators of his own theatre, whom he referred to as *attori pittori*, to take part. The show thus confirmed the notion that Cricot 2 was the artistic theatre of Kantor, Jaremińska, Mikulski, “who wished to achieve a unity of the literary and visual idea in the spectacle, advocated by the twentieth-century avant-garde theatre (...) the choice of text, director, gesture and word, costume and prop all formed a unity” (Czartoryska, 2004 (1976): 14; Baranowa, 1995: 83–97). The exhibition could prove the existence of a theatrical *Gesamtkunstwerk* in Kantor’s environment.

The invited artists seem to have successfully demonstrated that they were more than merely actors and painters in this “collective” work in the broad sense. If not in the Cricot 2 Theatre itself, then in its circle, determined precisely by various practices of the artists who would act as playwrights, stage designers, directors, poets... Artists who, like Tadeusz Kantor, made an attempt to perform an artistic exploration of the world, its elements, the process of its creation, development and order, differentiation and establishing of rules, as well as unlimited progress and existence that keeps restarting, over and over again. To study first and foremost its perceptible and remembered image. They transformed and broadened this image, disturbed its boundaries and stirred into motion the recurrent and enriching process of creation, becoming, life, existence, and questioning any limitations as to the image itself. And that was when they could turn into directors. Most of all, they were Tadeusz Kantor’s actors. Consciously at times, intuitively at times, they learned from the maestro and utilised the possibilities he offered them. In every “actor/painter” Kantor opened new expanses and he grew bigger himself, through their creativity. In this way, he contributed to their artistic development, opening up. And “going beyond.”

...and the art of cognition

For instance, leaving the well-trodden paths of the avant-gardes. Tadeusz Kantor and the representatives of the Cricot 2 circle stand for the rejection of the conformism of the avant-garde, which was in a state of degradation and destruction of its meaning; in grotesque humiliation. Perhaps it was precisely owing to the specific style and aura, bluntly exposing the conventionality of pictures, realities and systems, that Kantor’s circle brought about an artistic revolution (so desired by all avant-gardes)? It was a “small” one as the circle was small as well as seemingly marginal, and a “poor” one in terms of style but it went on and on in a little, constantly humiliated, deprived, poor and miserable world in the middle of Europe. In the avant-garde of the lowest rank there were still extraordinary levels of sensitivity to poetry and philosophy that made it possible for the theatrical “going beyond” to become a cognitive act of going beyond oneself.

What the creative outputs of most of the artists discussed earlier in this essay, otherwise so diverse, had in common was the investigation of orders, exposing and emphasising them. The very observation that systems do work. Perhaps this is why the association with the work of a scriptwriter/playwright and stage designer – who study and imitate the world – seems appropriate here. However, in terms of directing, the observation relates to how new orders are imposed upon pre-existing ones (which was a common tendency among avant-garde artists) but also decomposed, dismantled, questioned and overruled in artworks.

The reason for this may be, for example, the will to reveal the energy stifled by enforced rules and regulations. Enforced in order to prevent changes – both revolutionary and subtle...

Or to release the constantly escaping subconscious...

Or to show that underneath understandable orders, rules, rhetoric, and narratives hides unattainable logic of which art can be part for a little while. It is then that art draws closer to Mystery. The Mystery that is neither amusing, funny, nor ludic, and not always nice, gentle or Arcadian. It seems that the attempt to unravel the Mystery might have been a major challenge responded to more or less intuitively by the artists. Although or in spite of the fact that resolving this Mystery is a task that can never be fully completed...

Ironic humiliation, belittling, stifling, mistrusting, liberating and demonstrating that we are incapable of knowing what we want to set free found their expression in the work of “Kantorian” artists. These artists were not so much modernistically avant-garde or postmodernist (although many would presumably apply these names to some of them) but primarily “Kantorian” and unique in this quality. Odd, disgraced, deprived, and for all these reasons not less than universal. Just like Kantor as he set out to perform an artistic exploration of the world and himself in order to reach beyond the world and himself, thus approaching metaphysical revelation.

Translated by Monika Ujma

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