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**Andrzej Szczerski**



**THE MODERN FLUX  
POLISH ART AFTER 1989**

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**The Modern Flux: Polish Art after 1989**

by

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In 2003 the Azorro group (Oskar Dawicki, Wojciech Niedzielko, Igor Krenz, Łukasz Skapski) produced the film *Everything Has Been Done*, recording a long brain-storming session during which the members of the group struggled to produce an original idea for an art work or project which has not been done yet. Despite an avalanche of ideas, ranging from “let’s do nothing” to the more elaborate “let’s paint a black square”, each time the artists arrived at the same conclusion: it is impossible to invent something entirely new in art, because “everything has been done”.

The film can be perceived as an ironic commentary on the poststructuralist proclamation of the exhaustion of the avant-garde narrative and the end of art, as defined by Kant and 18<sup>th</sup>-century aesthetics, which gained currency in the art world in the 1990s. Indeed, Azorro specializes in turning the dogmas of contemporary art criticism and art history upside down to show the superficial application of fashionable theories by even more fashionable art critics and the lack of any profound debates about art and its role in the public sphere. The group also inverts artistic utopias, turning them into their own caricatures. In the 2004 film *The Family* Azorro filmed the non-existing perfect consumers of contemporary art, a typical young Polish family with two children, who on a Sunday afternoon indulge in a conversation about the fate of contemporary avant-garde artists and their controversial projects, displaying profound knowledge of the art scene. During the conversation the children are drawing Malewicz-type squares and mimic the installation “Work No. 227: The Lights going on and off” by Martin Creed, 2001 Turner Prize Winner, turning a standing lamp on and off. Ultimately art has won the control of people’s minds, but the irony of the films emphasizes that this totalitarian art-dominated world is neither possible nor desirable.

With all their tongue-in-cheek poststructuralist references, Azorro films could also be seen as ironic self-portraits of contemporary Polish society on the verge of modernization, associated with the political and social changes began in 1989. Seen from that angle, *Everything Has Been Done* shows a bunch of provincial artists, sitting in a small garden allotment, a symbol of the banality of their lives, who are hoping to make it to the global art world using the avant-garde strategy of originality. The film presents a portrait of Polish provincialism, with its characteristic eagerness to become internationally recognized, coupled with the disillusionment about one's own chances and capabilities. Therefore the Azorro films could also be perceived as an allegorical image of Polish society after the fall of communism, sitting on the ruins of the by-gone world and trying, to use one of the key notions permeating Polish cultural and social life after 1989, to get 'modernized'. At the same time, the very idea of the desired end of the modernization process according to international (Western) standards, shown in the film *The Family*, is also ridiculed. Indirectly the question is asked if Polish culture needs to produce its own modernization narrative, with the implication that the local traditions are the liberal alternative against the uniformity of global culture.

The narrative of modernization is but one angle from which the polyphony of post-1989 Polish art can be analyzed; however, it is the one which is possibly the most compatible with the general changes in Polish society, resulting from an openness to the world to an extent unknown for over 50 years<sup>1</sup>. Art under communism functioned in an entirely different system, which included significant state support

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<sup>1</sup> Among the scholarly books which began the discussion about the post-1989 art see Kitowska-Łysiak (1999) and Piotrowski (1999).

and social benefits for the artists, yet at the expense of their freedom and the public resonance of art, confined to the elitist spheres which constituted a fraction of society. There were some exceptions: the greatest artists, such as Tadeusz Kantor, were able to pursue their careers and win worldly acclaim, despite the restrictions on traveling and on the international exchange of books, journals or exhibitions. Together with the fall of communism and state censorship the old system disappeared, but the newly founded institutions, both public and private, the art market which developed slowly but steadily, and the access to international buyers provided the arts with an efficient and flexible system of support and promotion<sup>2</sup>. The open borders and the variety of international grants and international art projects turned artists into nomads of the post-industrial world and resulted in several brisk careers, at least on the European art scene. In that respect the arts could be seen as a symbol of the successful transition from communism to capitalism, through their embracement of the modern means of communication, and the strategies and values of the post-industrial society as well as the international art world.

Most importantly, contemporary art entered the democratic public sphere, being no longer the domain of specialists, even if this shift had been initiated by simple controversies surrounding the shows in the state-supported Zachęta gallery in Warsaw or in some regional centers, which in one extreme case resulted in legal action against the artist. The general public witnessed the subsequent intense media debates centered around the issues of freedom in art and the actual role of art in the transformation of society. The advocates of the new art saw it as no longer confined to the domain of ‘art for art’s sake’ practiced under communist censorship without any

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<sup>2</sup> The new structures are still not entirely satisfactory and show the paradoxes of the economy in transition see Michalski (2005).

relevance for the public sphere<sup>3</sup>. Art was to play an important role in the foundation of modern civil society in Poland, as if trying to fulfill the 20<sup>th</sup>-century avant-garde hopes for a fusion of art and life. Equally important had been the issue of universalism or rather the attempt to break free from the parochialism of Polish society, detached from the world for decades, and from certain nationalist traces of Polish culture, which -- paradoxically -- the totalitarian system strengthened and manipulated. The artists wanted to speak a language which would be understood by the public not only at home but also worldwide. The dichotomy of the national versus the universal was not new in the 1990s and can be traced back to 19<sup>th</sup>-century discussions about the national style, but also to general relations between Central/Western European cultures in the modern epoch. Yet in the context of the newly regained freedom, it acquired particular currency and new interpretations.

The decade which began in 1989 saw the continuation of several artistic careers of the 1980s which had a worldwide resonance. The minimalist works of Mirosław Bałka, simple, unornamented large-scale geometric forms made of concrete, stone or wood, focused on the issues of memory and remembrance with a strong autobiographical bias, quickly won recognition on the international scene (see **Image nr. 1**). The work produced after 1989 showed a refinement of Bałka's artistic language rather than a radical change. At the same time the artist began to comment on issues of fundamental importance for contemporary Poland, above all the Holocaust, positioning himself in the context of current political and historical debates.

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<sup>3</sup> See Piotrowski (1991).



Image nr. 1

MIROSLAW BAŁKA, 500 x 40 x 40, 2000

Equally significant had been the appreciation of Krzysztof Wodiczko, who began his career in Poland in the 1970s and since the early 80s has been living in the USA. In an exemplary way, his works tackled the relevance of art for the public sphere, as can be seen in the project “Car for Homeless” (1988-1989), a movable object providing shelter for the urban homeless, or the “Wanderer walking stick” (1992), a stick with an in-built monitor and speakers, broadcasting the testimonies of the homeless and illegal immigrants. Since 1980 Wodiczko has been using the monuments or facades of public buildings as screens for his large-scale projections of films, composed of

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anonymous testimonies of the victims of violence, political upheavals, racial hatred or social exclusion. The chosen 'screens' always provided the crucial context for the projections, as various symbols of political and cultural power, which contrasted with the voice of the excluded. In 1996 he staged a projection on the Town Hall tower in the Market Square in Krakow, screening a film composed of the testimonies of AIDS victims, in a radical gesture of making their voices public, which was particularly significant in the context of the historic architecture and the space of leisure such as the Cracovian Market Square.

Wodiczko's last major project in Poland, "Monument's Therapy", took place in Warsaw in 2005, where the façade of the "Zachęta" (Encouragement) National Gallery of Contemporary Art was used as the projection screen. The very act of choosing this location was an 'encouragement' to regard art as a medium capable of transforming people's inner lives, but also as a democratic domain which has social and political resonance. The artist emphasized the role of public monuments as silent witnesses to history, which provide a striking background to the true stories revealed by the protagonists of his films. This attitude was related to the healing capacities of monuments, which can provide a 'therapy' for individual traumas, allowing them to be expressed in a public space, no longer hidden under the mask of everyday normality. In Warsaw Wodiczko concentrated on the personal experiences of women living in Poland, both in the capital city and in small towns. Despite some striking differences, the position of women in these very different social environments showed similar problems of exclusion and marginalization.

The arrival of the new generation of artists is usually associated with the emergence of graduates from Grzegorz Kowalski's studio at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw in the early 1990s. The innovative teaching methods employed in the studio, which included the experimental self-investigation of the artists' psyche as well as the issues of body and its cultural contexts, proved to be surprisingly relevant for the current discussion about the limits of freedom and the reconstruction of individual identities after years of equality enforced by a totalitarian regime. Among Kowalski's students undoubtedly the most famous debut was that of Katarzyna Kozyra. Her 1993 graduation work included a pyramid of four stuffed animals and a film showing the process of killing and preparing the animals for the exhibition. The work operated perfectly well within the boundaries set by contemporary artists like the American Bruce Naumann or Britain's Damien Hirst (notorious for his shows of dissected animals), reaching back as far as Eli Lotar's photos of the slaughterhouse in Georges Bataille "Dictionnaire critique" published in "Documents" in 1929. It also provided a cross-cultural reference to the allegory of death in the context of literature: the corpses of a horse, dog, cat and cock alluded to the famous tales of Grimm brothers, known for their mixture of allegorical morals and violence, as well to the logic of a contemporary media spectacle, reminiscent of the circus and the horror chambers. In this respect it proved that the artist had learnt well the language of the international art scene and justly earned her M.A. degree. However, the exhibition of the work caused a major concern. First of all, it clearly signaled the end of the 1980s paradigm, which gave preeminence to painting as the common language of communication, with its political and literary references. Secondly, the adaptation of the shock strategy, marginal and forbidden under communism, reappeared on the scene, to be seen on the one hand as the radical expression of freedom, while on the

other criticized due to its similarity to the free market strategy of self-promotion, equivalent to the wild capitalism of the early 90s. Most importantly, however, the debate concerning Kozyra's work did not remain confined to the specialist circles, but entered the popular press and a wider readership, which expressed concerns about the breaking of taboos, surrendering to second-hand influences from the West and, last but not least, the frantic and senseless search for modernity. The defenders of Kozyra pointed out that her and her fellow colleagues' work represented the new phenomenon known as critical art (*sztuka krytyczna*), which consciously sought a dialogue with social and political issues<sup>4</sup>. The unspoken aim of critical art was the transformation of society through the expansion of the borders of freedom and the direct involvement with the experience of the transition from a totalitarian regime to a civil society. Although the concept of critical art subsequently evolved, in the early 1990s it had been largely associated with the "art of the body". The dominance of the body was explained not only by the popularity of the subject on the international art scene, but also by the importance of religious and romantic traditions in Polish art, with their emphasis on bodily sacrifice.

The diploma work of Katarzyna Kozyra was just a hint of what followed. In 1995 the artist showed a set of a film and photos of herself during cancer treatment, documenting her actual stay in hospital. The title of the work -- "Olympia" -- referred to a famous painting of Edward Manet, which Kozyra took as her model when posing for the camera, including the props and the accompanying figure, who in her work turned from a black servant into a nurse. Instead of the beautiful body of the model, painted to resemble 16<sup>th</sup>-century nudes by Titian, the non-canonical, ill body was

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<sup>4</sup> On the early account of the phenomenon see Szyłak (2000) and also Kowalczyk (2002).

exposed. Using the technique of appropriation, similarly to artists like Yasumasa Morimura, Kozyra quoted the history of art as the residue of aesthetic standards, but also aimed at the public, not used to such radical encounters with a naked and deformed body. While talking about exclusion and focusing particularly on the woman's body as a gendered text, Kozyra extended her investigation into the issues of life/death, suspended between religious narrative and existentialism. Kozyra's most famous piece of the 1990s was undoubtedly "The Women Bathhouse" (1997). With a hidden camera and without asking for permission, the artist filmed the naked women bathing in the historic bathhouse of Hotel Gellért in Budapest, focusing on the juxtaposition of the young and the old bodies, with their ritualized gestures, mutual respect and all the more drastic contrast<sup>5</sup>. A parallel project was completed a few months later when, dressed as a man with an artificial beard and genitalia, thus crossing the threshold of the essentialist concept of gendered identity, Kozyra repeated her task in the men division of the Gellért bathhouse (1999). When comparing the two projects, she emphasized, among other things, the differences between the attitude of the bathers to each another in both bathhouses, as the women showed mutual care and the men mutual show-off. In that respect the film documented the differences between the public appearances of both sexes and their performative character. "The Male Bathhouse", shown in the Polish Pavilion at the 1999 Venice Biennale, won the honorary prize, the highest distinction ever conceded to a Polish artist, and secured Kozyra's fame at home and on the international scene. The artist proved to be capable of speaking the international language, as her work centered around the issues of body and gender, current due to the impact of works by among others Michele Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, as well as feminist artists and

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<sup>5</sup> Kozyra shared the interest in the Gellért baths with Tacita Dean and Matthew Barney -- see i.a. Rottenberg (1998).

writers. Nevertheless both “Bathhouses” cannot be seen as merely illustrations of the must-read dictionaries of cultural studies. The films were screened as large scale video projections, dominating the viewer, hence creating an overwhelming and almost mystical space of participation. “The Women Bathhouse”, shown on several screens and accompanied by the reproductions of works by Ingres, anchored the installation in the historical tradition. Instead of focusing on the Foucault-like medical eye, Kozyra provided the body with a sense of the sublime and turned it into a sphere of subconscious revelations. At the same time she attacked the traditional spheres of intimacy and privacy and, more importantly, the usual ways of portraying the body. It should not be surprising that she was straightforwardly adopted by feminist and queer criticism as a role model who introduced new qualities into the public debate in Poland. Paradoxically, as a result of her Venice success, Kozyra also became the official representative of Polish culture and showed to what extent the official cultural politics, at least in the 1990s, were eager to rely on the contemporary artistic experiments. Consequently, the position of the artists associated with critical art became ambiguous, as on the one hand they won professional and official acclaim, and on the other became the scapegoats criticized by the general public. Kozyra certainly must be given credit for escaping easy categorizations and carefully balancing the elements of the romantic and the political in her art. In her subsequent works she continued the analysis of the body and gender, employing postmodern allegories made of incomplete, bizarre and uncanny elements. *The Rites of Spring* (1999-2002) reenacted Igor Strawinsky’s ballet, performed by naked and elderly people filmed against a white background, with a sense of grotesque deformation. Similarly the grotesque provided the framework for the most recent film series “In art dreams come true” (since 2003) where Kozyra, looking back at the supernatural and

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magical rites of transgression, tries to assume new roles, e.g. that of an opera singer taught by a severe Maestro, and crosses the borders of gendered sexuality, guided by the drag-queen Diva Viagra.

The preeminence of body in the mid-1990s, summarized by the show “Me and AIDS” at the Center for Contemporary Art in Warsaw in 1996, seemed to be anchored not only in the politicization of the body in contemporary culture, but also in the Catholic tradition, which the new generation wanted to tackle. Yet, paradoxical as it may sound, the provocative gestures of the artists reenacted the importance of the body, whether exposed or hidden, not as a commodity or a hedonistic object of desire but as the crucial element which constitutes the individual, and positioned the body in a spiritual rather than purely materialistic domain. Among the graduates of Kowalski’s studio, the issues of the body were analyzed particularly profoundly by Artur Żmijewski in a series of photos and films. In *An Eye for an Eye* (1998) Żmijewski photographed the naked bodies of healthy people together with those who lost their hands or legs in radical gesture of investigation into the limits of manhood. The elaborate compositions of the photos, in which the bodies were helping each other but also competing, invoked images of damaged Greek sculptures, the pillars of Western civilization, whose incomplete bodies have been studied for centuries as the epitome of beauty. Żmijewski thus exposed the limits imposed by culture on the process of perception, where the ‘handicapped’ have been relegated to oblivion and asked to cross the boundaries of conventional beauty. The search for new harmonies, on the fringes of the established definitions of taste and culture, found its best expression in Żmijewski’s film *The Singing Lesson* (2003). The film featured a choir of deaf young people, who were given the notes of a Bach cantata and were asked to

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sing it in the St. Thomas church in Leipzig. The film simply documents their efforts, during the rehearsals and the concert, and the camerawork is both unattached and objective, but also compassionate and admiring.

Although the main focus of the 1990s was on forging a new identity of the individual, art soon entered into the field left empty after the fall of the grand narratives of modernism, particularly poignant in the post-communist reality. The legacy of the totalitarian past became the obvious reference point as the struggle for modernization included the painstaking discovery of what was left of the totalitarian regimes in the personal and the public consciousness and of the way in which totalitarianism was defined.

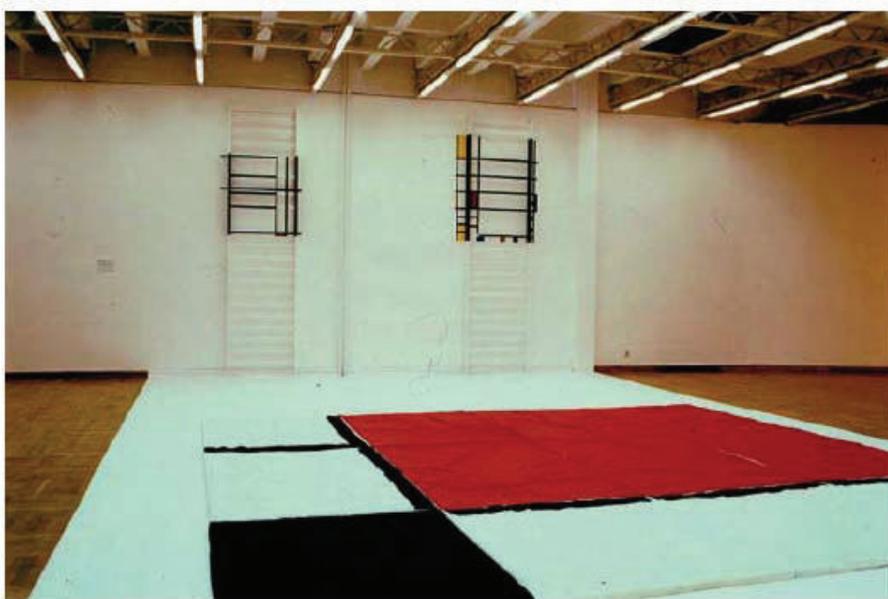


Image nr. 2

GRZEGORZ SZTWIERTNIA, NEOPLASTICISTS EXCERSISES, 2002

Among the artists working with metaphors rather than direct statements, Grzegorz Sztwiertnia became known for his in-depth analysis of the totalitarian aspects of avant-gardes, which coincided with the legacy of the micro-powers permeating the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>6</sup>. His “Neoplasticict excersises” of 2002 consisted of gym equipment -- mats and ladder -- and excerpts from medical books showing exercises aimed at correcting bodily imperfections (**Image nr. 2**). Yet the entire installation was painted in Mondrianesque colors, the ultimate symbol of avant-garde perfectionism and the unrestrained hopes for defining the universe, turning the idea of physical exercise into a metaphor of mental and social engineering. At the same time Sztwiertnia asked questions about the relationship between modernist avant-gardes and their involvement in the ‘modernization project’ which led to the catastrophes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In his recent project, “The final solution of the question of form” (2006) he installed, within a space painted in white and blue horizontal stripes, the enlarged scenes of the daily horrors of Auschwitz presented in drawings by camp survivors juxtaposed with the drawings of the Polish constructivist Władysław Strzemiński, showing the destruction and mass-killings in Łódź. Both the naïve drawings of the prisoners and the semi-abstract works of the artist showed the limits of representation in context of the Holocaust, acknowledging the incapacity of the form to express the heritage of 20<sup>th</sup> century drama and the necessity to find different languages of communication. Sztwiertnia often refers to the idea of investigating the subconscious and cultural archetypes as the new modes of understanding. For the series of 24 paintings entitled “Theatre and Film” (2004) he used photos, illustrations and film stills showing i.a. the excerpts from Leni Riefenstahl films and the food ratios in Auschwitz, explaining their content in two captions, one true and the other absurdly

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<sup>6</sup> See artist book Sztwiertnia (2002).

false. In this way Sztwiertnia evoked the idea of film as a technique of manipulation and a technique of the magical, where the exploitation of the subconscious is based on the persuasive power of the image, despite the logo-centric attempts to divert its meaning.

One of the most powerful statements on the totalitarian past and its aftermath was provided by Zofia Kulik, a member of the 1970s neo-avantgarde, particularly known for her conceptual films and performances produced together with her partner Przemysław Kwiek under the name KwieKulik, which analyzed the political and social realities in communist Poland. In the 1990s, Zofia Kulik concentrated on photography and produced large scale photo-collages made of hundreds of images representing the symbols of power, stylized according to elaborate decorative patterns as if in ritual ornamentation. The power symbols referred directly to the icons of the communist past, such as the Stalinist Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw, the statues of heroes and warriors as well as religious images, which for Kulik were the residues of patriarchal power<sup>7</sup>. One of her most ambitious works was “From Siberia to Cyberia” (produced in the years 1998-2004). The title referred to Siberia, which in Polish cultural memory stands as the symbol of slavery and exile, the land to which the Russians were deporting rebellious Poles in late 18<sup>th</sup> century and afterwards, most recently during WWII. For Kulik, Siberia could be equaled with the contemporary virtual space “Cyberia”, overwhelmed by the media culture, disseminating the electronic images of power and repression. The work consisted of thousands of photos of the TV screen, showing the images of military parades, wars, church celebrations and infamous political leaders. Kulik elaborated also the feminist dimension of her

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<sup>7</sup> Wilson (2001). pp. 233-244.

work, since the composition showed the images of patriarchy, as seen from the private “feminine” domain invaded by the mediated, patriarchal image. The privacy could therefore be perceived as the space of opposition, and the collage work could refer to the myth of Penelope and to weaving as the metaphor of female resistance.

The heritage of the totalitarian past as seen from the Polish perspective could not exclude the question of Auschwitz. Although the Auschwitz and the Holocaust had been always present in the life of the country and thoroughly studied after 1945, a true debate about its essence could only begin after 1989. The gesture of Zbigniew Libera, who in 1996 built a model of the Auschwitz concentration camp out of the system of LEGO blocks has been acknowledged as the most radical. The work was stylized after the popular children’s toy, and included not only the barracks but also the figures of the prisoners and the guards performing criminal acts. At first glance Libera’s work pointed to the commodity-like appearance of the Holocaust in the contemporary media-based culture, and to the commodification of memory. Yet, more importantly, he asked questions about the strategies of remembrance and the available means to make the history part of the present, trying to investigate to what extent we can cope with the heritage of the past and to what extent we are capable of treating it seriously, without using it for various goals, including politics. These statements were as much directed to the general public as to the recipients at home, asking very critically how far we proceeded in understanding why and what happened during WWII and where the place of the Holocaust is in recent Polish history and contemporary culture.

The focus on the persistence of history and its reappearance in the ‘here and now’ perspective crucially influenced the series “Positives” (2003), where Libera used well-known photos of 20<sup>th</sup>-century tragedies to give them an apparently blasphemous interpretation. The clichéd images were reenacted à rebours, making the history present once again, this time by its denial. The Auschwitz survivors photographed behind the barbed wire in January 1945 turned into happy campers, the victims of the Vietnamese war escaping from the napalm attack strolled on the beach as holidaymakers, the German soldiers destroying the Polish border post in September 1939 looked like members of a cyclist club removing an unwanted road barrier. Libera decided to colonize not the geographical but the historical space, trying to subvert its well-accepted truths. His project can be interpreted in the context of the paramount importance of history in Polish culture, which since the 18<sup>th</sup>-century partitions of Polish state has become the imagined territory where the debates concerning identity questions could take place.

After 1989 the debate on history once again became the focal point of the modernization process, as it started to be rewritten or ‘colonized’ by various discourses, ranging from a total rejection of Polish national myths to their unashamed glorification. This heated debate also signaled the emergence of the civil society, where knowledge was no longer controlled by centralized institutions and the media and hence could be seen as the attribute of freedom. It is significant, though, that it was late as the end of the 1990s that the artists started to explore historical topics, as if they needed time to reconstruct individual topics first, and only then gained the self-confidence to tackle the issues connected with communal narratives. The dominant mood was not to indulge in rewriting grand narratives, but rather to search for the

lacunas and absences caused by censorship and the communist imprisonment of memory.

One of such absences was the history of Jews in post-war Poland, understood not only in terms of memory, but also in terms of their presence and most importantly their absence. The issue has been analyzed in various ways by Artur Żmijewski, whose interest in the Holocaust and its remembrance dates back to film *The Tag Game* (1999), where in a gesture similar to *Libera* he filmed naked people playing the tag game first in an unknown cellar and then in a gas chamber in Auschwitz. In the 2003 film *Our Songbook* Żmijewski recorded some elderly citizens of Israel, who were born and lived part of their lives in Poland, as they try to sing the Polish national anthem and various popular songs memorized during their years in Poland. The film shows the process of the excavation of memory, as the people forget the details, make up for the lost words, try to behave joyfully to hide the tragedy of being exiled. Although remembrance is the main subject, the film frames it in a melancholic analysis of the destructions, broken personal histories, the loss and the inability to 'correct' history. Most of the interviewed people were very elderly and their histories seemed to be fading away, yet the personalization of the film turned them into dramatic monuments impossible to obliterate. The film was not perfectly edited, leaving no space for artificial make-up, thus making the statements even more straightforward.

Among works intended for public space which concerned Jewishness the most visible was "The Palm" (2001) by Jolanta Rajkowska, an artificial palm tree located in central Warsaw in the middle of the street called Jerusalem Avenue. The original

idea of the artist was to place tens of palm trees alongside the entire Avenue, the major boulevard of the capital, in a semi-surreal gesture referring to the street in Jerusalem with the same name. Hence Rajkowska tried to show the common history of both towns and make visible the lost traces of Jewish culture in Warsaw, not only through the reference to the Holy Land, but also by pointing to the origin of the street's name, which dates back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century Jewish settlement in Warsaw, known as the New Jerusalem<sup>8</sup>.

The rediscovery of history had been perhaps the most significant and important symptom of the changing paradigms in Polish art at the end of the first decade of freedom. Though they did not disappear altogether, the discourse of the body, the analysis of individual identities defined by gender and the competing cultural discourses ceased to play the most exposed role as the language of communication. Instead, the new art aimed at providing an analysis of the society after the first years of the transformation process and at finding a place for art in the new reality. Instead of films, photos and installations overloaded with meanings, shocking and highly conceptualized, at the end of the 90s came the triumph of painting. This traditional technique started to be appreciated due to various reasons. The new painting could be produced without the help of major institutions and without large grants, hence it could react with greater flexibility to the social realities and, paradoxically, be more independent than the art which could not exist without institutional funding. As the costs of paintings were still significantly lower than those of complicated installations, the artists easily adapted to the demands of the developing art market, and could sustain their existence even with the limited

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<sup>8</sup> For the most recent account of these project and critical art in general see Żmijewski (2006).

resources of private collectors. Although for its critics the new painting was like the new commercial culture, easy to produce and to consume, the artists proved to be able not only to use market strategies for self promotion but also retained self-criticism. At first glance very simple and superficial, the new painting in fact fashioned a complex and thoughtful image of the society. It also became indirectly the self-portrait of the first generation of artists and intellectuals who grew up in the III Republic. The new painting made visible those spheres of existence and everyday realities which crucially shaped the existence in Poland, entering the public and private spheres abandoned and forgotten in the early years of the decade.

The new chapter began with the group “Pretty” (Ładnie), founded in c. 1995, which included three students of painting and graphic arts at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków, born in the early 1970s and reaching their maturity with the 2001 show “Pop-Elite” at the Bunker of Art Gallery in Kraków. The members of “Pretty” focused on the images from daily existence, and used them as tools to comment on the Polish reality. Marcin Maciejowski became famous for his paintings based on repainted photos and diagrams from the popular press, showing scenes from Polish everyday life, full of absurdities, paradoxes and ironic humor. Despite their simple and caricature-like appearance, Maciejowski’s paintings acquired allegorical status, trying to portrait the society struggling to modernize at the expense of history and eager to catch up with the self imposed models of Europeanization. His portraits of sport stars as the new heroes corresponded to the images of wars between football hooligans, who represented the failed model of the struggle between good and evil **(Image nr. 3)**.



Image nr. 3

MARCIN MACIEJOWSKI, I AM GONNA PUT HIM DOWN ON THE RING, 2000

The bizarre occurrences in the life of farmers testified to the intervention of supernatural forces, while the search for happiness was equaled with simple diagrams showing how to cook or how to properly make a bed. Maciejowski developed a very straightforward, if simple, technique of painting, using very intense colors and thick brushstrokes, reminiscent of comic stripes or TV commercials, with the bright colors of supermarket shelves. This visual language devoid of any ambiguities presented the new type of aesthetics born in the 1990s, rooted in visual persuasion, the ultimate

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attribute of the commercials. Maciejowski synthesized it with the heritage of the communist propaganda posters, as if to present the dependence of the ‘new society’ on the embarrassing and forgotten past, which unexpectedly struck back. However, the most radical shift caused by the works of “Pretty” was the abandonment of the sublime and the neo-romantic narratives, and instead the focus on the obvious and banal fragments of the daily life, on emotions and observations, where the subject of a painting or drawing could be a pretty girl working in the copy center, doctors on strike, petty smugglers, happy soldiers, etc. Suddenly a whole new sphere of perception was discovered, which quickly found its adherents among the new collectors, who had become rich in the 1990s and saw the new painting as a sign of their times.



Image nr. 4

RAFAŁ BUJNOWSKI, FROM THE SERIES „FRAMED PAINTINGS’, 2003

Two other most significant members of “Pretty” also based their works on simplicity and everyday life, but added their individual stamp. Rafał Bujnowski focused on the conceptual aspect of his work, analyzing the very act of painting and its theoretical implications. He painted bricks on brick-like boxes made of canvas or standard Polish countryside houses on house-like canvases. Among his most prominent works were the series of images based on photos from his childhood, showing both his personal memories and the reminiscences of the events and realities of communist Poland (see **Image nr. 4**). Wilhelm Sasnal elaborated the idiosyncratic visual language, a unique synthesis of architectural drawings, comic stripes, film stills, photography and contemporary painting, capable of producing multifaceted metaphors and allegorical statements. For Sasnal, aesthetics became the language of expression and communication, with clear political and social implications. The iconography of his works encompassed references to his private life as well as the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the heritage of totalitarian regimes. Sasnal’s paintings, drawings and films are permeated with the search for lost memory, understood as the platform of communication between different generations and individuals with their own histories. The memory context could be very diverse, ranging from a series of works dedicated to airplane catastrophes, through paintings of rail tracks in the woods – a clear reference to the WWII death transports to concentration camps (**Image nr. 5**) – and, last but not least, copies of Polish comic books for teenagers published in the 1980s. The paintings showed a fascination with the object of remembrance, which -- like in a museum exhibition -- is both present and absent. Sasnal’s works seemed to investigate the role of memory as the crucial foundation of the experience of solidarity, being aware of its promises and illusions<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> See Sasnal (2007).



Image nr. 5

WILHELM SASNAL, UNTITLED (THE RAILTRACKS), 2004

The impact of the works by “Pretty” resulted in a much wider rediscovery of painting as an autonomous medium but also as the language capable of commenting on current social and political issues. The success can be measured with the appearance of numerous followers of the Cracovian painters, supported by the local art market but also by the international esteem of Polish painting, epitomized by the fame of Wilhelm Sasnal, whose works entered major art collections in the world, won prestigious prizes and reached high prices among the collectors. The phenomenal rise of the new painting brought also the emergence of individual and idiosyncratic talents, to mention only Paweł Książek and Jakub Ziółkowski, whose paintings and

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drawings are based on the tradition of post-war European and American abstraction but also on the legacy of surrealism (**Image nr. 6**).



Image nr. 6

JAKUB JULIAN ZIÓLKOWSKI, UNTITLED, 2005

At the same time the interest in the local and the fascination with Polish otherness within Europe, revealed by “Pretty”, influenced the emergence of a new sociological trend in Polish photography, which only now starts to be acknowledged and

appreciated and is usually associated with the works of Krzysztof Zieliński (see **Image nr. 7**) or Wojciech Wieteska<sup>10</sup>.



Image nr. 7

KRZYSZTOF ZIELIŃSKI, FROM THE SERIES “HOMETOWN”, 04.01.2000,  
WELCOME THE YEAR 2000, 2000

But painting does not exhaust the Polish art scene. At present, the Polish art scene is so diverse as it has never been since 1989, and it would be futile to try to categorize it definitely<sup>11</sup>. It might be helpful, though, to name the few most important individuals and see their ways of defining the process of modernization. The most poignant issue is the heritage of communist Poland, known as PRL (Polska

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<sup>10</sup> See Mazur (2006).

<sup>11</sup> See the account of contemporary Polish art scene written from the perspective of art critic and curator Rottenberg (2005). Very useful also are the information published by the Center for Contemporary Art Zamek Ujazdowski in Warsaw on the occasion of the series of exhibitions of Polish contemporary art “In the very center of attention” 2005/06.

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Rzeczpospolita Ludowa -- People's Republic of Poland) and the reaction it provokes today. Monika Sosnowska's sculptures analyze the fragments of PRL architecture falling apart, as the symbols of the ruined totalitarian regime, raising questions about the currency of its utopian ideals (**Image nr. 8**).



Image nr. 8

MONIKA SOSNOWSKA, RUINS, 2005

Sosnowska creates very dense and expressive spaces, illustrating the Kafkaesque character of public buildings and environments of the previous regime. At the same time they appear as the portraits of the internal psyche of contemporary mankind, with all the complexities of the shattered universalistic image of the world and the resulting anxieties. The visual culture of PRL is also the inspiration for Paulina Ołowska, who sees the remnants of the old system as the roots of contemporary Polish identity and

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also as an alternative to contemporary public space, dominated by the free market reality. In this context her most telling project was the 2006 reconstruction of the famous 1960s neon sign in the very center of Warsaw, emphasizing its refined aesthetics and the personal memories associated with it by many Warsawians.



Image nr. 9

ROBERT KUŚMIROWSKI, PHOTO-ATELIER, 2004

The progress of democracy in Poland is also a process of rebuilding the confidence in public life and in the existence of a reality which is transparent and no

longer manipulated by propaganda. Yet the paradoxes of the transition period result in a distrust for the 'here and now', where old hierarchies disappear and new ones have not appeared yet. The idea of parallel worlds and of world-as-simulacrum interests as diverse artists as Robert Kuśmirowski, who is involved in copying and falsifying various documents, such as certificates of education, photos (**Image nr. 9**), objects and even whole architectural environments like cemeteries (D.O.M. 2004), or Oskar Dawicki, who collects his portraits painted by street artists all over Europe, searching for the true image of himself (Street portraits 2003).

In recent years wider acclaim has been won by the new feminist artists, who focus on the heritage of second and third generation feminist art, with the emphasis on the personal dimension of womanhood and the features perceived as feminine, in order to both celebrate and transgress it. Monika Zielińska celebrates the female body as the source of feminist power but also as the symbol of motherhood, as in the photo of the umbilicus entitled "The Scar from Mother" (1999). Anna Baumgart produced the series of photos entitled "Ecstatic, heretics and other saints" (2003-04), showing the effects of the self-mutilation of women detached from the world and confined to private spaces behind locked doors. In contrast, Julita Wójcik takes up the traditional female act of weaving, and with it tries to feminize and personalize not only children's toys but also the well known institutions of art life, the symbols of world art power (Gallery Arsenał, Białystok 2005). Marta Deskur focuses on the issues of family life, creating a complex network of fictive relations between her different friends and relatives, which later on, with their mutual interdependence, produce new emotional bonds, equivalent to family ties (Home 2004, **Image nr. 10**).



Image nr. 10  
MARTA DESKUR, HOME, 2004.

Last but not least, among the most significant changes is the attempt to win back the public space, not only through the exhibition of art works, but through an attempt to intervene in the economy of what is “public” in a semi-anarchist attempt to create environments where art dictates the rules and organizes society from within. This notion interests designers from the group “Twożywo” (Fabric), who appropriate the visual codes of the pre-war avant-garde to produce different types of information, posters, books, and wall paintings, intended as a direct commentary on the current issues in political and cultural debates<sup>12</sup>. Among other artists there is Jadwiga Sawicka, known for her paintings composed of slogans and orders, who mounted on the streets of Polish cities little pink posters with questions regarding the relationship

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<sup>12</sup> See Twożywo (2006).

between the state, presented as a mother, and the citizens, principal among them being “Does Poland love you?” (2003). The posters, which included also the phone numbers of governmental ministries, were distributed on November 11, the principal national holiday. Cezary Bodzianowski employs the dada and anarchist irony as a way of expressing the unlimited freedom of the individual. On one day, in the morning hours, the artist dressed in an old-fashioned military costume and sitting in a hydraulic lift, knocked at the windows of a block of flats in Łódź to say “Good morning” and then engaged in a conversation with the residents (1996). In 2001 Bodzianowski queued for hours to get into a very popular impressionism exhibition at the National Museum in Kraków and just before entering the building offered his place to a person at the end of the queue. The engagement with the public space is most complex in the work of Paweł Althamer, who graduated as a sculptor and still produces expressionist works made of natural fabrics, focusing on the existentialist image of man and woman<sup>13</sup>. Yet he also revives the avant-garde tradition of the artist as the agent of change, seeing his work as a social duty. At the same time Althamer gives art the power to transform society and every day reality into an ideal community, based on the sense of solidarity. He often works with the homeless, as during his show at Vienna Secession in 2001, when he offered the gallery space to homeless Polish workers he had met at the Vienna railway station, so they could use it as a refuge during the day. In 2003, as part of the show entitled “Contemporary Art for All the Children” at the Zachęta Gallery in Warsaw, he used the budget allocated to his project to renovate a playground in the apparently inhuman space of the large housing estates in Bródno in Warsaw, where he lives. The playground facilities were painted in white – for Althamer, the color of peace. By appropriating the color which had

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<sup>13</sup> For the survey of artist’ works see Althamer (2005).

been reserved for the “white cube” of the gallery space, Althamer subverted the hierarchies of the institutional art world. In 2000 he persuaded the inhabitants of his block of flats in Krasnobrodzka street in Warsaw to produce a gigantic composition made of lit windows showing the number of the year, as a gesture to celebrate the millennium but also as the pretext to create a community out of individuals who share the same address but otherwise are entirely anonymous to each other. The actual show lasted only 30 minutes, but the essence was the long process of preparation and then the communal meeting during the show, which produced a sort of a public event, accompanied by concerts, free meals and visits of local politicians, organized spontaneously, without the intervention of the artist. Althamer seems to be genuinely active in the manipulation of reality, but without the sense of invading and subordinating it. His main critique is directed towards the institutionalized art world and his shows often end in the destruction of gallery spaces or turn the logic of the formalized art world upside down. Hence Althamer revives the old avant-garde utopia of art as a factor of social change and the artist as the prophet and leader of such change. The millennium project could therefore be seen as the revival of the tradition of anonymous resistance during the martial law years in the 1980s, when the illegal Radio Solidarity asked people in Warsaw to turn on and off the light in their flats to show their support for the anti-communist underground and to prove that the message of the irregular broadcasts of the radio was actually audible. The flashing blocks of flats of the Warsaw housing estates became one of the most significant incarnations of the idea of solidarity in the 1980s.

If modernity is the hidden desire of contemporary Polish society, the artists themselves contribute to the diversity of the opinions concerning what kind of

modernity it should be. Firstly, its foundations are to be seen in the elaborate and exuberant expression of individualism, even if it means the transgression of social norms, but also in the involvement in community life. Secondly, the new modernity is built on the ruins of the PRL culture, but conscious of its heritage, which is more palpable than 19<sup>th</sup>-century Polish national myths or the debate about the successes and failures of the interwar II Republic. Most importantly, though, the artists are clearly anchored in a particular tradition of Polish 20<sup>th</sup>-century experience, which no longer is an obstacle to tackling the universal problems. Instead of entering the logic of the free market and the production of art as a commodity, artists are entitled to act as agents of change in the society, to some extent reviving the Romantic paradigm of Polish culture, where art serves as the main platform for communication and the foundation of the nation's cultural identity. Although Polish art is enjoying one of the few moments in its history when artists are not enforced to perform patriotic duties according to an imposed set of ideological premises, they nevertheless remain at the center of public life. The long awaited freedom raises questions regarding individual and group identities and arts seems to be giving answers equally important as those given by the traditionally more celebrated genres in Polish culture, literature and film. It seems that there is general consent that art has a lot to say about contemporary Poland but remains in the margin of the general interests of society. Despite this marginalized position, in some ways art holds a privileged position, as it possesses the freedom to tackle various controversial issues, including "modernity".

The issue of modernity in Polish culture is particularly poignant. During the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, the beginning of the era of modernization as we know it, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was losing its political and economic strength,

which eventually led to the partitions of the state at the end of the century and turned it into the backyard of Europe. Yet before the ultimate catastrophe, the Polish Enlightenment witnessed a debate concerning the necessity of “modernization” as a form of rescue for the disintegrating state. The Polish elites advocated Western European-style reforms on the one hand, and on the other stood by the preservation of Polish cultural and economic uniqueness as the only residue of national independence, thus leaving little space for any moderate visions. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Poland not only failed to participate independently in the modernization processes, but the political and social reforms introduced by the partitioning powers were welcomed very cautiously and often perceived as a threat to national identity. However, the dividing lines were never clear cut, as even the conservatives were often very supportive of the westernization of Poland and several Romantics welcomed the arrival of modern technology<sup>14</sup>. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century both the elites of the inter-war II Republic and the communist leaders of the People’s Republic of Poland played the modernization card, even if their political and social reforms were radically different. In both cases modernity found its adherents across the social strata, due to its attractiveness and the promise of social advance; but also due to its elusive character, as it could be manipulated according to the dominant ideology.

From the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the arts played a crucial role in the process of modernization, being part of the intellectual life which flourished despite, or rather because of, the general level of backwardness. As noted by Ivan T. Berend, in the entire Central and Eastern European region, the longing for change “manifested itself equally in political ideologies, party programs, concepts of economic

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<sup>14</sup> On the 19th century Polish search for modernization models see Jedlicki (2002).

modernization, and artistic trends” and since the arts offered more possibilities for sociopolitical rebellion than politics, “rebellious artistic groups sought to play a direct political role in mobilizing people and destroying old values that they considered false and hypocritical”<sup>15</sup>. Regarding the situation at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Berend quotes Modris Eksteins, who saw the peripheries (geographic, social, generational and sexual) as the cradle of many contemporary artistic experiments aiming at liberation, or a break from central authority in aesthetic and moral terms<sup>16</sup>. Therefore the peripheral location of any Central European society turned it into a fertile ground for experimental and innovative art, which aimed at criticism of the local environment, but also expressed doubts about the unreserved praise of the Western style of modernization. In the Polish case, the privileged position of the visual arts resulted from the importance of painting during the partitions period, particularly after the January Uprising in 1863/64, when above painters forged the visual language which has been decisively shaping Polish cultural identity ever since. Equally important, though, was the role ascribed to the artist, who acted as the spiritual leader of the nation. Although the contemporary situation cannot be analyzed in similar terms, society at large still expects artists to be not only mere producers of art objects but rather the participants in the dialogue concerning the issues of cultural identity. In particular, the artists are expected to comment on and influence the course of the civilization shift which occurred after 1989. Again, just like in the previous stages of the history of reforms, ‘modernity’ appeared to be the general category, which encompassed political and social issues, but also the cultural phenomena resulting from the openness to the West and its impact on national identity.

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<sup>15</sup> Berend (1998). p. 85

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem.

As we have seen, Polish art after 1989 did not refrain from assuming the role of a precursor of the general changes in culture and its social context. The artists looked into the established national and religious traditions eagerly and with a sense of risk and commitment, in order to ask questions about the currency and relevance of these traditions for the new era, associated with the EU membership and the new version of the “Westernization” narrative. Within the arts, the debate about the World War II and especially about the communist past could have taken place more easily than in other domains of the democratic, public sphere. Instead of a politicization of the debate, the arts showed the way to a reconciliation with the past and also the way to transgress the totalitarian traumas and not to indulge in a superficial nostalgia. The artists were also capable of presenting the arrival of the a model of the world, which preferred diversity and a decentralized network of information exchange, personal relations and models of social organizations. Through art, the issue of public space has also been raised, provoking questions about the implementation of a democratic diversity and its presence in the popular domain, meaning both the real and the symbolic agora. The new generation of painters and photographers showed the capacity to portray society in the transition period, registering the hybrid structure of post-communist modernity.

In search for the new shape of the modern narrative, Polish art, as suggested by art critic and curator Magdalena Ujma, was haunted by the myths of revolution and consumption. Revolution means the desire to be politically motivated and practically influence social realities, while consumption means the search for professional success and high standards of living. For Ujma, this dualism results from the two different experiences of life under communism and late capitalism, but in fact reflects

the artists' complex of not conforming to the Western standards. Precisely here, however, lies the source of the importance of art for the contemporary Polish culture. Art is capable of dealing with the particularities of the Polish/Central European experience and possesses the language to express them<sup>17</sup>. Possibly the continuous evolution of this new language is the most important outcome of the post-1989 changes on the artistic scene, showing that not everything has been done yet. It also shows that the progress of modernity can be conditioned by particular historical experiences and the existence of a universal modernization model needs to be supplemented by studies into the particularities of its local implementation.

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<sup>17</sup> Ujma (2007).

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**For information about individual artists see the web-sites of the following galleries:**

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[www.fgf.com.pl](http://www.fgf.com.pl) (Foksal Gallery Foundation Warszawa)

[www.raster.art.pl](http://www.raster.art.pl) (Raster Gallery Warszawa)

[www.zderzak.pl](http://www.zderzak.pl) (Zderzak Gallery Kraków)

and internet journals:

[www.piktogram.pl/index.html](http://www.piktogram.pl/index.html)

[www.obieg.pl](http://www.obieg.pl)

as well as the individual web-sites of the artists.

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