

Artist as a critic

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The critical, or rather the self-critical activity of artists in Poland has a long tradition. It is also characterised by a great number of forms or, to put it generally, of intention. Perhaps the primary organic cause of this activity is the fact that artists are always more sensitive than critics and more radical in their opinions. ~~This is true~~ Not only ⁱⁿ Poland. Already in the pre-war period, all controversies concerning the avant garde were conducted in artistic circles. When the debates tended to become less heated, the critic would step in to report upon them and sort out the conclusions. Not much has changed since that time. The critic creates syntheses, evolves new names for trends, arranges and classifies them. The artist is not fond of name tags - he wants to be unique. He will always have a higher regard for the opinion of another artist than for that of the professional critic since he can feel truly manifest only before another artist and knows that then he must remain true to himself. In front of a critic, the artist preens himself, grimaces and assumes poses - he plays a role. The critic is the avant garde of the public and one cannot admit to e v e r y t h i n g in front of the public, for example, to a lack of motives or to low incentives, unless such announcements constitute an element of a game, are planned in advance and calculated to bring about a given effect. If the critic is not a sufficiently sensitive conveyor belt, or, more often, if for certain reasons he simply does not wish to fulfill this function, the artist himself reaches for the pen and comments on his own creativity. Tadeusz Kantor is a typical example of an artist who conducts such a game, always surrounded by his "court" critics, whom he confesses certain truths about

himself and his art, and then censors their texts in an extremely thorough manner, removing all "unsuitable" formulations. "Wild", unconsulted criticism makes him angry - Kantor makes scenes, gets offended, breaks off relations and later is kind enough to accept apologies; in other words, he plays the tyrant towards the critic by using all the available theatrical means. At the same time, Kantor produces numerous manifestos and successive auto-biogrammes, all maintained in a convention of poetic prose, characteristic also for his theatrical "scores". These biogrammes differ as regards details and each of them emphasises different values depending upon the current interests of the author and upon the leading trend in art. They are therefore intentional biogrammes, self-creations full of mystification, a sort of fulfilled wishful thinking to which no critic has a right, while the artist both has and makes use of that right, which appears to be his natural ^{*licentia poetica*} ~~poetic license~~, certainly due to him.

The attitude represented by Kantor which is motivated internally and justified by external circumstances dating back to the Stalinist period when he was mistreated by critics for his boycott of socialist realism, is not universal among members of his generation. We encounter much more often diaries written "for the drawer" and published, frequently in a highly edited form, after the author's death, or the simultaneous pursuit of the professions of an artist and critic. This joining together of professions, which, it seems, is rather rare in other countries, is sufficiently widespread in Poland so as to give rise to reflections. In the Polish Section of the AICA which has about 60 members, there are ten persons who are active

3 ^{an} have art' education.
in both professions and a few more ~~are also trained artists~~
Outside the Section, there is a group, just as numerous, of
artists who regularly publish in the press. The only rational
explanation is the earlier ^{indicated} ~~discussed~~ * crisis of Polish art
criticism which, on the one hand, expresses itself in the
absence of social credibility and, on the other hand, in a
linguistic paralysis or perhaps in the fluidity and dullness
of criteria. It is not so much the essentially simple mechanism
which results in the fact that distrust towards critics is re-
placed by trust in the artist, that is of interest, but the fact
that the critic too believes the artist more than he does his
own colleagues. We are faced with the question whether, in view
of his obvious personal interests, the author-artist deserves
such credibility, and whether he enjoys it. It seems that
the only such artist was, and still is, Jozef Czapski who for
over half a century enjoys the constant trust and high regard
of the Polish artistic milieu. Czapski deals with the art of
others as well as with the phenomenon of its independent existence.
Involved in searching for the metaphysical values of art and
tracing its fleeting essence from the point of view of a person
conscious of his own shortcomings, he never allows himself to
cross the borderline of confabulation, to engage in "self-
creative" writing or to develop wishful thinking. Reading his
opinions about art in the context of a detailed and thorough
description of the years spent in Soviet imprisonment **, one
has the impression that God saved Czapski to give evidence of
truth, and that Czapski himself harbours such a conviction,
unable to give any other explanation of the fact that he did

* "Why are we disobedient?"

** Jozef Czapski, On Inhuman Soil, Paris 1984

not perish with the thousands of others, who were shot in the back of the head, ~~he~~ died of cold, hunger or typhoid fever. One can presume that this feeling of a mission, supported by a Catholic world outlook, arouses in Czapski an extremely rare virtue: the courage to s e e t r u t h , often experienced as a painful but necessary imperative of an honest person. This, in turn, enables him to attain a rare acuteness of opinions which contrast particularly vividly with Polish critical activity because of his status as an émigré. Right after the war, when the elite of Polish painters was "overcoming" the bitterness of the war years and "victoriously freed itself" from wartime burdens, by demonstrating succulent canvases in the Parisian Palais de Chaillot (the UNESCO exhibition in 1947), Czapski, an admirer of Bonnard and a tireless spokesman of pure painting, posed the dramatic question: "When reality changes totally, does it not influence ^{perception} ~~seeing~~? Is the painter truly devoid of those 'terrifyingly subtle' links with his times?*** Is the fact that man's vision does not experience any shocks sufficient proof that that vision is stronger than death, or, more simply, that it is not a vision but the repetition of something which has already departed?"***

No other Polish critic has dared, either at that time nor later, to question in such an open way the achievements of "Polish colourism", a trend initiated, among others, by Czapski himself at the beginning of the twenties and uninterruptedly continued for a long time after the war as if the question: "Is poetry possible after Auschwitz?" was never asked.

One could, of course, charge Czapski with the fact that by

* A quote from the "Journal" of Stanislaw Brzozowski, Polish politician and thinker.

** Jozef Czapski, *Seeing*, Krakow 1983, p. 138

Living abroad he did not have to take into consideration the current political situation and he could be honest. But in the case of ~~collurism~~⁹, everyone could have afforded to be honest under the condition that he would motivate his opinions in a credible way. We must admit that this was a difficult task since the arena of artistic efforts was at the time being taken over by the prophets of the new faith - socialist realism - who eradicated everything that was different. The spokesmen of socialist realism, just as the earlier charismatic leaders of the avant garde, proved to be more radical and consistent than the critics. They originated from the pre-war, pro-communist artistic groups and in a natural way assumed the steering of artistic life in the favourable conditions provided by 'peoples' Poland. They did not, however, renounce their doctrine even when it became a laughing stock and totally compromised. The same art critics who in the years 1948-1955 supported enthusiastically (although without much conviction) socialist realism, abandoned their opinions just as easily and gracefully as previously they acknowledged them to be their own. In order to continue this struggle for an already lost cause, in 1960 the critics were deprived of the "Artistic Review", the only art periodical at the time (the "Project" was design-oriented), which was subsequently given to a group of Party artists who did not change their attitudes to the very end, that is, up to 1974 when they, in turn, lost the editorship. There is something characteristic in the fact that the same ~~publication~~^{art magazine}, after much turmoil and a change of its title to "Art", ^(5274 KA) once again found itself in the hands of a Party artist, because no critic, even the most avid supporter of the regime, had the courage to edit it after

December 1981.

The political conditions in Poland which definitely influenced the functioning of professional critique, did not hamper the development of authors' self-criticism, universal in the 1960s and 1970s all over the world, and expressed most predominantly by numerous group and individual manifestos and artistic programmes. This type of an extra- or rather para-artistic activity, which is rather typical for the counter-culture generation in the world, is perhaps less interesting from the point of view of my reflections. It was, however, connected with two other types of artistic activity, more specific for the Polish situation. The first is known as the authors' gallery, and is similar to Western "alternative spaces", being an area of relatively free artistic expression ("relatively", since it was always controlled by censorship), and of a carefully selected programme. Such galleries appeared in Poland in 1955 (the "Krzywe Koło" ^{gallery} founded by Marian Bogusz) and were most often conducted by artists who initiated, stimulated and organised new forms of artistic activity which in turn influenced wider circles. The second type of artistic activity consists precisely of those new forms. The most frequent were plein-air exhibitions organised under the patronage of great industrial enterprises (the Nitrogen Works in Pólawy, the Mechanical Works ZAMECH in Elbląg) and were often accompanied by a theoretical symposium. Inasmuch as the galleries were an area of individual or group activity, supported by a manifesto or programmes, the plein-air exhibitions and symposia became the stage for confrontation and theoretical discussion augmented by examples of artistic paroxysms. The types of artistic-critical-initiative

activity which emerged at that time, became very popular in Poland.

Here one must mention the completely heroic and pioneering (not only on Polish soil) activity of the "El" gallery in Elblag which in the years 1961-1974 was run by Gerard Kwiatkowski, the author of the Biennale of Spatial Forms (1965) which brought about a totally unexpected growth of Polish plein-air sculpture (also due to the opportunity to use material provided by ZAMECH), and for many years determined the trends of its changes which resulted in new formulae of sculpture structure, close to minimal art. The accomplishments of the gallery (and the effects of the successive Biennale exhibitions) have still not been properly presented in Poland. For his truly frenzied activity, Kwiatkowski first found himself in prison, then in a mental hospital and finally, in 1974, embittered and discouraged, he decided to leave the country, just before the opening of the Polish Congress of the AICA which, according to the programme prepared by professor Starzynski, was to visit Elblag. Kwiatkowski cut himself off from the past by taking ~~another~~ ^{the} name of Jurgen Blum, and began a new life. After a few years, he created a new artistic centre, this time near Fulda. ^{Also} Zbigniew Markiewicz is an example of a successful blending together of one's own creative vision with the activity of an initiator, organiser and critic, who worked in Wroclaw in the 1960s and 1970s.

The way in which authors' self-critical publications appeared and functioned - they were regulated and controlled by the authorities - was a Polish feature, but their very existence, and frequently their contents, were a symptom of a specific artistic cosmopolitanism, and expressed the desire to participate as a partner in world art, and to co-create its current

image. Regardless of the type of activity, creative temperament or the artist's attitude towards the existing reality, in other words, from Czapski to Kantor, and from the adherents of socialist realism to conceptualism, the Polish artists shared an awareness of participating in Western culture, a feeling enrooted in the tradition of generations. Hence the anxieties experienced by Czapski who was concerned with the fact that the level of Polish painting is insufficiently French, and the feverish "catching up" after the years wasted on portraits of Dzierzynski and Stalin. Hence also the eternal uneasiness whether Poland already has its own informal ~~art~~, op-art, happenings and performance art; whether we are not late? Often we are just that. Repulsion towards realism, that "mirror walking down the street", accompanied by a constant lack of consumer goods never provided a favourable foundation for the appearance of pop art which, after all, was also a mirror, a crooked, fun-fair mirror which reflected the face of prosperity. Theoretical bases created in Elblag did not result in the realisation of minimal art because of a lack of sufficient material and production opportunities. Only conceptualism developed rapidly and comprehensively, since it did not require expensive and inaccessible material and used intellectual instruments, which in Poland were still in abundance.

The youngest generation of artists who matured at the end of the seventies, and studied in a period of the deepest political and economic crisis, rejected the entire pursuit. This is a generation which harbours no illusions as regards its partnership with the West but is also free of complexes. It is also the first generation which is fully aware not only of time but also of place, and which, by accepting the existing conditions

as specific historical coordinates, refers its creativity to the
 If one could speak about a certain supreme common feature which
 characterises the art of the youngest generation, it is , at
 present, not relativism vis a vis New York or Paris, not a search
 for partnership based on false premises, but an emphasis of
 their own distinctness, interest in their own status as artists
 living in a country of paradoxes. These young artists are, at
 the same time, seeking such means of para-artistic expression
 whose very form would be eloquent. Already in the first period
 of martial law, there appeared practically simultaenously
 a number of publications symptomatic for that new trend of the
 artist's self-reflection and reflection of art. These publicati^{ons}
 included FABRYKA (FACTORY), "Tangó," "Luxus," and soon after "Oj,
 dobrze już" (It's alright now) - all uncensored.

FABRYKA, in contrast to the remaining publications, is not
 a periodical. It was originally published as a replacement
 for an earlier planned catalogue of an exhibition entitled
 "Construction in Process" (1981). It is also the only publication
 which refers to the historical continuity of Polish art, that is
 to the constructivist tradition*. FABRYKA, is, however, something
 more than an occasional publication since it is also an area of
 group activity and displays the course of group effort
 which contributed to its appearance. It is also a platform for
 discussion and the latter's theme, as well as a precise,
 literal materialisation of the motto of the exhibition to which
 it refers, and whose artistic consequence it is; in other words,
it is a construction in process. FABRYKA's special connection
 * I discussed this problem in detail in "Factory and environs",
 ICSA Cahiers 1984 no 2/3, Bruxelles, and in a group publication:
 "Art of under Martial Law", Paris*1985.

with the times is expressed not only in its very form (200 hand printed copies) but also in the contents of the published programmes which raise the issue of the circulation of art in society without the participation of state institutions and mass media. FABRYKA was realised upon the artists' own initiative (above all that of Ryszard Waśko) without any subsidies or official seals of approval, which are such a bureacuratic nightmare for all Poles, and it became an institution for its own sake.

The type of artistic interests and the essentially "conceptual" language as well as the participation of artists from abroad, mean that FABRYKA is still inclined towards the "commopolitan" trend of the seventies, which the remaining publications decidedly reject. It is true that they do refer to Western myths, idols or symbols, but only to show how absurd and comical they are on Polish ~~soix~~ terrain. "Luxus", the achievement of Wrocław artists (Pawel Jarodzki, Bozena Grzyb, Ewa Ciepielewska) who began it as students, excels in employing a satirical style. Micky Mouse and comics, Superman and Sexy Doll, accompany the Polish reality of a soap powder unavailable in stores, towns under clouds of tear gas, and hand printed underground poetry. The authors do not proclaim manifestos or programmes, nor do they write them. They do not dream about conquering the world. "America is everywhere", writes Jarodzki, "only in Poland it has a Polish character". *

Self-mocking titles belong to the two remaining periodicals, which otherwise differ considerably. "Tango" originated in the

* Cf. Szymon Bojko, Luxus, in: Art under ~~Martial~~ Martial Law, Paris 1985

pre-December artistic undertakings of the anarchising- post-Dadaist group Lodz Kaliska * (whose members also took part in "building" FABRYKA) and, similarly to FABRYKA, it is practically the sole area of the artistic creativity of the members of the group which is of an open, ephemeral nature and frequently appears under the name of Strych (Attic) or Tango. "Oj, dobrze już" is a publication of young painters who pursue their activity with great impetus and considerable success. Their periodical forms a stage for confrontations of the group ('Gruppa') which they established in 1983 and, at the same time, it is a means for presenting "artistic reflection beyond painting". Members of the group publish poems, treatises, polemics and reviews. Both periodicals share one feature - adequacy of language. The "Tango" uses obscenity in a programme-like manner, and propagates an ideology of a "zrzuta"**, instead of art, since the former is more imbedded in national culture. Both in "Tango" which demonstrates its total contempt for various authorities, and makes fun of all forms of social life, as well as in "Oj, dobrze już", where "serious" texts always include irony and maintain a distance towards one's own creativity, that of others and ^{to} ~~of~~ the dramatic position of an artist, deprived, in our part of the world, of all opportunities, the language of the texts is adequate as regards the visual contents. In "Tango", this visual aspect functions as an immanent component of the publication and in "Gruppa"'s periodical, the text is a supplement or elaboration of that which is displayed in the pictures.

* The name of a train station in Lodz

** Slang term for a collection of money for buying a bottle of vodka.

As I have already ^{en}mentioned, all these publications share, apart from lesser elements, a "Zeitgeist", the atmosphere in which they appeared. One aspect of the periodicals is the use made of Polish reality, of the inferiority of the situation in which we have found ourselves. The second, more optimistic ~~aspect~~ ^{aspect}, is their very existence. After 35 years of depending upon a sponsor and waiting for the approval of the censor, there has come a time for launching our own initiatives; everyone can write his own book and publish his own newspaper if he only wishes to do so - such is the impact of the underground publishing houses. Let us hope that this new consciousness will also give rise to a new type of artist-critic.