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Why not national?
(“Novelty” and nationality in Polish art of the 20th and 21st centuries)

Abstract

The author discusses the issue of national art after Poland's regained independence in 1918. That period saw no unequivocal definition of what national art – art related to national identity – should be, despite the nascent country's need for such art, especially that which was inspired by rural life. The chief proponents of this idea did not perceive it in strictly national terms but were open to cutting-edge art and formal experimentation. Evidence to the above can be seen in the positive recognition bestowed on the Polish pavilion at the 1925 International Exposition of Modern Industrial and Decorative Arts in Paris.

The author believes that controversy surrounding national art (i.e. a Polish style) began to arise in the 1930s. At that time, the term “novelty” [nowoczesność] in the vocabulary of Polish art criticism began to take on a meaning that reflected a common contemporary style, one that referenced the avant-garde and was stripped of its original ideological underpinnings. For the elite, “novelty” became the de rigueur worldview and a symbol of civilisational and progressive change. Meanwhile, Polish painters returning from Paris in the 1930s spearheaded an emphasis on Colourism and a concept of autonomous modernist works which relied on timeless artistic principles. Consequently, the idea of national art receded into the peripheries of critical discourse along with the emergence of a fundamental semantic opposition in the form of national versus “novel”.

This opposition was further enforced by the authorities during Poland's communist era (1945-1989). Paradoxically, this was the case not only during the height of Socialist Realism (1950-1952) but particularly during the Post-Stalinist thaw and in the 1960s and 1970s, as avant-garde tradition dominated the arts and critical discourse in Poland. Thus, the national-“novel” dichotomy was compounded by a subsequent opposition: painting (having unequivocally negative connotations) versus “novelty”/avant-garde tradition (as an undisputedly positive phenomenon).

Political events and the involvement of the Church in the 1980s (the decade of Solidarity and martial law) set the stage for a reversal in the negative attitude towards the idea of national art and the issues associated with it (for instance, we see the emergence of previously unbroached subjects such as German and Russian issues and an interest in Church art). After Poland regained her independence in 1989, however, we see a return to the erstwhile opposition among artists from critical art and oppositional art circles. Matters of national identity and national art (along with painting) were not considered modern or progressive and were thus rejected or even attacked.

In more recent years, there has been mounting interest in art addressing national concerns in the wake of, for example, Poland's accession to the EU (2004) and the Polish plane crash in Smoleńsk (2010).

In 19th and early 20th century Poland there was a rather widespread conviction regarding the need for creating a national Polish style. Contributing to the

popularity of such a belief were both the political situation at that time (Poland was not a sovereign state at this time) and the historicising concepts prevailing in the 19th century. The “Vistula Gothic” architectural trend was considered a statement of a Polish national and religious identity that stood in stark contrast to the orthodoxy of the Russian occupiers. The Zakopane style emerging towards the end of the 19th century referenced more universal sources that existed beyond classification into particular styles – folk art and art from the Polish Tatra Highlands. Propositions for new directions in art were beginning to take shape just before the outbreak of the First World War and continued developing through the war. One example would be Formism, which incorporated the language of Expressionism and Cubism while drawing inspiration from folklore and referencing Polish Romanticism. The Exhibition of Architecture and Interior Design in the Garden [Wystawa architektury i wnętrz w otoczeniu ogrodowym] held in Cracow in 1912 popularised the manor style, which became a significant trend in the early years of Poland’s regained independence. Although, by and large, the manor style utilised Neo-Classical inspirations, it avoided the trap of historical models thanks to the fact that at the essence of this movement was a focus on the building type rather than on the stylistic costume that adorned it.

Poland’s regained statehood in 1918 beckoned for a visual brand. Utilitarian graphic art (and thus the nascent country’s bureaucratic print materials) exhibiting ties to folk woodcuts as well as architecture that incorporated the manor style and Tatra Highland motifs (much appreciated in public use buildings) proved to be ideal for this purpose. The environment of Warsaw’s School of Fine Arts (renamed the Academy of Fine Arts in 1932), which was at the heart of the quest for a national style (also referred to as the Polish style), was extremely open to experimentation and new artistic developments, as evidenced by Kazimierz Malewicz’s visit to the studio of Wojciech Jastrzębowski in 1927. In one of the main documents outlining the direction for the school, Władysław Skoczylas identified three characteristics that works produced in the school should have: “Polishness”, “modernity” (taking advantage of the latest advances in art) and “unity” (art that was pure and utilitarian)¹. In the text, Skoczylas also emphasised art’s social impact. Nonetheless, this leading ideologue in the formation of a national style in 1920s Polish art did not specify what such art works should look like. The intended native style was not defined by ethnicity, while the folk influences merely constituted a basis without which new works by prominent artists could never emerge and, as Skoczylas believed, ultimately delineate a uniquely Polish quality. In Skoczylas’s concept, the national art style was not associated with a particular form or content but with a “certain defined sphere of emotions”, feelings connected to “works by our artists [...] who struggle against and resist the death of the nation and give the nation a right to a brilliance commensurate with the past, the loss of which they cannot ponder without experiencing tragic pain”². In Skoczylas’s proposal there was no room for the work of, for example, Stanisław Szukalski, who referenced Slavic tribal

¹ W. Skoczylas, “Szkoła – sztuka – państwo”, ed. W. Włodarczyk, in: *Zeszyt Naukowy Akademii Sztuk Pięknych w Warszawie*, no. 4/10, 1984.

² W. Skoczylas, *Styl narodowy w sztuce*, in: *idem*, “Szkoła – sztuka – państwo”.

history. Skoczylas's proposal was also considerably removed from the ideas of critics associated with the national democratic camp, where moral-political criteria were the focus of much attention. A breakthrough came with the success of the Polish pavilion at the 1925 Paris International Exposition, which verified the importance of the national style proposed by the School of Fine Arts circle as well as the artistic quality of this movement.

The School of Fine Arts environment and the "Rytm" group (1922-1932), which was closely associated with it, both shared a belief in the superiority of drawing over colour along with the importance of form and clear composition (in line with Neo-Classical inspirations that were common in those days). That standpoint allowed them to distance themselves from the individualistic art of the Young Poland era, while simultaneously criticising the previous generation of epigones of Impressionist, subjective painting. In this setting, the term Modernism (1)³ (as applied to the art of the Young Poland movement) took on a negative connotation. However, the word Modernism (2) also had a different meaning – it was used to describe innovative advancements, such as the avant-garde that was emerging in the 1920s, or before that, Formism, both of which, much like the School of Fine Arts circle, favoured formal solutions and considered (especially the avant-garde) the social and political impact of art⁴. The most radical wing of the Polish avant-garde which drew on patterns from Soviet Constructivism and Productivism failed to find widespread approval due to the memory of the Polish-Soviet War in 1920 standing in the way of its ideological formula being accepted.

In the late 1920s, the advancing, forward-thinking meaning of the term Modernism began to be replaced by the use of the term "novelty" (2) [the Polish term "nowoczesność" typically translates to "modernity", though for the sake of clarity, let us accept the term "novelty" in the herein article]. Early in the 1920s the word "novelty" (1) had meant currentness, pertinence or contemporaneity in Polish art criticism. In the 1930s "novelty" (2) came to signify the spirit of a new era and new art, mass democracy, a lifestyle and technical progress⁵. In line with this new mentality, the most resonant event of the decade – the 1937 Paris International Exposition – took place under the banner of "Art and Technology".

The intertwining of the modern with the national, marking one of the more important developments in Polish art of the 20th and 21st centuries, began in the 1930s. But first, to see the primary source of this plait we must look back to 1903, when Roman Dmowski produced his *Thoughts of a Modern Pole* [Myśli nowoczesnego Polaka] as a charter for the National Democratic Party. It was

³ In contemporary art study, precise terminology is vital. Therefore, I have decided to numerically differentiate the various meanings of the terms "Modernism" and "nowoczesność" as they appear in criticism and research papers.

⁴ D. Wasilewska, *Przełom czy kontynuacja? Polska krytyka artystyczna lat 1917-1930 wobec tradycji młodopolskiej*, typed doctorate dissertation manuscript at the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń (in print, Universitas Publishing). This interesting study does not account for the evolution of the term "nowoczesność", and relies too little on what I believe to be the artists' own decisive ideas. It also practically omits any mention of Skoczylas's proposition and the impact of his ideas.

⁵ *Ibidem*, particularly the subsection *Styl*.

this very party that stood as the chief opposition to Józef Piłsudski's Sanation movement, which took control after the May Coup in 1926 and was in the midst of carrying out a programme of political reforms in the country. Sanation criticised their opponent for its modern, partisan and Darwinian views of the country. To the Sanation supporters, the positivist approach to work was a fundamental negation of Poland's romantic tradition – its severance, and above all, a dismissal of Poles' armed efforts to regain the country's independence. The Piłsudski-led act of independence was averse to positivistic, modern, and egotistical biding of time in wait for favourable political conditions. From the moment they took power, the ideology inspiring the Piłsudski legion to action began to rapidly transform into a nation-building ideology – a project of social solidarity, work and organisation. That is why the ideas coming out of the School of Fine Arts, which was a milieu tightly connected to Sanation (and refereed to, not entirely accurately, as a nation-building circle) never reflected the National Democratic concepts for a national art. We also notice a reluctance, if not to say an unwillingness, to using the word "modern". The term "contemporary" was seen to be better suited to the project of nation-building at hand⁶.

The term "novelty" was subject to fundamental changes until the early 1930s. As mentioned earlier, it ceased to be a neutral quantifier and began to be increasingly associated with a worldview blueprint of an enlightened pedigree⁷. The term Modernism (3) was still in use, and continues to be to this day, but in a slightly modified meaning, referring almost exclusively to Polish architecture of, initially, the 1930s and 40s and later to the period after 1956⁸. In spite of this, use of the term was obviously in sharp decline. "Novelty" (2) began to be understood as the style of the 20th century utilising experimentation and innovative form (though not as radical as amongst the avant-garde), as well as the social consciousness coinciding with it. Because of the stylistic universality of the 1930s, "novelty" also applied to art coming out of Western Europe, which for Poland meant the Paris art scene more than any other. Yet "novelty" (2) was an exceptionally voluminous term that also covered the modern design and residential architecture of Nazi Germany.

To further trace the relationship between what is national and modernity in Polish art we must take note of a new tendency gaining in popularity in painting throughout the 1930s – Colourism. Associated with Impressionism in the 1920s, it was later recognised by critics as a distinct movement. The turning point for Colourist ideas came during an exhibition of the Komitet Paryski group (known as the "kapistas") in Warsaw in 1931. The painters arriving from Paris represented an idea of art that we today would call Modernist (4) (in the sense of it applying to autonomous works, as defined by Clement Greenberg

⁶ W. Włodarczyk, "Niepodległość i nowoczesność", in: *Sztuka wszędzie. Akademia Sztuk Pięknych w Warszawie 1904-1944*, red. nauk. J. Gola, M. Sitkowska, A. Szewczyk, [katalog] Zachęta, Warsaw 2012.

⁷ Enlightened novelty (3) as a worldview-philosophical construct dominated by great narratives usually appears in connection to Post-Modernist views. It is not a goal of the herein article to present the various views of nowoczesność, Post-Modernism or Post-Structuralism, or to provide even a cursory relation on the immense literature on the subject. I refer to the ways in which these phenomena were understood and named in their time, as employed by artistic or other, related communities.

⁸ Modernism (3) in this sense was situated in between the avant-garde and novelty (2).

in the second half of the 20th century). Modernist art was and still is closely associated with the idea of the artist as a clerk (as defined by Julian Benda in the late 1920s) and with a radical rejection of all notions of national art as well as of all art intended to serve functions beyond the purely artistic. Czapski wrote: "Today, having 'a land, a country, a home and people' – having *freedom*, we cannot sacrifice our ambitions of creating the highest values in art..."⁹ This stood in opposition to the Piłsudski circle's and the School of Fine Arts' conviction that independence was paramount and to nationalist concepts in general. Now, as per Czapski's diagnosis it was time that independence be replaced by freedom. This way, freedom was divested of political connotations and began to be perceived as a value that is, above all, artistic, a moral creative impulse and the foundation for an artist's identity.

In 1930s Poland, the idea of the nation was becoming an instrumental category, markedly political, terse and, like independence, irrelevant to an artist's identity. It was starting to become overshadowed by the notion of "novelty" (2), which was often used to describe the work of the *kapistas* from Paris. And, though this notion was marked by a shade of National Democratic leanings, it took on the shape of a leftist worldview blueprint as a result of changes that were taking place not only in Poland. It became a label covering everything in art that was not connected with nation or independence. A semantic reshuffle was underway: the nation was replaced by society (which figured heavily in the avant-garde vocabulary) and independence (affiliated with the School of Fine Arts and the Academy of Fine Arts) gave way to freedom (the Colourists' premier concern). The nation and nationalism was endowed with a new interpretation; a new shade of meaning. "In the period in question, we can identify the beginnings of theoretical analyses of the ways in which nationalism and modernity are linked, which forecast the emergence of a «Classical Modernist» school in the 1950s and 60s"¹⁰... Up to 1939, works which attempted to «classify» or «present a typology» of nationalism laid the foundations for a modernist approach, which gained strength after the Second World War. Though very few works touched on the issue of national history, nationalism was finally beginning to be perceived as a 'modern' phenomenon in and of itself"¹¹. In this new view, the nation became an invented tradition, a community of ideas, a construct of the Enlightenment¹². This type of understanding of nation, of casual nationality, can be noticed in the works of the *kapistas* and in avant-garde circles¹³. The post-war years confirmed the direction of the changes which had begun in the 1930s. The moment when Nazi occupation ended was not described

⁹ J. Czapski, "Wpływy i sztuka narodowa", in: *Droga*, no. 3, 1933.

¹⁰ P. Lawrence, *Nacjonalizm: historia i teoria*, "Książka i Wiedza", Warsaw 2007, p. 134.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 86.

¹² For more on this, see: W. Włodarczyk, "Niepodległość i nowoczesność", cf. J. Chałasiński, "Antagonizm polsko-niemiecki w fabrycznej osadzie *Kopalnia* na Górnym Śląsku", in: *Studia socjologiczne*, 1935, an interesting text from the Polish point of view and relevant to the herein article. It also preceded Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*.

¹³ J. Sosnowska, "Kapiści na tle dyskusji o sztuce narodowej", in: D. Konstantynow, R. Pasieczny, P. Paszkiewicz (eds.), *Nacjonalizm w sztuce i historii sztuki 1789-1950*, Instytut Sztuki Polskiej Akademii Nauk, Warsaw 1998, p. 213; J. Sosnowska, "Sztuka w oczach polskiej prawicy do 1939 roku", in: *Roczniki Humanistyczne*, R. XLVI, no. 4, 1998.

as independence but simply as freedom. The reason was that many people believed it was only a shift from one occupation to another – Nazi to Soviet. The nation, which the language of communist propaganda often touted, was replaced with the idea of a people and, above all as it seemed, was associated with scientific objectivism and society.

The Exhibition of “Novel” Art in Cracow [Wystawa Sztuki Nowoczesnej] in 1948 (later called the first WSN on account of subsequent editions in 1957 and 1959) featured none of the leading representatives of the Polish pre-war avant-garde. Leftist contemporary artists headed by Tadeusz Kantor, the exhibition’s main organiser, strived to present “novelty” (2), which was understood as the style of the day and a worldview of an innovative nature, as a proposition for the new authorities. The position of the Colourists, though they remained faithful to their idea of art ensconced in an ivory tower, i.e. Modernist (4) art, and were a group capable of working towards their own interests, changed very little in the 1940s. Though the leading ideologue of Polish post-war Colourism Jan Cybis made certain concessions to the new authorities (an example being his involvement in the propagandic and extremely “novel” (2) Recovered Lands Exhibition [Wystawa Ziem Odzyskanych] in Wrocław in 1948), he also spoke out for the Polish nature of landscape painting and devoted serious thought to the Polish school of landscape¹⁴.

The Colourists were the most menacing opponents in all of the arts to the communists, who since 1947 made increasingly stricter demands on artists to create art for the masses and who postulated a cultural policy which would allow them to control the world of culture. After all, the Colourists still propounded an exclusive idea – Modernist (4) art of separation that did not acknowledge social or political context. Meanwhile, “novel” artists or those from the avant-garde tradition acknowledged social context heavily. Socialist Realism began to dominate in late 1949 and the role of the chief codifier of Socialist Realism in Poland fell to the art historian Juliusz Starzyński. Prior to the war he was the director of the Art Propaganda Institute, an institution that was open to all forms of art but was closely tied to the School of Fine Arts and, obviously, the Sanation camp. Therefore, it is not surprising that Colourism was deemed a more dangerous type of formalism than even “novel” abstraction. Abstraction was an obvious antithesis to Socialist Realism, whereas Colourism could seriously weaken the ideological concepts on a Socialist Realist canvas. What is more, it was much more difficult to undermine the tenets of the Colourist approach than it was to simply reject the language of obvious deformation or unrepresentative works. Starzyński was closely attached to the idea of “domestic” art: the painting of Felicjan Szczyński-Kowarski, the graphic art of Tadeusz Kulisiewicz and the sculpture of Xawery Dunikowski. There was no room for the Colourism of the kapistas. Starzyński’s vision did however conjure the unrealised pre-war hope held by artists of all camps that art would make a considerable contribution to the aesthetic face of the country and its social character.

¹⁴ W. Włodarczyk, *Akademia Sztuk Pięknych w Warszawie w latach 1944-2004*, WSiP, ASP, Warszawa 2005, pp. 57-58; A. Markowska, *Definiowanie sztuki – objaśnianie świata. O pojmowaniu sztuki w PRL-u*, Wydawnictwo UŚ, Katowice 2003.

One of the foremost aesthetic catchphrases of Socialist Realism was the postulate of a “national form and proletarian (socialist) message”. Here, national form was treated like a slogan; it was a fig leaf attached to works that were at the core contradictory in spirit to, for example, Polish architecture. The Palace of Culture and Science (1951-1955), a gift to Warsaw from Joseph Stalin, crowned by a form inspired by St. Florian’s Gate in Cracow, its attics designed to resemble the ornamentation adorning Polish Renaissance town halls – this structure confirmed that it was not about a national canon but about imposing the eclectic Soviet style on Poland. The national form category drew on models of “progressive” eras (such as the Renaissance and Classicism) and 19th century Realism. The chief deciding criteria were the attitude of the artists and the subject matter of their works with respect to oppressed classes. What Socialist Realism did was to effectively trivialise national points of reference for artists.

The doctrine-driven approach and the battle against Colourism were very soon verified by the authorities. In spite the expectations of artists, the authorities did not see art as an indispensable tool in their domination (physical violence and economic repression were effective enough) and found no reason for its use in the indoctrination of the public. The communist authorities were not interested in art but in artists. As early as October 1951, hundreds of artists were invited to a meeting organised by the Minister of Public Security Jakub Berman at the State Council building. There, the artists were presented with a vision of art based on values of the Enlightenment; an art, as the authorities claimed, that was socially effective. The result of the meeting was the dismissal of the partisan and ardent Socialist Realist editor-in-chief of *Przegląd Artystyczny*, the leading periodical on art. The editor-in-chief post was then handed to the art historian Mieczysław Porębski and other high-ranking positions were awarded to non-partisan artists. Additionally, the first-ever poster art studios were established and their management was entrusted to such icons of “novelty” as Henryk Tomaszewski and Józef Mroszczak. This gesture of good faith on the part on the authorities was indeed merely a gesture. It was extended because the authorities were busy with plans to address matters they believed to be most urgent: to crack down on the kulaks and on the Church, which manifestly emphasized its national character. The communists made use of the “novelty” (2) of the 1930s, which suited the conditions of a repressive state and was more than enough to satisfy (as per the postulate for art to be socially effective) the expectations of the liberal and lay intelligentsia¹⁵. We must note that Primate Stefan Wyszyński was arrested in 1953, after the death of Stalin.

There was another factor that was conducive to the term “novelty” (2) taking on new meaning. The moment the cold war was announced and the “iron curtain” divided Europe, the previously-unknown concept of an East-West rivalry germinated in the consciousness of not only artists. The West was understood in a two-fold manner: as a bordered and inaccessible land of “novel” (2) art and as a basic point of reference in one’s personal artistic pursuits and a sort of

¹⁵ W. Włodarczyk, “Po co był socrealizm?”, in: J. Goszczyńska, J. Królak, R. Kulmiński (eds.), *Doświadczenie i dziedzictwo totalitaryzmu na obszarze kultur środkowoeuropejskich*, Instytut Slawistyki Zachodniej i Południowej, Uniwersytet Warszawski, Warsaw 2011.

criterion for self-assessment. In this sense, the local, national tradition seemed not to belong to the West and, at best, could only try to keep up with this Western role model.

It is no wonder then that the main artistic slogan in Poland in October of 1956 was "We want to be 'novel'". This phrase was coined by an architect who was a member of the communist parliament¹⁶. References to the category of nation (sporadically borrowed by the extreme nationalist wing of the communist party in 1956) and especially to the category of independence no longer entered the into the artistic equation under such conditions. "Novelty" (2) pushed notions of Polish cultural identity (nation, religion) into the peripheries. Hopes for a political thaw, even an insincere one, only solidified the attitude of artists and intellectuals. The term freedom did not appear in commentary on the abstract paintings that dominated the second and third editions of the Exhibition of "Novel" Art or in the critical texts of that time¹⁷. The yearning for a civilisational leap forward gave priority to architecture and utilitarian art; a fact that complemented the political modernisation project of the associates of Władysław Gomułka, the new head of the communist party¹⁸.

The latter half of the 1950s was the most creatively fruitful period in Polish "novelty" (2,4). This includes both "novelty" (2) understood as a worldview, and "novelty" (4) understood as a historical/artistic period taking place here and now and covering all artistic manifestations, including Modernist (4) (as defined by Greenberg) painting. Polish "novelty" (4) of the second half of the 1950s was marked by Modernist (4) abstract art and a "novel" (2) approach to issues of space. Artists addressed the subject of space unmindful of the fact that its sole administrator was the communist state. The belief that art could have an effective social impact in public space (through architecture, graphic art, etc.) for the purpose of shaping a new mankind had a distant source in the "novelty" (3) of the Enlightenment. Once again, the first time being in the 1930s, "novelty" (4) pushed the national and the religious into the background. It was only on account of the exceptional pressure from the political events of the autumn of 1956 and, above all, artists' involvement in the dubious thaw of 1951 that artists believed it correct to disregard the issue of the political prisoners who were being freed at that time and of the recently-released Primate¹⁹. Upon going to take up a position at Harvard University's school of architecture, Jerzy Sołtan cited the Church's disapproval of his Modernist (3) church designs as one of the main reasons for his decision to leave Poland.

What brought about serious scrutiny of this construction – the "novelty" (4) project and timeless Modernist (4) painting without references to national

¹⁶ J. Hryniewiecki, "Kształt przyszłości", in: *Projekt*, no. 1, 1956, p. 7. Written in 1955.

¹⁷ P. Juskiewicz, *Od rozkoszy historiozofii do „gry w nic”. Polska krytyka artystyczna czasu odwilży*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Adama Mickiewicza, Poznań 2005.

¹⁸ P. Koryś, "Idea nowoczesności w działaniach i planach partii komunistycznej w Polsce 1945-1980. Przegląd problematyki", in: E. Kościak, T. Głowiński (eds.), *Gospodarka i społeczeństwo w czasach PRL-u (1944-1989)*, Wydawnictwo Gajt, Wrocław 2007.

¹⁹ Such a view reinforcing the mythology of the thaw in the mid-1950s can also be found in newly-published books, such as: A. Markowska, *Dwa przełomy. Sztuka polska po 1955 i 1989 roku*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, Toruń 2012.

history – was a reflection on the historical interdependency between the functioning of the state and long-term historical determinants of what Polish culture means, which surpassed the short scope of the Stalinist period in the country. The political source of these reflections was a programme of festivities celebrating the 1000th anniversary of Poland as a Christian nation announced by the still-imprisoned Primate Wyszyński along with a novena that preceded the festivities. In this context, the communist episode in Poland was confronted with the millennial history of the country. The response of the authorities was to announce celebrations commemorating 1000 years of Poland's statehood. The moment when these two diametrically opposed ideas come into confrontation with each other was compounded even further by the communist authorities' anti-German stance, hailing the Soviet Union as the guarantor of Poland's western border. The authorities' loyalty to the Soviet Union was in turn demonstratively countered by Polish bishops with a much-publicised letter of amity to their counterparts in Germany, which was the first instance of a sovereign Polish voice in the international arena. The anniversary year falling on 1966 was also a deciding moment in the strengthening of the Polish avant-garde and marked the beginning of a new stage in its development, referred to as the neo-avant-garde. Having been on the peripheries of the Polish art world until then, avant-garde tradition made the first great stride in its development at a symposium in Puławy organised as part of the 1000 years of statehood celebrations. The symposium, a review of contemporary and innovative Polish art, was headed by Mieczysław Porębski and the director of the Łódź Museum of Art Ryszard Stanisławski. The idea to make avant-garde tradition the leading undercurrent amidst the changes in Polish contemporary art and a kind of chronological framework for it was informed by the modernisational, political (the symposium coincided with the launch of the Azoty chemical plant in Puławy) and historical views of the 1960s²⁰. The notions of progress, development and experimentation inherent to the avant-garde paradigm fit in nicely with the concept of a Polish "novelty" (2,4) and even enriched it²¹. The avant-garde paradigm also became the foundation for a new – though exploiting earlier premises – dichotomy which aimed to scrutinise the art status quo: painting versus neo-avant-garde work or action.

In the eyes of the neo-avant-gardists, painting was a symptom of anachronism and insularity. But it was precisely painters (e.g. Jerzy Jurzycki, Wiesław Szamborski, Zbysław Grzywacz) who undertook the task of criticism towards the system and the subject of patriotism, acting in response to the dramatic political events of the times (March and August 1968, December 1970). These were things the neo-avant-gardists seldom did. Only a small few, such as Anastazy Wiśniewski, criticised the authorities, though it can be said that it was done within rules that the authorities themselves established, i.e. through political

²⁰ W. Włodarczyk, *Ustanawianie obrazu. Sztuka lat 60-tych*, in: *Wiesław Szamborski. Malarstwo*, [katalog] ed. J. Dąbrowski, Akademia Sztuk Pięknych, Warsaw 2011.

²¹ One of the artist "statements" for the Puławy symposium was a performance by Włodzimierz Borowski in which he sang the words "mocznik, mocznik" [urea, urea] to the tune of the Polish national anthem. This took place against a backdrop of urea production apparatus.

revisionism. Those neo-avant-gardists who did speak out were scorned at the time and labelled “pseudo-avant-garde”²². There was no talk of references to nationalist ideas or of concepts for a national style. The general lack of political statements was partly due to the fact that such action could easily be mistaken for sympathy with the “Moczarians” (an extremist faction of the communist party led by Mieczysław Moczar propounding strongly-nationalist views) but mainly because there was no room for national pursuits in the ethos of the neo-avant-garde. Juliusz Starzyński’s 1973 book *Polish Road to Independence in Art* [*Polska droga do samodzielności w sztuce*] was already irrelevant although it created an interesting context for the much-talked-about exhibitions of the late 1970s, particularly the one titled Polish Self-Portrait [*Polaków portret własny*]. That exhibition was one of the most highly-attended events of the time but it had no influence on the artists of the neo-avant-garde and made only a slight impact on painters. Neo-avant-garde art was being increasingly perceived as an institutionalised art that enjoyed the support of the authorities. In its first issue in 1974, *Sztuka*, the leading arts publication of the 1970s, ran an article titled “Realism and the Avant-Garde” [*Realizm i awangarda*] which was intended as a sort of bridge between the communists’ cultural policy programmes of the early 1950s and the 1970s²³.

It occurred that what had originally determined the neo-avant-garde’s position in the Polish art world in the late 1960s and early 1970s became the cause of its downfall ten years later. The neo-avant-garde was detached from social and political context, and it was practically official. Faced with growing resistance from the working class and the expansion of underground opposition network, the avant-garde tradition was the first victim of the events of 1980. In 1976 a vehement protest erupted against constitutional amendments in which the socialist character of the country, the leadership of the communist party and the country’s alliance with the USSR would be officially entered into the constitution. Painters and sculptors such as Henryk Błachnio, Jacek Sempoliński, Hanna Rudzka Cybisowa and Barbara Zbrożyna added their names in support of the protest while representatives of the neo-avant-garde were conspicuously absent.

The face of art in the 1980s would be decided by a young generation who didn’t know Stalinist oppression, didn’t comprehend the quiet pact of artists during the period of the thaw, and didn’t understand those artists’ entanglement in “novelty” (2,4). But what shaped the phenomenon of Polish art of those days even more were changes in humanities studies brought on by Post-Modernism and Post-Structuralism. Post-Modernism challenged the great narratives of “novelty” (3): History, Nation, God, Art. But it was the exact opposite on the Polish art scene in the era of Solidarity (1980-1981) and during martial law (1981-1983). Narrative painting began to address subjects that had never, or at least very infrequently, arisen in the past. Young artists, without complexes and ignorant of the older generations’ experiences, undertook subjects like

²² That was the term applied to artists who challenged the hegemonic arrangement between Galeria Foksal and the Museum of Art in Łódź, the two foremost institutions which defined the shape of art in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The art exhibited at these two institutions was of a Modernist (4) nature.

²³ K. Kostyrko, “Realizm i awangarda”, in: *Sztuka*, no. 1, 1974.

Polish-German and Polish-Russian relations, their personal stories, and political restrictions. Young Ukrainians talked about Ukrainian art. The painter Leon Tarasewicz affirmed his Belarusian roots. A boycott of official exhibition venues and a tendency to organize shows in places of worship brought a part of the intellectual community back to the Church. Jerzy Nowosielski's iconic paintings were achieving their greatest triumphs at that time. Not only the works but the actions of artists were starting to take on meaning. The "Battle for the walls" [Walka o mury] initiative of the underground opposition during martial law set the stage for the unique shape of Polish art in public space in the 1990s. A radical shift in social awareness was driven by Pope John Paul II's first visit to Poland in 1979 and the establishment of the massive Solidarity labour union.

We must attribute the young generation's rejection of Post-Modernist perspectives to Poland's specific history and culture. Just like the year 1920 influenced the unique reaction to the avant-garde, the year 1980 (as well as subsequent years) triggered an essentially different adaptation of Post-Modernism. In a nutshell: Post-Modernism validated the meaning of painting and challenged the erstwhile dictates of the neo-avant-garde. It did not, however, undermine great narratives. References to religion and national history stemmed from experiences with totalitarianism and "novelty" (2,4) and from knowing how they had been overcome. It was in the 1980s that we see the appearance of texts examining the role of "novelty" (2,4) in Polish culture and, at the same time, pointing out its ambivalent character. Yet, a noteworthy summit of art historians in 1984 put forth another diagnosis: the impact of totalitarianism's ubiquitous and unwavering ideological pressure – the concept of "ideoza"²⁴ [the term relates to the link between authority and artistic activity, where the authority dictates what belongs in the cultural mainstream and what must remain outside it – trans]. Similarly to what Czesław Miłosz expressed when escaping Poland in 1951, an "ideoza" challenges the subjective sovereignty of individuals living in a system of total enslavement²⁵.

It is interesting that the year 1989 – the beginning of independence – saw a resurgence in the communist-era relationship between nationality and "novelty", bypassing the experiences of young art of the 1980s and eliminating them from the reserves of recent art tradition. The reason for this was partly political. A compromise reached during the round table proceedings between the exiting communists and members of the opposition stipulated a vague treatment of communist times. The compromise made it easier to deny historical experience and to forget, while also rendering it unclear whether the year 1989 should in fact be acknowledged as the moment of the independent state's establishment. After all, the first free parliamentary elections were not held until 1991. On the other hand, the reason was also rooted in art and worldview.

In the 1990s and into the new millennium, the Polish art scene was dominated by critical art. Artists belonging to this category generally acted on two

²⁴ The term was coined by Andrzej Turowski, a scholar of the Polish avant-garde with ties to Galeria Foksal. A. Turowski, "Polska ideoza", in: *Sztuka polska po 1945 roku: materiały Sesji Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki Warszawa, listopad 1984*, PWN, Warsaw 1987.

²⁵ C. Miłosz, *The Captive Mind*, Penguin Books LTD, London 1980, p. 20.

premises: artistic criticism of medium, and criticism of the broadly-understood, in a Foucauldian sense, power. The medium of painting and Modernist (4) works were deemed to conserve the political status quo, to conform to the authority, which in the currently-free country meant the authority of the Church and of conservative opinion²⁶. The body of work of the previous decade's young painters was discounted along with their cultural diagnoses. The medium of painting, politically interpreted this way and negated, was replaced with new electronic media, with the body and with art in public space. It was a public space diametrically opposed to the public space of the 1980s, when its unpermitted use could have serious repercussions and all types of public actions were strictly controlled. In the 1990s, though, it was a public space of a free and democratic country where artistic performances are subject to public debate, or in the most extreme, arguable cases, to proceedings in an impartial court of law.

The criticism of power found new meaning in the "ideoza" diagnosis: the ubiquitous authority and the inescapable threat associated with it were now identified in the Church and in xenophobic and nationalistic worldviews. Hence, it was not a direct criticism of political authorities but of the authority of public opinion. It concurrently elevated art and its creators to the top of the cultural practice hierarchy.

Critical art took on all of the aspects of "novelty" (2,4). This included the ones from the 1930s, but most of all, those attached to "novelty" (2) in communist times: an ambivalence to reality, a denial of historical experience, an avoidance of Polish circumstances, an assignment of a specific role to the artist and the designation of art as a locus for formulating moral and political diagnoses, and finally, an advanced level of institutionalisation. This happened because critical art, just like the neo-avant-garde before it, quickly found institutional support at the hands of galleries and museums, not to mention subsidies. Aside from conducting cursory examinations of Polish artists' works on the basis of a simplified painting/critical art dichotomy, scholars from this artistic circle ideologise the artistic environment, spotting the main threats to contemporary artistic life in the dominance of Christian values and in the preservation of a national awareness²⁷. Moreover, in doing so, they regularly disregard the self-regulating and protective mechanism of democracy and the instances of impartial courts.

It is a fact that after Poland's accession into the European Union interest in symbols of national identity spiked. With the current fashion for all things vintage, ethno-design – in this case meaning the Polish style of the 1920s and folk crafts from the communist era – enjoys great popularity and is garnering international recognition. The Smoleńsk air catastrophe of 2010 elicited a wave of immense social emotion and reflection on national identity, which was channelled in at least two high-profile exhibitions: "THYMÓS. The Art of Anger 1900-2011" in Toruń and "New National Art" at the Museum of Modern Art in

²⁶ Such a view is expressed in the book: P. Piotrowski, *Znaczenia modernizmu. W stronę historii sztuki polskiej po 1945 roku*, Dom Wydawniczy "Rebis", Poznań 1999. Piotrowski's book was the most important publication and constituted one of the most important theoretical substantiations for critical art theoreticians and scholars.

²⁷ "Independence of the nation, and thus, of the ethno-cultural collective is often of a negative nature". P. Piotrowski, *op. cit.*, p. 222.

Warsaw in 2012. The emotions accompanying both exhibitions (and even the demonstrative withdrawal of artists taking part in the Toruń show) indicate that exhibitory institutions are seeking to respond to these unusual social interests and to escape the methodological trap of critical art study and the dead end that the selective premises of critical exhibitory practices had led them into.

Today, when we talk freely of the wane of Post-Structuralist theory, when we can spot the limitations of the enlightened “novelty” (3) project, issues of nationality are being increasingly noted by artists and scholars. These issues cannot be contained in a post-colonial trauma formula the way that practitioners of critical art would like to see them. Today, questions surrounding subject and community belong as much to the philosophical realm as to the field of economics. Certain scholars anticipate a conservative turn in the world of art on the basis of earlier such reactions to Post-Structuralism. It appears that, at least in Poland, the current changes have a deeper foundation and cannot be explained – like the concept of national art – solely on the basis of changes in art. They must take into consideration the historical and cultural context as well as the collective memory.

So, why not national? Because “novel” art was preferred. The imperative of “novelty”, a liberal, nationally-indifferent – and thus, perceived as progressive and leftist – worldview was stronger than an observance of national identity and collective experience. Colourism, with its ideas of Modernist (4) works of art and avant-garde tradition was not different from “novelty” (2,4) in this regard. The source of this attitude lay in the hazy position of artists with ties to the Piłsudski camp – a camp that was, after all, leftist, composed of liberal-leaning Colourists – and in the convictions of pro-communist artists drawing on avant-garde tradition. What is important in this arrangement seems to be the relationship. It is not only that “novelty” (2,4) can give critical insight into the trend of national art tradition but that taking a look at what is national in art can reveal much about the character of the “novel” (2,4) art that has taken over the Polish art scene. In a perspective befitting novelty (2,4), art that reflected national values could not be treated seriously and was therefore pushed into the margins, into the same territory as religious zealotry, political deviance and artistic banality²⁸. But this also shows the shortcomings of such a perspective. One of these shortcomings, particularly when it comes to critical art theory, is the interpretation of a painting on the basis of what it is, as a Modernist (4) work bearing a politically negative mark. The examples of works and painters involved in oppositional activity mentioned earlier obviously contradict this. Certain analogies can be found in the work of Gerard Richter and George Baselitz.

The “novel”/national dichotomy can occur to be a simplification or a trap if we fail to take into consideration the complex historical and political circumstances. The majority of works of art addressing the issues of the Holocaust (this also being a very relevant subject in deliberations on national art in Poland)

²⁸ “The taboos of sex, death and violence no longer exist in art. The only one that remains is nationality. That is because the subject of nationality is in poor taste and redolent of provincialism. Nobody knows how to broach the subject” – this is the sentiment of one of Poland’s most high-profile artists of the middle generation P. Uklański, “Orzeł z balonów”, in: *Rzeczpospolita*, 10 December 2012.

arose on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the Warsaw ghetto uprising. They were commissioned by the painter Marek Oberländer, a Jew from Lviv, among his artist friends. Aside from his sister, Oberländer's entire family lost their lives in the ghetto while he himself spent the war toiling away waist deep in water in Ural Mountain mines. He harboured leftist beliefs and though he filed the necessary paperwork, he was never granted party membership. The pieces commissioned by Oberländer were meant to be shown in an exhibition requested by New York's Jewish community. Yet, they ultimately refused to go ahead with the project citing a reason that baffled the would-be curators: it was decided that a depiction of the Holocaust as drastic as that one must have been the result of the artist's fantasy and an unthinkable idea. That experience was an impulse for him to organise an exhibition two years later at Galeria Arsenal; an exhibition that would be one of the most significant ones in communist-era Poland. Oberländer's reaction to the insincerity of the thaw in the 1950s, as to the reception of the Arsenal works, is rather thought-provoking. His riposte to Modernist (4) abstraction, which in line with "novel" (4) premises was to be an appropriate answer to Socialist Realism, was not a polemic against the language of Socialist Realism but against the rules of artistic life. In 1956-1959 he headed Salon "Po prostu" [Simply Salon] and Salon Nowej Kultury [New Culture Salon] in Warsaw. The extremely diverse shows organized there are among the most important events in the history of Polish contemporary art. Oberländer's diagnosis took into consideration something that is absent in the perspective of "novelty" (2,4): truly alternative and extra-institutional (as opposed to the exhibition programmes of official institutions) ways of organising artistic activity. "Novelty" does not allow us to see the deeper nuances in the course of such activity, the peripheral issues connected with artistic work, for example, those involving the question of ownership²⁹. The private nature of space was nearly eliminated during communism, with space being solely at the disposal of the authorities. There is no need to state what a dream situation that was for a designer. Or how "novel" it was.

The nature of art interpreted as national, containing national motifs and patriotic subject matter, does not allow us to relegate it to the margins of "novelty." It is likewise impossible to not note the Church, and above all, its critical function in communist times, when examining the relationship between "novelty" and that which can be deemed national. To omit the role of the Church as an essential point of reference to the shifts in Polish culture in the latter half of the 20th century is a basic research error of an obviously "novel" pedigree. The issue of "novel" (2,4) art's, neo-avant-garde art's and critical art's institutional embroilments is another example that points to the potency of "novelty" tradition and the selectivity of perspectives associated with that tradition. I use the term "'novelty' tradition" because it seems that today we can notice its limitations more than in the early days of Post-Modernism. For instance, we can do so by comparing 'novelty' (2,4) with national art. In the

²⁹ W. Włodarczyk, "Przestrzeń i własność", in: M. Kitowska-Lysiak, M. Lachowski, P. Majewski (eds.), *Grupa „Zamek”. Konteksty – wspomnienia – archiwalia*, TN KUL, Lublin 2009.

'novelty" (2,4) perspective, just the term "art" in the context of national art gives many a researcher considerable trouble.

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