

Art Is not a Commodity

An Interview with Mirosław Jasiński, Director of the City Gallery in Wrocław, by Ewa D. Bogusz-Boltuc

Ewa D. Bogusz-Boltuc – *Now, you are a Director of the City Gallery in Wrocław, but you've been a diplomat and a film maker. You have a degree in art history and in Polish studies. The City Gallery alone and in cooperation with other art venues has hosted dynamic, diverse and influential exhibitions, such as "The Breughel Family Exhibition: Masterpieces of Flemish Painting" and "Correspondage", a visual correspondence between one of the most prominent artists of the 20th century, Jiří Kolář and a young Parisian, Béatrice Bizot. So, let me start with a personal question - how important is art in your own private life?*

Mirosław Jasiński – To reply, half-jokingly, in the tradition of the Old Testament – and what role can art play in the private life of a man who for the past year or so has engaged with it for 12-15 hours on daily basis?

Incidentally we are preparing an exhibition of five artists, which we have playfully named "Five Musketeers." As it well known, the literary musketeers served the Queen – in Polish (and Latin) art is feminine; that is quite unique. In some sense art is a possessive, demanding and ruthless queen. Her Majesty's service requires dedication and responsibility. The aforementioned exhibition is meant to showcase five artists who pledged their life to art, for whom being an artist is no longer a mere job. What I try to say is that it is close to heart to treat one's work as service rather than occupation.

Of course we live in times where it is common to divide life into professional and private, work and rest, or more precisely, work and rest through entertainment. In such divisions shrinks the space for art as one of the cultural fundamentals, which shapes the role models both for a public and private man. The erosion of such approach naturally progressed since XIX Century only to undergo a radical collapse during the I World War. Just as in case of a scholar – truth, or a judge – justice, so for the people dealing in arts (not just artists) it should be difficult to separate private sphere from professional or public. Of course it does not always work this way.

EDBB – *In one of your interviews you've boldly stated that art is not a commodity. However, it seems that artworks are collected for aesthetic and intellectual*

pleasure as well as for prestige and investment. So, according to you, what is art for?

MJ – In my opinion, nowadays the understanding of art's essence was undermined as a result of various complex processes. In this regard I'm an essentialist. Obviously the different aspects of art, or, actually, of its presence in society gained and lost in significance. Yet it seems that the foundations have not changed since the times of the Chauvet cave, the oldest known manifestation of art and artistic creation. As H.-G. Gadamer once wrote "it seems instead to belong to the experience of art that the work of art always has its own present". In contrary to the prevalent up to now yet bankrupting before our own eyes conviction – I believe in the longevity of old triad of beauty, truth and goodness. Foreign to me is both the contraposition of the "living beauty" of mass culture against the "beauty salons" of high art (R. Shusterman) and the post-modern deconstruction of meaning.

When I was studying art history (which was a long time ago) I was taught that in our field, besides the vast knowledge, extremely important is the intuition of an art historian. This exudes a kind of reassuring humility towards an object or research material, i.e. artistic output and its creations. To answer the question more literally, I would say that essentially art is neither a source of aesthetic or intellectual pleasure (in the hedonistic approach) nor a source of prestige or an investment. Of course it could be that as well. Yet at its very foundation it is definitely something more. Sticking to the area of arts based on artefacts (as that is the one I am talking about), it could be said that naturally artworks essentially serve the communication of intricate details of human experience by the means of calculated artificiality to heighten an aesthetic and emotional reaction (after Edward Wilson). But I would highlight this existential, not hedonistic, aspect of art's impact.

EDBB – *In your Gallery, you exhibit artworks from the past and present. Works by Picasso, Goya and contemporary Polish artists like Henryk Musiałowicz and Julia Curyło have found their way to your parlor. How do you choose artists and works for exhibitions?*

MJ – From history of art we know that the so-called Great stylistic epochs during which various movements, aspects, mixtures of the old and the new exist so all that which researchers later describe as, for example, Roman style, renaissance, mannerism, baroque, etc. have their organic model of growth, maturation and dying out. For some time now I had this poignant feeling of living at the edge of such two epochs. Naturally it is difficult for us to go beyond our times, nor does that happen in a revolutionary manner, although in arts precisely the role of geniuses and extraordinary artists is the key. Before our very own eyes the artistic potential of modernist epoch has been exhausted. Without a doubt we live in times of conceptual confusion. Hence the bi-directionality of our explorations resulting from doubly optimistic view on the world and the history of art – the faith in its continuity and its indispensability in keeping our humanity, and on the other side the belief in the ability to at least vaguely determine the

direction that the future art will be heading. I don't believe that all artists are right. From its history we know that art is pitiless, both for those who too easily succumb to temporary fads often from mundane reasons and those who, committed to the forms and formulas they have created, did not notice that "the world has changed."

Contrary to what might be the dominating attitude I do not think that all the manifestations of the so called ephemeral art have future (this sounds rather banal). I do not know whether such form of art presentation like gallery will survive (after all it is a relatively recent phenomenon). If it is to survive however, there does not seem to be any other option but to return to the artefact – the fundamentals of plastic arts. I do not deny various artistic activities like video, performance, intervention etc. the right to exist. But their place is outside of art galleries, if only because of their temporality. Artefactuality, that is the fact that artworks carry, besides everything else, a record of this particular form, of grappling with matter, that they have a dual spiritually-material ontological structure constitutes for us, as the Gallery, the backbone of our program.

The standard to which we try to hold on to in the times of artistic, and perhaps first and foremost conceptual and terminological confusion.

Naturally there remains a problem of trivial art, of art treated as commodity. It is interesting enough that up to this day what I see as the milestones of development for XX Century art (but who still seem present in some way) namely Marcel Duchamp, Andy Warhol and Joseph Kosuth – negated in the field of art the rightfulness of one of the elements of the aforementioned triad – respectively Truth, Goodness and Beauty.

But what I think today is most important is the process of trivializing arts – turning it into consumerist goods, "positional good" or productions of Damien Hirst. Rightfully so in any case.

I get the impression however that something important is happening. Signals coming from the field of arts, of getting tired of emptiness and gibberish are, it appears, foreshadowing some huge, dare I say tectonic changes. Concerning, in my opinion, other spheres of social life as well. Incidentally this is depicted in a wonderful, fully of irony yet incredibly keen manner by Julia Curyło, a painter who is only 28 years old. I feel that her works are a portent of times to come and a new point of view. Additionally approached in a way that is fearless of the established opinions.

In case of art, its touchstone could be the emanating from or felt in the viewed work "unity of silent knowledge of mind and body" mentioned by Richard Sennet.

Absence of any of these elements renders the given work dubious in terms of its qualities. Although this does not mean that it automatically becomes rubbish. It could remain a work of art, although a less successful one, if it will not situate itself in the category of consumables like plastic spoons, cinema tickets, plastic bag or toothpicks, the items with which we, as humans, interact in a different manner.

EDBB – *It seems that dematerialization of contemporary art lets curators to reshape their role within the artworld. In the old days curators adhered to artifacts and/or art works. They created narratives and contextualized pieces as these objects allowed to. Now, curators appear to be equally involved in art creation as artists themselves. How could you evaluate this trend?*

MJ – I think this will change. As some food for thought (I really enjoy those kind of coincidences) I will mention that the year 1975 is viewed as the cutoff date between modernism and post-modernism. In 1973, at the conference of International Astronomical Union in Cracow, Brandon Carter proclaimed his famous lecture, which de facto concluded the modernist, neopositivist epoch in cosmology, opening the gates to anthropic, spiritually post-modern visions about the nature of universe. Although they greatly contributed to the developments of physics, it seems that for the past few years we have been observing their steady decline. The technological development and the research at CERN research have been gradually bringing empirical observation back. In the meantime, that is between 1971 (when US terminated the international convertibility of dollar to gold) and 1978 (an amendment to the IMF's Article of Agreement – resignation from gold parity) international economy (and especially the Western one) started to be dominated by the post-modern (detached from the so-called real economy) derivatives and virtual currency.

Nowadays we are witness to mental changes that will lead to money being once again anchored in the economy, or rather in the production (see the EU program of reindustrialisation). How does this relate to art? It seems to me that the artistic equivalent of these tendencies is the restoration of artefact's position in the art system. But how exactly it is difficult to say. We are facing a looming tendency without the knowledge of its final shape. This is actually applicable both to economy and physics. In case of finding out a formula for the quantum theory of gravity we will likely face completely new questions about the physical structure of the universe.

As usual, even if indirectly, art will situate itself in those new contexts. This applies to the curators as well.

As we know, art criticism is not a science but practice. Moreover it is practice rooted in what K. Popper called the second and third world, which means the spheres that evade falsification principle particular to natural sciences. Furthermore, what makes for the special role of art is the fact that we are dealing with artefacts, with things that exist physically and whose significant rationale for existence exists beyond physicality. In my opinion in the end result, both the process of evaluative differentiation of works and its effect cannot be fully rationalized.

As in any other practice, what counts is the theoretical knowledge, experience, intuition, sensitivity, sometimes the precognitive preferences (of which we need to be wary), taste, and many other, non-artistic variables.

In case of gallery exhibitions, there is also the spatial variable and its requirements.

EDBB – *What makes a good exhibition, besides, of course, that we need good art works?*

MJ – Basically the last sentence from the previous paragraph partially answers this question. But I would add three more things.

A prosaic one – financial means and two more complex – will and ability to sense ideas, thoughts and narratives that are interesting to the audience, especially when it involves people at various level of competence. And secondly, receptiveness and ability to take risks connected to placing under public scrutiny the phenomena, characters and works that go beyond the scope of existing frames and habits.

EDBB – *There are no universally accepted rules or common agreement as to what makes art works good or excellent. How you distinguish between “culture and trash”?*

MJ – How to distinguish art from rubbish, non-art? I would admit that for me the most convincing (at least nowadays) is the twofold model for assessing works of art. Actually the precursor and pioneer of this approach was the eminent Polish phenomenologist Roman Ingarden, and after him Stanisław Ossowski. Currently in a modern, enriched by the Anglo-Saxon tradition, form it is Czech aesthetician Tomas Kulka. In fact his book “Art and kitsch” is the first publication in the series of Library of City Gallery in Wrocław. Following Ingarden, Kulka distinguishes between artistic and aesthetic values. Examining the phenomenon of kitsch as a kind of parasite on the aesthetic dimension of an artwork, situating itself outside of art, Kulka paradoxically discovers a mirror brother of kitsch – conceptualism, something that de facto parasitising on the artistic values also places itself outside of art. While in case of kitsch it is difficult to talk about the artistic qualities, for conceptualism there is no aesthetic aspect of an artwork. That is very amusing.

EDBB – *You rely on the work and authority of Ingarden, Ossowski and Kulka. All three of these theories are widely questioned and have been proven to be highly controversial. Moreover, you seem to refer to two different dichotomies: the art/non-art dichotomy and the good art/bad art dichotomy. So let me rephrase my question. Relying on your experience as an art historian and a gallery director, could you give us a sort of guidance how to distinguish between good pieces, mediocre works and bad art?*

MJ – Obviously differentiation between art and non-art is of primary importance when differentiating between a masterpiece, an average piece and a weak one. Generally, I deem as pertaining to arts that, which can be evaluated aesthetically and artistically (let me stress ‘and’, not either). Naturally both types of evaluation only make sense as intersubjective processes. Both beauty and the strength of artistic expression are subject to evaluation, which has sense only when its intersubjective verification is possible. This obviously is relevant to art in general. The other matter is the division of art into disciplines. There

is a lot of talk about interdisciplinarity and I do not hold anything against correspondence or synergy in art. Sometimes an auditory experience (for example an organ concerto) reinforces the strength of our visual experiences (when viewing a church interior). But it is a different thing altogether when crossing the boundaries entices a blurring of evaluative criteria which is something that, for example, I experienced a number of times watching, as a practising documentary film-maker, the video installations which struck one with their ineptitude once the assessment criteria of film technique were applied. I think that keeping the boundaries (although we should not be strict) between various disciplines has its reason and serves the purpose in keeping the competences of both artists and audience.

Obviously civilizational changes and new technologies bring new challenges. New art disciplines emerge, which gradually develop their own criteria, possess their own history, requirements and institutional background. This is what happened to photography or film and this is likely to happen to the new media as well. What irritates me is the inadequate demands of some of those new phenomena which purport to be a part of an art discipline while in fact representing a disjoint set.

I'm thinking here about performance, video art and video installations. In the first case fascinating is the inversely proportional development of performance in relation to that, which used to be called open theatre. Video art, if it does not want to be a discipline *sui generis*, seems more akin to film than to the so called Fine Arts. Almost fifty years long invasion of terms from the field of anthropology, sociology and politics into the discourse about art has in my opinion resulted in two negative phenomena. It legitimized the inclusion of non-artistic phenomena (like interventions) into art. On the other hand art, which always existed in a context, under pressure and sometimes in dependence on the three major powers – Religion, Science and Politics – it nonetheless was also a representative of something different altogether, something that exists both in an individual human being as well as in the lives of communities, something that escaped the pervasive tendencies on the side of those three giants. I get the impression that the manner of discourse and the set of terms that were imposed have over those past fifty years pushed art into the custody of Politics (understood very generally, not just as an institution of power). Due to the lack of time, I did not even address the issue of economization. I feel putting those things in order is just as important as the criteria for evaluation of art, if not more.

EDBB – *Taking into consideration prominent controversies around many contemporary exhibitions, I wonder how you see the relation between art and ethics, between aesthetic and moral. Does art have to be ethical or it is immune from ethical constraints?*

MJ – So I will arbitrarily examine these oppositions in the “old-fashioned” style. I think anyway that this kind of juggling hurt all four terms, starting with

aesthetics (with its various institutional, relational, etc. theories) and finishing with art and finally morality.

First one might ask whether it is possible and if so, how would art look in a society completely devoid of morality? A clue of sorts is provided by the old Roman saying: "inter arma, silent Musae". The times of war, ravages, slaughter and pillaging of course does not help arts, although there are many works celebrating those slaughters, ravages and pillaging (such as Trajan's column, battle scenes). War is probably the worst phenomenon that human collectives manage to create. But if we ignore the actual state of affairs, it is rarely connected to complete anomie. Despite all of that it abounds in examples of dedication, heroism and sacrifice. I am reminded at that moment of the famous in the 1960s book by the prominent ethnographer and anthropologists Turnbull - "The Mountain People" - a terrifying examination of a society that has fallen into a state of almost complete anomie (note bene in his spectacle, Peter Brook used the Ik people as a metaphor for our civilization). In the Ik society almost all the higher needs, together with family and parental ties, compassion, love etc. have disappeared. What fascinated me and made me wonder, were the two fragments: a description of how the members of now completely disintegrated and devoid of fundamental bonds, society had a custom of sitting every evening in the kitchen, each separately, in isolation, without any contact though sitting next to each other, on the side and silently contemplating the wide mountain range. They (the Ik) exuded an unspecified metaphysical longing. The other description concerns the Ik observed by Turnbull, who in their collapsed, non-cooperative world were able to minimal cooperation when combing and doing hair (they were holding mirrors to each other). It is as if the needs of looking aesthetically pleasing were more primary than the family ties. Another thing is that the last of the Mohicans of artistic sense (who anyway have died out very quickly) were, amongst other Ik who fought for very existence and plunged further towards anomie, arousing not only curiosity but also puzzlement because of their purposeless, impractical and nonsensical (they were decorating the jars they moulded) activities. In that regard I see art as closely connected to morality. At the existentially elemental level.

In the second take, I feel that the most moral society does not guarantee the creation of good art, nor it is the case that there is no excellent (great?) art serving evil and amoral goals. It does exist. Nonetheless the question remains about its timelessness and universality.

Some of these works still astonish, which I think could be explained due the special role that eyesight plays in our perception. It is much easier for us to be fascinated by the horror of a viewed scene, e.g. a burning apartment, than to listen to the screams of burning victims. The aesthetic and artistic sense tells us that the famous Bolshevik poster from the Revolution "Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge", a masterpiece of avant-garde, is a great work. And yet it is a call to slaughter. It would be difficult to find amongst the old masters an example of such activism. It is a different matter though that very often morality is confused with social mores. There are great masters like Caravaggio

who were at odds with both of these, and others like e.g. Da Vinci, whose life is an example of respecting both one and the other. As per usual, in case of practical mind the establishing of strict norms and their enforcement could lead to a misfortune (e.g. wasting of God-given talent). Anyway, we are talking about the old Faustian dilemma, described in more detail by T. Mann. Despite many doubts, after the experience of communism, I agree with him after all. In some way the myth of Faust is a negative, mirror image of the myth of Prometheus. It might be an exaggeration but I would say that in reaction to the Promethean ambitions of modernism, the Faustian threads shine through the post-modernism. Nonetheless, despite the appearances, the situation of European culture nowadays and in the times of Thomas Mann (1947 AD) in terms of the state of foundations is similar. What we, the City Gallery and Thomas Mann, share in common is hope. In what way? A peculiar manner. In a catalogue for the exhibition "Derealism" inaugurating the new programme of the City Gallery, my essay, which was broadly outlining our point of view, concluded with the following words: *In Hesiod's "Theogony", Zeus, to take revenge on Prometheus, orders creation of Pandora, who, upon opening her box, unleashes evil and misery on the world. It is interesting that the creators of Pandora are Hephaestus (technology), Hermes (trade), Athena (knowledge) and Aphrodite (inspiring lust). Once all the disasters have spread around after opening of the box, Pandora managed to close the box. There is only Hope left at the bottom.*