

About Compassion, Tourism and Rubbish

Our discussion about art keeps producing anomalies, if we assume, to paraphrase the title of a genealogical thesis, that it was born from the spirit of modern art.⁽¹⁾ on which it wants to motion a vote of no confidence. Moreover one must admit that this discussion is typical of modernism.⁽²⁾ As it cannot question the recent tradition because it would be contrary to the recent tradition because it would be contrary to the economy of novelty, to the neurosis and history's dialectic, it can do is to embroider it, produce an ornament which eventually may itself compete with what it was supposed to adorn. The ornamental annihilation of the object is part of the contemporary nihilism which however is not a metaphysics of negation but a positive performative. Owing tension of the 80s. We look at the drama of a body in the "Intervention", (1992) referring to the declaration of marshal law in Poland, we see the iconography of „A Genius” (1982) and of „A Debile Fellow” (1982–83), both considering the poor condition of art historical pathology. The feeble figure of a genius–wreck is seemingly contrasting with the athletic body of a weak–minded fellow with his head in the shape of penis. The pictures, places within an irreligious world–view⁽⁴⁾ whose central icon is the „Threeheaded Executioner” (1982), are now increasingly covered with ornaments–decorative hearts, spirals, coloured checkers and bordures. The decorations are gay because of their freedom and sad because of their banality. The ornamentation is growing and so does and apathy.

But neither relaxation nor apathy seem to dominate in Woźniak's work although in the early 90s he did paint a cycle „Furniture” showing signs of exhaustion and a search for compensation, while some of his recent pictures are almost completely ornamental – „Chariot–Field” (1993) or „Dancer–Field” (1994). Here I must recal the most primitive of all the possible gestures an artist can make – a reference to the vulgar intuition of colloquial speech. The unclarity and inconsistency of that language has long been surprising us throwing also a discredit upon the notion of „aesthetics”. It surely is somewhat related to the notion of „admiration”. In this positive term Woźniak discovered on one occasion a critical quality which affects its commonly accepted sence. „There is in the state of admiration – he wrote in 1985 – something producing helplessness. We say that somebody became speechless out of admiration or was overwhelmed by admiration. So the notion involves being mute or weak”.⁽⁵⁾ Today he stresses it even more when he says that „arts is of a pre–linguistic nature” and he goes on to suggest that the artist should take into account that critical weakness or that he should think of it at least. There is muteness and weakness in present art. In that frailty he also discovers the morality of art because being a weak and alienated medium it can hardly be used to a greater extent in enslavement and domination. He does not find in it its former fascination with strength and form. „Art fulfils and achieves its purpose exclusively at the level of compassion”.⁽⁶⁾

In July 1992, at the ZPAF Little Gallery a show of Woźniak was held entitled „Stopping the Exit” bearing a quotation from Joyce. We did not read there about death but about a more ruthless kind of annihilation which is the „fading away of photographic film in the Sun”.⁽⁷⁾ He took up here for the first time the ideal appearing often in contemporary thinking, one of forgetting. This was a different, more mature handling of the motif of „the figure of nothingness” that used to appear in some pictures in the early 1990s. At that time he was reflecting over „the corpse” as a category of object which we refuse to regard as „inanimate objects”. Because the inanimation of a corpse is something else than the inanimation of a stone: it is a direct category transmitting values towards which we feel a respect and a frail from of sympathy – a frail one because affected by repugnance, fear and strangeness. It is therefore no accident that the show „Stopping the Exit” had been well thought out just in respect of „mediation and transformation of values”. The exhibition contained photo–souvenirs of Ewa Karoń Swindells dating from the years 1980–1992, made in various countries of Europe, America, Africa and Near East. The photos were made by her relations, friend, people she met accidentally. It was a striking use of banal photography which was given here a different, durable value. Photographical portraits, when seen against a tourist background,⁽⁸⁾ appear much more unusual, assume a new quality. A portrait made in a foreign place becomes tourist attraction because there is in it a tension between the sitter and new surroundings to which the given person nourishes his or her own domestic and provincial expectations. In this sense the tourist portrait will always appear unbalanced, caricature–like as it with Hanson. The tourist wants to satisfy his or her expectations that is, paradoxically, to annihilate the thing which, on the strength of its difference, is the main tourist attraction. The tourist consumption of attractions undermines at the same time the contextualism as an alibi of the tourist semiotics.

to that ornamentation we can forget about the nightmare of the past decades terminated by the revolution of the 80s. In order to forget we describe history not in its own terms, but with a cruel intention, with maliciousness towards the geniuses of the avant–garde who while conjuring up the demons of history would themselves become their victims. And we do admit that this whole ornamentation of a modernism's bad image provides material for the current aesthetics of loftiness, aesthetics of paradox, tension and ambivalence. The avant–garde was surely a high–minded phenomenon, but can our thinking of the tradition be reduced to an aesthetic thinking? We know after all that high–mindedness was associated also with ethics.⁽³⁾

The latest pictures of Ryszard Woźniak – once belonging to the Warsaw „Grupa” – seem to materialize at first sight that economy of forgetfulness. We can see in them quotations of pictures that were made still in the atmosphere of political Tourism, as MacCannel says, fulfils itself ritually in diversity of societies which raise different monuments, oppose to one another their customs and cultural practices.⁽⁹⁾ Tourism cultivates cultural differences but as a mask of the multi–national capital it is a simulation of the economic system that destroys finally its topos of visiting the organic, autonomous and inborn reality which appears as an attraction constructed by the international tourist practice. The tourist is somebody else than a traveller. He is a passive consumer, whereas the traveller is always at work, he is active seeking new people, adventures and experiences. Mrs. Ewa Karoń Swindells, who is probably a likable blonde, as an emancipated woman must stand for the equal rights for women which consist in the free travelling and education, but she would lose much if there were in the Moslem countries no women covering their faces under the pressure of religious fanaticism. She is not interested in penetrating the alibi of practice in the given society and points only to the signs without giving their motives. This inconsistency of the contexts (alibi of social practise) was well understood by Woźniak when he produced the metaphore of „the photo film faded in the Sun”. So he was not interested in tourism from the point of view of its cultural and economic importance but as a figure of nothingness. He was less interested in the way the tourist code was formulated according to which a French song performed in English with a French accent was more charming than when it was sung in French. Instead he concentrated on tourism as a state in which a man admiring tourist attractions becomes a pitiful caricature.

Tourism, in the opinion of Culler, is a good manifestation of contemporary culture dominated by mass consumption. It just simulates a participation in culture.

Although we aspire to belong to the elite and declare our ignorance and dislike of the television, rock music or fashion, in our mentality we do remain pitiful tourists and observe other tourists who are not unlike the client of a massage establishment.

The show of tourist photographs staged by Woźniak did not present high values although it strove for values, concentrated on them without however publicizing them, because its character was not offensive but nostalgic. What was the role of that relatively innocent show? Probably the same as that of all sorts of mummies, relict, souvenirs, letters etc. all of which belong to the object of culture that only with great difficulty become part of the economic system of value exchanges. And yet, as it was suggested by this little show, their marginal place in culture is only apparent. In order to describe that place one has to refer to the rubbish theory.⁽¹⁰⁾ According to this theory each culture is based upon the distinction of cultural objects as being transient and durable. But we know the view that each classified system, including also this one, must give an impulse for the emergence of an anomaly and each culture must lead to a confrontation with the phenomena that seem to oppose its very foundations. So structuralism defined dirt, tabu and any anomaly as a product of a differentiative, diacritical system that is to say as a matter outside its place (e.g. food a plate is clean but it is not so on a clean floor or a neat dress). Each exclusion can be done only from the point of view of a definite system. And the knowledge of a system is more effective if it is linked to a knowledge of the anomalies that go with it. It is still the structuralistic principle that lets us maintain that any anomalies, scraps and rubbish of culture have indirectly to do with values. If somebody is interested in values he must think at the same time of rubbish. The categories of „transient” and „durable” object which implies the need for the existence of a third category – that of rubbish. The history of Mrs. Karoń Swindells photographs' shows the mechanism of the values' circulation – photographs are at first a transient category because having fulfilled their occasional function they may be thrown away. Then the same photographs, now belonging to the category of rubbish, having lost their value and staying in a timeless sphere, suddenly get the chance of being discovered and moved over to the category of durable objects of culture. The now lose their magma nature of rubbish because durable objects are characterized by being

differentiated. One could say that this marginal category of rubbish becomes in a sense the central category transmitting transient objects. This is what Woźniak has been doing lately when he paints pictures—collections, relicts preserving his earlier work, now to a large extent already forgotten (transient objects) and inserts them into a system of values which aspires today to a status of durable values such as ornamentation — a performative of oblivion full of relaxation and apathy. He makes use of outdated information — old Gruppa posters or discarded plates with Jenny Holzer's announcements — against the background of which appear equally useless forms or pictures quoting his early work. He thus paints rubbish—pictures exploiting the idea of matter outside its place. Woźniak achieves the effect of rubbish, the sameness and chaos through the insistent repetition of a single picture while giving the possibility of casual arrangement that is the simulation of an exhibition. Thompson is right in remarking that the theory of rubbish leads to unlogicality, anomaly and paradox because it tries to integrate two contrary orders of values.¹¹⁾

The category of rubbish is a collective category and a point of passage between the transient and durable objects of culture. Rubbish gives a clue to the understanding of the dynamics of a process in which value is created and destroyed. That is why the "dynamics of a process in which value is created and destroyed. That is why the „dynamic theory of rubbish" has been opposed to semiotics as the latter is too static. Semiotic — says Culler — seeking meanings and rules was not a good tool in the description of that dynamic process which is better described by the theory of catastrophe with its determinism and indeterminism. The problem of rubbish in culture is the problem of a conflict between the order of transient objects (e.g. a sofa) and durable ones (a symphony). This particular conflict destabilizes the classification and asks for mediation in which what remains is the unreducible tension and paradox. He who brings together a collection of absolute values, as does the artist in painting, once he has got it he reveals in its light his grotesque figure. That is why in Woźniak's iconography, in his pictures—collections—rubbish there are the monstrous figures of

Genius and the Debile Fellow because the thinking of values leads inevitably to the garbbish heap (who can still remember the once so strong prestige of the avang—garde or, say, the recent one of the Gruppa?), art must therefore find between these opposites a possibility of comp—assion.

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Notes:

1. Wolfgang Welsch, Die Geburt der postmodernen Philosophie aus dem Geist der modernen Kunst, in: *Asthetisches Denken*, Stuttgart 1993, p. 79–113.
2. Umberto Eco, *Postmodernismus, Ironie und Vergnügen*, in: *Wege aus der Moderne—Schlüsseltexte der Postmoderne* Discussion, hrsg. W. Welsch, Bamberg 1988, p. 75.
3. Mieczysław Wallis, *O przedmiotach wzniosłych (About High-Minded Objects) 1937*, in: *Przeżycie i wartość (Experience and Value)*, Cracow 1968, p. 286. I am thinking here of Kant's concept of genius and ethics as a stage in the formation of an aesthetics of high-mindedness. „He is high-minded — says Wallis — who creates moral laws for himself and acts accordingly to them; high-minded is „the independence of man's creative spirit" .
4. *Comp. my essay: The Art of Admiration — restitution of artistic independence*, in an exhibition catalogue: Ryszard Woźniak, „Arsenal" Gallery, BWA, Białystok 1991.
5. Ryszard Woźniak, *All of us together, nobody is missing. That's fine*, no 3 (Winter 1985).
6. *From a card to myself*.
7. Ryszard Woźniak, *Stopping the Exit*, Small Gallery ZPAF/CSW, Warsaw July 1992.
8. Jonathan Culler, *Framing the Sign. Criticism and its Institutions*, Oxford 1988, chapter: *The Semiotics of Tourism*, p. 153–167.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 166.
10. *Ibid.*, *Rubbish Theory*, p. 168–182.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 182, Michael Thompson expounded the theory of death in the work *Rubbish Theory: The Creation And Destruction of Value*, Oxford 1979.

Galeria DAP

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