



The Polish idea in contemporary art Critique and affirmation¹

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The Polish idea

The durability of the Polish idea, or *eidōs*, felt despite the conditions unfavorable to its realization owing to successive losses of sovereignty, is sometimes indicated as a characteristic feature of the Polish nation.² The revaluation of freedom, permanently dominant among the values pursued by the Polish community as a whole, or individually within it (and then not always to the benefit of the community) is supposed to result from the aforementioned experience of frequent periods of captivity.³ The durability of *eidōs* was supported in such periods by cultivating language and history – as a science of history or a tradition independent of state status and circumstances. Religiousness has been (and continues to be) important for national continuity, distinguishing Poland from other nations through its distinctive rite, but also serving to accept faith as an instrument of metaphysical knowledge.⁴ This is sometimes considered (also self-critically) as superstitious emotionalism, typical – along with the “historicist” attitude recognizing the metaphysical order of history, “military” patriotism, sensitivity to symbols, and irrational idealism – of the heritage of Romanticism.⁵ It is precisely such emotional Romanticism, also encompassing idyllic folklore, sometimes juxtaposed with “Sarmatian”

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2 Compare: P. Rojek, *Awangardowy konserwatyzm. Idea polska w późnej nowoczesności*, Kraków 2016, p. 10.

3 Compare: *ibidem*, p. 31.

4 Compare: Ioannes Paulus PP. II, *Fides et ratio. Do Biskupów Kościoła katolickiego o relacjach między wiarą a rozumem* [To the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Relations Between Faith and Reason], Encyclical, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Roma 1998, I, 9, 15; II, 16, <https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/pl/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.html> (as of 7 December 2022).

5 Compare, for example, M. Janion, *Zmierzch paradygmatu*, [in:] *eadem*, *Do Europy – tak, ale razem z naszymi umarłymi*, Warszawa 2000, p. 19.

republicanism and bravery, as well as the ability to unite in a solidaric community,⁶ that is supposed to constitute the Polish *ethos*, the nation's way of being, in which *eidōs* is expressed, transcending *ethnos*, i.e., ethnic limitations, thanks to solidarity. Emotionality is also present in the attitude of mercy and in the sense of solidarity within the community, which “happened” to Poland in a particular way in the twentieth century.⁷

Critical art. Appropriation and subversion

However, when observing contemporary art, one may get the impression that the Polish idea is revealed today by artists in a way that arouses ambiguous reactions in the recipients. Activities related to critical art, popular in the mainstream of the art world, indicate previously insufficiently noticed or “excluded” margins of this idea. Artists often “capture” and “appropriate”⁸ patriotic themes, especially those in which Polishness is combined with religiosity and the romantic ethos of resistance and sacrifice, subjecting them to activities characteristic of the remix culture, in which selecting, publishing and provisionally combining anew texts and materials available in the media means a critical and anarchic discourse that is modifying culture in general.⁹ Subversive criticism is particularly characteristic of critical art¹⁰ and it appears in relation to national themes. Observed practices undertaken for patriotic and religious reasons are typically presented with an emphasis on their old-fashionedness and superficiality, or even the resulting acts of aggression and conflict.¹¹ Such actions are sometimes qualified as examples of “anti-culture.”¹²

One example is the work *Them (Oni)* by Artur Żmijewski from 2007. As a video installation, it presented a record of workshops revealing the impossibility of understanding or even coexistence of four groups of people with various ties to Polishness: older practicing Catholic women, the All-Polish Youth (whose representatives wish for a “Greater Catholic Poland”), young Polish Jews, and young representatives of the Polish left.¹³ Developing the group's own logo, later placed on T-shirts, and drawing or painting their visions of Poland on large white cards in one room were initially mutually amicable. The older women would circle the shape of the church

6 Por. P. Rojek, *Awangardowy konserwatyzm*, p. 10.

7 Compare: D. Karłowicz, *Miłosierdzie i solidarność*, “Teologia Polityczna”, 10, 2017–2018, p. 19.

8 Por. *Appropriation*, [in:] *Dictionary of Modern and Contemporary Art*, I. Chilvers, J. Graves-Smith (eds.), Oxford 2009, pp. 27–28; and *Sztuka zawłaszczania w Zachęcie*, about the exhibition of *Kanibalizm? O zawłaszczaniach w sztuce*, <<http://culture.pl/pl/artykul/sztuka-zawlaszczania-w-zachecie>> (as of 22 August 2017).

9 Compare: H. Jenkins, *Kultura konwergencji. Zderzenie starych i nowych mediów*, translated by M. Bernatowicz, M. Filiciak, Warszawa 2007, for instance, pp. 9, 135. About the views of Eduardo Navas and Lawrence Lessig and perceiving remix culture as grassroots folk culture, see: G. Sztabiński, *Inne pojęcia estetyki*, Kraków 2020, pp. 217–244.

10 Compare: G. Dziamski in an interview *Wartością sztuki krytycznej jest to, że wywołuje dyskusje*, “Gazeta Malarzy i Poetów”, 2–3, Poznań 2001, <http://witryna.czasopism.pl/gazeta/drukuj_artykul.php?id_artykulu=56> (as of 17 August 2019); Ł. Ronduda, *Strategie subwersywne w sztukach medialnych*, Kraków 2006, pp. 9–11.

11 See for instance: I. Kowalczyk, *Podróż do przeszłości. Interpretacje najnowszej przeszłości w polskiej sztuce krytycznej*, Warszawa 2010, e.g., p. 269.

12 Compare: K. Karoń, *Historia antykultury 1.0*, <<https://www.historiasztuki.com.pl/strony/021-00-00-ANTYKULTURA.html>> (as of 6 February 2024).

13 Compare: A. Żmijewski, *Them* (2007), <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ob3t9l-PzXU>> (as of 15 December 2022).

with a line, and over time it had a tower, a dome, an open door... The “szczyrbiec” sword appeared independently, also followed by the Hebrew inscription “Polin”, as well as rainbow colours and the inscription “tolerance” upon the contemporary shape of Poland’s borders. Along with adding details to individual drawings, “uninvited” supplements made by opposing groups began to appear; followed by aggressive over-painting, or even the burning of works. The communities turned out to be mainly “emotional”, hence the conflicts and aggression, caused, among others, by the reference to faith. The artist commented: “We are stuck, practically all of us are, in a truly Sarmatian paradigm, from which it is impossible to break away, regardless of our views. One can only destroy, burn the enemy’s symbols, to replace them with one’s own.”¹⁴ Criticism of communities did not turn into social art, which could create and animate those communities, while also taking up worldview and political issues;¹⁵ instead, it remained an exposure of the evil hidden in the social and axiological system.

In the video installations of a younger artist, Klementyna Stępniewska (Kle-Mens), there was a uniform model of subversive “interception” and “appropriation” of motifs or works. In the *Pieta* with a composition based on the sculpture by Michelangelo, widely known from the Vatican Basilica of St. Peter, Christ was replaced by a deathly pale youth in a boxing-fan outfit (*Pieta*, 2014). In the Last Judgement according to Memling’s painting known from Gdańsk, Christ sat on a white and red rainbow (because there is no place for the colours of sexual diversity in Catholic Poland), and only men who constituted the majority among the participants of patriotic demonstrations were saved (*Sąd Ostateczny*, 2019). Among the damned, there were only women who predominated in pro-choice demonstrations (characteristically equipped with umbrellas, which could be seen shortly afterwards during the “women’s strike”; the artist herself suggested this association).¹⁶

Can the described artistic procedures, usually paradoxical, determining the aesthetic properties of surprise, intensity and violence, only be used in art that is called critical? Or is it also possible to use them approvingly and affirmatively, especially in relation to the Polish idea? These are the questions that this text tries to answer. The examples presented below will demonstrate how quoting, intercepting, appropriating, remixing, but also taking inspiration, using allusions, stylizing – seemingly similar to the artistic methods characteristic of critical art – turn into a variety of artistic activities resulting in experiencing aesthetic qualities that, surprisingly sometimes, reveal traditional values such as goodness and beauty, i.e., universals, but also other transcendentals (fundamental properties of being, defined by the concepts of cause, purpose, existence, substance, thing, oneness, distinctness), participation in which serves to realize the Polish idea.¹⁷ Concealing the essence of the message in a poetic play, possible ambiguity and the presence of ironic elements characteristic of the described art are sometimes construed as typical of various contemporary artistic activities that ultimately serve to reveal metaphysical ideas,

14 A. Żmijewski’s statement quoted in: R. Jakubowicz, *Strażnik krzyża*, “Arteon”, 11 (127), 2010, p. 26.

15 Compare: G. Dziamski, *Sztuka u progu XXI wieku*, Poznań 2002, pp. 71–72; K. Niziołek, *Sztuka społeczna jako środek aktywności obywatelskiej*, “Magazyn Polskiej Akademii Nauk”, 3 (67), 2021, pp. 28–42.

16 Compare: /kle-mens.pl/, <<https://secondaryarchive.org/artists/kle-mens/>> (as of 7 October 2023).

17 Compare: W. Stróżewski, *Transcendentalia i wartości*, [in:] idem, *Istnienie i wartość*, Kraków 1982, p. 12.

whereas surprising and enigmatic qualities are sometimes even specifically recommended for artists who are not indifferent to metaphysical issues.¹⁸ Furthermore, the intensity, moving and evoking the “thrill of transcendence”, also in superficial or “skin-deep” action and using what is marginal, is sometimes considered a characteristic feature of contemporary works on religious themes, usually related to metaphysics, appearing alongside more or less objective artistic observation of rituals.¹⁹ Perhaps it is precisely this perception of the “thrill of transcendence” and focus on the marginal, which may seem more appropriate for criticism, that is also justified in the observation of the affirmative attitude to the Polish idea and its possible metaphysical quality, as suggested by the interpretation of the examples below. These are only examples selected from the entire range of them, presented in the monograph *Afirmacja i krytyka. Metafizyczność i polskość w sztuce pierwszego dwudziestolecia XXI wieku* [Affirmation and criticism. Metaphysics and Polishness in the art of the first two decades of the twenty-first century].²⁰ The monograph, an excerpt of which is presented in this text, focused separately on one issue – the possibility of using the poetics proper to critical art in affirmative works (which will prove possible by arousing the “thrill of transcendence”) – contains more detailed explanations of concepts and interpretations, along with a presentation of the background of the “conservative turn” in Polish art, its presentation in numerous exhibitions (such as, among others, *Nowa sztuka narodowa*, or New National Art), and its description. According to the classification in the article, the authors of this text and the cited monograph would be classified as “gołębie” [the pigeons].²¹

Affirmation in the Times of Critical Art

In Zbigniew Warpechowski’s performative actions, acts of self-aggression and the radicality of exposing ugliness that serves as a means of criticism have an intense impact. In his action *Obywatelstwo dla czystego odczucia Kazimierza Malewicza* [Citizenship for Pure Feeling by Kazimir Malevich] (1985), the artist lay under the reproduced *Black Square*, a fundamental abstract avant-garde work by Kazimir Malevich, intercepted and peculiarly appropriated for critical use. The artist simultaneously subjected himself to whipping (performed by Natalia Lach-Lachowicz) through a garment with a square opening, which left a square shape “stamped” on his back with a whip.²² Bodily suffering, condensing the “pure sensation” pro-

18 Compare for instance: J. Elkins, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art*, London, 2004, p. 47 (this is quoted in many places in: J. Winnicka-Gburek, *Krytyka, etyka, sacrum. W kierunku aksjologicznej krytyki artystycznej*, Gdańsk, 2015).

19 Compare: G. Sztabiński, *Marginesy transcendencji w sztuce współczesnej*, [in:] *Sztuka wobec metafizyki. Postawy i strategie lat 2000–2020*, Ł. Murzyn, R. Solewski, B. Stano (eds.), Kraków 2023, pp. 17–21.

20 Compare: R. Solewski, *Afirmacja i krytyka. Metafizyczność i polskość w sztuce pierwszego dwudziestolecia XXI wieku*, Kraków 2024. The initial content of this monograph, together with illustrations and accompanying texts, can be found on the website: *Metafizyka i polska sztuka dziś*, <<https://metafizykapolskasztukadzis.uken.krakow.pl/>> (as of 28 March 2024).

21 Compare: W. Kozioł, *Homary, Gołębie, Jastrzębie. Zwrot konserwatywny w sztuce polskiej*, “Szum”, 15 September 2021, <<https://magazynszum.pl/homary-golebie-jastrzebie-zwrot-konserwatywny-w-sztuce-polskiej/>> (as of 28 March 2024). The author of this text and of the quoted monograph, according to the classification in the article, would be classified as one of the “pigeons”.

22 Compare: Z. Warpechowski, *Obywatelstwo dla czystego odczucia Kazimierza Malewicza*, <<https://artmuseum.pl/pl/filmoteka/praca/warpechowski-zbigniew-obywatelstwo-dla-czystego-odczucia>> (as of 20 May 2020).

claimed by Malevich, was offered to him as compensation for “Polish stupidity, opportunism, and cowardice”,²³ that is, the refusal to grant the artist citizenship in the interwar period. Warpechowski continued his mission of reminding us of the Polish origins of the artist seeking transcendence through non-figurative art, the geometric variety of which he initiated, also in the twenty-first century, e.g., exhibition *Malewicz w Polsce* [Malevich in Poland], which he curated (in June 25, 2004–August 15, 2004, at Galeria Arsenal in Białystok). The criticism of an event from Polish history and the attitude of Poles, a critique wounding one’s own body, reminded us of the romantic tradition of sacrifice and represented the “avant-garde conservatism” proclaimed by the artist.²⁴ The oxymoronic term results in the experience of paradox and arouses a “shiver of transcendence”, similarly to radical performative action. Recognizing metaphysics among paradoxes is justified by the words of the artist himself, a religious and avant-garde patriot: “in spite of everything I confess belonging to the avant-garde, equally I do not hide my attachment to the faith in God and the Church of my ancestors. [...] Spiritual bond with the highest good and wisdom give me a sense of strength and freedom.”²⁵

The painting *Spotkanie ekumeniczne 2008 Aleksy II i Jan Paweł II* [Ecumenical Meeting 2008 Alexei II and John Paul II], from 2008, whose author hides under the pseudonym Whielki Krasnal (often ironically appropriating the works of artists identified with critical art, e.g., Wilhelm Sasnal), presents two small figures of priests in patriarchal robes (white for John Paul II and black for Alexei II) against a white background. The “painterly” way of applying colours, the blurriness of the figures, their faces devoid of features, marked only by a yellow-brown stain, the apparent unfinished quality in the manner of “non finito”, the use of a tonal difference in the intensity of white, indicate the skills and the flair of the artist, without actually announcing a critical paradox. Meanwhile, the paradox exists and is based on the fact that such a meeting never took place. The fact that a painting featuring figures that are important from the point of view of religion represents untruth is surprising and can arouse a “shiver of transcendence.” Something that never happened – and that probably be something essentially good if it did – and something which may be happening now for those who have faith (John Paul II died in 2005, Alexei II died in 2008, so their souls could have met in metaphysical space precisely in 2008); that event shown in the artwork, is a painted criticism of evil, whose rule could not be broken in earthly reality. Appropriating a meeting that did not take place for political and religious reasons, despite John Paul II’s efforts to hold such meeting and the verbal declarations of the Moscow Patriarch to that effect, is an instance of paradoxical criticism for yet another reason. The “critical” work by Whielki Krasnal turns out to be affirmative towards the actions of the “Polish” pope, whose striving for agreement overcame reluctance and resulted from the mercy characteristic of Catholic Polishness,²⁶ even though Poles may feel a particular aversion towards Russia. In that, there was also a paradox, yet it was one proper to the Christian attitude.

23 Ibidem.

24 Compare: Z. Warpechowski, *Konserwatyzm awangardowy*, Kraków 2014; idem, *Konserwatyzm awangardowy 2*, “Pressje”, 43, 2015, pp. 210–213.

25 Z. Warpechowski, *Między młotem i kowadłem*, “Arteon”, 9, 2001, p. 39.

26 Compare: D. Karłowicz, *Miłosierdzie i solidarność*, p. 19.



1. Jakub Różalski, 1920 *Przed burzą* [Before the storm], 2014, digital image, reproduced in print on different media, in various dimensions, after: Solewski 2024.

In his digital graphics, Jakub Różalski generally captures Polish realistic and battle-scene painting, known as a convention and style from the paintings by Chełmoński, Gierymski, Wyczółkowski or Kossak. Różalski often represents peasants with scythes or village girls with rakes, working in the field. Sometimes they stop to rest, for example with a cat at their feet. A young peasant woman in a red skirt, vest and scarf, with a scythe in her hands, standing among golden field of wheat, is looking at the Polish cavalry moving through the fields with white and red pennants on their lances, and at black “walking machines” straight from *Star Wars*, supporting the uhlans (1920 *Przed burzą* [1920 Before the storm], 2014) (see: **Fig. 1**). Together with the uhlan holding a lance, one of the girls is watching a gigantic machine, this time with a red star, standing over impressionistically blurred village houses. This is a piece titled *Sierp i młot* [Hammer and Sickle] (2014) from the series, and the setting, of 1920+. In another composition, the leaning machine in the background bears a Polish eagle in a red field, for a change. In front of it, in the foreground, a charging uhlan aims his sabre at a Cossack in a fur hat, standing backwards and aiming at the rider. Elsewhere, a soldier leans out from a smaller structure and picks apples behind a fence by a country road (*Koneser jabłek* [A Connoisseur of Apples], 2014). The leaves of the trees in summer are yellow and green, the pickets and roofs are illuminated by white-grey-blue light, a dog is barking at the machine, and the girl next to it has a red skirt again. An armed soldier gets out of the black basket of a motorcycle on the other side of the road. The captured Polish realistic painting from the second half of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, with its genre elements and battle-scene elements, surprisingly and effectively enriched with fantasy from the end of the twentieth century, sends shivers down your spine due to the paradoxical contrast of conventions. The artist uses a quote from mass culture, which according to some is inappropriate or marginal for lofty, patriotic subjects. Pop-fantasy seems

to be a contemporary capture of the margins of the Polish idea, so that ultimately the traditional ethos of the valiant defense of the idyllic reality turns out to be a full revelation of this idea.

Ignacy Czwartos's paintings depicting "cursed soldiers" can arouse a "shiver of transcendence" with their drastic and controversial character, which is still relevant.²⁷ In the *Epitafium dla żołnierzy wyklętych* [Epitaph for the Cursed Soldiers], Hieronim Dekutowski "Zapora", Zygmunt Szendzielarz "Łupaszka", and Antoni Olechnowicz "Pohorecki" stand in a trio against a beige background, in green uniforms, armed, but signed in medallions with the abbreviation D.O.M. (*Domus Omnium Mortuorum* – "house of all the dead"). Łupaszka is in the middle, on a small pedestal with a tombstone and a Marian gorget. *Czwórka* [The Four] (2017) are Stanisław Marciniak "Niewinny", Edward Taraszkiewicz "Żelazny", Stanisław Torbicz "Kazik", and Józef Domański "Łukasz". In this painting, two soldiers support the bodies of two colleagues. They are shown wearing brown uniforms, against a light cream-coloured surface. In the middle, there is an oval medallion, with the numbers 4 and 1 on the upper, navy blue background, and numbers 2 and 3 on the lower, brown background. In the photographs of the Homeland Security, such numbers were placed next to captured or killed cursed soldiers, corresponding to specific persons killed.²⁸ Sometimes only such posthumous photographs have survived, e.g., in the case of Stanisław Torbicz "Kazik". Czwartos studied archival materials concerning the portrayed heroes, and the faces from the photographs return in subsequent canvasses, painted flat, with rigorous lines and sublime separation of the figures.²⁹ In the *Epitafium dla Józefa Franczaka "Lalka"* [Epitaph for Józef "Lalka" Franczak], (2018), a soldier whose body was buried without a head, which was stored as a preparation in formalin, carries his head accompanied by two NKVD officers. The group stands against a background of burnt sienna. The colours of the faces and uniforms of the Soviet soldiers are "toned down" with navy blue. This signifies death, a transition from the mundane to the "other side."³⁰ It also raises questions about the evil that is responsible for the manner of this "transition." The colour blue was used similarly in the paintings of Andrzej Wróblewski, who inspired Czwartos. The composition of the paintings and the arrangement of the dead or convulsively dying bodies also refer to the cycle of *Rozstrzelania* [Executions] painted by the older artist. In turn, the cephalophoria, that is the motif of a severed head held and carried by its owner, is appropriate for holy martyrs who gave their lives for the faith. *Ryby* [Fish] from 2019 show the disjointed remains of cursed soldiers, whose bodies were buried scattered and in unmarked graves. The irritating intensity results from a kind of "capture" of archival material, as well as elements of historical and patriotic art (the gorget and the epitaph, probably intended to evoke associations with "Sarmatism")

27 Por. M. Grąbczewski, *Odwolanie Czwartosa z Biennale: przykład instytucjonalnej cenzury i gorszego traktowania konserwatystów* [Removal of Czwartos from the Biennale: An example of institutional censorship and worse treatment of conservatives], <<https://klubjagiellonski.pl/2024/01/29/odwolanie-czwartosa-z-biennale-przyklad-instytucjonalnej-cenzury-i-gorszego-traktowania-konserwatystow/>> (as of 2 April 2024).

28 A Jajszczyk, "Żołnierze wyklęci" Ignacego Czwartosa, <http://jajszczyk.pl/wp-content/uploads/A_Jajszczyk_Wystawa_I_Czwartosa_03_2018.pdf> (as of 19 July 2022).

29 Por. D. Koczanowicz, *Piękne fantazmaty polskości*, "Format" 2019, pp. 58–59.

30 J. Gałkowski, *Ignacy Czwartos – polonica pictor*, "Teologia Polityczna", 19 December 2021, <<https://teologiapolityczna.pl/ignacy-czwartos-polonica-pictor-sylwetka/>> (as of 19 July 2022).

in particular), but also of modern art (Wróblewski's use of the colour blue) that increase the power of the *vanitas* motif and the historical theme. In the whole of Polish history, "cursed soldiers" are a small, marginal, almost annihilated group. However, the fidelity to an idea despite the historical situation, even of a "marginal" but heroic group, reveals the power of that idea, for which it has been affirmed for centuries despite the adversities and the necessity of sacrifice, only stressed by the drastic nature of the images.

Since 2017, Adu Karczmarczyk has been running an artistic activity called the *Wielka Rozgrzewka Narodowa* [Great National Warm-up] posted online. The videos presented exercises that "were intended to unite the conflicted Poles."³¹ Adu and her two "muscular" assistants, one dressed in white, the other in black, treated various accessories in a "fan-like" and gymnastic way. These included, in addition to scarves: volumes with the romantic novel in verse *Pan Tadeusz* by Adam Mickiewicz and the modern novel *Ferdydurke* by Witold Gombrowicz, ultimately practicing "on a cardboard mat in the shape of Poland and in national colours."³² The perseverance in revealing the Polish idea through means that are marginal from the point of view of an expert in elite and sophisticated aesthetics was also demonstrated by the long-term *Miss Messianist* project, begun in 2018 and lasting into the 2020s. It was meant to ask questions "about the relevance of Polish messianic ideas in late modernity" and "the identity of a contemporary woman inspired by messianism."³³ In addition to staged photographs posted on the Internet, inspired by the sometimes quoted works of Józef Hoene-Wroński, Adam Mickiewicz, or Andrzej Towiański, photographs that are actually reminiscent of performative "cosplay" in the Romantic style, an example that had a particularly powerful effect was the music video for the piece entitled *Miss Messianist*. In it, the artist is standing in the center of the screen, facing the viewer, in a silver jacket, among the clouds, holding in her right hand a volume with a pyramid standing on it, and in her hand, a candle in a cubic frame (see: **Fig. 2**). "Metaphysical" colours dominate: blue, navy-blue, magenta, and shiny silver, while the light is intense. At selected moments, the singing artist raises her eyes (which had been dutifully lowered until then), and the lyrics of the song reiterates the words:

W internetach są kobiety [...]	[There are women on the internet [...]
A pośród nich ona	And among them she
Do światła zaprasza	Invites you to the light
Z mesjanizmem w dłoniach	With Messianism in her hands
Wskazuje na Mesjasza	She points to the Messiah
Oczy jej koloru Królestwa Bożego	Her eyes the colour of the Kingdom of God
Głowę zdobią wrota Nowej Ery	Her head is decorated with the gates of
Myśli zaczerpnięte od Hoene-Wrońskiego	the New Era
Imię jej czterdzieści i cztery.	Thoughts taken from Hoene-Wroński
	Her name is four and forty].

31 A. Mokrzanowska, "Lecimy ze Smoleńska". *Kim jest ADU i dlaczego szokuje zarówno prawą, jak i lewą stronę?*, <<https://www.wprost.pl/newsroom/2021-04-26/kalendarium.html>> (as of 24 June 2022).

32 *Wielka Rozgrzewka Narodowa*, [in:] the artist's portfolio published on her website *Adu, Ada Karczmarczyk*, <<http://adakarczmarczyk.com/>> (as of 10 June 2022).

33 *Miss Messianist*, *ibidem*.

At the end of the video clip, a luminous flash emerges from the heavens in the center of the screen, and in the flash, a crowned figure in glory.

The baroque-romantic ornamentation prevailed in a climate that contrasted the quality of *glamour* with the aesthetics characteristic of emo, techno and rave subcultures. The messianic margins of the Polish idea are revealed in the encounter with mass culture through irritating kitschiness, a sideline in the world of “high art.” Karczmarczyk evoked the “shiver of transcendence” in her “camp” way exceptionally consistently – and that can also be seen as an example of “live engagement”, which Grzegorz Sztabiński believes to be useful for revealing and affirmatively penetrating the “margins of transcendence” in contemporary art.³⁴ Adu’s strategy was ultimately explained as “minority camp”, which undermined the binary opposition of the Polish cultural war: a masculine Pole-Catholic – a feminist woman-atheist, and “saved the particular identity of a converted woman.”³⁵

The captured element in the installation *Figury niemożliwe* [Impossible Figures] was the canopy over the exit from the crypt hosting the royal tombs under the Wawel Archcathedral (see: Fig. 3). The canopy designed by Adolf Szyszko-Bohusz was erected there in 1937 in homage to Marshal Piłsudski (buried in Wawel in 1935) and was made of post-partition “spoils” – the plinth from the Poznań monument to Bismarck, Austrian cannons, and the remains of the Alexander Nevsky Church in Warsaw (demolished in 1926). Jakub Woynarowski’s design, which used the canopy, represented Poland at the Venice Biennale in 2014. When making the replica, the contemporary artist raised the upper plate of the canopy slightly above the capitals of the columns. Thanks to this, the flat modernist cuboid with the inscription on the vertical walls *Corpora dormiunt, vigilant animae* (“Bodies are sleeping, but souls remain vigilant”) did not rest on classicist columns but appeared to be levitating in the air (in fact, the roof was supported by hidden elements). The history



2. Adu Karczmarczyk, *Selfie z kagankiem oświaty. Juliusz Słowacki: “Lecz zaklinam – niech żywi nie tracą nadziei i przed narodem niosą oświaty kaganek” (Testament mój)* [Selfie with the torch of learning. Juliusz Słowacki: “But I beg you – let the living not lose hope and bear the torch of learning before the nation” (My testament)], from the *Miss Messianist* series, 2018, after: Solewski 2024.

34 Compare: G. Sztabiński, *Poza estetyzacją. Problem duchowości w sztuce współczesnej / Beyond Aesthetization. The Question of Spirituality in Modern Art*, “Sacrum et Decorum. Materiały i Studia z Historii Sztuki Sakralnej”, 2, 2009, p. 129.

35 J. Lendzioszek, *Adu-kamp*, “Pressje”, 39, 2014, p. 180.



3. Jakub Woynarowski, *Figury niemożliwe* [Impossible figures], Venice 2014 (authors of the entire exhibition at the Venice Biennale: Dorota Jędruch, Marta Karpińska, Dorota Leśniak-Rychlak, Michał Wiśniewski, photo by Wojciech Wilczyk, Zachęta – Narodowa Galeria Sztuki), after: Solewski 2024.

the “crack” of disagreement, growing from a marginal dispute between conservatives and modernists to a space that is increasingly larger and fundamental to the state, can be filled by metaphysical transcendentals recognized and affirmed by “vigilant souls.”

In the project of painting new images of the *Merciful Jesus*, in accordance with the vision of Saint Faustina Kowalska, evoking the ideas of the divine mercy (together with the idea of solidarity, indicated as particularly significant to the Polish ethos in the twentieth century),³⁸ from the very beginning attention was drawn to “the danger of treating it too arbitrarily and departing from the essential instructions of the Commissioner.”³⁹ The intention was not to appropriate the sacred

and the meaning of the object were narrated at the Biennale in large-format diagrams.

The original entrance could symbolically indicate that the marshal’s power guaranteed Poland’s strength in accordance with the romantic tradition (Piłsudski himself was an admirer of Słowacki’s poetry, and he revered the January Uprising), albeit without rejecting modernity.³⁶ Yet the authors of the entire contemporary exhibition (Dorota Jędruch, Marta Karpińska, Dorota Leśniak-Rychlak, Michał Wiśniewski) emphasized the role of the illusory “crack.” It was now a symbolic gap between “modern form and reactionary content”, separation between “opposing aspirations of the re-born state – on the one hand, deeply rooted in myths and superstitions about its own past, on the other, starting the modernization race with an unwavering faith in progress”, and finally highlighting the opposition “between a homogeneous idea and a heterogeneous material resisting demiurgic gestures.”³⁷

“Appropriating” the canopy and to some extent subversively transforming it meant a reflection that was as critical as it was apologetic towards marshal Piłsudski (who had been efficient in constructing the state after the partitions), and finally postulative in relation to a national concord. It is likely that

36 *Wenecki baldachim Adolfa Szyszko-Bohusza. Rozmowa z Martą Karpińską*, “Szum”, 11 November 2013, <<https://magazynszum.pl/baldachim-szyszko-bohusza-w-wenecji-rozmowa-z-marta-karpinska/>> (as of 21 July 2022).

37 *Ibidem*.

38 Compare: D. Karłowicz, *Miłosierdzie i solidarność*; and ks. J. Grzybowski, *Mistyczka i ojczyzna. O narodowych i politycznych przesłaniach Dzienniczka świętej siostry Faustyny Kowalskiej*, “Teologia Polityczna”, 10, 2017–2018, pp. 15–21, 103–123.

39 Compare: *Obrazy Jezusa Miłosiernego według wizji siostry Faustyny*, Kraków 2022; K. Wojciechowski, *Czy sztuka wysoka wróci do Kościoła? Polscy artyści namalują ponownie obraz Miłosierdzia*

image and subversively criticize Polish Catholicism, but to reveal the idea of mercy, which is important for Poles, in accordance with the tradition and religiosity characteristic of the Polish ethos. And yet, the works have been accused of secondary illustrativeness or post-Christian arbitrariness in paraphrasing recognized iconic representations.⁴⁰ The religious works of the eleven artists contained elements of the individual style of each artist, as well as traces of using inspiration from native primitivism, medieval tempera painting, icon painting, or abstract art. Perhaps the aforementioned accusations resulted from nothing else than the aroused “shiver of transcendence” accompanying the unveiling of the idea of mercy, important to the Polish ethos, and revealed together with its subordinate Polish idea in contemporary art. After all, the “primitivism” of Christ similar to the folk figure of a saint in a painting by Jarosław Modzelewski ultimately proved to be implementing the principles recommended for icons at the Second Council of Nicaea (a slightly elongated, oval and swarthy face with a dark brown beard, a straight nose and almond-shaped eyes), and the white of the tunic almost glowed with light thanks to the contrast of the dark background – brownish juicy, intense, laid in traditional egg tempera. From the place of the touch of the hand at the level of the heart, diagonal, split rays of mercy, white and scarlet-red, spread downwards, in accordance with the vision of the holy mystic. It was in accordance with this vision, and in only superficially surprising way, that the idea of mercy affirmed and cultivated in Poland was revealed.

Affirmative possibilities of critical poetics

When artists expound the intensity of experience and show only the margins of the idea, then typically works or actions of art achieve criticism by way of appropriation and subversion. Having said that, the examples here described suggest that affirmation is also possible in a language seemingly appropriate only to critical art. Interpretations indicate that the intensity of experience is similar, which can be identified as the “thrill of transcendence” serving to reveal the metaphysical Polish idea. Even if only the margin of the idea is captured, it is still cultivated; often with the means that would be considered marginal. What is characteristic is a keen commitment – both to the cultivation of the margins of ideas, and to the controlled use of the means applied in their cultivation.

The works here described thus use the poetics proper to critical art, however, the interception, appropriation, and remixing of the material extended by inspiration from a broader sense of history, posing challenges with allusion, free styling, poeticising with symbols and metaphors (especially oxymoronic ones), building illusions, highlighting painterly qualities, or reducing them to a synthesis may all serve to restore the meaning critically undermined by others, or even to emphasize this meaning or downright demand it. The use of the language of

Bożego, “Teologia Polityczna”, 8 November 2021, <<https://teologiapolityczna.pl/czy-sztuka-wysoka-wroci-do-kosciola-polscy-artysci-malarze-namaluja-ponownie-obraz-milosierdzia-bozego>> (as of 27 June 2022).

⁴⁰ E. Kiedio, *Namalować katolicyzm od nowa*, <<https://wiesz.pl/2023/02/27/namalowac-katolicyzm-od-nowa/>> (as of 13 October 2023); Ł. Murzyn, *Drogi Kościoła i sztuki muszą się na nowo zejść. Inaczej pozbawimy się piękna*, <<https://klubjagiellonski.pl/2022/11/15/drogi-kosciola-i-sztuki-musza-sie-na-nowo-zejsc-inaczej-pozbawimy-sie-piekna/>> (as of 13 October 2023).

mass communication, characteristic of critical art,⁴¹ may be used to expose what this communication often eliminates, and critical art usually deprecates.

The intensity of visual qualities and the paradox used in the message render the described examples appropriate for observing the “shiver of transcendence.” It is worth noting, however, that an intense paradox usually turns out to be the basis of a poetic metaphor, used to reveal the Polish idea, even by cultivating its margins. Perhaps, then, the paradox of affirmation is also the “way” by which beauty, even “uninvited”,⁴² is “smuggled”, as it were, into contemporary art used to reveal the Polish idea, so that art remains art, defined precisely by beauty (even if it is a beauty variously placed), and the Polish idea is revealed as participating in the transcendent properties of being.

Abstract

The Polish idea in contemporary art. Critique and affirmation

The aim of the text is to explore whether elements typical of critical art (e.g., appropriation, subversion) can be utilized in art that affirms Polish ideas. The analysis and interpretation of works by Zbigniew Warpechowski, The Krasnals, Jakub Różalski, Ignacy Czwartos, Ada Karczmarczyk, Jakub Woynarowski, and Jarosław Modzelewski within the context of the initiative to “repaint Catholicism” using terms introduced by Grzegorz Sztabiński (such as “the shiver of transcendence” and “the margin of transcendence”) confirm the possibility of using tools that are seemingly only critical in affirmative art that nurtures the margins of Polish ideas.

KEYWORDS:

Polish idea, critical art, appropriation, subversion, affirmative art, intensity of experience, paradox, shiver of transcendence, margin of transcendence

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41 Compare: A. Żmijewski, *Stosowane sztuki społeczne*, “Krytyka Polityczna”, 11–12, 2007, pp. 14–24.

42 Compare: C.K. Norwid, *Promethidion. Rzecz w dwóch dialogach z epilogiem*, [in:] idem, *Pisma wybrane*, vol. 2: *Poematy*, J.W. Gomułicki (ed.), Warszawa 1980, p. 295.

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