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BLURRING THE BORDERS BETWEEN ARCHITECTURE AND THE VISUAL ARTS

ZACIERANIE GRANIC POMIĘDZY ARCHITEKTURĄ I SZTUKAMI WIZUALNYMI

Abstract

Traditional fields of visual arts – sculpture and painting – have been connected with architecture in different ways. At the end of 20th century, artistic practices within these arts intensified efforts aiming to incorporate architecture in an unprecedented manner into the area of interest as a source of inspiration. The contemporary phenomena have not only expanded, but very often introduced new actions and experiences of space perception that escape classical classification of fine arts.

Keywords: architecture, architectural sculpture, unity of arts, visual arts

Streszczenie

Tradycyjne dziedziny sztuk wizualnych – rzeźba i malarstwo, w różny sposób były powiązane z architekturą. Pod koniec XX wieku praktyki artystyczne w obszarze tych sztuk nasiliły działania włączające architekturę, w sposób dotąd nieobecny, w obszar zainteresowań jako źródło inspiracji. Współczesne zjawiska nie tylko rozszerzyły, ale często wprowadziły nowe działania i doświadczenia percepcji przestrzeni, wymykające się klasycznym klasyfikacjom sztuk pięknych.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura, jedność sztuk, rzeźba architektoniczna, sztuki wizualne

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1. Introduction

The traditional place of sculpture and painting in architecture was always subjected to architectural structure and was used mainly as a decoration. Architectural objects were used as a medium dressed in the costume of sculpture decoration, often a polychrome – in order to become a distinguishing factor evocative of a higher value, fine art. But often the architecture united to such a large extent with sculpture and painting that the borders lost their distinction. Thereby, experiencing the art was not limited only to perceiving a painting or walking around a sculpture, but also by bringing architecture into the game, the art could be perceived from the outside as well as from the inside.

The concept of integration of the arts was particularly visible in ancient art. It is impossible to separate the figural presentations of the facade of the small temple in Abu Simple dedicated by Ramesses II to his wife Nefertari from the architectural tissue. The reliefs filling the metopes in the decorative friezes of Greek temples had not just decorative and symbolic value, but at the same time brought narrative. In the space of tympana, reliefs harmonised starting from corners and expanding towards central figural groups. Separate forms of architectural sculpture were columns in form of atlantes and caryatids that for example in the Southern portice of the Athenian Erechtheion combined sculpture with architecture – not only in a material aspect, but also by forming a part of complex linguistic system. In the Pergamon Altar the sculpture follows the forms of the architecture. In the Middle Ages, architecture completed by sculpture and painting serving their didactic role as *Biblia pauperum*, carried a narrative in an evident manner and transported the recipient into the world of *sacrum*. In the times of the Renaissance, the monumental forms are visibly inspired by sculptural goldsmith forms, which when enlarged became architecture; *vide* dome of the Church of Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence by Filippo Brunellesco. The unity of visual arts is particularly well visible in the illusionist representations in the spaces of baroque domes. The baroque *theatrum sacrum,* being a synthesis of painting and sculpture, in the environment filled with light and musical effects, aroused the emotions of the bystander; *vide* "The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa" sculptural group by Gianlorenzo Bernini. However, at this time the idea of the synthesis of arts was materialized by opera that combined not only visual arts, but also literature, music and theatre. In the era of Romanticism the total work of art (*Gesamtkunstwerk*) combining the concept of consistency in the material of various arts (poetry, music, painting, dance) manifested itself in the form of one visual work of art. Indeed, theatre and opera become a nucleus for creation that allowed different fine arts to speak. During opera performances, in order to blur the border between the stage, the orchestra and the audience, Richard Wagner applied various methods, including artificial clouds and light [1]. By continuously changing reference points, thus changing the perspective, he put the viewer into different levels of reality with the materiality of architecture blurred. After 1960, such solutions become one of the nuclei for the concept of *environment art.*

For the most of 20th century, if the connections between architecture and other visual arts were not avoided, they were at least reduced to archaising elements following the motto "Ornament is a crime". Sigfried Giedion, in his view of creative the limitations of artists working in the field of visual arts, in the urbanistic composing indicates "a need for some modesty allowing architects and artists to work together from the very beginning" [2, p. 19]. At the same time he points out realisations of Le Corbusier, who was at the same time architect, painter and sculptor, where not only architecture, but the entire urban composition is treated from the point of view of a sculptor.

2. Architecture as a source of artistic inspiration

Historian and critic of architecture, Anthony Vidler in his essay "Architecture's Expanded Field" of 2004 points out the fact that architecture after several decades of autonomy, at the end of 20th century became open to the fine arts, including the visual arts, by entering and blurring the borders between them [5, p. 143–154]. The criticism of architectural autonomy led to the revaluation of its perception, particularly in terms of interactions of new visual arts – performance, installations, *environment* art, *site-specific* art, assemblage and emballage. The wave of postmodern revolt in the 1970s brought a new perspective to the affinity of architecture and sculpture by referring to reminiscence and aware decoration. An example of works combining of architecture with sculpture, but with preferred compilation over the avant-garde, become the works of Frank O. Gehry, Mario Botty, Hans Hollein, Philip Johnson, or Aldo Rossie, which repeatedly were made in cooperation with sculptors.

The sculpture-building "Binoculars" was created in 1991 in Venice neighbourhood of Los Angeles, California as a work by a couple of sculptors, Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen (Ill. 1). The structure, of dimensions 13.7×13.4×5.5, is part of office an complex designed by Frank O. Gehry. Scaled up, realistic sculpture sends a message competing in size with the main building. Sculpting the building block in the later works became for the architect almost a punching machine, made to give an external effect.

A novel example of treating the architectural tissue as a sculpting material were the artistic interventions of Gordon Matta-Clark (1943–1978), one of the most important New York artists of the 60s and 70s, and a trained architect. Up to this moment sculpture at the contact with architecture was utilitarian – as an addition, even if playing a structural role, or as furniture. By different forms of "building cuts" he revealed their inside, just as did Lucio Fontana in the series of "cut" paintings "Quanta". The intervention involved cutting, misplacing, shifting, tilting or removing parts of the buildings. The result was a change of perception of the space of the structures, including their relationship with the environment, as well as a change of perspective. These actions were short-lived and unstable, and were most often performed on objects destined for demolition. The only traces of them are preserved elements of sculpture-buildings, video tapes and photos taken by the artist or his friend. Matta-Clark „by breaking the borders between architecture and art, photography and film, performance and installation (…) became a critique of modern functionalism, post-war urbanism and social consequences of liquidation of urban slums, as well as the critique of autonomy of art that separates itself from the practice of everyday life in the city" [4, p. 365]. In 1974, expression of this was his most famous intervention "Splitting", performed in the Englewood district, inhabited mainly by Afroamericans in New Jersey, USA (Ill. 2). Matta-Clark cut in half a building typical of this area. Then the foundations of one part were lowered by several centimetres and in the final phase tilted and at the same time deposited on new foundations. The result of this was a gap approx. 5 degrees wide. The intervention was not only a criticism of urban degradation, but also a criticism in terms of the social and economic dimensions. The symbolism of splitting a house refers to the disintegration of social ties, including the myth of the American family living in a house in the suburbs.

Another famous intervention of Matta-Clark was the project "Conical Intersect", created as part of the 1975 Benniale de Paris, in the vicinity of the construction site of the Centre Georges Pompidou. In two 17th-century houses to be demolished, the artist cut out the form of a shifted cone of base of 4m diameter, by cutting through the walls and ceiling. When looking at the gap in the facade resembling a gigantic spyglass in form, the object was opened to
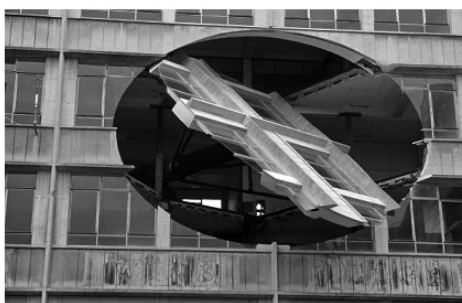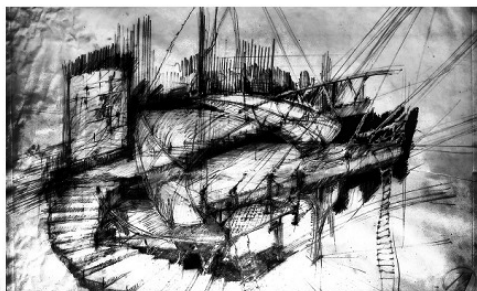
Ill. 1. Claes Oldenburg i Coosje van Bruggen (sculpture), Frank O. Ghery (architecture), „Binoculars",
Veinice, Los Angeles, Kalifornia. Source: www.losangelesloveaffair.wordpress.com
Ill. 2. Gordon Matty-Clark „Splitting", Englewood, New Jersey, USA, 1974. Source: http://www.
ionoi.it
Ill. 3. Richard Wilson, „Turning the Place Over", Liverpool, 2007.Source:www.flickr.com
Ill. 4. Krzysztof Wodiczko, „Guests", 53rd Biennale in Venezia, 2009. Source: www.magazyn.o.pl
Ill. 5. Dan Graham, „The Rooftop Urban Park Project Two-Way: Mirror Cylinder Inside Cube",
Nowy Jork, 1981. Photo Marilynn K. Yee, The New York Times
Ill. 6. Piotr Obracaj, scenography for the show by Michał Markowski „Prywatne życie Piotrusia
Pana" in Teatr Nowy in Zabrze, 1980. Fig. Piotr Obracaj

view the Eiffel tower and the futuristic Centre Georges Pompidou. While from the outside, the viewer could see the "bloodstream" of the building. The intervention was mainly a criticism of the demolition of historical structures. Including the demolitions in 1971, despite much public controversy, of buildings located near Les Halles, built during Paris' reconstruction following Baron Haussmann. The form of a cone was inspired by Anthony McCall's film „Line Describing a Cone" of 1973. The intervention of Matta-Clark became an inspiration for the project "Turning the Place Over**"** by English sculptor, Richard Wilson, who in 2007 cut in the external wall of Old Yate's Lodge in Liverpool a circle of eight metres diameter, that, when turning, also revealed the inside of the building (Ill.3).

Initiating the play of the visual arts with architecture, where the former become reduced to utilitarian purposes, was met by criticism by Rosalyn Deutsche, art historian, lecturer at the Columbia University in New York [2, p. 150–165]. Deutsche emphasises the creations of Krzysztof Wodiczka, a Polish visual artist and art theoretician living in the USA, whose works in the form of visual arts are presented not only inside the galleries, but also on architectural structures. In 1985, the artist, protesting against apartheid, displayed an image of a swastika on the Tympanon of the South African embassy in London. While in 2005, on the wall of Warsaw Zachęta gallery he displayed recordings of women talking about traumatic events in their lives. In 2009, on 53rd Venice Biennale in the Polish Pavilion in Giardini, the artist presented his famous installation "Guests" on the subject of presence of immigrants in society (Ill.4).The images displayed inside the Pavilion in the form of windows, organically integrated with the architectural form, suggesting their partial transparency, showed a virtual and at the same real world – immigrants at various activities.

The sculpture in the direct vicinity of architecture can also interact with it. The series of sculptural objects named pavilions created by Dan Graham, New York artist and writer, also blur these borders. Graham's creations are made of several glass panes, mirrors and half mirrors that can be both reflecting and transparent. The sculptures being at the same objects of streetscaping are a kind of hybrid between quasi-functional space and installations, which form optical illusions that disorient the viewer about his location in the environment. As the artist himself says they: „are hybrid, [...] are halfway between one thing and the other at the same time" [6]. One of his most famous works is the transparent and reflecting pavilion "Two-Way Mirror Cylinder Inside Cube", created in 1981, which is a part of the project "The Rooftop Urban Park Project" in New York (Ill. 5). In the creation of the work, architects Mojdeh Baratloo and Clifton Balch were also involved. Similar games based on optical illusion, on the border of the real world and imagination are conducted by Monika Sosnowska. During the exhibition "Clandestini" at the 50th Venice Art Biennale, deconstructing the architecture, created over a dozen metre long corridor with typical of PPR architecture green panelling, where by bringing the walls closed introduced a convergent third dimension of perspective, thus suggesting to the viewer that the corridor is infinite.

The theatre was obviously a field for other artistic activities. Prof. Piotr Obracaj, architect and stage designer, in 1980 created a scenography in Zabrze Teatr Nowy for the play by Michał Markowski "Prywatne życie Piotrusia Pana" ("The Private Life of Peter Pan")

directed by debutant Adam Gessler (Ill. 6).The stage designer intended to open the auditorium to a somewhat larger audience by introducing an element of surprise. The effect was obtained by placing the audience in front and behind the stage and introducing mirrors, so that part of the audience saw the show in mirror image. Additionally, another stage was built, suspended over the heads of the audience.

3. Summary

The appearance in the second half of 20th century of numerous new visual arts, which were often a result of marriage with architecture, is a prognostication of new ones, even more innovative. While the development of the contemporary IT revolution and the appearance with it of new technologies and communication media will inevitably multiply all the existing arts, giving them new meaning and mutating them with new ones. Consequently, an increasingly important question is about the quality of the art, including the architecture as the most exposed medium, as well as its message and its form. Particularly, in the era of uniformisation and domination of technological efficiency and race created by economy, it must be paramount to connect all artistic activities with the context of site, time and tradition.

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