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**„ВРЕМЕТО“ КАТО АСПЕКТ В ТВОРБАТА
(ИЗБРАНИ ПРИМЕРИ ОТ ПОЛСКО КОНЦЕПТУАЛНО ИЗКУСТВО,
СОБСТВЕНИ И СТУДЕНТСКИ ТВОРБИ)**

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**THE ASPECT OF “TIME” IN AN ARTISTIC WORK
(ON SELECTED EXAMPLES OF POLISH CONCEPTUAL ART,
OWN WORK AND STUDENT WORKS)**

Abstract: Attempting to visualize concept of “time” has a great tradition in contemporary art, in particular in conceptual art in the 20th century. The starting point for that consideration are conceptual activities in Polish contemporary art and their influence on the didactic program of teaching photography – the topics and selections taken for the visual structure of the work. Discussion on the example of selected works of Polish conceptual art of the 20th century, including the effects of the didactic process of the Photography and Multimedia Activities Studio that I run at the Academy of Fine Arts in Łódź. As a part of research and didactic observations, for many years students have been given the task of creating a visual work that shows the passage of time. The selection of photographic pictures and the method of working should be treated as an attempt to create a personal commentary on the surrounding reality. Students are choosing a theme, planning and recording over for a long period of time, for example a few weeks or months, the natural variability of the motif with particular emphasis on the type of light resulting from the time of day and the environment. The collections are presented in the form of a slide show, and the rhythm of the appearing photographs can be variable, consciously used as an additional artistic element. In the initial phase, the students discuss the selected issue and chosen artistic convention, while the technique and artistic form are free. In my own artistic work, too, the aspect of the “time” is an important factor. In many art works and art projects it is an important semantic element. Years later, I return to the same themes or places to reinterpret them and relate to the past. It concerns both the topic, issues and the composition of the visual implementation. Examples of artistic projects implemented over many years are cycles regarding the identity of the home city, for example “Postcards from Łódź”, “genius_lodzi” or “The Origin”.

Keywords: *light; time; photography; concept; process; relation; variability; education*

“Time is also an element.” J. W. Goethe

Attempting to visualize “time” has a long tradition in contemporary art, and in conceptual art in particular. The starting point for the following considerations are selected activities in Polish conceptual art of the 20th century and their influence on one’s own work and on the didactic programme of teaching photography – topics undertaken and choices of the visual structure of the work in the Studio of Pho-

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tography and Multimedia Activities run by me at the Władysław Strzemiński Academy of Fine Arts in Łódź (Poland).

1.

Time is, besides eternity, the most materially elusive notional category. The main question posed by philosophers from the times of antiquity to the present day, which they tried to answer, is the question of the existence of time and its nature. Starting with Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Newton and Kant, this question was answered differently. The theme of “time” has always been present in art, even in the oldest art, always in accordance with the current intellectual and moral experience of its existence. This experience of time is manifested, for example, in the ways of measuring and naming it. There is natural time, astronomical time, vegetative time, historical time. A distinction was made between natural time determined by the movement of the sun and formal time measured mathematically. One can calculate the ways of calculating time for a long time without going beyond the Middle Ages. Modern times brought new astronomical discoveries, a new philosophical thought, which also changed the perception of time. Modernity and contemporaneity, together with the theory of relativity, have created new challenges for people to think and experience time.

In fine arts, sculptures, paintings and other attempts to capture time materially, the difficulty of depicting time as a question of passing away, the past and the future was important. This was often done on a symbolic level. An example of this is the particularly popular religious-artistic motif associated with art, cognition and time – *vanitas* (Latin for *futility*). *Vanitas* is one of the most important motifs in art history. It combines beauty and transience. Frequent associations evoking images of passing were the sentences *memento mori* and *carpe diem* in the Baroque. The notion is connected with the main idea of the Book of Koheleth (Ecclesiastes) – *Vanitas vanitatum et omnia vanitas* – Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. The motif of futility is most visible in the Middle Ages and Baroque, the fascination with death and passing was manifested in art and literature. Thoughts on the existential background appeared, of course, also in other epochs. Dutch painting of the 17th century in particular liked the *vanitas* motif in various variations of the theme of *memento mori*. Margality is represented by many symbols: a skull, broken or withering fruits, clocks and hourglasses, and musical instruments. In painting, *vanitas*' symbols have a moralising influence, indicating the transience of life and earthly goods. What better symbolizes death and transience than a dead skull? Their message is to make the viewer aware that the joy of life is only a passing moment, lasting only for a moment. Often still lifes depicted a rich and perfectly painted scene filled with *vanitas*-related symbols. These symbols were fully understandable for the contemporary creation of the work.

(pic 01.)

The aspect of time in the visual arts is undoubtedly an important factor influencing the shape and form of a work of art. In many cases, the longevity and tedious creative process affects the final shape of the work. This is influenced by technological issues, workshops or even the author's skills. Especially important issues in manual means of expression. Is it possible to present time in itself or only in relation to other phenomena, especially movement? After all, time and movement are the closest to each other – movement and changeability take place in time, and the passage of time requires movement; moreover, the very phrase “the passage of time”, “time flows” movement suggests. How can time be captured and shown in a painting and sculpture? Would it be easier to use a photographic image?

2.

In the artistic practices of conceptual art since the middle of the 20th century, when an idea contained in a work of art has become the most important, addressing the issue of visualization of “time” has been the subject of many attempts and research. The conceptual trend in art was quite common in Poland in the second half of the 20th century. Depreciating the artistic technique and all the rules of organising the artistic form opened up a free way for artists to reflect on art, broaden their field of activity, experience and experimentation. At the turn of the decades 60. and 70. in Polish art appeared attempts to define “time” and temporal understanding of reality. Photography was a medium that not only emerges

a short moment from a temporal continuum, but a given moment acquires a double existence and can be manipulated. With series of photographs artists created not just narrations but tried to give a material form for the idea of "time". The issue of temporality exists as an interpretation of order, stability and changeability of nature, the psychological and spiritual experience of human transience. In Conceptual Art photography was equal to other art disciplines. The invention of photography leads towards the reduction of the artistic gesture, which, in turn, was one of the factors contributing to the popularization of this medium among conceptual artists. The questions to photography were different. They were a challenge for photography as a medium capable of "seizing the moment", an attempt to take photographs of the passage of time and thus at the same time the question about time itself. The following questions were asked: How to include time in the plane of a photographic image? How can we build time and its image in space? If we assume that time is a chain of events, we raise another question: how to build time from moments? Real time is continuous, but its imaging by means of photography will refer to space. Therefore, we can talk about the image of time in a photographic image, rather in the aspect of time reconstruction, which will always be of a discontinuous character. The result was the use of sequences of photographs¹. For example Krzysztof Wojciechowski registered the passage of time by photographing objects of everyday use (dishes in a kitchen sink, an unpadding bed) and their changing appearance in the series "Imperfectum" (1973). The image of time obtained in this way, by means of a sequence of photographs, is disturbing. With the help of a few photographs it is possible to combine two events that he divided the year into two so that a suggestion appears as if they were divided by a minute and vice versa². The issue of movement and time, in terms of the possibilities of the photographic medium, was studied by the artists associated with the Film Form Workshop operating in Łódź. In 1972 Ryszard Waśko made such works as "I am running" (1972), "I am moving around" (1972) and "From left to right" (1972), in which he included a disturbance of the image caused by its movement, which was the result of the movement of the camera held by the photographer³.

Another Polish conceptual artist, continuing the experiments on the structure of time Wojciech Bruszewski referred to his earlier work „The video touch” (1976–77) and specifically to the audio-visual installation "Time structure-Stopwatch" (1977) "The picture shows a mechanical stopwatch dial. The movement of the hand is uniform and precise. In the soundtrack, the stopwatch sound can be heard but in reality it comes from an electronic generator. The author continuously changes the frequency of the rhythmically repeated sound, resulting in an impression of acceleration or slowing down of the hand motion, although it really is moving uniformly". A different principle of imaging time was used in the object "The time I need for Emmet" (1981). "If this is not time within time, it is at least an image of time in another image of time. Two clocks. One motor and one electric. The electric clock, with a little manipulation, is going backwards. The mechanical clock, which is going normally, is located on the axis of the electric clock hand. With the opposite movement, the second hand, although it is going, remains in one place"⁴.

Zygmunt Rytka, another Polish conceptual artist conveyed the impression of universal transcendence. He managed to produce a similar spiritual effect in some of his realizations. He wrote about his works "Time units" (1971): "The photographic image is a permanent record of time. Every image, in itself a record of a certain time period, at the same defines its own position in time. Every photograph begins or ends a given time period, which may be assumed, incidental, independent, impossible to define"⁵. Another important series of Rytka's works is cycle "Continual infinity" (1983-1984). His comment: "Rapid mountain creek, millions of stones smashed into pieces. Helplessness against the immensity of constancy and one's own minutness. Consciousness of aiming at an unreachable solution. If the Universe is assumed to be 1 then 1 makes infinitely great number. If 1 stone is broken into pieces then each piece makes 1 stone"⁶. The artist's later works titled "Momentary objects" (1988) concern the aspect of time in

¹ Conceptual art. Photographic medium. Museum of Łódź, Łódź 2010.

² Ibidem, p. 7, p. 156–159.

³ Ibidem, s.150–153.

⁴ Wojciech Bruszewski, Fenomeny percepcji. Municipal Art Gallery in Łódź, Łódź 2010, p. 162–163.

⁵ Energia przekazu. Mikołajczyk, Robakowski, Rytka. In Sitiu/Fine Grain 2005, p. 138.

⁶ Ibidem, p. 144.

a different perspective. We have to accept that as time passes everything changes. “Momentary objects” exists only for the duration of the show, and its major value is that it will come into being just for a moment (within the scale of a human life) and just in this place. Water – Stone – Time⁷.

(pic 02.)

The search for a new shape and form of art are artistic concepts of an important figure in Polish art – Roman Opałka. His most recognizable work is “from 1 – to infinity” series, called by the artist and critics the Program. The axis of the project is clearly linearly defined time. Since 1965, the artist has been using white paint to write down series of numbers on his canvas. Its beginning is marked by the number “1”, initially he did it on black canvas, gradually brightening the background used to achieve the point of “absolute white”. Opałka realized the Programme on three levels: painting recording, photographic documentation – daily facial photographs and sound recordings of the act of countdown itself, creating a coherent, narrative and symbolic image of human temporality. He additionally pronounced each number by recording it on a tape recorder, and added his current photo to the finished picture. The series is supposed to depict the passage of human time. The artist defined time as a measure of life. The framework for Opałka’s realization was: the question posed by the artist about the meaning or senselessness of human existence and painting, and the final unification – the artist’s death – envisaged as the culmination of the Programme⁸.

In my opinion, the above mentioned examples from Polish art are the most obvious, but they are only a part of a huge output undertaking a conceptual reflection on time. In conceptualism, the reflection on “time” results from a specific combination of intellect, intuition, spirit and physicality – it is the basis of all experience and interpretation.

3.

In my own artistic work, too, the aspect of “time” is an important factor. In many realizations and projects it is an important element of meaning. Years later, I return to the same themes or places to re-interpret them and refer to the past. It concerns both the subject matter and issues, as well as influences the composition of the visual realization. Examples of artistic projects realized over many years are the cycles concerning the identity of the city.

At the invitation of the Manhattan Gallery in Łódź, I took part in an artistic and social project concerning the identity of Łódź entitled “Łódź/Boot/Лодка/Lodke”. It was then that the work entitled “Postcards” (2002), which functioned in the public space in the convention of free postcards, was realized. The photographs include selected objects from the Łódź urban landscape in analogy to iconic objects of world architecture, and by means of signatures identified as world famous cultural monuments and tourist attractions. Slightly pathetic substitutes, in no way growing up to the originals, but referring to the universal desire for a clear identity, to dreams that could play the role of places of community identification. This cycle was reworked after seven years and then, after a further seven years “2002/2009/2016, The Postcards: Re-cultivation/re-activation/revitalisation” (2016)⁹. The project originated from thinking about the transformation that Łódź is undergoing and is a continuation of the previous reflections on the city, which is constantly changing. It is said that seven years is a period after which the character of man changes. Does the character of the place also change? It is always intriguing how cities or places change and develop, how human characters or their appearance change. The city of Łódź was granted the right to organize an exhibition of the so-called Green Expo Horticultural in 2024, so the next moment to observe the transformation will be after the next seven years, i.e. just before this world event.

(pic 03.)

Another project concerning the specificity of Łódź was the work entitled “Młódź-Identyfikacja/Identyfication”. In the series entitled “Cleaners/Czyściciele” (2005), the views of a destroyed, dirty city with holes in asphalt, anointed spray and a full shredder of Łódź were recorded. In the dialogue I re-

⁷ Ibidem, p. 152.

⁸ Pojęcie i doświadczenie czasu w polskiej sztuce konceptualnej, M. H. Zdanowicz, Sztuka i Dokumentacja, nr 6 (2012).

⁹ Galeria Manhattan. 25 lat działalności, red. M. Milewska, Poleski Ośrodek Sztuki, Łódź 2017, p. 85.

turned to the same places after 14 years, looking for the identity of the place and finding the inscriptions Love and Hatred.

(pic 04.)

The works discussed above, concerning the meaning of the place, can be interpreted in the context of the classical *genius loci* motif, i.e. discovering and exposing the “spirit of the place”. In 2009, with a site-specific work entitled “genius_lodzi”, I asked myself about the “spirit of the place” of the city I live in. To this end, I decided to change the space of one of the abandoned backyards in Łódź, decorating the small wooden annex with colourful flashing lights. Thanks to this treatment, the disintegrating cell became an aesthetic object. Something that was dirty, damaged, ugly and unnoticeable, thanks to a small intervention, became an attractive, shiny and interesting object. Currently, this place looks completely different – the outbuildings have been demolished, and in their place were built office buildings. Somewhere in its foundations remains the remains of that place and a wooden cell¹⁰.

The continuation of the search for the context of place and time was sometimes manifested in the method of changing the legibility of the photographic image through the environment in which it was placed, i.e. through mystification, playing with the viewer and with the message. In the site-specific work titled “Among the four walls” in the context of a spray-sprayed room in an abandoned tenement house I introduced a collection of glass negatives with indistinct traces of life in the same interior – sentimental fantasies about the wonderful past of the place and the people living in it. Their presence was symbolized by created, seemingly found photos – shattered, broken with their internal strength of memories and dreams.

The power of photography as a medium of time document and mementoes of events inspired me to further activities in this area. The catalyst for these reflections was the accidental discovery of a collection of glass negatives from the first half of the 20th century. The photographs depicted images of the inhabitants of the village in the suburbs of Łódź. Found and forgotten, I underwent the process of rephotography. I wanted to draw attention to the possibility of showing intangible or even spiritual content, ambiguous and very subjective. According to the theory of dualism, everything that concerns us is considered on the basis of the opposite principle. Positive and negative, light and darkness, past and future – contradictory but also interdependent notions. Archival photographs provoke deductions, fantasies and interpretations, they create a particularly mysterious aura, and an important feature of photography is its ability to convey the memory of the past.

(pic 05.; pic 06.)

The resultant series of works described above is a series of works based on a photographic image, functioning under the common title “The Origin” (2015–2017). The works have been presented in subsequent editions at three solo exhibitions in Poland, Germany and South Korea. In the work discussed here, the face was of particular interest. Collections of gravestone photographs from various corners of Europe were used in this work. During my subsequent travels and journeys I documented portraits found in cemeteries, not anonymous at all, because most of them were signed with name and surname. However, apart from the years of their birth and death, there was no detail about them in their lives, only their image and the supposed memory of their loved ones remained. Tombstone photographs are a contemporary analogy to old posthumous masks, whose practice served to meditate on the spiritual presence of individuals. Tombstone portraits usually do not express emotions, the people in them seem to be restrained, calm and quiet. One can only try to recognize individual character or origin from these faces. As a personal motif, I included images from the private circle of my loved ones in the gallery of faces, which are part of the cycle – their presence is important only for me, for my awareness of mutual dependence and my own history with their participation. Creation is a mystery, but it also contains a substitute for the answer to the question about the sense of existence and can be a reflection on passing.

(pic 07.; pic 08.)

¹⁰ **Ogrodowa.** Office, Łódź, 8 Ogrodowa Street.

4.

In the current didactic practice within the framework of my Studio of Photography and Multimedia Activities I continue many aspects of the functioning of the photographic image, which I mentioned. The didactic and organizational activity of the Studio is based on stimulating students to creative activities using photography and related media, taking into account the links between visual arts and music, literature or science. The main goal is to support students in developing their own individual language of artistic expression and searching for their own artistic identity. The right choice of context, medium and means of expression are to create a specific, consciously assumed message expressing the planned content.

For many years, students have been given the task of creating a visual work that shows the passage of time in the framework of research and didactic observations. The choice of a photographic frame and the way of recording should be treated as an attempt to create a personal commentary on the surrounding reality. Students choose a theme, plan and record over a longer period of time, e.g. a few weeks or months, the natural variation of the theme with particular emphasis on the type and color of light resulting from the time of day and the environment. The collections are presented in the form of a slide show, and the rhythm of the emerging photographs can be variable, consciously used as an additional visual element. In the initial phase, the students discuss the selected issue and the chosen artistic convention, while the technique and form are free.

(pic 09.; pic 10.; pic 11.)

Polish writer Olga Tokarczuk, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature (2018), deals with the subject of the understanding of “time” in her book entitled “Flights/Bieguni” One of the characters in the book interprets time in the following way: “(...) settled, agricultural peoples prefer the pleasure of circular time, in which each event must return to its own beginning, roll up in an embryo and repeat the process of maturation and death. But the nomads and merchants, when they set out on the road, had to come up with a different time for themselves, which would better suit the journey. It is a linear, more useful time, because it is a measure of the aspiration to the goal and the growth of percentages. Every moment is different and will never happen again, so it favours risk and taking full advantage of the moment. (...) The author herself, however, in the form of the novel’s narrator, refers to the subject in this way: “I, however, have a different opinion about time. The time of all travelers is a lot of time in one, a whole multitude. It is an island time, archipelagos of order in the ocean of chaos (...)”¹¹.

Every time we switch clocks from daylight saving time to winter time and vice versa, we get or lose a symbolic hour¹². One island from our private ocean of chaos.

(pic 12.)

¹¹ **Bieguni, O.** Tokarczuk, Wydawnictwo literackie 2008, p. 61.

¹² 26th October 2019.