

Kantor and memory mechanisms

Krystyna Czerni

Memory, both individual personal memory and social, collective memory – is the most interesting topic of contemporary art and literature. As an elementary ability of the human mind to collect experiences and recall impressions or information, memory is a characteristic of human spirituality, a component of intelligence. The gift of memory is what distinguishes us from dead matter and most animals. Without memory we do not exist, as we have no past and become helpless. The loss of memory is equivalent to a loss of identity. What about historical memory, the memory of nations? “The loss of memory by a nation is also a loss of its conscience,” wrote Zbigniew Herbert.

The most loyal guardian of memory is art, which developed various strategies to protect the past, from literal illustrations to coded symbols. One of the most original and unusual artistic methods was proposed by avant-garde painter and creator of the Cricot 2 theatre, Tadeusz Kantor. In the formula for the Theatre of Death, he found a key to the collective experience. Thanks to subjecting symbols and emotions to the strict discipline of form, Cricot performances moved audiences in every place in the world, reaching the power and size of a masterpiece.

It is a good idea to look at the means with which Kantor achieved this expressiveness. The unusual formula of the Theatre of Death in fact consisted in the creation of an artistic illustration of the mechanisms of memory; the sequences of unreal images, scraps of memory, obsessively recurring scenes, absurd situations. Everyone knows them from their own experience. We all have a similar chaos in our heads: a series of animosities, daring longing, comic memories. We are corporeal, physical and it turns out that our memory and imagination are such, too. We do not exist without form; we think, or even feel with images. Kantor knew how to show this on stage.

He created an extremely expressive, suggestive space in which the dead and alive mingle, where our most shameful desires and even the most cruel experiences come out. War, love and crime, fear, passion, hatred.

Unlike any other contemporary artist, Kantor believed in the memory of dead matter, the past of old ceremonies and events kept in forgotten props. He used to say that every metaphysics must have its physics. His grotesque machines, surreal, exaggerated mobile objects illustrated external, spiritual mechanisms and emotions. He spoke about mental impulses, “memory mechanisms” and “emotional baggage”. Tadeusz Kantor understood it literally, translating the movement of thoughts into a mechanical activity of theatrical objects, the emotional baggage into absurd experiences dressed in uncomfortable costumes and burdened with bags.

Kantor did not like the pretence of emotions or excessive psychology in theatre. “Mechanisation” was his proposal: translating the impulses of biology and mental mechanisms into a literary movement, the “memory of matter.” His exceptional objects: demonic, shaking machines, meticulous instruments of torture, impractical equipment reveal the deep truth of human thoughts and motivations. This “metaphysical lumber room” emanates mysterious energy, becoming a real vehicle for memories. When walking on wooden platforms, among the labyrinths of secret objects, we enter the world of Kantor’s theatre – a sort of environnement where dead items arranged in dead space inspire anxiety and tenderness.

Children in a rubbish cart

Cricoteka Centre for the Documentation of the Art of Tadeusz Kantor (Ośrodek Dokumentacji Sztuki Tadeusza Kantora Cricoteka)

The metaphor of a "rubbish dump" is also an extremely capacious symbol of memory. All archaeologists know that the rubbish dump is the most valuable excavation site as it remains a testimony to the past and to culture, a trace of somebody's life. Everyone who has looked inside a forgotten drawer or tidied a cluttered flat after someone else's death knows this feeling; the avalanche of recollections, images and smells. Rubbish is also a testimony of memory as it can carry an unusual emotional load. Contemporary art is aware of that: Italian matter painting, Pop art, and French New Realism annexed real, destroyed objects, degraded scraps of matter, waste and the most common objects to high art.

But Tadeusz Kantor was first to do so. Already in the performance of Witkacy's *W małym dworku* (Country House), he introduced a "heavy iron RUBBISH CART borrowed from the Municipal Street Cleaning Company." An ironic pram for newborn twins has become the first artistic manifestation of the rehabilitation of a rubbish dump, a perverse materialisation of the idea of the "reality of the lowest rank."

"Kantor used to collect waste, invalid objects, «no-longer-objects», fetishes," wrote Jerzy Nowosielski, "in his hands this waste of reality, civilisation, or culture became a highly valuable artistic substance. Only he had this power of a magician that, as I suppose, nobody else in the world had, to make a museum of preciousness for them. In his hands, the hands of an inspired artist, all this changed into a set of precious stones."

The trumpet of the last judgment

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It is not always words or images that are decisive for the durability of reminiscence. A detail like a sound, smell, or recalled melody can sometimes be more suitable for retaining something to memory. In performances at the Cricot theatre, text was of secondary importance as Kantor considered drama to be an obsolete literary genre and he aimed at the full autonomy of the theatre. What turned out to be most important was rhythm, musicality of the show composed as a music and ballet piece. The content could have been a collage of quotations: counting-out rhymes, alphabet, a verse remembered from the Bible. Also, the melody and intonation of repeated verses were important. In fact, Kantor created a non-verbal language, a kind of glossolalia influencing emotions. The "soundtrack" was decisive: a well-selected music motif (the waltz, the tango, a liturgical song, or a military song) built the tension and drama. The melody rose and fell, returned obsessively as a mechanism of recollection. Other sounds were added to it: funeral rattles, clatter of wooden balls, ominous salvo of guns, screams and actors' steps. Kantor directed the audience's emotions with sounds and called this method the constructivism of emotions.

Sometimes sounds were produced by one of the famous "Kantor's machines", like the Trumpet of the Last Judgment in the performance *Gdzie są niegdysiejsze śniegi* (Where are Last Year's Snows?) - "neither an instrument, nor a siege engine by the walls of Jericho." As the artist explained, "the whole structure on wheels, with scaffolding that made the trumpet go up and down, with movable funeral banners and with a bucket for water (...) Inside the trumpet was a small loudspeaker playing the melody of Brestiger's JEWISH GHETTO ANTHEM. It was the MUSIC MOBILE DEVICE."

Wardrobe - interior of imagination

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Costumes for all of Kantor's performances were subjected to the aesthetics of "poor matter": destroyed, torn rags, worn-out and shabby clothes; bowler hats, trains, veils – the memory of former splendour decayed the memory covered with dust in the attic. Costumes were supposed to play a role of emballage – packaging that restricted the actor's movements, paralysed his or her natural gestures, enforced artificial, embarrassing and obtrusive situations. Their sophisticated "anatomy": multitude of bags, straps, buckles, pockets, tied bundles, organic growths helped achieve this. Wandering people, tramps carrying the memory of their entire life, the bump of the past on their backs...

In the performance entitled *W małym dworku* (The Country House) based on Witkacy's play, the most important prop and the main place was a wardrobe inside which actors crowded hanging on hideous hangers like clothes, dangling and keeping their enigmatic dialogues or they were mixed with bundles and bags. An actor of the Cricot theatre was as if beset, incapacitated by the costume restricting his or her movements. Kantor forced artists to play against themselves, against their own conditions and habits. He changed artists into "bio-objects": bodies knit together with objects, connected with a weird mechanism that became their part, their extension. This strange symbiosis mixed live limbs, wax prostheses, attached sexual attributes and props. This meant a specific "equalisation of matter", standardisation of the live and the dead, organic and mechanical matter. Integration of the performance's elements consisted of animating what was dead and turning what was alive into objects. As Brunella Eruli wrote, in Kantor's theatre "all matter is in one and the same condition that blurs differences and hierarchical distinctions. Objects, actors, wood, old papers, or human bodies – all this functioned on the same plane. Human beings, dummies, planks, abandoned objects are castaways thrown to the edge of the refuse heap. Matter is rejected, destroyed by the roller of life and carried to an unknown destination. This is exactly when it reaches the absolute, eternity, and art." [translator's note: free translation]

Sink

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From the very beginning, Kantor was fond of "poor" matter. The idea of "reality of the lowest rank" that prescribed seeking beauty in poor, greyed, destroyed matter referred to the matter paintings of the late 1950s, although Kantor already saw its beginnings in the theatre during the time of occupation. The memory of war humiliation and degradation was best preserved in the matter of poor, desolate objects taken from life, such as this banal, metal sink on wheels carried on the stage in processions by a Scullery Maid. "During the occupation, we were all of the lowest rank," the artist recalled in his interview with Mieczysław Porębski, with whom he co-created the occupational Independent Theatre (Teatr Niezależny).

The "reality of the lowest rank" – an idea that emerged from necessity and limitations – became the main advantage and strength of the aesthetics of Kantor's theatre. A distinctive, natural, yet strong range of colours: the harmony of greys, beiges, bronzes. Faded, washed out colours like recalled memories, old photographs; rotten, torn fabrics, decayed planks, all as if covered with mould, turned ash-grey, indistinct. Matter subjected to erosion; forms, relics which are an artistic means of expressing the condition of death. Paradoxically, this "poor", kitschy art is very elegant and sophisticated, and it proposes a particular variety of beauty which is characteristic of modernity. "All props in Kantor's theatre," wrote Krzysztof Kłopotowski, "come from the lumber rooms of the town located at the ends of civilisation. It is art poor in material terms, but rich only with the power of imagination, the art to be practised in the toughest conditions, manifesting the strength of survival of the human spirit."

Mechanical cradle

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One of the main principles of the poetics of the Theatre of Death was a strong sense of paradox and perverse, slightly gallows humour. This enabled Kantor to mix extreme poetics and conventions on stage, generate tragicomic chaos that effectively reproduced the mechanisms of recollection and memory.

The clash of extreme emotions, inadvertently looking for the hidden agenda; backstage, reverse, the "lining" of things – this alternation is voiced in all of Cricot's performances. The fundamental ambiguity and ridiculousness also covers the structure of memory which functions in a similar way, recalling unbelievable images and associating incoherent facts. On the stage of the Theatre of Death, the altar suddenly changes into a barricade, the wedding ends up with a funeral, the sacred ritual changes into vulgar scolding. A living human unexpectedly turns out to be an effigy: a woman, a man, a child, an old man. In the Family Machine, which turns into an archaic, or even a comical gynaecology chair, the Mechanical cradle takes the disturbing shape of a little wooden coffin. The ritual of birth intermingles with the ritual of death. As Kantor admitted, "It is a joke by a brutal CLEANING LADY, the birth and the death, two complementary systems."

This mixture also applies to moods and emotions. Commonness clashes with dignity, humiliation is associated with apotheosis, the sublime is brutally compromised, and beauty and sanctity are ridiculed. "I am in very good relations with God," the artist boldly states, "even though I am an atheist. For God has a great sense of humour, as Picasso used to say. (...) A sense of humour offers great possibilities. It makes it possible for him to present the most extreme and cruel situations, also through ridicule."

Boat of charon

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"Theatre is a place that uncovers the traces of «passing» from «the other side» to our life, through some river fords," Kantor said. He gave the stage away to ghosts and for him the theatre was the world of the dead who returned to us; only for a moment.

One of the functions of the funeral liturgy was to accustom the faithful with the fear of the beyond, with the fear of the human fate after death. In the Theatre of Death, Kantor did the same thing in a way, he tamed the same fear. Zaduszki – All Souls' Day is one of the lasting traditions in Poland. It was believed that the dead returned to earth, to their relatives on that day. The archaic ritual of Dziady, the feast during which ghosts and souls of forefathers came from our recollections, dreams and the beyond, is one of the main topics of Polish culture. Dziady (Forefathers' Eve) by Adam Mickiewicz, Wesele (The Wedding) by Stanisław Wyspiański, Sanatorium pod klepsydrą (Sanatorium Under the Sign of Hourglass) by Bruno Schulz. But also paintings by Wyspiański, Malczewski, Wojtkiewicz, and the famous cycle Rozstrzelania (Executions) by Andrzej Wróblewski.

"The stage is a cemetery through which one wanders in search of a future life," said Kantor.

Performances at the Theatre of Death were like a séance and reminded one of invoking ghosts as well as the reading of the roll of the dead. Soldiers had faded uniforms and sallow faces; they were not only dead, but also exhumed. Kantor performed real exorcisms over his own memory; a procession of the dead entered the stage in the danse macabre procession, crowded in a queue to "poor" Charon's tin metal boat, repeating as if under hypnosis the same words and gestures from the "celluloid of memory". The death dance, the circus parade, the stations of the cross – Kantor's theatre was a declaration of faith in the "communion of saints", in the sense of a particular community with the dead. Not only did the artist invoke ghosts, but he also let them speak.

"Kantor may seem to be Charon transporting the deceased to the other side," wrote Jan Kott.

"But Kantor did not only escort the dead, but also bring them back to our side across the River of Memory."

Rat Trap

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For many years, Kantor was a professional stage designer, but he had the worst opinion about a traditional, "professional" theatre. He called it a "public utility building with the false glitter of decorations and costumes." Bored with the role of an "upholsterer furnishing interiors", he dreamt of creating a theatre which would have the primal, shaking power of acting, which would throw the bourgeois audience out of complacency. In traditional stage design, he especially liked the "REAR" of the stage and decorations: "colossal line sets, heavy and thick hoists, vertical, break-neck ladders, bridges suspended over a dark abyss, (...) this whole inferno, machinery holding the «lordly» glitter with the dirty hands of workers."

The theatrical back-up was the real origin of the famous Cricot machines. Thanks to absurd monumentalisation and surreal names, cruel mechanisms, demonic mobile devices and torture tools achieved the symbolic capacity; they started to play other enigmatic functions gaining the "mysterious spiritual power." Patched together from old wooden planks and used metal sheets, they looked extremely coarse and gloomy, yet they were extremely carefully designed. "I am madly thorough," emphasised the artist, "in details I am dismally boring, extremely exact. Every detail is extremely important in whatever I do. They may look plainly banal, but the utmost perfection depends on it. From this perspective, I may be an academician..." In Kantor's precision, there was some kid's passion for DIY as well as an obsessive and almost desperate desire to reproduce the past faithfully, to resurrect the reality hidden somewhere stored in our memory. The austere primitiveness of machines hid, as he wrote, a "desperate provisionality to which the population in our part of Europe is doomed by the incomprehensible history."

Christ on a palm donkey

National Museum in Krakow (Muzeum Narodowe w Krakowie)

Kantor wrote: „It was not the first time that today's theatre experienced great longing for a return to its beginnings and sources. It seeks new, deep origins in primitive customs, rituals, magic practices, feasts, festivities, games, parades and processions." The structure of successive performances at the Theatre of Death referred to many classical theatrical traditions: an ancient Greek stage with three doors; an archaic Japanese structure of the nô theatre; Italian folk comedia dell'arte shows. However, Kantor was irritated by classical theatre and its terminology: performance, stage design, play. He preferred to use the following names: show, revue, mystery. And the difference between theatre and ritual is fundamental. A theatrical performance does not expect the viewer to be an attentive and passive recipient; a ritual is a kind of sacrament, requiring participation and faith. As a child, Kantor took part in the life of his parish and experienced emotions in these events: church processions, services, nativity plays, Easter tomb decorations. Liturgical references in the Theatre of Death reached later Medieval Passion Plays. In Poland, the liturgical theatre was born in Krakow where already in the 13th century Nawiedzenia (Visitations) were celebrated in the Eastern liturgy and since the 15th century Lenten mysteries with Palm Sunday processions and celebrations of Sacrum Triduum. The classical mystery consisted of separate stations – episodes performed in wooden mansions. Breaks between successive scenes were filled with a choral and music intermezzi, which functioned as a sort of a link keeping tension. Prayer monologues: orations and collects were interspersed with recurring musical sequences: antiphons, canticles and acclamations. Sometimes, staging took the form of a procession of wheeled platforms and mansions going through the city. In increasingly ludic shows, apart from the actors, mimes and jugglers performed there also as well as effigies: sculpted figures of Christ with movable arms, soldiers sleeping in a tomb.

Pillories Of Characters

I-Dying

Hangman

Author

Dirty Fellow

Scullery Maid

Pimp-Card Player

Goody-Goody Woman

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The most interesting avant-garde works were created as a result of dialogue with the past, as confrontation of tradition and modernity. It was a sort of gloss, correction to recognised works of culture. It was also one of the strategies of keeping a memory perverse, sometimes blasphemous, but extremely effective. Tadeusz Kantor created a proprietary avant-garde paraphrase from the works of Velázquez, Wojtkiewicz, Matejko, or even Veit Stoss and his opus magnum – the Altar at St. Mary's Church in Krakow.

In the climactic scene of *Niech szczeną artyści* (Let the Artists Die), Kantor imprisoned actors in fancy gallows and pillories, forming "live sculptures" for Veit Stoss's altarpiece. The prison torture chamber changed into the liturgy site; unnatural poses of tormented figures imitated gestures from the central quarter of the polyptych at St. Mary's Church: a kneeling, fainting Mary and apostles surrounding her. Comedians: Pimp-Card Player, Scullery Maid, Dirty Fellow, Hangman, Goody-goody Woman changed into martyrs; they were transformed from common suspects into apostles, saints, thus gaining immortality. This is the driving force of great art.

Medieval pillories, once placed in front of town halls as sites of disgrace and condemnation, were changed into a tool of consecration here. Mystery tools: movable beams, metal chains, fixtures, leather belts in buckles, toothed wheels and winches were attached to vertical poles. Diabolic, wooden stocks immobilised a convict in the most unnatural and sophisticated poses. Torture machines on movable platforms had the characteristics of authentic objects and they were made of wooden beams retrieved from an old ceiling of a 16th-century tenement house in Krakow. They are old, authentic, and inimitable.

Dummy of bedel (image of kazimierz mikulski)

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Dummies, figures with wax faces and hands, played an important role in Cricot performances. With them, Kantor referred to theatrical concepts from innovators: Heinrich von Kleist and Gordon Craig, who postulated the substitution of a live actor with a puppet that better suited the fictitious condition of the art. However, Kantor did not remove live actors, but doubled them, creating effigies similar to them. "In my theatre, a dummy is to become a MODEL for a living ACTOR," he wrote. And Cricot artists acted like dolls, repeating their wooden gestures and unnatural grimaces mechanically. Beginning with the "Theatre of Death", the most important rule was that a dummy having the same features and costumes as the actor became a look-alike of the deceased. It is as if figures present in our memory were in fact more real than the living ones, often dead while still alive. Here Kantor referred to the mystic, Jewish faith in a "dybbuk" – a dead person's spirit materialised in another living being. "Fiction, «World of the Dead» drama, must be given its second life (...) These dead, wandering and ephemeral figures must be given a LIVE «D U P L I C A T E»! A look-alike from our living world, from our times. To «G R A F T» the «spiritual matter» of the deceased to a living human being."

Cricot's dummies – wax effigies imitating the features of a living human – were made of polyvinyl chloride by the modeller, exactly according to Kantor's design. Immobile, dead figures – transported, seated and mixed with living actors in the desks of *Umarła klasa* (The Dead Class) – crowded on the barricade crowning the memories from Wielopole with living recruits that were killed by bullets from the lethal machine. The famous Bedel from *The Dead Class* saw its several

versions, as he had to substitute several actors successively acting in this part. The most famous Bedel was Kazimierz Mikulski, an outstanding painter and member of the Krakow Group.

Cross

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Favourite props and attributes obsessively recurring in successive performances multiplied on the stage, growing, almost persecuting somnambulistically maundering actors who played an immense role in Cricot's performances. One of such fetish-objects was a wooden cross: huge, towering over the stage in Wielopole, or small, carried by Veit Stoss in an unprofessional manner under the arm in *Niech szczerą artyści* (Let the Artists Die). The cross was used as a prop in the kids' cemetery play, an object of blasphemy by drunken soldiers, and finally the war wheeled scaffold. With its coarse, austere aesthetics, the cross in Kantor's performances belongs also to the family of theatrical objects: demonic mobile devices, torture tools and pillories.

In his childhood, the artist lived in a former presbytery building. Residence in the church, in the vestry, equipped Kantor forever with unusual familiarity and acquaintance with the "behind the scenes" of the Catholic rite. Obsessive presence of religious symbols in his art and abruptness towards sacrum were sometimes perceived as an unsuitable provocation, or even a sacrilege. They caused the thrill of surpassing the taboo. But Kantor approached religious symbols as any other cultural stereotype: he extracted them from their customary context and clashed them with new and shocking surroundings. The mechanism of "lowering the rank" was used to fight the routine and was an attempt to refresh the symbol and throw us out of the automatic experience.

"I was raised at a presbytery," reminisced Kantor. "I was familiarised with all activities and objects. They are the same for us. Even this object - the Cross - for me is an object like... well, my table in the new studio. I am not a believer, but I am a Catholic," he added, "the Gospel is a sort of fundamental mythology that has kept us alive for centuries."

Infanta's portrait

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"Mise en abyme", "system of mirrors", "celluloid of imagination" – these phrases appear in interpretations of the modern culture. More and more frequently, art is absorbed in itself and artists are willing to supplement their own visions with the products of someone else's imagination, rooted in the collective artistic imagination. It is also a "game with memory" as it especially applies to "emblem-works", cult paintings, immortal cultural topoi. Images of Infanta Maria Theresa by Velázquez, which have inspired and provoked artists for more than three hundred years now, constitute such a "recurring motif." Velázquez's Infanta, a martyr of courtly etiquette dressed in a corset, a woman-child with sad eyes, has been present in art as a mythical dybbuk, seeking successive incarnations.

Velázquez's Infantas are like relics or madonnas, as Kantor wrote. "They are helpless in their formal dresses, with forced gestures and emptiness in their eyes, so something should be done with their helplessness." In successive versions of Infanta portraits (white, black, red), Kantor transformed them even more and in the last ones the face was covered by a blurry, scribbled grimace: "I substituted the famous skirt of Infanta as a liturgical chasuble with an old, destroyed postman's bag ...". In the object from the performance, *Dziś są moje urodziny* (Today is my Birthday), only the funeral robe of the Infanta is left in the empty frame of the painting and it is stretched in a sinister way on the wooden frame like bat's wings. Abandoned shoes, an empty costume – the figure of the princess "evaporated." It may be recalled and embodied only by our memory and power of imagination.

Children at their desk from umarła klasa (the dead class)

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In the early 1970s, during a holiday walk by the seaside, Kantor encountered an old, desolate school building. Seen from the outside, through a dusty window, the rural classroom with several desks became an artistic revelation. And so was born the "Theatre of Death" – show of memory. In *Umarła klasa* (The Dead Class), a group of seniors return to school desks to participate in classes they have missed. They drag dead child effigies, as the forgotten childhood from which they cannot free themselves of. The Dead Class is a story of a mad desire to return in time and about the world of the deceased being real, but in a different way. The topic of the dead class recurred in Kantor's art in many objects and drawings, the last one being his Mother's gravestone at the Rakowicki Cemetery in Krakow. The sculpture cast in bronze depicts a barefoot boy sitting on a desk near a cross.

Denis Bablet wrote that, contrary to what can be thought, "The Dead Class is not only the world of old people, but the world of the banished and annihilated childhood, the world of a small dummy sitting at a school desk. Tadeusz Kantor, present on the stage, recalls the past with his warm and precise gesture, moves a hand on the hair of a dummy as if with this movement he wanted to reproduce all that is close to life. Tadeusz Kantor is between life and death: such is his position as an artist and man of theatre. A child-dummy is Kantor's look-alike, one of those closest to him."

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She has published, among others, *Nie tylko o sztuce. Rozmowy z Mieczysławem Porębskim* [Not Only About Art. Conversations with Mieczysław Porębski] (1993), *Rezerwat sztuki. Tropami artystów polskich XX wieku* [Art Reserve. In the Footsteps of Polish Artists of the 20th Century] (2000), *Kantor – malarstwo, teatr. Przewodnik po twórczości artysty* [Kantor – Painting, Theatre. Guide on the Works by the Artist] (2003), *Nowosielski* (2006), *Nietoperz w świątyni. Biografia Jerzego Nowosielskiego* [Bat in a Temple. Jerzy Nowosielski's Biography] (2011). For the latter, she was granted the Kazimierz Wyka's Award, Award of *Nowe Książki* (New Books) monthly and in 2012 she was nominated for literary awards: "Gryfia", "Gdynia" and "Nike". Currently, the author is working on a monograph devoted to Jerzy Nowosielski's monumental religious compositions. Czerni is a member of the International Association of Art Critics AICA, the Association of Art Historians, the Association of the Friends of Emeryk Hutten-Czapski's Museum, and society of the members of the democratic opposition "Maj 77".