

# Jadwiga Sawicka, “NATIONAL / exclusive”



- Author Jadwiga Sawicka
- Date of production 2012
- Dimensions height: 50 cm; 40 cm, width: 60 cm; 50 cm
- Author's designation signed on the reverse
- ID no. MSWK/M/145, MSWK/M/146
- Museum [Museum of Contemporary Art in Kraków MOC AK](#)
- Availability The MOC AK Collection, level -1
- Subjects [contemporary art](#)
- Technique [oil painting](#), [acrylic](#)
- Material [canvas](#), [oil paint](#), [acrylic paint](#)
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From the mass of thickly laid off paint, there emerge words taken out of context and deliberately crooked. The clash between the background and the semantic content enhances the impact. The choice of words has been thought of carefully. They are all related to current ideological and patriotic discussions. Gender play is an additional device to manipulate meanings. The same adjective has different connotations depending on whether it is feminine or masculine.

Jadwiga Sawicka (b. 1960)

Painting, object, photography, textual installation. Her works are defined by the term "written painting." Individual items of clothing appear in the paintings, frequently accompanied by sentences out of context – popular phrases or newspaper headlines. She also creates works whose main ingredients are texts saturated with tension. Beneath the highlighted verbal communicate, each member of the audience may "add" his or her own story. Despite the common starting point, however, each of the stories has its own identity.

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## **Leaving the house. The art of contemporary female artists in the collections of Małopolska's Virtual Museums**

The art of contemporary artists presented on the Małopolska's Virtual Museums website is a small fragment of the collection, which is the subject of this project: collections which are not only exhibited in museums, but are also created by galleries and cultural centres. These are connected by a geographical criterion: they are all located in Małopolska. This presentation is a multi-coloured polyphony of dozens of female artists. It is difficult to treat their works as elements of a single patchwork. Putting them in a homogeneous, convincing picture is impossible, because the collections from which they come are diverse: they were created out of specific conceptual assumptions, for their own purposes and time frames.

What connects the art of Jadwiga Sawicka, compiling what is textual with what is carnal in her painting ([FATHERLY/motherly](#), [UNGRATEFUL/infamous](#) [*OJCZYSTY/macierzysta*, *WYRODNA/niestawny*], both canvases come from a larger collection, 2012), with Małgorzata Markiewicz's activity, who examines in her projects the importance of folklore for building contemporary identities ([Counting rhymes](#), 2005)? What connects the sculpture of a Lviv-based artist from the early twentieth century, Luna Drexler ([In the Theatre box](#), beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century), with [A girl with chrysanthemums](#) by Olga Boznańska (1894), an iconic picture, reproduced countless times? Not much, if anything. And yet there is something in common, something that has been defined in the title of my text as "leaving the house." In this metaphor lies the women's path to art. First of all, there is the possibility of pursuing art by women, whom patriarchal culture would like to see confined to their homes, and secondly, professional education, which they have been able to acquire at art academies for only a hundred years now.

Professional female artists emerged in the nineteenth century, even before women gained the opportunity to study at art academies officially. They were privately educated, by recognized authors, or at schools, which offered drawing and painting courses exclusively for female students (e.g. Baraniecki's courses in Kraków). These female artists, whom we know from earlier periods, were more of an exception in their activity. In Poland, moreover, relatively early in comparison with other countries, from the year of the restoration of independence, women were allowed to study at universities. During the interwar period, women's art experienced a period of flourishing: many artists emerged, some of whom were remarkably successful (Zofia Stryjeńska, Olga Niewska). Sculptors, architects, and weavers were among them. There were female artists' associations which organized annual exhibitions. In the People's Republic of Poland, they lost their sense of individuality due to the official proclamation of gender equality by the ruling party. A lot of female artists conducted creative activity, sometimes with

spectacular success, like Magdalena Abakanowicz. However, the vast majority usually functioned on the margins, as a kind of complement to the “real” art created by men. After 1989, a new generation of female artists appeared, which strongly marked its presence on the art scene. Then, a new phenomenon became the topic of discussions: women’s art.

Only at that time did the critics with essential tools at their disposal appear to analyse the work of female artists. The female artists were made to step out the shadows and write the history of modern art thanks to their achievements. The movement of publications and exhibitions therefore began, and the symbolic beginning thereof was the exhibition named *Artystki polskie* [*Polish female artists*] at the National Museum in Warsaw (1991). The project, which was carried out under the leadership of Agnieszka Morawińska, was to cover the whole phenomenon stretching over the centuries. From the earliest, anonymous authors possible to trace (e.g. church embroideries), to date. Nowadays, many gaps in history have already been filled. The fortunes of Zofia Stryjeńska were recalled, and much has been done to popularize the art of Alina Szapocznikow. Furthermore, the works of Maria Pinińska-Bereś, Jadwiga Maziarska, Erna Rosenstein, Katarzyna Kobro, and, more recently, Maria Anto, have been recalled. But there is still room for more. For instance, it would be a great idea to make a movie about Boznańska, spending her life in the studio in the attic of a Parisian tenement house.

The art of women after 1989 was often read in a way akin to essentialism. Critics took it for granted that the biography explains the work, as well as that privacy and domesticity is a fundamental inspiration for female artists. There was talk of motherhood, housework, and daily life. For this reason, female artists referred vividly to activities that gave them more importance within art, not necessarily identifying with them. Often, they thought that the label “women’s art” closed them in the minority ghetto, while, in the meantime, they want to be on the side of good art without any definitions. Without entering into disputes with this—incorrect, in my view — opinion, let me just mention that many creators today also accept interpretations of this type as limiting (e.g. Anna Baumgart). Nevertheless, today we have a distance from pioneering critical texts about women’s art from the nineties. We see them as overly simplified. Artists, however, still use those styles of interpretation to deconstruct them and overcome the “typical” features of women’s art, turning them upside down and perversely accepting them.

Keeping in mind the history of discovering women’s art, due to the lack of space, I shall address the current artistic production in further parts of this text. Therefore, I will not write about Boznańska nor about [\*The portrait of two boys\*](#) (approx. 1875–1880), signed as Ignacy Krieger, but most likely painted by his daughter, Amalia Krieger. I shall not mention Luna Drexler’s collaboration with the founder of anthroposophy, Rudolf Steiner. I shall also reject newer works: I will skip the great sculpture [\*Dance\*](#) by Maria Jaremianka (1955), the canonical Polish art work, [\*Herbarium\*](#) by Alina Szapocznikow, (*Peter's head*) from the cycle *Herbarium*, 1971), and the sculpture [\*Circus\*](#) (1963), made by her most important rival, Alina Ślesieńska. I shall not analyse folk art, which was extremely abundant in Lesser Poland, neither shall I write about the outstanding painter from Zalipie, Felicja Curyłowa ([\*Bouquet\*](#), 1969). However, I shall pay attention to currently active female artists, who became prominent around the time of the political system breakthrough in 1989 or after.

If we talk about the general thematic and ideological framework for the art of the discussed artists, then one can reach for the concept of autobiographical content. The artist’s own life experience is a source of ideas for art, but the author’s character itself functions as a permanent reference point. The subject is always created for the needs of art; however in this case, it clearly means its authenticity: “she really thinks that”, “it really happened to her”, “she is really experiencing it”. Speaking one’s truth evokes not only reflections of our times, but also scenes from the past and memories that appear in art. But that’s not all: the area of interest in autobiographical art extends to interpersonal relations. The artist portrays not only herself and her relatives, but is also interested in strangers. For example, the topic of motherhood has undergone such evolution: it has changed into the attitude of caring for others, whole groups of people, even social groups. There are also motifs associated with space and with the environment: adapting to space, settling in it. Not only in physical space, but also in the space of culture and language. On the contrary, in actions affecting language, not only spoken or written, but also visual, there is a

tendency to show its underlying layer, artificiality, conventions, and faults. Finally, the perceptible tendency is to work with one's own images, specific narcissism; one's own images treated as a medium of transmission and expression among many artists.

Let us start with issues related to caring, that is, extending outside caring for one's own person towards caring for other people. Elżbieta Jabłońska's art was always interpreted in this way as well as, for example, the series *I got it from my mother* by Anna Baumgart. Almost two decades years ago, their works were read directly, in reference to the private biographies of the authors. Importance was attached to: motherhood, mother and daughter relationships, female genealogies, and the background: the figure of the Polish Mother, effectively hiding the real problems of Polish artists in their shadow. More recent works complicate this straightforward situation. *Between words* by Monika Drożyńska (2011) was created as a result of meetings. The artist talked with people visiting her exhibition in the Bunkier Sztuki Gallery of Contemporary Art. She recorded the conversations and then edited the soundtrack (she cut out words and kept only sounds like laughter or sighs). The computer soundgraph, coding emotions that hid between the words, served as a model for embroidery, which is the finale of the whole undertaking.

Drożyńska creates situations and conditions for relationships to develop, and people spend time with each other and cooperate, the best example of which is the Embroidery School "Handymen Golden Hands" (currently operating as *Kolektyw*) operating in the period 2014–2016. She is the author of the concept of "critical embroidery" and "occupation embroidery"; she expresses current and political content in embroidered works. She participated in demonstrations for the freedom of artistic expression and women's rights with embroidered banners. Characteristic for her creativity is the transfer of appropriate message for one medium into another environment. And so, an obscene scribble on a wall, the words of a popular song, a quote from a politician's statement, an advertising slogan or a revolutionary slogan are immortalized by being stitched onto fabric. What is impulsive, fluid, moving quickly from the sender to the recipient, is "immobilized" in the traditional, slow embroidery technique.

The work by Elżbieta Jabłońska *Helping* (2003) was created as a part of the cycle bearing the same name. The event, which was immortalized in film, took place in Kraków, as a part of the independent "Women's Day". At that time, the artist was known for works devoted to motherhood and domestic work. She adapted the activities taken from the life of a mother and housewife to be a piece of art: she cooked, laid the table, cleaned. Her *Supermother*, which appeared in 2002, caused a sensation in the world of art. This work, which is a photograph of the artist in her own kitchen with a child in her lap, gave rise to endless interpretations of her art through family life. With time, she began to expand the meaning range of her mother's figure. She created a kind of universal motherhood, a mother who cares for the well-being of all people. But, at the same time, the cycle *Helping* was born out of practical thinking: help those whom the artist encounters on her way. The recipients were not necessarily those to whom help is usually directed, not only unemployed and homeless, but ordinary artists or mothers with small children. Although the film *Helping* featured residents of the shelter of St. Brother Albert but for the work of making paper tulips, they received a fee. Jabłońska, leading the workshops, made sure that the atmosphere was pleasant: she gave cakes, had a chat. She was the universal mother with a warm, caring attitude towards the world, while the participants of the performance are reduced to the role of children who need to be looked after.

Care includes the living, home, and public space as well as the space of nature. This is trend that the works of Cecylia Malik and Piotr Pawlus *6 rivers* (2012) and Karolina Kowalska *Window for winter* (2004) fall into. Malik has been actively working for the protection of nature and greenery for years, primarily in Kraków. She successfully uses artistic tools for conducting social campaigns. Her best-known activities are *365 trees*, *Blue tits*, and *Mothers on a clearing*. She was one of the first to pointed out the harmful activity of developers and the growing process of gentrification of some urban districts. She fought to stop the regulation of the Białka River in the Pohale region. Under the guise of joyful fun, accompanied by a hint of surrealism, she touches upon essential matters: to whom the city belongs and according to whose will it is shaped. The essence of *6 rivers* is a slow and monotonous landscape movement, travelling along with the artist as she moved along the rivers of Kraków. Aesthetic paintings

with Cecilia Malik in the main role are supposed to fulfil an educational function, to make people aware of the existence of neglected areas of nature. In fact, the film is the artist's celebration against the backdrop of nature's beauty. Malik is shown here in connection with nature; cultural myths and fantasies about a wild woman are voiced.

Kowalska's *Window for winter* is an ordinary plastic window with a photo of lush greenery. The artist is interested in the visual side of Polish reality transformed by capitalism: i.e. the aspirations of her fellow countrymen reflected in advertisements. This deals with the fiction of photos from image banks, used in Polish advertising as a way to economise, which — being completely artificial — do not have specific features and show the world as unchanging, happy with itself, and repulsive in its corporate happiness. This shows, for example, Kalwaryjska Street in Kraków, which is one of the more cluttered in the city, as unrecognisable, because it has been cleared of banners, wall charts, boards, and announcements; her attention is drawn to the sterilised world, full of reflections and shiny surfaces, but without an interior. The photo itself, placed in the *Window*, exudes ugliness. Leaves and branches are bathed in bright light. There is no depth, everything takes place on the surface. In addition, the photo blocks the view outside through the window. It offers the illusion of happiness but it is a lie. In the same way, Kowalska's other works, interpreted as friendly towards the audience, reveal the other side of the concern for the viewer's well-being, showing the artificial paradises of capitalist modernity. Art gives a sense of security in exchange for deception, falsification of reality, and imprisonment in the image.

Threads of concern often lead to sacredness. Elżbieta Jabłońska, with her concept of the super mother and universal mother, came into direct contact with the figure of a goddess. Concern and care have something that is not of this world, something that makes one to go outside our own selfish interests to act for the benefit of others. Here, therefore, there are works related to the goddess, or archetypes of femininity, which determine the subsequent stages of a woman's life (giving life, sustaining it, death). In a similar context, one can place *Third sowing*, by Teresa Murak (1973/2014), remembering, however, that the artist rejects such interpretations and places her interests within the Christian perspective. However, the densely cross-covered shirt she wore when she sowed the plants and when they sprouted, leads to a less orthodox approach to spirituality. When she gained artistic maturity, echoes of the revolt of youth and the hippie movement reached Poland. Murak grew up in a traditional environment; her search is based on a sense of sacredness seen in nature and vegetation. She interprets the sources of spirituality in a feminine way: holistically, with respect for the earth, and every manifestation of life. She declares attachment to traditional religiosity, breathing new energy into it.

Through the paintings of the goddess, one can interpret the famous triptych by Katarzyna Górna, *Fuck me, Fuck you, Peace* (2000). The usual interpretations of this work focus on the portraits of women in different phases of life. Here are three large-format pictures of naked women, depicting a young girl pointing to her womb, a middle-aged woman in a ruling posture, barred from the outside world, and an elderly woman who only wants peace of mind. The work perfectly fits the theme line, leading to the Northern Renaissance painting with its moralistic representations of the woman's life. The pious warning "remember death" is there, and in Górna's work — rather the praise of female power, although this force is based on fragile support: women are sitting on a thin table top, located on even thinner legs. Returning to the interpretation of "goddess-like", there is a great resemblance to the representations of the mythology of different cultures, concerning the goddess in her three incarnations: white, red and black. This is how, for example, Hindu Devi is presented.

The reverse of caring for our fellow neighbours and the world is to focus on ourselves. Its signal is narcissism, the multiplication of one's own images. Pola Dwurnik, in her painting, deals basically with presenting herself. She herself is the object of her own staging, the most important element of the language she has developed. And this examines the possibility of presenting emotions, creating a new version of physiognomy; she presents herself as the heroine of important historical events, and, if she presents others, it is in relation to herself, totally dependent on each other (e.g. her lovers as animals). She feeds on her own privacy without any embarrassment; she is the first recipient of her works; she is the queen and lady of her own court. In the picture *Mercy!* (2012), Dwurnik painted her own faces laughing

and being distorted, the whole surface covered by self-portraits. Why is the artist reduced to such desperate loneliness? Do the reasons lie in individual conditions, or do they concern the artists in general? A woman deprived of interior and reduced to being an image is, after all, one of the incarnations of femininity under the yoke of patriarchy.

Laura Pawela became known as an artist who often and willingly paraphrases various cultural trails. In a video triptych devoted to the Upper-Silesian landscape, Pawela blackened her face; she also posed as the male figure from the romantic landscape of Caspar David Friedrich. She also expresses herself on various topics, through the use of her body and face, but those matters are more related to the outside world and often deal with social problems. In the painting, [we.jpg 17%](#) (2003), Pawela portrayed herself in the manner of “pixellation”. This painting belongs to a series of scenes that were taken from the youth days of the artist; they show more or less trivial episodes of her life. Maintained in the stylistics of early electronic media, the first displays of mobile phones, this work addresses the autobiographical theme in a new approach. By entering the effect of pixellation in the traditional painting technique, the artist creates the impression of “getting out of sync”, the mismatch between the contents and its medium.

[Counting-out rhymes](#), by Małgorzata Markiewicz (2005), were created as a response to the accession of Poland to the European Union. The artist often balances on the border between designing and everyday life as opposed to “pure” art and festivity. She is interested in clothes, which she treats as a sculptural material, but also as an excuse to create a social situation. In *Counting-out rhymes*, fashion is a metaphor for the meeting of what is universal and that which is specific, more particular. Will the integrated structure of states which the European Union is, allow Poland to maintain its distinctiveness, or, if we include our culture into the supranational system, will we not lose our soul? These questions were really popular in Poland at that time. The motif of the folk costume which inspired Markiewicz is in itself a *memento*. Such outfits died along with the peasant culture, and the one we are dealing with is fake, artificially maintained to seem alive. To decorate the skirts, the artist used children’s counting rhymes. They are associated with a relic of the past culture, when the literature was passed verbally and poems were memorised by heart. Furthermore, an embodied culture, in a private version, is passed on orally in the comfort of the household. It is departing; we try to keep it, but these efforts only emphasise the artificiality of such reanimation.

[Daily news](#) (2012) by Basia Bańda bring to the mind the world seen through the eyes of a child. The painter took the pose of an artist-girl. Thanks to this, with her femininity, directness, uninhibited approach to eroticism, and speaking from her heart, she conquered the Polish art scene. Small pictures, with carelessly written snippets of words and scribbles, where the writing goes into the drawing and vice versa, can be considered her trademark, in which she retained the imagination from the world of childhood. Real news, taken directly from the media, was converted by the artist into bad fairy tales. Misfortunes take the form of parables, slightly anecdotal, and a bit like fantasies about the presence of evil in the world. Evil is an object of fascination, but it is also tamed, being a structural part of the world and an indispensable element of the story. Bańda’s works are also operations on both visual and textual language, and on the language of the media, which the artist uses for her collages.

Jadwiga Sawicka and Zofia Kulik work on the language and methods of narration. Sawicka deals with clichés of visual and textual language. Both of these languages are treated as one language, which contains abstract meanings as well as the ones that directly adhere to reality. If any words appear in her paintings, these are quotes from the media, advertisements, street ads, and when taken out of context, they reveal all their cruelty, destructive power, coldness in their crushing eloquence. In Sawicka's work, words crush the body, which the background of her pictures refers to — blurry, bland and vulnerable — because they are devoid of form. The words are firm, emphatic, and built of black, sharp outlines. Words and objects that appear in the paintings can be considered containers for meanings, which are empty inside (Batman, 2005, and written images, including *FATHERLY / motherly* [OJCZYSTY/macierzysta], 2012, *NATIONAL /choice* [NARODOWY/wyborowa], 2012).

All the missiles are one missile (1993), by Zofia Kulik, is a kind of monumental composition

composed of several dozen small photographic motifs. Visible references to the ornamental fabric—traditional carpets or shawls — as well as the role of tedious manual labour that the artist puts into creating her work, have been discussed many times already. The work is devoted to what Zofia Kulik is most interested in: the visual language of power. It is a kind of mosaic made of tiny, hand-made motifs. Echoes and repetitions of symbols from the history of culture appear in these, ones from the Roman Empire and form all its later interpretations, in the form of the totalitarian propaganda of the twentieth century. In *All missiles*, we deal with the symbolism of male and female genders being complementary to each other, equally subjected to the pressure of power. The contents were expressed through pictures of architecture, people, plants, things, TV screens. This monumental fresco is a kind of homage paid to the power that visual systems wield over us, the power which still maintains its hold.

In an [untitled](#) work (2015), its author, Zorka Wollny, does not merely rework old languages, but rather uses cultural memory. Culture is remembered here as an event which gathers people in a special place and which allows them to work together on some piece of work. In her film, Wollny refers to the Cracovian avant-garde. We can see an echo of Kantor's performances here, the plays of the Cricot Theatre and cabaret nights at the Piwnica pod Baranami. The actors — older people — found themselves in the basement of Bunkier Sztuki, in which other cellars, those of Krzysztofory Palace and Pod Baranami echoed. They repeated the sequences of words, whispering, shouting, rhythmically walking and performing other simple movements. They created a hypnotising monotonous performance, full of nostalgia and a sense of helplessness about the possibility of reviving history, resurrecting dead events.

A similar approach can be seen in the work by Anna Baumgart [Article 1000](#) (2012). The artist alluded in her film to a real event: a cabaret show organised immediately after the war by political prisoners in Norway. The performance referred to historical truth in art. Baumgart paraphrased rather than reconstructed that performance. She added women to the group of actors, which were not present in the original; she also told everyone to speak in Polish. The artist made the movie seem like a documentary film, showing an avant-garde theatre whose formula can be considered old-fashioned for us today. At the same time, the theatre talks about the pressing issues of today's world in an uneasy way: freedom of expression and censorship. Anna Senkara, in the film [Szlachcic](#) (2010) focuses attention on the son of a party dignitary from the times of the Polish People's Republic, Franciszek Szlachcic. This movie also approaches the genre of the documentary.

The inspiration for Anna Zaradny's work [BruitBruit](#) (2013) was the building of Bunkier Sztuki. The artist tried to capture its architecture beyond the material structure, and the most interesting aspect of this work, connecting the sound and video layer, is to reach for the ideal vision of the building, which has never been realised. Monika Niwelińska in [Lighting](#) (2016) addressed the issue of light in the interior of Bunkier Sztuki. The concept of exhibition space lighting played an important role in the original plans of the gallery, but the author's vision was quickly abandoned.

When it comes to the works of foreign artists, there are literally a few and it is difficult to enter them into the framework in which the works of Polish artists are located. Let us mention them briefly. Sarah Lucas, a representative of the Young British Art group, which was very popular two decades ago, is represented by her work [Sucky Thing 2011](#). The form of the work is bleak, if you assume that a toilet seat, dressed with a stocking, is an extravagant metaphor of a woman. Hungarian artist, Dora Maurer, in the work, [What can you do with paving stones?](#) (1971), on the one hand placed a methodical presentation of various uses of the titular stones. On the other hand, this set of photographs, with conceptual genealogy, refers to the revolutionary activism of May 1968 and street demonstrations. Artist Ane Lan, with her work, [Woman of the World](#) (2011), offers her self-portraits in the roles of women, belonging more to the field of advertising product than photography. Vlatka Horvat, in [Balance Beam # 0715](#) (2016), created an installation of ordinary household items, arranged in the form of a swing, in a state of uncertain equilibrium. Aliska Lahusen in [Red mirror of impermanence](#) created a contemplative sculpture from red lacquer, which has nothing to do with the daily bustle. We see here a range of attitudes and views: from the ones sarcastically commenting the position of women in society (Sarah Lucas), to the representation of their struggle for their rights (Dora Maure), through haiku built with everyday objects, referring to the

inner life of a housewife (Vlatka Horvat), to sex, class, ethnic group as a costume (Ane Lan), and a sculpture created under the influence of Zen Buddhism (Lahusen).

Finally, I shall return to the titular exit from the house. The artists, whose work I was discussing, undoubtedly have left home, heading towards the world of art, social activities, urban activism, sometimes politics, travel, nature protection, and care for internal life. They did not close the door behind themselves. They can return home, but without coercion: when they feel like doing so.

Elaborated by Magdalena Ujma-Gawlik,



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## Value added – value subtracted

### 1.

When is contemporary art good and when is it bad? How can this be assessed and who can undertake such an assessment? And furthermore, can people who are not experts talk about this, since they are often dying to say: “this is not art at all!”? There are known cases of destruction of valuable works that were not recognised as art at the right time. An example: the story about how a cleaning lady in a German museum scraped the residue away from a water container, thus destroying a sculpture by Martin Kippenberger worth € 800,000. Similar situations happen almost regularly, even in such renowned institutions as the Tate Gallery and to such recognised artists as Joseph Beuys.

The problem with defining and evaluating contemporary art has been an issue for a long time. All over the world, people complain about its incomprehensibility, real or assumed elitism, and cynicism. Many point out the lack of criteria and reliable tools, recognised by the majority of real, or only potential, recipients, used in order to verify questionable judgments on artistic topics — in a nutshell — on widespread relativism. In Poland, the blame for this state of affairs is often passed onto the audience. The average Pole does not read and does not go to either the museum or the theatre. Their aversion to culture is said to arise from their lack of aesthetic sensitivity, for which, in turn, school curricula, that are outdated and overloaded with content, are, of course, to blame. This is my account of the reflexive train of thought characteristic of Polish intellectuals. In recent years, the reasons for this aversion started to be looked for on a deeper level, namely, in the social structure, with the memory of poverty and the fact that the majority of Poles came from the countryside preserved therein, as well as in the ways of thinking formed back in the age of feudalism.

However, let us not forget that low participation in culture and the troubles of contemporary art with its own identity are two separate problems, which, at times, tend to overlap. There exists a problem with evaluating art and there is nothing to indicate that it is going to disappear. For several decades, reviewers have regularly proclaimed the death of its various disciplines. As such, we have reached the end of painting, drawing, sculpture, performance, poster art and so on, and a number of times at that. The end of the arts as an institution also took place, at least in the form in which we have known them (since the beginning of the modern period). In a widely-read essay, Jean Clair described the end of museums in the traditional sense of the word, which abdicated in favour of institutions dedicated to entertainment,<sup>[1]</sup> and, earlier Arthur Danto promoted the idea of the end of art,<sup>[2]</sup> which was to be marked by Andy Warhol's exhibition of boxes of the Brillo washing powder in the 1960s.



## 2.

Humanists examine the deadlock intently, but their actions resemble the efforts of Sisyphus. XI Seminarium Metodologiczne Historyków Sztuki [the 11<sup>th</sup> Methodological Seminar of Art Historians], which was held in 1986 in Nieborów, had both diagnostic and remedial intentions. The participants agreed that a crisis had ensued. Mieczysław Porębski observed: “three converging pathways of the syndrome threatening the fundamental value of creative work”.<sup>[3]</sup> These were: textualisation, musealization, and conceptualization, that deprive art of its main value: a concrete, unique existence. Maria Poprzęcka demanded room “for artistic failures, creative defeats, analyses of unsuccessful works”,<sup>[4]</sup> that is, reliable negative evaluation, which is also missing in this day and age. Elżbieta Wolicka tried to outline a vision of a new order of carrying out assessment that would be based on: “the intuition of the complementarity of opposing but not contradictory values, on the sense of the criteria and scales of cultural assessment, complementing rather than excluding each other”.<sup>[5]</sup> To some extent, the author has taken into account civilizational changes, closely related to the twilight of modernist cultural formation and the advent of what, following Zygmunt Bauman, we call liquid modernity.<sup>[6]</sup> However, she did not predict the power and inevitability of change, hence elegantly dodging the matter of problems that trouble contemporary culture. Nevertheless, it is worth paying attention to the concept of intuition which she brought up, and which intellectuals will soon be using as the primary source of judgments on art.

These kinds of diagnoses which, *incidentally*, have been rendered many times in different places and across varying timeframes, contrast with the rapid pulse of the art world.<sup>[7]</sup> The global circulation of art, is probably doing this well for the first time in its relatively short history. As such, are the pessimistic humanists talking about the same artworks that have, over the last dozen or so years, scored triumphs at gigantic exhibitions scattered around the world, from Venice, through São Paulo, Havana, Gwangju, Moscow, to Istanbul, Dakar, Sharjah and Porto Alegre? At the immensely popular art fairs, from Basel, through Singapore, to Madrid and Miami? In commercial galleries springing up like mushrooms after the rain? The contrast between this diagnosis and reality is striking.

Let’s stop for a while at the international art biennials. They show what art is used for in the modern world and what values are sought in it. Although the first one of them, the Biennial in Venice, was established over one hundred years ago, in 1895, and other important events of this type emerged around the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (São Paulo, Sydney), the real *boom* for these gigantic ventures took place in the 80s, to explode at the turn of the century. According to the estimates made by a specialist organisation – the Biennial Foundation – their number has already exceeded two hundred and is still growing.

The role that these impressive art festivals play in the life of the host city or region is multifaceted: symbolic, brand-establishing, economic and social. The reason for their popularity cannot be attributed only to art, which is a pretext. Cities use art for their own purposes: to be a testimony of their openness and worldliness, and strengthen their position in the globalised world. The biennials are also of benefit to local communities, expressing their aspirations and offering them a sense of pride and belonging. German critic and curator Peter Weibel spoke in this spirit, warning that one should not only see politicization of the biennials and the instrumental treatment of them by the authorities, because they offer the audience: “space for a critical meeting with political and social problems, for which there is often no place in existing institutions”.<sup>[8]</sup>

Specialist employees ready to act anywhere around the globe have appeared around biennials. The artists produce works, whose message and form fits the format of these usually effective, and, at the same time, socially engaging exhibitions perfectly. A narrow group of curators moves around the world from one place to the next, because employing someone with a recognizable name to build the biennial reduces the risk of failure and increases the chance of getting a return on the investment. The brightest star in the group was the Swiss Hans-Ulrich Obrist, invited to so many places that probably even he lost track and did not know where he was at any given moment. Modern art offers artistic celebrities of Obrist’s calibre

the opportunity to travel, enjoy good food, and attend parties, as well as gain fame, money, and power.

As part of the biennial model, art becomes an instrument of urban marketing, a cog in the machine of the entertainment industry, an opportunity to adopt a proper lifestyle. It is a tool for building media careers. It sometimes happens that art criticises the hegemonic attitude of the Western approach to organising such events; it speaks in the voice of the excluded, provides small countries, ethnic and political communities with an opportunity to gain prestige.

### 3.

Since art meets so many different needs of the modern world, why do intellectuals talk about its crisis? The reason for this is that they measure the artistic products of modern times with inadequate standards. They apply fixed, rigid criteria to that which is variable, contextual, relative. Art in the old sense is either in a state of perpetual perfection, looking for novelties and ideal identification with the medium, or strives for transcendence, adhering to some spiritual system.

The search for the fundamental value of art is an expression of nostalgia for a classical pattern, which was the only one that had clearly defined qualities and was widely recognized. This pattern does not fit today's era. Andy Warhol's silk screen-prints reproducing ordinary photos from newspapers, basketball balls sunk in Jeff Koons' aquariums, and thousands of other works, do not have the aura of uniqueness; we do not see their mastery. They show us the artist's charisma, the magic of his name, his image, in a word: the commercial brand they have managed to create. By the same token, the division of art into disciplines, still used in art schools, does not make much sense at a time when artists – such as Paulina Ołowska – can exhibit ceramic objects, fabrics, costumes and not be their creator. What's more, the artist also exhibits works by other creators (neon signs, garden sculptures), copies of others' creations, opens a cafe, creates cabaret shows. Other artists – such as Oskar Dawicki – are able to create painting exhibitions without even touching the brush, by employing subcontractors.

There is no single universal definition of art or an artwork. Since the memorable gesture of Marcel Duchamp, who, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, decided to treat a bicycle wheel on a stool, a bottle dryer, and a urinal as works of art, the power to label things as art has been transferred over to the artist. Decades later, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the century, the centre of gravity found its place in the environment: an artefact that had been accepted by the world of art became a work of art. The considerations by Arthur Danto on the subject of *artworld* have been creatively developed by the philosopher George Dickie, who proposed a theory according to which art is what institutions approve of and exhibit. Over the last hundred years, in parallel with civilizational changes, a radical departure from the essence of a work of art took place. Today, we define them through the environment: the utilitarian, functional, historical context... The new status of art has also been considered by Polish theorists. Jerzy Ludwiński developed a vision of the "era of blue", which was to constitute the ultimate goal of avant-garde transformations, that assumes the dissolution of art in reality, and the utopia of universal and instant interpersonal communication.<sup>[9]</sup> On the other hand, Świdziński created a less visionary and more pragmatic theory of contextual art, inspired by the Polish experience of living in isolation behind the Iron Curtain.<sup>[10]</sup>

Theories are one thing, but the functioning of the art world is best regulated by market principles in the broad sense of the word. Still, it might be said that there is public art, participatory art, relational, critical or socially-oriented art: these are the types that, at first glance, are not subject to marketization. However, they are also bought, most often by the state or other authoritative bodies, which award grants for their production and thus guide artists ideologically in the direction desired by the grant provider. As for the proper art market, those who enjoy the most recognition are the ones who have succeeded in the west, and they don't really sell any works in Poland because of their high prices. Success has made them credible in the eyes of the local environment, making their works desirable at exhibitions in local galleries or museums. Among them are Wilhelm Sasnal, Paulina Ołowska and Piotr Uklański, who has lived in America for years. Besides, market value doesn't always translate into artistic value: the choices of those

investing in art do not necessarily correspond with the taste of professionals; there are perhaps too many examples of that. Random examples include the works of Franciszek Starowieyski or the late works of Edward Dwurnik.

The situation in Poland is a peripheral chip off the global situation. The bitter words of the aforementioned Peter Weibel, refer to this:

[...] “the contemporary art system works like a stock exchange. Former collectors became market operators. They buy artworks [...] for a good price and count on selling them quickly for a much higher price. Few artists and works are able to follow these rules of capital. Hence, 90 percent of the global artistic production is a waste from the point of view of the market, its subcontractors and suppliers, such as museums, galleries and private collectors. All the new museums built by owners of renowned brands such as Prada and Gucci (François Pinault) and LVMH (Bernard Arnault) show that a certain kind of art has become structurally and systemically part of the luxury goods market and the financial industry”.<sup>[11]</sup>

Such processes can also be observed here, although admittedly, to a lesser extent. They can be seen, for example, in the case of Grażyna Kulczyk’s activities as a patroness of cultural events at the Stary Browar in Poznań and in her efforts to create a museum that would accommodate the collection of pieces of art she has accrued. After the collapse of negotiations with the cities of Poznań and Warsaw, the millionairess pursues her idea of a museum in Switzerland’s Susch.

#### 4.

The answer to the question of how modern art should be assessed cannot be provided by art criticism. As James Elkins, a specialist in the analysis of contemporary literature on arts, points out, nowadays more critical texts are being created than ever before, but they have no influence on shaping the opinion about a given work.<sup>[12]</sup> Publications are just an addition to the portfolio of those artists, whose works commercial galleries are trying to sell at the highest possible profit. That is why nowadays we are dealing with “the phantom of criticism”. Judgements, opinions and analyses have become a kind of little theatre played out to keep up appearances, regardless of the fact that there is no audience.

In the colourful history of criticism, let us especially clearly mark those moments, when attempts to introduce certain kinds or even entire systems of valuation were made. During the Baroque period, the first modern academies began (“free artists’ associations under the protectorate of the ruler”, as Maria Poprzęcka wrote<sup>[13]</sup>): in Florence, Rome, Bologna and Paris. The last one – Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture – opened in 1648 – gave rise not only to a new education system. but also – indeed – criticism. The theoretical and organizational activity of 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century thinkers associated with the Academy, such as Charles Le Brun, Charles Perrault or Roger de Piles, introduced operative networks of concepts, which were employed in the analysis of art. There was a belief that art is the work of mind and should be judged on the basis of the appropriate selection and treatment of a subject, not the ability to evoke emotions. It was these assumptions that gave rise to the conviction that the art could be learned and that rational, universally applicable, immutable principles governing it make it possible to objectively evaluate any work. In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century academies, theory had primacy over practice. “Tables of principles” regarding drawing, the proportions of human figures, expression and colours multiplied. Report cards given to painters by Roger de Piles were the result of this code. His *Balance des Peintres* employed four criteria (composition, drawing, colour, expression), within which it was possible to award points on a scale from 1 to 20. De Piles’s evaluation amazes the contemporary viewer, for he awarded Rafael a score of 18 points for his expression, while Caravaggio did not get a single point.<sup>[14]</sup>

The establishment of the academy marked the beginnings of art criticism. The first attempts, made by Étienne La Font de Saint Yenne in 1748, were met with strong opposition from artists who expressed their indignation that someone outside the academy would dare judge art. The reason for this commotion was, of course, the protection of their own interests. The term “art criticism” was used for the first time

not by a French author, but by the English painter and writer, Jonathan Richardson. In the book, *An Essay on the Whole Art of Criticism*, from 1719, he introduced strict categories used for the assessment of a painting. A table designed by him made it possible to award from 0 to 18 points for such criteria as inventiveness, composition, drawing and colour. The goal was to create a system of unbiased assessment that would be available to everyone.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the literature on art grew in strength. The famous case of critic John Ruskin, who lost in court proceedings against painter James Whistler after accusing him of deceiving the audience, shows how much the words of reviewers, who could ruin an artist's career and diminish his earnings were being reckoned with. As early as 1829, Eugène Delacroix published a scathing article *On critics*, in which he accused them of craving for the ability to exercise power over artists: "These vigilant gendarmes exist to teach you, the audience, how you should feel pleasure, to send you ... [the creators] onto the scene using strings, the ends of which they hold..." [15]

However, neither Whistler nor Delacroix managed to stop the ongoing processes. The moment of art criticism's greatest glory was undoubtedly the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when it was not limited to analyses, but told art what shapes and meanings it was to take. It owed its rise to three authors: Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg and Lawrence Alloway. However, the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century marked the decline of its power. On the pages of the British "Guardian", Adrian Searle gave art critics the following piece of advice: "You can be as creative and as mischievous, as serious or as funny as the mood takes you or the situation demands..." [16] Contemporary criticism, at least declaratively, is not based on a specific set of concepts and verifiable criteria. However, by maintaining that the shape of texts depends solely on his own mood, the author hides the real requirements directed towards published statements (attractiveness, accessibility, addressing emotions, fulfilling the advertiser's conditions etc.).

## 5.

In one of her texts, Dorota Jarecka asked a question: *Who decides that something is a piece of art and how do they do so?* [17] She replied to herself immediately: "the group consisting of the heads of the following institutions decides: the Museum of Modern Art, the Foksal Gallery Foundation, the Raster Gallery, the Zachęta Gallery and the Centre for Contemporary Art in Warsaw, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Kraków, the Museum of Art in Łódź, plus Anda Rottenberg". In the next paragraph, she continued the countdown: "Abroad, these are respectively: Hans-Ulrich Obrist, Adam Szymczyk, Okwui Enwezor, Massimiliano Gioni, Klaus Biesenbach [...] and the heads of the Frieze London fair [...]. Now and then, there appear newspaper articles that expose this gang, but to no avail, because everyone has known about it for a long time." The text carries tension caused by the fact that the author poses an extremely significant question and jokes about it. By ironically referring to the institutional theory of art (in the version, which says that nowadays people have become institutions) and to the texts appearing in the media from time to time and aiming to blow the cover of the "mafia" that's in charge of art, she says that the act of defining something as a piece of art can only be based on the piece itself. Returning to the essential understanding of a piece of art, the author does not defuse the tension present in the initial question. How do you sense the existence of an artistic essence? Who has the credentials to do so? One can discern evasion in the text: the author's ironic reply to the question she poses remains true, regardless of whether Jarecka is mocking it or not. Yes, the status of a piece of art is determined by a small group of people who are at the top of the hierarchy of the *artworld*, yes, these people are institutions – Jarecka's text seems to be saying – but we have to accept it because that's how the world of art is structured. Let's not be bothered by the issue of power, and let us not talk about values.

In response to the question about the criteria for the assessment of good and bad art, Anda Rottenberg admitted: "I do not have the feeling that I can objectively determine that. I can only say that I either respond to something or I don't. Some things have persuasive power over me and they attract me in, others do not [...] I use the sum of intuitive convictions, supported by years of being surrounded by works of art" [18]. This is what the situation looks like from the point of view of a person mentioned by Jarecka

among the ranks of the elite endowed with the power to transform items into works of art. And there is no reason not to believe her.

The ideological envelope of today's art can be unbearable. People who are not experts in it may feel repelled by its hermetic, environmental language. The discrepancy between the declared, noble ideas, such as criticism, opposition to social injustice and exclusion, the struggle for equal rights, and so on, and the use that is made of such ideas is sometimes striking. Meanwhile, these ideas can be used as marketing slogans, covering up the struggle for prestige, power and money. That is something we must remember.

There is no easy answer to the question of values in contemporary art. It is you – the viewer, the reader, the listener – who chooses whom you're going to listen to: yourself or the expert. Speaking of experts, be cautious and choose someone wise, whose knowledge is supported by achievements and life experience. The choice is yours; there is no other way.

Elaborated by Magdalena Ujma-Gawlik, 

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- [1] Jean Clair, *Museums' crisis*, trans. Jan Maria Kłoczowski, słowo / obraz terytoria, Gdańsk 2009.
- [2] See e.g. Arthur C. Danto, *After the end of art. Contemporary art and the pale of history*, trans. Mateusz Salwa, Universitas, Kraków 2013.
- [3] Mieczysław Porębski, *Zagrożona wartość*, [in:] *Sztuka i wartość. Materiały XI Seminarium Metodologicznego Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki*, Nieborów, June 26-28, 1986, edited by Maria Poprzęcka, Zakład Wydawnictw "Sztuka Polska", bm. bd., p. 15.
- [4] Maria Poprzęcka, *Jak mówić źle o sztuce?* [in:] *ibid*, p. 81.
- [5] Elżbieta Wolicka, *Kilka uwag na temat wartości i wartościowania w historii sztuk*. [in:] *ibid*, p. 65.
- [6] See e.g. Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid modernity*, trans. Tomasz Kunz, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 2006.
- [7] An adequate name for the increasingly globalizing world of art — *Artworld* — was proposed back in the 1960s by Arthur Danto, cf. *idem*. *The Artworld*, *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 61, No. 19 (1964), pp. 571–584.
- [8] Peter Weibel, *Introduction*, [in:] *Biennials: Prospect and Perspectives*, Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe 2015, p. 3.
- [9] Jerzy Ludwiński, *Epoka błękitu*, Open Studio, Kraków 2003.
- [10] Jan Świdziński, *Konteksty*, Galeria Labirynt, Lublin 2010.
- [11] Peter Weibel, *Introduction*, [in:] *Biennials: Prospect and Perspectives. International Conference at ZKM (27.02.-01/03/2014)*, Centre for Art and Media, Karlsruhe 2015, p. 3, [zkm.de/media/file/de/2015-publication-prospect\\_and\\_perspectives-zkm.pdf](https://www.zkm.de/media/file/de/2015-publication-prospect_and_perspectives-zkm.pdf) (access 23/08/2018).
- [12] James Elkins, *What Happened to Art Criticism?* Prickly Paradigm Press, Chicago, 2003.
- [13] Maria Poprzęcka, *Akademizm*, Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 3rd edition, Warsaw 1989, p. 22
- [14] Quote from: *ibid*, p. 52.
- [15] Quote in: *Francuscy pisarze i krytycy o malarstwie 1820-1876*, wybór i oprac. Hanna Morawska, vol. 2, PWN Warszawa 1977, pp. 16-17.
- [16] Adrian Searle, *Do not trust your prejudices but believe in your instincts*, [in:] *Our critics advice*, "the Guardian", 8.07.2008, [www.theguardian.com/arts/youngcritics/story/0,,2289650,00.html](http://www.theguardian.com/arts/youngcritics/story/0,,2289650,00.html) (access 10/11/2017).
- [17] Dorota Jarecka, *Kto i jak decyduje o tym, że coś jest dziełem sztuki?* "Notes na 6 Tygodni",

notesna6tygodni.pl (access: 28.08.2018).

[\[18\]](#) *Należy sobie ufać Anda Rottenberg w rozmowie z Łukaszem Białkowskim*, "Znak", No. 736 (September 2016), p. 27.