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The Transformative Power of Cultural Heritage: The Avant-garde of the Interwar Period at the Exhibitions of the Museum of Art in Łódź towards the Conservative Turn

Transformatywna siła dziedzictwa – awangarda
dwudziestolecia międzywojennego na wystawach
Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi wobec zwrotu konserwatywnego

Abstract: The article is a critical response to the populist rhetoric utilized in Poland in the aftermath of the 2015 elections. What the author reflects upon is how the visual arts of the twenty-year interwar period (1918–1939) have been represented in museum exhibitions organized in the twenty-first century. Focusing on the expositions at the Muzeum Sztuki [Museum of Art] in Łódź, in particular two displays: *Pole, Jew, Artist...* and *Correspondences*, the author asks a question: What methodological assumptions were those expositions based on and how did they transcend the traditional discourse of the Polish history of art? Based on these case studies, the author demonstrates that curatorial practice at the Museum of Art had been closely intertwined with revaluations occurring in the academic reflection on Polish art after 1989. Subsequently, the author refers, among others, to the thought of Michał Paweł Markowski and Laurajane Smith, while discussing the problem of the current role played by the avant-garde heritage. In this perspective, the analysis of exhibitions at the Museum of Art shows that the representations of the twenty-year interwar period, instead of having been focused on the past, were future-oriented, since the said heritage may have a preventive character and transformative power. By opposing the populist visions of culture, it persuades to be open to difference, to empathically notice the communities based on values, and to remain critically mindful of conceptual foundations of arts. The article's content spans the spheres of studies on alternative modernisms and, in its backdrop, of critical heritage studies.

Keywords: contemporary history of art, Polish art of the interwar period, museum exhibitions, critical heritage studies

Abstrakt: Artykuł stanowi krytyczną reakcję na populistyczną politykę kulturalną prowadzoną w Polsce po 2015 roku. Przedmiotem tekstu jest refleksja nad reprezentacją sztuk wizualnych dwudziestolecia międzywojennego na wystawach muzealnych

organizowanych w XXI wieku. Skupiając uwagę na ekspozycjach w Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, a zwłaszcza na dwóch reprezentatywnych pokazach: *Polak, Żyd, artysta* oraz *Korespondencje*, autor pyta, jakie metodologiczne założenia przyjęto dla tych ekspozycji i jak przekraczano w nich tradycyjny dyskurs polskiej historii sztuki. Na podstawie tych studiów przypadek autor dowodzi, że praktyka kuratorska w Muzeum Sztuki pozostawała w ścisłym związku z przewartościowaniami w akademickiej refleksji nad sztuką polską po 1989 roku. Następnie, nawiązując m.in. do myśli Michała Pawła Markowskiego i Laurajane Smith, w artykule stawia się problem aktualnej roli dziedzictwa awangardy. W tej perspektywie analiza wystaw Muzeum Sztuki pokazuje, że reprezentacje dwudziestolecia nie skupiają się na przeszłości, lecz są skierowane w przyszłość, gdyż dziedzictwo to może mieć charakter prewencyjny i siłę transformatywną. Dając odpór populistycznym wizjom kultury, nakłania do otwartości na różnicę, empatycznego dostrzegania wspólnot wartości oraz krytycznej uważności, potrzebnej do rozumienia koncepcyjnych fundamentów sztuki. Tekst sytuuje się w polu studiów nad alternatywnymi modernizmami oraz, drugoplanowo, krytycznych studiów nad dziedzictwem.

Słowa klucze: współczesna historia sztuki, polska sztuka międzywojenna, wystawy muzealne, krytyczne studia nad dziedzictwem

In December 2019, the Minister of Culture and National Heritage in the majority government of the Law and Justice Party, Piotr Gliński, dismissed Małgorzata Ludwisiak as director of the Ujazdowski Castle Center for Contemporary Art. At the end of 2020, he did not extend the term of office of Hanna Wróblewska, who had been the director of the Zachęta – National Gallery of Art since 2010 and enjoyed strong support from Polish artistic circles. Finally, in April 2022, he dismissed Jarosław Suchan – the director of the Muzeum Sztuki [Museum of Art] in Łódź, who has been widely regarded as the mastermind behind museum's success over the past seventeen years. Suchan's dismissal was reported extensively in the leading international press. As in the case of Wróblewska, it also triggered numerous actions of support by artists, art historians, and art critics. These significant reshuffles led to letters of protest since they were carried out without consultation and without the competitive procedures that would have identified suitable successors. They all followed the same pattern: progressive directors, distinguished by their critical thinking about the role of the arts, were replaced by individuals who promoted the conservative vision of culture openly enforced by the Law and Justice government.

This article seeks to fulfill two mutually complementary goals in the shadow of aggressive cultural policies. First, I will look closer at the museum's exhibitions from before the change. Focusing on the selected

exhibition projects, which I regarded as representative case studies and realized in the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, I specifically analyze how the art of the interwar period was presented there. I investigate the methodological framework of these exhibitions and how the traditional discourse of Polish art history (developed before 1989) was transgressed there. What aspects of the interwar period were emphasized, and what kind of thinking lay behind such representations of the past? And this is related to the second, supporting goal of my reflections – since I am interested in the question of how the vision of the interwar period that the Muzeum Sztuki has consequently developed can be seen as one of a preventive character and serve as a tool of intellectual resistance against simplistic, obstructive, and populist counter-visions of culture. In other words: how can the interwar period's heritage in the visual arts field be conceived as a cultural resource that enables the revision of its meanings and – in this context – can also support the practices of criticality, awareness, and empathy?

The Interwar Period in the Muzeum Sztuki after 1989

After the breakthrough year of 1989, a total number of 46 exhibitions presenting and problematizing the legacy of visual art of the interwar period have been organized at the Muzeum's three locations in Łódź, as well as at other venues in Poland and abroad; another 15 exhibitions of postwar and contemporary art have either reinterpreted or creatively engaged with it. These impressive figures show that the museum's programme reflected a high level of appreciation of the period. Since the early 1990s, a total of just over 250 exhibitions have been organized, one in five of them reflected on the interwar period. Within the same time span, the International Collection of Modern Art was created, which formed the core of the museum's post-war collection. This fact makes

today's Muzeum Sztuki an extraordinarily self-analytical cultural institution. In this respect, it is exceptional compared to other institutions of modern culture in Poland and across the entire region.

After 1989, exhibitions focusing on the interwar period were organized with varying regularity. Their character also clearly evolved. In fact, between 1990 and 2006 (if Suchan's term was to be considered a turning point), only eleven such exhibitions were organized. Among them, monographic exhibitions of individual artists prevailed, which often marked the anniversaries of their birth or death such as the anniversaries of their birth or death (the retrospectives of the works of Katarzyna Kobro, Henryk Stażewski, Władysław Strzemiński). After 2006, the interwar period exhibitions became more important and problem-oriented, and this change should be seen in relation to the simultaneous reevaluations in the field of Polish art history.

The late 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century brought a new reflection on Central European art in Poland, mainly through the contribution of Andrzej Turowski and Piotr Piotrowski. Drawing on French Theory and post-dependence (post-colonial) studies, these historians – in short – questioned the universalism of the canon, style, and meanings developed in the West and called instead for diversification of meanings through “framing”: emphasizing local, socio-political, and geo-historical contexts (Piotrowski, 2009: 5–14). Among Polish institutions focused on exhibitions, the Muzeum Sztuki was the first to apply these postulates and did so in the most disciplined manner; the first example of this was the process of preparing the permanent exhibition. The emphasis was on the dynamized representations of the past (variable “framings,” as Piotrowski would define them). Three versions of *Drafts* on the Collection evolved into a more mature form in the exhibition *Correspondences* (2013), which in turn was a harbinger of a final version of the permanent collection – *Atlas of Modernity* (2014 – present). The latter two most consistently show that the Muzeum has departed from the conventional model of a historical exhibition, namely, ordered according to the chronology of events and artworks, and has instead introduced a narrative based

on the network of relationships linking the fundamental concepts of modern art (progress, experiment, engagement...), and thus also on a much more unrestricted circulation of the meanings behind the objects associated with these framework concepts. This is a significant shift. Just as the new art history separated the region's artistic practice from disparaging comparisons with the West based on mechanical application and following trends, *Correspondences* and *Atlas* went a step further, multiplying and even expanding the rational grounds for pursuing alternative interpretive frameworks with a local, regional, and global reach.

In the same way, 43 temporary exhibitions from 2006 to 2021 that problematized interwar art (or at least addressed it in postwar and contemporary art) can be seen as scattered yet more specific elaborations of this profile. In a nutshell, the image of the past created in this way is characterized by: 1) going beyond the boundaries of “Polish art” and following the transnational relations between artists of the 1920s and the 30s, as well as 2) searching for the later dialogues or references, and then also 3) turning away from superficial national identifications and instead emphasizing the complex cultural identity instead and, as a consequence, 4) recovering art and convoluted biographies of migrating artists that cross borders or stretch between very different cultural fields. In addition, 5) to be open to modern media that go far beyond painting: avant-garde photography, graphic art, design, and theatre. Finally, the interwar period reconstructed in the museum is characterized by 6) questions about art from the perspective of nature-culture as well as the agency of artistic practices in the context of great emancipation and modernization, historical or state-building processes. And quite naturally, it is also followed by 7) a reflection on the current status, sustainable usability, and possible future of the interwar period avant-garde and the Muzeum's collection.

From the perspective of the Muzeum Sztuki, the interwar period is a flexible cultural resource that remains open to the needs of a still-evolving contemporary world. Following this path, I would like

to look at three of the abovementioned exhibitions to analyze how the already century-old heritage has been updated within their framework.

Diversification and Decolonization of the Interwar Avant-Garde

“Avant-garde is what it aims at, but also what it stems from” (Suchan, 2010: 13) – the following sentence from the catalogue accompanying the exhibition *Pole, Jew, Artist. Identity and the Avant-Garde* conveys the methodological stakes of the project curated by Joanna Ritt and Jarosław Suchan. The show coincided with the publication of the last book by Piotr Piotrowski, *Art, and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe* (2012). Perhaps the most important part is the introduction entitled *1989: The Spatial Turn*. In this text, Piotrowski emphasizes that modernism and the avant-garde strived for what was considered international, but it was achieved at the cost of blurring all differences: cultural, gender, and class (Piotrowski, 2012: 38). At the same time, *Pole, Jew, Artist* addresses the very same problem of complex identities, clearly showing that behind modernist universalism, there were, in fact, rich local cultures, including the (national) Jewish art highlighted here. Therefore, an important feature of the exhibition is the shift in focus and the different distribution of accents compared to analogous outstanding intersectional exhibitions organized after 1989. While *Where is Abel, thy Brother?* (Zachęta – the National Gallery of Art in Warsaw, 1995) and *Polish Art and the Holocaust* (the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, 2013) focused on the human and cultural consequences of the Holocaust, *Pole, Jew, Artist* did not absolutize the Shoah. The exhibition emphasized either what happened before or what survived the Second World War: the artworks of two generations of the Jewish avant-garde (c. 1905–1924) and scattered presentations of art by representative Polish-Jewish circles (Yung-Yidish – an artistic group operating in

Łódź) and individuals (such as Henryk Berlewi, Bruno Schulz, and others), who were active primarily in the visual arts and theatre.

In its assumptions, the exhibition aspired to be a research study, as it reconstructed and critically reinterpreted large parts of the historical material. In this sense, it was closely linked to similar revisions in academic studies in the field of art history, as evidenced by the participation of Jerzy Malinowski and Andrzej Turowski in the project. In the catalogue, Malinowski writes about the Jewish avant-garde, making significant reference to his pioneering studies that deconstructed the national character of the “Polish” modern art (Malinowski, 1987 and 1991). Turowski’s text for the catalogue “*Jewish*” *Malevich*, also a result of his earlier studies (Turowski, 2004), brought about a profound critical revision not only of Polish but also of Western art history. By reconstructing the far from a homogeneous cultural and linguistic background of the originator of Suprematism and the artist rooted in the universal canon of twentieth-century art, Turowski provided the best evidence that hybrid identities are not exclusively specific to allegedly fragmented Central Europe, but in fact to all the “prolific surnames” emphasized in Western-centric narratives that operate with epistemic simplifications. Turowski’s argument is, in fact, the synecdoche of the entire exhibition. From the perspective of the present, its most potent quality is not so much to present Jewish culture as to present it as a fundamental part of Polish culture; to show clearly that many visual artists who are rightly considered outstanding Polish modernists (Jonasz Stern, Marek Włodarski, Teresa Żarnower, and others) are artists of Polish-Jewish origin, and that these two perspectives are not mutually exclusive.

The exhibition had a clearly decolonizing character by deconstructing the existing general categories such as national art, (self-)identification of the artist, and universalism versus specificity of the avant-garde. Because of this contribution, it proved to be groundbreaking in comparison to other projects devoted to the interwar period, which focused on a more scattered but in-depth presentation of the locality of a place, emphasizing its rich tradition as well as visual and acoustic cultures that constituted a flexible cultural resource for the artists rooted in them

(one of many striking examples being *Henryk Streng/Marek Włodarski and Jewish-Polish Modernism* at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, 2021). And from this perspective, Polish-Jewish culture just a single phenomenon that can be abstracted from the past and resist the temptation of compatibility with Western modernism and modernization according to the logic of civilizational acceleration. In this respect, *Pole, Jew, Artist* has considerably expanded the space for presenting non-canonical artistic practices: confused, idiomatic, or seemingly irrelevant as anachronistic.

Circulation of Ideas and Artistic Communities as Histories from Below

In 1931, the International Collection of Modern Art was opened to the public in the then Julian and Kazimierz Bartoszewicz Museum of History and Art in Łódź. Its establishment was the result not only of favourable circumstances but, first and foremost, of the collective effort of several people: the unprecedented determination of the “a.r.” avant-garde group members (especially Jan Brzękowski and Władysław Strzemiński), complex but compelling cooperation with the Łódź City Council (with one of its officials, Przecław Smolik), and the openness and trust of French avant-garde artists, who helped the “a.r.” group acquire 111 works of art thus enabling them to create the second collection of exclusively modern art in the world (Jach, 2015). It would be difficult, with due sensitivity to the Collection’s genealogy, to link it to the national (in this case, Polish) art discourse of the period and – concerning the rhetoric adopted for state pavilions at the 1925 International Exhibition (Sosnowska, 2007) – to the ideas of unity, development, mission, and uniqueness of certain cultures in the context of the community that stood behind it. On the contrary, the history of the Collection is a history of grassroots alliances, solidarity, risk, and trust, as well as supranational collaborations for the sake of shared approaches to art.

The exhibition *Correspondences* emphasized this very communal character of the Collection from Łódź by presenting it in the context of the almost contemporaneous collection of modern art founded by Hermann Rupf – a Swiss industrialist and art critic from Bern who shared social democratic views and saw his contemporary art as “a socially useful instrument of common artistic education” (Suchan, 2012: 16). And it is worth mentioning here that, in acquiring works for the “a.r.” Collection, Strzemiński pursued similar goals and drew inspiration from Russian Museums of Artistic Culture. Thus, despite the apparent incompatibilities (artists without financial means vs. wealthy industrialists), these efforts corresponded to a shared belief in the progressive value of art and its social role.

Starting from the juxtaposition of the two collections, the exhibition *Correspondences* constructs a multi-threaded narrative woven from twelve arcades or, to refer to Walter Benjamin – passages. In this way, two critical displacements occur: in space and time. The first is the abandonment of the logic of “national art” in favour of the circulation of artistic ideas; the second is the constant revision of the meanings behind the art and, thus, to the “telescoping of the past through the present” (Benjamin, 2012: 81). The intention of the curators – Małgorzata Ludwisiak and Jarosław Lubiak – was further reinforced by the architectural design of the exhibition by Krzysztof Skoczylas, which offered the visitor neither an open view of the entire space (the modernist *white cube*) nor with the conventional route from point A to point B (the characteristic of educational exhibitions) typical of various museums. Instead, the designer created a maze-like system of smaller spaces that, although separated by irregular partitions, still shared several common points and could not be further from one another. He created clusters and distant relationships between objects so that the exhibition’s conceptual framework (circulation of ideas and revision of meanings) found its visual equivalent there.

In this context, several artists of the interwar period are framed differently, not by the previously established determinants of the époque, but by transhistorical (in)compatibilities within an arcade. The arcade “Lost Letter” touches upon the fundamental problem of the new language of modern art in the early twentieth century and the associated risk of the

incomprehensibility of the message for potential recipients (in the epoch and the future). It reveals the comparative approach of simultaneous attempts to enter the horizon of modernism, from Leon Chwistek to Piet Mondrian and from Tytus Czyżewski to Kurt Schwitters. Elsewhere, it points to a break with chronology. Works by Kazimierz Podsa-decki, the Kraków artist of the 1930s who created photomontages praising the cumulative and mass “Modernist Beauty”: a city, a machine, and sexual liberation, enter into a dialogue with critical commentaries on beauty and femininity proposed by Alina Szapocznikow (the 1950s) and Marina Abramović (the 1970s). A similar approach can be observed in the arcade “Politics of Dreaming,” which combines the creation of naïve utopias of the 1920s avant-garde by constructivists Mieczysław Szczuka and Teresa Żarnower combined with a kind of completion of the process: Josef Beuys’s practice of exercising alternative and more pragmatic political utopias from the 1970s and the 1980s, that had emerged from the ashes of the avant-garde project.

This suggests that *Correspondences* strengthened the concepts of installations based on narratives of a transregional and transhistorical character. Undoubtedly, they set the tone for the Muzeum’s permanent exhibition (*Atlas of Modernity*) and several subsequent temporary exhibitions (such as *The Avant-Garde Museum*). And although they reconfigured the consolidated image of the interwar period, they formulated, above all, a serious critical reflection on the representation of art history according to the logic of closed historical epochs.

The Future of Avant-Garde Heritage

In their project, *The Interrogative Museum*, Ivan Karp and Corinne A. Kratz make an inspiring demand: “Exhibit the problem, not the solution” (Karp, Kratz, 2014: 281). It leads to a shift from a museum exhibition that imposes a closed and perfectly persuasive narrative to an exhibition that constitutes a form of dialogue and serves as a platform

for raising important questions and discussing important issues. Following this path, I argue that the exhibitions organized at the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź – including, and perhaps especially those related to the interwar period – continually confront the public with the central research problem and, at the same time, with the social problem: What is the legacy of the historical avant-garde movements of the twentieth century, or rather, what could it potentially be? How should it be cared for (or practiced), and in what form should it be narrated and presented to future generations of viewers?

A question posed in this way provokes us to begin with the essential, if unobvious, assumption that heritage is a source that is open to flexible transformations. Following Laurajane Smith, one of the pioneers in the field of critical heritage and museum studies, it is reasonable to assume that the latter is not only a group of objects determined by experts and inscribed in the elitist discourse of high art (*vide* avant-garde), but also, and perhaps above all, an inherently variable cultural process (Smith, 2007). And if this is the case, then the interwar period – as it is reimagined in museum exhibitions – constitutes a network of reinterpreted phenomena that clearly transcends its 1918–1939 historicity. The interwar period is not about the past but about scenarios for the future.

Focusing on the exhibitions *Pole, Jew, Artist* and *Correspondences* allows one to identify two crucial transformations in the knowledge of the epoch. The first is the development of a sensitivity to cultural and identity differences and, thus, to the complex subjectivity of artists. The second is the deconstruction of the coherent narrative of art history, constructed in terms of chronology and national discourses, and its opening to the free circulation of creative ideas in space and time.

Homogeneous notions of the avant-garde as a universal and cosmopolitan phenomenon are replaced by a presentation of the avant-garde as a collage of identities/localities: linguistic circles, visual cultures, or soundscapes, as well as national and regional traditions, including those cultivated by ethnic minorities – all of them formative for the artists. Although I am still discussing the avant-garde (etymologically: ‘vanguard’ or ‘advance guard’), paradoxically, from this perspective, the

division between modernist and anachronistic loses its *raison d'être* here. However, in this way, it is easier to see the alliances and common approaches inscribed in history from below. When the avant-garde formation is no longer seen as universal and therefore hierarchical (the West as the expert in the field of norms), it begins to be seen as more democratic and egalitarian. Consequently, this naturally leads to consistencies and compatibilities beyond the existing place and time: transregional and transhistorical communities consolidated by the affinity of thought. And suppose the positions of the avant-garde artists can be reconfigured in this way (the absence of the division into “big names” and followers). In that case, the idea of the avant-garde also begins to be understood differently, as with the inclusion of what has been consistently omitted and ignored. The “vertical” fractures that were the cornerstones of this formation, such as progress – backwardness, utopia – moss-covered past, reason – superstition, and finally, culture – nature, are no longer visible. Instead, we see “horizontal” cultural-natural networks of connections, relationships, and inspirations.

Openness to difference, empathetic attention to the community of values, and the critical attentiveness necessary to understand the conceptual framework of art: are these the qualities that interwar art exhibitions activate in their recipients. In this way, a museum exhibition becomes a form of thinking and acting, and as such, it comes closer to humanistic reflection. A few years ago, the literary scholar Michał Paweł Markowski analyzed the contemporary status of the latter and proposed the “politics of sensibility”. At the same time, he saw the political function of the humanities in their strong interest in “discourses used in the public sphere. In this sense, expanding the field of existence means expanding the repertoire of discourses through which individuals and groups define their own identities.” He understood its sensitivity as “attentiveness to different patterns of speech” (Markowski, 2013: 430). Adopting such an approach as one’s own inevitably leads to the transformation of the subject. “A subject becomes the subject through art, reflection, and interpretation. Otherwise, one is no one” (Markowski, 2013: 431). Jarosław Suchan

made a similar point about the meaning of art and institutions that work with art:

What art can do – and what the mass forms of cultural production and distribution do not do, because that would be like taking a saw to the branch on which they are sitting – is develop critical imagination, help increase self-reflection, and promote independence in perception, thought, and feeling. I believe that individuals equipped with such skills are more resistant to all kinds of media manipulation and, at the same time, less inclined to succumb to the persuasive power of various forms of propaganda.¹

The politics of sensibility that characterizes the interwar representations in the exhibitions at the Muzeum Sztuki is, therefore, also about the practice of prevention. Prevention does not necessarily refer to penitentiary discourses but rather to its own etymology. The Latin derivation of the word “prevention” (*prae* and *venire* – ‘before’ and ‘to come’) means as much as to anticipate and to prevent, and in a broader sense – to prevent potential, mostly adverse events in the future. As such a preventive action, it has the potential to bring about social change, as it counteracts populism in thinking about culture and representations of the past. We can draw a meaningful conclusion from this. In this context, not only are the practices of contemporary artists capable of shaping today’s transformative avant-garde, as Krzysztof Wodiczko noted (Wodiczko, 2014: 1–28), but it is evident that this historical avant-garde can also constitute a legacy of equally considerable social, affective, and intellectual transformative power.

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