

FREEDOM

Here, There and Everywhere

How much freedom should we give Poland? The country has gone through the 1989 changes, has been accepted in the European Union and is at the moment of big interest to the Western countries. This constant increase in freedom and possibilities is warmly welcomed by Poland, but is it such a good development? How to deal with the fact some Polish artists have made their best works and a successful career in times of the most severe restrictions. I would like to go deeper into recent developments in the Polish art scene and its representation in the west, as well as to analyse possible consequences of different approaches of Polish art.

Poland is still often defined by stereotypes, obstructing an update of the country's quickly evolving identity. Such background knowledge, whether based on truth or not, defines the approach and evaluation of the country. Contemporary artists can suffer from this. Not only can such a limited view distort reality and the ability to see changes, but it also creates certain expectations. From my own experience, knowledge of my Polish nationality made people associate my art work, which happened to be red, with communism. This can happen on a bigger scale too. A current project at Modern Art Oxford shows works of the new 'Arrivals', the countries that entered the EU in 2004, starting off with Poland. The emphasis on 'arrivals' puts the work in a specific context and awakens the previously acquired knowledge about the country, probably mainly the communist background. This can negatively affect the aim of the artist. A neutral approach could be more preferable. This is easily done by individuals like Wilhelm Sasnal who is included in part two of "The Triumph of Painting" at the Saatchi Gallery. Groups of artists from the same country are much easier associated with the country, but this was no problem for last year's exhibition 'New Polish Art' at the Emily Tsingou Gallery, aiming at showing and supporting new talent from Poland. The same objective, but curious, approach is taken up by the Prague Biennale; in both 2003 and 2005 'Recent Polish Art' and a 'Poland Overview' are chosen to be shown among a few other countries like China, Czech Republic and Germany.

Of course, Polish history has put its stamp upon art, often being preoccupied with preservation of the national identity. Nevertheless, from the 1970s on, the state tolerated quite experimental and innovative art. Especially in the 80s, with the Martial Law (1981-1985), artists were 'getting drunk on freedom'¹. Being connected with the Foxal Gallery in Warsaw for example, you could get away with a lot, as long as the gallery kept its apolitical image. In such a way the state maintained an illusion of given freedom. There was some exchange with artists abroad, but in general artists were often informed about western art movements from a second hand source and getting a passport to go abroad was almost impossible. This isolation had the advantage that it allowed Polish artists to create their own versions of western activities like minimalism, conceptualism and neo-expressionism². The year 1989 did not notice the expected changes in the art scene. Artists turned their back to current political and social affairs, as well as to the experiences of the preceding decade. This is an interesting phenomenon for critics and researchers, as one would expect an outburst of emotions triggered by the new freedom, which were so much stronger under the Martial Law. The new power of the information society did of course affect artists. Wojciech Włodarczyk remarks in his essay on Polish culture that weirdly enough now that "traditional patterns are threatened by globalization" one would expect a greater demand of "the individual artist's manual and craftmanlike dexterity"³.

The question is where the balance is between these two ways of working nowadays. A recent talk by two Polish curators, Magda Kardasz (curator at the Zacheta National Gallery of Art in Warsaw) and Aneta Szylak (Gdansk-based critic and curator) in Modern Art Oxford highlighted two streams in Polish art. The Zacheta Gallery works in the classical way of displaying and curating art in a standard gallery building, but is very progressive in that there is a lot of exchange with international artists. It is very similar to the way Western galleries and museums work. Aneta Szylak works in a much more social and national orientated way. The exhibitions she curates are in form and content a reaction to the Polish identity and past. As part of the Lodz Biennale 2004, Szylak curated an exhibition, which was commented on by saying that "The danger of this exhibition concept was that Polish historical navel-gazing tended to overwhelm the international artistic dialogue in which Poland's artists clearly

¹ Czerni, Krystyna, 'Spoiling Cannibal's Fun', pg. 269

² Bartelik, Marek, 'The Place "In Between"'

³ Włodarczyk, Wojciech, 'The most recent art in Poland'

wish to engage”⁴. This is indeed the problem with such an approach, as Polish artists are very keen to exhibit in the West. It is not only a challenge, but also a very welcome addition to their CV and career continuation, perhaps even abroad. It seems not only a consideration for Western curators which art should be shown, but also for Polish curators how to present Poland abroad.

Art in Poland since '89 has been described as using civilisation as a whole as the subject matter, moving away from political and social problems and working with identity and the body. The specifically Polish context is absent from Polish art. This has caused for quite some serious incidents in the last few years in which artists were attacked by government and church for their shocking works. Perhaps best known is the ongoing case of Dorota Nieznalska – since 2002! - shocking the whole art world in Poland, as well as the community. Her work was attacked by the rightwing political party League of Polish Families for its combination of religion with sexuality - the cross with male genitalia - and has been accused of offending religious beliefs. This extreme situation is quite interesting considering that under the Martial Law artists linked with the Church which opposed the communist regime. Not much later than in '89, this tight link with the Church became the reason to break with it, seen as another restraint. Nieznalska's situation is in my view not only an illustration of the growing division between art and religion, but also of many splits in the society, caused by some very quick developments while others stayed behind. Nieznalska was proved guilty, with a verdict of six months of limitation of personal freedom and a fine. It is clear that even within Poland the question of freedom is the order of the day. The same accounts for issues like homosexuality, abortion, euthanasia etc. My own experience of Warsaw is indeed that the face is young, fresh and progressive, whereas the mind and mentality are very conservative and limited. It is interesting to see then that Polish contemporary art is described as creating new realities, as if it wants to get away from the oppressing structures. This same description is given by Maria de Corral, one of the two main curators of Venice Biennale 2005, stating that today's artists shape a new reality for themselves, without sharing a style. I think style comes into existence when there is a communal aim, like there was under Communism. Political oppression creates a communal mission, and therefore style.

De Corral also acknowledges the “constant anxiety about the effects of globalization or multiculturalism”⁵. Next to so many advantages of the expansion of the EU, the art world will notice a big disadvantage. Without doubt the increasing easiness of exchanges and sharing experiences between European cultures has a hand in the creation of globalisation. The same works will be shown everywhere; the same artists will be known; the same art experiences will be added to the collective unconsciousness. The latter creates the 'national' character of art, or in other words, it influences the artist in the process of art making. We end up with homogenisation of creation.

The paradox is clear: Polish artists using the full scale of freedom in their art development automatically constitute globalisation. The issue can arise even earlier in the process. Polish artists are so familiar with Western art and culture that they themselves are caught in the web of uniform stimulations. As I said before; when exchange with Western movements was limited, works developed successfully, growing on its own seeds. On the other hand, in the case that artists would continue their nationally engaged art, a consequence could be that Poland would be approached by Western countries as an exotic, alien culture, adopting the role of 'the Other'⁶. This would be in contradiction to the aim of the EU, to bind countries and support unification. This pressing problem of the working of globalisation is seen everywhere, clearly illustrated by the written introduction of the president of the Venice Biennale 2005, Davide Croff: “it is a matter of rebuilding an identity of the visual arts, given that this discipline is undergoing a phase of rethinking because of globalisation, which means the simultaneous distribution of experiences, sometimes causing alienation”. This awareness doesn't restrain him though to add that “the intention is to spread the word of our culture everywhere”⁷. I think it is important that Poland is sure not to be dependent on Western interest by being pushed in the role of 'the Other', as this could consequently mean that the interest is for a short period. I have noticed that England's mentality is quite self-centred, an island mentality, of which the preoccupation with Young British Artists and the annual Turner Prize - only for British artists – is an example. Hopefully the English art scene is able to keep its gaze directed to the horizon.

Another consideration when showing country specific work is in how far a Western public would be able to understand and react to such art. An important point made by Gerardo Mosquera is that seeing is not enough. Listening, understanding “what values are recognized here, what sensibilities it satisfies, what perspectives it opens, what it contributes”⁸ is necessary to get the

⁴ Lyon, Christopher and Lilly Wei, 'The persistence of history: three satellite shows accompanying the inaugural Lodz Biennale offered visitors a rare all-Polish contemporary art experience'

⁵ De Corral, Maria, 'The experience of Art'

⁶ Mosquera, Gerardo, 'The Marco Polo Syndrom', pg. 269

⁷ Croff, Davide, Introduction by the Biennale's President

⁸ Mosquera, Gerardo, 'The Marco Polo Syndrom', pg. 272

message of the art exhibited. Only then can it enrich the experience. It might be the fault of the postmodern notion of the death of the author, in Barthes' words, that we end up with globalisation. If one would only use own interpretation, the experience of texts and works of art would become very narrow, being produced by the communal unconscious. As Mosquera states, it is all about finding a balance between giving new information and at the same time something of interest to the viewer, while avoiding centrisms and clichéd expectations. To give an example: religion is still of big importance for old and young generations in Poland. The art is therefore more influenced by a spiritual understanding and sensitiveness. I know that The Netherlands on the contrary has to a high degree lost this extra sense, perhaps better called respect. The Pope's visit of The Netherlands in 1985 was followed by heavy riots. Comparing this reaction to the upheaval that arose in Poland when Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan showed his sculpture of Pope John Paul II felled by a meteorite says enough. A Dutch public would probably have laughed at it. A curator has to be aware that the gallery visitor can lack the ability to feel an extra layer in art.

Whichever face of Poland will be represented in the West, the dilemma of a return of limited freedom exists. If Polish national characteristics are shown, following Tadeusz Kantor's belief that the Pole's destiny is his duty to God and Country, the young artist will feel misunderstood and unaccepted by the West which will see a partially true image of Poland. If young artists show their shocking, unattached art, not only Poland's reaction will be negative and in certain cases affect the artists freedom, but one could question if freedom after all isn't just an illusion for all of us, here in the West, there in Poland, and everywhere else, in an era of globalisation.

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