

Which Polish? What *Neue*? What *Wilde*?

Provincialisation of the centre – centralisation of the province
on the example of the Düsseldorf *Papers*
by Marek Sobczyk and Jarosław Modzelewski

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Germany, at least in my artistic life, is the most important reference. This is the country where whenever I go to, I always learn something. And this is the only country that can give me any chance to inform me about my position¹.

The beginning of the 1980s brought about changes in Polish art which, at first sight of an eye not equipped with knowledge about the specifics of the region, could be misinterpreted as a distant echo of the Western European “hunger for pictures”². After a decade of conceptual breakthrough, the reduction of artistic language and the shift from traditional media to work with the body, word and space, the artists once again reached for the brush to give immediate comments on the reality they experienced. It should not be overlooked that the flow of information about what was happening on the art scene behind the Iron Curtain was scarce in Poland at that time, also the conditions for the production and distribution of art were necessarily diametrically different from those in the West. Therefore, the uncompromisingly negative assessments of figurative painting by such authors as Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, appearing at the beginning of the 1980s, indicate not only a cursory knowledge of the new phenomenon, but above all, the ignorance towards regions outside the so-called centre, which was quite common among Western critics

¹ M. Sobczyk, statement in: D. Monkiewicz, *Artyści “Gruppy” rozmawiają o Jörgu Immendorffie, sztuce polskiej i niemieckiej, o Polakach i o Niemcach. Rozmowa z Ryszardem Grzybem, Jarosławem Modzelewskim, Markiem Sobczykiem i Ryszardem Woźniakiem*, [in:] Jörg Immendorff. *Znaki, symbole i wizje* [exh. cat.], Ed. D. Folga-Januszewska, Warszawa 1998, p. 89.

² W. M. Faust, G. de Vries, *Hunger nach Bildern. Deutsche Malerei der Gegenwart*, Köln 1982.



1. M. Sobczyk, J. Modzelewski, *Das Gebet des deutschen Pfarrers oder die Bleistiftprobe*, 1984, acrylic paints, packaging paper, 292 × 288 cm; Egit Foundation, deposit in Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, © M. Sobczyk, J. Modzelewski. Courtesy of Marek Sobczyk and Jarosław Modzelewski

of that time. Any diagnosis made from this hegemonic “Western-centric” perspective cannot fully explain the phenomenon we observed in the 1980s in countries like Poland³. As Anda Rottenberg rightly pointed out already in 1984:

If one wants to understand what young painting in Poland is about, one has to pay attention to the intertwining of processes which make credible the occurrence of the young much more than attributing to them the tendency to identify with the West⁴.

Stressed in the texts of Western art critics, the mercantile aspect of the positive economic situation for painting, the accompanying increase in popularity of neo-conservative political tendencies, or the alleged resignation from the critical function of art, manifested in young painters’ failure to notice the growing antagonisms in the public sphere⁵, could not be in any way translated into the Polish reality of the early 1980s. There was practically no commercial art market there, and new painting appeared in Poland not only as a result of the exhaustion of the avant-garde language⁶, but also at the moment – as Marek Sobczyk, the painter, described it – “of the greatest fatigue with the regime of the socialist Poland”⁷.

The breakthrough came, therefore, with significant changes in non-artistic life, both social and political, which developed opposition ideological attitudes and, what is equally important, an iconosphere of discord and objection grew around them, against which artists could not remain indifferent. It is worth noting that both the iconosphere and the semantics of statements accompanying the early *Solidarność* movement, with which the new painting emerged, were created mainly by the workers’ opposition. Thus, they reflected not so much the privileged ways of contesting and communicating characteristic of the intelligentsia as the common language of “people’s counter-publics”⁸. It should be supposed that for these folk records, rivalling in public space with the practices of stilted propaganda of the Party, played a significant role in the period of crystallization of the publicist poster-like style of new painting expressions, in which the artists operated with legible signs, brilliant associations, as well as vulgar “street” iconography. In this situation, almost every doctrinal, substantial or formal transgression took, *nolens volens*, the form of political commitment⁹.

Moreover, living in conditions of economic and cultural shortages made Polish artists look longingly to the West. In the decade of the 1970s, they tried to compensate by themselves for their shortcomings by initiating various grassroots activities aimed at creating a substitute for participation in international information and art circulation¹⁰.

³ See P. Piotrowski, *Znaczenia modernizmu. W stronę historii sztuki po 1945 roku*, Poznań 2011, pp. 92–95.

⁴ A. Rottenberg, *Przeciąg. Teksty o sztuce polskiej lat 80.*, Warszawa 2009, p. 260. See also M. Morzuch, *Nowe malarstwo w Polsce*, [in:] *Sztuka polska po 1945 roku. Materiały Sesji Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki, Warszawa, listopad 1984*, Ed. T. Hrankowska, Warszawa 1987, p. 275.

⁵ See R. Deutsche, *Representing Berlin*, [in:] *Eadem, Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*, Cambridge [Massachusetts] – London 1996, pp. 109–157.

⁶ In the case of the “Gruppa”’s artists, conceptualism was not so much rejected as appropriated (or, in G. Debord’s way, “captured” in order to change its function not so much ideological as semantic) for the needs of a new painting language. This is particularly evident in the concise titles of the works, often absurd, typical of word games and parapoetic lexical experiments characteristic of conceptualism.

⁷ M. Sobczyk, *Historia malarstwa polskiego*, [in:] *Suplementy do sztuki polskiej lat 80.*, Ed. J. Ciesielska, Wrocław 2009, p. 47. Fatigue is the leading motif of the 1980 E. Bryll’s *The Queuers’ Psalm*, popularized by K. Prońko.

⁸ E. Majewska, *Kontrpubliczności ludowe i feministyczne. Wczesna “Solidarność” i czarne protesty*, Warszawa 2018.

⁹ See A. Rottenberg, *op. cit.*, p. 266: “They’re not interested in politics. They are interested in the life in which they are immersed”. For Sobczyk and Modzelewski, the very choice of profession was a political decision. A. Turowski (*Polska ideaza*, [in:] *Sztuka polska...*, p. 31) coined the term “Polish ideaza”, widely discussed in Polish artistic historiography. In Turowski’s view, *ideaza* is a politically determined space in which, even in works that are apolitical by definition, ideology manifests itself. Thus, the *ideaza* makes free artistic expression virtually impossible, because regardless of the artist’s intentions, it will always be interpreted in the context of the dominant political ideology.

¹⁰ See *Sieć – sztuka dialogu / Net – art. of dialogue*, Ed. B. Czubał, J. Kozłowski, Warszawa 2012. See also *East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe*, Ed. IRWIN, London 2006.

However, the “fatigue” mentioned by Sobczyk also meant the moment of final fatigue with aspirations and disillusionment that the West would in any way be possible to “caught up” in the existing conditions:

We only looked around the nearest surroundings when it became clear that we couldn't catch it up. More so, that the chase is pointless and completely unnecessary. That what we have left is to look inside ourselves and discover ourselves¹¹.

Thus, fully aware of the limitations of their own geopolitical location, the next generation of artists-painters make the provinciality of their art one of the key artistic strategies, treating peripherality as a hopelessly inevitable, but also a fully conscious starting point for creative self-analysis. Nevertheless, the need for a confrontation with the West, which would enable one to look at oneself from a distance and provide points of reference for these self-vivisections, remains.

One of the most original representatives of the new Polish painting were then graduates of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, creators of the formation known as the “Gruppa”¹². The artists' paintings, maintained in the style of expressive figuration, strongly inscribed in the climate of the Solidarność opposition art, simultaneously constituted a clear counterproposal for it. They offered an alternative to the opposition related to the Catholic Church, which Piotr Piotrowski described as “third place chromatics”¹³. While the art presented in this parish context was characterized by a martyrdom and political fierce pathos¹⁴, the members of “Gruppa” were much closer to the rhetoric of irony and absurd. Until 1984, their work, although showing considerable similarities to the phenomena widely discussed at the time behind the Iron Curtain, developed in isolation from them. As the artists themselves declare, and there is no reason to doubt it, it has grown primarily from local conditions and references¹⁵. However, in the slightly later period of the formation of the *differentia specifica* of the “Gruppa”, apart from the undisputed importance of these non-imported identification patterns, equally important for its members were the trips to West Germany, initiated by Sobczyk and Jarosław Modzelewski's two-month scholarship stay in Düsseldorf¹⁶.

Sobczyk and Modzelewski's scholarship visit to Düsseldorf in the autumn of 1984 opened a window to the world for the artists, enabled them the desired look from the outside, but to the same extent it caused that their painting, which grew out of the Polish cultural and socio-political context, underwent a kind of test of authenticity. What was more, not without significance for the cultural capital brought back to Poland was the very destination itself, namely West Germany: a country with which relations, due to the historical past and the arrangement of political forces after the War, were many times complicated during the Polish People's Republic period. In addition to crossing ideological, economic, linguistic and cultural boundaries, the artists also had to cross the border of polarly different historical experiences and ethical dilemmas associated with them. Thus, the stay in Düsseldorf turns out to be an important caesura in the work of the artists in question in two ways: it deepened their reflections on their own place on the his-

¹¹ A. Rottenberg, *op. cit.*, p. 262.

¹² The composition of the “Gruppa”: R. Grzyb, R. Woźniak, J. Modzelewski, M. Sobczyk, P. Kowalewski, W. Pawlak. Most of them were from S. Gierowski's studio. The information about the moment of the establishment of the “Gruppa” is inconsistent. M. Sitkowska gives two conflicting dates: winter 1985 and spring 1984 – see *Gruppa 1982-1992. Ryszard Grzyb, Paweł Kowalewski, Jarosław Modzelewski, Włodzimierz Pawlak, Marek Sobczyk, Ryszard Woźniak: Galeria Zachęta, Warszawa, XII 1992 - II 1993* [exh. cat.], Ed. M. Sitkowska, Warszawa 1992, p. 51, 60.

¹³ P. Piotrowski, *op. cit.*, p. 226. See also M. Kościelniak, *Egoiści. Trzecia droga w kulturze polskiej lat 80.*, Warszawa 2018.

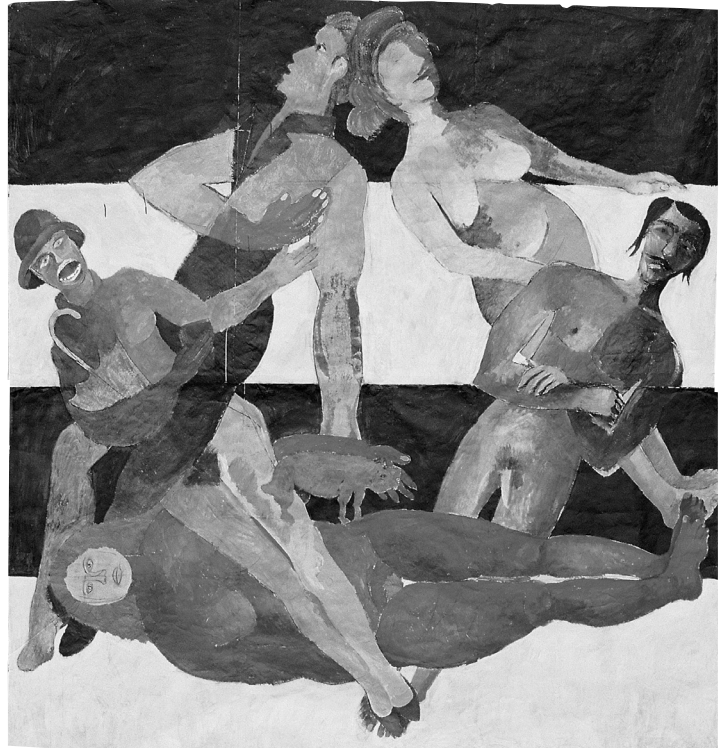
¹⁴ See A. Wojciechowski, *Czas smutku, czas nadziei. Sztuka niezależna lat osiemdziesiątych*, Warszawa 1992.

¹⁵ See D. Monkiewicz, *op. cit.*, pp. 85-86.

¹⁶ In later years, R. Grzyb and R. Woźniak also travelled to West Germany.

torical-artistic map and triggered the process of transferring cultural content from Germany to Polish art. It introduced topics of German-Polish relations and dialogue, rare at that time, and of collective memory after the War¹⁷, which would only fully resonate in post-transformation critical art of the 1990s. It is also important for another historical-artistic reason: in the face of the post-1989 research postulate that artistic geography must be revised and the art of the former Eastern Bloc countries must also be taken into account, as well as the revaluation of the centre-periphery relations (or, as Piotrowski wished – margins)¹⁸, it shows how the artists themselves, before 1989, not only faced, but also problematised in their work the system of geopolitical and geocultural coordinates, in which they had to create.

Thus, the works that were produced during the stay in Düsseldorf, and those resulting from it, can serve as an excellent starting point for deepening the reflection on the above mentioned relations, at the same time allowing for a critical reflection on the issue of the “originality” of phenomena that arise outside the main centres of art.



2. M. Sobczyk, J. Modzelewski, *Warum zwei fremde Künstler keine Synagoge gefunden haben*, 1984, acrylic paints, packaging paper, 300 × 300 cm; Stadtmuseum Landeshauptstadt, Düsseldorf, © M. Sobczyk, J. Modzelewski. Courtesy of Marek Sobczyk and Jarosław Modzelewski

Ambassadors of the “Grupa”¹⁹ in Düsseldorf

We went during the prolonged Martial Law. It was one of the first trips. There were no such things in Poland as for instance books [...]. We saw then exhibitions simultaneously showing what was shaped later, what “*Neue Wilde*” was talking about. In Hamburg there were brothers Oehlen, Werner Büttner, Kippenberger, Fettig and so on [...] “Von hier aus”. It was a very important exhibition [...]. We were at the organisation of this exhibition. We met artists, such as Immendoff, Mucha [...]. [...] I remember that we made a special trip to Hamburg to visit these Hamburgers at Café Vienna. The owner of the café looked after these Oehlers, Büttners, etc. He rented them studios. So we got to know it all from the inside²⁰

¹⁷ The exceptions worth mentioning were the works of artists connected with Wrocław: Z. Makarewicz’s and E. Niemczyk’s *Muzeum Archeologiczne Festung Breslau* presented during the Symposium Wrocław ’70 and J. Koszałka’s works, e.g. the performance *Die Heldenbrust* performed with Makarewicz in 1968.

¹⁸ See, among others, P. Piotrowski, *Towards a Horizontal History of the European Avant-Garde*, [w:] *Europa! Europa? The Avant-Garde, Modernism and the Fate of the Continent*, Ed. S. Bru, Berlin 2009; *idem*, *Globalne ujęcie sztuki Europy Wschodniej*, Poznań 2018; A. Szczerski, *Transformacja. Sztuka w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej po 1989 roku*, Kraków 2019.

¹⁹ See J. Modzelewski, M. Sobczyk, *Miejsca/obrazy*, [in:] *Tabela. Co?, czym? [Polityka]*, Ed. A. Szewczyk, Gdańsk 2016, p. 27.

²⁰ M. Sobczyk, statement in: D. Monkiewicz, *op. cit.*, p. 87. The artists also visited Frankfurt, Stuttgart, Hamburg, Cologne, as well as museums in Essen, Wuppertal, Krefeld, Mönchengladbach and Darmstadt. See J. Modzelewski, M. Sobczyk, *op. cit.*, p. 177.



3. M. Sobczyk, J. Modzelewski, *Die Einsamkeit*, 1984, acrylic painting on paper, 330 × 300 cm; the artists' property, © M. Sobczyk, J. Modzelewski. Courtesy of Marek Sobczyk and Jarosław Modzelewski

– recalls Marek Sobczyk years later. He and Modzelewski were the first scholarship holders to go to West Germany thanks to the funds collected during the auction “Gegen das Kriegsrecht in Polen für Solidarność” (Against the Martial Law in Poland for Solidarność), organized on 13 November 1982 in Kunstpalast in Düsseldorf²¹. The *spiritus movens* of the event, which was to provide an opportunity for German creative circles to show material and symbolic support for Solidarność, was a Polish art history student at the University of Bochum, Rafał Jabłonka. He managed to acquire the works of over 60 renowned contemporary West German artists²². The media face of the auction was Joseph Beuys, who lived in Düsseldorf and already in August 1981 expressed his support for the events in Poland by personally bringing his “Polentransport” to the Art Museum in Łódź²³. The collected money was transferred to the Independent Polish Literature and Science Assistance Fund based in Paris, whose honorary chairman was Czesław Miłosz, the patron of the auction²⁴.

The confrontation with the western German reality of the art world may have caused a cultural shock to the artists coming from the Eastern Bloc. Suffice it to mention how important a topic in the German press at the time was the concern about the declining role of the institutions and the contemporary art market in Düsseldorf in favour of the growing popularity of Cologne²⁵. For those who came from behind the Iron Curtain, this must have been an exotic phenomenon (I will come back to this issue later in the text). The exhibition “Von hier aus” (1984), mentioned in Sobczyk’s above statement, was one of the undertakings aimed at resuscitating the declining Düsseldorf art scene²⁶.

There was even a postulate to entrust its realization to the charismatic Harald Szeemann, but in the end Kasper König, co-author (together with Laszlo Glozer) of the famous Cologne show “Westkunst” from 1981, became the curator. During the exhibition organization, König was assisted by the already mentioned Jabłonka, which made it possible for Sobczyk and Modzelewski to explore the environment as early as at the stage of its creation and confront their own creative search with the works of his western German peers. Therefore, it is worthwhile to stop for a while at this event.

Both König’s exhibitions, though important, are at the same time model examples of exclusion mechanisms typical of the then thinking resulting from the habitual use of categories of the Cold War divisions. The very title of the first one: “Westkunst” (Western art) testifies to the synonymous identification of Western European and North American art with contemporary art *en bloc*. This universalization of the “Euro-American” line of development of modernism means *de facto* an *a priori* removal from the field of view of what was happening in the central-eastern regions of Europe, not to mention non-European areas²⁷. The exhibition “Von hier aus” replicated the same pattern. The idea was to present the most interesting personalities of artists from Germany or those who have lived there since the 1970s, which

²¹ See *Gegen das Kriegsrecht in Polen für Solidarność*, a pre-auction exh. cat. with a text by Iring Fetscher *Protest zwischen Moral und Politik*, and a poem by Cz. Miłosz *Das Lied vom Weltende*, s.l.a.

²² They were, among others: G. Baselitz, E. Bach, W. Dahn, F. Droese, I. Genzken, H. Haacke, K. H. Hödicke, J. Klauke, H. Middendorff, M. and A. Oehlen, G. Richter, Salomé, K. Staack, G. Uecker, F. E. Walther.

²³ See *Polentransport 1981. Wystawa prac Josepha Beuysa z kolekcji Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, maj – lipiec 1996, Galeria Sztuki Współczesnej Zachęta* [exh. cat.], Ed. T. Rostkowska, Warszawa 1996.

²⁴ See S. von Wiese, *Od utworzenia Muzeum Sztuki, 1931, do Aukcji na Rzecz Solidarności, 1982. Artyści w darze dla Polski*, [in:] *Konstrukcja w procesie 1981 – Wspólnota, która nadeszła?*, Ed. A. Jach, A. Seciuk-Gąsowska [exh. cat.], Łódź 2012.

²⁵ The Cologne art fair, held since 1967, also had its Düsseldorf edition since 1976, which was eventually abandoned in 1983. These were also the times when Fluxus became a thing of the past, G. Richter moved to Cologne, and Beuys no longer taught at the Academy and was increasingly absorbed by didactic and political-organizational activities.

²⁶ See *Die Szene der frühen 80er Jahre wird beleuchtet. “Neue deutsche Kunst” – ein Rettungsprojekt für Prestige und Profil der Stadt*, “Düsseldorf Hefte” 1984, No. 1, pp. 13–14.

²⁷ See *Westkunst. Zeitgenössische Kunst seit 1939*, Ed. L. Glozer, K. König [exh. cat.], Köln 1981. See also K. König, O. Enwezor, *Ist Westkunst Weltkunst?*, conversation at the Ludwig Museum in Cologne, 1 December 2015, <http://vimeo.com/149392220> (access date: 24.03.2019).

was further specified by the subtitle: “Zwei Monate neue deutsche Kunst” (Two Months of New German Art). As we learn from the curatorial statement, König was particularly keen to go beyond the existing constellations of artistic stars by including artists, both males and females (the latter were much fewer) from outside the mainstream²⁸. Although the artists invited to participate in the exhibition met in part this postulate of “inclusiveness” and formal pluralism – the “new German art” was reduced exclusively to artistic production from West Germany. For there was a tacit agreement that there was no “new German art” on the other side of the Wall and it could not be.

König’s declarations were also contradicted by the content of the exhibition catalogue, where a lot, if not most attention was paid to German neo-expressionist painting, which has been triumphant in the media and the market, and which at the same time has been a source of contradictory opinions in professional circles²⁹. In the exhibition halls, one could see paintings of a plenty of top representatives of this trend, both from the older generation (Georg Baselitz, Anselm Kiefer, Jörg Immendorff, Markus Lüpertz, Sigmar Polke, Gerhard Richter) as well as the younger generation (Ina Barfuss, Thomas Wachweger, Reinhard Mucha, Jiří Georg Dokoupil, Albert and Markus Oehlen, Werner Büttner, Martin Kippenberger, Gruppe Normal, Salomé, Rainer Fetting).

The prominent place in the catalogue was occupied by the text by Benjamin H. D. Buchloh entitled provocatively: *Einheimisch, Unheimlich, Fremd: wider das Deutsche in der Kunst?* (Homely, Amazing, Alien: Against Germanness in Art?) also referring to the “return of images” in German art. Buchloh maintains his position expressed already clearly after the Venice Biennale in 1980, when Klaus Gallwitz placed Kiefer’s canvas emanating with Germanness in the German pavilion together with Baselitz’s primitive-expressionist sculpture³⁰. According to Buchloh, such an arrangement of works of art according to the national key is, by definition, wrong and contrary to the very idea of art. For art deserves its name as long as it performs critical functions by blowing up the existing identification schemes. If it merely petrifies “abstracted culture as heritage and property”³¹, it soon becomes a handy tool in the hands of political power and the driving force behind the corrupt art market. According to Buchloh’s interpretation, the use of the national repertoire as a stabilizer and binder of identity is in fact compensatory in nature and is a response to the lack of real social communication and civic faith in real political efficacy. The search for universal models of national identity manifested in neo-expressionist painting is even called by Buchloh “an escape into irrational humanism”³², which is particularly worrying in (West) Germany, where similar, regressive tendencies led at one time to a strengthening of authoritarian power.

Everything that Sobczyk and Modzelewski managed to read, see and observe in Germany at the time will create an important field of reference for their further work, starting with four paintings they created together in Düsseldorf, known in the literature of the subject as *Papers*. As Rottenberg points out, these paintings “entered into a strong dialogue not only with German art, but also with history”, while “the Germans did not notice this, because their thinking about Poles has not changed since before the War. This was particularly evident then, in the mid 1980s, before the Fall of the Wall”³³. This bold observation seems

²⁸ K. König, *Zur Ausstellung*, [in:] *Von hier aus. Zwei Monate neue deutsche Kunst in Düsseldorf* [exh. cat.], Ed. *idem*, Köln 1984, p. unnn.

²⁹ It is telling that the conversation about the “new German art” in the exhibition catalogue starts with embedding the title new German art in the context of the phenomena defined as “neue Malerei”, “wilde Kunst” and “Hunger nach Bildern”. See *Zur neuen deutschen Kunst. Positionen eines Gesprächs zwischen Oswald Wiener, Gufo Reale und Friedrich Heubach*, [in:] *Von hier aus...*

³⁰ B. H. D. Buchloh, *Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression. Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting*, “October” 1981, No. 1. See also J. Balisz-Schmelz, *Przeszłość niepokonana. Sztuka niemiecka po 1945 roku jako przestrzeń i medium pamięci*, Kraków 2018, pp. 101-102.

³¹ *Idem*, *Einheimisch, Unheimlich, Fremd: wider das Deutsche in der Kunst?*, [in:] *Von hier aus...*, pp. 162-164.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 163.

³³ A. Rottenberg, *op. cit.*, p. 377.

all the more interesting in light of Buchloh's main theses, as well as the above remarks about German curators' failure to notice artists from outside Western Europe and America, which was also connected with the lack of exposure of subcutaneous tensions in artistic (and non-artistic) relations between the East and the West.

Papers

The first painting created jointly by Sobczyk and Modzelewski in the Düsseldorf studio at Sittarderstrasse 5 is *Das Gebet des deutschen Pfarrers oder die Bleistiftprobe* (The Prayer of a German Priest or a Pencil Test). The title of the painting – just like the other three – is written in German, and acrylic paints (*Lackfarben*) [Fig. 1] of German production were also used to paint it, but it was nevertheless created on grey, not very durable and common paper called "*w rzucik*"³⁴, which they brought from Poland. The composition, built diagonally, shows three figures: a disabled man with pencils in his ears, moving in a wheelchair with the motif of a Bourbon Lily, a German priest praying in a translucent cassock turned to him with his back, and a man (also a German) looking over his shoulder. The disabled person in the wheelchair is a Pole, the pencils in his ears are a reminiscence of the torture used during the interrogation of the UB (Office of Security). He embodies both the victim of Party's violence and Everyman departing from the socialist East for the capitalist West. The artists themselves were also such geopolitically handicapped "the close Other". They recall:

All the time in Düsseldorf we experienced a sense of disability. This could have been due to the omnipresence of facilitations for *Behinderte* [disabled]. Some of these facilitations did not apply to us, but "in general" the facilitations applied to us³⁵.

A German priest prays to a non-disabled German who is indifferent to the rest of the protagonists, for the intention of the disabled Other disadvantaged by fate and history. This is a picture about a chasm, which cannot be bridged, between characters levitating in a communication vacuum. Their biographies and experiences were probably diametrically different, as was the role and position of the church in both countries³⁶. These are relationships based on a melange of guilt (see the solidarity of the German intelligentsia with the Polish opposition) and an unspoken sense of superiority. As Timothy Garton Ash noted:

They [i.e. Poles] travelled to Germany mainly to study or earn money. And the Germans travelled to the East to spend or teach. They usually acted there as self-satisfied investors, employers or holidaymakers, while the visitors from Eastern Europe were poor shoppers, poorly paid *Gastarbeiters* or at best poor relatives in Germany. The privileged layer of intellectuals, artists and scholars was the exception confirming the rule³⁷.

It is interesting to note however, that Polish artists (as well as art critics writing about the "Polish *Neue Wilde*") referred in their analyses exclusively to the art scene in West Germany; similarly, artistic contacts of that period were more frequent across political divisions.

³⁴ The term coined by the artists themselves for the wrapping paper then available in stores. This paper had a faded, repeating geometric motif on one side. Hence the name "*w rzucik*", which could be translated as "patterned" (translator's note).

³⁵ J. Modzelewski, M. Sobczyk, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

³⁶ In October that year, Father J. Popiełuszko was murdered.

³⁷ T. G. Ash, *W imieniu Europy. Niemcy i podzielony kontynent*, Londyn 1996, p. 335.

As Günter Grass bitterly stated just after the reunification:

[...] Germans from the GDR during decades of [...] communist rule were, according to Poles, worthy of contempt; because the heir of Prussia was considered an obedient vassal of the hated Russians, and Poles evaluated and sufficiently often treated the inhabitants of the GDR – in contrast to Western Germans admired from a distance – as second class citizens³⁸.

The overwhelming feeling of alienation experienced by Polish artists in Germany is not surprising when one considers that German painters, who belonged to the movement of figurative expression, creating on opposite sides of the Wall, did not show any particular interest in each other either. Both artistic scenes, so similar to each other since the late 1970s, developed in almost complete seclusion³⁹. Joint exhibitions of artists from the FRG and the GDR did not start to appear until the second half of the 1980s⁴⁰, which does not change the fact that only a few artists from East Germany managed to make their mark in the Western German museum and market circulation before 1989 (Baselitz, Richter, A. R. Penck). Alienation is therefore a condition experienced by the vast majority of German artists settling on the other side of the Wall⁴¹. It had to be felt all the more acutely by painters from socialist Poland.

The second joint painting by Sobczyk and Modzelewski on packaging paper brought from the country is entitled *Warum zwei fremde Künstler keine Synagoge gefunden haben* (Why Two Foreign Artists Did Not Find a Synagogue) [Fig. 2]. Against the background of the horizontal yellow-blue stripes, there are five people arranged in the shape of an incomplete Star of David. This is a visual account of a walk through Düsseldorf, during which the artists in vain asked five random passers-by about the way to the title synagogue. The choice of topic was not accidental: “This painting got a little bit into the subject of guilt. Polish artists are asking about a synagogue in Düsseldorf. We became involved in it, but we also had that kind of things in mind”⁴². The questions about a synagogue from people with an eastern accent must have seemed embarrassing to the residents of Düsseldorf, especially since at the beginning of 1984 a synagogue from the end of the 19th century, located in the Gersheim district on the outskirts of the city, burned down almost completely. The intentions of the arsonists left no doubt: their signature in the form of a swastika was found on the walls of the building⁴³.

Two subsequent *Papers*, which put much less emphasis on German-Polish relations, and more on interpersonal relations between the artists themselves⁴⁴ in the context of their temporary emigration, have already been painted on “western” paper⁴⁵. This material lack of the Polish component of the painting

³⁸ G. Grass, *NRD na wyprzedzący. Mowa wygłoszona w Berlińskim Reichstagu*, [in:] *O kondycji Niemiec. Tożsamość niemiecka w debatach intelektualistów po 1945 roku*, Poznań 2008, p. 449.

³⁹ See E. Gillen, *Berliner Malströme*, [in:] *Die Wilden 80er Jahre in der deutsch-deutschen Malerei* [exh. cat.], Ed. J. Götzmann, A. Havemann, Petersberg 2017.

⁴⁰ See, among others, the exhibition “Zeitvergleich '88. Aktuelle Malerei aus der DDR”, Neue Kunstquartier Berlin, August–December 1988, and *Malstrom. Bilder und Figuren 1982–1986*, Haus am Waldsee, 13 June – 27 July 1986 (exhibition of GDR emigrant artists).

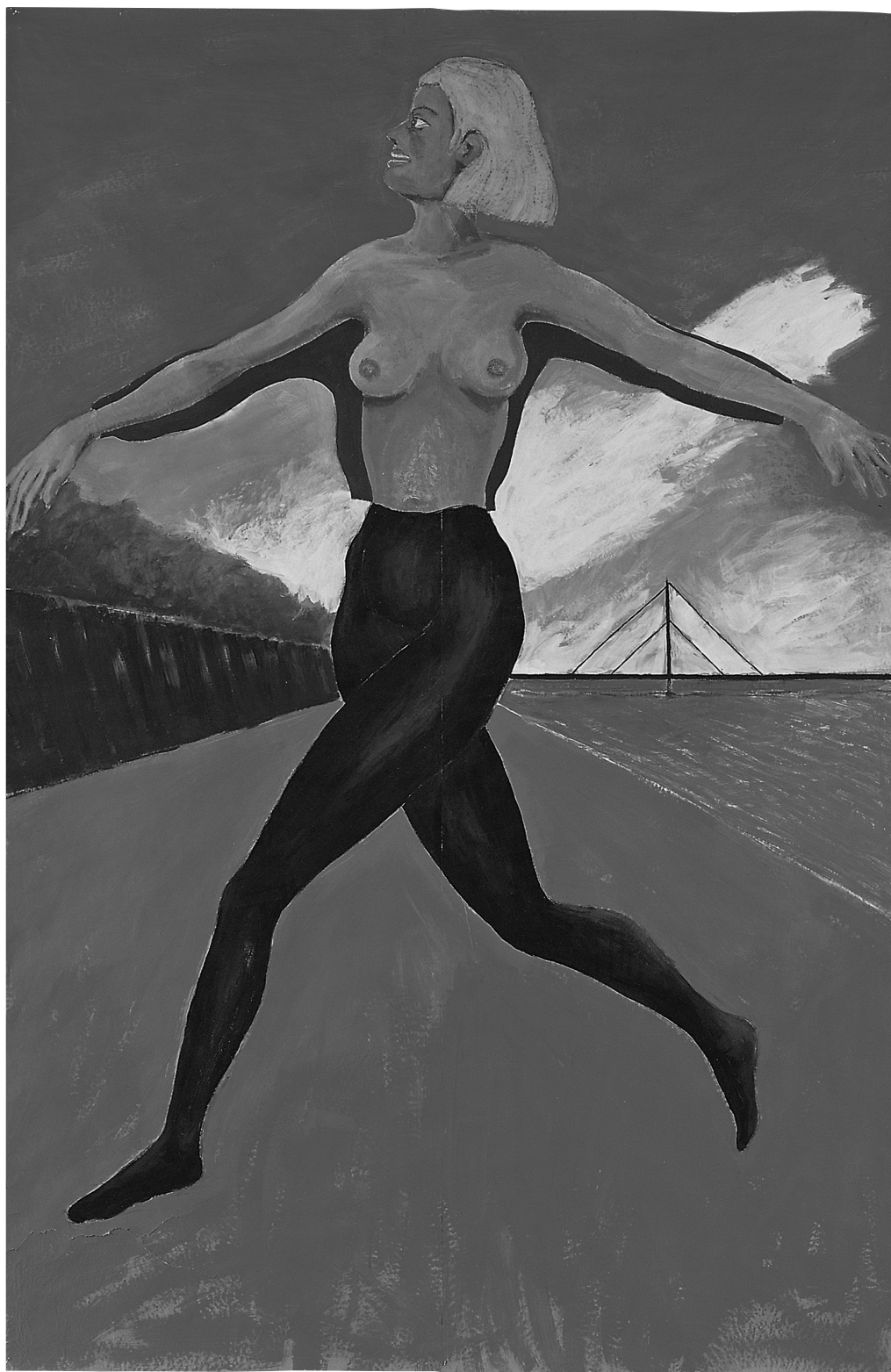
⁴¹ About the difficulties of integration in the new environment is told by R. Kerbach, an immigrant from the GDR in his painting *Malstrom versagt (Germania Wüste)* from 1985–1986. The painting shows the silhouettes of East German immigrant painters scattered in the desert landscape of the promised West German land.

⁴² J. Modzelewski, M. Sobczyk, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

⁴³ Erected in 1875, the synagogue has served as a storehouse for a Christian merchant since 1917, and thus survived the Night of Long Knives in 1938. The ruin of the synagogue burned down in February 1984 was finally demolished two years later. See Ch. Holthoff, *Als Gersheim noch eine Synagoge hatte*, <http://www.derwesten.de/staedte/duesseldorf/als-gerresheim-noch-eine-synagoge-hatte-id11021909.html> (access date: 18.03.2019).

⁴⁴ In J. Michalski's interpretation (*Ikonografia "Gruppy" w świetle poezji tytułów*, [in:] *Suplementy...*, p. 57), *Papers* speak of four pillars of human *communitas* and at the same time four elementary human needs: friendship, love, spirituality and identity, which indicate the desire to create a community built on camaraderie and friendship as an alternative to the imposed political community.

⁴⁵ J. Modzelewski, M. Sobczyk, *op. cit.*, p. 28.



4. M. Sobczyk, J. Modzelewski, *Die Frau, die ich für dich gesehen habe*, 1984, acrylic painting, 270 × 200; the artists' property, © Marek Sobczyk, Jarosław Modzelewski. Courtesy of Marek Sobczyk and Jarosław Modzelewski

seems to signal a symbolic breaking of the umbilical cord with Poland. The painting *Einsamkeit* (Loneliness) shows two embracing men standing in a deserted pool, one of them wearing swimming trunks, the other wearing only glasses [Fig. 3]. The scene is a recollection of the action of colleagues from the “Gruppa” described in Ryszard Woźniak’s letter to Sobczyk and Modzelewski. As Maryla Sitkowska reports, during the opening of Woźniak’s exhibition in gallery Dziekanka, Warsaw, Zbigniew Kowalewski and Włodzimierz Pawlak hugged each other –

Kowalewski was holding a statue of Abraham Lincoln, a bag with red paint was placed on his chest – a bloody stain was left after the action. The artists stood embraced for about 40 minutes. The guests spontaneously took part in the action, joining the embrace and creating a living bunch of grapes⁴⁶.

In the letter, which mentioned, among other things, loneliness, there were suggestions that the action was an expression of the longing of the other members of the “Gruppa” for their colleagues who were in Germany at the time. Sobczyk and Modzelewski decided that the interior of a swimming pool in Düsseldorf “where there was an echo and cabins [...] was so big that it could accommodate their loneliness”⁴⁷. Apart from these obvious references, there appears here – even if not directly – a thread of non-heteronormative relations, unusual in the iconography of the “Gruppa”, which was known from its caricatured machismo. The artists had their first opportunity in Germany to get acquainted with gay clubs unknown to them in Poland. Also culturally bold were the paintings and eccentric queer performances of the Berlin artist creating under the pseudonym Salomé (in a duet with Luciano Castelli). One of Sobczyk’s Düsseldorf paintings was a travesty of the latter’s canvas⁴⁸.

On the fourth *Paper* we see a slim woman in black tights and with a naked torso, running along the banks of the Rhine; in the background, a bridge characteristic of the Düsseldorf panorama. This woman was seen for Sobczyk by Modzelewski who gave him his memory of her slim figure as a gift. This poetics of a disinterested gift from nothing is marked in the title: *Die Frau, die ich für dich gesehen habe* (The woman I saw for you) [Fig. 4].

Papers can be read as an attempt to translate the experience of otherness and strangeness into the language of painting in the form of an intimate visual diary from a joint trip to the West. They depict a complex network of relations in their interpersonal, cultural, national dimensions, and above all, the identity dilemmas that arise with them. The *Papers*, like the artists themselves, are “internally conflicted”, which manifests itself in both the formal and thematic layers. German titles, good quality German *Lackfarben* could indicate the ambition to create a product tailored to the expectations of the German consumer and art market⁴⁹.

On the other hand, however, the somewhat sad, slightly sentimental Polish “*w rzucik*” paper and hermetically personal topics or topics that were problematic from the point of view of the German policy of memory, make the artists condemn themselves voluntarily to the inconvenient and separate status of the Other.

⁴⁶ See *Gruppa 1982–1992...*, p. 60–61

⁴⁷ J. Modzelewski, M. Sobczyk, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

⁴⁸ Information from the author’s interview with M. Sobczyk and J. Modzelewski conducted in Warsaw on 22 November 2018.

⁴⁹ Th. Bayrle offered the artists an exhibition at the Academy in Frankfurt, but it did not come to fruition – see J. Modzelewski, M. Sobczyk, *op. cit.*, p. 76. The painting *Warum...* was purchased by the Museum in Düsseldorf, and then the trace of it disappeared. Therefore, in 2011, due to the impossibility of showing the original at A. Rottenberg’s exhibition “Side-by-Side [Tür an Tür]”, the artists made its (slightly “modernised”) replica. See *Tür an Tür. Polen – Deutschland. 1000 Jahre Kunst und Geschichte* [exh. cat.], Ed. M. Omilanowska, Köln 2011, p. 724.

Provincialising the centre – centralising the province

In a letter to Jabłonka and his wife dated 21 February 1985, Sobczyk and Modzelewski report on their deep need and obligation to share their thoughts, because they “feel permanently scholarship holders”⁵⁰. These two intense months will resonate for a long time not only in the artists themselves, but also in their close circle. Yet there was no radical change in the artists’ work after their return from the scholarship; on the contrary, the Düsseldorf episode only confirmed their conviction that the creative path chosen at the beginning of the 1980s was the right one. But they returned with all the stronger need to define themselves and their position on the artistic map of Europe. This seems easier now since identity can only be defined through relationality – in this case it was determined by the attitude to the West, whose *pars pro toto* was Germany in this case. However, let us bear in mind (I will come back to this issue) that this was not as obvious a point of reference for Polish artists after the war as it might seem obvious due to the geographical location of both countries. In the case of West Germany, those relations were somehow doubly burdened, historically and politically: West Germany, associated with the catastrophe of the World War II, was now one of the leading players among the “imperialist Western states”.

The colleagues from the “Gruppa”, with their own contrariness are said to be mocking Sobczyk and Modzelewski, calling them “Germans with a syndrome of tighten ass” because “they were too concerned about the scale of what they saw”⁵¹. This strategy, called in the language of postcolonialism the strategy of mimicry, i.e., over identification with foreign cultural patterns, supposedly threatened their artistic subjectivity, so far uncontaminated by foreign influences. As early as in April 1984, Bożena Kowalska wrote about the birth of the “Polish New Wild” in the “Projekt” magazine⁵². The artists’ stay in Germany seemed all the more likely to entitle critics to make such spectacular, yet – due to their little knowledge of the German art scene – not necessarily legitimate comparisons. At the presentation of “Gruppa’s” work, organized after Sobczyk and Modzelewski’s return from Düsseldorf, in the Warsaw branch of the Art Historians Association, the organizer Barbara Majewska suggested in her announcements that “here will be a presentation of the Polish version of *Neue Wilde*”⁵³. Kiefer, who works in the field of German history and mythology⁵⁴, became a handy figure for comparison, which in fact diminished the achievements of Polish painters. In the wake of similar, recurring parallels, the “biggest problem” for artists then seemed to be “proving their credibility and identity”⁵⁵. They started to play with labelling themselves in a defensive reaction: “First of all, it turned out that Anselm Kiefer, not even being aware of it, belongs to our group”. The second way out of the impasse was a strategy that can be given a working name – centralization by self-provincialisation. Perhaps it was this shift in emphasis that Sobczyk and Modzelewski had in mind when they reported in their next letter to Jabłonka in May 1985: “Recently we have moved from a phase of immediate reaction and commenting on the time that is taking place, to creating timeless and general reflection”⁵⁶. Further understanding of the change that occurred in the aftermath of the Düsseldorf episode is helped by Modzelewski’s texts in the subsequent (unnumbered) issues of the zine “Oj, Dobrze Już” (Oh, Ok Now) edited after his return.

⁵⁰ M. Sobczyk, J. Modzelewski, letter to T. and R. Jabłonka, of 21 February 1985. It was made available by courtesy of Rafał Jabłonka.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*.

⁵² B. Kowalska, *Polscy Nowi Dzicy*, “Projekt” 1984, No. 4, p. 16.

⁵³ M. Sobczyk, J. Modzelewski, letter...

⁵⁴ See C. Gockel, *Anselm Kiefer – Geschichte als Mythos. Vergegenwärtigung der Vergangenheit, w: eadem, Zeige deine Wunde. Faschismusrezeption in der deutschen Gegenwartskunst*, München 1998; S. Schütz, *Geschichte als Material: Arbeiten 1969–1983*, Köln 1998.

⁵⁵ M. Sobczyk, J. Modzelewski, letter...

⁵⁶ M. Sobczyk, J. Modzelewski, letter to T. and R. Jabłonka, of 17 May 1985. It was made available by courtesy of Rafał Jabłonka.



5. "Oj, Dobrze Już" 1985, © M. Sobczyk, J. Modzelewski

On the cover of one of them there is a black heart surrounded by rays with a blue inscription: "Boże na Beuys [Oh, God on Beuys]" [Fig. 5]. On another one we can see a blood-red swastika with tops ending each time with a symbol of a Bourbon Lily⁵⁷ (the same one that appears on the first of *Papers* [Fig. 6]). In the last issue of "Oj, Dobrze Już" from 1984, one can find, among others, Modzelewski's short essay *Kilka uwag o twórczości niektórych artystów* (A Few Remarks on the Works by Certain Artists) containing reflections on the dangers of "spiritual homelessness" as a result of denying one's origins through denial or voluntary – real or imaginary – emigration. As an example of such an artist doomed to "spiritual homelessness", Modzelewski gives a German poet Friedrich Hölderlin, who was fascinated with the culture of ancient Greece, and whose works he read at that time passionately. An echo of this fascination can also be found in his paintings of that time, such as *Hölderlin w mundurze Napoleona* (Hölderlin in the uniform of Napoleon] and *Głowa Hölderlina (z kołkiem)* (Hölderlin's Head [with a Pin]), both from 1985.

"Poland", Modzelewski continues, "is a country suspended between the East and the West, which not only determines its political and cultural situation, but also devel-

ops specific individual characteristics". Thus: "The young painters about whom I write and with whom I deeply sympathise make efforts to define their spiritual home and identify it with the real one. Their search tries to take root as a new quality between the East and the West"⁵⁸. Once this "new quality" will be established – concludes the author – nothing will prevent the centre of European art from moving to Poland, because from the historical and geographical point of view it has all the predispositions for this⁵⁹. The perspective outlined by Modzelewski – even if in the form of persiflage – was somehow in harmony with the ethos of the broadly understood opposition of the early 1980s, when referring to a common cul-

⁵⁷ The 1980s saw an increased interest in the themes of Nazism in the art of West Germany, which A. Kiefer described as "Hitlerwelle" – a wave of Hitler. The popularity of the swastika motif in German art prompted M. Kippenberger to deal with this phenomenon by creating a painting in 1984 under the ironic title *Ich kann beim besten Willen kein Hakenkreuz entdecken* (Despite my sincerest intentions, I cannot find a swastika here).

⁵⁸ "Oj, Dobrze Już" 1984, No. 23, p. unn.

⁵⁹ J. Modzelewski, *Kilka uwag o twórczości niektórych artystów*, "Oj, Dobrze Już" 1984, No. 23, p. unn.

tural experience and creating on this basis a symbolic universe⁶⁰ legible to all who created a substitute for such a “new quality” enabling citizens to consolidate with one another across political divisions.

It turned out, however, that the creation of such a coherent artistic quality, which did not reproduce others’ patterns (as German artists did in the 1980s), was a necessary condition as it was not enough to make a mark in the international art field. The differences in the dynamics of art development in the East and the West were to a large extent the result of structural differences, which in this case were more difficult to eliminate. In the West, one of the important measures of the artist’s significance was already then the market value of their works⁶¹. Unlike capitalism, socialism did not create an extensive infrastructure stimulating the development of contemporary art: a network of institutions with a whole system of mediations and related market mechanisms that would influence significantly evaluation criteria and exhibition practices. Undeterred by these disparities, the artists of the “Gruppa” decided to take matters into their own hands and promote themselves. The “Oj, Dobrze Już” issues from 1985 provide evidence that during their stay in Germany, they not only did their home-

work but also did a critical reflection on their lesson about the rules of the game in the Western art world. A part of self-promotion was the creation of the figure of Sharm Yarm, an American art critic writing for the fictional magazine “Art Evening” [Fig. 7]. The origin of Yarm is not accidental – let’s remember that the accoucheurs of success in the homeland of such artists as Kiefer or Baselitz were not so much German but American critics, together with American collectors of Jewish origin⁶². In her exalted texts, edited in the form of correspondence from distant, communist Poland, Yarm deplored the lack of pres-

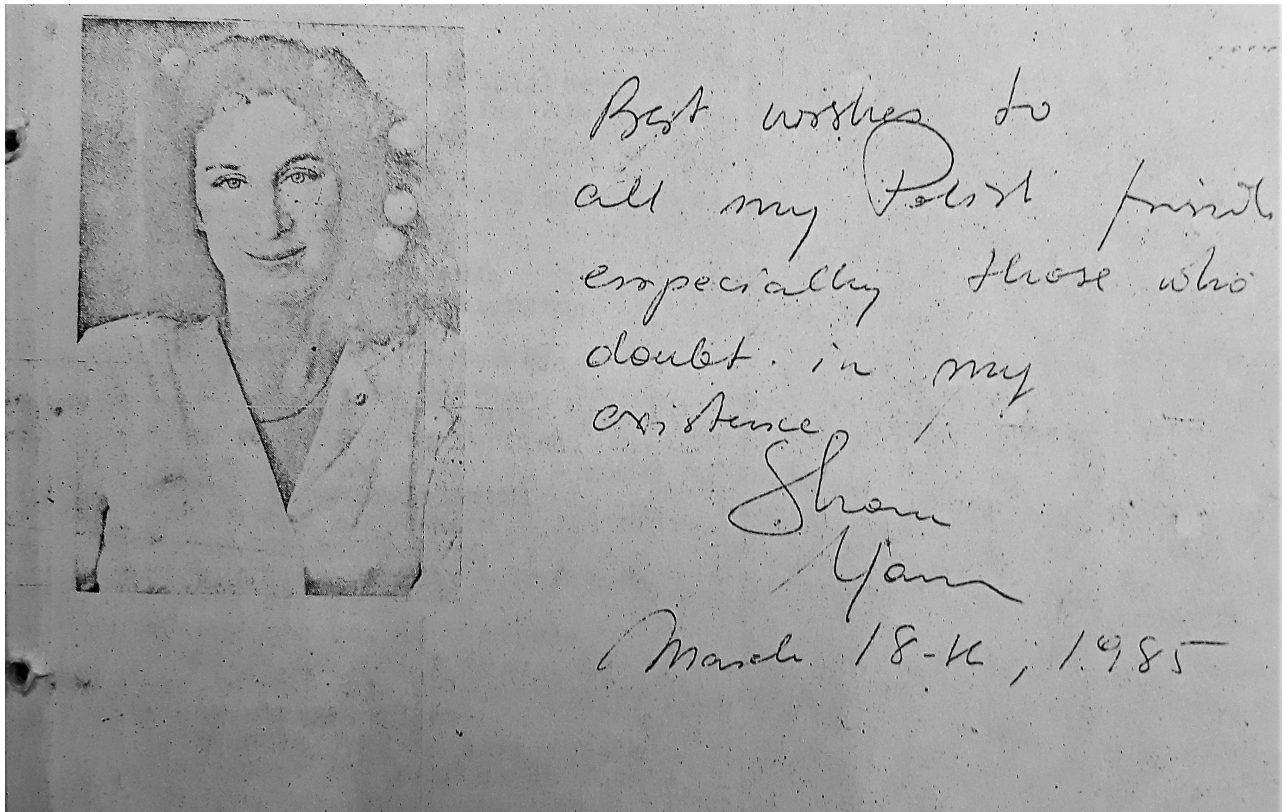


6. “Oj, Dobrze Już” 1985, © M. Sobczyk

⁶⁰ See A. Wojciechowski, *op. cit.*, p. 10. See also T. Szawiel, *Struktura społeczna i postawy a grupy etnowe (o możliwościach ewolucji społecznej)*, “Studia Socjologiczne” 1982, No. 1/2. As E. Gorządek (*Wizualne equilibrium – wspólnie malowane obrazy Marka Sobczyka i Jarosława Modzelewskiego*, [in:] J. Modzelewski, M. Sobczyk, *Szesnaście wspólnie namalowanych obrazów*, Warszawa 1998, p. 6) writes: “Sobczyk and Modzelewski are continuators of the Symbolic-Romantic tradition”.

⁶¹ See, among others: P. Bourdieu, *Reguły sztuki. Geneza i struktura pola literackiego*, Kraków 2001; I. Graw, *High Price: Art between the Market and the Celebrity Culture*, Berlin – New York 2009.

⁶² See L. Saltzman, *Anselm Kiefer and Art after Auschwitz*, Cambridge 1999, p. 110.



7. Sh. Yarm, *Co się stało dziś wieczorem*, "Oj, Dobrze Już" 1985, © M. Sobczyk, J. Modzelewski, P. Kowalewski

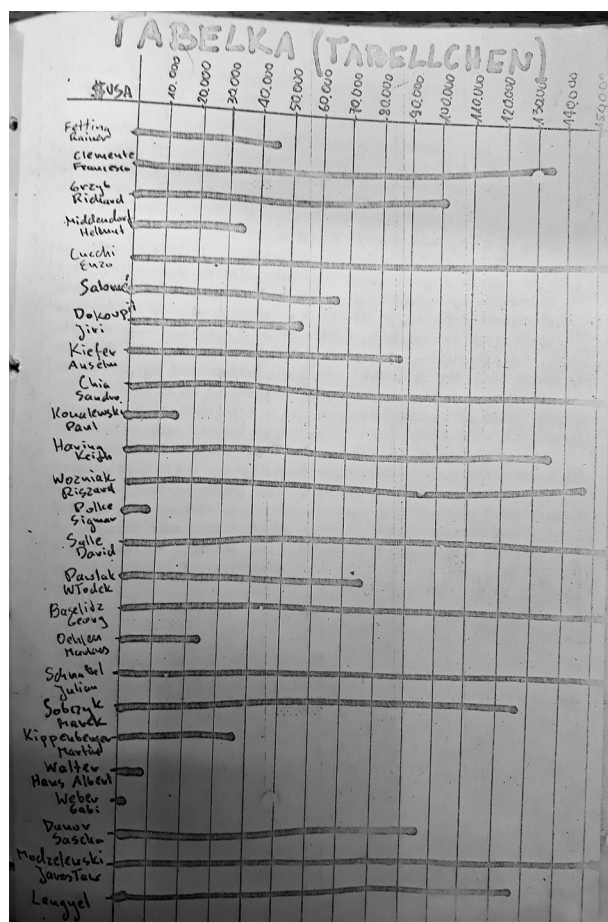
ence of the "Gruppa" members in the international market-gallery circulation⁶³, due to the geopolitical situation, although undoubtedly "this small community of friends places Polish art in a high position in the world". Yarm spoke in superlatives about the "Gruppa" artists, emphasizing their distinctiveness and even superiority over the overrated German representatives of new expression:

Undoubtedly, it was a phenomenon with the spirit of all what is the best in painting, the spirit of humanity, partnership, love and humility. It confirmed the unreasonableness of simply calling the young artists *Neue Wilde* epigones. This is something much deeper and fuller than the candy expression of Salomé, Elvira Bach or Middendorff. [...] Anxiety and shivers are the impression given by this strange picture of the state of the souls of Eastern Europe⁶⁴.

The situation in which the artists found themselves was tragically paradoxical: their most valuable asset turned out to be their origin, which determined this "state of soul" and original creativity, the origin of Eastern Europe, which could be – like the German new expression – a recognizable brand in the Western art world if only this Eastern Europe were not Eastern Europe. The reality of the Western art world is

⁶³ See Sh. Yarm, *Co się stało dziś wieczorem*, review signed as of 18 March 1985, "Oj, Dobrze Już" 1985, p. un.: "Are you surprised why you hear about them for the first time? Unfortunately, the only answer to this question is, ironically, the birthplace of these young people. While only a few thousand kilometres to the west their German colleagues are besieged by art dealers who pay 25 to 60 thousand dollars for a painting, our players, whose paintings breathe in unbridled enthusiasm and freshness, remain almost unknown".

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*.



8. *Tabela (Tabellchen)*, "Oj, Dobrze Już" 1985,
© M. Sobczyk, J. Modzelewski

merciless: symbolic capital is worth little if it cannot be exchanged for economic capital⁶⁵. Another example of the effort to self-position in the international field of art, was a handwritten "little table" posted in "Oj, Dobrze Już" from 1985 (named in German as *Tabellchen* [Fig. 8]). Basically it was a graph that compared the prices of "Gruppa" paintings with the prices of works by well-selling Western artists (especially German). The self-appointed position in the upper price ceiling (Sobczyk and Modzelewski turn out to be more expensive than Kiefer⁶⁶) indicates an artificial price increase procedure, which is not unknown to the free art market, and the arbitrariness of such rankings. In this simple way, the artists traced the network of economic, political and personal determinants that give the artist visibility in the Western art world. They can be interpreted as an unusual example of institutional criticism, full of ironic distance, carried out in conditions of a real lack of criticized institutions.

The stay in Düsseldorf broadened the thematic spectrum of the "Gruppa" to include topics that had not yet been addressed. Although economic concerns of the life were known to artists in Poland, to a much greater extent they were the everyday life of a western artist, due to their entanglement in a complicated institutional and market machine, sometimes leaving little time and space for proper creative activity. As a Croatian artist Mladen Stilinović wrote jokingly, but not without a hint of truth, about the Western art scene:

Bothering with null and void things such as production, promotion, the gallery system, the museum system, the competition system (fighting for who is most important) and focusing on the object – all this distracted them from laziness and art. After all, money is only paper, and a gallery is only a room⁶⁷.

The texts and diagrams of the "Gruppa", showing the gulf between the conditions of production and distribution of art in different political and economic realities, also become a valuable identification of the traps of working under the rules of the free art market, which makes the economy of monetary value creation becoming more important than selfless giving.

⁶⁵ I. Graw (*op. cit.*, p. 9–17) puts forward a controversial thesis that the assessment of artistic value is usually derived from the value of a work in the commercial market.

⁶⁶ *Tabela (Tabellchen)*, "Oj, Dobrze Już" 1985, p. unnn.

⁶⁷ M. Stilinović, *Artist at Work: 1973–1983*, Ljubljana 2005; quoted for: B. Kunst, *Artysta w pracy. O pokrewieństwach sztuki i kapitalizmu*, Lublin 2016, p. 143.

This generates, as a further consequence, the divisions and hierarchies within the environment that make the “friendly community” so affirmed by Yarm, in which “the spirit of humanity, partnership, love and humility” manifests itself, has been (in this case almost prophetically) broken down⁶⁸.

Conclusion

To explain the significance of the Düsseldorf episode for Sobczyk’s and Modzelewski’s work (or, more broadly, the “Gruppa”s), the concept of cultural transfer developed in the mid-1980s in the circle of French Germanists may prove useful⁶⁹. It was meant to offer an alternative methodology to the comparative method used so far in the study of mutual cultural influences. However, this is not an expansionist landing of a foreign culture, but a selective reception of its individual elements in order to compensate/complement their lack in one’s own culture. The party that controls the flow is always the receiving party⁷⁰. The transfer of culture consists in adapting the imported resources to local conditions and dialogue them with local constraints⁷¹. For a successful transfer to take place, specific conditions must be met. First of all, there is a need for people who play the role of intermediaries (so-called *Grenzgänger*, *Vermittler*), who, having become acquainted with another culture, become a valuable source of knowledge and information upon their return. Sobczyk and Modzelewski, thanks to their scholarship trip in autumn 1984, undoubtedly acted as such intermediaries. Another important condition of this process is the readiness to receive new content (understood as ideas, concepts, material objects or symbolic systems) by the receiving society. This readiness is determined mainly by the historical moment and the appearance of demand for it. As already mentioned at the beginning of the text, Sobczyk’s and Modzelewski’s trip to Germany coincided with the years of prolonged Martial Law and was connected with the interest that *Solidarność*’s activities aroused outside Poland. At this point, it is worthwhile to explain a little more about the “historical moment” at which the boom for cultural content from Germany could have occurred.

For the Polish society in general, Germany was above all a synonym for a rich Western society, a country of economic prosperity, which was looked upon with a longing and economic aspirations. At the same time, however, the times of the Occupation and the traumas associated with it cast a deep shadow over everything that was associated with Germanness. Official propaganda of the Party used these deeply held grudges and resentments to create a fear of German rematch and expansionism, which helped to consolidate the Polish nation around the power controlled by Moscow: it helped to create an image of the Soviet Union as the only credible guardian of peace and the post-war western borders of Poland⁷². All of this contributed significantly to the consolidation and deepening of stereotypes that existed in the public consciousness even before the War⁷³ and to the questioning of Germany’s cultural and civilization achievements. The circles of the opposition intelligentsia were among the first to try to break the anti-German rhetoric of political propaganda. It was both an anti-government gesture to simply reverse the

⁶⁸ As the chronicler of the “Gruppa”, M. Sitkowska, writes ([in:] *Gruppa 1982–1992...*, p. 5), the action “Głos przyrody na Solidarność” (Voice of Nature for Solidarność), carried out in Warsaw just before 4 June 1989, should be considered as a symbolic end of its history.

⁶⁹ See D. Pick, *Czym jest transfer kultury? Transfer kultury a metoda porównawcza. Możliwości zastosowania transferts culturels na gruncie polskim*, [in:] *Monolog, dialog, transfer. Relacje kultury polskiej i niemieckiej w XIX i XX wieku*, Ed. M. Zielińska, M. Zybura, Wrocław 2013.

⁷⁰ See *idem*, *Drogi i uwarunkowania transferu kultury z Republiki Federalnej Niemiec do polski w latach siedemdziesiątych i osiemdziesiątych XX w.*, [in:] *Monolog, dialog...*, p. 258.

⁷¹ See D. Pick, *Czym jest...*, p. 104.

⁷² See J. Kiwerska, *W atmosferze wrogości*, [in:] *Polacy wobec Niemców. Z dziejów kultury politycznej Polski 1945–1989*, Ed. A. Wolff-Powęska, Poznań 1993, p. 68.

⁷³ See *Wokół stereotypów Polaków i Niemców*, Ed. W. Wrzesiński, Wrocław 1991; T. Szarota, *Niemcy i Polacy. Wzajemne postrzeganie i stereotypy*, Warszawa 1996.

signs and to draw attention to the convergence of political interests of both nations. Thus, they argued that as long as the division of Germany was maintained, Europe would be divided into two spheres of influence, which for Poland meant in practice submission to the USSR⁷⁴. However, while the German left-wing intelligentsia was not only deeply moved by events in Poland but also felt co-responsible for them⁷⁵, the distanced and even reluctant attitude of the social democratic German government towards the Polish opposition during the *Solidarność* and the Martial Law periods put these Pro-German sentiments to a serious test⁷⁶. Jacek Kubiak draws attention to yet another aspect of the misunderstanding between Polish oppositionists and representatives of the political elite of the German side that is important to us:

The difficulty of the dialogue [...] was due to the fact that the Polish opposition ethos was dominated by a traditional sense of patriotism, based on a community of historical experiences. The German elite, struggling with its own national past, created, in the language of Jürgen Habermas, an “unconventional sense of national identity”, a pro-occidental “patriotism of the constitution”. Hence, the sensitivity of these elites to appeals to their national feelings and unification aspirations could only be very limited⁷⁷.

Addressing the “German question”, the German-language titles of the works would therefore be an important and courageous step towards a way out of the space dominated by the politicized discourse of Polish-German relations after the War, which does not change the fact that they largely operated (which was characteristic of the iconography of the “Gruppa”) with stereotypes and clichés. Yet how significantly different the function performed by the ostentatious exposure of the local, national perspective with the help of hermetic narratives and symbols could have been in the case of the “Gruppa”, was made possible to understand by Gabriele Lesser’s observation. Lesser recalls that until the outbreak of *Solidarność*, all the countries behind the Iron Curtain were for her and the majority of Germans from West Germany one monolithic *Ostblock*:

At the time, in the West, this other world was called *Ostblock* [...]. I thought there are also the same people, the same story and nothing more. [...] On the other side there was no *Westblock*, but there was a free world, something completely different. There, all countries had their own, individual history. Those in *Ostblock*, behind the curtain, did not. At least not for my generation⁷⁸.

It was *Solidarność* that sensitized the Germans to the historical differences between the individual socialist countries.

The language of the avant-garde, belonging to an earlier generation of Polish artists, contributed in part to such unification of the different historical experiences of the Eastern Bloc countries. The neo-avantgarde silenced local differences (which does not mean that there were no such differences⁷⁹) in order to develop a common platform for transnational communication, which was of course justified

⁷⁴ See J. Kubiak, *Uwagi o stosunku opozycji demokratycznej do zagadnień niemieckich*, [in:] *Polacy wobec Niemców...*

⁷⁵ See H. Böll, *Ein neues Vokabularium finden. Protokoll einer Pressekonferenz*, [in:] *Verantwortlich für Polen?*, Ed. *idem*, F. Duve, K. Staeck, Reinbek bei Hamburg 1982.

⁷⁶ On 13 December 1981, a joint press conference was held by H. Schmidt and E. Honecker to conclude the visit of the German head of government in East Berlin. On this meeting, Schmidt expressed his concern about the events in Poland and expressed his positive opinion about General Jaruzelski’s decision. In September 1981, “Neues Deutschland” published an article comparing *Solidarność* to “SA-like combat units”. See D. Pick, *Brücken nach Osten. Helmut Schmidt und Polen*, Bremen 2011, p. 102.

⁷⁷ J. Kubiak, *Uwagi...*, p. 404.

⁷⁸ P. Semka, *Polacy i Niemcy a “Solidarność”*, “Biuletyn Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej” 2005, No. 7/8, p. 8.

⁷⁹ See *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s* [exh. cat.], Ed. L. Beke, L. Camnitzer, Michigan 1999.

in the times of dominance of state cultural policy and related restrictions. As a result, however, it also happened that neo-avantgarde practices were used by the communist authorities for their own particular purposes. It is no coincidence that symposia and open-air workshops, which were laboratories of conceptual art, took place in the so-called Recovered Territories. Suffice it to mention the legendary meetings in Osieki near Koszalin (Köslin), Elbląg (Elbing), Zielona Góra (Grünberg), or Wrocław (Breslau). The authorities accepted, and even supported financially, this art because in its eyes it created a new history, unconsciously participating in the process of forgetting the unwanted, and, what is important, German heritage⁸⁰.

Papers, being a manifesto of the next generation of artists, did not create such a utopian space, but instead problematized the actually existing boundaries, geopolitical and mental divisions with their inevitable consequences, making them – in an act of ironic and at the same time heroic resignation – an undeniable asset.

Słowa kluczowe

Grupa, polski neoekspresjonizm, *Neue Wilde*, Marek Sobczyk, Jarosław Modzelewski, *Papiery z Düsseldorfu*, RFN, relacje polsko-niemieckie, Solidarność, lata 80. XX wieku

Keywords

Grupa, Polish Neo-Expressionism, *Neue Wilde*, Marek Sobczyk, Jarosław Modzelewski, *Papers from Düsseldorf*, FRG, Polish-German Relations, Solidarność, 1980s

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⁸⁰ **D. Monkiewicz**, *Ziemie Odzyskane*, [in:] *Dzikie Pola. Historia awangardowego Wrocławia* [exh. cat.], Ed. eadem, Warszawa 2015, p. 41.

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Summary

JUSTYNA BALISZ-SCHMELZ (Jagiellonian University) / Which Polish? What Neue? What Wilde? Provincialisation of the centre – centralisation of the province on the example of the Düsseldorf Papers by Marek Sobczyk and Jarosław Modzelewski

The starting point of the article are four paintings created jointly by Marek Sobczyk and Jarosław Modzelewski during their trip to Düsseldorf in autumn 1984 on a Solidarnosc scholarship, the so-called *Papers*. Both painters belonged to the Warsaw "Gruppa", whose work was compared in Poland with German Neo-Expressionism. Their stay in Germany enabled them to make their own reconnaissance in the German artistic community and become familiar with the western conditions of art production and distribution, but in the same way it made their painting, which grew out of the local cultural and socio-political context, subject to a test of authenticity. Also not without significance for the cultural capital brought back to Poland was the destination itself – West Germany: a country with which relations, due to the historical past and the arrangement of political forces after the War, were multifold and complicated during the communist period. Inspired by the trip, the works both highlighted the consequences of the Cold War divisions and initiated in Polish art the process of transferring cultural content from West Germany, which was a brave step towards a way out of the space dominated by the politicized discourse of German-Polish relations after the War. Thus, *Papers* can serve to prompt a deeper reflection on the complexity of multiple relations: Poland–Germany, centre–periphery, East–West, while at the same time making it possible to problematize the issue of "originality" of phenomena in art that arise outside the main centres.