

A Picture behind Glass

To Mieczysław Porębski

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Abstract

The paper considers the singular situation of reception occasioned by a painting shielded with a reflective pane of glass. The reflections in the glass dramatically break the cohesion of the painting and bring about distracting – although sometimes intriguing – surprises. The glass is an iconoclastic intrusion, an infection of the artistic order by an invading disorder and transient immediacy, which however can be very attractive visually. The accidental obliterates the significant. "The truth of art" is confronted here with a delusive phantom. Not only two entirely different visual effects are mixed here, but also different ontological and axiological spheres.

<1>

Bacon said he liked
looking at his paintings through glass

he even likes Rembrandt
behind glass
and is not bothered by chance viewers
reflected in the glass
who blur the image
and pass

I
hate pictures behind glass
I see myself there I remember once
noticing some Japanese
imposed on Mona Lisa's smile
they were very animated
Gioconda became fixed
in a glass coffin
after that encounter
I've never been to The Louvre¹

Francis Bacon's fondness for paintings behind glass is a rather rare condition. Most viewers seems to share the feelings of the author of this poem, Tadeusz Różewicz, even if their reaction would be less vehement and they sometimes do come back to the Louvre and other museums, although they know that they can run into pictures behind glass there. The glass, albeit gradually eliminated as a remnant of the old exhibition

¹Tadeusz Różewicz, fragment from "Francis Bacon or Diego Velázquez in a Dentist's Chair," in: *They Came to See a Poet. Selected Poems*, trans. Adam Czerniawski, London 2004, 245.

methods, is sometimes necessitated by conservation considerations, or protection against the most insane threats from the public. Hence the armoured glass cases around the world's most celebrated paintings. Treated as necessary evil, they seem imperceptible. But then – as is indicated, for example, by the quoted fragment of poetry – a glass pane on the surface of a painting is more than just an irritating obstacle when viewing it.



1 Francis Bacon's *Three Figures in a Room* (detail) with reflections on the glass (photograph by Krzysztof Pijarski)²

<2>

Glass is transparent. But when placed on a non-transparent surface, it becomes reflective. The painting – on canvas, wood, cardboard, or paper – works as the amalgam, so that the glass that is "coated" with it becomes a mirror. When standing before a painting placed behind a pane of glass, we can see the reflection of everything in front of it: the space across from it, other pictures, viewers, and last but not least – ourselves. Add to that the light reflexes, the dazzling lamplights, and the sheen of various surfaces. It would be hard to come up with a better example of cognitive dissonance. What we are supposed to be viewing is disrupted by something we should not be looking at. Faced with this situation, we usually channel our effort into eliminating everything that has invaded the painting area; we strive to ignore, to parenthesise, everything that is not part of the work but rather has been superimposed on it, or actually we have superimposed it ourselves by standing in front of the painting and getting it reflected in the glass. We attempt to restore the painting to its untainted

² Full credit details for the artworks visible in the photographs of this article are provided in [note 28](#) at the end of the text.

form, much like a conservation worker cleaning an old canvas of the accumulated strata of overpaint and varnish to reach the original, authentic layer of the work. The effort is prompted by the opinion that is fundamental for our encounters with art, namely that a painting is an autonomous existence and that its adequate reception should be contemplative. Therefore, anything that undoes this autonomy and interrupts this contemplation should be eliminated from perception. A painting behind glass is a singular challenge to one's professional competency and receptory self-control, one's ability to extricate the proper message from the visual informational din.



2 Duchamp's *To be looked at ...* with reflections on surface
(photograph by Maria Poprzęcka)

[<3>](#)

On the other hand, however, it can be observed that anything seen on the surface of a glass-covered painting can be very attractive visually. While the painting is a fixed image ("Gioconda became fixed in a glass coffin"), the reflection that is superimposed on it can move (the Japanese "were very animated"). It moves, so it is alive, while the picture buried under the glass is dead. It is unchangeable while the life that goes on on its surface continues to change. What slides over the petrified, tangible painted base are liquid, intangible, accidental and unexpected shapes and lights. The painting, albeit untouchable in its hypodermic layers, undergoes endless metamorphoses, becomes a screen, passively accepting the images projected upon it. What's more, just what the

reflection is like is largely up to us because it changes with our each motion. Paradoxically, when trying to get rid of this undesirable addition, we change our position, which makes the picture even more dynamic and intriguing. And when we finally manage to eliminate the reflection, we lose sight of the picture itself; well, at least in its version undistorted by intense reduction. Namely, it is us who are decisive for the existence or nonexistence of the reflection. After all, it disappears when we move away, out of the reflection's reach (usually, this is exactly the spot we are looking for). The things are similar to a mirror situation again, where the amalgam coating is fixed while the images appearing on the glass surface are ephemeral, dependent on our presence and our gaze. Light reflexes, which are the greatest obstacle in viewing a glass-covered painting, create a flickering interplay of flashes and sheens that attract our sight. They undo the picture, but they also tempt the eye. And, most importantly, what we view there is "the most interesting surface in the world" – our own face.

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The disruption of the viewing process by a glass pane between the viewed object and the viewer is not an event that happens only in museums. Although we are not always aware of this, we live among reflections, failing to notice a multitude of representational ambiguities. Like the poet Miron Białoszewski, we can see

a wide world through a pane of glass, overheated, populated, nothing but processions, a shop window, Marszałkowska Street, a wide, wide world [...]

people following people. And people preceding people. People in glass, in panes, walking in, into department stores, through all the transparencies.³

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Standing in front of a shop window which reflects the street, in order to get rid of the unwanted image, the passers-by (including us) practically press their noses against the pane and shield their eyes against the light with their hands.⁴ In art galleries, where such conduct would not be acceptable, all we can do is try to find a vantage point from which the reflection is relatively weak and whatever is behind the glass can be best seen. Sometimes, when the lighting is right, the viewer – without moving, based on his or her own decision alone – can view either the reflection or the painting.

³ Miron Białoszewski, *Szumy, zlepy, ciągi (Utwory zebrane 5)*, Warszawa 1989, 315, 282, not published in English; fragment translated as part of this essay by Jerzy Juruś.

⁴ This situation is described by Jonathan Miller in *On Reflection*, London 1998, 47. The book was published for the exhibition *Mirror Image: Jonathan Miller on Reflection* at The National Gallery London, 16 September – 13 December 1998.

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But just what is it that we do when we decide to view something at the cost of eliminating something else?, asks Jonathan Miller (responsible for an exhibition focusing on reflections, at the National Gallery in London) when considering this phenomenon, using none other than the shop window example.⁵ How is such a decision made? The question is close to the issue which experimental psychology calls the "the cocktail party problem". In a crowded room full of chatting guests, we are making an effort to listen to someone talking specifically to us. Suddenly, we are reached by a fragment of someone else's conversation which we find more interesting. Then we can either "shut down" and tap into that distant conversation or, quite contrarily, "shut off" the voices coming from the outside and focus on our direct interlocutor. But we cannot do both things at the same time. Acoustic alteration is analogous to optical alteration. In both cases, psychology describes this as the effect of the operation of the human will and intellect rather than any movement of the body. With some effort, we can listen to a distant conversation without even turning our head in the direction it is coming from. An in the same way, without moving our head, we can decide whether to look at the exhibits in the shop window or at all the commotion in the street.

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In both cases, the phenomenon is described in terms of a "filter" but it would be difficult to imagine what sort of filter is at work here. Acoustic filters work at various frequencies, either high at the cost of low ones, or the other way round. What we listen to, however, is the content of the conversation, and not its frequency. How can we create a filter sensitive to the subjects that we find interesting? The same rule applies to the window shop, but there are certain noteworthy differences. It is possible to use Polaroid glass, which eliminates, or at least reduces, reflections. But a "filter" which enables the viewer to choose between an elegant manikin in the shop window and an elegant passer-by does not work this way. It is rather a matter of shifting interest – and, again, it would be hard to imagine a device that could translate changes in interest into mutually exclusive differences in visual perception.

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And yet, despite the psychologists' conclusions, our experience of perception tells us that our attention can be split, that we can see or hear two things at the same time. The history of art and the history of its reception seem to indicate that perception is historically changeable. And this goes not only for as well-known and researched an

⁵ Miller, *On Reflection*, 47.

area as fluctuation of preferences and evaluations. It also applies to attitudes toward art, and to the possibilities and ways of seeing things. Over half a century ago, Walter Benjamin wrote that paintings could not have been the object of simultaneous collective reception for a long time, and he perceived their transfer to museums, which forced such collective reception, as a symptom of crisis and a harbinger of decline.⁶ The Dadaists and the successors of Duchamp did much to deprive paintings of the "aura" that made them the object of contemplative meditation. Contemporary art, and multimedia art in particular, precludes such contemplation by definition. By operating various contradictory and strong stimuli, it prevents concentration; it is – as it is meant to be – experienced in a state of distraction and inattention. The difference may be compared to that between reading, which requires basic concentration, and the general lack of concentration when zapping through television channels. It is this excess of stimuli that causes the failure to hear and see – the failure that Hans-Georg Gadamer accuses the modern civilization of.⁷ Contact with contemporary art, whose borders are hazy as it mixes hierarchies and often reaches for the "inartistic", is significantly changing the way we look at a work of art, also old art, pitting distraction against contemplation.⁸ A painting behind glass becomes an almost symbolic focal point for the contradictions and conflicts that arise here. The painting as such belongs in the traditional order of art, entails an attitude applicable to that order, and implies appropriate habits of reception. The glass reflection that is superimposed on it is an iconoclastic intrusion, an infection of the artistic order by an invading disorder and transient immediacy. The accidental obliterates the significant. We are inclined to perceive the picture reality as "granted", made credible just by its "artistic" processing. What appears in the pane of glass – still being a faithful mirror reflection of reality – seems a mere illusion. "The truth of art" is confronted here with a delusive phantom. One feels compelled to ask about the "true" or "false" quality of the image created by the overlapping of the "true" painting and, after all, the "true" reflection of the reality around it. This way, accidentally, not only two entirely different visual fields are mixed here, but also different axiological spheres.

⁶ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in: *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn, London 1999, 211-244, here 228.

⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. Nicholas Walker, ed. Robert Bernasconi, Cambridge 1986; here sourced from the Polish translation by Krystyna Krzemieniowa, *Aktualność piękna*, Warszawa 1993, 49.

⁸ "Distraction and concentration form polar opposites which may be stated as follows: A man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it. He enters into this work of art the way legend tells of the Chinese painter when he viewed his finished painting. In contrast, the distracted mass absorbs the work of art." This diagnosis, considering painting and film, was already provided by Benjamin, although its ideological foundations are now entirely anachronous. Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 232.

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The dual image behind the glass, interfered with by the reflection, is thus not only a problem of visual perception and its mechanisms, which are not entirely known anyway. Perhaps it is the experience gained in contact with contemporary art – blurring the borderline between "art" and "reality" – that compels us to notice it, exactly in spite of the "failure to see", and ask what this peculiar case of "two in one", this hybrid that we are confronted with in a museum room, actually is. A work of art in which "chance viewers ... blur the image and pass." What is a picture that also becomes a mirror?



3 Duchamp's *Fresh Widow* with reflections on surface (photograph by Maria Poprzęcka)

<10>

Scholars have long been interested in the role of the mirror in painting. From the 15th century onward, painters were intrigued by the relation between the virtual reality that obviously appeared in a mirror and the one they created themselves on the non-reflective surface of their support material. In both cases, the viewer can see something that is not what it appears to be but – as opposed to the painting, which presupposes a visible surface – the view that appears in a mirror requires the surface that reflects it to be invisible. When mirrors feature in paintings, the situation becomes complicated because the virtual reality of the painting contains yet another order of virtual reality in the form of the painted reflection.⁹ Art historians, however, have paid more attention to

⁹ Miller, *On Reflection*, 10.

the meanings carried by mirror reflections than to the ways and conventions of depiction. The starting point for Jan Białostocki's deliberations was of course *The Arnolfini Portrait* by Jan van Eyck, a painting in which the mirror serves to include in the picture a reality that exists outside it. The work influenced not only the Dutch painters, but also ones who worked later, all the way to Velasquez.¹⁰ In van Eyck's work, Białostocki writes,

the mirror is not just a decoration, a symbol, or way to show the artist's technical ability to represent glass and the effects it creates. It is another image, a picture within the Picture, and enables Jan van Eyck, the insuperable master, to show us as completely as possible the section of space involved and what is going on there.¹¹

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The glass reflects whatever is present in front of a painting; it seems to play a role similar to that of the mirror in *The Arnolfini Portrait* – it brings the opposite space and "what is going on there" into the depicted image. The glass-covered picture takes on a sort of panoramic dimension. In addition to itself, it also shows what is outside it. Can we, however, talk about "a picture within a picture" here? Given the apparent similarities, there are still more differences. While inclusion of a mirror in a painting is an enhancement of its representation intended by the painter, here it is an unintended accident. Considerable painting skill is required to implement that intention. A painting by Giorgione, known only from Vasari's account, showing a nude young man reflected in water, and also by a suit of armour and a mirror, and consequently visible from all sides, was to be an argument in favour of the superiority of painting over sculpture, and proof that the art of painting was able to show a lot more than just one aspect of a figure.¹² An accidental reflection in a glass pane not only falls short of being any artistic tour de force, but simply results from the operation of the laws of optics. As said before, the painting is fixed while the reflection appearing in its glass shield is transient. The painting is finished, closed; the reflection is subject to time, open to anything that can be brought about by the life that goes on in front of the reflective surface of the glass. The space together with the objects and people that it holds and that are reflected in mirrors painted in pictures usually make up a coherent spatial whole, depicted in such a

¹⁰ Jan Białostocki, "Man and Mirror in Painting: Reality and Transience," in: *The Message of Images: Studies in the History of Art*, Wien 1988, 94; here sourced from the Polish original: Jan Białostocki, "Człowiek i zwierciadło w malarstwie XV i XVI wieku: trwałość i przemijanie," in: *Symbole i obrazy*, Warszawa 1982, 86-102. *The Arnolfini Portrait*, which is at The National Gallery in London, was also the starting point of the exhibition mentioned above.

¹¹ Białostocki, "Man and Mirror in Painting," 89.

¹² Vasari quoted by Białostocki, "Man and Mirror in Painting," 98.

painting, becoming its extension: we can see the other part of the Arnolfinis' chamber,¹³ the royal couple posing for Velasquez in *Las Meninas*, or the cabaret room, the barmaid's back and the customer talking to her in *A Bar at Folies-Bergere* by Manet.¹⁴ The mutual relation of the two virtual realities is simple – complementary. The mirror makes it possible to "look round", make a 180-degree turn; it contributes to the painting what the depicted individuals can see. It intensifies the illusiveness, doing away with one of the weaknesses of painting, namely its quality of showing only one aspect, and includes another (or several other) vantage point(s) in its virtual reality. It offers some spatial simultaneity. It shows more and lets you see more. The mirror broadens, augments, enriches the depiction, both visually and semantically. The inner cohesion of such depiction makes it also substantially different from any effects of overlapping or merging images, used in film, or created accidentally by the wrong rewinding of film or projecting two transparencies at once. The glass reflection is closer to the latter, as it brings into the painting an alien space, the exhibition surroundings that are accidental in relation to the depicted reality. It arranges truly surrealistic encounters of various realities on the "operating table" formed in this case by the surface of the painting. This is not so much "a picture within a picture" as "a picture on a picture", entirely incoherent and autonomous in relation to its original support surface. The reflections in the glass dramatically break the cohesion of the painting, impose a view that goes against our expectations, bring about distracting – although sometimes intriguing – surprises. In a painted mirror, we can see what the characters depicted in the painting can see. In a pane of glass, we can see ourselves. The reflection offers us an image of ourselves which is our unwanted, but inevitable, creation. We become creative against our will. This seems to be the greatest trap of perception. What is it actually that we do wish to see?

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The mirror, like many symbolic images, takes on ambivalent meanings. When shown in the hand of a courtesan, it becomes an attribute of vanity; in the hand of personified Prudence it is a symbol of self-knowledge, a miraculous object enabling one "to know oneself". Reputedly, only humans and chimpanzees have the ability to recognise themselves in a mirror. Freudian psychoanalysis called the autoerotic fondness for one's

¹³ It is exactly the mirror reflection that becomes the starting point for different interpretations of the painting. Apart from the items quoted by Białostocki, recent bibliography: Antoni Ziemia, "Arnolfini i inne portrety Jana van Eycka," in: *Wielkie dzieła, wielkie interpretacje*, ed. Maria Poprzęcka, Warszawa 2007, 21-23.

¹⁴ The issue of the mirror reflection in Manet's painting, its meaning, and related representational inconsistencies, are discussed by several articles in the compilation *12 Views of Manet's Bar*, ed. Bradford R. Collins, Princeton 1996.

own appearance narcissism. It could be added here that this is a mistake on Freud's part – and not the only one, either. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Narcissus falls in love with his reflection in water without knowing that this is his own face, which is why he perishes out of yearning for the unattainable object of his desire. What we recognise in a reflection – as opposed to Narcissus – is our own figure. This goes for our reflection in a glass pane too, far as it may be from the delusive credibility of a mirror reflection. It is well known that the visibility of a surface is inversely proportional to its reflectivity – the more it reflects, the less it is apparent as a surface itself.¹⁵ A perfect mirror is one that is not experienced as a surface at all. A glass pane on a painting is always perceived as such, and the reflection in it is imperfect, never entirely "mirror-like". What is, however, interesting here is not the narcissistic fondness for one's own image but the relations between the two interfering surfaces, seen simultaneously. Both images are "of the same essence" but at the same time they disrupt each other. They compete with each other. The better we see ourselves, the worse is our vision of the painting. The more we look at ourselves, the less we look at the painting. Furthermore, "the other me" has entered the virtual reality of the picture not only as a mirrored (even if imperfectly) image, but as an active factor which shapes what I see. Thus, we are entering a purely personal sphere of sensations here, a game between giving in to habits and submission to duties on the one hand and imagination and curiosity on the other, between concentration and openness to accidental stimuli. But also our very person enters the picture, our figure plunges into it. Quite literally, *Der Betrachter ist im Bild*. The whole created with our active and passive participation appears unclear, as if several sketches were superimposed on one another, none of which is definitive. Incidental existences create ephemeral configurations. But it is this lack of clarity, this ambiguity, this unfinished status that endows them with intensive life. It produces the feeling of surprise, of being caught, suspended in a nondescript unreality.

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Although not permanently, the painting behind the glass and the reflection in it are integrally fused. Placed on one surface and equivalent, they are submitted to our viewing to the same degree. The reflection is not a shielding screen that can be moved aside, not varnish that can be removed, or dust that can be wiped off. As long as we are looking at the painting, it remains within the reach of our gaze. This situation allows us to ask about the diverse relations between reality and its representation.¹⁶ A painting is

¹⁵ Miller, *On Reflection*, 59.

¹⁶ This is one of the most debated notions in modern history of art, yet still far from unambiguous definition, as its discussions tend to be historical and presentational rather than definitive. David Summers, "Representation," in: *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard

a reflection of reality but, due to the glass, it reflects a reality different from the one it was originally intended to reflect. The picture behind the glass is dual, but composed of three realities: the reality of the painting, the reality of the reflection, and the reality of the image resulting from their fusion. Which is then more "real", more "realistic"?

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What do you think he would answer, if one were to tell him that, until then, he had only seen ghosts, that he now has before his eyes objects that are more real and closer to the truth? Would he not think that what he had seen earlier was more real than what he is shown now?

Plato's question (quoted here in Albert Aurier's literary transcription¹⁷) paradoxically seems to reflect this dilemma. Namely, there are two different "realities" here. And there are different reflections of it, different "realisms": of art and of the mirror, whose origins and morphologies are entirely different. What is "truth" here, and what "illusion"? The painting comes from the past (even if not so distant, but past nonetheless), while the reflection is present. As already said, the painting came into existence through complicated artistic effort; the reflection has resulted from the operation of the laws of physics. The painting should therefore be experienced as more "artificial", and the reflection as something natural, real. And yet, albeit far from the Platonic understanding of the picture, in a direct confrontation with the reflection it is the painting that we are inclined to ascribe "reality" and "representation" to, while we would rather call the unstable, animated shapes carried over by the glass reflections a "fantasy", a "changeable phantom". If – to follow Gadamer's line of thinking – we assume that, despite the increasingly diversified awareness of the picture, which gets further and further away from magical identity, "non-differentiation remains essential to all experience of pictures,"¹⁸ we have a much greater awareness of the non-identity of the reflection than of that of the picture. And this is yet another paradox. Namely, if the essence of any experience of pictures is the placing of an equation mark between the

Shiff, Chicago/London 1996, 3-15; Keith Moxey, *The Practice of Theory. Poststructuralism, Cultural Politics, and Art History*, New York 1994, 29-40. The position that seems the closest to the understanding assumed in this article is that described by Moxey, in reference to the critics of Ernst Gombrich (Nelson Goodman, Norman Bryson) "who believe that visual representation has less to do with a perennial desire to obtain mimetic accuracy – that is, the artist's desire to duplicate the objects of perception – and more to do with cultural projection, with the construction, presentation, and dissemination of cultural values." (Moxey, *The Practice of Theory*, 30)

¹⁷ Plato, *The Republic*, Book 7, 515 d, quoted after Albert Aurier's article "Symbolism in Painting: Paul Gauguin," in: *Symbolist Art Theories. A Critical Anthology*, ed. Henri Dorra, London 1994, 192-203, here 195.

¹⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, New York 2004, 134; here sourced in the Polish translation by Bogdan Baran, *Prawda i metoda. Zarys hermeneutyki filozoficznej*, Kraków 1993, 152.

picture and the pictured, the thing and the image, then our understanding of art forces us to see "representation" – the causing of a presence – in the picture rather than in the glass reflection. The latter may be merely a "likening". And this comes about not due to the blurriness, the imprecision of the reflection, but rather because of our convictions. Such is our "logic of the gaze". Once implemented, certain mental constructs, a certain mental coercion, and none other than our aesthetic awareness, move aside what we perceive with our own eyes. An analogy can be found here with the two ways of imitation between which the European culture oscillates, i.e. the representation of the phenomenal and the ideal sides of the world, or between likeness and truth.¹⁹ The reflection will be the former, false image, and the painting will be what reaches the real existence. By dismissing the reflection, we unknowingly dismiss the delusive, mimetic model of representation in our strive to know the "real" picture, arisen not out of the senses, but born out of an idea. And moving on to the more concrete field of art theory, we dismiss the representation of things as they are or as they appear to be, accepting instead the representation of them as they should be represented, and therefore we are moving around in the midst of the oldest – but also the most durable – categories in our thinking about art.

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"Gioconda smiled into her moustache," Tadeusz Różewicz writes in the next verse. This evocation of Duchamp, although merely a poetic intuition, is extremely relevant here. He was the first one to sense and utilize the ambiguity that a work of art is endowed with by a pane of glass: *The Large Glass*. Leaving aside, for now, the countless possibilities for interpretation of Duchamp's Glass, whether metaphysical, esoteric, or cabalistic, let us just recall that it was the first work of art "left at the disposal of the viewer". In 1918, in Buenos Aires, Duchamp attached instructions for the viewers to his *Small Glass*: "To be looked at (from the other side of the glass) with one eye, close to, for almost an hour" – a travesty of the guidelines given by Leonardo in his instructions about colour perspective.²⁰ That small work foreshadowed *The Large Glass*. In the photograph taken by Ozenfant during the exhibition organised by Catherine S. Dreier at the Brooklyn Museum in 1926, paintings by Mondrian and Leger, hanging on a wall, can be seen through the *Glass*. Duchamp believed that the use of the glass pane liberated the artist from the tedious process of painting the background of the picture and

¹⁹ Michał Paweł Markowski, *Pragnienie obecności. Filozofie reprezentacji od Platona do Kartezjusza*, Gdańsk 1999, 38. A major part of the book focuses on the tradition and development of these two ways of imitation.

²⁰ Oskar Bätschmann, *The Artist in the Modern World. A Conflict Between Market and Self-Expression*, trans. E. Martin, Köln 1997, 186; Leonardo, *A Treatise on Painting*, no. 261.

enabled him to change it freely by merely moving the glass somewhere else.²¹ By the same token, *The Large Glass* can absorb other works, adapt them freely, merge with them, make – together with them and with the surroundings, and a whole interplay of reflections – ever new configurations, and this capacity potentially multiplies to infinity the number of the meanings suggested by this subversive anti-masterpiece.

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Duchamp, who traced the delusiveness of vision all his life, also utilised the reflective shop window effect once, as a joke. A photograph he took in New York in 1945 shows a bookseller's window display of Andre Breton's books, whose attractiveness is enhanced by a scantily-clad manikin – obviously "the bride stripped bare by her bachelors, even" – pressing against her breasts one of the books by "the pope of Surrealism". Duchamp and Breton, facing each other, are reflected in the window pane on both sides of the "bride", which produces an impression that they are both eyeing her intently. All of this, however, is an illusion. The two men are separated from the manikin by the glass, much like the "bachelors"; in fact, they are not looking at her, but at each other. It is only our false impression, from viewing the photograph, that they are casting their lustful eyes at the "bride's" bosom.²²

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Going back to the question of what exactly a picture behind glass is, in its accidental and transient shape, one can therefore look at it as an inadvertent Dadaist work. The unexpected and absurd clusters of images appearing in the glass pane and mimicking the picture can be compared to the ironic and iconoclastic distortions of famous masterpieces, made with a great gusto by the Dadaists. The effects can be compared to the Dadaist collages and photomontages that do not serve any intentional artistic structure but are merely supposed to reflect – in the torrent of automatically associated forms – the chaos and disorder of the phenomena simultaneously brought forth by reality. The simultaneous narrative technique, the disruption of the unity of the work, the inclusion of shreds of everyday reality, taken out of context, the lack of meaning – the analogies can go on and on here.

²¹ Bächtmann, *The Artist in the Modern World*, 187.

²² Hans Belting, *The Invisible Masterpiece*, trans. Helen Atkins, London 2001, 332.



4 Brâncuși's *Mlle Pogany* with reflections on surface (photograph by Maria Poprzęcka)

<18>

What should be added is that the reflection of the viewer on the reflective surface of the painting may also be intentional; it may be deliberately included in the sphere of meanings, and even be decisive for the message of the work. This is the case in the famous Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington by Maya Ying Lin. The subject of much heated debate when it was erected in the nineteen-eighties, the memorial is formed as a long wall of black granite slabs, gradually emerging from a lawn near the Lincoln Memorial. Inscribed on it, in a chronological order, are some fifty-eight thousand names of the soldiers who lost their lives in the Vietnam War. The shiny surfaces of the granite slabs reflect the figures of the living who have come to pay their homage to the dead or look up the names of their loved ones. The living are amidst the dead; memory is literally "alive". The height of the wall grows along with the growth of the number of the casualties, and conversely our reflection becomes smaller and smaller in comparison to it and to the ever-higher columns of names. As the war dies out, the wall shrinks, sinks into the ground, which again changes our own proportion in relation to it. The reflections of the human figures are distinct from the black of the granite, but remain obscure. Suggestive, if ambiguous, is also the message of this memorial, "leaving us with the dead, our doubts and our fears," in the words of Sergiusz Michalski, who notes

this aspect of the work commemorating the Vietnam veterans.²³ In a more evident way, the reflection effect is used in Berlin's Deportation Memorial, where the names and selected photographs of the victims are placed on mirror walls, and thereby the commemoration merges into the ongoing life of the city (Wolfgang Gochel, Joachim von Rosenberg, Hans-Norbert Burket, Ehlers-Platz, Berlin-Steglitz, 1995).

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Reference to contemporary art prompts yet another interpretive temptation. The hesitations exposed here, caused by a phenomenon that may be trifle and hardly worthy of attention, namely reflections seen in glass surfaces protecting paintings, are not merely a problem of disrupted perception. The disruption stems from the doubt as to the very ontological status of a work of art and its relation to reality – which is indicated for example by the cited Platonic questions. They refer us to the attempts – made mostly in French philosophy – to "reverse Platonism", to induct the notion of simulacrum into the sphere situated between the dichotomies durably rooted in thinking about art: essence and appearance, idea and picture, model and copy, original and reproduction. The career of this term – hardly understood unambiguously – in the history of art of the last three decades is intriguing and would require a separate discussion²⁴ (e.g. Gilles Deleuze treats it as a philosophical issue, while Jean Baudrillard, operating from a sociological perspective, paints an apocalyptic vision of a society living among simulacra, no longer capable of telling reality and its electronic mirages apart). Michel Foucault, in his famous essay whose starting point was Magritte's painting *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*, points to the possibility of writing an alternative history of modern art, based on the inclusion of the notion of simulacrum in it, in confrontation with which all the existing concepts that are rudimentary for the theory of representation, such as the original, priority, similarity, imitation, or credibility, become blurred out.²⁵ It would be a history not of victories in mastering the imitation of reality but of the escape from it, a history not of actual objects but of the strategies employed to pretend them, an Art and Delusion rather than an Art and Illusion.²⁶ The reflection in the glass may be seen – metaphorically, of course – as a figuration of the simulacrum, that delusion forcing its way into the accepted orders of representation.

²³ Sergiusz Michalski, *Public Monuments. Art in Political Bondage 1870-1997*, London 1998, 188 et seq.

²⁴ A brief exposition can be found in Michael Camille, "Simulacrum," in: Nelson and Shiff, *Critical Terms for Art History*, 31-44.

²⁵ Michel Foucault, *This is Not a Pipe*, trans. James Harkness, London, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1983; sourced here in the Polish translation by Tadeusz Komendant, *To nie jest fajka*, Gdańsk 1996.

²⁶ Camille, "Simulacrum," 40.

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A picture behind glass is not simple, not homogenous, but entangled in complex relationships with other images. "Taking a close look at transparency"²⁷ in search of references and comparisons for its status, one can also reach for Deconstructivist thought, questioning the simple relation between the sign (the signifier) and the notion it stands for (the signified), which involves the sign into complex relationships with other signs. A picture behind glass can be seen almost as a figuration of such a sign, always entangled in other contexts and signs whose existence in it we do not even suspect. Such a sign places us in a situation of "non-decidability": we come close to its meaning but we cannot master and control it, which is a situation close to the hesitations of perception that have been described here. The outline of the notion becomes blurred, and the notion itself "absent" – similarly, there is no way of reaching the "presence" of the picture, disrupted by the invasion of another reality and a different mode of representation. Also Deconstructivist is the very act of directing one's attention to what is different and what destroys the coherence and homogeneity of the notion, making it heterogeneous. What has become the subject matter of the deliberation is the "other" – intermediary – surface, blurring the direct presence of the picture. After all, even in the colloquial language, "the world behind glass" stands for what is only seemingly accessible. This, of course, is only a tentative comparison. Nevertheless, one could ponder on the question to what degree not only contemporary art, but also contemporary thinking, breaking the hierarchic and logical orders, pervades – sometimes without our awareness of it – our perception of art, compelling us also to notice and think about what distracts us, ejects us from the obvious rut, prevents us from reaching the essence of things, from looking "face to face".²⁸

²⁷ The expression used in reference to Wisława Szymborska's poetry by Małgorzata Baranowska in her book *Tak lekko było nic o tym nie wiedzieć ... Szymborska i świat*, Wrocław 1996.

²⁸ The photographs for this article were taken of the following works of art ([back to note 2](#)):

fig. 1: Francis Bacon, *Three Figures in a Room* (detail), 1964, triptych, each panel 198 x 147 cm. Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris (© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2010)

fig. 2: Marcel Duchamp, *To Be Looked at (from the Other Side of the Glass) with One Eye, Close to, for Almost an Hour [À regarder (l'autre côté du verre) d'un oeil, de près, pendant presque une heure]*, 1918, oil paint, silver leaf, lead wire, and magnifying lens on glass (cracked), 49.5 x 39.7 cm, mounted between two panes of glass in a standing metal frame, 51 x 41.2 x 3.7 cm, on painted wood base, 4.8 x 45.3 x 11.4 cm; overall height, 55.8 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Katherine S. Dreier Bequest (© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2010)

fig. 3: Marcel Duchamp, *Fresh Widow*, 1920, miniature French window, painted wood frame, and panes of glass covered with black leather, 77.5 x 44.8 cm, on wood sill 1.9 x 53.4 x 10.2 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Katherine S. Dreier Bequest (© VG Bild-Kunst Bonn 2010)

fig. 4: Constantin Brâncuși, *Mlle Pogany*, 1913, bronze with black patina, 43.8 x 21.5 x 31.7 cm, on limestone base 14.6 x 15.6 x 18.7 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest (© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2010)

Translated by Jerzy Juruś

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