

## Foreword: Non-memory

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[1] In 1998 Starmach Gallery in Krakow organised a reconstruction of the 1<sup>st</sup> *Exhibition of Modern Art* in Krakow from 1948 to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary<sup>1</sup>. It was the first postwar major review of Polish art and an attempt to defend the art world from the growing pressure of the political power. It featured various genres of art: painting, experimental photography, and installations. The exhibition had soon been closed by the authorities. Soon after, Socialist Realism had been officially accepted as the only dominating art trend.

[2] Professor Mieczysław Porębski, one of the creators of the historic exhibition, met in the Gallery in 1998 with students of art history. The exhibition presented various approaches to "modernity": *The Surgeon's Hiccups* [*Czkawka chirurga*] by Tadeusz Brzozowski, *There Were Many Roads* [*Istniało wiele dróg*] by Marian Bogusz, *Spatial Forms* [*Formy przestrzenne*] by Tadeusz Kantor, dialog with Juan Miro by Andrzej Cybulski, delicate lyric paintings by Kazimierz Mikulski, photographic experiments by Fortunata Obrąpalska and Zbigniew Dłubak, Władysław Strzemiński's transpositions of afterimages of the invisible by his student Stefan Wegner, and *Sun and Other Stars* [*Słońce i inne gwiazdy*] by Andrzej Wróblewski. What dominated was abstraction and a non-figurative version of Surrealism.

[3] The first and most important question posed by the students was: why pictures painted by young people who had just experienced occupation, war, and camps showed no sign of war trauma? "Because we wanted to live!" – Porębski answered immediately.

[4] The surprise that we witnessed was a surprise of the ones "granted the grace of being born later" than the witnesses of history who wanted to forget it, or at least separate it with a "thick line". It was a clash between the generation of grandchildren who emphatically and curiously anticipate testimonies and the grandfathers' and fathers' need of forgetting, necessary for the life to keep going normally. "Let us pretend that this never happened" – a similar phrase was used by Konstanty Ildefons Gałczyński, who had spent the war in Oflag, to wave off the solicitations of his daughter<sup>2</sup>. One might say that

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<sup>1</sup> *I Wystawa Sztuki Nowoczesnej pięćdziesiąt lat później*, Starmach Gallery, Kraków 1998–1999.

<sup>2</sup> Cited in: Anna Arno, *Konstanty Ildefons Gałczyński. Niebezpieczny poeta*, Kraków 2013, 305. More about the historical need for forgetting in: Robert Traba, "Konieczność zapominania, czyli jak sobie radzić z *ars oblivionis* / The Necessity to Forget, or How to Cope *ars oblivionis*", in: *Herito*, 13

the reconstruction at Starmach Gallery did not meet the expectations of those who were then in their twenties and who still remembered the recent exhibition *Where is Your Brother, Abel?* [*Gdzie jest brat twój, Abel?*] at Zachęta Gallery in Warsaw and who walked there through Mirosław Bałka's *Soap Corridor* [*Mydlany korytarz*] (1996).

[5] This seemingly trivial anecdote introduces us into the essence of conflicts and entanglements of the "phenomenon of memory"<sup>3</sup> that for over a quarter of a century has dominated both academic, as well as political and public discourse, having a particularly emotional and conflict-inspiring nature in post-Soviet countries. Paraphrasing the term by Jerzy Stempowski, one might say that memory has been released from its leash. Now – let us add – it is taking its revenge. These threatening words are very much in place here. For, no other subject of humanistic reflection has been at the same time a tool for current politics of all options in equal measure. To a great extent this political dependence provides its fuel, though perhaps not directly. The discourse is taking place on all levels – from elite university conferences through media to Internet blogs and tweets. It gets stuck between academic language and journalist, ideology-invested post-memory. It includes the reflections of the greatest philosophers of our time, such as Paul Ricoeur, major historians, like Franklin Ankersmit, as well as loudmouthed party propagandists. It is driven by the river of typological specifications: natural, biological, collective, cultural, manipulated, imposed, reconstructed, constructed, archiving, falsified, de-falsified, unaccepted, repressed, conflicted memory, wounded or ill, post-memory, pop-memory etc.<sup>4</sup> What is interesting in this context is not so much the research on the essence of memory ("which is neither simple nor obvious"<sup>5</sup>), but a reflection on its public, often intrusive over-presence. It is more or less known when a decision was made that it was high time "to recall the history of the fathers". It is the revenge of memory. "If during this period people had made an attempt to confront memory, to release it, even if it was to divide them, perhaps it would not have come back so powerfully with all its destructive, previously repressed force" – wrote Robert Traba<sup>6</sup>.

[6] It is not possible or reasonable here to control the discourse about "the phenomenon of memory". One can only note that despite the infinite "secondary city"<sup>7</sup> of

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(2013).

<sup>3</sup> Sharon Macdonald, "Europa jako kraina pamięci / Europe as a Memoryland", in: *Herito*, 13 (2013), 31. The author refers to *Memorylands*, a notion she introduced in her *Memorylands. Heritage and Identity in Europe Today*, London 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Amid a profusion of publications two issues of *Konteksty* magazine are very helpful: *Pamięć i zapomnienie. Pamięć jako kategoria kulturowa i poznawcza*, 1-2 and 3-4 (2003) as well as one of *Herito: Konflikty pamięci / conflicts of memory*, (13) 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Stanisław Obirek, "O dialogu w kontekście konfliktów pamięci / On Dialog in the Context of Conflicts of Memory", *Herito*, 13 (2013), 12.

<sup>6</sup> Traba, *Konieczność zapominania*, 28.

<sup>7</sup> This well known yet invaluable notion was coined by George Steiner, *Real Presences*, Chicago 1991, 1-50.

the discourse of memory, Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations on The Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*<sup>8</sup> remain open. In this situation of excess I would like to focus on "individual memory", which I would rather call private, personal. Maurice Halbwachs, the classic researcher of memory who introduced the notion of "collective memory", drew here a very important dichotomy. He states that there are individual and collective memories. In other words, each individual uses two types of memory. Yet, if one uses either the former or the latter kind, then he or she introduces two different or even contradictory approaches. On the one hand, memories are created within one's personality and individual life; the ones shared with other people are interesting to one inasmuch as they differentiate one from other people. On the other hand, at certain moments one can simply feel like being a part of a group and recall impersonal memories inasmuch as they are of interest to the group<sup>9</sup>.

[7] Over half a century has passed since Maurice Halbwachs's book was published (1950, posthumously, the author died in 1945 in the camp in Buchenwald) and the "phenomenon of memory", drawing highly from the writings of the French sociologist, imposes a complication of this dichotomy. Personally I agree with a radical statement by Robert Traba that "from a biological point of view collective memory does not exist"<sup>10</sup>. There is merely a private, singular, individual memory.

[8] The reflection on this type of memory is much less developed. Usually, it is understood as memoirs written after some time, diaries and journals, oral history, intimate come backs to childhood provoked by a Proustian magdalen, which take various forms. It is anything but surprising as this kind of memory cannot be captured by sociological, anthropological, psychological or neuropsychological research methods. Like all fields of privacy, it is being made public and laid bare by contemporary culture, as well as deprived of its exceptional and uncovered nature. Yet, it does not mean it is being revealed thoroughly or that it does not hide the inviolable reserves of its iron capital. That it does not preserve what is hidden, reserved, and consciously "forgotten". It is not being revealed either in a confessional, or in sociological surveys, or at a psychoanalyst's office. Not necessarily because it is shameful, disgraceful, and humiliating. Also because it is so precious that it is being kept like in a safe. It is a phantom memory that can make the pain stop existing. Yet, it also lets one live. It will give comfort and it will heal, if only in an escapist manner. It is discontinuous and lacking not only continuity, but also any structure at all. The disc will never be perfectly rid of it. We can never be safe from it. It is waiting in hiding and it falls suddenly provoked by sound, smell, taste, or a heard word. It can sneak inside a dream. It is being driven away like remorse. It is rather

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<sup>8</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, trans. J. R. Hollingdale, Cambridge 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Maurice Halbwachs, *The Social Frameworks of Memory*, trans. Lewis A. Coser, Chicago and London 1992.

<sup>10</sup> Traba, *Konieczność zapominania*, 23.

reluctant to "provoke regret for the sins" and inspire the need to redress. These religious categories seem most justified in the light of Paul Ricoeur's reflections, who used notions from the field of theology, such as guilt and forgiveness. Keeping one's scepticism towards the dichotomy obverse – reverse in reference to the representation of memory – forgetting, one can also add the third category: secrecy. This kind of authentic, hard, and uncorrupt secrecy.

[9] Yet, do we not expect from art that it and only it will provide access to this memory? With a pinch of self-criticism we know how much of faulty and revoked conviction that "the artist expresses himself" is in such an expectation. Yet, where to look for what is individual? After all, it is not in sociological surveys. Nor in academic *memory industry*.

[10] What works as a point of reference for several following remarks (mainly personal and without any pretence for generalisations) is recent Polish art as seen (or is being presented by curators and critics) in several recent review exhibitions. It seems that these years have brought a sharp turn in the approach of artists to the past, its remembrance and not so much forgetting, but a casual dismissal from the sphere of interest. It is clear that the work made in the 1990s within the framework of "critical art", which in a painful and drastic manner addressed the trauma of the Second World War and most of all of the Holocaust, is a matter of the past. Several of them: Mirosław Bałka's *Winterreise*, Artur Żmijewski's *Game of Tag* [*Berek*] and *Our Songbook* [*Nasz śpiewnik*], have procured a stable position in art history. Yet, they remain spiritually closer to Oskar Hansen's Auschwitz Memorial from 1958 than to the art of artists born in the 1970s and later.

[11] Is the change that we are observing only a result of the emergence of a new, younger generation, of a growing temporal distance, of the decline of biological bonds with the witnesses of that period? It is so to some extent, yet it is not a decisive reason. "Critical artists" born in the 1960s were separated from the war by more than one generation. They were not a generation of children, but of grandchildren. Their memory of Auschwitz and the Holocaust was already a reconstructed post-memory and even big generational differences do not make a big difference here. Bałka's work was made as a result of his "winter journey" to Auschwitz and Birkenau, an experience shared by hundreds of thousands of tourists (which he pointed out in his work *Auschwitz – Wieliczka*). Żmijewski's *Game of Tag*, on the other hand, was a staging, and a shocking effect stemmed from the information that naked actors, recruited from among the homeless, were chasing each other in the former gas chamber. From the point of view of the genre, Żmijewski's *Our Songbook* is a reportage from the Israeli care home. All of these works were made as a result of a conscious restitution or arbitrary reworking of the past, additionally mediated by the medium of the film. It is a restitution of somebody

else's memory. While the nature of the change is well presented by Darek Foks and Zbigniew Libera's work (exhibition and book) titled *Co robi łączniczka?*, it was made late, in 2006, when the "critical art" waned receded. Yet, the work does not refer to the Warsaw Uprising. It refers to the Museum of the Warsaw Uprising (open in 2004). This is not about the restitution of memory, but about the analysis of the results of its institutionalisation, spectacular representations and inclusion in pop culture.

[12] The decline of interest in the Holocaust can also be influenced by its inflation and opportunist overuse, which gained such sarcastic names as *holobusiness* and *shoahbusiness*. Increasingly suspicious seemed the comfort of post-memory – its psychological, moral, political, artistic comfort, free from any risk. However, something else is way more important here – the young generation entered the realm of art with their own memory, the memory of the Polish People's Republic<sup>11</sup>.

[13] It was clearly manifested at the exhibition *Concrete Heritage. From Le Corbusier to blokiers* at the Warsaw Centre for Contemporary Art in 2007<sup>12</sup> (the term borrowed from Andrzej Basista's book about the architecture of communism<sup>13</sup>). It turned out that high-rise blocks quarters – rejected as an unwanted heritage, degraded and degrading places and pockets of criminal subcultures and social pathologies – build very strong identity. They are a natural environment for young people who are born and bred in blocks of flats, regardless of their social status. It was because the communist mass housing development projects were highly democratic. Contrary to popular opinions and research, these places foster the formulation of social bonds. They are provincial, small town enclaves within metropolitan agglomerations. Finally, blocks of flats shape their own culture or pop culture – importantly, it is their own culture. It turns out that "small homelands" do not have to be of pastoral, rustic nature. They can also be repulsive and concrete-made<sup>14</sup>.

[14] What is the memory of communist Poland like, which for the generation of forty and thirty-year-olds is their own, not inherited or transmitted memory? Most of all, it is the memory of childhood. Its protagonists are characters from fairytales and television films, Kolargol and Uszatek bears, Maja the bee, the four tank-men, and *Star Wars*. This is the memory of "the land of one's parents"<sup>15</sup>, it is a domestic, local, and peripheral memory. There are no major historic events in it. It can only be qualified as consisting of

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<sup>11</sup> The memory of communist Poland is addressed in two issues of *Konteksty* magazine: 4 (2010) and 1 (2011).

<sup>12</sup> *Betonowe dziedzictwo. Od Le Corbusiera do blokiersów*, The Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle, curated by Ewa Gorządek and Stach Szablowski, Warsaw 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Andrzej Basista, *Betonowe dziedzictwo. Architektura w Polsce czasów komunizmu*, Warszawa 2001.

<sup>14</sup> One of the proofs of the change of the assessment of quarters of blocks of flats is Jarosław Trybuś's *Przewodnik po warszawskich blokowiskach*, Warszawa 2011.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Tadeusz Sobolewski, "Polska moich rodziców", *Konteksty*, 4 (2010), 49-52.

"micro-histories". Today, it is seen through the photographs of Anna Beata Bohdziewicz, Chris Niedenthal, and Tadeusz Rolke, as well provincial photographers-documentalists discovered with passion by young researchers from the Foundation of Archeology of Photography. In the recalled (constructed?) image of communist Poland there dominates the tendency to capture coincidence, ugliness, curiosities, but most of all absurdities, as taught by films *The Cruise* [*Rejs*] and *Teddy-Bear* [*Miś*], the formative films of the generation born in communist Poland, but reaching maturity already in the period of political transformation. It is a black-and-white country or in a flamboyant ORWO colour. It is banality and ordinariness reaching out from Jerzy Lewczyński's *Cracks of the Everyday* [*Szczeliny codzienności*]<sup>16</sup>. These "cracks of memory" were shown at the exhibition *Wonderful Years* [*Cudowne lata*] at the Museum of Literature in 2009<sup>17</sup>. Yet, all considered, I agree with Tadeusz Sobolewski: "It is a fascinating, unrecognised time. Leaning towards the future. Who can recognise it, who can falsify it? Those who will be born later"<sup>18</sup>.

[15] Defining the 1980s as "time leaning towards the future" brings to mind one more reflection. It is being suggested by the recent exhibition in the Warsaw Museum of Modern Art titled *As You Can See. Polish Art Today* [*Co widać? Polska sztuka dzisiaj*]<sup>19</sup>. The exhibition is big and very "curatorial" (Sebastian Cichocki, Łukasz Ronduda). It confirms that war memory (variously reconstructed) has ceased. What, then, can actually be seen? Young artists "leaning towards the past". Backwards, not forwards. Retrospection, revision, restitution, restoration, reproduction, reconstruction, relativisation, remix, requisition, reaction. Also, rehabilitation or resentment. These are the terms that could be used to analyse the majority of the exhibited works. We could also add crafts – for what is clear is a come back to "handcrafts" after the period of the domination of the camera and the computer. Hence, everything is a reference to the past, yet it is mediated, sometimes multiple times by arts and the media. This is why it is so difficult to state to what extent it is a reference to individual memory. Polish art "today" is turned towards "yesterday", as if it were unable to liberate itself from the network of dependence on "memory", even if the repository of this memory is now completely different.

[16] How far is this "leaning towards the past" merely a casual form of searching in the drawers of the media<sup>20</sup>. Or perhaps in the nostalgic Filandia?

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<sup>16</sup> *Szczeliny codzienności. Zwyczajność. Banalność. Krawędzie pamięci. Fotografie Jerzego Lewczyńskiego*, The Municipal Art Gallery in Częstochowa, Częstochowa 2009.

<sup>17</sup> *"Cudowne lata". Muzyka. Poezja. Malarstwo. Lata 70., 80*, Adam Mickiewicz Museum of Literature in Warsaw in 2009. The exhibition subsequently toured around several cities.

<sup>18</sup> Sobolewski, *Polska moich rodziców*, 51.

<sup>19</sup> *Co widać? Polska sztuka dzisiaj*, The Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw 2014.

<sup>20</sup> A term by Hanna Baltyń, "Szuflandia", *Konteksty*, 1-2 (2003), 194-207.

Never again will there be a summer like this one [...]  
Never again will a cigarette taste this good,  
Nor the vodka so cold and tasty.  
Never again will there be girls so pretty.  
Never cookies this tasty [...].

[17] Further on Bogusław Linda sings Świetlicki's lyrics about coca-cola, meats, and mustard... Only the final part brings some kind of awakening:

Never again  
Will there be  
A summer like this one...  
There's a light in the horizon  
And the sound  
Of iron<sup>21</sup>.

[18] Yet, this kind of fear is expressed only by the poet. It is not seen in visual arts.

*Translated by Karolina Kolenda*

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<sup>21</sup> Marcin Świetlicki, *Filandia*, Świetlicki group, vocals by Bogusław Linda, access: You Tube.