

ANDRZEJ TUROWSKI

L'IMAGINATION AU POUVOIR:
ART HISTORY IN THE TIMES OF CRISIS, 1960S–1970S

The present paper on art history practiced at the University of Poznań in the context of changing theoretical and research tendencies is rather personal and not very academic, and I have no intention to make any far-reaching generalizations. My scope is quite narrow: about fifteen years, from 1965 till the end of the 1970s, which is just a fragment of the century-long history of the Poznań Institute of Art History. What follows, are mostly my recollections, but they will also refer to my present reflection on art history, rooted in my experience in the 1960s, and somehow – perhaps obliquely – touching upon the general turn in the humanities, largely caused by the social crisis and cultural revolution of 1968, which resulted in introducing imagination into positive knowledge and critical thought. I will address an apparently simple question: how did it happen?

Among items found during archaeological excavations in my private archive, both private and typical for my generation, I find a veritable *bric-à-brac*: the 1956 issues of *Współczesność*, with the title provocatively beginning with a small “w,” *Bonjour, tristesse* by Françoise Sagan, films of the Italian neorealism, watched in student clubs that were popular after the Thaw, Grotowski’s performances in the Theater of 13 Rows in Opole, William Gibson’s “Two for the Seesaw,” starring Cybulski and Kępowska, in the Warsaw Ateneum Theater, Komeda and Ptaszyn Wróblewski’s jazz basement somewhere in Poznań (maybe in Wilda), also Poznań poetry festivals with the rebel poet Andrzej Bursa from Cracow, the first exhibition of Vedova’s abstraction, organized by Professor Zdzisław Kępiński, a surprising show of Henry Moore’s sculpture at the National Museum. Besides, continuous hitchhiking all over Poland with books, mostly translations of contemporary world literature: Sartre and Camus; Steinbeck, Faulkner, Hemingway, and Capote; the French “*Nouveau Roman*”: Michel Butor and Alain Robbe-Grillet, also Beckett, and the Polish writer Marek Hłasko who was a genuine star. But first of all, Sartre’s essay *Marxism and Existentialism*, written especially for the Polish reader.

Then studying at the university: first law, then art history. I passed an examination in world art history with Piotr Skubiszewski just a week after passing another one in international law with his brother, Krzysztof Skubiszewski. The former exam took place at the Department of Art History on the top floor of a building on Fredry Street: a long, dark corridor with Zbyszek Czarnecki's photo studio at the end, on both sides offices of junior and senior faculty, a seminar and lecture room with a huge projector to show illustrations, and benches in the corridor, on which we were spending long hours sitting. We made friends with students of the Academy of Fine Arts, sharing intellectual fascinations with colleagues who also studied art history. When I started teaching as an assistant lecturer, Adam Labuda was just about to graduate. We were both reading Foucault's *Order of Things* on the Hel Peninsula beach, soon to discover Derrida's "*différance*" which we did not quite understand. Janos Brendel, a senior and a refugee from Hungary, was telling us about the Budapest uprising. The year 1968 was at hand and I just visited Paris for the first time, fascinated with structuralism, watching the famous debate between Raymond Picard and Roland Barthes on the "new criticism and new imposture" (1965), and then the revolutionary and semiological disputes within the "Tel Quel" group. It was hard to make all that a coherent whole. We were traversing a shaky terrain where everything could easily explode and disappear into thin air. Such was the atmosphere in which we were asking our first questions about art and scholarship, culture and knowledge, history and methodology, politics and responsibility.

At that time we also realized that the choice of a specific rationality makes our scholarship coherent and rigorous. Normative theories, which determined the framework of our research in advance, were convenient and logically clear. Those strategies which grew out of the historical material under consideration proved more difficult and potentially ambiguous. Still, we found such theories, relativizing the process of knowledge acquisition in respect to what remains unknown, much more interesting and stimulating. Imagination, chance, emotions, and even fantasy which allow for creative uncertainty give the scholar an experience of knowledge that is "in-complete," i.e., free of the hegemony of rational doctrine and the institutional power of the academia.

The directions concerning ways of reasoning and the falsification of the material under consideration are not "neutral." I knew about it only at that time. Today, stressing such a position of the scholar among the ideological, political, and academic discourses, I do not adhere to the reductionist (or metaphysical) ideological determinism in the humanities, but put in the foreground the role of "ideosis" as a context, milieu or network to which we belong as academics.

At each stage of knowledge acquisition, we must remember about the placement of our research in some specific episteme including socio-symbolic fields and institutions, legal and political orders, psychological and emotional phenomena, desires and traumas, traditions and visions, affects and myths which naturally belong to our scholarly competence, making irreducible elements of the art historian's consciousness as well as the unconscious. However, the problem is that with the crisis of modernism the great meta-narratives which attempted to structure and rationalize the episteme failed, too. As a result, every description of that episteme is fragmentary, each order accidental, and a chance to achieve an interdisciplinary universal synthesis quite doubtful. What we are facing, as a popular saying goes, is liquid reality. The essential truth of academic knowledge has been degraded to the status of partial truth while the integrity and stability of knowledge has been challenged when it turned out that no ultimate meaning or definite identity can be established.

The meanings that emerge from the remains and rifts, instead of wholes, have been moved to the domain of pragmatic experience and the acquired (produced) knowledge has become performative. Thus, the scholar's responsibility for the results of research has increased, which is now definitely an important feature of his/her condition. In other words, the problem of the social engagement of the scholar and the intellectual has been redefined. Scholarship is facing the challenges of today's world, connecting in a new way the metaphysics of crisis, absence, and memory with reality in which there is more poverty than justice, more wars than happiness, more violence than communication, and more hatred and exclusion than peace and bonding, while democracy as a social order of life and a project of the political and cultural community is facing the peril of populism. Science is confronted with the egoistic anthropocentrism of humanity which is destroying both human and non-human eco- and biosphere on an unprecedented scale and with indifference that suggests a suicidal drive.

It has been often emphasized today that the limitations and duties of the humanities are ethical, not just "purely" theoretical. The idea of the freedom of research and publication (liberalism), related to the scholar's ethical sense of responsibility for the world, refers to the question of methods only via the concept of alternative experience which implies the necessity to reconstruct everything, including the methodological foundation of knowledge. We live in a period of transition from one world-system to another, which is particularly unpredictable, claims Immanuel Wallerstein, the founder of utopistics: "If we want to use our chance, we must first understand it. This requires a transformation of the frames of knowledge to make us understand the nature of the

present structural crisis, and by the same token, our historical choices for the 21st century."¹ Far from my present awareness of the problem, I was confronted with a similar perspective in 1968, at the beginning of my academic career.

Certainly, what is crucial is the direction and character of that reconstruction, particularly if we realize the modernist failure of the idea of progress with all the ensuing real dangers without accepting ethical conservatism which in the 20th century developed socially dangerous symbolism and did tremendous damage with its political practice. Under the circumstances, it does not make sense to expect the emergence of any schema of scholarly activity subject to one method and integrated with social progress. Leaving open an agonistic (debatable) area where academic disputes may be conducted, i.e., allowing for the coexistence of different truths, just as different cultures, within a common democratic space is an attempt to bring together contradictory methods and keep their distinctness in the imaginable orders of the past and future. It is obvious, wrote Paul K. Feyerabend, the founder of epistemological anarchism, that

It is clear, then, that the idea of a fixed method, or of a fixed theory of rationality, rests on too naive a view of man and his social surroundings. To those who look at the rich material provided by history, and who are not intent on impoverishing it in order to please their lower instincts, their craving for intellectual security in the form of clarity, precision, 'objectivity', 'truth', it will become clear that there is only one principle that can be defended under all circumstances and in all stages of human development. It is the principle: anything goes.²

This principle does not mean that "everything can be said about everything." It does not express a nihilistic belief that there is no goal and all means can be used. It is not cynical opportunism which rejects social values in favor of individual benefits, but a kind of epistemic relativism which, fully aware of its limitations as regards conveying the truth, is open to critical thought that challenges academic habits, received ideas, and petrified knowledge. In my opinion, methodological anarchism has been a critical contribution to positive knowledge and the gist of the alternative ways of knowing. In this case, methodological meta-reflection "goes astray" to fill the empty spaces of ignorance, asking questions about the facticity of what we get to know without determining either our fields of study or objects of reflection once and for all. It makes us change our points of view and be more attentive and critical, chal-

¹ I. Wallerstein, *Utopistics: Or Historical Choices for the Twenty-First Century*, New York 1998, p. 90.

² P.K. Feyerabend, *Against Method*, London and New York 1993, pp. 18–19.

lenging the historical and disciplinary integrity of scholarship. Such a method, questioning methodological boundaries, subverts the order of knowledge and opens it to the intrusion of imagination.

In this sense, losing its “hard” object of reference, art history turns into a kind of literary practice or an intellectual narrative which attempts to penetrate the margins beyond scholarly control, grasp the blurred origins, and include in the field of research the ideas that are too weak to confront “hard” knowledge. It legitimizes the desire to take into account a range of affects and emotions which have evaded unambiguous description, and acknowledges the potential of remains and vestiges. What follows is an incomplete identity of art history which, by creating literary fictions and intellectual constructs, reaches the ineffable and the formless, entering the domain of memory and the related experience of trauma, silence, and melancholy. I do not mean a historical nostalgia for the nonexistent totality, but a situation when the effects of research materializes, instead of blurring, complex emotional and imaginary interactions between the evasive object of art history and the art historian who deals with the “living archive” of the present.

It is quite obvious that in this sense, no matter how we define it, methodology brings us close to history, being a process of incessant reading and rereading of the whole past and present of our discipline, reinterpreting its methodological aspirations and operational achievements. One cannot expect all this to be a disinterested activity, which was why I considered it a strategy of the legitimation of art history among various social practices and subjects of power. As a discourse, it was both mythical and critical. On the one hand, it allowed art history to construct academic strongholds with distinct boundaries (universities and museums), on the other, it challenged those institutions by transforming them and transgressing their limitations. Thus, methodology defined the core conflict of the political in art history, turning it into a public practice. Understood in such terms, it is only an aspect of research, published texts, and academic lectures and seminars, simultaneously becoming the core of social relations and contact with students, scholars, and artists. In place of the alienated knowledge with a doubtful identity, which favored a specific model of art history, during my academic career dating back to the Poznań years I have always preferred a transversal and engaged mode of reflection related to the professional research practice involved in an endless debate about method (rationality), object (art), and ideology (history). Writes Feyerabend:

Without ‘chaos’, no knowledge. Without a frequent dismissal of reason, no progress. Ideas which today form the very basis of science exist only because there were such things as prejudice, conceit, passion; because these things opposed

reason; and because they were permitted to have their way. We have to conclude, then, that even within science reason cannot and should not be allowed to be comprehensive and that it must often be overruled, or eliminated, in favour of other agencies. There is not a single rule that remains valid under all circumstances and not a single agency to which appeal can always be made.³

Such problems largely determined my academic career in Poland and then in France, but definitely first in Poznań already in the mid-1960s. It was then that I became aware of the changes in the theory and practice of art history, including a profound reevaluation of the received ideas and approaches. The most important in that respect were four questions. First, it was the role and significance of contemporary art in teaching and research. A chronological approach – from antiquity to the present – was replaced by a tendency to approach the entire history of art from the point of view of modernity, initiated in the 1960s. The history of modern art (of the 19th and 20th century) became more and more prominent in the research projects and teaching of the Poznań scholars. It did not mean simple turning the order upside down, but a belief that the scholar's position is historically determined by the present events and institutions which influence his/her concepts and interpretational procedures applied in different ways to every fragment of the past. Consequently, an attitude based upon the theoretical consciousness and ideological responsibility conditioned by the present became a historical foundation of art history in practice and a source of verification of all judgments. A crucial contribution to the origin of that attitude was a debate with a group of young German art historians on the work of art "between scholarship and worldview" in 1973.⁴

Conclusions drawn from that meeting brought us to another important question: the necessity to combine critical methodological reflection and detailed historical research. The idea of knowledge could no longer imply an ideological enclave. In that sense, methodology was no longer a kind of knowledge (meta-knowledge or theory) that is external in reference to its object, but was related to the latter, as we would say, dialectically. In teaching and research it meant more emphasis on the history of art history as a changing discipline than on the traditional philological and philosophical analysis of

³ Feyerabend, *Against Method*, p. 158.

⁴ A conference titled *Dzieła sztuki między nauką a światopoglądem* [Works of Art between Scholarship and Worldview] took place on November 14, 1973 in Rogalin. The proceedings were published in a collection called *Interpretacje dzieła sztuki*, edited by Janusz Kęłowski (Poznań 1976). See also: A.S. Labuda, "Polska i niemiecka historia sztuki w polemicznym dyskursie – sympozjum w Rogalinie w roku 1973," *Artium Quaestiones* 2017, 28, p. 227.

artistic doctrines (aesthetics). The results of such a line of reasoning were far reaching and the third question appeared, signaling an ever deeper change of approach to art history. The historical relativization and contextualization of the object of study went along with questioning its generic boundaries and modes of existence. In this respect, particularly seminal was the study of contemporary art, and above all the interest in the strategies of the avant-garde (collage, montage, ready-mades, conceptual art) which successfully disrupted the ontological status of the work of art. An impulse coming from the theory of the aleatory character of the modern artwork (Eco, Barthes) resulted in opening up the artistic structure and abandoning the idea of its unity based on a transhistorical principle and single meaning. On the one hand, the work of art was losing its conceptual, formal, and aesthetic identity, while on the other, it became iconically, genetically, and functionally diversified. All in all, art history was revising its descriptive vocabulary and concepts – losing its autonomy, it found a new place among specific problems of the general study of culture.

The boundaries of the discipline, so far guaranteed by its separate object of study and methods, were challenged, and the epistemological independence of the new knowledge of art with its methods of interpretation had to be reestablished in a debate. The point was not to integrate it with a “general theory” of symbolism or iconology, which was preferred in the early 1970s by the scholars who favored the trends dominant in Poland, but conversely, to allow for the historical and social diversification of art in the contexts of structural anthropology (myths), semiotics-semiology (sign, communication), and anthropological sociology (artistic life and milieu, social reception). In other words, at stake was a transdisciplinary theory, later to be called “cultural studies.” Behind it stood a critical idea which did not absolutize or institutionalize history and knowledge, but rather ideologized history and sociologized the artwork. In the Polish art history of those times, it was a revisionist perspective that came into being in the post-1968 atmosphere of rebellion, quickly and correctly recognized as a coup directed against art history practiced in museums and universities as a scholarly discipline separated from ideologies and social conditions.

Already in the early 1970s, quite many Polish scholars were familiar with the concepts which came from what is called today “French Theory”⁵ as well as the Marxism of the Frankfurt School, in particular Walter Benja-

⁵ P. Piotrowski, “‘Francuskie teorie’, amerykańska mediacja. Pro domo sua i/lub humanistyka po dekonstrukcji,” in: *French Theory w Polsce*, eds. E. Domańska, M. Loba, Poznań 2010, pp. 105–111.

min.⁶ Their critique of the bourgeois culture was interesting due to its potential of critical engagement with the present interpreted in historical terms. Still, it could hardly be applied to the situation of Poland. Important was also the role assigned to modern art with its idea of autonomy (Adorno), which allowed scholars to reveal the dangerous power of social ideologies and the manipulations of the authorities (Althusser). A significant evolution of the "new art history" from the history of ideas through structuralism and the sociology of discourses took place against that background which also inspired a new choice of problems and terminology of description and interpretation transferred to art history. The paradigmatic problem of the avant-garde in the study of the twentieth-century art gave rise to historicism in respect to the 19th century. What connected those two contexts was research on the external and internal tensions generated by works of art, and the social dynamic which determined not so much their origin but their functioning. An example was the question of style, whose origin was found first of all in the ideological and technological production of form (historicism), not in the history of shapes and the aesthetics of beauty. As regards the avant-garde, a similar role was played by the concept of utopia, which allowed scholars to abandon the ideological and formal dualism of rationalized or expressive form, still popular in all the surveys of the twentieth-century art. The principal concepts in thinking about art and explaining artistic processes became the definitions of structure and power, related to a long series of interconnected terms, such as revolution and transgression, critique and exclusion, utopia and ideology, autonomy and engagement, historicism and dialectic, text and discourse, function and myth, innovation and stereotype, diachrony and synchrony, center and periphery, the signifier and the signified, etc.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, art history, dissolved in interdisciplinary projects, needed a new consolidation. Political tensions and passions gave rise to a new and significant orientation in research, which became the fourth step that provided a closure to the changes in the art history practiced in Poznań. Not only was it the time of strikes, but also of solidarity debates on identity. The problems of feminism and creative subjectivity rooted in the unconscious, long ignored and repressed by the communist ideology, emerged with much subversive energy. Another question was the artistic identification of East Central Europe in the context of common destiny of the countries

⁶ A Benjamin seminar was held in March 20–21, 1981, and a detailed report from it was published in *Artium Quaestiones* 1983, 2, pp. 190–192. The same issue of the journal included Wojciech Suchocki's translation of Wolfgang Kemp's paper "Walter Benjamin and Aby Warburg," pp. 145–172.

marked by the “colonial” dependence on the Soviet Union, including the need to draw a new artistic geography which would allow promoting the history of the art of that region as a legitimate field of research. That particular task was set for the first time in the fall of 1980 at an international conference on the relations between the Central European avant-garde movements and the art of the West. A crucial paper of a Swiss scholar specializing in the Polish avant-garde was titled “Who’s Afraid of the Periphery?”⁷

Addressing an old question about the cultural borders of Central Europe and within such a space the margins and farthest ends of the avant-garde art, the discussion focused on three fundamental problems. The first referred to the lives of artists and their artistic careers as foundations of their cultural identity. The second was geography – spatial, synchronic, and horizontal differentiation, with all the complex and changing historical and cultural, economic and political, and philosophical and ideological relations. Finally, the third was about artistic processes in history, including such questions as the rise of stylistic trends, ideological options, the ideas of history and visions of the future, as well as the structure of the work of art, its integrity and fragmentariness, and its autonomy and disintegration.

Presented above in a nutshell, this research perspective, which resulted in changing the position of modern art and incorporating Central Europe in the field under scrutiny, provided opportunities for an interesting research experiment that became more and more common in many academic institutions both in Europe and in the United States. In the 1980s and 1990s, the studies on the avant-garde in Central Europe resulted in introducing a number of descriptive terms which are used also today to deal with modern history. In my case, such was the book that summed up the Poznań stage of my academic career, published in 1986 in France under the title *Is There Art in Eastern Europe?*

To understand better the art of the 1980s, in the first place I decided to use such terms as “crisis,” “margin,” and “rupture” as a new field of critical reflection which challenged the integrity of artistic biographies, homogeneity of the avant-garde artworks, and the coherence of programs and trends.

⁷ The conference was held in Gołuchów in December, 1980. Its title was *Les relations du constructivisme d'Europe de l'Est et d'Europe Centrale avec l'avant-garde des deux premiers décennies du XX siècle*. A report was published in *Artium Quaestiones* 1983, 2, pp. 188–190. The proceeding were published only in French many years later in *Ligeia* 1989, 5–6, pp. 31–131. See there, next to the preface, A. Turowski, « L'avant-garde en Europe de l'Est : problèmes et orientations de la recherche » (pp. 31–34), a key text by A. Baudin, « Qui a peur de la périphérie? », *Ligeia* 1989, 5–6, pp. 124–131. The aftermath of the conference included also my book: A. Turowski, *Existe-t-il un art de l'Europe de l'Est?*, Paris 1986.

Moreover, I questioned the model of art history based on binary oppositions, paying attention to ambiguities (differences) instead of opposites. The point was not to acknowledge a dialectic, which is always bipolar, but a kind of knot. As a foundation of the study of contemporary art, I proposed a model of multi-level discursive texture, complex enough but with no single principle of order, and covering many fragments of the artistic life of a given area and specific time period, subject to continuous social and psychological pressure. That kind of texture I described in *Budowniczość świata*, using the concept of "ideosis." I was referring to different levels of culture and heterogeneous discourses. Ideosis did not structure the field, but allowed me to describe it as an unstable space. What integrated artistic and social phenomena were interactions instead of casual and genetic relations. In this texture specific works, trends, programs, criticism, and the like constituted in a somewhat fluid manner overlapping circles with a varying but always complex degree of internal organization. The border circles were not distinct, ties were weaker there, and the discourses of margins started proliferating chaotically. The result was the state of instability.

Conducted from such a viewpoint, the study of the avant-garde was not intended to disclose rifts and mistakes or, as some critics like to say, the "fraudulence of the avant-garde art" (statements of this kind usually conceal opportunism or conservative ideologies), but to let art history overcome a deeply ingrained model of modernist thinking. No wonder then that already in the early 1970s I was interested in the discourses of those artists and theorists who, moving into the area of the modern, not quite mapped, challenged more or less codified works and theories of modernist art, allowing for critical approaches to them. A critique of the avant-garde was made possible by its own discursive texture. Particularly helpful in this respect was Tadeusz Kantor and the experience of the Foksal Gallery. That seemingly "other" history, unfolding in artists' studios, could not be separated from the academic art history practiced in Poznań.

Thinking about the concepts that would possibly match the world in crisis in the 1960s and 1970s, with which I could approach contemporary art in its complex network including the artist's studio, the curator's practice, the scholar's library, and the university seminar, as well as the East and the West, I turned in that decade toward two art historians: Aby Warburg and Max Dvořák. For them the Great War, the key event in their history of modernity and the ensuing crisis, was the crucial experience which made them change their epistemological orientation in anthropology and philosophy of history. For Warburg, who belonged to Western culture, it was predominantly the problem of visual memory; its fluctuations, crossings, transformations,

and returns. Their history was complicated, multi-leveled, tangentially connecting different cultures. For Dvořák, who came from Central Europe, it was abandoning the formalism of linear history in favor of approaching art history as a domain of discontinuity, breaks, ruptures, and hybrids, such as, for instance, mannerism and expressionism. Both founded their visions of the history of art on the concept of rupture. Interested in different artists and epochs, they agreed that early modern art could not be interpreted only in terms of the heritage of classicism.

Art history according to Warburg, and in a sense also according to Dvořák, critically referred to the origin of the discipline, when not only its name, but also the object of study and method were defining their meaning and limitations. Their model of art history challenged each of those elements which, determining its autonomy, gave it the status of a field of academic study. Taking into consideration that essential change, during the Poznań discussions I fully realized that the first art history, based on the model shaped by the Enlightenment, rooted in the excavations in Pompeii and Herculaneum and articulated by Winckelmann, with Warburg gave way to another model, born in psychiatric clinics and the excavations in memory, whose key achievement was *Mnemosyne*. That other art history was brought to surface from the depth of the unconscious, from phobias and passions, in the shock of danger and the diseases caused by trauma. One must remember that Michel Foucault's *History of Madness*, published in 1961, was a polemic with the Enlightenment discourse of rationalism. While the first art history, that of Winckelmann, came into being under the sign of Sun, the other one, that of Warburg, emerged under the sign of Saturn. In its center was the idea of man in danger – it was the history of art evolving in the times of permanent crisis.

What interested me years ago in Warburg, and despite all the differences between them, also in Dvořák, was the fact that in their studies the object of art history was breaking out of crisis. If crisis was a permanent condition, the knowledge that it made possible was close to what cannot be grasped in research – incomplete, fragmentary, changing, and always critical.⁸ Why can we not then adopt the concepts of crisis and non-positive affirmation, i.e., contestation as the gist of the research practice in art history, such as it has been since 1968? In other words: the gist of critical political practice, challenging methodology of scholarship, and radical art.

⁸ All the participants of the SHS (Association of Art Historians) conference in 1985, in which I did not take part because I was already in France, were of a different opinion. See *Kryzysy w sztuce. Materiały z sesji Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki*, Lublin, grudzień 1985, ed. E. Karwowska, Warszawa 1988.

In the past, the equivalent of the word “outrage” was “contestation.” Michel Foucault wrote in his “Preface to Transgression”:

Perhaps when contemporary philosophy discovered the possibility of nonpositive affirmation it began a process of reorientation ... and opened the way for the advance of critical thought and the principle of contestation. ... Rather than being a process of thought for denying existences or values, contestation is the act that carries them all to their limits and, from there, to the Limit where an ontological decision achieves its end: to contest is to proceed until one reaches the empty core where being achieves its limit and when the limit defines being.⁹

Foucault, similarly to Nietzsche, placed the contesting and anarchistic “yes” in the center of the conflict (agon) that stimulates society, where “yes” means disagreement, an expression of protest, a revelation of difference, an emphasis on otherness, the essence of hiatus, a result of anger, a symptom of indignation, a form of rebellion, the need for revolt, the (im)penetrability of the limit.

Even though the artist’s position in today’s democracy has been defined many times by artists themselves, it still requires continuous reformulation. This is a problem that is both artistic and political, which means that it pertains to art history. Whenever I start thinking about it, what comes to my mind is the Polish March 1968 in Poznań, which back then was my present. The present always calls for being alert, just like Émile Zola was alert when he pronounced his famous “*J’accuse!*.” He did it in a public letter addressed to the President of the Republic in relation to the anti-Semitic trial of Dreyfus, which included sharp criticism of the French government and its frauds. Fully aware of the consequences, Zola was ready to face a libel lawsuit that indeed ended with a sentence and his emigration. He wrote that his letter, like a revolution, was intended to foster an “explosion of truth” – with passion, in the name of suffering humanity, it was supposed to remember the public that “people are entitled to happiness”; as an act of indignant protest, it was a “cry of his heart.”¹⁰

The Poznań art historians learned their lesson of imagination and engagement in March and May of 1968, and I practiced art history throughout the 1970s accordingly until I made a difficult decision to leave for Paris and take an academic job in France.

⁹ M. Foucault, „Preface to Transgression,” trans. D. F. Bouchard and S. Simon, in: idem, *Aesthetics and Methodology, Essential Works of Foucault*, vol. 2, ed. J. F. Faubion, New York 1998, pp. 74–75. English translation slightly modified – M. W.

¹⁰ É. Zola, “*J’accuse!*,” *L’Aurore*, January 13, 1898. English translation by Wikisource.

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Summary

The present paper is reminiscence and an attempt to reconstruct the intellectual heritage of art history as it was practiced at the University of Poznań in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s in the context of new developments in cultural theory and changing research interests. Besides, it includes the author's account of his own academic work in that period, began in the 1960s and inspired in particular by the year 1968 that brought a social crisis and a cultural revolution, as well as introduced the element of imagination into academic knowledge and critical thought. The author draws a wide panorama of intellectual stimuli which contributed to an epistemic and methodological turn, first in his own scholarly work and then in the work of some other art historians in Poznań. Those turns opened art history at the University of Poznań to critical reading of artistic practices approached in relation to other social practices and subjects of power. As a result, four key problems were addressed: (1) the position of contemporary art in research and teaching, (2) the necessity to combine detailed historical studies with critical theoretical reflection, (3) the questioning of genre boundaries and ontological statuses of the objects of study and the semantic

frames of the work of art, and finally, in connection to the rise of an interdisciplinary perspective, (4) the subversion of the boundaries and identity of art history as an academic discipline. Then the author reconstructs the theoretical background of the “new art history” that emerged some time later, drawing from the writings of Walter Benjamin, the French structuralism, Theodor Adorno’s aesthetic theory, and Louis Althusser’s interpretation of the concept of ideology. Another important problematic was the avant-garde art of Poland and other East-Central European countries, studied in terms of artistic geography and the relations between the center and periphery. The conclusion of the paper presents a framework marked with the names of Aby Warburg and Max Dvořák, which connected the tradition of art history with new developments, took under consideration the seminal element of crisis, and allowed art historians to address a complex network of relations among the artist’s studio, the curator’s practice, the scholar’s study, and the university seminar, as well as the West, the Center, and the East. At last, the author remembers the revolutionary, rebellious spirit and the lesson of imagination that the Poznań art history took from March and May, 1968.

Keywords:

art history in Poznań, art history, theory and methodology, avant-garde, 1968, contestation