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REMARKS ON THE "MARGIN"

The topic of my text was a change of meanings of basic concepts used in the study of contemporary Polish art. If in that context I paid attention to the key role of Piotr Piotrowski's book *Znaczenia modernizmu* [Meanings of Modernism], it was because in his previous book of 1993, *Artysta między rewolucją a reakcją* [The Artist between Revolution and Reaction], which Andrzej Turowski has found missing in my considerations, I did not find any change of that kind. The distinction between the "metaphysical" and the "materialist" extreme of the Russian avant-garde still remains within the semantic field of the latter, while the term "modernism" appears there only in passing, related to Piotrowski's polemic with Buchloh, most likely for the sake of referring to the argument of the author of the article published in *October*. Certainly, the present reader will impose on the concept of the "metaphysical" avant-garde the term "modernism." Even though we interpret them now slightly differently, the concepts used in *Artysta między rewolucją a reakcją* by no means make it hard to understand Piotrowski's intention. The gist of my argument was not the reference of the terms which we would replace with others today, but the fact that the concept of modernism in its present sense appeared in his writings in 1999, i.e., in relation to a radically new artistic situation in Poland, determined by the evolution of the "critical art." If Turowski charges me in respect to this with the "polemical fervor," arguing that since the early 1990s "the right and the left, under the conditions of the freedom of choice, acquired their proper meanings" and "we were facing a totally different political contextualization," I will gladly agree with him, because it is an obvious, supporting argument in favor of my understanding of the field of art of that period. Is it true, however, that the question of autonomy and, according to Turowski, the turn toward hermeneutics and phenomenology, were connected with those changes? I do not think so. One may take a close look at the translations published in *Artium Quaestiones* or a fundamental study by Mariusz Bryl in terms of their allegedly covert political background but in my opinion that would be an oversimplification.

There is, however, another problem – and this is how I understand Turowski's doubts – namely the validity of the terms we are using today in reference to the present. In an indirect sense, this problem is also related to the ordering capacity of those terms in the art history what we are practicing. Surely, the terms about which I wrote in my text will be in use – the public discourse is subject to inertia – but the question is whether the horizon of values to which they belong keeps sufficient operative power. Are “avant-garde,” “modernity,” and “modernism,” so prominent in the vocabulary of Polish historians of modern art, still useful, not only due to the pressure of the new humanities, but above all because of the “conditions of the freedom of [political] choice”? In such a perspective, the book *Artysta między rewolucją a reakcją* is definitely worth reconsidering.

Piotrowski's postulate of the ethical art history, which is placed in the book's subtitle and comes up on its closing pages, connects the “tragedy” of the Russian avant-gardists with a clue addressed to today's scholars. The author makes an attempt to find an excuse for the avant-garde in the innocent and “pure” motivation of the artists' rebellion that preceded their toxic and manipulating relation with the Soviet regime. This is, of course, too little to recognize the doubtless artistic value of the avant-garde works as decisive and derive from it an ethical excuse. Therefore Piotrowski writes with a bit of theatricality about “tragedy” and points at the duty to understand reality as the ultimate criterion in the evaluation of the artist's choices and actions as a citizen. Thus, we find ourselves at the very heart of the mythology of the Enlightenment and the avant-garde project which was derived from it. It is the mythologized figure of the artist who has a mission of changing the world and showing the way to that goal and the obstacles on that way. It is also a mythologized, universal picture of the authority which is evil by nature, as the example of Russia was supposed to confirm. Finally, it is also a simplified and selectively interpreted view of the “social reality and political *praxis*,” which Anthony Giddens connects to the “separation of experience” characteristic of modernity.

Let us begin with “reality.” A suggestion to build a bridge connecting the situation in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century and the present puts in the center of such comparisons the problem of democracy which in the Soviet Union was missing. Do today's free elections in Poland resolve the dilemma of the “tragic” decisions of the artist? According to Turowski, as well as Piotrowski, which was confirmed by his later texts, not at all since the polemical democracy has not been put into practice and the status of the authorities is by nature stable. However, let me add that Hamlet's alternative of the avant-garde artist under the totalitarian regime has been replaced by

a figure which is similar to the Bermuda triangle determined by the artist, the authorities, and the public opinion. The problem of today's artist is the public opinion, an equal partner in a democratic field, who does not have to accept the emancipatory (in the Giddensian sense, as a project of the Enlightenment politics) character of the artist's activity. At critical moments, artists use the argument of the cultural immunity of museums and galleries. Still, decisions are usually taken by the public opinion, and it is also the public opinion which most often influences the decisions of the authorities who want to receive democratic legitimation again, and not the artist. I am not passing judgment, just remembering.

Piotrowski's book is an attempt to save the reputation of the avant-garde from disparaging, one-sided judgments provoked by its political engagement. The main argument is rebellion, which implies the problem of the social context of avant-garde art, and in the specific Polish context of the two decades between the world wars, the "new art." That was what I had in mind when pointing at the utopian ideas of Szczuka and the socially desirable projects of Syrkus and Czajkowski, which were put into practice. But Piotrowski wanted to protect the position of the artist as rebel and utopist from the verifying rules of reality. In the avant-garde perspective, rebellion is the first step toward making a utopia come true, and a particular mode of this utopia is imagination. Thus, a reaction to inadequately recognized reality may indeed be, as Piotrowski wanted it, Zola's "*J'accuse!*" Is it true, however, that both rebellion and imagination, in his opinion the cornerstones of the avant-garde and its tradition, have the status of principles of value? What is the origin of their crucial role? Is it constituted by the universality of the individual's autonomy or the elementary principles of social relations? Let me quote Professor Dorota Głowacka, a noted Holocaust scholar: "Still, I do not think that artists have absolute immunity that allows them to do anything they like, to stick their noses everywhere, including gas chambers, because of the power of imagination. Imagination is not so free and aesthetic experience so disinterested, either. ... A belief in the unlimited power of imagination may turn out its greatest weakness, since going incessantly ahead and transgressing more and more borders, it does not reflect on that which perhaps limits it in a hardly graspable way. To believe in the absolute power of imagination may be misleading and even dangerous, since in consequence one may stop thinking about the conceptual frames of the social, historical, and cultural conditions..."

To sum up, the reality beyond art, which we try to grasp with our concepts, is much more complex than its picture obtained thanks to those concepts. That was why I chose the topic of my paper. The limitations originated in the Enlightenment assumptions make it difficult for some of us to come up with

a correct diagnosis and apply new strategies of research, which explains the postulates formulated in the concluding part of my text. It is good to be as sure as a current publication of another museum of modern art reads: "Only subjects independent in their thinking, which have overcome the state of intellectual immaturity, can take full responsibility for themselves and the world." I am not so sure about it, but I understand Andrzej Turowski's protest – our ideas of the subject are different.