

The idea of *Sacrum* in Polish art of the 1980s

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Polish art of the 1980s was in a period of transition from modernism to postmodernism. Theoretical debates and disputes concerning both of these terms and their interrelations are still going on. However, the goal of this article will be to portray the specific character of Polish art in the 1980s in relation to the problem of *sacrum*. Spiritual and metaphysical themes were present in post-war avant-garde work, but it was only in the art of the 1980s that there was a real explosion of interest in such ideas. So significant was this new trend that a new term, *sacrum*, appeared, to designate such interest. The term *sacrum* is drawn from the phenomenology of religion, and means sanctity, a sphere of meeting deity with believer (*sacer, sacra, sacrum* in Latin – devoted to God). Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade thought that *sacrum* was an overall feature, present in all religions. They emphasised the universality of *sacrum*, as something naturally felt by all men. This term, transformed into the context of art, embraces not only religious art, but metaphysical and spiritual works also.

The term *sacrum* was introduced into art theory by the important Polish critic and art historian, Janusz Bogucki (1916-1995). In the 1960s he ran the Contemporary Gallery in Warsaw, one of the most interesting *auteur* galleries in Poland. In the spirit of ecumenism he founded the Asram Anavim foundation, organising meetings of various cultures and religions. He based his vision of contemporary culture on the distinction between three artistic attitudes: EZO, POP and SACRUM. EZO corresponded to the egocentric attitude of the avant-garde presented thus far, its attachment to the *sacrum* of art. POP was a new attitude, 'a total secularisation of art, its incorporation into the scientific, technological and administrative mechanisms of civilisation and mass culture.'¹ The tendency within POP was for practicality and pragmatism, characteristic of the civilisation of haste and success. The third attitude, in which Bogucki placed his hopes, was SACRUM, an attempt at rediscovering the relation between the *sacrum* of art and the primal *sacrum*, manifested in reflection on the timeless and non-material meaning of human existence. This third way of understanding art was supposed to give it a chance of rebirth, although in a changed form. Unlike the earlier unity of religion and art, it was to be a meeting of two autonomous domains, where neither is dominant but where both co-operate harmoniously and find this co-operation valuable. Art should, first of all, reconstruct the universality of meanings in its language, overcome the alienation of the artist through communal activity, and finally save from insanity or exhaustion those artists who seek spiritual metamorphosis on their

own, without God and thus without any preparation. In order to attain this goal, artists were to give up the basic assumptions of modernism: egocentrism and the cult of individuality in favour of humility, group work, combining creation with spiritual experience, and going back to original sources, especially Christian ones, to deepen their faith. Bogucki's conception came into existence around the time that the views of critics of modernism reached Poland. Those critics saw the modernist de-sacralization of life and art as the source of spiritual and moral crises and cultural nihilism. Such a claim was made, for example, by Daniel Bell, who described the period of modernism as a process of rationalisation in the technological and economic spheres of life, secularisation in politics, and de-sacralization in culture. He believed that the contemporary man suspended in a spiritual void could only be saved through religious rebirth.² This concept of postmodernism received a warm welcome in Poland, and was popularised by Bogucki, who held similar beliefs.

There are many circumstances responsible for the interest in the problem of *sacrum* in Polish art in the 1980's. The political situation was optimistic with the establishment of 'Solidarity', an independent trade union with almost 10 million members. There was hope for a peaceful agreement with the Communist authorities and for a deep transformation of the economic system. This hope for change united the Poles and gave them a strong sense of citizenship and community. Moreover, the election of Karol Wojtyła as the pope and his subsequent visit to Poland consolidated this feeling and added a religious and moral dimension to it. Artists, as citizens, felt they should declare themselves personally in favour of Solidarity in their work. Characteristically, patriotism in Poland was connected with religion. Over the past two hundred years the Catholic Church had been traditionally identified with freedom and resistance, first against the invaders³ and then against the Communist regime. After the introduction of martial law on the 13th December 1981⁴ most artists signalled their protest by boycotting the official cultural scene. They no longer appeared in the official media or exhibited their work in state galleries and museums. They did not give up their activity, however, but organised an alternative, independent cultural movement. Many of these independent galleries arose in catholic churches.

Church galleries and individual exhibitions created by artists and critics in vestibules or other church premises were focused primarily on patriotic and religious paintings. The most recurrent motifs were crosses, the icon of the Virgin Mary of Jasna Góra⁵, white-and-red flags, bread, chains, bars, V-shaped fingers, national heroes such as Pope John Paul II and Lech Wałęsa. These motifs had political rather than religious meaning and were clear and accessible to viewers, not generally interested in contemporary avant-garde art.

The main reason why artists drew closer to the Catholic Church was

this need for an alternative place to show their work. It cannot be denied, however, that many artists also felt that they needed spiritual support. It would be impossible to create the idea of *sacrum* in art without the commitment of artists. Bogucki noted a tendency towards the spiritual in the Polish avant-garde: a current of metaphysical art, which in the case of many of its representatives arose from a similar need to achieve transcendence. It was characterised by a searching for the Absolute, which reflected a longing for universal principles to order the Universe and human life.

Different and individual approaches to this current can be seen in the work of three avant-garde artists: Jerzy Tchórzewski, Stefan Gierowski and Jerzy Bereś. They are artists, whose work can be understood within the concept of *sacrum*. Using the range of tools developed by the avant-garde, from matter painting through geometry to performance, they all try to find their own different ways to approach the *sacrum*, the Mystery, the Infinite.

Jerzy Tchórzewski, an artist of the older generation of the Arsenal group⁶ and a member of the Cracow Group, used matter as the basis of his paintings. His painting took shape under the influence of Surrealism and expressive abstraction akin to *Art Informel*. His painting was fully abstract in the second half of the 1960s and in the 1970s. Later Tchórzewski started to introduce anthropomorphic and floral shapes, giving his paintings some figurative features. In all phases of his work, his most important means of expression was the materiality of the paint. He focused on the texture of his pictures, their surface is like relief or like thick, wrinkled skin, which makes them almost organic. The thick paint, rich texture and colour scheme carry deep symbolism and create mysterious space that seems to be hostile, sometimes dangerous or even terrifying to man. The organic forms with pincers and horns threatening the world and eating up light are meant to reflect human desires and attempts to attain the unattainable. But Tchórzewski's work also shows an internal light that emanates from the painting, which is a life-giving, creative force. Tchórzewski reached various lighting effects through the medium of colour. As Piotr Krakowski said: 'In the fantastic abstract spaces there appear electrified zigzag lines, lightning, flares, and flames. The pictures are filled with 'inner' light emanating from the interior of the canvas and diffusing, as if it were outside the frame'. In 1987 Tchórzewski said:

'Only once in my life I stopped painting for some months. It was the time for my country, when it seemed, that the sun died out [He meant martial law]. But darkness was around us, outside. In our inside the light did not die. This internal light is more important – it generates life – the light of painting'.

Light in Tchórzewski's paintings, standing in opposition to dark organic forms, transforms the painting of matter into metaphysical art.

The anxiety and fear evoked in the viewer by Tchórzewski's paintings is intended to restore in him the primal premonition of the *sacrum*, a sphere of meeting with something beyond cognition, something irrational. It is not religious or devotional art, though in the 1980s he painted some devotional works, such as *Golgota* (1984), or *Way to Golgota* (1985), and it does not transcend the immaterial world. Rather, his work shows a dramatic way for human beings to reach eternity. As Janusz Bogucki said, Tchórzewski's painting is 'a passionate and uncompromising art, sensitive to the essence of the intellectual and ethical dramas of today, penetrating with its magic beauty every particle of nature, capable of pathetic explosions of superior quality.'

Stefan Gierowski also belongs to the generation of the Arsenal, but in late 1950s he abandoned figuration and took up geometric abstraction. He used the language of geometry not only as a means of examining or structuring the world and art, but also to explore the spiritual world. He was aided in this task by his special fascination with colour and light. For him creating is about seeking the truth, but not necessarily human truth. He believes that an abstract painting can be an uninterpretable message, strongly rooted in truth, not the truth of the structures of the material world, but the truth of an immaterial entity. His art, though non-figurative, can therefore be interpreted in the context of Christian faith. The ultimate declaration of such an attitude was his cycle *Painting the Ten Commandments*. In these paintings he undertook the risky task of attempting to show Decalogue by geometry – integrating the geometrical principles of painting with the religious laws that can govern humans. For example, in the painting *Do Not Steal*, the violet spot takes light from blue and red spots, destroying the harmony. In the work *I Am Thine God*, white emanating spots cover many multi-coloured points underneath. Gierowski became an abstract painter who, in his work, uses his great artistic awareness and discipline to say a prayer through matter. Gierowski's painting can be seen as a confession, an intimate prayer, a medium of conversation with God. In this conversation, the artist uses only the simplest words, signs, geometrical figures, flat patches of colour, basic contrasts, light and shadow.

When discussing avant-garde artists within the sphere of the *sacrum*, it is impossible to leave out Jerzy Bereś, an artist who has made mystery of his art. His actions and performances are artistic rituals. He has celebrated masses (*Artistic Mass*, 1979. *Romantic Mass* 1978). He has built altars, such as *A Beautiful Altar*, *A Pure Altar*, *The Altar of Silence* and lit sacred fires (*Fires of Truth*, *Fire of Hope* and *Fire of Love* at the Exhibition *New Heaven and New Earth?*, *God's Mercy Church* in Warsaw, 1985). He has employed all the attributes of religion, drank wine and shared out bread. The artist has repeatedly stood naked, innocent, in front of the public and performed sacrifice or transfiguration. He believes that art has the power to transform

forms, materials, things and, that it can make people better. He believes that when we are offered wine, or vodka, we drink a transfigured personality of the artist. However, these are not gestures of blasphemy, he does not think of himself as a priest of a new religion, nor does he sacralise art, or deify the artist. What painters used to experience in the seclusion of their studios, Bereś, as a performer, displays to his viewers. He creates a place of meeting with *sacrum*, with transforming energy. His art, like the work of the previously mentioned artists, aims to become a vehicle taking the viewer to a different world.

The works of these artists, along with many others, were for Bogucki confirmation of his idea that art should turn to *sacrum*. He invited them to take part in his new projects in the first years of the '80s. His friends, avant-garde artists became co-authors of big 'church' exhibitions. The first, and probably the most famous, exhibition was organised in 1983 by Janusz Bogucki in the church of God's Mercy in Warsaw. Under the title *The Sign of the Cross*, it brought together over fifty artists and photographers, as well as actors, musicians, art theorists, and filmmakers, who took part in the meetings, lectures and concerts accompanying the exhibition. Popularising the idea of 'art returning home', i.e. coming back to the *sacrum*, Bogucki managed to convert to it many respected and important artists from the Polish avant-garde. The interior of the Gothic church, ruined during the Warsaw Uprising in 1944 and in the process of being laboriously rebuilt by the parishioners, played the function of an extraordinary gallery. Without interrupting the construction work, the artists used the space of the church and the vaults, including the elements of its architecture into their arrangements. They had to learn how to co-operate and talk with the parishioners, who felt themselves to be the owners of the place and were not always willing to accept the artists' ideas. It was a good preparation for further exhibitions organised by Bogucki, such as *Apocalypse – The Light in the Darkness* (1984) and *Labyrinth – The Underground Space* (1989). Janusz Bogucki's ideas of spiritual rebirth in art⁷, and all his activities related to it, were very different from the politically motivated undertakings that were also popular at this time in Poland⁸. Bogucki's exhibitions were professional, open to various artistic and religious orientations⁹, and most importantly, devoid of political pathos, although one could find patriotic symbols within them. They were consistent and ideologically homogenous, and seemed to confirm his prediction that art would be reborn through *sacrum*. However, Bogucki's hope was under threat. Younger artists, debuting in the 1980s, were willing to present their work in church exhibitions, but had a completely different attitude to the question of faith than the older generation. Their embrace of the *sacrum* was only illusory, which resulted in the ultimate failure of Bogucki's ideas.

The most controversial among these young artists¹⁰ were the members of the group named Gruppa [the group].¹¹ The majority of their

works, dealing with society, religion and Communist reality in Poland, were brutal, with schematically shaped figures, painted ugly and quickly. The members of Gruppa never made straightforward statements, but used the strategy of the grotesque and the absurd. Their works typically manifested traits that make them hard or even impossible to interpret unambiguously. They are non-intellectual and employ pastiche, quotation, elements of mass culture and a relaxed attitude towards history. Placing their works next to the political and religion-oriented productions in 'church' exhibitions was a risky and rather naive undertaking on the organisers' part. The Gruppa were playing a game with devotional art, the critics and the viewers. The unconventional way of depicting religious motifs employed by the artists from Gruppa was treated by Bogucki and some organisers of church Exhibitions as an expression of youthful rebellion, a positive provocation with profound objectives, posing questions about the most important truths. Their opponents, on the other hand, saw it as blasphemy and impertinence. The activity of the 'young wilds'¹² turned out to be a game they played with the established reality: the only alternative exhibition sites the young artists had were within church or official, communistic institutions. Theirs was not, however, programmatic absurdist activity, but rather feigned engagement and feigned embrace of the *sacrum*. Artists from Gruppa frequently reached for Biblical themes, but never constructed them according to the traditional canon. Peweł Kowalewski often illustrated biblical sentences without any metaphors. *The cock will not crow tonight until you have said three times that you do not know me* (1985) shows only the words of the quotation and a big head of a crowing cock. When Marek Sobczyk painted *Birth of Christ* (1987), he showed the Virgin Mary during childbirth, and when Ryszard Woźniak painted *Temptation of Jesus* (1987), he showed two people, a white one (standing and blessing) and a red one (falling down) and in the background two naked persons (possibly Adam and Eve) during sexual intercourse.

The religious motifs, often mixed with erotic ones, were used as cultural clichés, which were superimposed on one another to see what effect this would produce. These works must be treated as processed quotations or as subjects of academic debates whose aim is not drawing conclusions, but discussion for its own sake. The view of the Gruppa is that the artist cannot be expected to solve any problem in his painting, he has no ambitions to transform and transport audience to the better world, and he does not reach for the *sacrum*. In effect, he maintains distance to the main problems undertaken by avant-garde artists mentioned above. Sometimes works of Gruppa were treated as individual, personal considerations about religion, but the artists stated that the true purpose of their painting is the sheer pleasure of painting. Its main advantage, says Ryszard Grzyb, one of the members of Gruppa, is 'mixing paint and touching the canvas with the brush'. Works of Gruppa announced the

changes that would take place in the 1990s.

After the fall of Communism in Poland in 1989, the attitude of artists, especially of the younger generation, towards the *sacrum* has changed drastically. If such themes are taken up at all, it is only in the context of a debate on the quality of Polish religiousness. There are no attempts to reach spirituality or to seek transcendence through art. An apparent interest in the *sacrum* can be found in the work of Robert Rumas. His installations consist of childhood memories hidden in 'magical' objects, like aquariums with pieces of coloured glass and shells, jars with mysterious contents like photographs and holy figurines. He places Madonnas and Christs in aquariums full of coloured, shimmering water, or lets them float in the middle of the pool. There is no profanity in them, since they charm us with their 'prettiness'; they balance on the verge of the banal, the cheap and the naive, which Rumas wields under the pretext of fascination with objects known from everyday life. He balances on the boundary of criticism and nostalgia, the fascination of the naive and superficial devotion. Rumas transfers the sphere of the *sacrum* into banal aesthetic.

The examples presented above show how perversely the hopes of Janusz Bogucki have been fulfilled. *Sacrum* has become a popular term and has often been abused both by artists and critics. Religious iconography and activities associated with religious practices are treated as quotations, pretext or provocation, and thus no longer fulfil their basic function. They have lost their sacral or transcendental dimension. The elements that used to be associated with the *sacrum* are becoming de-sacralized.

¹ Bogucki presented these ideas in his book *POP-EZO-SACRUM*, Poznań 1990, 24.

² D. Bell, *The cultural contradictions of capitalism*, 2nd ed., London 1979.

³ In 1795 Poland lost independence and was partitioned between the three invaders, Russia, Prussia and Austria, until 1918.

⁴ Martial law was introduced by communist authority for the purpose of suppressing anti-communist resistance.

⁵ Jasna Góra is a sanctuary with an icon of the Virgin Mary, believed to help Polish people in the most dramatic moments (she was claimed to be the Queen of Poland after the Polish-Swedish War in 1655).

⁶ *Arsenal* – the title of the exhibition of young artists opened in 1955 in Warsaw; it was one of the most important artistic events of the period of the 'thaw' after the death of Stalin.

⁷ Description of the particular exhibitions can be found in *Od rozmów ekumenicznych do Labirytu*, Warszawa 1991.

⁸ The church movement was characterised by a return to figurative representation and iconography, the abandoning of intellectual ambitions, giving up individuality in favour of group identity, balancing on the verge of kitsch, and replacing the cosmopolitan with the patriotic stance. It was very broad movement, involving over 1500 artists and critics.

⁹ As a rule Bogucki invited artists of various religions.

¹⁰ All of them debuted in 1982.

¹¹ Gruppa was established in Warsaw in 1983 and included Ryszard Grzyb, Paweł Kowalewski, Jarosław Modzelewski, Marek Sobczyk, Ryszard Woźniak.

¹² Gruppa was often referred to as 'The New Wild' and compared to 'Neue Wilde Malerai', because of a similarity in the way of painting.