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MARIUSZ HERMANSDORFER (1940–2018)

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Abstract: Mariusz Hermansdorfer (1940–2018) passed away in Wrocław on 18 August this year. Director of the National Museum in Wrocław in 1983–2013, custodian of its contemporary art department from 1972, critic, curator of exhibitions, and one of the most significant figures in Polish culture of the past half a century.

Born in Lwów Mariusz Hermansdorfer studied art history at the University of Wrocław. While still at the University he started working for the Silesian Museum (since 1970 known as a National Museum). In 1967, moved to a branch of the City Museum of Wrocław – the Museum of Contemporary Art on the eve of its opening. There he co-operated with Jerzy Ludwiński, one of their achievements being the memorable Fine Arts Symposium Wrocław '70; engaged in the undertakings of the Mona Lisa Gallery run by Ludwiński. In 1972 returned to the National Museum and became custodian of the contemporary art department until his retirement in 2013.

Created, practically from scratch, one of the best collections of Polish contemporary art in the country containing vast sets of works by such artists as Magdalena Abakanowicz, Tadeusz Brzozowski, Edward Dwurnik, Józef Gielniak, Władysław Hasior, Józef Hałas, Maria Jarema, Jerzy Kalina, Tadeusz Kantor, Jan Lebenstein, Natalia LL, Jerzy Nowosielski, Jerzy Rosołowicz, Jonasz Stern, Jan Tarasin and many others, predominantly representatives of the metaphor and expression.

From the mid-1970s Mariusz Hermansdorfer was curator of Polish sections at international art festivals in Cagnes-sur-Mer, São Paulo, and New Delhi. He also organised exhibitions featuring works from the Wrocław Museum collection held in Germany, the United Kingdom, the United States, and the Netherlands.

Art critic writing mainly for the "Odra" monthly – from 1990 member of its editorial board. Texts by Mariusz Hermansdorfer can be found also in catalogues and publications of the National Museum in Wrocław.

Keywords: Mariusz Hermansdorfer (1940–2018), Silesian Museum in Wrocław, National Museum in Wrocław, "Odra" monthly, director, art critic, curator of exhibitions, modern art.

On 25 November 2013 the National Museum in Wrocław celebrated its 65th anniversary. On the same day it ceremoniously opened two exhibitions: "Polish painting from the Baroque to Modernism" and "The Hermansdorfer Collection". The first, arranged by Ewa Houszka and Piotr Łukaszewicz, was a permanent exposition returning to the Museum showrooms after a several months long renovation. Naturally, from the point of view of its concept it differed from the earlier version and, additionally, was supplemented with a recently issued scientific catalogue. This was the last permanent gallery of the Wrocław institution to be successively refurbished, and its catalogue in a certain sense completed studies on the entire resources of the Wrocław National Museum, probably the only in Poland to have carried out this task systematically and consistently.

I return to events from 2013 because this was also the moment of bidding farewell to Director Mariusz Hermansdorfer upon his retirement as well as a sui generis summary of his activity after 30 years of fulfilling this honourable function and almost 50 years after he, at the time still a student, joined the museum staff.

The second of the above-mentioned exhibitions – "The Hermansdorfer Collection" – was a symbolic and unconventional reference to that half a century, a presentation of a private collection composed of donations made by artists – friends of the Director in his capacity as a custodian of the department of modern history with whom they co-worked for decades. The collection comprised a uniquely private reflection of the larger Museum collection proper, which, for all practical purposes, Mariusz Hermansdorfer created from



scratch, granting it a conspicuously auteur character. Director Hermansdorfer magnanimously donated to the National Museum almost half of his private collection and deposited the remaining part, to which members of his family are entitled.

Retirement and the accomplishment of almost all professional goals did not put an end to Mariusz Hermansdorfer's activity in the domains of art and museology. He remained keenly interested in the progress of the modernisation of the Four Domes Pavilion designed by Hans Poelzig, which ultimately, in 2016, became the site of a magnificent Museum of Contemporary Art-branch of the National Museum in Wrocław; the project had been initiated by M. Hermansdorfer, who also co-worked with the miaART GALLERY, i.a. by supporting the organisation of "Effigies of life", a large exhibition of works by Magdalena Abakanowicz, and by once again showing his collection, this time in a slightly different version. He also returned to writing: in a series of articles published in "Odra", a monthly that he befriended – Hermansdorfer was a member of its editorial board – he described his activity as critic, museum curator, and curator of exhibitions of Polish modern art shown abroad, while dedicating much attention to his artist friends. Today, when the author of those texts is no longer with us, they enable us to we learn more about him and to understand him even better. Hermansdorfer was never effusive and only a few could admit to being among his closest acquaintances. But then the times in which he realised his ambitions and pursued his passions were by no means easy for people "with a strong personality" – and Mariusz Hermansdorfer was certainly one of them. He died on 18 August 2018 in Wrocław and was buried in the local Grabiszyński Cemetery.

Mariusz Hermansdorfer was born on 8 May 1940 in Lwów. He studied history of art in Wrocław and in 1964, still as a student, began working at the Silesian Museum (today:

National Museum): first briefly in the Museum library under Józef Gębczak and then in the Painting Department supervised by Bożena Steinborn where, as he recalled, he learned the firm rules of museum work. At that time he also succumbed to the temptations of art critique and put his talent to the test by taking part in a competition held by the "Odra" monthly, in which he came second *ex aequo* with Paweł Banaś. A first prize was not announced, but the winners received works by Wrocław artists – Hermansdorfer was presented with a canvas by Eugeniusz Geppert: Rider in a Black Jacket, which, as it turned out later, inaugurated the above-mentioned Hermansdorfer private collection. The competition made it possible to make a debut as a publicist in "Odra" and, as a consequence, inaugurated regular co-operation with the periodical.

In 1967 critical aspirations and growing involvement in contemporary art led Mariusz Hermansdorfer to the Museum of Contemporary Art, at the time emerging in Wrocław alongside the City Museum of Wrocław and inspired by Jerzy Ludwiński. This legendary, albeit never fully completed institution was rarely associated with Hermansdorfer. It was managed by Alicja Bajdor and its program was conceived by J. Ludwiński, active in Wrocław at the turn of the 1960s and running the Mona Lisa Gallery while waiting for the opening of the long-dreamed-of museum. Hermansdorfer collaborated with Ludwiński at the Gallery and during the organisation of the Fine Arts Symposium Wrocław '70. When it became obvious that Ludwiński's plans would not materialise and he left Wrocław, the place of the Mona Lisa Gallery, which enjoyed the hospitality of the local International Press and Book Club, was taken by the newly-established auteur EM Gallery opened by Mariusz Hermansdorfer, who in the meantime returned to the Silesian Museum (1972) and succeeded Paweł Banaś as head of the modern art department. At that precise stage Hermansdorfer's decisions concerning his further professional career assumed final shape.

In the course of the following decade or so he created almost from scratch a museum collection of Polish modern art unequalled on a national scale. This accomplishment was probably favoured by Hermansdorfer's rank as a critic – astute, empathetic, politically neutral, and thus opened to assorted artistic stands, tendencies, and traditions. Hermansdorfer was by no means a cultural "official" but cherished a vision of that, which is most essential and most varied in Polish culture, both intellectually and aesthetically. He was capable of speaking the language of artists and winning their trust. Most importantly, he offered them participation in prestigious exhibitions held in places of importance and at an appropriate time. This was a period when Poland was devoid of an art market and works of art were not a commodity: artists seldom sold them to private persons and "state purchases" did not guarantee that the obtained artworks would find themselves in a suitable place. Destinations included the storerooms of renowned museums, even if works of art stayed there longer than they were exhibited. This is the reason why Mariusz Hermansdorfer managed to acquire for the Museum, and at relatively low prices, sizeable collections of representative exhibits by acclaimed artists, which could be used for creating interesting expositions, including retrospectives.



1. Young curator Mariusz Hermansdorfer as an active participant of the "Let's try conceptualism" art campaign according to a scenario by Mieczysław Zdanowicz, National Museum in Wrocław 1975 (Photo: National Museum in Wrocław)

Such purchases were very often followed by donations made by artists and, after their death, by their families. The status enjoyed by Hermansdorfer grew significantly when he became curator of Polish sections at international expositions held in Cagnes-sur-Mer (France), São Paulo

or New Delhi, and when he sponsored exhibitions of Polish contemporary art in Germany, the United Kingdom, the USA or the Netherlands.

Great significance was attached to contacts established with Polish émigré artists in the course of Hermansdorfer's trips abroad. Consequently, already at the end of the 1980s the taboo surrounding their oeuvre was at the very least strongly undermined and Wrocław Museum was enhanced by striking collections of works by, i.a. Jan Lebenstein and Marek Oberländer.

What, in briefest terms, is the essence of the excellence of the Wrocław contemporary art collection? Mariusz Hermansdorfer did not, as is sometimes believed, "frown upon" the currents of geometric, abstract or conceptual art. After all, one of his earliest acclaimed exhibitions: "Space, motion, light" was dedicated to them. Nonetheless, I am of the opinion that he discovered the prime trend of Polish art in the oeuvre of those artists who reconciled the emotional approach with intellectually working through the experiences of Polish history, sought accord between their aesthetic visions and symbolic culture, and used the metaphor not just impulsively, on a whim, but by sensing the spirit of Polish culture in which literature for long overshadowed visual arts. Not many equalled Hermansdorfer's ability to point out in the works of our "modern" artists oft-camouflaged traces of wartime trauma and humanism massacred by twentieth-century totalitarianisms. These were the sort of artworks that he primarily wished to save and preserve for future generations.

This is not the place for detailed inquiries, analyses and, even more so, ultimate verdicts proclaiming whether his intuitions were entirely correct. The accomplishments of Mariusz Hermansdorfer certainly cannot be denied consistence, disinterestedness, and passion, and as such they shall for long speak to us, conduct a dialogue, and stir our imagination. To a considerable degree they shall also define the cultural rank of Wrocław by becoming an inalienable part of its history.

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Art critic, publicist, editor of "Odra" (a monthly); recently published the book: *GET Eugeniusza Stankiewicza* (Wrocław 2015).

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