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Instructive Invisibility: Paradoxical Sub-Pedagogy of Janusz Orbitowski

Teaching when being unseen

Janusz Orbitowski was a geometric abstract painter working in Krakow at the turn of the 20th and 21st century. He ran a drawing studio at the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow since 1981 and he was the head of the Chair of Drawing since 1993. As a supervisor, he was valued as very well organised and disciplined. However, in the artistic *milieu*, he was perceived ambiguously.

“He was withdrawn, silent and secretive” – said his former co-worker Zbigniew Sałaj (Sałaj, 2018). Another assistant, Grzegorz Sztwiertnia, added that the former head of the chair was defensive and averse to risk-taking (Sztwiertnia, 2018). He was silent during official academic events or faculty meetings, he did not get involved, he was transparent, unseen...

Maybe it was because of Adam Marczyński, whom Janusz Orbitowski perceived as the model of academic attitude. The older professor was a widely respected authority, who was considered restrained, distanced, sometimes at most ironic (Oramus, 2015: 15). Janusz Orbitowski was his graduate and long-time assistant, and later also his close friend and neighbour. He had to learn distance, moderation and seriousness. Perhaps the reason was also that the geometrical abstraction Orbitowski cultivated was neglected at the academy? And perhaps also that the three-dimensional structures which he created using cardboard or wooden boards earned him a contemptuous nickname of “carpenter,” which he shared with Marczyński? The reason could also be that Orbitowski was never given to run a painting studio, although it was usually received after the supervision of the drawing studio. Or maybe the work at the academy was simply a disliked necessity for the artist, held just because of the benefits that came with fixed salary and insurance? This possibility finds confirmation in the words of the artist’s son, Łukasz Orbitowski, who clearly stated that work at the academy was a “real cross to bear” for his father (Orbitowski Ł., 2018). Anyway, in his workplace, numerous colleagues perceived the artist as silent and invisible. Paradoxically, there were some who found metaphysics in this unobtrusive silence (Sałaj, 2018). As if the

inconspicuous artist, avoiding loud and violent reactions and ignoring the need for immediate answers, created this way a place to be filled with that which is not loud and vividly visible.

The paradox was the greater that outside the academy Janusz Orbitowski was the life of the party, a man full of humour and anecdotes. Openness and warm energy were strongly present in his relations with other artists from the geometric artists *milieu*, the art-dealer Andrzej Starmach, and his friends from the legal and medical circles in Krakow (Wiktor, 2004: 100; Starmach 2018; Orbitowska 2018). On the one hand, the richly instilled artistic and social meetings simply allowed Orbitowski to present his real attitudes and emotions. On the other, his colleagues from the *plein-air* painting workshops remember him not only as always desirable, “brilliant and witty,” but also as an “extremely spiritual character – up to the state of levitation” (Wiktor, 2004: 100). There are grounds, therefore, to see Janusz Orbitowski as a person who opened up metaphysical experience just by his very presence. This experience was evoked both by his silent and invisible presence, as well as by his visible, “strong” activity, clearly shaping social relations. Perhaps the paradox of such a dual personality can be treated as an unintentional “hint” (though not an answer) at the meaning revealed just by the paradox itself.

The paradox was also hidden in Janusz Orbitowski in the relationship between his art and his teaching of drawing at the academy. As a drawing teacher, Orbitowski taught a traditional study of the nude (*Katedra rysunku*, 1996: M16). It required the teaching of mimetic imitation, representation, resemblance and the preservation of the traditional principles of harmonious composition. He expected his students not to spoil the appearance of the body, or its limbs. Finally, accuracy and conscientious work were required. The professor criticised simple mistakes. Orbitowski’s pupil and his later assistant, Bogusław Bachorzcyk, remembers simple words, such as “here you ‘shifted’ the leg,” delivered by the professor during the correction (Bachorzcyk, 2018). Admittedly, the refinement of details was appreciated, but the teacher emphasised above all that a student should use a traditional study to arrange the plane and develop an individual language expressing his own vision. This was possible also during the work on a simple nude composition (*Katedra rysunku*, 1996: M16).

Art seemingly absent

As an artist, Janusz Orbitowski himself perfectly arranged the plane and developed his own language of painting and drawing. This was evident in experiments with the coloristic geometry through perceptual op-art and minimalist forms. Even so, his own art did not appear at all during the classes he was teaching. This art was as if invisible to students. Meanwhile, Orbitowski’s works included many elements that could work as a starting point for important reflections on the theory of art (not only abstract) and its various contexts. His original artistic approach may be

observed already in his early works such as *Ciemny czerwony* [Dark Red], painted in acrylic in 1968 (size 100 × 65 cm). There are three red glowing spots with irregular edges, arranged diagonally inside black and white rhombuses. The higher one, in the upper left corner, is more suppressed by a black shadow surrounding it. The lower one, on the right, more distinctly red, resembles a cross-shaped reflex, surrounded by a smaller grey stain. The shadows merge together. The dark field grows with another red incandescence inside, on their connection. The viewer approaching and changing the direction of his gaze notices that the composition of rhomboids is made up of small close adjacent rectangles. They form the internal rhythm of the entire image, which ultimately imposes on the viewer.

The painting seems to realise in abstract art the concentration on the experience of the viewer, as postulated by Władysław Strzemiński in *The Theory of Vision* (Strzemiński, 1958). It exposes the role of eye-catching stimuli, shows the importance of visual changes that identify rhombuses and rectangles, almost synthesises the ways of creating a grey and blurred “peripheral field,” and finally underlines the role of natural rhythm. A challenge to join “the rhythm of the world,” taken in the pulsating and vibrating lattice of the painting, is an example of the relationship with nature that Orbitowski would later always maintain by accepting “organic” traces in his works (Orbitowski J. in Szczepaniak, 2005: 7). However, in this specific work, the trace is not in the similarity to natural objects but rather in the presence of the pulsating “rhythm of the world.”

Orbitowski’s concentration on the viewer’s experience and its inclusion into the vibrating energy of the environment corresponds with op-art and *The Responsive Eye* exhibition. The multiplicity of events on the retina which experiences a rhythmic and alternately pulsating play of colours, a combination of red that defies the “nothingness” of black hue (and at the same time emphasises its intensity), achromatic contrast of white and black (tonally, subtly mediated by grey) are the features typical for “optical paintings” (Seitz, 1965: 18–19). On the other hand, the rhythmic movement of repeated rectangles, which could indicate the “unistic” repetitions of the painting frames (Strzemiński, 1977: 449–450), is broken by the dominant rhombuses with angled lines, repeated and varied by size. Such an experience suspends reception. Temporary suspension forces the viewer to reflect on one’s vision and its boundaries. Then, “the optical unconscious” demands the logic of “transparency, simultaneity, and the containment of a frame” to ask the question about “the higher orders of the intellect” (Krauss, 1996: 19, 12) Perhaps the stopping moment of the rhythm and angled lines become the symptom of “the inner Gaze” expressed in an abstract painting?

The use of Strzemiński’s ideas, juxtaposed with the reflection on perception open to various aspects of experience, leads finally to metaphysics. It seems that this early picture is just a “spontaneous” and “pre-discursive” experience of a metaphysical “fundamental reality” present in the “strangeness” of the world. Such an experience is possible especially in painting, as it was suggested by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Merleau-Ponty, 1996; Migasiński, 1993: 58). It is possible, therefore, to

discover in the art of Janusz Orbitowski, already at its early stage, a mutual interpenetration of Strzemiński's ideas, perceptualism, optical unconsciousness and the phenomenology of perception open to metaphysics.

A later example well shows the evolution of style and the search for the artist's own proper artistic solutions. Work titled *21/91* (the twenty-first work painted in 1991, size 140 × 100 cm) was painted in acrylic on canvas in white. Its specificity, however, is the result of a linear structure of delicate and thin cords attached to the white canvas (forming initially unrecognisable ridges and grooves). The cords construct four planes covered with tightly arranged delicate darker lines that run in parallel and rhythmic constancy, but in four different directions. The planes collide in the upper part of the work to build an "arrogant" triangle. It looks as if it is "slicing" between two basic planes. Such a suggested movement can give this figure an apparent spatiality. However, another lower plane moves upwards with a definite calm force. It makes the impression as if it wants to cover the triangular illusion of space. The impression of movement prompts the spectator to trace the directions of planes and lines. As a result, it turns out that in fact the upper triangle and the sliding plate from below are one plane. The side forms were simply overlapped on it. The cognitive paradox is hidden in the initially imposed dramatic illusion of movement.

The contrast and ambiguity of white plane and darker cords, flat canvas and spatiality of ridges and grooves, the permanence of rhythmic order and the movement of a created form could be associated with the *Black and White* trend, singled out at *The Responsive Eye* exhibition (Seitz, 1965: 30–31), and represented, for example, by Bridget Riley, Josef Albers, François Morellet, Francis Celentano, and Henryk Berlewi. The more so that in special lighting the cords may seem black. Such an association is sustained and extended in "the stimulation of experience" by the textural tremor and vibration of parallel lines (or ridges) made of cords. The impression grows especially when a spectator, after approaching the painting and looking at it from various perspectives, identifies the non-illusory space in the grooves between the lines.

Then the rhythmically trembling texture provokes to expand the experience "synaesthetically" (Merleau-Ponty, 2001: 249–250). It is as if the painting "asks" to touch and cross the grooves with a finger or a hard tool to induce a whirr to experience the order and rhythm acoustically. Such an illusory sense of sound causes not only visual participation in the physiological and natural rhythm, as it might be called in the context of Strzemiński's concept of perception (Strzemiński, 2016). Neither does the picture simply "bombard" the retina with an energy, which was emphasised by William Seitz. It is rather the immersive perception caused by the painting, because it induces "engaged reception in which the work approaches and overwhelms the viewer, interacting fully with his cognitive power" (Ostrowicki, 2006: 204).

Finally, the last paradox is revealed. It turns out that one of the grooves runs strongly and "definitely" from top to bottom of the painting, as if even the frame

could not stop it. Its course is categorical like the yellow line in *The Command* by Barnett Newman. Or perhaps it is Worringer's "symbol of necessity," excavated from subconscious memory (Sztabiński, 2004: 12)? Or a trace of an infinite Absolute Being to be experienced in a sensual reception (Merleau-Ponty, 1996; Migasiński: 53, 55)? The more so that the scale of the painting maintains an impression of minimalistic monumental sublimity.

There are, finally, works smoothly covered uniformly with white paint, made after 2001. This is one of the last recurrences of "whiteness" characteristic of Orbitowski (the first white relief appeared as early as 1967, white works were created e.g. in 1973, 1978; Kowalska, 2006: 102). White uniformity, however, is violated and changed by the relief included into paintings. In one of the works (*Relief 7/02*, acrylic, fibreboard, cardboard; size 1 × 1 m), the rows of vertically oriented, adjacent, several-centimetre-long rectangles form diagonally inclined columns. Rectangles rise above a flat surface, cast a shadow, offering an impression of stairs or panels ascending within staircases. Black rectangular contours in the left part of the rows and the white ones in the right resemble sequences of illuminated or darkened windows. The relief "animates the white space of the ground" (Kowalska, 2015). It is geometry, however, that organises the space. There is still an overwhelming order in the painting. Even if some of the rectangles seem pushed far to the back of the plane. Geometry that violated the quiet sublimity of white colour simultaneously restores this sublimity despite the dynamic interplay of light and shadow and the introduction of the third dimension. The dramatic paradox shows the stability of overwhelming and immersive sublimity.

Only that this is not the end of the experience offered by this work. It is a double-sided relief (one of a series of eleven reliefs made in 2001). Its reverse is also intended for viewing. Narrow strips are visibly made of cardboard, a light-brown colour is exposed as a raw material of geometric and refined structures, while the interiors of the ascending stairs turn out to be stairs leading down to dark unknown depth. Or is it a symbolic way to reveal the Mystery just by constructing space?

This is an essential challenge to experience the simultaneity of both ascending upward "pyramidal" stairs in the gradual growth of form and downward recesses in one work and, moreover, in the same place and in the same structure. However, it requires the viewer to change the perspective. The viewer looks at the obverse and then turns the picture to see the reverse. During such an activity time passes and "simultaneity" cannot be observed. The essence of the work is impossible to experience, paradoxically enough. This paradox itself shows the limitations of cognitive powers within the categories of time and space. It suggests that, guided by the space-time order, so expressive in Janusz Orbitowski's works, we ultimately stand in the weakness of the senses facing the Mystery. Nevertheless, it is the poetics of paradox to suggest that metaphysical inaccessibility and inferiority reveals itself the most just in the experience of the paradox. The more so because in this work the paradox also appears through the complementarity of opposites

(*coincidentia oppositorum*). What is ascending is at the same time descending, the obverse has the same meaningful reverse, the white outline of the planes has dark equivalents (in the rows of “windows”). The paradox transcends human expectations, habits, knowledge and understanding. Consequently, it reveals that there is another, unknown order. An order of the Absolute Existence, unlimited by the categories of time, space, vision, understanding...

Paradoxical cognition

The duality of Janusz Orbitowski’s approach, described earlier, is present in a certain way also in the artist’s works. Often, it is the first impression of an abstract form, maybe a bit too ornamental, not interpretable, not challenging. And yet, the concentration on the work and its reception reveals a richness of experience it offers. There is a lot going on in the paintings and they could be the subject and a foremost inspiration for a reflection on important artistic issues. Among them is the role and construction of space, the function of both order and rhythm, the role of changing the viewpoint, the stimulation of experience, perceptualism, phenomenology of perception, Strzemiński’s ideas, metaphysics, and so forth. What’s more, the multiplicity of events occurs in an image or results only from it. Analyses can therefore be implemented in accordance with the most categorical abstractionists and conceptualists, as “analytical judgments” (Kosuth, 1969: 134–137).

Why, then, did Orbitowski decide not to use his own works in any way in his teaching? Why were his own paintings and drawings “invisible” for students during the education process in his studio? Was the artist unwilling to raise demanding subjects? Erudition combined with diligence and discipline, which characterised Janusz Orbitowski, do not justify such an opinion. Or maybe he was embarrassed to talk about his own art? He was indeed restrained at the academy but among other geometric abstractionists and his friends he discussed art a lot. The artist’s wife, Teresa Orbitowska, mentions that “he talked with Marczyński about art for hours” (Orbitowska, 2018).

Or maybe Janusz Orbitowski did not appreciate his students? On the contrary, the students who displayed required diligence were allowed to make experiments. The teacher did not bother them or try to stand in an individual way of a student. Such selected young artists were accompanied by a calm and patient observation. This was “sub-pedagogy” of sorts, as education in Orbitowski’s studio was called by his student, Piotr Bujak (Bujak, 2018). A film, made by Bogna Podbielska and Grzegorz Sztwiertnia during a picnic organised in the garden of Orbitowski’s favourite summerhouse in Tenczynek, shows sympathy for students (Piknik, 2003). Janusz Orbitowski simply liked them. But, nevertheless, the master was still staying out of sight at the academy, distant perhaps also in the drawing studio, as if he was hidden in the shade. Although he was perceptibly present, he was becoming invisible in his own way.

Even Orbitowski's son identified the cause of this approach as the usual dislike of the academy. However, maybe, in his own way, Janusz Orbitowski taught drawing not only because of financial necessity (as his son stated above). Perhaps the artist used his ambiguous situation to make use of the paradox to reveal what his art was ultimately discovering and what constituted the foundation of the artist's personal identity and his understanding of art. The same son writes that "the need for silence, some harmony between the soul and the world" was important for his father above all (Orbitowski Ł., 2018).

Indeed, on the one hand, he was teaching in a very traditional way. On the other, during such teaching he was still present, as well as he was patiently waiting. There was, in the quiet waiting, an opening of space for a response. The teacher expected the students to see the essence of art themselves, during the process of learning their ordinary artistic craft. Instead of unambiguous answers, he offered space and silence for the students to find and resound their own answer. His "unseenness" served this purpose. In this way, the silent invisibility was instructive. The "unseen" Janusz Orbitowski taught to be invisible and patient to give a place to see and hear what is happening in the silent simplicity where one can find their own identity and cognise the universal sense of existence. The metaphysics of presence, observed by friends, resonated with the metaphysics of expectation appearing in relations with students. Perhaps, in this way, Orbitowski taught not so much art but rather metaphysical cognition (Krapiec, 2006)?

Lastly, the mentioned paradox of the dual attitude to artistic *milieu* and dissonance between teaching and art appeared to be an element of a demanding game. Participation in such a game made participants aware of the causes and the role of the silent invisibility. It taught the ways of looking to find meaning. Participation in the game includes the necessary entry into the relationship and inclusion into the community of participants. The community of the game discovers the value of a shared view and mutual learning. This way the community itself appears to be the cognised value, too. Such a value is discovered and cognised, paradoxically (again), because the initial impression was an alienated and silent invisibility.

Such a paradoxical invisibility, however, served metaphysical cognition, too. It was the cognition of the identity, complementarity of opposites, existential necessities, universal sense of being, Absolute Existence. And it was the essence of Janusz Orbitowski's sub-pedagogy of art expressed in an apparent silence and invisibility. Such an essence was present on various levels of personal presence, art making, and art teaching. The paradox of both silence "distended" with sublime meanings and the dramatic multiplicity of "the unseen" transcended the activities of Janusz Orbitowski. Finally, the presence of transcendence ultimately indicated a paradox as the way to experience the invisible Mystery. As well as the way to discover such an experience as the essential task of art, teaching and human existence.

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Abstract

The text focuses on Janusz Orbitowski, a Krakow-based painter of geometric abstraction, and on his teaching methods at the Academy of Fine Arts. This discussion is combined with interpretation of his works. Orbitowski's distance to the academic *milieu* and his quiet teaching of traditional nude drawing are presented as a contrast to his openness and "energetic" lifestyle among friends, as well as to the distinct expressiveness found in his works. The text suggests that the paradoxical duality of silent invisibility, concealed by expression, could lead the artist and his students as well as the viewers of his art to a variety of cognitive experiences, including metaphysical cognition.

Keywords: Janusz Orbitowski, teaching art, Academy of Fine Arts, geometric abstraction, op-art

Słowa kluczowe: Janusz Orbitowski, nauczanie sztuki, ASP, abstrakcja geometryczna, op art

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