

THE DEPARTMENT OF ART HISTORY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ŁÓDŹ AND THE RESEARCH INTO THE AVANT-GARDE MOVEMENT

This year's centenary of the avant-garde is one of those occasions which make us reflect on the history of the institutions related more or less directly to various forms of artistic activity. In Łódź, they are three such institutions concerned with different aspects of art and art education, bound together by common interests, focusing on the efforts of artists, curators, art critics, and art historians. Obviously, for chronological reasons, the first one to be mentioned is the Museum of Art in Łódź. The genesis of this institution springs from the initiative of the members of the a.r. group, particularly Władysław Strzemiński, to assemble a collection of the works of foreign avant-garde artists. We need to emphasize the outstanding quality of this collection, which from the very beginning included the works of the major artists of world renown. The second link is the Academy of Fine Arts, the co-organizer of our meeting. Its establishment in 1945 crowned the long-time efforts of the local artistic community. An important moment for this school was the opening, one year later, of the Faculty of Spatial Arts, headed by Władysław Strzemiński. The third element of the triad is the Department of Art History at the University of Łódź.

Reflection on contemporary art, with particular emphasis on the phenomena connected with the avant-garde, is a natural area of interest in Łódź academic research. The University of Łódź was established in 1945, in the heroic period of post-war enthusiasm, also accompanied by great uncertainty. The uniqueness of the Łódź academic scene consisted in the boldness of creating it from scratch, originally combining very different research attitudes. Similar boldness had been at the base of the creation of Łódź as an industrial metropolis. Experimentation and innovation were an inherent part of the short history of this large urban centre. Academic institutions were born in Łódź in a similar spirit.

In the spring of 1945, the task of organizing the art history department at the University of Łódź was entrusted to Professor Waclaw Husarski and Professor Mieczysław Wallis¹. They were extraordinary personages, with diverse interests and experience. In the pre-war period, Husarski was an associate professor of the Independent Polish University [Wolna Wszechnica Polska]. His experience included research in art history (he had written his habilitation thesis in this

¹ W. Nowakowska, *W stronę nowoczesności - historia sztuki na Uniwersytecie Łódzkim*, in: *Dzieje historii sztuki w Polsce. Kształtowanie się instytucji naukowych w XIX i XX wieku*, ed. A.S. Labuda, Poznańskie Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Nauk, Poznań 1996 p. 266.

field), practice as a painter (he was a member of the Rytm group) and as an art critic. Similarly varied passions characterized Professor Wallis, a graduate of the Universities of Warsaw and Heidelberg, who combined the interests of an art historian and a philosopher with the practice of an art critic and theorist. The diverse and complementary experiences of those scholars determined the innovative character of the Łódź department. The team unconstrained by the limitations of earlier academic tradition was fully open to new contemporary phenomena. This seemed natural in the context of the lively artistic tradition of the pre-war avant-garde. The interest in its study was also smuggled into the Department's founding assumptions by Marian Minich, invited to work as a lecturer. This talented art historian, a graduate of Jan Kazimierz University in Lviv, long-time pre-war and post war director of the Art Museum in Łódź, had played an important role in the development of the Museum's collection of avant-garde art, and the promotion of "difficult" modern art². Thus, at the very inception of the Łódź art history department, traditional art history uniquely intermingled with aesthetics, art criticism and art theory, which interestingly coincided in some cases with the faculty's artistic practice. An important complement to this constellation was a course in museology and curatorship. From the contemporary perspective, this combination seems to be natural and obvious. However, we need to remember that in the realities of the second half of the 1940s it seemed truly innovative. Juxtaposition of the historical and the contemporary, as well as the introduction, at the very beginning, of aesthetics and art criticism into the curriculum of the institution focusing on art history, was undoubtedly pioneering and modern³. Thanks to Professor Wallis, this curriculum remained an important determinant of the directions of research in the Department of Art History, even after its formal closure after 1952. Interest in modern and contemporary art, including the avant-garde, thus became an essential part of the Łódź model of teaching art history. It was characterised by conflating the interests of art historians, art practitioners, theorists, critics, and curators. An interesting confirmation of the validity and attractiveness of this model was the donation of several hundred of most recent publications devoted to 20th-century art to the department by the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which took place in the 1960s. At the time, such an initiative did consolidate the only art history department in Poland that specialized in educating the historians of modern and contemporary art, with particular emphasis on the avant-garde.⁴

² P. Kurc-Maj, „Teoria widzenia” Władysława Strzemińskiego i „O nową organizację muzeów sztuki” Mariana Minicha, czyli jak patrzeć na sztukę in: *Acta Artis. Studia ofiarowane profesor Wandzie Nowakowskiej*, ed. A. Pawłowska, E. Jedlińska, K. Stefański, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź 2016, pp. 125-151.

³ Cf.: E. Gieysztor-Miłobędzka, *Warszawski Instytut Sztuki* in: *Dzieje historii sztuki w Polsce*, p. 261.

⁴ E. Jedlińska, *Profesor Wanda Nowakowska*, [in:] *Profesor Wanda Nowakowska*, “Sylwetki Łódzkich Uczonych”, Zeszyt 118, ed. E. Jedlińska, Łódzkie Towarzystwo Naukowe, Łódź 2015 p. 20.

The combination of interest in art theory and aesthetics with the traditional field of research of art historians was upheld in subsequent years. This duality may also be found in the research of the student and continuator of Mieczysław Wallis, Professor Wanda Nowakowska. In the beginning of her academic career, she was more inclined towards art theory and aesthetics, and it was only later that she decided to pursue research into modern painting⁵. Professor Nowakowska had been a long-time head of the Institute of Art History at the University of Warsaw. Thanks to her energy and unusual organizational skills, the Department regained its formal status at the University of Łódź. Full re-activation of the Department took place in 1992, and one of the most important arguments for its revival and its main goal outlined on this occasion was the research into contemporary art, with special focus on the collections of the Art Museum and the activities of the Łódź artistic community affiliated with the Academy of Fine Arts. Glancing through the list of the faculty members of the revived institution, we can see a continuation of the principles governing art history research in Łódź as early as in 1945. Apart from the researchers engaging in traditionally practiced art history, a number of other present and former lecturers have pursued research into art theory and aesthetics. This is most characteristic of the academic activity of Professor Grzegorz Sztabiński⁶, a long-time lecturer at the revived department, who successfully combines deep aesthetic-theoretical reflection with artistic practice. It is also true of other former lecturers at the department, Professor Ryszard Hunger and Professor Ryszard Kluszczyński. In the 1990s, the academic staff also included the curator Janina Ładnowska, who introduced the students to museology and curatorship. The interdisciplinary profile of the department, which can be regarded as unique to it, is upheld by the younger researchers open to the most recent artistic phenomena, including Professor Eleonora Jedlińska, Professor Aneta Pawłowska, and Dr Paulina Sztabińska.⁷ The ideas of the avant-garde and its contemporary manifestations play an important role in those researchers' academic work. Inquiry into modern and contemporary art, with a special focus on the avant-garde movements, remains one of the most important directions of research at the Łódź Department of Art History, and these interests naturally translate into didactic activity.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 41-42.

⁶ G. Sztabiński, *Dlaczego geometria? Problemy współczesnej sztuki geometrycznej*, wyd. Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź 2004; Idem, *Inne idee awangardy. Wspólnota, wolność, autorytet*, Neriton, Warszawa 2011.

⁷ E. Jedlińska, *Sztuka po Holocauście*, Tygiel Kultury, Łódź 2001; idem, *Polska sztuka współczesna w amerykańskiej krytyce artystycznej w latach 1984-2002*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź 2005; A. Pawłowska, *Pro Arte. Monografia grupy warszawskich artystów 1922-1932*, Wydawnictwo Neriton Warszawa 2006; P. Sztabińska, *Geometria a natura. Polska sztuka abstrakcyjna w drugiej połowie XX wieku*, Neriton, Warszawa 2010; idem, *Sztuka geometryczna a postmodernizm*, Neriton, Warszawa 2011.

As noted above, the development and functioning of the Łódź Art History Department has been related to the exploration of this field of artistic activity from the very beginning. Its uniqueness consists in the coexistence of very different academic interests and attitudes towards artistic creation. This unusual combination is the result of establishing the department from scratch without strictly defined academic traditions, its consequent openness to new solutions, and the local tradition of avant-garde practice from the interwar period. Undoubtedly, the story of art history research in Łódź has been inseparably connected with the analysis of the artistic phenomena known as the avant-garde.

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