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ON THE ARTISTIC PERSPECTIVES OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

Abstract: The biggest problem of the European Union is that a true poet who would like to write a poem about it has not been born yet. The spiritual foundations of today's EU are not shaped by Christian priests, nor by marshals and generals. They are formed by EU politicians and bureaucrats who tell us the true from the false. Only banal and boring truths can meet the political and bureaucratic criteria of truth. Therefore, the truths of today's Union are banal and boring. They involve no mystery and therefore no metaphysics, in the depth of which individuals would be willing to lose themselves. If it is impossible to die for the Union, we thus need to ask if it is possible to live in the Union. The positive thesis of the article is the conviction that aesthetic experience might be the source of both the spiritual and life-giving mystery and hope.

Keywords: art, God, mystery, performance, the European Union.

INTRODUCTION – OR HOW TO LIVE WHEN YOU DO NOT HAVE TO DIE?

The European Union is still the name of a problem. Its biggest problem is that a true poet who would like to write a poem about it has not been born yet. A true poet does not write poems on request, but from the depths of his poetic heart. This has not happened yet, although I have no doubt that the EU authorities could afford a contest for a poem about the Union that would be so financially attractive as to encourage poets not only from Africa, India, China and South America, but also from the United States, Canada and Australia, not to mention those from several Arab oil paradises.

Today's Union is not constituted by those who have done their best to spread the idea of the EU in our still nationalist minds. Namely, it is not constituted

by Christian priests, even though Christianity was the first religion meant to embrace all people, and thus all the inhabitants of Europe. The beginnings of Christianity heralded an absolute happy ending in which all people would be brothers and sisters. In contrast to the logic of the Old Testament, according to which spiritual and physical otherness condemned people to death, now euphemistically called exclusion, the New Testament offered all spiritually and physically different people the gift of the Gospel, owing to which each of them had a chance to become a citizen of the New Testament's world. At least this was how it was meant to be, but it turned out otherwise. There was and still is one God of the Old Testament. The God of the New Testament is nothing but trouble. Although there is one God, he exists in three persons. Protestantism has identified with the invisibility of the Father and the Holy Spirit, while Catholicism and Orthodoxy have built their spiritual identity on the visibility of the Son, the Virgin Mary and all the saints. Christian Europe was not superior to pre-Christian Europe, and there is no indication that post-Christian Europe, where more and more emissaries from all sides effectively undermine the so-called Christian roots of Europe, will prove worse. Without these roots, Europe seems to be more open to the future, rather than dwelling on the horrors of the past. The less God in Europe, the fewer wars and conflicts. The last time God reminded us of himself was in the former Yugoslavia. Let there be no doubt – I am not accusing God of anything. All I am saying is that where people derive the meaning of life from the necessity to rely on God, the atmosphere becomes thick and hostile to the ironic perception of human conflicts which are a faithful companion of the human condition. Nothing soothes the savage breast better than the need for self-mockery. Above all, the nearness of God, who – as was wittily observed by the artists from the Polish art group Łódź Kaliska, “envies people their errors” – is not conducive to self-depreciation.

1. THE EMPTY FUTURE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION?

The Europeans of the future will certainly not be religious people in today's sense emphasizing the denominational nature of religion. We should perhaps re-read the once-popular book by Leszek Kołakowski *Świadomość religijna i więź kościelna* [*Religious awareness and the ecclesial bond*] to glimpse an outline of the religious future of the United States of Europe. The title of the book perfectly captures the drama of any religious spirituality condemned to develop within the confines of a particular church. Religion offers spiritual awareness, the church is naturally founded on a bond – which on the one

hand unites and joins the faithful, giving them a sense of belonging to a community, but on the other hand limits, tames and enslaves them. Perhaps the future of Europe is non-ecclesial and non-denominational religiousness.

The Christian priests do not shape the spirituality of the EU, because no matter how loudly they proclaim the universality of their ideas, they continue to develop the concept of local and national church. Therefore, although she has long been the Queen of Poland and the Queen of Bavaria, the Virgin Mary is still not the Queen of the United Kingdom of Poland and Bavaria. It is probably not possible to go back to the universal Latin because the language is dead. But who knows, perhaps we should start promoting the services in English?

Who, then, forms the basis of the EU's spirituality? If it is not priests, neither is it marshals and generals. Since 1945, the European countries have not been resolving any contentious issues using tanks and bombs – the staple component of nationalist consciousness. The bloody events in the aforementioned Yugoslavia were an exception. The ghost of nationalism, however, is still haunting Europe; it feeds on the aggression of sports fans and finds a cosy shelter in the poverty and uncertainty that are still, unfortunately, an important part of European experience. The fundamentals of the EU's spirituality are formed by EU politicians and bureaucrats who believe they can tell the true from the false. Only banal and boring truth can meet the political and bureaucratic criteria. Therefore, the truths of today's European Union are banal and boring. They involve no mystery and therefore no metaphysics, in the depths of which people would be willing to lose themselves. If it is impossible to die for the Union, we thus need to ask if it is possible to live in it.

2. IN SEARCH OF A MYSTERY

Every era is alive with a mystery it deserves. In the Middle Ages, it was provided by the language of liturgy and theology; God was not the subject of understanding, but the target of extra-rational love and prayers. Today, the average man in the street cannot learn the language of economics and comprehend the rules of the functioning of the stock exchange; he finds it equally hard to understand the theoretical principles of electricity, the telephone, the radio and television, the computer, the camera and the camcorder, the vacuum cleaner, or the microwave oven, even though he knows well enough

how to use these and other paraphernalia of modern life. The more light is thrown on the world by scientific understanding, the greater and darker mystery they become for the common sense. Once, both man and the world would “unravel” without God, because every moment of life and every element of the world was saturated with God. Today, however, the Nietzschean life without God can be quite easy to visualize and understand in all its biological, moral and social dimensions. We have known for at least two hundred years that people cannot be divided into believers and good on the one hand and non-believers and evil on the other. Neither goodness nor hope is necessarily defined by the heart of faith, or by the light of reason. The path to God led through suffering; in the culture of analgesics (already noted by Leszek Kołakowski in his *Presence of Myth* forty years ago), any recollection of this path provokes even more impassive silence over the empty coffin of God.

It is hard to imagine a life which would be able to free itself from the bonds of trust in the mysterious “beings” created by modern cybernetic and electronic metaphysics. It would be relegated to the margins of social life, and only in rare cases could it count on a positive valorisation. And such lack of trust would be understandable as a wise precaution in dealing with what we cannot comprehend. Because the mind does not understand the operation of the telephone and the radio, it should be wary of the voices that come out of them; if it does not understand the nature of television, it should be insensible to the beauty of the image that appears on it; for the same reasons it should distrust the calculator, while the computer should preventively go in the trash before we unpack it. However, it is not so. We trust the hands we have not seen and will never see, we trust the words we have never understood and will never understand; we trust the people of whom we know nothing and will probably never know anything. We entrust our everyday life and our future to the mystery which the light of our common sense will always be unable to penetrate. If we are to believe Nietzsche, even if we have not stopped praying, there is still no God who would sometimes take some human wisdom from our prayers; Foucault showed that our human reason was, is and probably will continue to be effectively knocked out by something – i.e. the world and life, by time and by place. It may be the end of a certain kind of man, and therefore a beginning of a new one. This passage may be called new humanism and post-humanism. The mirror of numerous old ideas and values in which our life has looked at itself so far is becoming cloudy right before our eyes. Life no longer wants to look at and find itself in the mirror as too many new expectations and claims escape it. Yet, let us not identify this crisis with the crisis of life itself; as Jan P. Hudzik reminds us,

“the aim of reflection is not to clearly and distinctly understand oneself, or to go beyond an incident in search of the essence of things – but to live in a creative way, i.e. to be able to orient oneself in the opaque world where each step involves uncertainty and risk.”¹ The still imperfect life continues to grow wiser and stronger as it develops increasingly perfect concepts.

3. THE EUROPEAN UNION AS A WORK OF ART

A) EVERYONE IS AN ARTIST AND ANYTHING CAN BE A WORK OF ART

A popular Polish saying is that (every) nature hates a vacuum. This time, it is the nature of contemporary human spirit, which is no longer able to fill itself with the signs of God. Contemporary art often attempts to redefine the transcendence inherited from God through artistic means. At the end of July 2013, I had the pleasure to participate in Contexts 2013 – the 3rd International Sokolovsko Festival of Ephemeral Art. For a few days, my “spirituality” was shaped by numerous performances and installations. We gathered around the performing artists, thus accepting their leadership. The leadership was safe because it was temporary. It was manifested by their annexation of the common area and their courage to focus the attention of the festival community on their performances or installations. Their actions offered us a momentary opportunity of experiencing a different perception of time and space. Each performance was composed of attitudes and gestures which created their own, ephemeral world through the liturgy of art, differing greatly from religious liturgy in its individualism and uniqueness, but within the same artistic situation, repetition was not only possible, but even desirable and recommended. The artists did not so much come to their performances with their own liturgy, as they created it in their course.

Jean François Lyotard wrote that "the postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes or the work he creates is not in principle governed by pre-established rules and cannot be judged according to a determinant judgment, by the application of given categories to this text or work. Such rules and categories are what the work or text is investigating. The artist and the writer therefore work without rules, and in order to establish the rules for what will have been made. This is why the work and

¹ J.P. Hudzik, *Estetyka egzystencji. Szkice z pogranicza ponowoczesnej etyki i estetyki*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, Lublin 1998, p. 127.

the text can take on the properties of an event; it is also why they would arrive too late for their author or, in what amounts to the same thing, why their creation would always begin too soon."² This description of the condition of the postmodern artist contains all that is present in Nietzsche's diagnosis of life.³ When the artist described by Lyotard approaches the canvas (or any other material), he can use them artistically in any way. He is free from the ascetic wisdom of style and the promiscuous severity of craftsmanship possessed by the Greek, medieval, Renaissance and academic masters, which put up an effective resistance to his atavistic desire to live in a state of perpetual anarchy. The modern artist is painfully alone. There is no God (in whom he often believes), and so there is neither truth nor goodness. Although ethics is impossible, art (aesthetics) is still possible. Although the painter knows he can do anything with the canvas, he also knows all too well that not all of the fruits of his creative passion will ripen in the world of art as its works. Freedom does not mean – as Hegel put it – the understanding of needs, but the artistic courage to create them. Although there are no longer any rules of beauty, hope, which sometimes stems from them, can still be alive. The artist can afford any one of an infinite number of artistic gestures, yet not all of them will become another artistic and aesthetic need. Thus, along with Nietzsche, we enter a world in which life itself, and perhaps even life alone lends to art the materials necessary for the creation of art works. We reject the ethical mask and we put on an aesthetic one. Although there is freedom, there is still no tolerance for discretion. It is events that acquire the features of art pieces and texts. They appear either too early or too late, which definitely distinguishes them from the physiology of childbirth that always

² J.F. Lyotard, "Answering the question: what is the postmodern?", in *The Postmodern Explained to Children: Correspondence 1982-1985*, trans. D. Bary and others, Turnaround, London 1992, p. 24.

³ "But even if the future were to give us no cause for hope – our curious existence in precisely this Now gives us the strongest encouragement to live according to our own standards and laws: the inexplicable fact that we live precisely today and yet had the infinity of time in which to come into being, that we possess nothing but this brief today in which to show why and to what purpose we have come into being precisely at this moment. We are accountable to ourselves for our own existence; consequently, we also want to be the real helmsmen of our existence and keep it from resembling a mindless coincidence. We have to approach existence with certain boldness and willingness to take risk: especially since in both the worst and the best instances we are bound to lose it. [...] No one can build for you the bridge upon which you alone must cross the stream of life, no one but you alone. To be sure, there are countless paths and bridges and demigods that want to carry you through this stream, but only at the price of your self; you would pawn and lose your self. There is only one single path in this world on which no one but you can travel", See: F. Nietzsche "Ultimately mediations", in: *The Nietzsche Reader*, K Ansell-Pearson, D. Large (eds.) D. Large (trans.) Blackwell Publishing, 2006, p. 143-144.

takes place at its proper time. The artist Alastair MacLennan has no doubts that “traditional Western religion is on the wane. It no longer sufficiently convinces, with its hidebound views of humanity's place in the universe. In postmodern times, some seek 'purpose' through DIY spiritual healing groups, eschewing dogmas and embracing core, pluralistic teachings from a diversity of sources. Krishnamurti recommends we all, individually and collectively, practise bare attention of mind. This serves to dissolve all unnecessary subject and object binary splits, which cause conflict throughout our private and public lives.”⁴

B) EVEN THE SENSELESS MAY MAKE SENSE

Nothing heralds the time of performance apart from the information which tautologically heralds the time of performance – and even that is not necessary. The gestures of the liturgy of art are by no means metaphysically empty. Every festival evening at 9 p.m., the installation “Forcing a miracle” by Joanna Rajkowska (largely a repetition of her installation in London a year before) came alive. In the park, next to the ruins of the reconstructed Bremer's sanatorium, numerous incense sticks hidden in the ground gave out a mysterious scent and formed illuminated streaks of fog hovering above the grass.⁵ The artist defies the traditional religion in which the faithful ask God for a miracle despite the obvious lack of guilt borne by the human suffering that lies behind this request. Through her artistic activity based on a kabbalistic ritual, the artist wants to force a miracle upon nature. Perhaps the callous and inhuman nature will turn out to be more friendly and compassionate than God who either drowned in the ocean of undeserved human compliments, or became spoilt? One thing is certain: if we do not want to accept the fact that this single gesture of the artist has just as much power as all the gestures of all priests of all religions of the world from the beginning of its existence, it is only because of our quiet and rather shy hope that Rajkowska's artistic gesture has enough power. She explains: “Soon after I had had a vision of smoking incenses my little daughter, Rosa, was diagnosed with a rare type of cancer, retinoblastoma, which is a cancer of the eye. Since then, the project has started to grow, along with my fear. I realised that I have a ready formula that I can use for something far more essential. I can activate the ground and

⁴ The Artists Newsletter June 1997, EYE TO EYE, *Mark Dawes in Conversation With Alastair MacLennan*. (<http://www.vads.ucreative.ac.uk/collections/macclennan/interviews.htm>).

⁵ See: G. Borkowski, *Wielowymiarowe „konteksty” w Sokołowsku*, *Obieg*, VIII 2013. (<http://obieg.pl/kronika/29436>).

grass to manifest my own greatest, most inner wish – to help Rosa in her struggle. I do believe that if you give the ground (soil, little stones, insects and plants) a language, it is far more effective than any human desire. [...] Miracles don't happen on their own. You have to ask for them. Or at least allow them to happen. [...] I am interested in inventing new social rituals, which usually occur when people don't really know what to do with themselves. I trust situations which go beyond recognised types of rituals and force people to behave in a slightly different way. This moment of awkwardness is quite creative.⁶

Karolina Kubik, one of the artists performing in Sokolovsko comments on her work: “In my performance, *Pochodzić z rodziny* [*To come from a family*], I directed sticks alternately soaked with gentian violet or stuck in my shoulder towards the ground. I performed a subtle, two-hour ritual – a rhythmic medical treatment on the land of Sokolovsko full of diseases collected for many years in local nursing homes. I turned the sticks in a clay ring. This way I prepared special injections, acupuncture needles, which were stuck into the ground for the whole night in the final stage of the performance. In the morning, only the punctures were left. From the perspective of a casual observer, through the intense presence, I gave the specific event *autonomy devoid of motives and consequences*.” The medicinal theme that recurs in the description draws attention. The performance has the power of giving meaning to what is common, “Because people normally feel that if someone somewhere in the world repeats an action, it has to make sense, and thus deserves attention. People rarely waste their time.”⁷

C) (NON)ACCEPTANCE OF OBVIOUSNESS

We create our own limits; at the same time, our own limits are what creates us. It is worth remembering that we are limited in a particular way by the need for obviousness satisfied throughout our life, and therefore, in accordance with what has been said, this need for obviousness is what forms us. Owing to the obviousness that we find in the world and that we also impose on the world, we do not have to stand to attention twenty-four hours a day, but we can also afford to stand at ease. Obviousness chooses objectives for us and identifies the simplest ways to achieve them. It is not bad when obviousness guides many of our numerous steps, yet it is bad enough when it is

⁶ <http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/14878/1/frieze-week-joanna-rajkowska>.

⁷ Private communication with the artist.

present in each of them. The largest and most powerful ally of obviousness is the conviction that our critical mind, in particular, will not let us fall into its trap. Popular culture largely filled with the spirit of voracious consumption seduces us with the images of a world in which we are active and all-powerful shapers of our fate; we are ensured within the limits of the culture that it is us and only us who choose responsibly our life goals, values and principles. Every day, we are showered by mass media with thousands of compliments and we use them to build our self-esteem: we give ourselves a bit of luxury that we always and everywhere deserve. Can we build the future of the European Union on the liquid foundations of the omnivorous popular culture?

CONCLUSION

The point here is not that nothing is obvious in art; the point is that nothing has to be and nothing can be obvious in art. In life, in science, in religion, in law and in morality, freedom is about increasingly coming to terms with the profound needs which constitute the reality of life, science, religion, law and morality. It is only art and love that allow for freedom – the freedom which escapes the traps laid by our needs – because art and love have the courage to fulfil themselves in constant self-creation from anything and everything. It is not necessary to be or have a genius to live a life, which is a mystery even to itself and the source of our human eternity – or perhaps we should admit after Beuys that the genius is in all of us, and we all are, or at least should be, artists.

The strict Saint Paul wisely instructed the believers two thousand years ago that everyone should love someone and be loved by someone. Obviousness is not obvious and non-obviousness becomes most obvious in a unique way only when we emerge from the darkness through the light of love. Only art can seduce us with the same hopelessly ephemeral and at the same time eternal light. Even the most national work of art, if it is just a work of art and not an artistically coarse record of nationalistic delusions about the greatness of some nation, hides a secret which has the power to open it up to the spiritual needs of the people belonging to all other nations as long as they genuinely need to commune with works of art. We need to believe that it is this mystery – the mystery of an art work, which today frequently has to explain its *raison d'être* – is our common European opportunity. Even if this is a utopia, isn't it true that its beauty is truly seductive?

**O ARTYSTYCZNYCH PERSPEKTYWACH UNII EUROPEJSKIEJ
(streszczenie)**

Największym problemem Unii Europejskiej jest to, że wciąż nie narodził się poeta, który chciałby napisać o niej wiersz. Duchowych podstaw dzisiejszej Unii nie tworzą także chrześcijańscy kapłani, marszałkowie i generałowie. Tworzą je natomiast unijni politycy i biurokraci, którzy orzekają, co jest prawdziwe, a co nie. Politycznemu i biurokratycznemu kryterium prawdy potrafią sprostać tylko prawdy banalne i nudne. Dlatego prawdy dzisiejszej unii są banalne i nudne. Nie ma w nich żadnej tajemnicy, a zatem i żadnej metafizyki, w której głębi jednostki mogłyby chcieć się zatracić. Jeśli niemożliwa jest śmierć za Unię, nie sposób nie zapytać, czy możliwe jest zatem życie w Unii. Pozytywną tezę artykułu jest przeświadczenie, że źródłem takiej duchowej i zarazem życiodajnej tajemnicy oraz nadziei może być doświadczenie estetyczne.

Słowa kluczowe: sztuka, Bóg, tajemnica, performance, Unia.