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REMARKS ON THE MARGIN  
OF WOJCIECH WŁODARCZYK'S ARTICLE  
"1989. ON THE CONCEPT OF MODERNISM"

The problematic of modernism, which appeared in Poland more or less in 1989, of which Wojciech Włodarczyk writes in his paper, had two aspects. One, artistic, put forward the question of modernism in the context of a debate on postmodernism; the other, political, inspired by the change of a political system, was related to the failure of the projects of "modernization" proposed by the communist regime (visions of the future). Social modernism was largely replaced by new conservatism (Leszek Kołakowski asked a question "how to be a conservative-liberal socialist"). The avant-garde utopia was compared to the utopia of the "new man" in the socialist ideology. I understand this position particularly well in respect to Wojciech Włodarczyk since it was him, who in the late 1970s called "modern" a group of artists who were neither "realists," nor "abstractionists" (adopting the tradition of the avant-garde), but who in 1956 chose modernity, identifying it with liberty. Then Włodarczyk pointed at the history of that line of reasoning, dating back to the 1930s and overlapping with a debate about the national art. It was a fundamentally different tradition, even though somehow related to modernism, at least of the kind referred to in 1959 by Wyka and Juszcak. Also, it had little to do with the history of the avant-garde that I analyzed (as related to modernism as well, but in a polemical way) in the context of constructivism. Włodarczyk's interesting terminological suggestion required clear distinctions among various artistic phenomena, such as modernism and avant-garde vs modernity, which makes it understandable why he calls for terminological precision on the meta-theoretical level. I can address his objections only with a claim that my liberty in using the concept of the avant-garde stemmed from a conscious methodological decision determined by my general worldview. On the other hand, defending the opinions of Piotr Piotrowski, I am sure that he made a clear distinction between the concept of modernism, which he always related to the idea of the autonomy of art in the sense given to it by Clement

Greenberg, and that of the avant-garde, which in Piotrowski's opinion was close to politics and society in terms of Peter Bürger. That was particularly clear in Piotrowski's *Dekada*, a book published in 1991, in which a critique of the "autonomous" approach characteristic of the conceptual modernism of the 1970s was combined with a praise of the avant-garde "engaged" in political processes. I wrote about in an essay published in *Szum*, called "Krytyczne instrumentarium etycznej historii sztuki Piotra Piotrowskiego" [The critical apparatus of Piotr Piotrowski's ethical art history], which Włodarczyk has most likely read. The problem is, however, much more general, which he probably hardly realized. I mean a fundamental change that took place in the Poznań art history in the 1990s thanks to a younger generation of scholars. It was not just a generational or ideological change, but rather a result of a different political contextualization and a new point of view which became common in Europe after the fall of the Berlin wall and the end of the post-Yalta division of the world. Contrary to what was being said at that time, it was then, under the conditions of the freedom of choice, that the political left and right acquired their proper meanings, while the semi-official intellectual and social communities fell apart. Still, I believe that after 1989 in Poznań the approach to art and art history was continued as regards the concepts I wrote about, but together with a new polarization of political choices, more radical both on the right, and on the left. The question of autonomy, so important in the avant-garde way of thinking, to return to Włodarczyk's categories, became an important component of the hermeneutics and phenomenology of the picture, successfully practiced by the Poznań scholars. The problematic of the discipline's self-consciousness brought a number of insightful publications on the history and theory of art. Quite penetrating were also reflections on the social life of art, once rooted in semiology but today resulting in many interesting studies of the significance of cultural phenomena and artistic biographies. Finally, another aspect of that Poznań reorientation was the rise of the feminist art history, in the 1980s and later connected with reading the books and essays by Maria Janion. It is too bad that all those problems, definitely worth discussing, have not been considered in more detail yet. This is, however, not the topic I want to write about since it deserves a separate paper. Among the papers and in the record of our discussion published in *Artium Quaestiones* as the aftermath of the centennial conference I miss a more perceptive analysis of the role played in the 1990s by my friend and scholarly opponent Piotr Piotrowski, who in the hectic year 1980 began his academic career in the Institute of Art History of the University of Poznań. It was then, in the atmosphere of revisions made possible by the rise of *Solidarność*, that he realized the dangers related to the mythologized concepts of the avant-garde

autonomy and the purity of scholarship. At that time he came up with a postulate of the "ethical art history." He argued that in the era of more and more common violence and intolerance mythologized scholarship was unable to show humanity the right way. To do that, a fundamental change was needed. The scholarly foundation of that line of reasoning was presented in Piotrowski's book, *Artysta między rewolucją a reakcją* [The Artist between Revolution and Reaction], published in 1993. I have been stressing that fact many times. In the book, Piotrowski asked questions about the causes of the contemporary artist's involvement in the ideology of political power, and considered the artist's complicity in creating false pictures of reality. Choosing by no accident as his object of study a "tragic" history, he seemed to address and warn his own times. Attempting to reconstruct the ideologization of pure form, he wanted to understand the artist "living in a destitute time" and in consequence point at his or her moral involvement. Since then, Piotrowski treated art as a kind of public activity which is by its nature ethical and political, while politics he defined as a democratic debate. His project, rooted in his scholarly approach, was not about determined moral norms, but about historically examined ethical behavior. The goal was a new humanism. As a result, Piotrowski believed not so much in the primacy of the social choices over the aesthetic ones, but in the indispensability of each artist and art historian's awareness that both history and art have their ethical aspect. He defined history as dialectical and materialist, pluralist and operative, where art and humans have their place, their rights, and their impact. That, I think, was the meaning of the "post-*Solidarność*" turn in the Poznań art history which combined high standards of knowledge with ideological pluralism, perhaps contrary to the expected single-mindedness of the faculty, assumed all too promptly and naively. We must reconsider Piotr Piotrowski's role in that completely different art history of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which began almost half a century earlier.