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CONTINUE LISTENING, PLEASE

Piotr Kosiewski

Tygodnik Powszechny

Proszę mówić dalej. Historia społeczna Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi [Continue Speaking, Please. Social History of the Museum of Art in Lodz] concept and ed. by Marta Madejska, Agnieszka Pindera, Natalia Słaboń, Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, Łódź 2022, pp. 190

The book *Continue Speaking, Please* is a proposal allowing to look at the Museum of Art in Lodz differently. Its creation serves as an example showing how museology research has been changing. The change applies also to the perception of the museum institution and the way it is defined and defines itself.

What has not as yet been written about the Museum which has existed for over ninety years? (p. 11). This question is posed by Agnieszka Pindera and Natalia Słaboń, authors of the book's concept. It is of key relevance, since the bibliography dedicated to the Lodz Museum turns out to be truly impressive. Over the last decade the Museum of Art has also put a lot of effort into assuming a new perspective on its own history. Let us just mention the two-volume 2015 publication *Muzeum Sztuki in Lodz. Monograph*¹ or the exhibition launched in 2021 and the publication that accompanied it *Avant-garde Museum*² which was one of the major museum events of the present decade.

The discussed *Continue Speaking, Please* publication can be regarded as a kind of a completion of the works on the history of the Lodz institution from the latest decades. It is at the same time a look at the Museum's history from a different perspective, allowing to give unobvious answers not only to the questions about the Museum's identity, but firstly to *who has contributed to what the Museum is what it is* (p. 11). Finally, the book *Continue Speaking, Please* constitutes a proposal to apply in the study of museums a methodology rarely used in such studies before, or to give a different public presentation of the results obtained with its use.

The departure point for the book can be found in the 'Tell the Museum' Project implemented as of 2018. Its first phase finished in 2022, and the continuation is planned. Twenty-two interviews were conducted in the course of the Project, engaging current and former staff, but also artists affiliated to the Museum. They cover the period beginning in 1966 when Ryszard Stanisławski, the longest-standing head of the Museum, became its Director until the moment

when Andrzej Biernacki was appointed the Museum's acting Director in 2022. The interviewee group included individuals representing various generations, different work experience and service periods. It encompassed museum curators, such as Krzysztof Jurecki, Jarosław Lubiak, Maria Morzuch, and Magdalena Ujma, conservators: Elżbieta Cieślak and Tatiana Matwój, Teresa Koprowska who ran the Museum's office for many years, or Dariusz Bugalski who created the Museum's educational programme. Furthermore, the following artists were spoken to: Edward Łazikowski, Andrzej Paruzel, and Tadeusz Rolek. The very selection of the interviewees is an attempt at obtaining a more varied, albeit complex look at the operations of the Lodz Museum.

Museums have been using 'oral history' for some time now (not to mention conventional interviews applied in the research into art history). As emphasized by Katarzyna Kuzko-Zwierz in the text tackling oral history in Polish museums, published some years ago, oral history is first of all present in *the activity of new centres of which a part, awaiting the creation of their final seat, conduct works on their permanent exhibition, while building their collections, and in those which have been developing or altering their formula in the last decade*.³ It was the establishment of new historical museums which to a great degree prompted the introduction of oral history into museums' regular praxis.⁴ They are the ones which implement the major projects documenting Poland's history from the previous century, to mention only the following: Oral History Archive conducted as of 2004 by the Warsaw Uprising Museum, the 'Separated by History' Project conducted by the Polish History Museum since 2007, the records of those hiding and saving Jewish residents of Poland recorded by the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews shared on the Polish Righteous portal, or the Émigrant's Archive run by the Emigration Museum in Gdynia.

Oral history methodology is also used by museums focused on cotemporary art. Since 2018 the Museum of Modern Art together with the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts

has been running the 'Oral Histories of Modernity' Project, so far encompassing interviews with e.g., Kōji Kamoji, Bożena Kowalska, Jarosław Modzelewski, Józef Robakowski, Anka Ptaszowska, and Wiesława Wierzchowska.

The case of the Museum of Art in Lodz is closer to the second group of museums described by Kuzko-Zwierz: it did not really develop or alter its formula, but under Jarosław Suchan as its Director (2006–2022) it asked questions about the topicality of the Avant-garde tradition it had stemmed from, what a museum should be today, and what its social function should be.

The authors of the 'Tell the Museum' were inspired by the 'Tell the City' Project implemented in 2020–2011 by the Lodz's Urban Initiatives Association Topografie. They also adopted the recommendations formulated by the Polish Oral History Association. The novelty is the methodological application of oral history to the research into a museum's history.⁵ The authors, however, formulated a relevant reservation: although the publication's subtitle reads *Social History of the Museum of Art in Lodz*, the project prepared by the Lodz museologists is not a social research, but merely *a certain stage in museological (self)reflection* (p. 12).

Furthermore, they chose quite a risky solution: they shared the interviews' transcript with five authors, males and females, who told the story of the Museum on their grounds. Only one of the five: Maria Madejska used to work for the Museum of Art, and is currently a writer and a social archivist. The remaining four were total outsiders, and more importantly, they were neither museologists nor art historians. One of the ladies: Olga Gitkiewicz is a journalist, book author, and a columnist; Marcin Wicha is a graphic designer and an essayist; Patrycja Dołowy is a writer and a multimedia artist; Olga Drenda, in her turn, is an anthropologist. As a result, a book has been created which speaks about the Museum from a perspective different than usual, or more justly said: perspectives, since each of the authors 'filtered' the material amassed in the Project through their own interests, knowledge, and experience. Furthermore, each of them gave the floor to the Museum staff. It is with the latter's voice that the history of the Museum of Art is told. Actually, in the case of Wicha's text: 'Life in the Museum. A Puzzle (One of Many Possible Solutions)' it is told exclusively with their own words, since the whole is a collage of quotes derived from the talks. *We grew as close as a family, things were so, so nice among us. /They were such times which brought people close to one another, very much [...] /The atmosphere was so friendly* (p. 74).

The *Continue Speaking, Please* contains one more material: a visual essay by Marta Kusztra who also graphically designed the publication. It is not a set of figures illustrating the text, but a separate autonomous voice. Marta Kusztra benefitted from the archival collection of photos recording exhibitions and events. By appropriately composing those, most often unknown, photographs, cropping respective ones appropriately, multiplying them, she told the story of the Museum bringing up what was most often omitted or forgotten. By doing so, she has shown the less-known aspects of important events, such as the visit of Joseph Beuys in 1981. She recalls the meeting of Ryszard Stanisławski with Maria Stangret and Tadeucz Kantor, or of Urszula Czartorska with Mieczysław Porębski caught years ago by a photographer; but she also brings to light photos showing previews,



a lecture for workers at the Lodz Furniture Factory in 1961, or community work of the Museum of Art staff in the Lodz Botanical Garden in 1975.

The focus on was marginalized in the research into the history of the Lodz Museum, bringing to light less prominent events, individuals, and even entire areas of its operations make the 'Tell the Museum' Project and the book published as its result close to the concept of rescue history promoted by Ewa Domańska: such rescue history is to focus on the aspects of the past which have been forgotten, omitted, or excluded. It is to focus on the areas and phenomena which were previously ignored in the mainstream of the academic research. The history which has to be critical of the dominating perspective, paying attention to what is local. And last but not least, the history *which often transforms the empowerment: it 'enhances awareness, changes attitudes of people to people, nature, animals, plants, and also to things'*.⁶

The texts included in the *Continue Speaking, Please* recall events of crucial impact on the Museum's history, such as Beuys's *Polentransport 1981/Transport do Polski 1981* or the sensational exhibition under the auspices of Solidarity titled *Construction in Process* in 1981; during the martial law the works presented in it found shelter in the Museum's storage, this not entirely in compliance with the law. Also the robbery committed that very year is discussed; some paintings by Jankiel Adler, Paul Signac, Alexei von Javlensky, and Louis Marcoussis from the collection of the Museum of Art were stolen, this actually being the biggest robbery in Communist Poland (PRL). The papers included show how the

Museum of Art was changing, and so was its organizational structure: creation, unification, division, but also elimination of respective departments. They talk about censorship which the Museum faced all the time in Communist Poland. There are also anecdotal stories included in the book, such as the dispute between Magdalena Abakanowicz and Ryszard Stanisławski about the manner of displaying her work *Cage*. Telling us about marginal cases, these stories help us to better understand the functioning of the Museum over the last fifty years.

Importantly, the *Continue Speaking, Please* takes an important position in the to-date not thoroughly described museums' operations during the political and economic crisis in the 1980s, as well as its activity in the subsequent decade, in the course of the transformation and violent, not entirely controlled changes within the realm of culture. The book may constitute a small, albeit important step on the way to investigating them. However, and this is the most important as emphasized by Madejska, thanks to the collected interviews, the publication can tackle issues which are *sometimes overlooked in official monographs, and which often cannot be found in archives, even the private ones* (p. 27).

Finally, it is the perspective from which these issues have been presented that is of key importance. It is extremely relevant that among the interviewees for the 'Tell the Museum' Project there is no one not who ran the Museum in the period the Project covered, although most of those individuals could still be available. As explained by Natalia Słaboń in her talk to Aleksandra Boćkowska, such a decision was made consciously, even as an act of 'social justice'. The history of the Museum is actually written from the *perspective of directors, important displays, legendary events, which, however, did not come to being by themselves. Someone had had to do things for Ryszard Stanisławski to be able to arrive somewhere and open a display. We made the point of removing the spell off the Museum, to show that a great museum of the Avant-garde is also a workplace.*⁷ That is why even the way in which the interviews were conducted mattered: between a narrative and biographical interview and a loose story. It was not by accident that the interviewers repeated the phrase, 'Continue speaking, please'. It turned into the book's title.

In such a presented history of the Museum of Art an important place is taken by individuals conserving the collections (and the conservation process as such) or those who mount displays. As a rule, an important role in the book is played by individuals previously absent from the main narrative about the Museum, such as Teresa Koprowska who worked for it for over 40 years (as of 1977), while her

fondness for new technological solutions she talks about undeniably constitutes an important element of her story about the meeting point of technology and the museum, but also of technology and contemporary art.

The adopted perspective also allows to tackle such issues as employee relations and relations with the Museum authorities under Director Stanisławski (and in general, of work at cultural institutions in Communist Poland), but also in the 1990s. The new political system after transformation brought about, as emphasized by Gitkiewicz, not only the change of labels and décor, but also of social relations. It was then that 'the invisible hand of the market' weakened employee relations. *The new management do not come to ask you, how you are, how you are doing, and how your husband or children are doing; they just step on the wet floor, dirtying it, not worrying about it, since they can outsource the cleaning* (p. 55). Not only should the description of those changes constitute the history of Polish museums after the political transformation, but it may also help in diagnosing their current condition.

The book *Continue Speaking, Please* proposes a different look at the Museum of Art and its environment, its position within Łódź's social and economic contexts, but it also provides a closer look at its space. *It would be advisable to begin with an outdoor photo, writes Gitkiewicz. Fair enough: this is a garden in the Museum's courtyard; back then, in the 1970s, it was usually closed to visitors, open only to the Museum staff and Director's family who were living in the Museum flat in the palace building* (p. 45).

The innovatory aspect in this perspective is, as emphasized by Dołowy, *the multitude and complexity of relations among people, among objects, people and objects, people and matter (also the living matter: organic), among all the Museum participants and the very matter* (p. 135). The pointing to this organic non-human dimension of the institution falling within Domańska's concept of rescue history is one of the most genuine motifs of the discussed book.

Continue Speaking, Please is not a monographic study. It only sketches or signals the motifs that could be tackled in the future history of the Museum of Art which would go beyond the to-date paradigm of talking about the history of this particular institution, or more broadly, museums in Poland. The book demonstrates how important it is to resort to oral history and use the knowledge and experience of the Museum's current and former staff, as well as those who rarely speak about their work. Not only in order to describe their past, but also to pose questions about the manner of museums' operation, their role and organization, currently and in the future.⁸

Abstract: The book published by the Museum of Art in Łódź *Continue Listening, Please* is the result of a number of interviews with current and former staff, and also with artists affiliated to the Museum, conducted in the course of the 'Tell the Museum' Project implemented in 2018–2012. Their authors methodically applied oral history to investigate the Museum's history, following which they commissioned a non-Museum affiliate to prepare texts on the grounds of the conversations. The selection of interviewees, encompassing curators, conservators, individuals responsible for

education, or administrative staff allowed to describe the aspects of the operations of the Museum of Art, events, and individuals, previously only marginally present in the to-date publications on the Łódź institution. Not really being a monograph, the book signals motifs which could be tackled in the course of the preparation of the future history of the Museum of Art, going beyond the paradigm of the existing stories about the institution's history, such as its functioning in the times of the political and economic crisis in the 1980s, the operations following the 1989 transformation,

employee relations, or the organic, including the non-human dimension of a museum. It also poses questions about functioning of museums, their role and organization, currently and in the future.

Keywords: Museum of Art in Lodz, oral history in museums, rescue history, museums in Communist Poland, museums after 1989, employee relations in a museum.

Endnotes

- ¹ *Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi. Monografia*, vol. 1, ed. by A. Jach, K. Słoboda, J. Sokołowska, M. Ziółkowska, Łódź 2015; vol. 2, ed. by D. Muzyczuk, M. Ziółkowska, Łódź 2015.
- ² *Awangardowe muzeum*, Museum of Art in Lodz, curators: J. Suchan, A. Pindera, 15 October 2021 – 1 May 2022; *Awangardowe muzeum*, ed. by J. Suchan, A. Pindera, Łódź 2020.
- ³ K. Kuzko-Zwierz, 'Historia mówiona w muzeach. Przegląd projektów prowadzonych przez polskie placówki muzealne', *Wrocławski Rocznik Historii Mówionej*, 5 (2015), pp. 91-110.
- ⁴ It has to be remembered that already for many decades spoken testimonies have been collected at martyrology museums, such as the State Museum at Majdanek. Furthermore, for over 4 decades the Phonic Lab at the Museum of Literature in Warsaw has been collecting recordings of writers.
- ⁵ The oral history methodology started to be systematically used in the research into art history not so long ago. One of the first projects was connected with the Conference of the Golden Cluster and the Biennial of New Art in Zielona Góra. See *Przestrzeń społeczna. Historie mówione Złotego Grona i Biennale Sztuki Nowej*, ed. by P. Słodkowski, Zielona Góra 2014.
- ⁶ E. Domańska, 'Historia ratownicza', *Teksty Drugie*, 5 (2014), p. 13.
- ⁷ A. Boćkowska, 'Nie dzwoń, ja to zrobię', *Dwutygodnik*, 4 (2023), <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artukul/10639-nie-dzwoń-ja-to-zrobię.html>. The text was published in a series started by Aleksandra Boćkowska 2019 and published in *Dwutygodnik* titled 'Backstage of Culture' in which she talks to individuals of key importance for the implementation of cultural events, whose work, however, is not widely noted.
- ⁸ Ewa Domańska underlines that the idea of rescue history applies first of all to rescuing the future.

Piotr Kosiewski

A historian and art critic; a regular collaborator of the *Tygodnik Powszechny* weekly and the *Szum* magazine. Member of the Polish Section of the International Association of Art Critics, AICA. Winner of the 2013 Jerzy Stajuda Prize for Art Criticism. He deals with the most recent art, cultural policy, and restitution of cultural goods: piotr.kosiewski@gmail.com.

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Table of contents 2023: <https://muzealnictworocznik.com/issue/14964>