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Hidden meaning in art

*In the process of seeing it is not important what the eye sees
but what a person realises from their seeing¹.*

I understand the title phrase “Hidden meaning in art” to denote a search for narrative plots that can be detected between the perceived representational-figurative motifs and the formal notions of a work of art. I shall discuss this using the examples of two versions of the sculpture *Matka Ziemia* [Mother Earth] by Zbigniew Władyka. The first one was created in 1981, and it is a sculpture of a pregnant woman in a layer of soil placed in basalt depression; the other one, created in 1986, is a sculpture of the same figure on a travertine slate.

In this article, I would like to highlight the multi-faceted nature of the narrative construction of the sculpture entitled *Matka Ziemia*. My analysis is going to lead to an answer to the question: What is the hidden meaning of the presented sculpture?

Allow me to delve into the analysis. Right at the outset, I would like to stress the fact that what is important is, on the one hand, the meaning layer, i.e. the presentation of the woman as a future mother, and, on the other, the materials necessary for creating it – their combination and the composition applied in this context, and the applied means of expression. Władyka’s sculpting method was also interesting – it consisted of direct shaping of the material without using any other tools than his own hands.

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1 W. Strzemiński, *Teoria widzenia*, Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź 2016, p. 53 [unless indicated otherwise, quotations in English were translated from Polish].



A



B

Figure 1. Zbigniew Władyka, *Matka Ziemia*, A. bronze, granite, soil, (65 × 65 cm), 1981; B. bronze, slate, (65 × 65 cm), 1986.

Source: own study.

The setting of the same bronze sculpture in different bases defines different stories about people. The purpose is not to present motherhood; the pregnant figure of a woman is a personification of people's relationship with the Earth. As the author himself put it: "it is Earth that is the mother, and man is its child. Earth/mother varies: sometimes she is gentle, warm, protecting people with her pillow against the cold block of granite, and sometimes she is sharp and inaccessible like a rock."²

Władyka's works from the 1980s were aptly defined by Heinz Emigholz, a German critic:

This art presents man actually walking on the earth and making it his; in it one can also see man nestling in the Earth trustfully, consciously and with a sense of security as a real-life Auteus. In Władyka's output one can also find a huge mental influence on the recipients through a careful choice and application of the sculpting materials, and often through combining various materials, which sometimes

² All of the recollections about Zbigniew Władyka presented in this article are based on never published notes by his daughter – the author of this article.

offers surprising results. [...] Man and nature exist in this art in a quite obvious and yet mysterious symbiosis.³

The dualism of the perception and interpretation of reality rooted in Władyka's works is also visible in the discussed sculptures. The 1981 *Matka Ziemia* embedded in earth evokes a strong association with calmness and harmony. When viewing it, one does not feel any dissonance or unrest. The later *Matka Ziemia* is not a mirror reflection of the earlier one. When contrasted with the cold stone and without the surrounding layer of earth, it seems cool, alien and indifferent.

Władyka was not interested in a simply statement of obvious truths. His sculptures are questions – those which he asked himself and those which he triggered in the viewers of his art. He also assumed that all those that were answered were good, though he respected those which offered a pretext for formulating new questions the most.

The essence of a sculpture

Erwin Panofsky developed a method of analysing the essence of a work of art by identifying iconographic and iconologic elements included in a particular work. He assumed that first one should identify individual communicational segments to be able to analyse their significance. In following Panofsky's assumptions in the analysis of the iconography of the sculpture of *Matka Ziemia* one should indicate the main formal device Władyka used: framing the woman at the borderline between realistic and abstract forms. That form, combined with other elements of the sculpture, i.e. earth and/or stone, constitutes the sculpture's main assumptions – it engages viewers in a conversation focussed on the question: What is the meaning of this sculpture? Viewers should grasp its multi-faceted nature, and discover the layers of hidden messages. They are forced to read two layers of references: one general, and the other addressed only to them, referring to their individual experiences and sensations. At the general level, only the actual components are noticeable. It is only after they are combined that they form the appropriate context for understanding the sculpture.

Panofsky assumed that to fully understand the message contained in a work of art, one needs to study its formal structure. In the case of the sculpture under discussion, this seems particularly important, even more so considering the fact that the repeated image of the woman in different sculptural arrangements defines her special role, which Władyka outlined when he created separate visual messages.

³ As quoted in: Z. Władyka, H. Koszaliński, B. Burchert-Perlińska, M. Koszalińska, *Brama sztuki Zbigniewa Władyka = Gate of art Zbigniew Władyka's*, Wydawnictwo Bilbo, Łódź 2000, p. 74.



Figure 2. *Pregnant woman.* View of sculpture: A. from the side, B. from the front, C. from the other side, D. from the back.

Source: own study.

Consider the sculptured woman without the context of the additional elements. Figure 2 presents various views of a photographed figure in a clockwise progression (A. from the side, B. from the front, C. from the other side, D. from the back). The woman's pose suggests the final moments prior to giving birth. The figure sitting on a flat surface, resting on one arm, was presented in the characteristic position of legs tilted outwards. The bulging abdomen and the telling curvature of the body trigger an unmistakable association. The connotation with giving birth is further emphasised by the arrangement of the body arching, with the neck and head tilted backwards. The future mother, clad in an airy gown, is not naked. When looking at her, it is impossible to tell the difference between the figure and the fabric. The only exception is the woman's feet, which the artist isolated from the rest of the body with the brim of the fabric. That line, clearly defined, divides the figure into two parts. It constitutes a borderline between the gentle and the realistic manner of sculpture interpretation.

NB, the mode of work discussed here was typical of Władyka. He shaped the form of a sculpture by pressing the clay with his hands thus leaving impressions, a kind of a signature. When discussing his art, he often emphasised that "the human hand is the perfect tool for a sculptor who works with clay,"⁴ a tool which offers the ability to develop even the most intricate of shapes. He always gesticulated when talking about this, grasping a portion of air as if he was holding clay in his hands. At that moment he would look at his hands as if monitoring the correctness of his gestures; next, he would shift his sight onto his interlocutor, as if checking whether he was being understood correctly. In his workshop, an exceptional sculpture has survived which he developed using only his hands. It is a figure in a 1-to-1 scale. He developed it in a very original manner, without relying on observations. He developed notes on the arrangements of his hands, which were then recorded as

⁴ Z. Władyka, according to his daughter's recollections.

a model and immediately transferred onto the sculpture. He first put a layer of clay onto his hand, then he searched for a shape on the human body to finally transfer it onto the sculpture. All those who visited his workshop were his models for this process. He first placed some clay in his palm, then he put it against the bodies of his guests, and, finally, he transferred it onto the sculpture being developed. Thus a **single** portrait was created which consisted of the images of **many**, a kind of proof that the human hand can reflect any shape there is.

When sculpting *Matka Ziemia*, Władyka applied two sculpting techniques. The first was based on a delicate yet dynamic guiding of the hand over the clay; the other consisted of defining the form using a metal sculpting tool. Soft hand strokes were reserved for the woman's body, the tool was used to shape the gown. Thus, direct touch was reserved only for the places where two bodies touched: that of the artist and that of the woman being sculpted. The described manner of shaping the form pushed Władyka's work away from the figurative interpretation of reality. What was important in it was the gesture outlining an undefined shape, and the more one focusses on a detail of his sculpture, the more clearly one sees the referential indefiniteness of the form. It is in that sense that I understand Władyka's shift away from realistic art and towards abstract art.

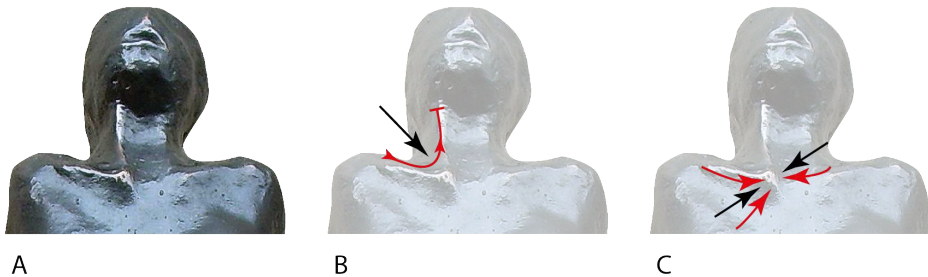


Figure 3. Bust – fragment of the *Matka Ziemia* sculpture. A. Original sculpture, B. and C. Analyses of the movements of the artist's thumb over the form of the sculpture.

Source: own study.

The fragment of the sculpture presented in Figure 3 illustrates the matters under discussion. In the general outline, one can see the shape of the head, but when looking from up close and studying the details, references to realism lose their meaning. The face lacks details – the nose, lips, chin are not realistic representations of a face. Expressiveness comes forward, revealing Władyka's emotional activities.

I propose that when viewing the *Matka Ziemia* sculpture one should focus on the manner of sculpting, and trace the movements and directions of the artist's thumb strokes over the form. I recorded and presented my own observations on

the third illustration in points 3B and 3C. The red arrows indicate the directions of movements, while the black ones indicate the direction of the visual factorial. Thanks to that experience, one can easily notice how the artist shaped the collar bone – the indicated fragment can be easily separated from the sculpture's context. In reproducing Władyka's gestures one can find the path the artist took when sculpting *Matka Ziemia*; it is also much easier to notice the referential layer produced using selected formal devices – the layer of the meaning of the departure from realism towards the art of gesture, or towards expressiveness.

A work of art is analysed at two layers: the referential/semiotic layer, and the formal layer. In this instance, it is necessary to combine both layers in a single visual message. In the article: "Rzeźby w Łódzkiej przestrzeni miejskiej" I stated that "semantic narration, a notion, cannot exist without a formal-compositional structure, that the dignity of those elements is the basis for creating a visual code clear for recipients."⁵ The two voices emerging in that dialogue should complement each other, forming a matrix for recipients' observations, and the more such relations there are, the more levels of strings of meaning can one find.

In order to find that relation in the case of the sculpture discussed here, I shall attempt an analysis of the formal structure.

Stanisław Witkiewicz in *Szkice estetyczne* defined the composition of a painting as follows:

We describe as composition, i.e. the arrangement of a painting, the relations between the constituent forms of that painting between each other and the relation between them altogether and a neutral form which is not a constituent of the internal forms, but only limits the painting from other objects, i.e. the frame. (...) Pure composition is an abstraction. For partial planes to be differentiable they must differ in terms of colour (...) or be separated from one another by very thin planes in relation to their sizes, i.e. lines or outlines. Therefore, a very elemental composition must include at least two different qualities.⁶

He also emphasised that:

The condition of a unity of a separated plane can be defined as a balance of divisions, uniformity of partial complications; then, any complication of composition as a multiplication of the divisions triggered by diverging from the symmetry of the whole and a part, and from balance. The unity of an entire plane depends on whether

5 Z. Władyka-Łuczak, "Rzeźby w łódzkiej przestrzeni miejskiej", [in:] *Badanie i projektowanie komunikacji 4*, eds. A. Siemes, M. Grech, Wydawnictwo Libron, Wrocław 2015, p. 206.

6 S.I. Witkiewicz, *Nowe formy w malarstwie. Szkice estetyczne. Teatr*, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warsaw 1974, pp. 32–33.

larger dividing planes also constitute unities for themselves. The bigger the number of divisions and imbalances coupled with the need to integrate that multitude into unity is, the stronger the sense of unity will be, which is the goal of Pure Art.⁷

At this point one should consider whether the definition of painting composition can be transferred directly onto the definition of the spatial composition of a sculpture. Painting clearly differs from sculpting with the notion of shaping space. Such kinds of art as painting, drawing or graphics must offer references to spatial imagination. They acquire the right to spatial activities only within the two-dimensional approach. “Something” defined further or closer can be presented in reference to itself within a plane only once in one representation. When compared to a painter, drawer or graphic artist, a sculptor is in a much more convenient position. A sculptor has many more planes for building spatial relations. Their works can be viewed from an infinite number of perspectives. What they only need to remember while sculpting is that they must ensure the compliance or rather the unity of the assumptions resulting from the spatial contexts.

Another important aspect mentioned by Witkiewicz are the applied means of expression, e.g. colour, or lines dividing planes. Sometimes when using the means of expression taken from the world of painting, a sculptor adds such elements typical for their art as texture, or the structure and colour of the materials they use, yet they always have at their disposal surfaces (rounded or flat), folds in those surfaces, or a situation where one penetrates another.

The problem was also studied by the Łódź-based artists Katarzyna Kobro and Władysław Strzemiński, who understood the meaning of a sculpture as a dialogue between “the internal and the external spaces”:

The basic right of three-dimensional plastic arts is their freedom in the lack of natural limits. A sculpture develops within an inorganic space [as opposed to paintings, which are enclosed in the limits of canvas]. A painting should not be related to anything which is outside it. It constitutes a world enclosed in itself, one which is separate, indifferent to its surroundings, and which constructs itself according to its own organic laws. A sculpture does not possess that pre-defined inherent limitation.⁸

According to Kobro and Strzemiński, limitless space and endless time form, by integrating one another, the space-time quality typical for sculptures. This enables a master sculpture to develop a strategy in the progressions of noticing selected shapes, which in turn defines the narration for the content being conveyed.

⁷ Ibidem, p. 33.

⁸ W. Strzemiński, G. Sztabiński, *Wybór pism estetycznych*, Universitas, Krakow 2006, p. 53.

Władyka was perfectly aware of the fact that composition is an abstraction, and that it can exist for its own sake and/or help develop the narration of content.

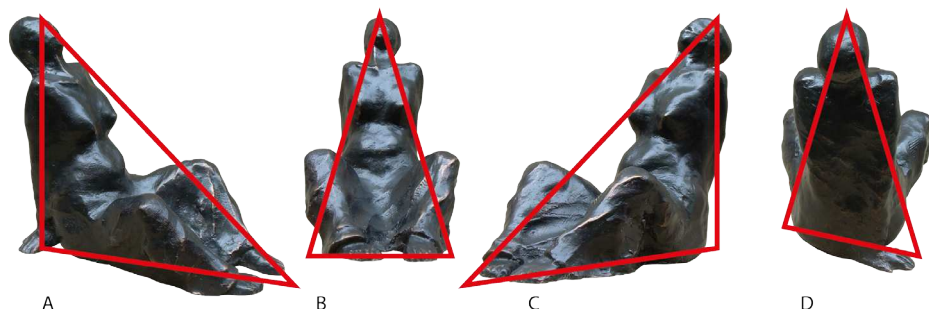


Figure 4. The main compositional assumptions of the sculpture. View: A. from the side, B. from the front, C. from the other side, D. from the back.

Source: own study.

Władyka based the composition of the *Matka Ziemia* sculpture, as indicated in Figure 4, on the classical triangular arrangement. From every side, it is enclosed within a triangular shape.

Considering the history of art, one could easily notice that this kind of composition is used by artists to maintain a static harmonious balance. Yet Władyka did not intend to achieve stasis, but rather to develop a composition which would depict the dramatic nature of the act of motherhood. The nature of the arrangement of all the elements leads to the emphasis of a rounded abdomen. That is the visual basis of the form; it supports the harmony of the sculpture. It is the remaining elements that are dynamic. How did he achieve that? To explain, allow me to use another fifth illustration with the image of the sculpture viewed from the front.

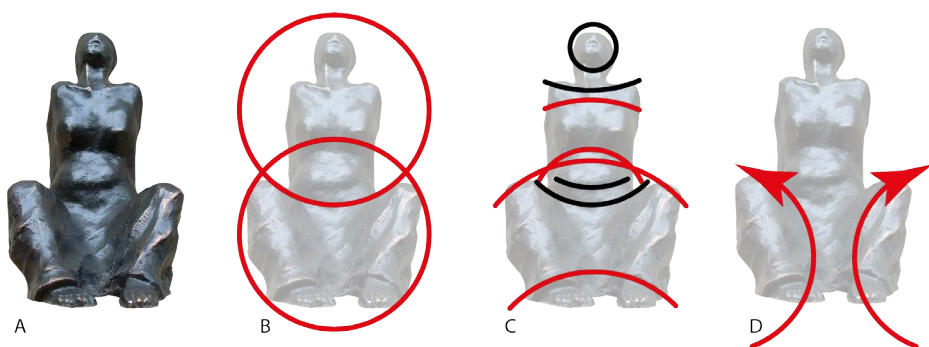


Figure 5. Dynamics of the sculpture. View: A. Original sculpture, B. Main compositional assumptions, C. Rhythm of repeating spherical compositional elements, D. Dynamic elements.

Source: own study.

The drawing superimposed on illustration 5B indicates the main compositional assumptions based on two oval patterns. This device helped Władyka maintain the enclosed nature of the sculpture. Moreover, circles overlapping at the abdomen enabled him to emphasise it and make it the main topic of the visual presentation. Thus the sculpture, enclosed within the framework of its contents, became a word: pregnancy. The unequivocal word is part of a sentence, developing multi-plot narrations. After identifying Władyka's creative assumptions, one can more easily understand the connections of the sculpture in other compositional arrangements and the artist's participation in his dialogue with his viewers.

Strzemiński supplemented the set of commonly used means of expression with one more: *architectonisation* [architektonizacja in Polish]. It was supposed to consist of "binding various shapes, various objects distant from one another, and creating their rhythmic relations – it consists of transferring some components of form from one object and merging them into the shape of another object."⁹

Architectonisation is a kind of an intentional perspective used to obtain a common denominator of the rhythmicisation of the shapes which form a work of art:

The process of architectonisation, i.e. of binding various shapes, various objects distant from one another, and creating their rhythmic relations, consists of transferring some components of form from one object and merging them into the shape of another object. Thus individual shapes somewhat lend each other specific components of form. Those components of form develop, by repeating themselves in a series of objects, a common bond of architectural rhythmicity.¹⁰

In Władyka's work, *architectonisation* did not borrow the shapes of one object from another. It was based on the extraction of the anatomical characteristics of the figure of the woman which enabled him to shape the visual arrangement of arches, the repetitions of which possess a special rhythm. The dynamics of the sculpture indicated in Figure 5B breaks down into two directions: upwards and downwards. The line drawn with the outline of the gown along the woman's feet begins the dynamics of the repetitions of *architectonisation* directed upwards, spreading through the abdomen, knees, and over the bust. It is finally stopped by the line drawn by the collar bones, which in turn defines a new rhythm of dynamics, this time directed downwards, towards the sculpture's centre, towards the abdomen. Clearly, the dynamics meet at the most important place for the sculpture, a place which emphasises its topic, its meaning: the pregnancy of the woman/mother – Earth.

⁹ W. Strzemiński, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

Witkiewicz assumed that the starting point for every shape was the regularity of its form. It is a circle in the case of painting, and a sphere in the case of sculpture. The notion of Pure Form seems important at this point, i.e. a form striving for perfection, multitude in unity. The point is not, of course, for every form to become a circle or a sphere. Neither is it about the outline of a painted or sculpted shape. It is about the aesthetic form which is “a composition of outline forms in an enclosed space.”¹¹

Władyka’s response to the call for developing *Pure Form* seems obvious. He created a sculpture based on an arrangement of forms which can be visually identified, and which Witkiewicz would have called *Pure*. The *architectonisations* of those I indicated earlier serve to amplify the compositional assumptions. If the sculpture’s forms had been limited to their already presented set, it would have lost its dynamics. The arrows indicated in photograph D in Figure 5 indicate the direction of the dynamising directional factorials. As they are distributed symmetrically, they, on the one hand, direct the dynamism outwards and, on the other, emphasise the curvature of its central part.

According to Wassily Kandinsky it was exactly those directional factorials that decides about the compositional assumptions of works of art. Similarly to Witkiewicz, he stressed that it was irrelevant what form was or whether it was abstract or representative; what was important were the internal tensions within it. In *Point and Line to Plane*, he wrote:

In fact, no materializing of external forms expresses the contents of a work of painting but, rather, the forces and tensions which are alive in it.

If by some magic command these tensions were to disappear or to expire, the work, which is alive at that very instant, would die. On the other hand, every accidental grouping of several forms could be called a work of art. The content of a work of art finds its expression in the composition: that is, in the sum of the tensions inwardly organized for the work.¹²

The form of *Matka Ziemia* was created in 1981. If it were placed on a classical rectangular plinth, it would constitute an enclosed topic of human birth, a monument to motherhood. Yet that was not Władyka’s intention. As I have already indicated, the essence of the sculpture exceeds the intimacy of human birth.

¹¹ S.I. Witkiewicz, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

¹² W. Kandyński, *Punkt i linia a płaszczyzna. Przyczynek do analizy elementów malarskich*, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warsaw 1986, p. 29 [English version: W. Kandinsky, *Point and Line to Plane*, Dover Publications 1979.]

Its dramatic nature covers a broader circle of the artist's interests. He created a story about the birth of humans, whose Mother is Earth. Humans whose task is to care of their Mother.

Matka Ziemia

The 1981 *Matka Ziemia* is no longer anonymous; it steps out of the crowd and starts speaking with the strength of global notions. In the author's own words: "I would like us to consider what kind of children we are for the Earth on which we live." Out of respect for the author's intentions, allow me to leave the question unanswered. I remember the following statement far too well: "It is not about finding an answer but about searching for it."

The sculpture itself somewhat helps in this quest. The artist applied formal means of adding to the figure of a pregnant woman a black granite depression filled with earth. In pursuing the formal analysis of the sculpture, one should indicate the shape of the stone, which referred to the oval compositional assumptions of the female figure. This is made complete with a ring at the place where the earth comes into contact with the stone.

Therefore, one can find proof that in its assumptions (coming close to *Pure Form*) the sculpture invites cooperation, participation, and discovering the meaning hidden in it.

The 1986 *Matka Ziemia* is different. It was placed on a cool piece of travertine slate, so there was no soft support of earth. The figure does not come into contact with the perfect form; it clashes with the cool line of the stone. A line which Kandinsky defined as a cool line, arguing that:

In the human imagination, this corresponds to the line or the plane upon which the human being stands or moves. The horizontal line is also a cold supporting base [...] Coldness and flatness are the basic sounds of this line, and it can be designated as the most concise form of the potentiality for endless cold movement.¹³

The sculpture of a pregnant woman, emphasised with a cool passive line, is not an invitation to cooperation. It is rather a warning against the mindless actions of humans towards Earth. The sculpture was created thirty-three years ago. It is quite obvious in the era of global climate problems that Władysław's warnings have remained valid.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 57.

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Zofia Władyka-Łuczak

Ukryty sens w sztuce

Streszczenie

Autorka pochyla się nad zagadnieniem interpretacji dzieła sztuki. Wychodząc z założenia, iż sformułowanie „ukryty sens w sztuce” należy rozumieć jako poszukiwanie wątków narracyjnych pomiędzy postrzeganymi motywami przedstawieniowo-figuratywnymi a zagadnieniami formalnymi w dziełach sztuki, dokonuje analizy dwóch rzeźb autorstwa Zbigniewa Władyki pt. *Matka Ziemia*. W procesie interpretacji zwraca uwagę na fakt, iż z jednej strony istotna jest warstwa znaczeniowa, czyli przedstawienie kobiety jako przyszłej matki, z drugiej strony ważne są materiały niezbędne do jej powstania, jak i ich zestawienie, a w tym kontekście zastosowana kompozycja oraz użyte środki wyrazu, a także obrona przez artystę metoda rzeźbienia.

Słowa kluczowe: sztuka, rzeźba, komunikacja wizualna, interpretacja dzieła sztuki.

Hidden meaning in art

Summary

The author discusses the notion of the interpretation of a work of art. Starting with the assumption that the expression “Art’s hidden meaning” should be understood as a search for narrative plots that can be detected between the perceived spatial-figurative motifs and the formal notions in works of art, she analyses two sculptures by Zbigniew Władyka, both entitled *Matka Ziemia* [Mother Earth]. In her interpretation she emphasises the fact that, on the one hand, the meaning layer, i.e. the presentation of the woman as a future mother, and, on the other, the material necessary for creating it, their combination and the composition applied in this context, and the applied means of expression, as well as the method of sculpting chosen by the artist.

Keywords: art, sculpture, visual communication, interpreting works of art.

Zofia Władyka-Łuczak – Ph.D., sculptor, Department of Communication Theory and Practice, University of Lodz, and the Academy of Fine Arts in Łódź. She specialises in two areas. The first area is associated with sculpture; she is the creator of two monuments: a monument devoted to Rafał Bratoszewski, the founder of Aleksandrów Łódzki, and a monument devoted to Rajmund Rembieniński, a founder of Łódź. Her other major projects include: the “Swan” fountain in Sienkiewicz Park in Łódź, the fountain in Władysław Reymont Park, the Portrait of the Synagogue, in Łódź at Kościuszki Ave. The others are associated with documenting and studying the course of creative works discussed from the anthropological-autoethnographical perspective. She also studies the role of visual structures in perception processes, and the formal devices employed by creators in the context of viewing and perceiving visual communications. She has discussed these issues in 11 articles and two monographs: *Praca twórcy w relacji ze światem* (2018), and *Przestrzeń tworzenia* (2018).