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RECOGNIZING A POLISH NATIONAL IDIOM IN GLOBAL ART: TWO EXHIBITIONS OF POLISH CONTEMPORARY ART ABROAD

‘Impossible translation’ and ‘clash of idioms’ are the issues in my reflection on the critical challenges for two presentations of Polish contemporary art abroad. The first of these was *State of Life: Polish Contemporary Art within a Global Circumstance* organised by the Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź, Adam Mickiewicz Institute at National Art Museum of China in Beijing in 2015 and second was *Waiting for Another Coming*, a joint presentation of Polish and Lithuanian artists, showed first at Contemporary Art Centre in Vilnius in 2018 and then as a different episode at Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art in Warsaw (October 25, 2018, to January 27, 2019). The Beijing show was curated by myself and the Vilnius one by Anna Czaban, Ūla Tornau, and myself. However, I am not going to focus on the curatorial practice of presenting Polish contemporary art. Instead, I will reflect on ways it

is interwoven with global art and the consequences of this intertwining for so-called ‘national’ shows.

In his seminal text, *Contemporary Art as Global Art: A Critical Estimate* (2009), Hans Belting argues that contemporary art became global after 1989 as the continuation, development, and domination of modern and world art.¹ He carefully juxtaposes the two pairs of terms, arguing that whereas the latter pair was strictly conditioned by the domination of the West, colonialism, and the idea of universalism, the former goes far beyond it. He focuses on the opportunities created by the global expansion of contemporary art, seeing it as liberating from cold war geopolitical constraints and hierarchies. He is utterly optimistic, arguing that inclusive policies of global art have replaced modern art's double exclusion (of non-Western modernist works and non-modern art). However, he notices one

discontent - the overwhelming pressure of the art market that subjugates artistic activity to the neoliberal model of creative production. Despite this, in his later text, *From World Art to Global Art: View on a New Panorama* (2013), he reiterates his belief in its liberating and emancipatory potential. “By its own definition global art is contemporary and in spirit postcolonial; thus it is guided by the intention to replace the centre and periphery scheme of a hegemonic modernity, and also claims freedom from the privilege of history.”²

What is striking, he describes global art mostly negatively by showing how it differs from modern art, and when it comes to positive definitions, they are somewhat vague and metaphorical. He says:

Art on a global scale does not imply an inherent aesthetic quality which could be identified as such, nor a global concept of what has to be regarded as art. (...) It clearly differs from modernity, whose self-appointed universalism was based on a hegemonial notion of art. In short, new art today is global, much the same way the World Wide Web is also global. The Internet is global in the sense that it is used everywhere, but this does not mean that it is universal in content or message. It allows for free access and thus for a personal response to the world.³

So, in his argument, contemporary art is first of all anti-universalist or at least non-universal in its content, and secondly, it is worldwide in its reach. While discussing the function of the Museum of Contemporary Art as a symbolic site for global art, he states that they “are built like airports awaiting the arrival of international art.”⁴ In this view, global art is not content and is not form; it is more like a format of appearing and protocol of acting.

Modern Art at the time was distinguished as ‘modern form’ in art, which could even

mean ‘only form’ without any subject matter when abstraction in the 1950s was recognised as a universal style, a ‘world language’ (...). The difference of global art, given this background, is all too obvious, for it lacks any common idiom in terms of ‘style’ and does not insist any longer on form as a primary or independent goal. Rather, art is distinguished by new proof of professionalism such as contemporary subject matter and a contemporary performance, usually a mixture of film, video and documentary materials.⁵

His argument may be reformulated. Although global art is not universalist, it should be understood as a kind of language because it uses formats and protocols to operate on meaning. Even if highly abstract, it is meaningful practice. It is like a language as it embraces a set of idioms and dialects and is based on specific pragmatics.

In her excellent book *The Global Work of Art: World's Fairs, Biennials, and the Aesthetics of Experience*, Caroline Jones, proposes the notion of ‘language’ to analyse the historical dynamics of modern and contemporary art.⁶ Unlike Belting, she shows that despite all differences the global language of contemporary art is a straightforward continuation of the universal language of modern art. She uses a notion of international language to show the continuity in terms of structuring, functioning, and accessibility through both periods. In that sense, the global language is a contemporary mutation of the international language of art. Following these assumptions, she comes to say: “The historical artists tracked throughout this book will be seen to navigate the world picture with varying success, but always under a specific set of rules: the artist must speak the international language, but use it to speak of difference.”⁷ And again: “the artist who would become international would need to speak a global language, but would just as often be understood to speak of her own representative difference.”⁸ Her argument may be reformulated: if differences are to be articulated,

one needs a common medium to make it possible. The language of art, whether international or global, is such a medium.

Both authors' positions may be reconciled: while the language of modern art was universalist as it imposed one idiom fabricated in the West, the language of contemporary art is a set of idioms that are similar to an extent but varied. In the latter, the differences are not subsumed in the universal language (as in modernism), but they are revealed through a series of variations to create idioms translatable to each other. It does not mean, however, that hierarchy and inequalities are abolished. On the contrary, global art circulation is hierarchically layered and geographically unequal, and this structuring is based on the economic, social, and political order of the world. Nevertheless, through its language, contemporary art may express it and respond to it.

To illustrate this, let me discuss the practice of the *Slavs and Tatars* artistic group. The collective call themselves “a faction of polemics and intimacies devoted to an area east of the former Berlin Wall and west of the Great Wall of China known as Eurasia.” They explore marginalised cultures that persisted under the pressure of hegemonic imperial projects clashing in this vast area over history. They are primarily focused on minor languages and their struggles for survival. They developed a very idiosyncratic practice of translating, transcribing, transliterating, and transferring images that might be called *transpicturing*. Their work *Jęzzers język* (2015, vacuum-formed plastic, acrylic paint, 64 × 91 cm) from the cycle *Language arts* may be seen as a comprehensive example. As they explain: “*Jęzzers język* celebrates the nasal phonemes specific to the Polish language through a retro exclamation: Yowzers! Unlike most other Slavic languages, the Polish language has prominent nasal phonemes – ‘ą’ and ‘ę’. These letters have provided an unlikely source of self-determination and resistance in the face of pan-Slavism, Russian imperialism, amid a panoply of perceived or real threats.” Later they add: “JĘZZERS A Polish phonetic

transliteration of ‘yowzers,’ an English slang word exclaiming excitement. (...) JEZYK Polish for ‘language’.”⁹ Words with precisely designed fonts are supplemented by a sketchy image of a nose. The relation between verbal and visual elements resembles that of a pun, and this kind of play is crucial for the collective’s practice of transpicturing.

Let us return to Caroline Jones's book. While it contains powerful analyses, it does not provide us with a precise concept of language. It is instead based on what Althusser calls a ‘spontaneous philosophy of scientist.’ I believe this lack may be compensated by the philosophy of language of Jean-Jacques Lecercle. His point of departure is a ferocious critique of linguistics (from de Saussure to Chomsky) for insisting on the simplified and reductionist concept of language as an abstract system and instrument of transparent communication. Instead, he proposes a philosophy as social practice through which “language is imposed on its speaker in social interaction.”¹⁰ Thus, language “produces effects of intersubjectivity by means of interlocution, creating subjects/speakers through interpellation.”¹¹ As a result:

The subject becomes a speaker by appropriating a language that is always-already collective – which means that she is appropriated by it: she is captured by a language that is external and prior to her (...). Possession here is a transitive relationship, something clearly marked by the ambiguity of the word: I possess the language in as much as I am possessed by it, just as people were once possessed by the devil.¹²

Obviously, Lecercle writes about natural languages. However, we may extrapolate his analysis to the artificial language of art by replacing the speaker with an artist, curator, or viewer who, after acquiring the language, may possess it and be possessed by it. So, if they are successfully interpellated by it, they become its subject and

a subject of it. This subjectivisation by the global art language is strictly a social process that would not be possible without numerous institutions that create the art world. By acquiring its language, anyone may get access to it. However, it is not a situation free from structural inequalities and discrimination. Lecerle is well aware of this when he states that every language is determined by “a hierarchy of places and a power relation.”¹³ They also structure the language of global art and the functioning of its subjects.

Three concepts of Lecerle's philosophy of language are remarkably relevant. First is refraction, a term with which he replaces the classic notion of reflection. Implying distortion, *refraction* “is not a simple image, mere representation” to the contrary “the action of language is a mixture of representation and intervention: the image of the world conveyed by language is not only deformed, it is transformed and, in return, transformative.”¹⁴ The second is the *linguistic* conjuncture, which “is the context in which meanings are formed, within the social practices of speakers (...), and within which they are reified into formations of meaning (...), which form so many points or forces in a semantic field.”¹⁵ It is strictly connected to historical and political conjunctures that are refracted in language. Furthermore, the third is *minority* - borrowed from politics and strictly connected to the power relations that structure every language, especially standard language or major language. The concept is created to juxtapose “minor dialects, registers and language games” to “a language of power, major because dominant.”¹⁶ Juxtaposition opens a “dual process: the minor dialects subvert the major language, they disquiet it, destabilize it, put it in a state of continuous variation; correlatively, however, by subverting it they make it live, they cause the linguistic formation to continue to develop, to be the site of tensions and contradictions that render it active in the historical and linguistic conjuncture.”¹⁷

The three concepts enable us to translate Lecerle's philosophy of language into a theory of global art language. And this, in turn, allows

us to analyse globalised art world(s) in terms of a hierarchy of places and power relations. For instance, access to the top layer of global art circulation connected with participating in most significant big exhibitions or biennials and gaining high prices at the most prestigious art fairs is rigidly conditioned by getting mastery of the standard global language of art. It is strictly connected with the ability to properly refract current global conjuncture or at least selected regional or local conjunctures. The collective *Slavs and Tatars* are examples of such a mastery of the global standard language of art. Furthermore, the dialectics of major and minor idioms within the global art language allows us to grasp the tensions occurring in any national presentation of contemporary art and face the challenge of impossible translation.

The exhibition *State of life. Polish Contemporary Art in a Global Context* was shown at the National Art Museum of China (NAMOC) in Beijing as part of a comprehensive and varied presentation of Polish culture in China. It was a counterpart to the exhibition *Treasures from Chopin's Country: Polish art from the 15th-20th Centuries* curated by Maria Poprzęcka in the National Museum of China. Both exhibitions formed a sequence that presented a panorama of the history of Polish art from the fifteenth century until today. The NAMOC and the National Museum of China are the most important art museums in the country. In this context, all the artworks included in the *State of Life* exhibition became connected with the issue of national identification. The Polishness attributed to them was to be translated into a story readable to Chinese viewers. In 2013 at NAMOC, there was a discussion about the preliminary concept of the exhibition. Fan Di'an, director of the museum, strongly emphasised the issue of presenting artworks that would be meaningful and relevant for Chinese viewers. Fan Di'an's voice was the more interesting, as he participated in introducing contemporary art to China; he co-organised its first official manifestation, the exhibition *China/Avant-Garde* at NAMOC, in 1989. The tension between the local (national?) idiom

and global standard language may be analysed with the example of Agnieszka Kalinowska *No Man's Land* (2011, paper string). The work deconstructs the national emblem treating it as a visual cliché that requires confrontation. The visual pattern dissolves in the complex texture of the sculptural object, while the rhetoric of the title exposes the suspension of national identification. Most of the artists included in the show seemed to agree with Étienne Balibar when he claims that every national “community reproduced by the functioning of institutions is imaginary, that is, it is based on the projection of individual existence into the weft of a collective narrative” but at the same time “only imaginary communities are real.”¹⁸ As a result, the artists treat the manifestations of national identity as imaginative clichés or stereotypes that can be critically or ironically reworked. Such an approach poses a challenge to narrowly understood promotion tasks of any national show. Furthermore, this very approach provokes a political controversy around contemporary art in Poland. Contemporary artists avoid merely representing national identity; instead, they want to refract it to intervene in the nation's conjuncture and interpellate viewers with the minor language of art.

The show, however, was aiming neither at celebrating nor at destroying national identity. Instead, it was to give access to Polish conjecture by translating it with the language of contemporary art into an experience that could be shared with the Beijing audience. Despite all the differences, some elements of Polish and Chinese conjunctures are comparable: communist past and rapid social and economic transformation. As the title *State of Life* suggests, the refraction was based on the category of the lived experience of Polish people and artists translated into exhibition form. The show was divided into five parts: *State, Environment of Life, Ecologies of the Self, The Shareable Part, The Globalised Enjoyment*. It presented 56 artists, primarily contemporary ones, and several classics of modernity strongly influencing current practice. According to the Adam Mickiewicz Institute, the

show was visited by 126 000 viewers. Nevertheless, I tend to believe that translation of the experience could not be entirely successful. As Lecercle emphasised, refraction should be a representation of the conjuncture and an intervention in it. While the exhibition inevitably reduced the meaning of all the works to representations of certain visual, symbolic, imaginary, conceptual, or affective aspects of Polish conjuncture. Although the translation appeared impossible, something was gained from it. The first was a vivid aesthetic experience. The second was the confrontation of the minor language of Polish contemporary art with a powerful language of Chinese contemporary art. The viewers could be interpellated by the works as representations of a Polish conjecture (without comprehending it deeply) and, at the same time, urged to intervene in the conjuncture of their own. The other project I would like to discuss is *Waiting for Another Coming*, consisting of two exhibitions accompanied by performance and lecture programs; first at the Centre for Contemporary Art in Vilnius (2018), Lithuania, and then at Ujazdowski Castle Contemporary Art Centre in Warsaw (2019). Both episodes presented Polish and Lithuanian artists together, and the whole project was curated by Ūla Tornau from CAC, Vilnius and Anna Czaban and myself. To avoid inequalities, every curatorial decision was based on consensus which made the process slightly arduous. The first episode will be the focus here.

A pretext for the project was a centenary of independence celebrated in both countries, while the subtext was the complicated common history that provoked questions about the current situation and future prospects. During preliminary research, it became clear that there were no deeper connections between cultures and contemporary art scenes. In fact, Polish and Lithuanian contemporary art were appearing as if created on two separate planets. Given this, the project aimed to create the possibility of encounters for artists of both countries and follow the dynamics of mutual exchange.

Not based on any presumptions, curatorial research followed the proposals of selected artists. As a result, the only motive that seemed to permeate all artists' ideas was that of heterotopia. The term was coined by Michel Foucault:

There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places - places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society - which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias.¹⁹

While “the former leads to the creation of a blueprint for an idealised reality, the latter results in the creation of an actual space, which is different from everyday reality.”²⁰ When Foucault mentions representing, contesting, and inverting, it may exactly be seen as modes of refracting. By creating their heterotopias, artists refracted their conjunctures, intervened in them. They abandoned thinking about designing the future, focusing instead on activities in their life environment.

To give some examples. Stroboskop collective created an artist-run, independent exhibition space in a small garage. Moreover, they were most rigorous in defending their heterotopia. When invited to the show, they commissioned an oil painting depicting one of their exhibition's openings (*Night of the Exhibition at Stroboskop*, 2018, oil on canvas). The very space of the gallery was not, however, revealed.

The starting point for Ewa Axelrad's sculptural installation *Hang and Sway* (2018, steel, concrete, soil) is carpet-beating frames that are cleaning devices installed in communal spaces of

Polish cities. They are also popular in other Eastern Bloc countries; however, they differ in shape. The frames are sites where children and youngsters used to hang out in pre-internet times. The artist investigates habits and rituals connected with occupying territories and forming gangs. She treats the carpet beating frame as a social apparatus and a tool to analyse the distribution of violence and hierarchy. Axelrad visually refracts some element of a conjuncture to intervene symbolically in it. The intervention is supposed to interpellate the viewers as most of them know the original device from their experience.

Of all the works presented in the exhibition, those of Rafał Dominik were most popular. He created not even an idiosyncratic idiom; actually, he developed a visual style to refract reality. Fascinated by popular culture, he creates images that are affirmative and sarcastic at the same time and this mixture is very appealing to the viewers. Furthermore, it challenges their social and class stereotypes. Again, refraction is a tool of interpellating the subjects to intervene in their own conjuncture.

However, when we come to a more general analysis, there is something striking about how both Polish and Lithuanian artists created their heterotopias. The whole process turns out to be a literal illustration of Caroline Jones's thesis: most artists used the global art language to speak of differences; they did not want to mention anything in common. The exhibition appeared to be an assemblage of idiosyncratic idioms; however, in most cases, precisely articulated in the most proper global art language. It reveals a more general paradox, only differences should be spoken out, but this may happen only in standardised language. They are refracted through the process of translation to the extent that they are reduced to mere representations of actual differences. Reified in objects, they become signs ready to be included in global circulation.

On the other hand, the exhibition could have been an encounter of two minor languages of global art. To a moment and extent, it was

intended to be such an encounter of Polish and Lithuanian contemporary art. In the end, it turned out that all artists had missed the meeting as they were too busy constructing their own heterotopias. They used the global language of art to escape the cultural policies of both countries and the curatorial agenda. The exhibition appeared to be a clash of idioms, an assemblage of idiosyncratic enunciations and sometimes individual styles. Their aim was, thus, to create radical minor languages.

Interpreting art in terms of Lecercle's philosophy of language allows locating contemporary art from Poland within the global circulation. It also provides a theoretical framework to understand how as a minor language, it is created by refracting a particular national conjuncture. Idiomatic specificity of Polish contemporary art may be expressed only when translated into the standard language of global art through a process of differentiation. Both *State of life. Polish Contemporary Art in a Global Context* and *Waiting for Another Coming* in various ways aimed to elaborate these translations and differentiations.



Notes

- ¹ Hans Belting, "Contemporary Art as Global Art A Critical Estimate," in *The global art world : audiences, markets, and museums*, edited by Hans Belting and Andrea Buddensieg (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009), 38-73.
- ² "From World Art to Global Art: View on a New Panorama," in *The global contemporary and the rise of new art worlds*, edited by Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg, and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2013), 178.
- ³ "Contemporary Art as Global Art A Critical Estimate," 40.
- ⁴ *Ibidem*, 50.
- ⁵ *Ibidem*, 53.
- ⁶ Caroline A. Jones, *The Global Work of Art: World's Fairs, Biennials, and the Aesthetics of Experience* (Chicago-London: University of Chicago, 2016), 249.
- ⁷ *Ibidem*, 32.
- ⁸ *Ibidem*, 96.
- ⁹ *Slavs and Tatars: Wripped Scripped*, (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2018), 118.
- ¹⁰ Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *A Marxist Philosophy of Language*, trans. Gregory Elliott (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2006), 23.
- ¹¹ *Ibidem*, 34.
- ¹² *Ibidem*, 142-43.
- ¹³ *Ibidem*, 52, 102.
- ¹⁴ *Ibidem*, 110.
- ¹⁵ *Ibidem*, 161.
- ¹⁶ *Ibidem*, 135.
- ¹⁷ *Ibidem*, 212.
- ¹⁸ Étienne Balibar, "The Nation Form: History and Ideology," *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 13, no. 3 (1990): 346.
- ¹⁹ Michael Foucault, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias," *Foucault.info*, accessed 27.07.2022, <https://foucault.info/documents/heterotopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en/>.
- ²⁰ Anna Czaban, Jarosław Lubiak, and Ūla Tornau, *Waiting for Another Coming: Exhibition Guidebook* (Warszawa: CSW Zamek Ujazdowski, 2018), 11.

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