

Beata Frydryczak

A painting recovers its breath

(A few words on Ryszard Woźniak's artistic gesture)

1. An end to painting?

Voices heard now and then, dispossessing painting of any hope for the future, or even radically proclaiming an end to painting, do not strike us as either shocking or radical. Hegel was the first to speak about the „death of art“, and yet art continues to develop. Hence claims made by staunch opponents of painting present no threat to its existence. The most traditional of traditional art media, painting, for centuries expressing itself in the same techniques and materials, has also become the frailest means of artistic expression, for it is the most vulnerable to the blows from the impatient. For this reason it seems to have been outdistanced by more modern (or innovative) art forms.

In this context, any attempts at questioning the right of painting to develop or even exist may be justified only by its „being anachronistic“. On the other hand, this, exactly, seem to be the source of the strength of painting as painting. This „anachronism“ is probably an expression of faithfulness to tradition, but it primarily implies a reiterated test of endurance and durability in culture, the most easily recognisable quality of which is its noise (as an expression of visual culture) and heterogeneity (in the sphere of values). Significantly, culture and art of this peculiar kind were herbingered by trans-avant-garde and new expression with its „hunger for images“ and imagery.

If an end to painting signifies the disappearance of images, this has already happened. If, on the other hand, its last breath amount to the „resurrection“ of painting, this has also happened. What makes the heart of an image beat again? How, pervaded by a sense of „coming in the wake“, of having exhausted our capacity for artistic trials and endeavours, are we to protect ourselves against a sense of impotence? How are we to take the risk of formulating positive strategy?

If the avant-garde transformation of paintings leading to their obliteration is to be treated as a „vicious circle“, attempts at going beyond it will free paintings of the „magic spell“ yet again. Attempts of this kind have been undertaken since the outset of classical avant-garde issuing in what was called the destruction of the world of art with all the implications of the fact in art and aesthetics. Yet a painted image has remained unimpaired in its essence, which is evidenced by New Expressionism. Today, despite the limited (largely exploited) repertory of formal solutions, any attempts at going beyond the traditionalism of painting are viewed through the lens of the „painterly object“ (though already functioning, the term does not strike me as felicitous).

2. Ryszard Woźniak's artistic gesture

These tendencies are more and more evident in the painting of Ryszard Woźniak whose work evolves towards the objective and subjective transformation of an image. Woźniak's undertakings, which have gained in momentum lately, can be no longer viewed as his trying on a new costume of painting or testing artistic approaches concentrating on the image, but should be viewed as a premeditated gesture of an artist aware of the impact of his work on the condition of paintings.⁽¹⁾ By no means does he seek to defy the image or question its *raison d'être*. Rather, Woźniak concentrates on the possible transformation of a painting (even upsetting its very concept), in which he oscillates between multiplying it and demonstrating that its palpable presence is superfluous, shifting to pictures-collections through the multiplication of an image („original reproduction“ in the artist's vocabulary) to a reproduction proper (indirect presence). At the same time, the artist experiments with the potential exhibitive qualities of a painting, its semantic carrying capacity and endurance in a situation in which the construction of a painting permits him to display it in different ways (as a whole or in part, by putting away a section of an image, or a whole set of images, or by displaying an image as such or an image against a background).

The ongoing transformation, concerning both the artistic and aesthetic value of a work of art suggests that the problem should be discussed in terms of the (postmodern) existence of a painted image. Putting the idea of the many-layered structure of a work of art aside, we may presume that – in accordance with the artistic gesture demonstrated by Ryszard Woźniak – his paintings exist in two different modes of reality, the reality of art where an image presents itself to us as an image (a painted one), and the reality of „daily life“ where it also makes its appearance as an object. It occurs to us that an image leads a „schizophrenic“ existence, which suggests that we may speak about the existence (aesthetic and artistic duration) of an image and its potential palpable existence (as an object).

3. Painting as an image

To make things easier, let me start defining what a painting-image in Woźniak's painting is by saying that this is where I find an answer in the affirmative to Gadamer's question about the possible existence of a unique image in the world of interchangeability.⁽²⁾

I think that his two works provide the context. These are the paintings *Genius* and *Imbecile*, developing on the term of the „original reproduction“ used by the artist. They are multielement images consisting of nine smaller, formally distinct elements which repeat, though not literally, or act as „imperfect“ copies of, the original... Which does not exist. We may seek the original, as the archetype and the aspect of „uniqueness“, both in the whole of the image and in its individual fragments. On its own, each of them is both the original and a reproduction. The only reference possible here is the Baudrillard *simulacrum*, an original without a copy, a sign with no reference, in which what is copied leaves room to simulation. At this point G. Deleuze comes to our aid, saying that in the circumstances we may only recognise and understand the difference resulting from the play between the „identical similarity of the original and the imitative similarity of a copy with a varying degree of resemblance.“⁽³⁾

Evoking the ideas of original and copy within a single image, Woźniak apparently relies on the interplay between difference and repetition. Deleuze writes that, confronted with the most mechanical, most stereotype repetition, we continue to watch out for small differences, variants and modifications. In turn repetition, masked, concealed and secret, animated by the unceasing shift of differences..., is recreated by bare, mechanical and stereotype repetitions.⁽⁴⁾ Yet it is in difference of all things that the aesthetic value of a work of art should be sought. The essence of „original reproduction“ likewise lies in difference which is at stake in the play for the „uniqueness“ of an image because it is in the distinct qualities of Ryszard Woźniak's individual paintings rather than similarities between them that we perceive them as a unity. Thus the „original reproduction“ strikes us as a toll with which the artist reinforces his message, and as a formal experiment.

Each of the image sections (image elements) is a self-sufficient unit which may at any moment (chosen by the artist) function as a painted image „with full rights“ (which Ryszard demonstrated during the „Don't blok the Sun to me“, exhibition at which he presented an unfinished, almost fluctuating, nine-part painting in process of change, but he only put up one section on the wall). Thus structured, a painting may be displayed in various arbitrary ways, as a whole, in part, or divided; it may be presented in an arbitrary configuration in which none of the elements has the utmost importance (which happened at the exhibition „Genius in the Water-tower“ in Konin where Woźniak separated the individual image elements of the *Genius* and beneath each of them put up one element of the *Imbecile* painting thus arriving at a different quality and meaning of the image or even suggesting the emergence of a new image).

The structure may be thus open thanks to the painter's concern about the composition of every single image element, in which his tendency to preserve the centres of the elements in noteworthy, especially as the whole may have no centre as is the case with the *Genius* and *Imbecile*. This introduces the componential quality: an image may be split and cemented, which does not upset either the composition or the concept of the

whole. The unity of the image is preserved. It can be arranged, however, in arbitrary configurations and sets of pictures. The evasive, unreiterated and unique is thus defied – the picture is established”, which intensifies its existence and adds to its lasting importance despite the whole changeability.

The image and the background add up to another formal problem in Ryszard Woźniak's work. He uses sheets of canvas and paper which have grown obsolete, such as painted up posters (most usually from the time of the activity of the „Gruppa”, which is not without meaning considering that this series includes paintings–collections also referring to paintings produced in those years). Here, thanks to the openness of his works to interpretation, we may consider the essence of an image in itself. What is an image as such, and what is the significance of the background to it? Does the wall on which a painting hangs act as a background for it? Does the wall, being alien to it, not remain neutral with regard to it? If so, does Woźniak's treatment of the background introduce a protective layer which isolates the painting, as it happened during the exhibition entitled „The Touch of an Object”, where the background of the *Avanguardia Polacca* was not fully spread out, as a result of which the painting seemed to be hidden in its wings.

Yet regardless of how the artist solves the formal problem of the mutual existence of an image and its background, i.e. whether the background functions against the background of an image or is displayed rolled, the relation between the two seems to be more important: the image and its background complement each other, functioning in each other's context. At the same time, the background may be the conceptual „background” which facilitates the reading of a painting.

4. Image as an object

What transformation of a painting is possible after the activities of the *avant-garde*, after Pollock's canvases spread on the floor to bring out their objective quality, or after Rothko, Juhos, Stella and others who have outlined the way leading from an image to an object? On the other hand, how can post-modern art enter the public world again if it has withdrawn from it at its own instance?

The objective aspect of an image pointed out here is primarily manifested in the artist's gesture putting an image, an image section or a whole set of images aside or on the floor, or placing them beneath a painting hanging on the wall, or heaping paintings up (which was demonstrated at the exhibition „Genius” in a water–tower). This „attempt” on paintings, though reminiscent of actions known as „iconoclasm” in the history of art, has nothing to do with it. The gesture of putting a painting aside implies no negation of it. The painting has not been withdrawn, it continues to exist, and its mode of existence may change any moment. Put away in accordance with the artist's intent, it may be looked at like a traditionally displayed painting though the quality of reception is different. When we have to touch a painting, shift it, pick it up, and move it to a different

place the way we move cards in a card–index, in order to see it, we lose the natural detachment and art loses its „charm”. The viewer perceives a painting primarily as a physical object; it becomes a work of art only on reflection. A situation thus created may be described as „a painting's another spell of silence” though it is not really a case of „negating” a painting, for Ryszard Woźniak's gestures strike me rather as actions „beside” it.

The process of „objectifying” a painting, ridding it of subjective traits and placing it in the same sphere as all other objects, devoid of specific values, should be underlined. This peculiar negation of the aesthetic values of art, however, does not eliminate its aesthetic quality, but underlines the dual existence of an image, which has been underlined above; as a painting–image, it continues to exist in the sphere of art, and as a painting–object, it shifts to the „world of daily life” where it can (but does not have to) exist in a way similar to objects which surround us daily in a way so natural as to be overlooked. This naturalness is only possible when a painting is inscribed in the surroundings adjusted to it, or even scattered in them, where the surroundings may also stand for a gallery interior. The „objectification” of an image brings out its limited functional utility in the midst of other equally useless things even though they seem indispensable to us in the culture of surplus. Only here can we speak about a painting being freed again from the magic „spell” and thoroughly rid of Benjamin's air round it.

This severely expressive gesture, resulting from the artist's cool intellectualism, is reminiscent, or perhaps the reverse, of a different situation known from the beginning of the century witnessing the first artistic gesture calling ready–mades to life, incorporating into the area of art mass–produced articles intended for quite a different purpose. Now, at the close of the century, an artist has returned a work of art back to its daily surroundings, has placed it in a space annexed by other objects. He has uprooted it, turning a painted image into an object similar to those that surround us.

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Notes

1. Cf. several successive exhibitions attended by Woźniak between January and June '95: „Touch of an object” (group show, BWA, Poznań, January), „Fields of art” (group show, Zielona Góra, March), „A step backwards” (one–man show, BWA, Poznań, April), „Don't block me the sun” (group exhibition, Zielona Góra, May), and „Genius in a water–tower” (one–man show, Konin, June).
2. H–G. Gadamer, *On the Silence of Images*, 1961.
3. G. Deleuze, „Difference and Repetition”, *Colloquia Communia*, no. 1–3, 1988, p. 208; the problem also refers to Woźniak's series of images–collections, here merely hinted at.
4. *ibid.*, p. 192.