



New  
Direction

Fundacja Twórców dla Rzeczypospolitej

# LOST BEAUTY. THE AESTHETIC CONDITION OF EUROPE.

An Attempt at Diagnosis



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Jan Tarnas <b>Introduction</b>	<b>5</b>
David Engels <b>The Civilisation of Death and the Culture of Beauty</b>	<b>9</b>
Jan Tarnas <b>The World Without Beauty</b>	<b>15</b>
Maciej Mazurek <b>On Confusion in Contemporary Art</b>	<b>21</b>
Jan Tarnas <b>Why Beauty Matters?</b>	<b>27</b>
Marcel Skierski <b>The Art of the Conservative Avant-Garde as a Subversive Search for Beauty</b>	<b>33</b>

Jan Tarnas

## INTRODUCTION

The presented report aims to analyse the current cultural landscape of Europe by exploring the concept of Beauty. It delves into not only the state of contemporary art and culture but also the existential state of modern individuals in Western culture. It seeks to understand how the portrayal of humanity is affected during contemporary crises, the influences and ideas contributing to the current state, and the potential future outlook that arises from this examination.

The foundation of Western culture rests on the principles of Greek philosophy and Christian ethics. These core elements share a fundamental belief in the essential role of values, serving as guiding principles for both philosophical exploration and the regulation of human behaviour and productivity. Within Western culture, the notion of beauty (known as „kalós” in Greek and „pulchritudo” or „pulchrum” in Latin) extends beyond the qualities of artistic creations to encompass modes of human behaviour. In both the realm of artistic creations and human behaviour, the Western tradition holds a common belief that beauty, when observed and experienced, elicits admiration and favour. The exceptional significance of the concept of beauty in Western culture stems not only from its status as an absolute value in both pagan and Christian circles, but also from its unity with the ideals of Truth and Goodness, tracing its roots from Greek tradition to Catholic theology. This trinity of absolute values, where the pursuit of one leads to the discovery of the others, serves as a prime example of the intricate nature of Western civilization. It is crucial to recognize that this harmony of values, established in ancient times and reshaped in the first millennium by Christian tradition, has become a fundamental element in the identity of European societies and Western civilization at large. Therefore, proposing the notion of the „decline of beauty” within the context of Western culture should prompt doubts and inquiries into the repercussions of such a state of affairs.

When posing the question of the status of beauty in relation to culture and its product, i.e. art, one must consciously take into account both the questions about the cause of such a state of affairs on the part of the recipients, i.e. both the individual and society. The first diagnosis is that contemporary reality in the age of globalisation is becoming an increasingly homogenised culture - not only are unique traditions of aesthetic expression disappearing, but the sense of identity behind them is being erased. This is not just about the emergence of political processes that seek to renationalise the sense of identity, but about a blurring of the understanding of the cultural code as an expression of the sense of identity within Western civilisation.

Throughout centuries, alongside the unique expressions of national identities, Western civilization has fostered a connection to specific values and freedoms that enabled individuals to identify as Westerners. However, this identity, which is closely tied to its underlying values, appears to be fading in modern times. This trend is evident not only in the diminishing appreciation for the meanings behind ancient art but also in the growing absence of a clear ideological message in contemporary art.

The current situation arises from both the social and political challenges of today, which divert focus from cultural and identity issues while marginalizing them. Additionally, it stems from years of humanist crisis, as evidenced in the educational model and the dominant role of critically evaluating cultural and artistic endeavours.

The present-day artistic landscape is embroiled in various conflicts and challenges, with one of the most prominent being the commercialization of art and the fundamental reshaping of the artist's social function and purpose. Rather than being viewed as conveyors and interpreters of culturally and communally relevant content, contemporary artists are often perceived as quasi-celebrities whose creations serve as extensions of the investment market for potential collectors and financiers. This shift is primarily attributed to the decline of traditional patronage in artistic production, with exhibition institutions assuming a predominant role akin to that of patrons or key stakeholders in artistic endeavours. The challenge with art institutions is that the publicly funded sector often lacks the financial resources to support extensive artistic endeavours, while the private sector tends to prioritize economic value over artistic merit. This has resulted in a decline in artistic innovation and freedom, leading to a standardized message in the art world. Without proper art education, aesthetic values have become less influential in determining the quality of artwork, affecting not only art exhibitions but also the broader cultural landscape.

The teaching crisis concerning aesthetic values impacts both art consumers and creators. This is evident in the art community, which, confronted with the continual advancement of the avant-garde, is primarily preoccupied with preserving originality in an era of unrestricted artistic expression, while overlooking the fundamental issue of the meaning and importance of art. Additionally, art enthusiasts lack the cognitive resources essential for assessing the true condition and worth of the displayed artworks. The present circumstance undeniably favours the enigmatic art world, inhabited by

a self-proclaimed elite comprising art critics, curators, and art dealers, who now function more as authoritative figures akin to the Delphic oracle rather than as mentors guiding inexperienced observers along unfamiliar paths. Consequently, the art world is characterized by confusion, where essential inquiries regarding the significance, intent, and role of art, as well as the values it embodies, are progressively obscured.

The growing technologization and digitization of art have become a significant accompaniment to the aforementioned disorder in the art world. Over the past few decades, this trend has led to a blurring of the boundary between pop culture and art. As a result, many contemporary observers find it difficult to distinguish between an artist and a celebrity, or between a work of art and a series on a platform like Netflix. The widespread use of digital devices has shifted attention away from physical and natural aesthetics, while fleeting trends have overshadowed enduring aesthetic values. Consequently, audiences, who have become increasingly accustomed to consuming short-form content and seeking instant gratification, are being deprived of the opportunity to engage with deeper meanings and contemplate long-term implications. This includes pondering questions about the potential future consequences of present actions and circumstances.

In light of the ongoing debate surrounding the aesthetic value of art, there has been a notable shift towards infusing political and social messages into artistic creations. This shift reflects the evolving demand for art that is relevant to contemporary societal needs, replacing the traditional timeless content. Consequently, art, which historically played an important role in fulfilling human religious inclinations, has now become a platform for social activism and a catalyst for reshaping worldviews.

This transformation has brought about a precarious situation, evident in the rising instances of art censorship. Unlike previous cases where censorship was predominantly based on the assessment of art experts critiquing artistic merit, censorship now stems from the perceived discomfort elicited by the

content of the artwork, indicating a shift towards the necessity of censorship for the sake of content unease. In the realm of art within the free world, we are witnessing a growing presence of political censorship that tends to target conservative and traditionalist viewpoints, particularly in opposition to prevailing liberal ideologies. This situation is detrimental to the evolution of artistic traditions by individual creators and the mutual understanding between art appreciators, both of which are essential for broadening the ways in which artworks communicate their content.

The theme of the report outlines a thesis that can also be articulated as a concern regarding superficial beauty within the realm of aesthetics. In this context, it is evident that a lack of awareness and comprehension of historical aesthetics has contributed to a contemporary aesthetic landscape that lacks diversity and experimentation, and has resulted in an increasingly mediated and impersonal expression of aesthetics. Neglecting or diminishing historical aesthetic accomplishments has, in fact, caused a loss of cultural continuity and a form of cultural amnesia within societies. A prominent illustration of this issue can be observed in the state of contemporary architecture and the creations that encompass our surroundings.

In the report ahead, you will find a collection of writings that delve into the multifaceted challenges of aesthetic beauty in both the theory and execution of art creation. These writings aim to shed light on the metaphysical importance of beauty, going beyond its visual aspects and exploring its significance in the realm of art. Each piece within this report shares a common goal: to delineate the profound impact of beauty in shaping not only art itself but also culture and the individual. As we navigate through the ever-evolving landscape of the modern world, individuals are faced with the pressing need to grapple with profound inquiries about their traditions, identities, and the far-reaching implications of the changes that surround them. These writings offer a thought-provoking exploration of these complex issues, inviting readers to reflect on the intricate relationship between beauty, art, and the human experience.

David Engels

## THE CIVILISATION OF DEATH AND THE CULTURE OF BEAUTY

### Introduction

The well-known „Timeout Magazine” has included Berlin’s famous „problem district” Neukölln in its list of the „40 coolest neighbourhoods in the world”. Now, as we all know, „cool” is a rather elastic term and, depending on the observer, can mean just about anything from the slums of Cuba to Belle Delphine’s bathing water and deep-fried Mars bars to overpriced Louis Vuitton bags. But still: the fact that a neighbourhood that is as disfigured as it is dilapidated and alienated is now considered particularly „cool” just because a few left-wing hipsters and bored it-girls want to demonstrate their thirst for adventure and/or gratuitous multiculturalism by buying overpriced and scratched vinyl recordings in some record shop or other and drinking peppermint tea by the roadside does have a certain politically correct flavour. How did it ever come to pass that such obviously completely ridiculous aesthetic value judgements are not qualified with Homeric laughter, but on the contrary promote the globally recognised myth of the failed-state capital Berlin as a „hip” and „youthful” city, according to the motto: „fair is foul, foul is fair”? And why can decay be confused with „coolness” and „coolness” with a special attraction?

The question of the particular attractiveness not of the beautiful, but - let’s call it by its name - of the ugly is anything

but trivial, even if it is extremely neglected in the current discourse on the numerous ills afflicting our civilisation. Aren’t mass migration, ageing, demographic decline, industrial delocalisation, social polarisation, environmental pollution, terrorism, decline of education, family breakdown, de-Christianisation, parallel societies and the increasingly obvious danger of ungovernability, at least of our major cities, considerably more important than questions of mere aesthetics - especially as the prejudice regularly circulates in conservative circles that „there’s no accounting for taste” and that beauty is only in the eye of the beholder? The answer to this question is no, because of course such a spectacular shift in the sense of aesthetics cannot be separated from all other aspects of our civilisational decline and, just like this, is only a symptom of the ageing of our Western culture.

In the following, we will therefore first examine the fundamental question of the basis of aesthetic judgements, then, compare the situation of past centuries with that of the present. In a next step, the approach of comparative cultural morphology will help us to determine our own position within the dynamics of history, permitting us to finally sketch some future perspectives.

### Beauty – Only in The Eye of the Beholder?

Once, the pursuit of beauty was an everyday part of life and inseparable from the worship of the true and the good. Right down to the smallest village, there was a desire to patiently invest labour and love in enormous, mostly sacred buildings over generations without any external constraints, in which service to the deity, the desire for meaningful activity and pride in the achievements of one’s own community were inseparably intertwined. For a long time, the elites also spent real fortunes on sponsoring countless artists and not only decorating their own swellings, but also furnishing their surroundings with marvellous examples of taste and piety: How many great families left mountains of debt to their descendants, but incredible treasures to the public, from which we still draw today? And what was true above was no less true below: anyone looking at even the simplest farmhouses from the past today cannot help but marvel at the power and energy invested in

the aesthetic design and decorative embellishment of the most ordinary living spaces.

Now I am prepared to hear the objection that the present also attaches great importance to beauty, only the standards of value are different: „You can’t argue about beauty”. But this is demonstrably false. Is beauty absolute or relative?

This question has been debated for centuries, even millennia, and in contrast to many other questions, the answer is surprisingly unanimous beyond all the details: The truly „beautiful” is always inseparable from the true and the good, and it is the actual task of beauty not only to reflect this supreme One, but also to make it comprehensible to the senses. It follows that anything that hinders rather than promotes this endeavour cannot be described as „beautiful” in the true

sense of the word. Although we can speak of „impressive” when it comes to dimensions, „inspiring” when, for example, a concrete social or political message is intended, „courageous” when established conventions are deliberately violated, „cool” when the passing fashions of youth culture are touched upon, we can hardly use the word „beautiful” in the narrower sense, neither in terms of the essence nor the intention of „beauty”.

For beauty has a dual nature, as the depiction of pain or suffering, although not „beautiful” in the strict sense, can nevertheless lead the senses to reflect on contingency and transcendence and thus be considered „beautiful” in a certain sense - think of the numerous depictions of pain and suffering in medieval art, for example. However, what is beautiful in the full sense is above all that which reflects or utilises those laws, proportions, forms and materials to which creation aligns itself and in particular the immediate natural human environment. Consciously reduced dimensions, proportions orientated towards symmetry and the golden ratio, a combination of naturalism and idealism, materials that are both natural and refined, the attempt to show the general in the individual and the individual in the general,

## The Modern West and the Civilisation of Death

Accordingly, the modern West suffers from an increasingly oppressive distortion of its aesthetic taste. The fact that our cities are becoming littered in a way that not only testifies to the organisational ability of the city authorities, but also to the citizens’ own initiative and their sense of order and beauty, has been discussed often enough in the media. But even worse than the hygienic neglect is the aesthetic neglect, which is not just to do with cleanliness and logistics: The dreariness of socialist prefabricated buildings is in no way inferior to that of the angular new buildings clad in sheet metal and glass that are sprouting up everywhere, and not just in European cities, suffocating them with their sterility; and the false „cosiness” of those hip ground floor cafés, where bookcase wallpaper, fake English leather armchairs and guaranteed vegan pumpkin pies are supposed to suggest „authenticity”, can only fill you with horror: It is like a hellish punishment where those who escape from the boiling kettles are only to freeze to death in ice water. What can we say about the dreadful omnipresence of various forms of „advertising”, which resound visually and audibly from everywhere and have now permeated all media to such an extent that it is often no longer possible to distinguish between art, entertainment and advertising? Pornography and music videos; clothing advertising and multicultural political ideology; evening news and climate religion - the boundaries between the genres are not only fluid, they are literally cancelled out, and they all refer to an aesthetic and moral cosmos that may make use of the memory of the actual „beautiful” here and there, but only as a means to an end. Whether seduction, pastiche, irony or object of hatred; the aim of the use of „beauty” in the modern context lies predominantly in an area that turns the actually transcendent nature of beauty into its opposite; and in the meantime the aesthetic sense of Europeans has become

and above all the desire to reach beyond the material into the transcendental sphere - all of this is not typical of just one or two episodes in art history, but a fundamental standard of value that has guided people’s perception of beauty at all times and in all places, albeit naturally in the refraction of the most diverse cultural archetypes; be it through positive imitation, be it through deliberate contravention.

For even ugliness is not a mere relative quantity: whatever does not belong to the good and healthy, but rather to the evil and sick - be it through its form, be it through its inherent references - must be regarded as ugly and avoided accordingly, in all its forms: Whether it is the ugliness that „only” lies in the absence of concern for beauty and order, the ugliness that is rooted in the actual hatred of beauty and the desire to destroy it, or finally the ugliness that primarily seeks to create confusion - all are extremely harmful to the mental and spiritual balance of man; especially the latter, which has become omnipresent today, particularly in advertising, art and the media, and consciously uses individual forms of classical aesthetics to convey a content that is radically opposed to that formal language.

so confused that they can hardly tolerate pure beauty without having to „alienate” it, or prefer to be satisfied with ugliness, which they confuse with a „contemporary”, „modern” way of life.

No wonder that even places like Neukölln, Moolenbeek or the Parisian banlieues still seem a touch „truer” than the arbitrarily interchangeable ugly backdrop of late civilisational emptiness. Every declining culture is therefore secretly consumed by the need for originality and exoticism, in which one believes one can find some last, „contemporary” traces of beauty; but even here only if one can avoid the associated inconveniences as far as possible: Even for the British colonial tourists, a walk through Cairo’s old town was one of the „must-sees” of the Grand Tour; but then they preferred to enjoy the evening with a white tie in the safe Shepherd’s with a French star menu, even if they occasionally threw down a coin to the singing donkey drivers in order to feel as worldly as generous.

Of course: Both the colonial tourist of old and the modern oat macchiato drinker are able to continue their expedition by steamer to England or by Uber to the nearest ultra-modern Motel One in order to enjoy an overpriced full English or pseudo-organic breakfast the next morning; however, unless they are gradually driven out by gentrification, those who live in those “cool” neighbourhoods will probably have a different opinion of its „coolness” or even its “exotic” aesthetics than a travel guide like „Timeout Magazine”: He fails to go into raptures over the „shabby chic” of his street cafés, the unbeatable prices of local kebab stands, the „bold” motifs of local tattoo artists or the picturesque traditional costumes of the neighbours in his block of flats, but has to deal on a daily

basis with poverty, parallel societies, clan criminality and neglect, while others follow the next fashion trend like global locusts and, after the „cool” Neukölln, explore the „exciting” Aulnay-sous-Bois (and certainly don’t cover the distance from Berlin to Paris in an electric car).

After all, there is hardly anything that is more at odds with genuine „sustainability” and genuine beauty than the actual lifestyle of the new left-wing green elite, which has taken de facto control of society everywhere in Europe, but especially in Germany, through its control of the media, politics, education and NGOs, and which not only makes a mockery of any ideological honesty, but also of any sense of aesthetics. Is it only necessary to recall the piles of rubbish that every „Friday for Future” demonstration leaves behind? The pictures showing

## Cultural Morphology and the Study of Aesthetics

The fact that art in the traditional sense would sooner or later become anachronistic due to its technical reproducibility has been a commonplace for over 150 years; but not that the aesthetic sense of late European man would also be characterised by such a frightening neglect. For even if it does indeed seem to make little sense to spend a fortune on a handmade piece of furniture or a photorealistic portrait when a machine can produce largely identical pieces for a fraction of the cost does not necessarily mean that any genuine sense of beauty is in decline: Causally, this has nothing to do with technology or postmodernism, but rather with a strange mixture of a cultural self-hatred linked to feelings of inferiority, an inability to take responsibility for what is next and not just what is furthest away, and a typically late-civilisational fascination with everything sick and unhealthy; that ubiquitous morbid „culture of death” that John Paul II wrote about.

Yet the ever-increasing spread of the „culture of death” is ultimately nothing new, as cultural morphology shows. All other civilisations have gone through a series of evolutionary phases that have had a significant impact on their aesthetic sense. While, generally speaking, the first half of a civilisation is entirely dominated by transcendence and, accordingly, aesthetics is entirely oriented towards the corresponding religious or philosophical convictions, the accent shifts to immanence in the second half. A largely formal survival of religion and tradition, together with an idealisation of the human being, made a few more centuries of what later generations usually called „classical” humanistic art possible. Soon, however, these last obstacles fall away completely, and all that remains is a „modernism” which, at best, is geared towards mere efficiency and megalomania, and at worst, deliberately discovers the „ugly” as an object of art and, partly with various, above all „social” intentions, partly out of actual pleasure in the sick, wrong and evil, moves it right into the centre of artistic activity.

Whether we are talking about the strangely deformed, blasphemous and revolutionary art of the Amarna period, the

kids who have been neglected by their affluence as they spend their pocket money in the nearest Burger King after fighting global capitalism? The obvious hatred of any real aesthetics, as evidenced by the fact that climate vandals make everything but so-called „contemporary” art the object of their iconoclastic endeavours? The pointless and absurd exclusive world trips by green ministers? The large-scale devastation of ancient woodland for solar panels and wind turbines? The destruction of established small farms and historic cultural landscapes by EU-subsidised large-scale agricultural enterprises? The fact that every one of these ridiculous pavement vegetable gardens, which are intended to encourage the neighbourhood to grow food “together”, suffocates in weeds after only 3 months at the latest due to a lack of care, even on the part of their initiators?

megalomaniac buildings and high-tech gadgets of the „Warring States” period or, finally, the Hellenistic era of Greco-Roman art, when age, pain, pathos, ugliness, hybris and exoticism replaced the classical humanism of Attic art - and the list could go on and on -: time and again, we experience a fundamental break in the aesthetic perception of later civilisations, which incidentally is not only evident in the realm of pure art, but also in the aesthetic order of everyday living conditions, if we think of the polluted cities, the impoverished populations, the culture of „bread and circuses”, the decadent elites, the fascination with exoticism and multiculturalism as well as the cynical manipulation of religious hopes that characterises all late civilisations - including ours...

Of course, the insight into the fundamental parallelism of the great civilisations also raises the question of the extent to which lessons can be learned from history - not necessarily in the sense of fundamental change, but certainly in the sense of a certain control of obviously predetermined evolutionary dynamics.

If we look at history, we see not only the depressing insight into the regular emergence of a „culture of death”, but also the realisation that this is ultimately overcome time and again by a cultural synthesis that preserves the concrete instruments of technology, rationalism and modernity, though at the same time, it understands that only a new foundation of society in the spirit of transcendence is capable of stabilising a decaying civilisation. Whether it is the art of the Ramessides, the Han dynasty or the Augustan period, to refer only to the examples already mentioned above, there is always a conscious return to tradition - a return which, of course, cannot be seen as a real new beginning, but rather as the conclusion of every civilisation, which completes the cycle of its development through this synthesis and enters a phase of increasing canonisation, petrification and simplification before it becomes so weak after a few centuries that it no longer knows how to defend itself against external enemies.

## Outlook

Of course, we are still some time away from this in the West, even if there are many signs of an imminent, albeit crisis-like, clarification of the situation, which could lead to the transition to such a synthesis, which would also affect our aesthetic perception. Of course, an insight into the probability of such an ultimate development only means an extremely vague prospect that we ourselves must fill with meaning and whose realisation requires all our strength and efforts to actually become a reality. For just as statistics can predict demographic, social or economic developments with great probability, at least in the short to medium term, without forcing individual people to behave accordingly, cultural morphology can only provide the general outlines of possible dynamics, the exact fulfilment of which is a matter for the individual and can always provide material for surprises.

For this reason, the solution to the problem of aesthetic perception described above cannot be imposed from above, even if the efforts of governments to create a clean environment, aesthetic urban development, a constructive media landscape or an education based on the love for one's own culture should

by no means be minimised. Ultimately, the decision in favour of beauty must come from below, not from above: Even today, no European city lacks grandiose sacred and secular testimonies to our civilisation, yet museums, cathedrals and palaces increasingly lie like mute and dead foreign bodies in the midst of a mass society whose life flashes by around them without perceiving them as anything other than anachronistic obstacles in the search for the straight path from workplace through shopping mall to entertainment district. There is a lack of people who allow beauty a place in their everyday lives above and beyond mere efficiency, who make an effort that does not „count” in cold numbers, but carries its value in its mere aesthetics, even and especially in the small tasks of the here and now. Only when it becomes normal again not to perceive beauty as a good that is somehow connected with luxury, leisure, abnormality or elitism, or that can only be „understood” by struggling through the jargon of absurd art critics, but that is directly accessible to everyone and intuitively understandable to the soul and accompanies, ritualises and sublimates every single act of our lives, will there be hope for a general victory of the culture of beauty over the civilisation of death.

Jan Tarnas

## THE WORLD WITHOUT BEAUTY

### Crisis of Western Civilisation

In the current era, the term “crisis” dominates public discourse, encompassing various critical issues such as politics, economics, climate, culture, humanitarian concerns, and social matters. Consequently, there is a growing number of publications and discussions seeking to uncover the reasons behind these challenges and propose potential solutions for a better future. This trend extends to the humanities and culture, which have been experiencing a prolonged period of crisis. Many individuals perceive these fields as peripheral and insignificant in the face of the complex issues of the modern, technologically advanced global society. However, amidst the multitude of modern crises, the fundamental questions revolve around the crisis of modern human identity, nature, values, and ways of life.

In interpretations aiming to analyze modernity from philosophical and humanistic perspectives, the recurring theme of beauty and its impact on the portrayal of contemporary art and culture is evident. Undoubtedly, the historical devaluation of aesthetic beauty has led to a disconnect in the realm of art, resulting in a disparity between genuine art and pseudo-art in today's context. However, the concept of beauty transcends the confines of art and should not be limited to evaluating contemporary art alone. It is a fundamental and complex issue that delves into the state of contemporary man.

Being mindful of this generalization, it can be argued that contemporary reality is largely shaped by two main civilisational traditions - Western culture and Eastern thought. While this is not an exhaustive analysis, it suffices for the purpose of this discussion. Additionally, it's important to note that in current discussions about the state of the modern world, concepts like the anglosphere have emerged. In the era of global technologization, they introduce a formula of social subjectivity based on specific civilisational foundations and cultural influences that transcend geographical boundaries. To some extent, the identities of Europe and the United States of America share common roots, and the influence of universally accepted patterns in the real world, through a significant cybernetic framework, shapes the manner and nature of digitally created content.

The statement suggests that Western civilization was established on the principles of Greco-Judeo-Christian traditions. Instead of delving into a debate on the specific contributions of each element to the development of European

and Western culture, it is important to acknowledge that it was not merely historical patterns or adherence to tradition that shaped the synthesis of these elements. Rather, it was a deliberate embrace of certain values and virtues that formed the foundational principles of future Western culture. Among these fundamental values is the concept of Beauty, which, in ancient philosophy, is one to the ideas of Good and Truth in what is known as the transcendental theory or absolute values. These values were later reinterpreted by Christianity as the Trinity of divine persons and extended to various levels of all creation.

The Christian understanding of God, who embodies Truth, Goodness, and Beauty while existing as three persons: Being, Logos, and Spirit, shaped the world and human endeavors in terms of Memory, Thought, and Speech. This perception of reality, infused with the essence of the trinity to varying degrees, gave rise to a traditional system of education that persists in some institutions to this day. This educational framework distinguishes the division of the sciences into the Trivium and Quadrivium, with the Trivium representing the trinity, where Grammar, Dialectic, and Rhetoric correspond to Memory, Thought, and Speech. This educational model, integral to the development of Western culture over the centuries, embodies the ancient pursuit of human perfection, in which Christianity, as articulated by Christ (“I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life” Jn 14:6), provides the path to salvation.

The concept of the trinity of transcendentals is rooted in the belief that what is Good embodies truth and beauty, what is Beautiful embodies goodness and truth, and Truth embodies goodness and beauty. If beauty reflects goodness and truth, then goodness also reflects beauty and truth, and truth reflects beauty and goodness. Where one aspect of the trinitarian concept exists, the others cannot be absent. The core idea is that seeking one value enables the discovery of the others, which in philosophy leads to an understanding and refinement of human nature, and in Christianity leads to God and salvation (it is no coincidence that the three divine virtues, faith, hope, and love, embody the same principle of the absolute trinity).

In light of this interpretation of Western culture, which forms the fundamental basis of Western civilization, the following questions need to be addressed:



- Is Superficial Beauty connected to Valuable Beauty, and how can they be distinguished from each other?
- Does the attempt to diminish Beauty also imply an assault on the principles of Truth and Goodness?
- Can Western culture, and consequently Western individuals, operate independently of the values that essentially define their identity? It becomes evident that the selective manipulation of the transcendentals not only impacts the nature of culture and its artistic expressions, but also influences aspects of personal and societal identity.

## The Challenge of Realism and the Essence of Art

The issue of beauty and its fundamental nature in the art world is most commonly discussed in the context of the debate surrounding realism and its artistic counterparts. Beauty is viewed as an embodiment of artistic realism, with the key point being to specify which form of realism is being referenced. The primary differentiation lies in the argument between metaphysical realism and material realism. Metaphysical realism asserts the realistic existence of universals and transcendentals (such as goodness, beauty, and truth) in the real world, while materialist realism (essentially nominalism) denies the existence of universals and transcendentals, reducing them to purely nominal forms. When applied to art, this issue revolves around whether the essence of art lies solely in creating a visually pleasing and materially delightful composition, or if it is also about representing the essence of things, which adds depth to the artwork and contributes to contemplation beyond the superficial optical reconstruction of the visible surface layer.

Artistic beauty is frequently interpreted predominantly from a biological standpoint as an offshoot of the longstanding practice of mimesis, overlooking its philosophical aspect. However, within the realm of art, both creators and observers recognized that art fundamentally concerns the essence of the subject being portrayed. This principle also applies to the tradition of realist painting, which is more than just a pursuit of technical perfection. The emphasis on craftsmanship in this tradition is a response to the dominance of photography, which is more inclined towards capturing surface appearances, whereas painting, by capturing the trace of the surface, primarily aims to convey the essence of the subject.

The correct way to interpret art is to recognize that the skillful depiction of an object's essence lies in the realism of its representation. This approach to art is timeless, transcending artistic epochs. To illustrate this, we can ask questions such as:

- In Neolithic wall paintings, why were animals portrayed realistically while human figures were represented with dots and dashes?
- What was the purpose of layering paint in ancient Phaumite portraits to create the illusion of emitting light from the depicted dead individuals?
- Despite their lack of anatomical accuracy, how do medieval images effectively convey the essence of the depicted scenes and transfer them into expressions of faith?

- In Leonardo da Vinci's „Lady with an Ermine,” how does the depicted woman's apparent movement within the static painting convey the fleeting nature of time?
- In Caravaggio's „The Vocation of Saint Matthew,” how does the painting not only exhibit technical perfection but also convey the weight and challenges of the faith's calling, transforming ordinary individuals into saints?
- Why do Romantic paintings simultaneously celebrate nature and express despair over the limitations of reason in the post-Enlightenment era?

The concept of metaphysical realism in art, despite being influenced by craftsmanship, does not shy away from it. Essentially, it is the Aesthetic Beauty that plays a central role in representing the content. This is evident in paintings that deviate from traditional material realism yet unambiguously portray beauty. Examples include abstract or primitive works that integrate beauty into their representation, as well as naturalistic paintings that, within the confines of the frame, allow us to appreciate the beauty of the world and the essence of life surrounding us. This perspective highlights the fallacy of a materialist worldview, emphasizing that the material universe is not the complete reality in which we exist.

The issue with the core of art and the neglect of beauty arises when a piece of art does not pursue either metaphysical beauty or the perfection of visual aesthetics in terms of craftsmanship. This is one of the reasons why artificial intelligence technology will not be capable of producing artworks on par with human paintings, as the essence of art does not solely reside on the surface of the composition. Furthermore, this explains the current resurgence of realist painting, which is significantly qualitative and quantitative, in the context of the ongoing crisis of individual identity. This resurgence not only signifies a fatigue with modernism in art but also revives the timeless quest for understanding the essence of humanity by delving into the human life's drama.

A prime illustration of such artwork can be found in the work of Odd Nerdrum, who has gathered a group of painters inspired to create profoundly thoughtful art. Nerdrum's recent exhibition in Poland, hopefully the first of many, presents an image of a man worn down by the world's crises and civilization, yet clinging to the inherent primal force within humans - the will to survive - in post-apocalyptic settings. Moreover, in the face

of the individual's drama and the world's tragedy depicted in Nerdrum's paintings, questions arise about the meaning and

significance of life, the value and essence of civilization, and its impact on human existence.

## The Social Function of Art: Sacred and Museum Context

Art serves the purpose of cultivating the viewer's aesthetic perception, enabling them to appreciate the visual aspects through a moral lens, thus creating awareness of the world around them. To exemplify this concept and the role of art in human development through moral values, consider the following: where do we predominantly encounter art today? The answer lies in museums and churches. This is especially evident in countries like Poland, where centuries of conflict, pillage, and devastation have resulted in the concentration of exceptional artworks in religious institutions and museum exhibits. If someone aims to immerse themselves in beauty and delve into the world of art, they are likely to find fulfillment by visiting historic churches and museums, especially those housing ancient art. This is not so much a question about the origins of the aesthetic divide between sacred and contemporary art, but rather about the clear impact of a significant event in the art world that has relevance to modern society.

In a simplistic manner, one might inquire as to why modern churches are unappealing and aesthetically displeasing. The easiest explanation would be to suggest that aesthetically pleasing structures are impractical from an economic or ecological standpoint. However, this notion is baseless, as it is the well-designed architectural and stylistic structures that endure the test of time and are therefore the most environmentally sustainable.

Some might passionately argue in favor of architectural modernism by asserting that, for matters of spirituality, the physical structure is not paramount, and that the artistic quality or visual form is secondary to the principles of faith and moral goodness. This argument is also weak, as it was Christianity that influenced the development of significant artistic styles, and without the pursuit of beauty in form for the sake of essence, our historical legacy would be significantly impoverished in terms of artistic achievements.

Expanding on this idea, it could be argued that in the pursuit of holiness, which is the central aim of Christianity, there may not seem to be a necessity for grand architectural structures. While this viewpoint may have its merits, it raises an important issue - the distinction between abstaining from building ornate places of worship and actively promoting unattractiveness through deliberately creating unsightly structures that contradict the concept of beauty. This presents the crux of the matter, as the absence of beauty could potentially hinder individuals from accessing a pathway to understanding, considering that beauty inherently signifies goodness and truth, ultimately leading to a connection with God. The stark contrast between the traditional Latin Mass

and the modern form of the Mass clearly demonstrates that impact. The visual changes in the modern liturgy, characterized by reduction and alteration, are closely linked to the fundamental truths it conveys. This leads to the question of whether churches that lack aesthetic appeal, coherence, and beauty might inadvertently cultivate a congregation devoid of depth and meaning. It raises the intriguing possibility of whether the artistic modernism in the church, juxtaposed with theological modernism post Vatican II, is a consequence of the latter or a deliberate, conscious choice..

When considering these ideas within a non-religious framework, we can ask: what is the prevailing ideology in today's museums? This applies not only to contemporary museums showcasing modern creations but also to their presentation of ancient artifacts using modern principles. The issue is that modernism, as an ideology, does not offer any current advantages, leading one to question its potential as a viable creative strategy for the future. Furthermore, modernism does not promote diverse perspectives; instead, it shapes the era in a way that hinders observers from understanding sentimentality and the complexities of classical art, ultimately limiting the rational interpretation of artistic meaning. Therefore, modernism actively contributes to the erosion of Western cultural values and distances individuals from the humanist essence developed over centuries.

Looking at this issue from a realist perspective, it becomes evident that much of modern production has been diverging from the principles of representational realism for many years, both in terms of style and content. Furthermore, within the contemporary art community, there exists a notion that realist art is a primitive mode of expression, catering to popular taste and demeaning the sophisticated sensibilities of art critics, curators, and discerning art aficionados. This view is unfounded, as the essence of art does not solely lie in realism, but in the emotional depth of humanism, which endeavors to portray human experiences through realism. Instead, contemporary art champions artistic originality, a concept that is somewhat illusory in an art world that lacks embellishment and creativity. In contemporary art discourse, the concept of creative originality often serves as a counterpoint to traditional notions of beauty. The reason for this lies in the contradiction between the pervasive nature of originality and the concept of beauty. To be considered an original creator, one must invariably deviate from the norm, elicit shock, surprise, or even offend, thereby diverting attention away from the pursuit of beauty. Consequently, the emphasis on self-expression shifts from its intrinsic need to the impact of the artistic creation, overshadowing the establishment of a shared poetic experience with the audience.

The recent redefinition of museums has brought attention to a notable shift from being purely educational temples of art to becoming institutions with politicized agendas focused on social issues expressed through what is described as art. This shift does not stem from the essence of art or the aspiration to enhance humanity. Rather than striving for truth and exposing people to a wide array of ideas, this trend of politicizing institutions leads to the division of art, culture, and consequently, society. Essentially, it promotes a Marxist approach by pitting opposing groups against each other instead of encouraging individuals to pursue truth. This approach hinders people's cognitive abilities on an individual level and obstructs their path to progress. On a larger social scale, it undermines the idea of fostering a social elite.

To summarize the preceding discussion, the issue of the vanishing of beauty in Western civilization is not purely

a visual concern. It signifies the abandonment of essential beauty, a fundamental element of Western civilization. Western culture typically assumes a natural order that objectively distinguishes between good and bad. This order, uniting all people, results from preserving certain norms and values. Among these values is beauty, whose essence extends beyond art and is rooted in human imperfection. The recognition of absolute beauty, alongside human imperfection, has fostered a distinct sense of political anti-utopia in Western culture. The concept of beauty compels individuals to surpass their imperfections and strive for a better reality in pursuit of objective values. The crux of the issue lies in acknowledging that the elimination of one value impacts others, and depriving humans of reference to values is counter to humanism, as being human entails being moral, necessitating reference to the absolutes of Beauty, Truth, and Goodness.

Maciej Mazurek

## ON CONFUSION IN CONTEMPORARY ART

There is perhaps no more heated dispute in culture than that concerning contemporary art. The number of excesses, provocations was and is so great that the whole sphere has become one of excess and provocation. And the sharpness of the disputes seemingly only concerning aesthetics conceals the wars of worldview. Democratic societies are subject to a permanent process of differentiation into classes. Aesthetic choice is a sign of what class we aspire to. Tell me what to listen to, what exhibitions you go to, and I will tell you your place in the ever-changing swirl of social stratification. The

chaos of modern art, the fashionable kind, bubbles up from this whirlpool to a large extent. And the very feeling of chaos is strong due to the “work of tradition”, which reminds us that there were rules, canons and art had great aspirations. Not coincidentally, Balzac stated that revolution kills art. After two hundred years of revolution, the image of modern art as a whole was nightmarish. Nor is this hypothetical totality unless we agree on the word “chaos”. Here an important caveat. There are bright, single points in this picture of degradation, i.e. interesting artists.

### An Attempt to Describe the Modern Art World

Attempting to systematise what is happening in the visual arts seems like an impossible task. Systematics and chaos are at odds with each other. However, reason cannot desert us. Until recently, this was possible. For example, the systematisation of art objects, description based on classical national characteristics, or description according to the rules of aesthetics, which at some point were arbitrarily considered a suspicious field. Until the 1990s, the division between German, Italian or Polish art was not considered an anachronism. What was sought and found was what was unique to the culture.

Globalisation and the first twenty years after the “Cold War” changed this with the foolish belief in the end of history, a fable to which left-wing artists, the forerunner of a potential revolution on a global scale, were and are understandably susceptible. The art world’s distancing from national traditions revealed a paradox particularly evident at the Venice Biennale. At this most extensive overview of the chaos of art, national pavilions were not abandoned. It is impossible to find a criterion other than the national to make an exhibition comprehensible at such an event. Organising the expression of hundreds of artists is a titanic task for a curator who must manage this chaos and does so through an ideologised leftist agenda.

The contemporary art world presents itself as cosmopolitan and following the path of globalisation (and money). It is supposed to help people better understand a complex world and gently indoctrinate. Art as an aesthetic sphere is secondary to this imperative to engage with “weighty social issues” and remodel the world.

There is a great deal of confusion within it. Above all, art has become, as a consequence of the process of secularisation, a para-sacral space. In the Western world, this phenomenon

has been observed on a massive scale since the 1960s. The art world has begun to swell and spin ever faster.

The years of economic prosperity from the 1980s to the economic crisis of 2008 were a boom period for the art market, and as Sara Thornton has noted - people were more willing than ever to give up their jobs to call themselves artists. The economic crisis of 2008 dampened the enthusiasm to some extent, but the structural changes and their dynamics that locate some residuum of “deeper” meaning in art remained. For traditionalists, admittedly, this is now a ruin, but it is worth reminding ourselves that it is awkward to take offence at reality. This boom in art is due in no small part to the richness of the material world, which has triggered an interest in the post-material world, which is, of course, what art is.

This democratisation of genius, i.e. anyone can be an artist, has produced its ideology. All the individuals playing the game called “modern art” are looking for their own originality; each artist seems to be unique, and in this need for distinction, they become similar. The fetish of originality reveals the herd behaviour and predictability of creation. The world of contemporary art is a loose network of overlapping subcultures connected by a profound belief in art. This belief is a remnant of religion. These subcultures have taken over the whole world but are concentrated in the art capitals: New York, London, Los Angeles, and Venice. But there are also places teeming with artistic life far from the centre. The art world is becoming a sphere where many people not only work but also live permanently. As Sara Thornton writes, a “symbolic economy” takes place within this sphere, i.e., people exchange thoughts. A community of sensitive individuals is formed around the para-religious myth of art. Compared to the twentieth century, the art world is more polycentric and ephemeral in nature. This ephemerality has been well described



by Zygmunt Bauman. It is known as “Liquid Postmodernity”. Behind this name is a description of the behaviour of the elites of an era in which post-material values and unbounded capital flows have become dominant.

Aesthetic criteria no longer seem decisive in this world without clear contours. The world of contemporary art is what we might call - after Sarah Thornton - a “statusphere”. Art objects in such a world no longer challenge time. The latticed and delicate construction of this entire sphere is built around vague and often contradictory categories of fame, although perhaps it is better to use the word publicity, which is mostly ephemeral. Also at stake is the uncertainty vis-à-vis the imaginary historical significance that artists who are uncertain of the evaluation of their works must ascribe to themselves. Hence, there are demands for rapid consecration by institutions with roots in tradition. I remembered the embarrassment and reaction of a prominent neo-avant-garde artist when I innocently asked how he felt in the National Museum, where he had a monographic exhibition.

If the artwork is video art with creative thought contained within it, then its ontological status is poor compared to the paintings of, say, Rubens. Modern art galleries are usually white and well-lit, full of monitors and screens displaying works with creative thought. All are very similar to each other.

Rarely is painting or larger objects. The reason for this probably stems from the economic principle of optimisation, to reduce transport costs. This emergence of a new medium for creative thought in the form of the DVD has been accompanied by a narrative about the end of the historical significance of painting. This situation clearly shows what matters in this world in the first place. Concern for money and the status of players is what primarily occupies participants in the game of modern art. This implies that art, according to classical principles of aesthetics that originated in Thrace, may no longer exist in this world; however, there still distinctly emerges the Platonic „Thymos” in all of this, meaning the struggle for recognition, prestige, and position. As for money, that is nothing new. What is new is the unprecedented level of hypocrisy. Works with humanitarian ideological messages are being sold for heavy millions according to the rules of political correctness. Given the financial scale of this art industry, quite a few lives could have been saved instead of investing in dubious “geniuses”. The problem is that an investment in a dubious genius will make a profit. Works of art in this world are the equivalent of money,

## Three Points of View

What has happened is that kitsch and nightmarish artistic productions have taken over galleries and are storming museums. We live in an age of terrible confusion. There is an ideological war declared on Western culture by the leftist international, which is the main beneficiary of this confusion. In the first instance, and this is the most terrible, it is a war of

a kind of promissory note that is traded. Big money and the para-religious aura surrounding contemporary art generate an “economic mysticism”. The picture is, therefore, not idyllic. In such an unstable world of fluid and shifting hierarchies, neurosis and depression must be widespread on a mass scale.

And the condition of what this contemporary art world produces is comparable to a gigantic great hall containing hundreds of thousands of pianos. On every piano, a solitary soloist plays their cantilena, and the sum of all these creations produces a gigantic noise. The lone soloist plays with the hope that in this cacophony of sounds, they will be heard and singled out, and their artistic production full of “creative thoughts” will become a canon of Western art while they are still alive.

Maurizio Cattelan, for example, turned out to be such a lucky find for us. Why this and not another artist makes a career is impossible to determine. It seems that the greater the absurdity dipped in leftist sauce, is the recipe for success, i.e. breaking through to the mass media via savvy intermediaries.

Returning to Cattelan. In Poland, he became known as the author of a famous event in Warsaw’s Zachęta Gallery in 2002. He was the author of an installation depicting Pope John Paul II knocked down by a meteorite, entitled “The Ninth Hour”. The title refers to the moment of Christ’s death on the cross at the ninth hour of his passion when, according to the Gospel, he was to confess: “Father why have you forsaken me”.

There is an extremely “creative” thought behind Cattelan’s “work”. Staged in a Catholic country like Poland, it caused a storm. And that was precisely the point. Another famous work by this artist is a stuffed horse with its head sunk into a wall. An untitled work. It costs a fortune. It is the object of adoration and admiration of this world’s modern elite. There is no point in talking about the work itself but to draw attention to those who buy it. They do it again for prestige. The more idiotic the idea, the more enthusiasm it arouses. I cite these two “works” somehow canonical in this modern art world to show what ideological degradation this world has undergone and what confusion it is in.

I use the word “degradation” to express my state of mind towards most nihilistic creations in the world of modern art. At the same time, I vividly remember a remark that when things are well-described, the temptation to portray the world in a Manichean style disappears, which I do not want.

surrender to Reason. Reason, and anything with a more potent form in culture, is treated as a source of repression that must be deconstructed. Critical thinking has become canonical.

In all likelihood, if we look at modern art from the position of an era where there was a canon, for example, the 17th century,

nullifying the claims of historicism, the language of modern art appears meaningless. This means that the kind of experience of life, space and time contained in that art - I am thinking of mainly in painting - was definitely more complete. Besides, this interest in and admiration for the art of the past says a lot about today’s human desires, which are not satisfied by modern art. This confusion has been introduced by moving images and electronic media, producing whirlpools that make it impossible to calm perception.

To understand how the degradation, exemplified by the art of someone like Cattelan, who in this sketch plays the role of the villain, came about, one cannot avoid historical reflection. Three attitudes towards contemporary art can be sketched. The first, perceived today as archaic, stems strongly from tradition.

Someone who is a lover of the Italian Renaissance and a devout Catholic, capable of feeling the divinised nature in the images of Madonna will look with horror at the excesses of modern art, especially feminist art. On the other hand, someone else, a fan of critical art that appreciates excesses may believe that everything created before 1968, everything rooted in tradition, served to legitimise and perpetuate the violence carried by the patriarchal culture supported by religion. This religious art expressed the adulterated consciousness of a people subjected to the pressures of feudalism and religion. This is, of course, Marxism in a version for the poor. There is no confusion here. Instead, there is the developmental logic of art and liberation from oppression or permanent liberation from oppression. Someone else, an aesthete with a high opinion of their aesthetic judgement, will admire Renaissance images of Madonna and, at

## Three Stages in the History of Western Art

The first is the ideal religious-metaphysical model. The world is an emanation of God, the Logos. The world is divine harmony, and art reflects and multiplies this harmony. No one doubts the purposefulness and meaningfulness of the world. The ladder up which the artist climbs towards perfection is the Greek Grand Theory, which has its roots in Platonism. The feudal social structure determines the artist’s place in the hierarchy. Artists are first and foremost craftsmen, although as early as the Renaissance, some great artists herald the birth of the Romantic myth.

The second is the Romantic phase. With the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, science and the element of history invaded history. This, in turn, heralded the Romantic stage God, hitherto apparent, hides deep in nature. This led to the emergence of symbolism, or broad undefinable “meaning”, in place of allegory, which dominates the pre-Romantic world and is characteristic of Classicism.

The world becomes opaque, its meaning hidden deep. Only the inspired artist has an insight into metaphysical mysteries. The problem of the justification of creativity begins to be something

the same time, consider critical artists’ speeches to be valuable in promoting tolerance in social life. These three points of view, fundamentally at odds with each other, make for conceptual confusion.

Confusion is also brought on by the massification of cultural participation. The revolution is killing art. It has lowered standards because the process of increased interest in creative activity, in people’s fulfilment in the arts, is accompanied by a decline in the quality of education.

In this picture of the world of modern art outlined at the beginning of this sketch, the material work as a symbol practically disappears; what is left is thought, creative intuition as a value in itself and other vague, indefinable ideas and degradation in general. Once again, I reiterate the question of how this happened. It is a fascinating question that relates more to the history of ideas than to art itself.

Following Whitehead’s philosophical intuition that we can say nothing about real things without relating them to ideal entities, he proposes to take the religious-metaphysical model, full of higher meaning, as a benchmark that allows us to look at European art as a history of the attrition and replacement of religious and metaphysical meanings with social, economic ones and, finally, as an expression of the nihilistic spirit. This is accompanied by a history of the severing of the link between art and object consciousness. This rupture of continuity is revealed, for example, in abstraction or, even more radically, in conceptualism. This attrition of metaphysicality or being essence can be presented in three stages.

important. Manifestos start to appear in which artists write why and for what they create. Romanticism brings a change in the role and meaning of the artist. The artist is someone special. The artist is a medium of higher powers.

The crisis of representation, or in other words, the crisis of the principle of “mimesis”, begins when nature loses its supernatural character through the disenchantment of the world by science. God does not so much withdraw from nature as “hide” deeply in it. The world, as a strong basis of meaning, the one we perceive with our senses, loses its law-making power. But Romanticism is something else, a sign of a more profound transformation. It represents a transitional stage, and with this, it opens up modernity between the theological and metaphysical eras and the economism of the 19th century, which reigns totally in the sphere of the spirit as the guiding force in the Western world to this day. As Carl Schmitt remarked, “The way from the metaphysical and the moral to the economic sphere is through aestheticism, and the way through even the most sublime consumption and aesthetic pleasure is the surest and most convenient way to a universal economisation of mental life and to a mental constitution that finds in production and consumption

the central categories of human existence”. At the end of this process to which the modern art world is subjected, aestheticism degenerates into kitsch. Vulgarity and obscenity become chic, and the works of artists who consciously create kitsch works sell the most expensive.

Stage three is modernity, nihilistic in its fundamental expression. It is also an epoch of conceptual confusion since these three stages, at the “culmination of history”, i.e. the victory of the liberal world, live side by side, although the nihilistic one dominates. However, neither the theological-metaphysical stage nor the romantic stage has ended.

The entry of an entire culture into the nihilistic field, which can be considered the beginning of modernity, begins, according to George Steiner, between 1870 and 1930. Steiner writes of a fundamental breakdown of perception, which means a rupture of the contract between words and the world. This applies to language but also extends to the visual arts. Until then, there was an assumption of an obvious covenant between word and object, an assumption that existence is sufficiently “utterable”, and that the raw material of existence has its counterpart in the structure of the narrative. No one questioned this. The permanence of this assumption was guaranteed by the trust in the Logos. It protected the culture from the outbreak of absurdity and paranoia. All human actions have limitations. However, there are exceptions. That exception is language. Language knows no conceptual, projective finitude. It is free to say anything. “But this unstoppable - Steiner writes - infinity of discursive potentiality also has its negative side. The unstoppable infinity of conceivable statements and sentences evokes a logic of vacuum and nihilism”. And this second “principle” seems to govern the world of modern art. Nothing, so it seems to them, binds the artist.

The reception and significance of the thought of the nihilist Nietzsche are a sign of this radically new situation of man and art. Art begins to be autotelic.

However, there is still an awareness of art as a heritage of religious-metaphysical tradition among a large proportion of cultural participants. That is to say, their consciousness is stuck in tradition, in the first theological-metaphysical stage. They do not - because they cannot - find works that respond to their expectations. This sense of lack, combined with the observation

of the terrain of art as a place contrary to their understanding of art, gives rise to a sense of confusion and rebellion.

Since Impressionism, the logic of the life of art has been bound by the principle of stylistic distinction. The result is a purging of the accidental and a path towards purism. To be original, the Post-Impressionists had to distinguish themselves stylistically from the Impressionists, simplifying the form. The most consistent purist was Duchamp, who was also the artist to lead the visual arts into the nihilistic field, as Mallarme and Rimbaud had led language.

To escape from objectivity into conceptualism is to shift the burden of creation and reception of the work onto the viewer. The ‘purer’ the ascetic form, the stronger the need for philosophical justification. For example, scribbling in black crayon on white sheets of paper, such as a two-year-old child would do, requires the viewer to be familiar with the developmental logic of contemporary art. Someone who does not have a sufficiently hermetic knowledge of the field does not quite understand how such scribbles can be admired. But this means that they do not belong to the elite; that is, according to what the chairs of contemporary art preach, they are an unenlightened being. Hence, large numbers of people succumb to this terror. This adds to the confusion. Ultimately, it can always be argued that these scribbles symbolise the chaos of modern life. They express chaos through chaos.

The deficit of metaphysical meanings has led to the emergence of an art issue closely linked to ideologies, mainly leftist - the avant-garde.

In this third stage, art in the nihilistic field becomes a tool for the struggle to change social relations. Such art is critical art, which takes the form of a message intended to compel reflection. The force of the attack through obscene images and the social and moral intensity of this reflection becomes a substitute for aesthetic experience.

The confusion of concepts stems from the fact that all three stages of Western art history are alive today, intermingling. The dominant nihilist field is created by the economic-consumption mentality of the liberal-left elite, enraptured by the originality of an artist like Maurizio Cattelan, which directly demonstrates the quality of these elites.

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Jan Tarnas

## WHY BEAUTY MATTERS?

*The few who listen to us deserve beauty  
but also the truth  
that is – horror*

*that they may be brave  
when the time comes*

Zbigniew Herbert,  
*Widokówka od Adama Zagajewskiego* (fragm.)<sup>1</sup>

The fight against Western civilization is being waged on multiple fronts, encompassing the vast domain of culture. The reason behind the frequent questioning, derision, and mockery

of culture and art of old times is intrinsically linked to a query: what is the significance of beauty?

### The Difficult Notion of Beauty

The Western civilization has witnessed a continuous evolution in the understanding and definition of beauty and art. Throughout centuries, there has been a quest to unravel their true essence and delve into their significance. However, starting from the 18th century, there have been endeavours to dismantle and reject not just the notions of beauty and art, but also the long-established traditions and philosophical frameworks associated with them.

Beauty, rooted in the ancient concept of *kalon* (meaning *beautiful, good, or noble*, yet somehow it transcends any one of those concepts), has undergone a transformation from being universally admired to becoming a matter of subjective taste. Critical opinions on beauty now reside solely in the eyes of the beholder, while society tends to dismiss it as a sentimental longing for a bygone era. To comprehend the reasons behind the standardized depreciation of beauty and its association with the liberal bias prevalent in the modern *artworld*, it becomes crucial to explore the true essence of beauty and ask why contemporary modernism appears to fear it.

The inquiry into the concept of beauty may appear insignificant, yet prevailing conversations suggest that modern evaluations of beauty primarily focus on its superficial aspects. Conventionally, beauty is perceived as a visual attribute, an appealing facade, or a delightful scene that offers pleasurable visual encounters. This understanding of beauty entices,

captivates, and stimulates. However, the issue lies in the fact that this perspective fails to fully encompass the vast potential of beauty that ought to be explored in the context of art and culture. Beauty is a concept that goes beyond mere cosmetics. By limiting our understanding of beauty to its surface value, we fail to appreciate its transformative power and its ability to shape our world, including ourselves.

Aesthetics cannot be simply reduced to cosmetics. Aesthetic beauty, whether regarded as philosophical, axiomatic, or Beauty with a capital B, holds cognitive, parnetic, and spiritual significance. It is important to acknowledge that beauty is not solely subjective, contrary to popular belief. The objectivity of beauty stems from the inherent nature of art and the world itself, as the world possesses its own inherent beauty that is not contingent upon human judgment or creation. Given that the value of beauty is not a result of human creation but rather a discovery, it becomes crucial to comprehend the fundamental nature of the artistic process based on these principles. It should be noted that humans do not originate art from nothingness, as the act of *creatio ex nihilo* is reserved solely for God. Instead, humans produce art using the resources available to them. As beauty resides within a realm beyond human creation, the instances where human genius and talent bring forth beauty are referred to as art. Or, at the very least, they used to be. The question remains, what led to the shift in modernist art, and to a great

<sup>1</sup> Translation by the author.



extent contemporary art, that resulted in the devaluation of beauty and its substitution with ugliness?

Beauty is an absolute value because it does not adapt to current times, but requires each individual to learn how to perceive and understand the manifestations of beauty. Experiencing art beyond the necessary level of sensitivity is a matter of developing taste and the ability to look consciously. This results from the axiomatic connection of Beauty with the values of Truth and Goodness. And in this field, the mechanism of the need to contemplate beauty becomes visible. How can we explain the rather peculiar phenomenon of viewing works of art and experiencing intellectual pleasure through them? How to explain pilgrimages of individuals to specific museums and works of art, sometimes spanning continents, just to stand with their own eyes in relation to a work of art? Beauty not only has an incredible power of attraction, but in this dialogue – the relationship between the work of art and the recipient – it allows us to contemplate the untold truths about the world and ourselves.

Humans have an innate desire for beauty as it fulfils their need for values, which is crucial for personal growth. This connection between human needs and their development is evident in the role of art throughout history. However, contemporary art theorists and practitioners struggle to define the concept of art,

## The Worship of Ugliness, Consumerism and Nihilism

The issue with modern society lies in rejecting absolute values and embracing utilitarianism, pleasure, and consumerism instead. This leads to a culture deeply rooted in materialism and moral relativism. Relativism hampers rational exploration of the meaning, purpose, and origins of our reality, as well as inquiries about the essence of humanity. Consequently, individuals are trapped in pessimism and nihilism, which promote moral permissiveness.

What about art, which exists beyond practicality and instead thrives in the domain of aesthetics? Art has also undergone alterations to align with the prevailing *status quo*, avoiding any opposition. Some theorists refer to contemporary art as *pseudo-art* or *anti-art*, claiming that true art never fades away. This *pseudo-art* has primarily centred around the artistic arrogance of individuals' egocentrism, ultimately leading to creative infantilism. This so-called "art" has transformed into something ugly, as it has detached itself from beauty and the artistic craftsmanship that accompanies it. Consequently, it has become a mere production domain, devoid of contemplation on the meaning, purpose, and human condition in relation to greater entities.

In what way has the transformation in the field of art occurred and is still taking place? Initially, there was a widespread deconstruction of the significance of artworks, suggesting that while they possess representational and expressive functions,

acknowledging that a work of art is recognized as such within the enigmatic *artworld* without any further criteria, which hinders the understanding of true functions of art. One such function is the social or parenetic function, which stems from art's inseparable link with society. By distorting the workshop medium – iconography & iconology, meaning narrative of the art work – and neglecting the aesthetics that connect art with its audience, the parenetic function of art is being questioned. As a result, both art and its audience are denied the opportunity to engage with reflective substance. This transforms the artwork into a mere source of visual pleasure or a means to convey its content solely through promotional materials and the opinions of experts following prevailing political trends.

It is because art serves the purpose of human growth, throughout history, the pursuit of enduring art that transcends the ever-changing trends of the avant-garde has been centred around the concept of beauty. In this sense, beauty serves a purpose and holds distinct functions, hence the art that unveils this beauty possesses functions that can be observed within the personal and societal realms of artistic engagement. Therefore, it is pertinent to question whether this understanding of beauty solely serves our interests or if it is, in fact, indispensable. Is beauty merely a luxury for the privileged few, a wasteful expenditure of time and money? Or is it, in fact, a fundamental necessity that signifies a deeper meaning?

they do not convey any definite meaning beyond their visual appearance. Furthermore, their expression primarily relies on evoking emotions. Consequently, artworks lost their meaning as conveyors of information and ideas, as well as their moral and aesthetic context. This reduction led to a decline in profound analyses, promoting anti-scientific relativism. This phenomenon is evident in visual art spaces, with the imposition of empty curatorial narratives in galleries, as well as in the realm of literature. However, this trend has had a significant impact on the academic humanities, where the pursuit of beauty and meaning through rational inquiry became a forbidden subject.

Few individuals question the cause and significance of the current crisis faced by the humanities. In today's era of globalization and technocratization, the majority of society perceives the humanities as remnants of a distant past. However, it is the humanities that delve into the fundamental aspects of our existence. They inquire about humanity, its experiences, values, origins, trajectory, development, and vulnerabilities. The modern-day culture wars, the assault on Western civilization, the crisis within humanity, and the uncertainty surrounding the purpose of art are all interconnected with the crisis afflicting the humanities.

In the past, the field of art studies within the humanities aimed to conduct contextual research on the final products of civilization and the prevailing norms. This involved separating

historical information about the creation of artworks and the artistic techniques used from the information available to artists' contemporary audience through the language of art (iconography and iconology) and the universal disinterested message conveyed by the artwork. However, this approach has changed over the past century. Now, there is a shift towards searching for the intentional message of the artist and exploring so called objective interpretations that are detached from the creator. This has led to the recognition of extreme relativism and the limited power of the humanities in interpreting and analysing artworks. Consequently, historical works are now open to various interpretations influenced by contemporary ideologies and political trends.

The principles of visual arrangement, rooted in humanity's inherent desire for harmony, have been superseded by disarray and disorder. As a result, the institutionalized art world imposes the notion that individuals' preferences are unsuitable and uncultured, discouraging them from exploring the realm of art.

The emphasis on conceptualism and individual expression in art education has diminished the importance of honing artistic craftsmanship, thereby restricting the range of positive messages that can be conveyed through art. Consequently, it is not surprising that a considerable portion of artistic storytelling revolves around irony, sarcasm, cynicism, and nihilism.

The relationship between art and politics has always existed. However, it is only when art loses its purpose as a medium for aesthetic values and universal meanings that it becomes solely a tool for political manipulation. In this scenario, an object is labelled as art based on its alignment with certain political agendas. This phenomenon is evident in the case of art's engagement with identity politics. When art no longer promotes the universal values that define a culture's identity, such as Western culture, it becomes entangled in specific political causes.

The possibility of such a situation could also result in the discontinuation of artistic expression and the infringement upon the right to freedom of speech. When art loses its authenticity and fails to convey meaningful values, critics and censors solely concentrate on the political implications of the artwork or the artist. Numerous instances of censorship and art cancellation, artist intimidation, gallery suppression, and even the destruction of artworks are prevalent in today's society. Art that no longer explores universal concepts and fails to address the significance of humanity within larger contexts becomes nothing more than a populist medium, conforming to the same rules of ideological communication as the press and television.

The absence of meaning and optimism in life leads to unsightliness and isolation, which are not only characteristics of art found in contemporary galleries, but also define the entire anti-aesthetic framework of the world we inhabit. It is important to take a moment for sincere introspection and ponder upon the appearance of our homes, our children's classrooms, and our

workplaces. We should question the ideologies that shape the formless structures of our churches and the transparent city centres lacking privacy. How do emotionless residential areas and utilitarian apartment complexes affect us? Moreover, what impact do visually mundane cars, roadside advertisements, and pragmatic clothing have on our perception? How do the visual elements in media, social media, phone software, and the programs we use appear? Do any of these domains align with the aesthetic and stylistic ideals of previous centuries? At what point did we inadvertently, as I don't believe there was a unanimous agreement, choose to distance ourselves from the beauty of our surroundings and the inspiration we should derive from our interactions with them?

The prominent representation of the described trends is evident in the unattractive architecture that surrounds us. The impact of tasteless architecture on our daily lives becomes evident when we consider our choice of travel destinations. We are drawn to places like Renaissance Florence, Baroque Rome, medieval Cracow, museum-filled Vienna, and vibrant Barcelona. These locations evoke a sense of harmony, order, and imagination. However, we don't experience the same sensations in shopping malls, modern city centres, or neighbourhood walks. The stark contrast highlights how the presence of uninspiring architecture can hinder our overall well-being and enjoyment of our surroundings.

This juxtaposition against ecological efforts is a disheartening irony. We continue to construct new buildings that not only mar the aesthetics of our environment but are also quickly replaced or left abandoned within a short span of time. This approach clearly disregards the principles of environmentalism, as the emissions from construction and the lack of durability in contemporary architectural styles fail to produce structures that can withstand the test of time.

The collision of shockvertising and minimalist attempts to eliminate detail has shaped the artistic reality around us. It is certain that marketing shockvertising, which effectively exploits the pervasive eroticization of messages nowadays, will eventually become mundane, much like other trends such as brutalism, remodernism, and minimalism. Just as art that solely concentrates on the challenges of its era, encapsulated within a specific time and place, and lacks a profound universal message, eventually fades away. At some point, someone will inevitably raise their voice, proclaiming that the emperor has no clothes. This declaration certainly will trigger crowd psychology and the implementation of social ostracism towards the individual.

The more significant issue at hand is that the concept of ugliness has transcended its boundaries and now encompasses not just contemporary artists, but also those from past centuries. This endeavour to exert control over the present, the past, and consequently, the future, prompts us to question the intention behind these actions. Furthermore, one must consider whether the diminishing originality of beautiful art and the consequent loss of its value is not only an external loss of beauty, but also an internal loss of beauty.

G.K. Chesterton once said that medieval individuals never concerned themselves with being medieval, whereas modern individuals are excessively concerned with being modern. In today's world, we find ourselves in a paradox. Despite having unparalleled access to knowledge, we fail to prioritize reliability and demand the same from the realms of art, culture,

and their underlying values. Our rage to be modern takes precedence over all else, reflecting that it is the intelligentsia, rather than the masses, who are most susceptible to the allure of contemporary trends. This phenomenon ultimately points back to the importance of education and its influence on society.

## Transcendental Beauty and Education

Beauty is the force that intertwines art and culture with the profound questions and challenges that define the course of human civilization. It serves as a powerful counterbalance to ugliness and uncertainty, offering solace in times of despair and discord. Beauty possesses the rare ability to inspire individuals to achieve greatness, illuminate the path to truth, and ultimately conquer the prevailing nihilism and relativism that permeate both society and the individual. It does so because Beauty is one in being with the Good and the True.

Nowadays, there is a concern that axioms, similar to the concept of God, are being questioned and debated. It is important to note that there is no void or vacuum effect in our world. Contrary to the belief that we are progressing by abandoning old superstitions in the realm of values, the reality is that many individuals who challenge universal and axiomatic values simply substitute them with their own beliefs. However, these replacements are often limited, temporary, and ultimately destined to fail, as no one has yet devised a universally applicable value.

The significance of beauty in society and its paradoxical marginalization in the modern world is closely tied to its role in education. Beauty holds a unique position as it inexplicably triggers rational understanding, enabling us to analyse our surroundings and form self-assessments. This perspective, shaped by the experience of beauty, allows us to perceive other values and comprehend the true fabric of our world. Understanding why beauty is both socially important and undervalued lies in its ability to guide our perception and self-reflection through education.

In one of his writings, Zbigniew Herbert expressed his belief in the existence of beauty and ugliness, good and bad, nobility and meanness, and he warned against blurring these boundaries in the name of anything. Beauty serves as a guidepost, revealing the truth about humanity, their worldview, and moral evaluation of their actions and character. By stripping away superficial hypocrisy, beauty reinforces the essence of humanity, existing between the lowliness of mud and the ethereal nature of clouds.

Hence, beauty becomes a source of distress within the framework of global division and the collapse of traditional values. The expression of beauty, as exemplified by the flawless craftsmanship of Old Masters' art rooted in established principles, starkly diverges from modern creations. This is precisely why humans crave art. Whether our aim is personal

growth, as Aristotle envisioned with *eudaimonia*, or the pursuit of holiness through Catholic teachings, encountering the sublime and divine beauty prompts us to strive for self-improvement beyond our current state. Dostoevsky's renowned quote emphasizes the power of beauty in saving the world. This concept holds true in Catholic doctrine, where beauty serves as a means to express the idea that God will be the saviour of the world. Additionally, in the realm of general ethics, beauty plays a crucial role by providing the necessary foundation for moral values and guiding human actions. Without these axiomatic values, there would be a lack of support for the morality and behaviour of individuals.

In today's education system, particularly in response to the challenges faced by academic institutions, there is a renewed focus on the purpose and significance of education. At the heart of this issue lies the question of beauty, as beauty, with its inherent connection to truth, paves the way to wisdom. In the past, the primary objective of education was not simply the accumulation of knowledge or practical skills, but the attainment of wisdom by students. Education aimed to explore the profound questions of life's purpose and direction, seeking wisdom as its ultimate goal.

The modern education system prioritizes teaching students critical thinking skills while neglecting to teach them logical argumentation. As a result, students lack the necessary methodological skills to independently seek the truth. The curriculum focuses on practical skills relevant to the technocratic and global reality of the 21st century, as well as social sciences, emotional intelligence, and creative development. However, it fails to address the holistic development of an individual's humanity, thus hindering the progress of civilization. This inherent flaw in educational methodology, particularly in relation to beauty and art, was identified by C.S. Lewis in the 1940s. Lewis observed that students were being taught that any value-related statements were merely reflections of the speaker's emotions and that all statements were inconsequential.

The departure from traditional workshops and aesthetics of the past has not only changed the way art and culture are expressed, but it also signifies an emotional decline that silently robs future generations of a vital aspect of human heritage, even before they can fully comprehend it. This blurring of cultural understanding has two significant consequences. Firstly, it disconnects mankind from the continuous knowledge that

explores the meaning of human existence. Secondly, it poses a challenge in terms of the educational and creative path that future generations will choose. If Western society has long regarded humans as the *imago Dei* and instilled this belief in its upbringing, what is the current position of humanity in the hierarchy of existence? How art and culture have influenced civilization in the past and what kind of civilization we are creating in light of the impact of contemporary art and culture is the subject matter discussed by Lewis. The question finds its answer in the writings of Aristotle and St. Augustine. Aristotle recognized that education aims to shape one's preferences in accordance with moral standards, which is also the purpose of art and culture. However, it is only when this purpose aligns with universal and transcendent values that we can truly consider it successful education, where every object is loved

appropriately based on an ordered hierarchy of affections (St. Augustine: *ordo amoris*).

Beauty, in this context, has the potential to rescue the world from the abolition of humanity. This is because beauty beckons us towards a greater existence and compels us to aspire to transcendental principles such as Goodness, Justice, Love, and Truth. These principles, in turn, inspire virtuous actions. However, we must reflect on the historical impact of art on education and the disregard for fundamental truths in the advancement of civilization. This prompts us to question whether we can dismiss the importance of values and aesthetics as mere outdated *decorum*, lacking true substance. Are we truly going to begin pruning the branches of the tree on which we are currently seated?

Marcel Skierski

## THE ART OF THE CONSERVATIVE AVANT-GARDE AS A SUBVERSIVE SEARCH FOR BEAUTY

Cases of Zbigniew Warpechowski's and Con-She's art

The starting point of this text is the diagnosis of deep crisis of beauty in the current culture – referring to the title of the whole publication. One of the main culprits of this state of affairs is avant-garde art, which broke the continuity with tradition. As a response to this, in my article I will present the main assumptions of conservative avant-garde proposed by the Polish artist Zbigniew Warpechowski

and development of this concept by philosopher Pawel Rojek. In the second part I will present a brief analysis of one of Warpechowski's performance and also the artwork of an anonymous artist called Con-She. I hope that this intellectual provocation will stimulate reflection on the vastness of the toolbox available to people for whom beauty still matters.

### Art of our Times as a Subversive Tool

I think we should create reality with the tools we have in the particular circumstances. Poles as a nation have special experience in it, because of facing the threat of its own statehood for many years – from The Partitions in the XVIII century to Soviet domination in the second half of the last century. Our national culture also was to be destroyed by oppressors. These difficult conditions only stimulated our artists to develop and present better and better works, storing the Polishness in the most difficult times. What connected these artists was a realistic look at their situation. They used gaps in the system to propose artistic solutions that helped destroy these systems.

I am far from thinking in revolutionary way. No matter how bad the diagnosis of beauty in modern Europe would be, we should not act rashly and radically. Revolution is the domain of destroyers, not builders. Many social changes have already been made, and the role of conscious people is to try to creatively use these changes, not to be offended by reality and try to „nailing jelly to the wall”.

Even most ambitious proposal of changes of the current paradigm will not immediately affect the functioning of contemporary culture's recipients, brought up in extreme individualism and voluntarism. We cannot speak only of

lost beauty, but of the lost series of fundamental values that have constituted our culture – beyond beauty is still good, truth, justice, natural law, etc. We are not at the stage when we can afford to subtly discuss the meaning of beauty and mourn our loss. We need guidance for our children on how to act here and now. I believe that such a clue exists and it is conservative avant-garde proposed by the Polish artist Zbigniew Warpechowski. Thanks to this, we can invisibly enter the enemy camp and use its tools to defend our own values.

Subversion should help us in this matter. Subversion in art consists in interfering with the meaning of a given work or phenomenon by repeating or imitating and at the same time shifting the meaning. One of the first and most well-known examples of subversive art was the exposition in 1917 by Marcel Duchamp of a urinal as a *Fountain* artwork. French artist criticized the system of institutional art in this way. So far, subversion in art has been used mainly to questioning the foundations of our culture. However, it is only a tool that I think can be used for both a bad and a good purposes. I believe that Zbigniew Warpechowski is the one the artist, who's using this avant-garde paradigm in very constructive way.

## Zbigniew Warpechowski and his Ideas

Zbigniew Warpechowski, born in 1938, is a Polish artist, best known for his work as a performer. He also creates paintings, sculptures, theatrical set designs, writes poems, and deals with art theory. He is one of the precursors of performance art in the world. Since 1986 he has been a member of the international group *Black Market*, bringing together eight artists performing joint performances in various places around the globe. Despite the adoption of an extremely radical creative method, putting it on the antipodes of traditional art — has repeatedly tested the limits of his own endurance during his performances, self-harming or tiring live animals — however, openly admits to the Catholic faith, Polishness and (in context of his art) presenting a surprisingly conservative worldview. The artist describes his attitude as „conservative avant-garde”, repeatedly referring to this term on the pages of his publications. Despite the fundamental importance of this concept for his art, Warpechowski has not yet presented an orderly and precise interpretation of this concept. He discussed the issue in probably the most comprehensive form on the pages of an essay published in 2014<sup>2</sup>.

Focused on artistic conservatism, the Warpechowski is against artists uncritically looking into the past and accepting tradition without placing it in the context of the times in which it was created. In his opinion, a thoughtless reliance on existing principles developed by predecessors is a laziness of creativity. Creators, whom we now perceive as classics, in the times of their activity struggled with misunderstanding, they were breaking the rules and proposing solutions that left behind their colleagues acting on the basis of the rules known at the time. On the further pages of the essay, he compares conservatives to Pharisees who „close their eyes so as not to sin at the sight of women” — they contempt of new phenomena, but it is only for hiding their ignorance.

Conservatism, as Warpechowski understands it, should be based on knowledge, both about past and present events, always in the context of the realities of its times. A mistake in the assessment of this phenomena is to ignore the conditions

## An Attempt to Clarify the Concept

An attempt to present an orderly approach to the Warpechowski's paradoxical term was presented by the Polish philosopher Paweł Rojek. In his book author emphasize a reflection on Polish identity and an indication of its components that will save it and become an interesting ideological proposal at any

of the time and limit yourself to their assessment from a time-safe perspective. Based on context-sensitive knowledge, we can indicate universal, timeless and reliable values that combine all significant artistic proposals, regardless of the times. In other words, the conservative artists are limited only by common sense and classical logic, and he remains free in the face of a great wealth of lasting values.

Artistic conservatism understood in this way should be guided primarily by the moral criterion, being a manifestation of creative ethics. The artist cannot support the idea of progress for the sake of progress itself, based on the destruction of any order, making art meaningless and sterilized. At the same time, he cannot escape from searching attempts to give a creative answer to the challenges of his time.

Such a creative response Warpechowski calls avant-garde. The Polish performer distances himself from the discussion of art historians and theorists about avant-garde(s), proposing an original proposal of this concept. In his approach, the avant-garde artist's ideas should be „carrying” and „fertilizing”. To be able to do this, the maker must be free in the search for truth and courageous in presenting his views — based on knowledge of the past and the present (that is, conservative, according to Warpechowski's understanding). Hence the elitist character of the true avant-garde, which always remains in the shadows, being incomprehensible in their times. The avant-garde artists act in isolation, rejecting institutional control and political correctness. It is difficult to consider them as „advance guard” (fr. *avant garde*) — do not constitute as good example for others in their times, because the true meaning of their work is usually manifested after years. For their contemporaries, they remain incomprehensible, being rejected both by conservatives looking back at the past (we should call them rather traditionalists) and establishment avant-garde artists, whose works fill art galleries. Their works is focused on the illustrate of fashionable intellectual trends, leading its authors to conformism, and as a result, ideological emptiness and nihilism of their art.

latitude. One of the chapters is devoted to the reconstruction of the meaning of the concept proposed by Warpechowski<sup>3</sup>. Analyzing the meaning of „conservative avant-garde”, emerging from the writings of the Polish performer, Rojek distinguishes three basic ways of understanding it, which I will try to present below.

## Conservative is the new Avant-Garde

Today's world is increasingly appearing as turned upside down. It connects with the change the meaning of value systems and concepts shaping our culture so far. The changes in social discourse, with the growing cult of individualism and expression at the expense of rationality, arouse the understandable reluctance of conservatives. People who adhere to the traditional system of values almost automatically transfer their reluctance to blind progress to all contemporary art, where, as in the lens, you can see the effects of the cultural revolution (rejection of taboos and abandonment of artistic craft and workshop skills). In this context, Warpechowski, probably one of the few who emphasizes his attachment to conservative values, does not reject the heritage of twentieth-century avant-garde art. What is more, his adversaries who throw such artists like Kazimierz Malevich, Pablo Picasso or Marcel Duchamp with contemporary cheap artistic provocateurs into one bag are called ignorant by him. According to Warpechowski, their view of the past makes it impossible to undertake interesting activities and responding to the present problems.

## Platonic Inspirations and Paradoxes

The second sense of the idea we are interested in is related to the meaning that Warpechowski gives to art. This also shows the social role of the artist from his point of view. The Polish performer recognizes the existence of universal values that are rooted in the divine sphere, exceeding the world around us. Artists who use their unique sensitivity have access to this transcendent sphere of values and, like prophets, pass it on to other people. It is worth emphasizing that Warpechowski considers himself at best a co-creator of art only, seeing himself in the role of „transmitter” transcendent meanings.

This romantic view of the artist's tasks links their activities to the duties of priests, leading to the sacralization of art, where authentic art is identified with prayer. In Warpechowski's vision, we see a direct reference to Platonic idealism. Without deeply analyzing views that the Greek philosopher had on art, it is important that he treated poets as under the influence of a prophetic inspiration. They were to mediate between the world of gods and men.

The Platonic ideal of art presupposes its mimetic character in relation to the world of ideas. There is no space for originality in art in this view, because perfect creativity should be the world of

On the other hand, the Polish performer notes that the current institutional world of art is dominated by conformism, extreme ideologization and predictability. The art galleries are filled with works that are confusingly reminiscent of the gestures of avant-garde artists from a century ago, but which almost exclusively concern problems derived from the currently promoted intellectual trends, such as gender fluidity, environmentalism, minority rights, post-humanism, etc. The *art world* allows creative freedom provided that it will be presented „appropriate” set of views. As Warpechowski notes, in view of such a narrowly defined framework of freedom, conservatism appears as a real avant-garde, allowing to ventilate exhibitions full of artifacts with the similar, liberal-left meaning. In the face of such outlined perspectives of the functioning of the art world, only conservative avant-garde appears as an interesting, creative alternative, allowing for a healthy understanding of the development of culture and creative freedom. The first sense of conservative avant-garde specified by Rojek stems from the fact that true artistic freedom is possible only after the external bonds of ignorance and ideology that bind it.

ideas repeated to the highest degree. The more perfect the art, the less space it leaves for the individuality of the artist. Is there a place for the avant-garde in this concept? Rojek's second sense of conservative avant-garde reveals a fundamental problem, noticed by other critics of Warpechowski's theory. They note that, in fact, the Polish performer is above all attached to tradition and negation of modernity (despite the declaration of Warpechowski himself). Let's give the artist a floor:

*„My conservatism is based on unconditional respect for the principles and values that European culture fed on and translating them into avant-garde creativity”<sup>4</sup>.*

With this quote, I emphasize the paradox hidden in the Warpechowski concept. Staying on the basis of the second way of Rojek's understanding this concept, it is impossible to determine how the disclosure of timeless ideas (in the Platonic sense) is to be made using avant-garde tools. However, at this point we have no way of solving this problem. For the purposes of this text, it is important that one of the possible approaches to conservative avant-garde presupposes the existence of art that takes affirmatively traditional values, using non-traditional means of artistic expression.

2 Z. Warpechowski, *Konserwatyzm awangardowy*, w: „*Konserwatyzm awangardowy*”, Kraków 2014, p. 159-172.

3 P. Rojek, *Awangardowy konserwatyzm. Idea polska w późnej nowoczesności*, Kraków 2016, p. 51-85.

4 Ibid., p. 61. Translation by the author.

## Christianity

The third approach to avant-garde conservatism is the most important from the Rojek point of view and is his contribution to overcoming the paradoxes functioning in this concept. It is true that classical conservatism and the avant-garde are mutually exclusive. Conservatism, in the most general sense, assumes that the essence of creation precedes existence, and man realizes himself fully only on the basis of the preceding patterns. The avant-garde is opposite, which is based on the modernist myth of the death of God. If the Creator does not exist, then there is no human nature that precedes us, to which we can relate. The role of the gods was taken over by artists-constructivists, who were faced with full freedom of decision on the nature of man and the world. As the history of the XXth century has shown, the modernizing tendencies of constructivists treating man as the only guarantor of their own dignity have led to the nightmare of Gulags and Konzentrationslagers. The defeat of modernization projects did not result in a return to essentialism – postmodern man rejected the belief in the creative nature of his work, while not revoking the Nietzschean „Gott ist tot”. The result was moral relativism and still progressive nihilism.

The set of views, which is the way out of this impasse, assumes that man has an innate nature, but at the same time has freedom that allows him to complement this nature freely. Such a set of views exists – this is Christianity.

Let us present, following Rojek, the development of this idea based on two texts of John Paul II, recognized as the unquestionable authority of contemporary Christian thought. It will be an apostolic *Letter to artists* from 1999 and the content of a speech from 1977 (even as Cardinal Karol Wojtyła) *The problem of the constitution of culture through human praxis*.

God created man – writes John Paul II in his *Letter to artists* – on his own image. This is the reason, among other things, to the fact that man by his nature is a creative being. It is true that the Pope treats creativity here broadly as the art of the whole life, but artistic activity here is simply a special case of the described activity. Through creativity, we realize our humanity and our origin from God. Deprived of the possibilities of creative work, man does not develop his potential, and his ability to define himself remains limited. At the same time, work is not a factor defining the essence of man, because the essence of the subject is primary in relation to the action taken by this subject. At this point the Pope refers polemically to Karl Marx, who in *Theses on Feuerbach* pointed to the „whole social relations”, including especially the labour, as the basis for defining human existence (as Rojek notes, Wojtyła’s argument also works as a tool for criticizing liberal democracy).

The measure of the value of work (including artistic creation) is the ability to combine the possibilities of human development with the inviolability of the integrity of his nature. In this view, we see a coherent combination of the sphere of human freedom with the essentialism of his nature. Creativity understood in accordance with Christian thought, mediated by the writings of John Paul II, exceeds both the limitations of Platonic idealism and unstoppable constructivism. At the same time, it presents a coherent synthesis of attachment to lasting values, characteristic of conservatism along with the creative freedom of action, which Warpechowski wrote about. Thus, we find many common features between the labour understood in a Christian way and the conservative avant-garde postulated by the Polish performer. Below I will present an example of the implementation of these postulates in practice. It will be a description and concise analysis of one of the key performances in the entire works of Warpechowski, entitled *Horn of Memory*.

### Zbigniew Warpechowski, Horn of Memory, performance, 1997<sup>5</sup>

Direct inspiration for the performance was the Polish premiere of the Miloš Forman’s movie *The People vs. Larry Flynt* in 1997. The movie is about the story of the creator of the pornographic magazine *Hustler* and his fight against moral censorship in the United States in the seventies of XX century. One of the posters promoting the film depicted the main character (played by Woody Harrelson), stretched like a Crucified on a female hips. The encounter with this poster in urban space caused in Warpechowski a strong sense of resistance. He decided to express it in his artwork.

The performance took place at the CCA Ujazdowski Castle in Warsaw, exactly two months after the Polish premiere of the Forman’s movie. Warpechowski moves between two rooms – larger, with the audience and smaller, on a square plan. His body is smeared with black and red paint, he is dressed in aprons (one larger, the other smaller, evoking associations with a Masonic apron), he has a necklace with construction tools such as pliers, screwdriver and others. Performance begins – artist enters the room. In one hand he holds a priest’s staff, in the other a shofar (Judaic liturgical horn). He presents props to the viewers. He withdraws to a smaller room and returns, blowing the horn. His play, initially pure, gradually becomes weaker. Once again, he returns to the room on the square plan and brings the viewers a stone tablets with a Ten Commandments. He shatters it on the floor with great bang.

The second part of the performance begins. Warpechowski changes his costume, remaining in his panties only. He has clippings of pornographic pictures glued to his body. On the

floor presents a poster from *The People vs. Larry Flynt* and pornographic pictures taken off his body. Around he puts packed condoms (its brand is *Elite*). He draws up the Holy Bible and begins to read. After a while, he pulls out individual pages, which he rolls. He pushes rolled pages of the Bible into the previously unpacked condoms and forms it the inscription NEW AGE. After this, the artist retreats again to a smaller room and returns dressed in aprons, with a necklace around his neck, holding a priest’s staff in his hand. He puts the priest’s staff on a movie poster. The performance ends when the artist breaks on the ground the second pair of stone tablets with Decalogue.

Warpechowski’s artistic act was part of a heated discussion about Forman’s movie and how it was promoted in public space. The controversial poster, with the main character in a pose imitating Christ, was withdrawn from circulation in the US, provoked outrage also in France and Italy. In Poland, the prosecutor’s office initiated an investigation due to reports of committing a crime of insulting religious feelings. After a few years, the case in the Polish court was discontinued<sup>6</sup>.

Warpechowski by his performance takes on the side of people affected by the use of the symbol of Christianity to promote Forman’s movie. At the same time, he is protesting against portrayal of pornographer, who’s becomes a hero of the fight for freedom of speech. Thus, it points to the two poles of the conflict – „ordinary” people and the liberal-left elites (the name of the brand of condoms used in action refers to this), which promote ideas that reject traditional taboos and order.

In his performance, the artist takes on the role of a prophet, a mediator between God and people. An important role is played by the division of Warpechowski’s performance space. Smaller room, separated from the audience, plays the role of *sancta sanctorum*, and a larger one refers to the sphere of profanum. The artist, moving between two spaces, gives the audience the message to which he has access as a messenger. He communicates his appeal with the help of a shofar. The sound of Warpechowski’s horn is not accidental. It’s tekija, a sound warning of the coming danger. In this symbolic way, the performer clearly calls people to conversion and change their behavior.

The artist’s breaking of the Ten Commandments tablets is a repetition of the biblical gesture when, after descending from Mount Sinai, Moses sees his people worshipping the golden calf. The patriarch, seeing this, in powerless anger destroys the tablets with divine commandments. It is worth emphasizing the significant difference between the biblical story and the action of Warpechowski. Israel receives another chance from Yahweh – Moses gives the Chosen People a second set of tablets. Warpechowski breaks the tablets again, pointing to the irretrievable distance of people from the foundations of our culture, resulting in the loss of ties with God.

The described performance seems to meet the features of the conservative avant-garde’s manifesto. The artist acts against the dominant liberal-left paradigm in the world of art in defense of tradition rooted in the Christianity. Warpechowski warns people of the consequences of renouncing human dignity, which we are entitled to from nature. He uses for this artistic strategy, which is the achievement of the XX-century neo avant-garde, associated with the rejection of all norms and traditions. At the same time, the performance of the Polish artist is far from a simple illustration of the biblical message, because he uses a number of gestures that affect the ambiguous character of the show. Who is the hero of the performance? A Moses or a master of the Masonic lodge (aprons and necklace made of tools) or Warpechowski himself? What’s the point of breaking the tablets again? We are dealing here with the freedom of creative means of expression, which affects the multiplicity of our interpretation and, ultimately, the freedom to take up the message that Warpechowski’s act brings.

### Con-She, *Inclusion, object*, 2022 (?)

At the end of this article I would like to indicate the possibility of implementing the postulates of conservative avant-garde on different example. Let’s look at the *Inclusion*, artwork of anonymous online artist Con-She. This example is far from Polish and Christian tradition. It is using completely different means of artistic expression than the Polish nestor of performance art. It is probably controversial, but I believe that following example show in wider perspective the potential behind the idea of the conservative avant-garde.

The artwork of anonymous artist is a female mask made of leather tapes, resembles a gadget from the counter-culture of BDSM. Inscriptions composed of girly beaded lettering is denote political-correct terms defining „women”: „cervix havers”, „black birthing bodies”, „bleeders”, „menstruators”, „pregnant people”, „womb carrier”, „womb havers”, „uterus haver”, „chest feeder”, „birthing people”, „people who bleed”, „uterus holders”, „people with vaginas”, „vulva owners”, „birth givers”. As we learn on the Con-She’s website, the ball gag is made of crumpled sheets of paper, on which are written the usernames associated with the twitter account „Terfs out of Art”. People behind this social media profile focus, as they write, on „working to kick transphobia out of art & beyond”.

TERF is the acronym for trans-exclusive radical feminism/ feminist. This phrase is used by representatives of the far left to insultingly identify feminists who oppose the recognition of transgender people as women. So called TERFs believe that the recognition of transgender people as women prevents the implementation of the basic assumptions of the feminist movement. If being a woman depends only on the will, so then it is devoid of distinctive qualities. It is impossible to fight effectively for women’s rights (defined in any way) if you do not know who is a woman already.

<sup>5</sup> Detailed description of the performance prepared by its author published in: Z. Warpechowski, *Zasobnik. Autorski opis drogi życia poprzez sztukę performance*, red. M. Szymański, Warszawa 2022, p. 200-201.

<sup>6</sup> Cfr. B. Zmudziński, *Larry Flynt, Miloš Forman i skandalizujący plakat – o granicy wolności w reklamie*, w: „Estetyka reklamy”, red. Michał Ostrowski, Kraków : Agencja Wydawniczo-Poli-graficzna „ART-TEKST”, 2002, p. 125–138.

Recognition of trans women as women in practice leads to many pathologies of social life. The most characteristic problems are men who consider themselves women, who go to female prisons and commit rape and abuse there. Another example is biological men winning sports competitions in female categories (an example is the activity of the famous Czech-American former tennis player Martina Navratilova. She is a declared lesbian and activist for the homosexual community rights, which has been called TERF after her criticism of the starts of trans women in women's sport competitions). All this results in the blurring of the designation of „women”. Therefore, to avoid mistakes, representatives of the radical left used words such as „cervix havers” etc., presented on Con-She's mask.

Another way of the radical left's activism for the radical inclusiveness of trans people is to operate in social media profiles such as „Terfs out of Art”. People behind this profile follow the activities of people of culture, artists and scholars in order to expose them as TERFs. In Con-She's artwork the names of people behind „Terfs out of Art” were written on ball gag, designed to shut the mouth of the mask-wearing.

Con-She in her (?) artwork reveals the true face of transgender movement postulated by the radical left. Beads with slogans, together with leather tapes, forming a mask. Like any mask, it makes it difficult to truly identify the wearer. In addition, a direct reference to the BDSM subculture allows to see the wearer as object, slave, which is reduced to the role of an erotic toy. The names of the users associated with the social media profile expose the alleged struggle for freedom and tolerance that leads to gagging and censorship by online activists.

For our considerations, it is important whether the analyzed object, obviously not related to traditionally understood art, implements the criteria of conservative avant-garde art indicated in this article.

When we open the website of one of the most prestigious art galleries in the world – Tate Britain – after putting the phrase „gender” in their browser, we can see countless exhibitions, publications, performances etc. devoted to this topic. All these events are part of the *gender mainstreaming* strategy, which assumes unequivocally affirmative taking up the subject of gender fluidity. It's just a modest slice. For anyone who follows the contemporary *artworld* it is obvious that in galleries nowadays dominates art promoting barrier-free inclusivity and full affirmation of minorities. The artwork of Con-She which

is questioning it puts the author on the margin of currently dominant discourses. What for conservatives is normal – statement that only a biological woman is a woman – testifies to the originality and avant-garde idea of an anonymous artist. It is, despite the superficial similarities of her *Inclusion* to the works currently presented in leading art galleries.

Con-She's artistic gesture does not refer to religion or transcendent reality. The artist comments on the surrounding world, in which the abandonment of the traditional understanding of femininity distorts reality, making women themselves victims. This artwork refers to the deep-rooted facts of our culture, based on the human nature division into two genders, which are determined by biology: „So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27). This expresses the second sense of understanding the proposed concept of conservative avant-garde. In this case it is art as a medium of timeless values.

This is directly related to the third sense of the concept discussed in this article. The value of artistic creation presented by Rojek, rooted in the writings of John Paul II, is based on the recognition of both the inviolable integrity of human nature and human freedom. *Inclusion* stands unequivocally for human nature (male and female) and reasonableness (absurd of „euphemistic” terms for women presented by the artist, taken from social life). It also clearly points to freedom and its modern enemies, doing so with subversive use of a gadget which is borrow from the world of BDSM subculture.

As I have tried to show in this text, there are different strategies in which artists, or more broadly – people of culture – can manifest their need for universal values. One of them is conservative avant-garde. We are only at the beginning of the journey to capture the full dimension of this paradoxical attitude. On the sidelines of contemporary art there are many artists whose attitude is rejected by both the establishment of art world, and who traditionalists do not want to see attached to the traditional artistic workshop. Conservative avant-garde exists, and their art has much to say in the modern struggle for human dignity.

Beauty does not always have to express itself in the traditional creative workshop, because man's struggles with the world take different forms. Although Beauty, Truth and Justice are eternal and unique, the inalienable freedom of the Children of God allows them to be undertaken in many different ways.





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