

through a selection and development of elements chosen from his tradition. This process was taking place also in those epochs in which novelty, originality, and the expression of individuality were not considered to be determinants of art. An eminent artist could frequently present his philosophical reflections about the sense of his activity and ask about the social mission of his art or about the major values his art should serve. The answers given to such inquiries often differed from one another; the sense of art was found in its connection with religion (as in the Middle Ages), with science (the Renaissance), with morality or politics (the Enlightenment). Yet, the necessity of art in culture was commonly acknowledged and it resulted from the belief that art contributes to the realization of certain indispensable spiritual needs of man: the need of endowing one's life with a deeper sense (the search for a religious or moral absolute), the need of gaining knowledge about the surrounding reality, the need of transforming the world according to some socio-political ideas, the need of expressing one's individuality and, strictly connected with the latter, the need to participate in human community and so on.

It is particularly significant that for a long time the aesthetic values (formal perfection) were not regarded as independent in European culture; likewise, the need of aesthetic experiences evoked by art was not seen as endowed with autonomous significance. Aesthetic pleasure was merely a reward for the recipient's effort in assimilating certain extra-artistic values. The proper aim of art was to stimulate metaphysical emotions, to deepen one's knowledge of man and reality, to shape civic attitudes etc. Aesthetic values were formed somehow "on the way" towards this aim and they constituted specific by-products of the creative act of the artist. The superior values at which art aimed were always connected with this or that vision of the world and human predicament. As K. Jeleński rightly remarks about painting, "*painting* itself was at the end of a long and exhausting journey whose real destination was unknown."¹

The situation was radically changed after the decisive victory of the avant-garde art after World War I and especially after World War II. One of the first theoretical works which illustrated the depth of the transformations taking place in artistic culture was the essay *Dehumanization of Art* (1925) by Ortega y Gasset. The main thesis of the Spanish philosopher was directed against previous approaches to art in which it had been regarded as a *reflector* of the values of life. Ortega's undoubtful achievement was the directing of the scholars' attention towards the essential weakness of those aesthetic theories according to which the *raison d'être* of art was found only in its service to some chosen cultural values. It was not infrequent that the values which apparently were to justify the existence of art became outdated, while art continued to exist. A typical example of such an *aesthetic ideology*, in which historically and culturally determined convictions about the mission of art were raised to scientific status and, hence, to the rank of a universal theory, may be found, for instance, in a treatise by Leo Tolstoy, *What Is Art?*, published at the end of the previous century, an anachronistic attempt to give back a religious *sacrum* to art. But Ortega's essay also had an *ideological* function since it attempted to base the values of art on an aesthetic *sacrum*. The transformations that took place at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of this century in the understanding of the place of

¹ K. Jeleński: *O kilku sprzecznościach sztuki nowoczesnej (On some contradictions in modern art)* [in:] *Zbiegi okoliczności (Coincidents)*, Kraków 1981, vol. 1, p. 172.

art in the hierarchy of human interests and activities, were described by the Spanish philosopher as *the a-transcendentality of art*² (the avant-garde artists ceased to regard art as a supreme social mission, comparable with that of a prophet or statesman and responsible for the fate of the world, and they concentrated on purely artistic values of art); according to him, those transformations foretold a new aesthetic sensibility, which was just being born and which was to characterize the future cultural elite.

As described by Ortega y Gasset, the process of the *dehumanization of art* was perhaps most evident in the domain of plastic arts. It was precisely this direction that was followed by the Dadaists who, according to many scholars, rightly deserve the name of precursors of the avant-garde movements of today. Especially the Dada collage was to prove most significant for the subsequent evolution of modern art. Since that time what counts in art most are inventiveness and ingenuity rather than so-called mastery (*métier*). The work of art is being deprived of the last traces of the so-called formal personality: the choice of a particular artistic technique and a specific manner of shaping the form of an object become incidental matters. Further development of European painting illustrates subsequent stages of the artists getting rid of the subject, canvas, and paint. Ultimately, at the end of this journey, there remains only an existential gesture which is to evidence merely the artist's intention and to help him discover his own identity. One may therefore say that "the present-day crisis in painting is paradoxically connected with the artists' understanding of *what is painting*"³. Since the artists had finally realized that the essence of painting lies in an appropriate arrangement of space and colour and the play of plastic forms, then there naturally arose a corollary question about a reason for the continuation of the exhausting psychological, or historical and philosophical search for moral, religious, or political ideas, if the desired aesthetic effect could be achieved directly. Along with the growing tendency towards the autonomy of art, the focus of attention was gradually shifted away from the work of art itself to the creative process. "The painter, if he can still be called so, is no longer connected with his picture by some mysterious, physical relation, analogical to that of giving birth. But out of this negation there arises an affirmative idea, that is, a personalization of the function of selection."⁴

Thus, the internal logic of development in art led to the rejection of those values which, even for classical avant-garde trends, had been constitutive of art, i.e., of aesthetic values. It was so at least in the consciousness of the creators themselves as expressed in their manifestoes. Acts of the re-evaluation of tradition, which had so far been an integral part of the tradition (the Futurist or Dada rebellion against *old* art was, in spite of everything, still within the domain of art), became acts of a total negation of art in the middle of the 'fifties and at the beginning of the 'sixties of this century. The very cultural necessity of art was then questioned as well as all the former functions which, in the opinions of the artists, co-operated in the creation of the nature of art. It was an ambition of the avant-garde creator to blur all the borders between art and life, to form

² J. Ortega y Gasset: *Dehumanizacja sztuki i inne eseje (Dehumanization of Art and Other Essays)*, Warszawa 1980, p. 318–321.

³ Jeleński: *op. cit.*, p. 172.

⁴ L. Aragon: *Peinture au Défi*, 1930. Quoted after Jeleński: *op. cit.*, p. 173.

directly the matter of life, to affect reality by shaping the material surroundings of man or by organizing human behaviour. In these activities traditional aesthetic values proved completely useless or even harmful. In the beliefs of the new avant-garde artists. A "beautiful" form merely creates a distance between man and the world presented in the work of art, while the emotions provoked are like the effects of a drug, in that man's desires and aspirations are discharged into the world of illusion instead of the real world.

Nevertheless, the point is that modern avant-garde has been unable, or has not known how, to realize consistently this program of the demystification of traditional art and to unite artistic creation with life. It turns out that there are still two mutually opposed tendencies in modern art.

One of them consists in raising life above art and, hence, without any limits or inhibitions, uniting life with art and blurring all distinctions between them as well as, consequently, the distinctions between various kinds of art, so that through such concepts as the assemblage, Happening, and Environmental Art, they offer new, original proposals of the integration of arts. The other tendency is characterized by a more formalist attitude and, one could even say, it comes close to the convention of *l'art pour l'art*, at least as a starting point and in the sense that art results from art and not from life. This tendency would include primarily the creation of abstract painters who, at least as far as some American artists are concerned, refer in a sense to the chromatic abstractionism of the 'forties and 'fifties: one should mention here both "visual" artists and representatives of *hard-edge* painting, the latter denoting a new kind of abstraction with sharp, hard contours, characteristic of the second half of the 'sixties: mention should also be made of the *Minimal Art*.⁵

In this perspective history of modern art may be perceived as a continuous confrontation between these two opposed conceptions of artistic creation. The constant tensions between them, their mutual attraction and repulsion, constitute the driving forces in the development of modern art. Thus, for instance, the Pop-Art, a movement clearly belonging to the tendency connected with life and which "was to be a reaction against excessive romanticism and isolationism, against the whole metaphysical character of abstract expressionism,"⁶ did not in reality escape aestheticism. As this example indicates, the confrontation between the two tendencies in art often takes place within the same trend. It may easily be observed even in the case of Hyper-realism. Created with the acceptance of the world, this trend finally had to resign deeper socio-critical attitudes for the sake of seeking another unusual reality hidden under the surface of phenomena: at the same time, other representatives of Hyper-realism made their creation merely *an occasion for art*. The Hyper-realists created new Formalism and, simultaneously a new concept of a special 'meta-art', thus moving towards Conceptualism rather than the traditionally understood realism or naturalism.⁷

A similar evolution may also be traced in the case of the Happening which originated from the same tendency as the Pop-Art. The creators of happenings tried to abolish the borders between art and life. They were convinced that the traditional, professional art (including classical avant-garde) was unable to affect life. Closed within the domain of aesthetic values it did not sufficiently mobilize critical attitudes towards social reality. Hence, many activities of the Happening artists had the character of dissension and they contained elements of sociopolitical criticism as well as of a provocation concerning

⁵ P. Krakowski: *O sztuce nowej i najnowszej (On New and Newest Art)*, Warszawa 1981, p. 9.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

manners and morals. Nevertheless, ultimately in all undertakings of this kind the element of spectacle was gradually becoming concerned, refer in a sense to the chromatic abstractionism of the 'forties and began to acquire characteristics increasingly similar to a special kind of theatre, a development confirmed by the artists themselves who willingly applied the term 'theatre' to them.⁸

In this way, if the early happenings at the beginning of the 'sixties, derived from the assemblage and Environmental Art, and aiming at bringing art closer to life, then the 'performance' from the middle 'seventies was characterized by striving for aesthetic effects.

Happening loses its immediacy and spontaneity, its improvised and unrepeatable character. *Performance* ceases to be an aim in itself and becomes a means, another artistic medium, one of several possibilities of artistic expression. This leads to an analytical attitude and to a presentation of certain conceptions in a reflective rather than spontaneous manner. In this way the ideological assumptions based on the *art - life* relation become subdued.⁹

All this seems to indicate that, contrary to the declarations of some new avant-garde artists proclaiming the *abolition* of artistic values, these values are still present in artistic practice in one way or another. Likewise, the phenomenon of aesthetic experience was not to be eliminated, either. The activities of the new avant-garde artists resulted not so much in an *abolition* of art as a separate domain of culture or in the elimination of aesthetic values and experience from art, as in widening the range of these concepts. It does not mean that the scope of the achieved transformations can be precisely determined today. Yet, one thing at least seems certain: the most recent art has liberated itself from the authority of classical beauty, that is, beauty based on harmony, rhythm, symmetry, and proportion. In the art of today the so-called *mild* aesthetic values give way to sharp, disharmonious, and dissonant values. The situation is similar in respect to aesthetic experience: instead of evoking consoling emotions and admiration, modern art aims at provoking strong agitation, often approaching shocks.¹⁰

Therefore, the disintegration of classical forms in modern art does not mean a total negation of form or of the human sense in art. Each new vision of the world and each change of man's attitude towards life produce a substitution of some forms by others in art. The same reasons which make us believe that human spirit will go on developing forbid us to think that art may ever *freeze* into *ready-made* forms established for good. Thus, one cannot accept H. Read's claim that the decline of classical forms in art (the author of *The Philosophy of Modern Art* meant primarily the art informal, action-painting, and Pop-Art) was identical with a refusal to evaluate the world by the artist and constituted a manifestation of modern barbarity and ethical nihilism.

Naturally, to complete the picture, the periphery of modern avant-garde does reveal a tendency to abolish all form or a desire to annihilate form as such.

The art of the 20th century, especially of its second half, is often barren, empty, and boring, because its battle against the Form and its attempts to liberate itself from Form do not constitute an expression of new, original ways of looking at man and the world, nor do they lead to a discovery of

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 64-65.

¹⁰ The distinction between mild and sharp aesthetic values and their corresponding aesthetic experiences has been introduced by M. Wallis. Cf. M. Wallis: *Przeżycie i wartość (pisma z estetyki i nauki o sztuce 1931-1949)* (*Experience and Value. Writings in Aesthetics and Science of Art 1931-1949*), Kraków 1968, p. 185-210.

a new *essence* of man. They are but liberating art from art itself and from the possibility of characterizing man and the world in a synthetic and symbolical manner.¹¹

Such art is truly dehumanized since it has nothing to offer and does not enrich our knowledge of ourselves, of the world, and of our condition in the world. The art which pushes the degradation of form to the utmost achieves its ideal, that is, its unification with nature, but at the same time it loses its humane aspect and ceases to be needed by anybody.

Yet, at this point we enter the domain of evaluating the phenomena in modern art. From the point of view of certain humanistic ideals, the evaluation of art was fully justified when art was regarded as a specific *generator* of *life values* while the aesthetic merits of a work of art were seen as playing the role of a carrier of the desired moral, political, or religious ideas. But even then, when evaluating the importance of particular social ideas for art, besides their qualitative aspect and the degree of progressive or reactionary character, it was required to take into account also such features as unity, coherence, internal integration, that is, characteristics which exert direct influence on the structural qualities of a work of art. Even classical avant-garde, breaking the mimetic rule or the principle of reproducing life in the forms of life itself, did not give up the expression of *human* content. Ortega was quite right when, virtually contradicting his thesis about the *dehumanization* of the new art, he saw a chance of saving *the magic power* of art in self-irony. Regardless of the articulated intentions of particular creators of classical avant-garde, their struggle for new forms was simultaneously an attempt to find an expression for a new *human* content and new ways of reacting to the world. Still, do we have the right to apply the same *humanistic* criteria of evaluation to the most recent avant-garde which consciously questions all the former social functions of art? Would it not be a misunderstanding to evaluate the works of the new avant-garde from the point of view of formal purposefulness, if the most radical representatives of the new avant-garde reject form as a determinant of art?

The problem of the evaluation criteria for the new avant-garde events, actions, and manifestations, still remains an open question. Students of the new avant-garde phenomena seem to be generally convinced that it is impossible to apply any constant, commonly binding measures of values; anyway, one can hardly accept novelty as such a criterion.

We all know perfectly well, S. Morawski, states: that the search for something 'absolutely new' at any price has become a tradition in our times and a sort of humbug. As in the rhythms of fashions, one *-ism* follows another, and the greater a revelation we expect in something pretending to be quite fresh, the more acute our disappointment is bound to be. There are no and cannot be any artistic phenomena without some roots. And, what is most important, even the latest work, of such existed, need not at all have to be the most interesting or inspiring one within the avant-garde and, in any case, it does not automatically cancel what succeeded to consolidate itself only yesterday and the day before yesterday.¹² A similar opinion has been pronounced by K. Jeleński who stated that.

¹¹ H. Skolimowski: *Antynomie formy w sztuce współczesnej (The antinomies of form in modern art)* "Studia Estetyczne", vol. IX, Warszawa 1972, p. 28. Cf. also his *Dezintegracja formy w sztuce współczesnej (The disintegration of form in modern art)*, "Studia Estetyczne", vol. XII: 1975.

¹² S. Morawski: *Pułapki i dylematy neoawangardy (na marginesie pewnej wystawy) The traps and dilemmas of the new avant-garde. Concerning a certain exhibition*, "Sztuka", vol. 5:1978, no. 3, p. 57.

The dogma of the revolutionary nature of modern art and the uncertainty about its application seems to me to be one of the main ailments of the art of today.¹³

It seems that the only criterion that could cover all the manifestations of the modern avant-garde and, at the same time, be acceptable to a majority of the new avant-garde artists, is the criterion of creativity. In addition, if one treats seriously the assertions of some new avant-garde practitioners that in their activities there is no place to apply such categories as artistic form, expression of personality, mimesis, or catharsis, then the category of creativity (regardless of all its indeterminacy) would remain the only link between art and post-art in the consciousness of these artists. For the time being, the application of this criterion encounters a serious obstacle in the fact that creative act is understood in a normative way by the new avant-garde representatives of the anti-art trend, that is, an action is regarded as creative only when it facilitates the realization of extra-artistic values approved of by the artist. The creative attitude is therefore identified with a revolutionary activity in the domain of politics for some artists: for others, authentic creation is a stimulation of imagination and an overcoming of the stereotypes of thought and experience; still others understand by creation all non-alienating activities, a constant push towards self-realization, and expansion of the range of human freedom.¹⁴

Perhaps it would be possible to overcome the difficulties mentioned above. After all, the various explications of the same term could be reduced to a common formulation, namely, that creative are those works and *actions* which widen the horizons of a given cultural system of civilization and which expose the dangers posed by contemporary technological civilization and *mass society* to man. In this perspective the new avant-garde could be interpreted as a specific *superstructure* of modern industrial civilization and a form of reaction on the part of young intelligentsia to the crisis phenomena which accompany mass society of the industrial age. It seems that precisely in this way it will be easier to discover not only the subjective motives of the attempts of some creators (though they are also significant to a scholar) but also some general tendencies in the development of artistic culture, as well as to reveal an objective sense in the undertakings initiated by the most recent avant-garde.

It will not be difficult to notice that such an approach comes close to the methodological principles of Marxism. Thus, it will not be surprising that, when considering the phenomena of the *avant-garde*, the suggestions to take into account not only the *aesthetic logic* of evolution in art but also the *social logic* of development, appeared first in Marxist studies, especially in some analyses by Leo Trotzky and Anatol Lunatcharsky.

For instance, according to Trotzky the Futurist revolt directed against the accepted art was primarily determined by reasons of the competitive fight in the artistic circles. The violent protest of the Futurists was "a rebellion of the Bohemia, that is, of the left, half-pauperized wing of the intelligentsia against the hermetic aesthetics of

¹³ J e l e ń s k i: *op. cit.*, p. 177.

¹⁴ A detailed analysis of various understandings of the concepts "artist" and "creation" by the new avant-garde representatives has been carried out by Morawski. Cf. S. M o r a w s k i, *Na zakręcie (On the turning point)*, "Sztuka", vol. 5: 1978, no. 44.

bourgeoisie intelligentsia."¹⁵ We should not be misled, Trotzky warns, by the extreme revolutionary phraseology about society and manners or by the nihilistic attitude towards the whole preceding artistic tradition. In fact, the battle was fought to abolish the dictatorship of the *mandarins* in art and to introduce the monopoly of the Futurism as allegedly the only art truly modern. It was to win for the Futurists an appropriate status in artistic life and to ensure formal acknowledgement by the cultural institutions of the bourgeoisie, a lasting place in the handbooks of art history etc.

The author of *Literature and Revolution* rejects the aspirations of Russian Futurists to spiritual leadership in the socialist revolution and he questions the *proletariat* character of the Futurism, though he does not negate the artistic (and, more widely, cultural) achievements of this trend. Seeking their own identity as a generation in relation to the *official* art, the Futurists appealed to a new artistic sensibility that was only being born and new ideals of beauty. It was precisely that factor that decided about the durability of the Futurism and made it play an important role in the process of cultural transformations. In Trotzky's opinion, the undeniable contribution of the Futurism was the acceleration of the process of the re-evaluation of traditional aesthetic conceptions. The Futurists formal experiments in plastic arts helped to demolish a wall between art and life, between artistic beauty and applied beauty. Thanks to them, there now occurred a possibility to take advantage of the technical experience of the Futurists for the needs of the industry and to apply the methods of plastic organization of materials which they invented to industrial production. In turn, the verbal inventiveness of Futurist poetry exerted a strong influence on the process of *the re-evaluation of language* and contributed to the *supplementation of the inventory of living speech*, typical of the 20th-century city culture.

The idea which is underlying Trotzky's comments about the Futurism seems to be his conviction that the art of the beginning of the 20th century was a positive response to the challenge posed to the artist by modern civilization while its objective cultural function was an attempt to re-orient the society's aesthetic awareness in such a way that it became a factor adding a dynamic impulse to further development of material and spiritual culture. Undoubtedly, a similar explanation of the genesis and function of the *avant-garde* is closer to truth than Plechanov's doctrinal conception that *Formalist* art constituted merely a product of the decline of bourgeoisie culture and that it played a servile role to the interests of the bourgeoisie since it did not contribute to the recognition of the system of social forces and did not reveal the real tendencies of historical development. For Plechanov the artist's resignation from the realistic reproduction of social life was identical with his refusal to become involved on the side of the proletariat in their fight against the bourgeoisie. The author of *Letters Without Addresses* seemed convinced that the Futurist art was always a way of escaping from reality and arose from a discrepancy between the artist and his social environment, between the artist and the political authority. Because of Plechanov's conviction that socialism will totally eliminate the possibility of such discrepancy, in socialist society the *art for art's sake* will lose all justification of

¹⁵ L. Trotzky: *Literatura i rewolucja (Literature and Revolution)*, Moskwa 1923, p. 102. Trotzky's remarks concern mainly the Russian Futurism but their significance seems to be wider.

existence.¹⁶ Thus, if for Plechanov *pure* art was a form of the artist's refusal to become openly involved on the side of the bourgeoisie and a manifestation of a protest against imposing on art bourgeoisie content, then for Trotzky it was rather an expression of creative intelligentsia becoming reconciled with the capitalist social order and attempting to adjust themselves to the changes in the civilization and even to direct them.

The myth of art as a forerunner of technological paradise, so vivid at the beginning of our century, has been subjected to severe verification by history. Already World War I showed that the achievements of technology could be not only beneficial to mankind but also tools of genocide on a mass scale. And it soon became clear that *mass societies*, regardless of the ideological differences between them, constituted an equal threat to human personality. In both technocratic and totalitarian systems an ideal is found in a uniform, conforming person, a passive consumer of industrial goods and pliable material for political *processing*. Thus, sooner or later, there had to occur a discord between the artist and the society, between the artist and the political authority, although this state of affairs by no means supported Plechanov's thesis. Art turned now against mass society and assumed the function of a defender of values threatened by anonymous social forces. Seen in this perspective, such trends, for instance, as Surrealism and abstract expressionism created after World War II, would not be a masked defense of the bourgeoisie but rather "the last violent attempt to retain freedom in its ultimate, essential fortress of instinct, autonomy of dream, subconsciousness."¹⁷

Many trends in the most recent "avant-garde" also derive their motivation from a mission to overcome all forms of alienation in the modern world. In this respect, too, they continue the humanistic tradition of "the great art", negating their own programs in this way. But parallelly there is a trend represented by artists reconciled with the industrial civilization and creators who feel at home in the world of computer technology and mass media. As S. Morawski rightly indicates, the common feature in this trend includes various forms of machine mythicization and preference of practical, instrumental values.¹⁸ Sometimes it happens, the critic writes, that young artists in the West make use of the most advanced technology for open attacks on the social order but such attitudes are still quite rare in these circles. Artists-technicians seem to reveal rather a fascination with the opportunities provided by modern technology. Electronics, television, and laser techniques are treated, first of all, as a pretext for a carefree play or a possibility to manifest one's own ingenuity. Needless to add, such an attitude hides numerous traps. The unequivocal approval of the reality containing so many unknowns does not seem to reveal too great a discernment of artists-technicians.

The existence of the two opposed trends in the *avant-garde* of today, that is, the trend of dissent which concentrates on the defence of the values of human individual, and an affirmative trend which identifies itself with technological civilization,¹⁹ reveals

¹⁶ G. W. Plechanov: *Iskustwa i obszczestwiennaja żyżn* [in:] *Izbrannyje fitosofskije proizwiedienija*, vol. V, Moskwa 1958, p. 741.

¹⁷ Jeleński: *op. cit.*, p. 179.

¹⁸ Morawski: *Pułapki i dylematy neoawangardy*, p. 59.

¹⁹ Some scholars additionally employ the term rationalistic trend to denote the affirmative tendency and the irrationalistic trend for the trend of dissent. Cf. Krakowski: *op. cit.*, p. 188.

a deep split in modern collective consciousness. An analogical split was also reflected in the classical avant-garde, although it did not appear so dramatic as today. In the light of the above considerations, the constant rushing of the new avant-garde between myth of the machine and the myth of privacy²⁰, between hope inspired by modern technology and scientific organization of society and the fear of becoming dependent on them, may be interpreted as an expression of the dilemmas confronting modern man and as an evidence of the social moods which predominate today. It would be difficult to speculate which of these tendencies may win; only the future may bring a solution to the dilemma. For this reason we can hardly demand an exhaustive answer to this question from the artists of the new avant-garde. But we do have a right to expect from them at least clearly formulated basic questions which face humanity today or rationalizations of the anxieties and an open expression of the doubts of modern man. If the new avant-garde is to retain its honorable name, it should become a self-consciousness of modern culture instead of being merely a factor which only deepens axiological confusion.

Meanwhile, many students of the most recent art pay much attention to the ambiguity typical of both the social situation of the new avant-garde artists (the creators challenging their social systems and at the same time taking advantage of all the opportunities offered by the systems to gain success and material profits) and the practice of the new avant-garde art. As far as the ambivalent character of the new avant-garde practice is concerned, it is revealed as much in the attitude of the artists towards artistic tradition²¹ as in the world views and ideology formulated by them. Since the very beginning of the 20th century the avant-garde artists have proposed slogans of breaking with the tradition of the *official* art or even demanded the elimination of art as such. One of the paradoxes of the avant-garde is the fact that such revolutionary demands have usually led to the formation of new artistic trends, each of which pretended to be the only modern and durable art. Thus, in modern art a kind of *the tradition of revolution* (K. Jeleński) has become established. The conviction of many avant-garde creators that experiments in the field of artistic form prepare ground for socio-political revolutions have turned out to be an illusion. What the critics favouring the avant-garde call the contradictoriness or perversity of modern art (it is to consist, among others, in the fact that under apparent acceptance of reality the avant-garde actually displays rebellious, ironic, or mocking attitudes) may equally well mean inconsistency or unwillingness to take a definite axiological stand. It is not quite clear, for instance, how much detachment, irony, or rebellion against the bourgeoisie ethos and how many remnants of the burger's love of things are hidden in the products of this kind of the modern avant-garde which utilizes objects found in *the junk yard of civilization*.²²

and J. Białostocki: *Refleksje i syntezy ze świata sztuki (Reflections and Syntheses on Art)*, Warszawa 1978, p. 207.

²⁰ Morawski: *Pułapki i dylematy neoawangardy*, p. 57.

²¹ This problem has been presented in greater detail by Morawski in his article *Na zakręcie*. Comp. also Morawski: *O krytycznym stanie estetyki (On the Critical State of Aesthetics)*, "Miesięcznik Literacki" 1981, no. 10, p. 51.

²² On this subject comp. Morawski: *Pułapki i dylematy neoawangardy*, p. 59.

Analogical doubts are also raised by the practice of the Pop—Art or Hyper—Realism. Does the reference to stereotypes of collective consciousness, use of ready-made elements taken over from the iconography of mass society, really aim only at mocking the consumer life style and placing mass culture in ironic *quotation marks*? At any rate, the question seems fully justified in relation to the American variety of the Pop—Art:

Having crossed the barrier of conventionality and being restricted mainly to imitation, the Pop—Art in the United States (with the exception of Rauschenberg) moved almost to self-identification with mass culture, unintentionally becoming its component. Today it is no longer certain whether Lichtenstein took out of context a fragment of a comic-strip and blew it up to gigantic dimensions or whether the comic-strip was a diminution of Lichtenstein's picture. Shaped under different conditions, the British variety of the Pop—Art has never crossed that subtle border.²³

A thorough analysis of the axiological significance of particular new avant-garde trends is beyond the scope of the present paper, the more so, that its creators have not yet said their last word in this field. Quite a different problem is the question of the evaluation of the effectiveness of the actions undertaken by various new avant-garde artists and the social response to these actions. The desire to save such values as directness, spontaneity, freedom, creativity, individuality etc. deserves all respect. Yet, it does not change the fact that the sphere of the new avant-garde activities is relatively restricted. Actually, the new avant-garde manifestations play their liberating role only in respect to the creators themselves. Should one turn this into an objection against them? The situation in which the values mentioned above may be realized only by few individuals who enjoy the special status of artists-creators certainly reveals an isolation of many avant-garde creators, but is it not, at the same time, an emphatic accusation of the system in which they have to act?

The elite character of many new avant-garde activities (illustrative examples are readily available in the Happening or Conceptual Art) also indicates a conclusion that it would be premature to speak of the approaching death of traditional art or its redundancy in modern culture. Still, the consolidation of the new avant-garde will undoubtedly cause qualitative transformations in the system of the sense of art and its social mission. This is also true about the situation of art in Poland, although the new avant-garde in this country does not find such favourable conditions of development as that in highly developed Western societies where conflicts caused by industrial civilization have become much more acute. It does not mean, however, that our creators play no role in the artistic avant-garde of the world and merely take over, transform, and interpret what has previously been demonstrated by Western artists.²⁴ It should be admitted that we have not yet experienced too many benefits of industrial civilization, still, its negative aspects have already revealed themselves in the destruction of natural environment or dehumanization of interhuman relationships. The development of the mass media has contributed to the popularization of cultural values but it has also introduced a temptation to manipulate social consciousness. Within the last decade mass culture, also in the negative sense of the

²³ A. Rottenberg: *Szczelina między sztuką a życiem (The gap between art and life)*, "Kultura" 1981, no. 47, p.11.

²⁴ Such an opinion is pronounced by Krakowski (*op. cit.*, pp. 7–8). Abundant documentation of the achievements of Polish avant-garde may be found in a book by A. Kępińska: *Nowa sztuka polska w latach 1945–1978 (The Polish New Art in the Years 1945–1978)*, Warszawa 1981.

term, has become an accomplished fact and the avant-garde, if it is to be worthy of its name, must take some attitude toward it. Thus, it seems that the importance of the new avant-garde in our culture will increase in time and, in consequence, sooner or later it will cause a re-evaluation of our present opinions about the cultural mission of art. In particular, one should expect a rejection of the romantic convictions about the special role of the artist-priest, as well as of theories of more recent origin, finding the sense of art in its subordination to *pure* form.

If art is to retain its cultural function of regulating the relationships between the individual and society, it should give up its posture of the teacher of life wisdom and reconsider the idea that it represents nothing but itself and realizes no values but self-centered values. For the main task of the artist is a clear articulation of those subjects of collective consciousness (or rather subconsciousness) that are only vaguely sensed or that are only being formed. It is true that a distinguished artist does not limit himself to the expression of fears, anxieties, longings, and hopes of his society, but he also enriches the spiritual life of his society with new ideas, points out new goals, and mobilizes social energy for new tasks. Yet, he should always bear in mind the fact that the success of his mission is conditioned by leaving some freedom of axiological decisions to the *addressee* of cultural operations.

What makes the art recipient get in touch with works of art is quite a *natural* impulse, though not always conscious, to desire a reconciliation of individual aspirations and demands with, or a harmony between his own needs, and those of the community to which he belongs and feels psychologically bound. But this is only one side of the phenomenon. An equally significant motive for the activity of the art recipient (and in modern civilization the significance of this particular motive seems to be growing) is a desire to manifest his own individuality through the choice of this or that form of participating in artistic life and through an expression of his approval of certain aesthetic and social values realized by art. The greater variety is there within a given artistic culture, the more numerous possibilities of similar manifestations are provided for the individual, the stronger is his attachment to this culture and its ultimate result, stronger ties with the community.

As can be noticed in the above considerations, an optimal state of artistic culture is that of a relative equilibrium between the socializing tendency and individualizing tendency. In such a situation, artistic activity has then two strictly interconnected functions; on the one hand, it leads to the consolidation of the *inherited* values, cementing the community on a given stage of its development, and, on the other — it evokes in the recipients a hunger for new values and initiates independent efforts aimed at achieving ideals desirable from the point of view of far-reaching social interests. Both tendencies, socializing and individualizing, mutually complement each other. Only their co-occurrence conditions the stability, as well as elasticity, of a given culture. The stronger is the sense of identity of individuals constituting a given community with the system of values acknowledged within it, the greater is their activity directed at creating new values and the greater are the resources of the vital forces of the society and its ability of modification.

The conclusions which the above remarks imply do not aspire to particular inventiveness or originality. Today it does not seem necessary to persuade anybody that

modern art is something more than merely a *destructive factor* or a symptom of the disintegration of contemporary culture. If, in spite of all, such opinions are still occasionally heard (what is most surprising, such objections often come from circles of opposed ideologies and world views), then they must partly be caused by the misunderstanding of the real intentions of the new avant-garde and they partly result from the inability to accept those values which are approved of by the new avant-garde. Thus, the accusations of *dehumanization, de-ideologization, contempt for values sanctified by tradition, "escape from reality"* etc., directed at the new art, actually constitute in themselves a symptom of a deep axiological antagonism which splits the modern world. And it is precisely the fact that controversies about the shape of modern art are so strangely connected with ideological and world view convictions of the critics, that constitutes a cause of the discrepancy in the evaluation of the importance of the avant-garde. Obviously, a theorist has every right to express his own judgements, moral, political etc.: additionally, he is justified in this by the declarations of the new avant-garde creators rejecting aesthetic values; yet, he should do it in a way which observes the rigours of science, that is, without confusing description and analysis with evaluation.

Regardless of the actual evaluation of the achievements of the avant-garde, one cannot negate the fact that they emphatically reflect our extremely complex, confused reality, full of dramatic conflicts. The new avant-garde constitutes a most sensitive instrument recording the ailments of the contemporary system of culture and civilization. In this respect, even illusions, inconsistencies, and mistakes of young avant-garde creators acquire the value of documents of our times.

As has already been emphasized above, one should not overestimate the influence of the avant-garde on the social order, convictions, and attitudes of the people. Even if the avant-garde (both old and young) were not an elite movement,²⁵ still the main sources of change in culture and civilization lie elsewhere. The only domain in which the activities of the new avant-garde have a chance to play a significant role is the sphere of widely understood artistic culture. Criticism by the new avant-garde creators of both *pure art*, closing itself in the reservation of autonomous forms, and of the art subordinated to extra-artistic *ideologies*, will undoubtedly contribute to a de-mystification of many convictions, outdated today, about the cultural mission of art. Perhaps the future does belong to the new avant-garde and *traditional art* (both mimetic and nonmimetic) will die a natural death. However, for the time being, nothing seems to indicate that this will take place in the nearest future.

Translated by Leszek S. Kolek

²⁵ The elite character of the Happening and Conceptualism has already been mentioned, but, in a sense, should not the same be said about the trend which in its very name aspires to mass appeal, i.e. the Pop-Art? At any rate, some theorists are of the opinion that the label of the Pop-Art is misleading and the trend is far from being popular (Cf. e.g. H. R e a d : *O pochodzeniu formy w sztuce (The Origins of Form in Art)* Warszawa 1973, p. 171). An original stand is assumed by Jeleński, who regards the Pop-Art as "an authentic and witty form of socialist realism and as a proof of the deep crisis experienced by art" (J e l e Ń s k i : *op. cit.*, p. 180). His opinion, however, seems to be based on a misunderstanding, since socialist realism has never been a popular art.

STRESZCZENIE

Artykuł zawiera próbę analizy kulturowych i cywilizacyjnych dylematów najnowszej awangardy artystycznej. Według autora, zasadniczym faktem wyznaczającym położenie awangardy w systemie współczesnej kultury jest jej stosunek do tradycji artystycznej. Neoawangardyści nie ograniczają się do odrzucenia „starej”, „akademickiej” sztuki, lecz dowodzą zbędności sztuki we współczesnym układzie kulturowym, kwestionują wszystkie dotychczasowe funkcje sztuki, w tym także funkcję estetyczną. Ambicją dzisiejszej awangardy jest unicestwienie wszelkich granic między sztuką i życiem, bezpośrednie kształtowanie materii życia. Okazuje się jednak, iż neoawangardyści nie są w stanie zrealizować w sposób konsekwentny programu demystyfikacji sztuki tradycyjnej i zespolenia twórczości artystycznej z życiem. Nie jest to sprawa przypadku: całkowite uwolnienie się sztuki od formy byłoby równoznaczne z zaprzeczeniem ludzkiego sensu sztuki.

Walka o nowe formy w sztuce jest zawsze próbą znalezienia wyrazu dla nowych treści „Judzkich”, odzwierciedla zmianę postaw człowieka wobec życia. Zaproponowany przez autora schemat ewolucji (czy raczej: inwolucji) sztuki (od sztuki tradycyjnej, wkładającej wartości społeczno-kulturowe w „piękną” formę dzieła sztuki, do sztuki eksponującej wartości czysto estetyczne, a stąd do działalności bezpośrednio zaangażowanej w proces przeobrażania świata) nie tłumaczy jednak wszystkich perypetii współczesnej awangardy. Obraz stanie się pełniejszy, jeśli na fenomen awangardyzmu spojrzymy nie tylko z punktu widzenia immanentnej logiki rozwoju sztuki, lecz również z punktu widzenia logiki ewolucji współczesnej cywilizacji. W tej perspektywie neoawangarda może być zinterpretowana jako swoista „nadbudowa” dzisiejszej technologicznej cywilizacji, jako forma krytycznej reakcji pewnej części młodej inteligencji twórczej na kryzysowe zjawiska towarzyszące masowemu społeczeństwu ery industrialnej, bądź jako wyraz aprobaty dla zachodzących obecnie procesów cywilizacyjnych. Pod tym względem praktyka neoawangardy również nie jest wolna od niekonsekwencji czy sprzeczności.

W zakończeniu artykułu autor formułuje pewne wnioski na temat wpływu neoawangardy na całokształt kultury artystycznej społeczeństwa, stara się naszkicować optymalny model takiej kultury. Według autora, w przyszłości nie zmaleje bynajmniej znaczenie homeostatycznej funkcji sztuki: sztuka nadal pozostanie unikalnym narzędziem przywracania zakłóconej równowagi kulturowej.

РЕЗЮМЕ

В данной работе автор попытался провести анализ культурных и цивилизаторских дилемм артистического авангарда. Автор считает, что самым существенным фактом определяющим состояние авангарда в системе современной культуры является его отношение к артистической традиции. Неоавангардисты не удовлетворяются отвержением „старого, академического” искусства, но также доказывают ненужность искусства в современной культурной системе, ослабивая все существующие до сих пор функции искусства, а особенно эстетическую функцию. Современный авангард, стремящийся уничтожить всякие границы на материю жизни. Оказывается, что неоавангардисты не в состоянии найти существующие между искусством а жизнью, старается непосредственно последовательно реализовать программу демистификации традиционного искусства и соединения художественного творчества с жизнью. Не случайно, что полное освобождение искусства от формы было бы равнозначно с отрицанием человеческого смысла жизни. Борьба за новые формы в искусстве является попыткой отыскания выражения для новых „человеческих” содержаний; она отражает изменения в отношении человека к жизни. Предлагаемая автором схема эволюции (или инволюции) искусства от традиционного искусства, вкладывающего общественно-культурные значения в „красивую” форму произведе-

дения искусства к искусству экспонирующему чисто эстетические значения, и дальше к деятельности, непосредственно связанной с процессом преобразования мира) не объясняет однако всех предприятий современного авангарда. Картина будет более полной, если на феномен авангардизма посмотрим не только с позиции имманентной логики развития искусства, но и с позиции логики эволюции современной цивилизации. Учитывая будущее, неоавангард может быть интерпретирован как своеобразная „надстройка“ современной технологической цивилизации, как форма критического отношения некоторой группы молодой творческой интеллигенции к кризисному явлению сопутствующему массовой обществу индустриальной эры или как одобрение выступающих цивилизационных процессов. В этом отношении деятельности неоавангарду не чужды непоследовательность и противоречие. В окончательной части работы автор вносит некоторые предложения на тему влияния неоавангарда на совокупность артистической культуры общества, стараясь начертить оптимальную модель такой культуры. По автору, в будущем не уменьшится значение гомеостатической функции искусства; искусство останется особенным инструментом восстанавливающим культурное равновесие.

