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CONCRETE WROCLAW

concrete

1. existing in a material or physical form
2. specific, definite
3. denoting a material object as opposed to an abstract quality, state, or action

The Concise Oxford Dictionary

Black-and-white, unsentimental Wrocław

The Zachęta Lower Silesian Society for the Encouragement of Fine Arts has for years been following the work of artists connected with Wrocław and Lower Silesia in order to identify all the more interesting trends. Over the years it has led to the emergence of a very complex collection, which presents different currents and tendencies characterising the oeuvre of artists representing many generations.

The title of the current exhibition – *Concrete Wrocław* – in combination with the venue where it is presented – Wrocław Contemporary Museum, whose façade is decorated with a work by Stanisław Dróżdź, one of the most outstanding representatives of concrete poetry – from the very beginning introduces the audience to the history of visual text in Wrocław. Not without reason. In the second half of the previous century, Wrocław became nationally and internationally famous for its dynamic milieu of conceptualists and artists working in concrete poetry. After all, due to its presentation on the façade of the museum, Dróżdź's *Hourglass* has become a symbol of Wrocław art for many of its inhabitants, while the inscription "it was, it is, it will be" has come to signify the continuity of local traditions and the constant development of the local art scene. Thanks to the collection of the Zachęta, this development can be followed year by year.

In the second half of the 1960s Stanisław Dróżdź managed to find a way of using a minimum of form to express a maximum of content by focusing on the expressiveness of a graphic sign devoid of any context. He was followed by other artists fascinated by the visual aspect of text, who created succinct and formally modest works characterised by intellectual depth. They would describe reality using very few signs, neatly ordered on a piece of paper (Stanisław Dróżdź *equal / not equal*, 1965). At other times, they would resort to more fluid, almost painterly solutions (Eugeniusz Smoliński, *For Your Beautiful Eyes Only*, 1975). There were also instances when the graphic sign burst the two-dimensional surface of paper and annexed the space around it (Barbara Kozłowska, *The Letter Tau*, 1990–1997). The colours black and white came to signify the practice of artists connected with concrete poetry. Meanwhile, Wrocław's avant-garde artists were rarely sentimental enough to dwell on the past, looking back on the German history of the city or its mythical origins dating back to the Polish Piast dynasty. Instead, they were focused on the future, searching for solutions without historical connotations, not only in the visual arts. In 1966, at Jan Chwałczyk's invitation, Jerzy Ludwiński came to Wrocław and established the legendary Mona Lisa Gallery, which would become the venue for presenting the most groundbreaking artistic ideas. It was here that artists such as Jerzy Rosołowicz, Jan Chwałczyk, Wanda Gołkowska or Zbigniew Makarewicz displayed their works. As Ludwiński predicted in a series of theoretical

texts outlining the future development of the visual arts, art became gradually blurred in reality, dematerialised and eventually reached point zero. A vision of art as a pure, immaterial idea came to the fore during the Wrocław '70 Symposium. Among the works featured during the event was Zbigniew Gostomski's *It Begins in Wrocław* (1970), whose very title so forcefully promoted a spirit of advancement that it inspired subsequent generations of art practitioners in Wrocław.¹

Some of the artists influenced by conceptualism decided to use the then new media – photography and film, and thus negated the primacy of form and mastery in favour of the convention of amateur documentation. Reality became their materials of choice (Natalia LL, *Permanent Registration of Time*, 1970; *A Permanent Registration Every 1 km of Motorway E22*, 1970; Andrzej Lachowicz, *Burning Grasses*, 1968, 1970) while the works were deeply rooted in logic, science and theoretical reflection. Art became an object of intellectual analysis. Andrzej Kostołowski in his series of quasi-scientific diagrams outlined the relations existing in the art world and its most important problems (the series *Diagrams*, 1970–2012). Yet others, such as Zdzisław Jurkiewicz, drew on notions derived from geometry and number theory² to penetrate the mystery of infinity (*Frame – 1m2 of Black; Painting – 1m2 of Black*, 1991). Wrocław's tradition of mathematical self-restraint was continued by other artists. In Marcin Harlender's *Portraits (Portrait 1, Portrait 2)*, 2005), the colours black and white make it possible to fully concentrate on the power of expression of geometric, primeval forms – and return to the roots and essence of painting.

A genius of simplicity – this is how Dr Sylwia Świsłocka-Karwot described Drózdź and his oeuvre³. This phrase is equally true about many artists from Wrocław, followers of various trends and representatives of different generations.

Colourful, sentimental Wrocław

The history of Wrocław's art is not painted just in black and white.

Colour played a significant role in works by Wanda Gołkowska, a precursor of many fields of art, including conceptual art (from the series *Blues*, 1976). Barbara Kozłowska, a famous representative of concrete poetry from Wrocław who was active at the same time as Drózdź, and even cooperated with him, in her practice often used different shades of blue. In Maria Michałowska's triptych *Art* (1973), not only the graphic sign but also colour seems to be bursting the canvas and even exceeds the frames, thus presenting a different, more colourful face of Wrocław's conceptualism.

However, a passion for colour characterised primarily the artists who came to the Lower Silesian capital right after the war, especially those grouped around Eugeniusz Geppert, the first post-war rector of the Academy of Fine Arts in Wrocław, as well as the representatives of the subsequent generations remaining under his influence.

In the 1960s Józef Hałas experimented with contrast by creating dynamic and static pictures based on expressive arrangements made with black ink (the series *Representations*, 1967). These were but exercises before he took to monumental pieces, in which not only

¹ In 2008 Rafał Jakubowicz referred to the title of Gostomski's work (*Es Beginnt in Breslau*) while Zbigniew Gostomski's individual exhibition titled *It Begins in Wrocław* inaugurated the functioning of Wrocław Contemporary Museum in 2011.

² S. Świsłocka-Karwot, *Zdzisław Jurkiewicz in Kolekcja 2004–2011* (Collection 2004–2011), edited by D. Monkiewicz, Wrocław, 2012, p. 268.

³ S. Świsłocka-Karwot, *Stanisław Drózdź in Kolekcja 2004–2011*, op. cit., p. 113.

composition, but also colour and the very matter of the work would become central to his explorations.

Jan Chwałczyk, the driving force behind Wrocław's avant-garde milieu, one of the forerunners of mail art and an active practitioner of conceptual art, eventually focused his interest on the notions of light and colour (*Blue Reproducer of Red Hues*, 2004). By making a series of hypnotising objects he situated his practice somewhere between painting, sculpture and kinetic art, while blazing the trail for "integral art"⁴ in Poland.

In the 1980s and 1990s the Wrocław art scene exploded with colour. Zdzisław Nitka ventured toward pure colour and the painting gesture, managing to achieve a maximum of expressiveness in painting to become one of the most recognisable figures in the local milieu.

In the 1980s, the colour and tempo of art in Wrocław was largely dictated by the Luxus group and the artists cooperating with it, who were driven by opposition to the grey reality. This original and creative unrest drew on the energy of subversion, pop art and culture jamming (Jerzy Kosalka, *Cosalca*, 1986; the series of stencils by Paweł Jarodzki, 1988–2008). Although their work stood out against what was dominant at the time, it is still possible to situate their practice in the context of Wrocław's traditions. Art was perceived as an antidote to the ubiquitous dullness of reality already by the members of the Form and Colour Search Group led by Chwałczyk (they shared similar motivations, although their programme and means of expression were very different). The very Luxus-esque desire to play jokes, to turn the existing state of affairs upside down, coupled with the unsophisticated character of their happenings, could be traced back to actions by the "sensibilists" and their leader Kazimierz Głaz.

Artists active in the late 1980s and early 1990s were acute observers of reality and the ongoing economic and political transformations. Their criticism of the greyness of everyday life would eventually turn into an ironic comment about colours that suddenly invaded public spaces (Krzysztof Wałaszek, *Pea, Canary, Nut*, 1994).

The legendary slogan "In Art we Trust", which originally appeared in one of the works by Paweł Jarodzki, could easily be the motto of many artists from Wrocław, who worked in different fields and "epochs" of the local art history.

While artists arriving in Wrocław in the second half of the 20th century perceived the city's German history as a subject beneath the interests of modern artistic thought, the younger generations were more eager to turn the newly-discovered remains of the past, including the architectural heritage of Wrocław, into a source of inspiration (Tomasz Bajer, *Kunstabombe*, 1998; Karolina Freino, *Kaiserpanorama / Panopticon*, 2009). They viewed the traces of old Breslau, which for years had been meticulously erased by the communist authorities, with fascination and a certain degree of sentiment.

Sentimentality in Wrocław art concerned not only history, but also nature. It led some artists to look for new forms of romantic landscapes using thoroughly modern means of expression and a succinct message. Sometimes they would draw upon the traditional medium of painting, but with an avant-garde, abstract twist (Andrzej Dłużniewski, *The Sun II*, 1994). At other times they resorted to new media and novel forms, such as video installation, which

⁴ S. Świsłocka-Karwot, *Sztuka we Wrocławiu w latach 1945–1970. Artyści, dzieła, krytycy* (Art in Wrocław 1945–1970: Artists, works, critics), Wrocław, 2016, p. 209.

blurred the boundaries between the natural and the virtual⁵ (Ryszard Jędroś, *Video-rain*, 1994; Maja Wolińska, *Blurring*, 2009).

In recent years the figure of the artist as a sensitive individual has increasingly often come to the fore in the Zachęta collection. However, even those succumbing to a critical or nostalgic reflection about the world and the human condition still retain extreme accuracy and succinctness in expressing their thoughts.

In Piotr Kmita's series of graphics entitled *The Disasters of Fun* (2011), scenes from the colourful world of cartoons and popular TV programmes are purposefully depicted in black and white. The cycle is permeated with a rather bleak observation about the human nature. A large number of scenes in which violence and brutality become a plaything makes the viewer laugh through tears. The artist synthetically reveals the truth about ourselves.

Krystian Truth Czaplicki (*Untitled [Exhaustion]*, 2008) contrasts the pristine form of the perfect circle with the composition of the work, which reflects human chaos and disorderliness. The subtitle could be interpreted as a metaphor of human existence as such, but it could just as well pertain to the problem of the creativity crisis. Once again, the succinct form of art is used to sum up existential dilemmas, but this time it also reflects the state of the artist's mind.

This somewhat romantic trend, which simultaneously comments on the artist's (or model's) dark subconscious (Olaf Brzeski, *Francis and Hashish*, from the *Orphans* series, 2012) and autobiographical threads (Piotr Skiba, *Sausage Hero*, 2012) while being characterised by a state of intellectual vertigo⁶ (Kama Sokolnicka, *Artificial Fullmoon, The End of Adventure with Representation*, 2009) is typical of works by many Wrocław artists of the young generations.

After all, the collection of the Zachęta Lower Silesian Society for the Encouragement of Fine Arts is a very rich repository of groundbreaking attitudes drawing on different means of expression and numerous sources of inspiration. However, this seemingly inconsistent set of works evolves into a very coherent and carefully thought-over picture of a collection that has been amassed over many years. One of the reasons for this is the fact that the artists selected by the Zachęta have one common denominator – irrespective of the subject, they always succinctly and matter-of-factly convey the message and address the crux of the problem.

⁵ M. Kubik, *Maja Wolińska* in *Kolekcja 2004–2011*, op. cit., p. 557.

⁶ A. Mituś, *Kama Sokolnicka* in *Kolekcja 2004–2011*, op. cit., p. 509.