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The putrescent liver and gilt frames

(Comments on the works by Paweł Kowalewski in connection with two of his exhibits held this year at the Appendix Gallery in Warsaw (March - April) and the Isy Brachot Gallery in Brussels (September - October).

"Whenever I face paintings I always wonder what part of that which has been painted comes from the person and what part reflects the presence of the convention and fashion prevalent at the time..."

A painting appears to be the image of something which has been filtered through a person but why must it also be made artificial with the artificiality of an author constrained not only by fashions or conventions but also by art itself. It is only somewhere deep down inside that we discover... truly human values, the truth about the artisan", Paweł Kowalewski confessed in 1983 in his diploma work symptomatically entitled "Personal, in Other Words, Private Art".

He counterpoised the modernistic interest in the form with an attitude which refers everything to the artist's I by citing such various authors as Gombrowicz, Beuys and Klein. He also postulated the creation of one's own language of artistic expression which eludes the leading aesthetic norms of the period and is an unhampered expression of the human being whose very nature makes him unique and free.

I began this text with a presentation of Paweł Kowalewski's view concerning art, voiced almost ten years ago since, firstly, in a confrontation with the mentioned exhibitions, they still appear to be topical and, secondly, because together with his earlier and more recent works, they situate him, in my estimation, in the current of a postmodernistic revision of twentieth-century art, assuring him a special place in the antiformalistic trend both in reference to Western and Polish art. It is also my opinion that from the end of the 1980's Kowalewski has essentially pursued the art of the "portrait" in which he depicts both himself and a wider group of people' this portrait will never be completed or cohesive since it sublimates different experiences and remains open to changes of "features", so that resembling "work still in progress", it makes indelible precisely that which is heterogeneous and variable.

I have placed the term "portrait" (although obviously the self-portrait is also considered) in quotation marks since in the case of Paweł Kowalewski's works it has nothing in common with the traditional comprehension of a portrait (self-portrait) which observes the rule of the physical similarity of the model to his depiction, although it too permits the interpretation of a portrait as a camouflaged self-portrait.

Actually, physical resemblance, despite a centuries-long heritage, is insignificant for the interpretation of someone's works in the categories of a self-portrait and portrait; the same holds true for the measures applied by the artists or the manner of presenting oneself or someone else. What is truly important is whether it is possible to capture the personal, individual trait of creativity as an outright causative factor, which at present, suggests more "**occasional morphologies**" than canons as the means of expression, a fact which we have been, after all, experiencing for years. In my opinion one might equally well discuss painting, drawing, sculpture, performance, body art, installations and so on.

An attempt at expounding the works of Paweł Kowalewski in the categories of a constant portrayal of himself and his socio-cultural surrounding, calls at least for a provisional solution of the relation between the self-portrait and the autobiography, and, in turn, their relation with the collective portrait and biography. In practice, it is difficult to separate them since individual experiences are determined by a group "**fate**" or "**submerged**" in it, and with the exception of certain particular or rare cases, the individual "**life story**" achieves its distinctness as inherent fragment stratum. That what is perceived as "**one's own**" exists within a framework which is imposed upon individual experience by the biography of a group. On the other hand, each attempt at presenting oneself or one's own place among the others. As a consequence, the biography and the autobiography, the portrait and the self-portrait, constitute a tangle of mutual impacts and relation, difficult to unravel, in which even the distinction between the subjective and the objective becomes blurred. Let us consider Beuys who seems to be a model-like example of an artist creating an untraditionally comprehended self-portrait and portrait. According to his own declaration, as a young man he approved of fascism and, as is well known, during the second world war bombed Soviet territory, where, after an airplane crash, he was saved by his "**enemies**" who used grease and felt cloth. Presumably, this event became for Beuys the most significant human experience which melted his later works, situated them above all ideologies, reduced them to an ethical dimension and turned them into a mission addressed to all of mankind. Grease and felt cloth in Beuys' compositions probably became the foremost means for making a statement and into symbols of solidarity involving the humanity as a whole. I maintain that they also comprise a foundation for his belief in the possibility of creating on the "**ruins**" of communism and capitalism, a new social organism, even if in extraterrestrial space... as he claimed in an extensive interview given shortly before his death.

The identification of Beuys' works with concrete elements from his biography is unquestionable, just as the latter constituted itself within the **"biography of a nation"**.

Nonetheless, the axiological shock experienced by the artist irreversibly excluded him from a group which cultivates **"national values"** and endowed him with own features. The fact that Beuys seems to be treated by the Germans as their conscience can probably be the measure of the obscurity of the collective and the individual in a creativity which sublimates the life of the artist.

The work of Paweł Kowalewski, a Polish artist born in 1958, are, in my opinion, an excellent illustration of the various and numerous mutual dependencies between that what is **"personal, in other words, private"** and that what is socio-cultural. Their combination produces a language with which he speaks about himself and his reality. At the exhibition, held at the Appendix Gallery, Kowalewski featured both paintings, including those which are part of the **"fin de siecle"** series inaugurated in 1991, and objects, displayed in glass showcases. All of them, I believe, present the curious nature and incoherence of the Polish socio-cultural **"spectacle"** or **"landscape"** in which the artist matured. Paradoxically, both were shaped, on the one hand, by Catholicism and, on the other hand, by communism and remained in variegated and ambiguous relations with **"class affiliation"** and family tradition as well as with Catholicism itself, cultivated secretly by the **"communists"**. In the case of Paweł Kowalewski, family tradition signifies, presumably, a bourgeois ethos which when confronted with the anti-ethos of communism, becomes a sort of a useless **"souvenir"** of old times, and, similarly to the Catholic ethos, becomes involved in an obvious conflict. What other relation could exist between a crystal ashtray placed on a lace doily or a **"solid"** dinner set and a panelled classroom painted grey and with the state emblem on the wall (the eagle is deprived of the head), or between the latter and an interior decorated with a colorful stencilled design and a copy of the Częstochowa Madonna?

In that other way than **"curious"** and **"incoherent"** could one describe a period which, on one hand, was typical for changing values and meaning of concepts, imposed by the system, and, on the other hand, for an inertia, imposed by resistance towards that system and revealed by values and concepts which in an undertrained intellectual atmosphere would have been subjected to authentic revision...

The iconographic motifs, mentioned here by way of example, which at the end of the 1980s appeared both in Kowalewski's paintings and **"sculptures"**, are almost tautologically copied on canvas or displayed quite literally in glass showcases, a fact which already for quite some time

situated them beyond the anachronic opposition between form and contents. These motifs are not so much "signs" as elements of an individual and group existence; putting it differently, they are materializations of competing "systems of value".

By sublimating autobiographical trends which stem from a heterogeneous cultural and social context into depictions endowed with the features of a self-portrait, Kowalewski seems to attach particular prominence to his religious faith shaped by Catholicism and appears to publicly exhibit his "**personal, in other words, private**" reflections connected with it.

I have in mind here the "**Tragic Opaqueness of Necessity**", an exceptionally, in my opinion, important in this respect work from 1989 which was also shown at the exhibition held in the Appendix Gallery. Actually, it would be difficult to describe its essence as an object, and the accompanying author's commentary only obliterates the interpretation. Does the composition consist of a piece of animal liver, submerged in water over three years ago, and now invisible due to the opaqueness of the water as a result of decay, and probably completely decomposed, a fact which it is impossible to ascertain, or is it rather the very process of the disintegration of matter, or something else still? We are struck by the "**setting**" and "**ceremony**" accompanying the "**Tragic Opaqueness of Necessity**". The piece of liver was placed in a marble "**sarcophagus**" which, in turn, was sunk in water filling a hermetically sealed glass vessel, and displayed in a large, transparent glass showcase. Certainly the decomposing or putrid liver is just as unusual in art as were Beuys' grease and felt cloth although, of course, this organic element plays a totally different role than the decaying products in the art of the German "**shaman**". Upon the basis of the author's commentary, we are also entitled to assume that Kowalewski has embarked upon his "**personal, in other words private**" discussion with the fundamental axiom of Christian theology about the resurrection of the body. He described the substitute ritual of burying the remnant of an animal which actually refers to a person, by placing it in a "**tomb**" submerged in a container full of water, by lighting candles and by "**separating with the glass box that what is occurring ... the sanctuary from the outside world**". At the same time, he confessed that with the help of this type of an undertaking he "**had decided to resolve his doubts as regards the resurrection of the body**" and "**initiated the process**" but that, unfortunately, God had enveloped this process and the flow of time with a tragic opaqueness".

Although the discussed composition could appear to be a "**devilish joke**", let us ask several serious and, possibly, naive questions. What is the purpose of such an experiment when it is known ahead of time that it will be impossible to observe its course and its ultimate result, in other words, the complete decomposition of matter, and when we know even without observation that it is taking place?

What is its sense if in the conclusion to his own commentary the author found it "**necessary**" to confess that "**I believe in the resurrection of the body and in eternal life**", because the heart of the matter is faith (or its lack) and not knowledge? What is the source, therefore, of the need to "**prove to oneself**" in this particular fashion that dead matter does really undergo total decay or to "**become certain**" that the resurrection of the body is impossible? What is the reason for the negation of faith with the aid of knowledge and with a recreation of the elements of religious burial rites? Was the author not actually concerned with both in the case of animals and men does not regenerate itself but which literally becomes decomposed in the living body as a result of illness? Did he have in mind an attempt at liberating oneself from a problem which is even more disturbing since it pertains to a professed faith, or freeing oneself from the obsession of imagining "**oneself**" in that particular, concrete, material body for all of eternity? Such a depiction of man after resurrection is somewhat grotesque although the "**consumers**" of Catholicism residing in the interiors painted by Kowalewski certainly ignore it. Perhaps the crux of the matter lies in the traumatic attitude of the artist towards his own body? In one way or another, in this work he undoubtedly has "**personally, in other words, privately**" undermined the very foundation of Christianity, although in no case has he infringed spiritual life after death, since he remains inclined towards a vision of a spiritual life liberated from the limitations of the body. The "**Tragic Opaqueness of Necessity**" appears to me to be the strongest accent in the art of (self) portrayal pursued up to now by Paweł Kowalewski.

Paintings from the "Fin de siècle" series shown both at the Appendix and the Isy Brachot Galleries seem to partially transcend the local socio-cultural context but at the same time they presumably register its transformations and quite possibly also new elements of an autobiography. If this were not the case, then the view expressed at the beginning of my text about the continuum of the art of self-portrayal (and portrayal) cultivated by Paweł Kowalewski would be unjustified. In what way does the "**fin de siècle**" series confirm this continuum and indicate certain changes in the individual and collective biography?

After all, for more than three years we have been **"entering"** into capitalism or **"striving"** towards a pluralistic Europe by transforming the Polish socio-cultural **"spectacle"** or **"landscape"** although the latter appear to be even more curious and incoherent than has been the case up to now...

What is it that Kowalewski paints, in what manner and to what **"fin de siecle"** is he referring? He covers the canvas with a **"wallpaper"** design, a colorful floral motif or black and white stripes, or else the two are combined together and presented in fragments of gilt frames fashioned in the style of the nineteenth century, the Baroque or Rococo.

A sophisticated and elitist frame from another period and a contemporary decorative motif, the product of vulgar taste, constitute, I believe, a successive act in the art of self portrayal and portrayal as such, which is performed both on the global postmodernistic stage and in local, neocapitalist surrounding. The historical, unique frame can be, after all, regarded as an expression of the cultural schizophrenia of the transition period. Such schizophrenia, however, possesses a broader since it testifies to contemporary eclecticism which is treated as inevitable and perceived both as an expression of the standard taste of the public and the perverse aesthetic taste of contemporary elites. At present, thanks to new technologies of reproduction, and in particular to computers, a copy of every object, both modern and historical, including that which original is no longer extant, becomes part of our possessions or finds itself within the range of our sensual perception, together with the values ascribed to that object. This is the reason, I maintain, why Paweł Kowalewski's paintings also refer to **"fin de siecle"** of mechanical reproduction with all its consequences in the realm of aesthetics, ethics, cognition and world outlook.

The **"fin de siecle"** series attracts our attention by an astonishing **"surplus"** of visuality or sensuality. What is even more engrossing, the decisive factor here is not exclusively the sculpted frames, but, paradoxically because, after all, one can consider them as mechanically duplicated banalities although the black and white stripes have a very interesting texture and are truly the work of a painter, similarly to the floral ornament which albeit flag is nonetheless rich. But all those floral and striped paintings, paintings combining flowers and stripes, or those partially enclosed in gilt frames, give the impression of a deliberately produced decoration or stage design, whose **"surface"** creates an illusion for the eye. Does it conceal some sort of **"profoundness"**, is there any place here for the **"I"** and what sort of an **"I"** do we have in mind?

Finally, in what does this **"personality, in other words, privacy"** of the **"fin the siecle"** series reveal itself in relation to the **"Tragic Opaqueness of Necessity"**, featured, after all, by the same exhibition?

John Tau (*The Phoenix of the Self*, "Artforum", April 1989, p. 145-149) claims that today's artists should in particular oppose the image of the I formed by the mass media and consumer culture, in which **"the hygienic (nonsecreting and unwasteful) body is the only possible home for the productive (money-making, and therefore generative) ming, and vice versa"**.

He also says that it is precisely the self-portrait which is capable of providing **"a recuperative and therefore imaginative response to the conflict between the public (surface)self and the personal (hidden) self"** in addition achieving a sui generis breakthrough in contemporary art since in the majority of cases the latter illustrates theories that prove the nullification of personality. What is especially important at this point is the fact that he does not have in mind a traditionally understood self-portrait but the kind which he calls speculative or imaginative and which, of course, does not take into consideration the physical resemblance between the author-model and self-depiction and, moreover, opposes the socio-cultural order sanctioned by the historical self-portrait. Examining the categories of the speculative (imaginative) portrait, the critic reflects on the creativity of such American authors as Frida Kahlo, Jasper Johns, Philip Guston, Anna Bialobroda and Archie Rand and distinguishes, respectively, the self-portrait as an allegory and caricature, and the self-portrait as a quotation. In his Freudian interpretation of the self-portrait, Yau accents the inseparable nature of that what is sensual (the body) and that what is experience (for instance, pain) in the domain of values. Together with Wittgenstein he stresses the unity of the images of life forms and linguistic forms. He also places a distinct emphasis not on the sociological aspect of the self-portrait (the social construction of identity) but on its psychological aspect (that what is individual). In effect, he contrasts the speculative self-portrait with modernism, treating the latter as depersonalized creativity because of its self-centered themes, and with the traditional self-portrait, which he regards as the product of a patriarchal socio-cultural order, and hence a self-presentation of the male I, or its definite image.

I believe that special attention is due Yau's reinterpretation of the works of Jasper Johns perceived in the categories of the speculative self-portrait, since regardless of the measure in which it remains a form of wishful thinking or unproven, it testifies to the extent in which an interpretation of twentieth-century art, regarded as almost canonical, is being undermined

the perfect I from the television screen, apparently liquidate the drama.

What a symbol of decadence it would have been for Paweł Kowalewski to have created a composition in which a putrescent liver is surrounded by gilt frames.