

Artist, mathematician, philosopher

Ryszard Winiarski was one of those exceptional artists who were completely mature creators both in terms of the thinking and the artistic attitude already in their initial works. In 1966, when he just turned 30 and received a diploma of graduation from the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, his paintings were awarded the Grand Prix at the Symposium of Artists and Scientists in Puławy. And it was one of the major events of the Polish avant-garde of that time, attended by widely popular and appreciated artists, such as Tadeusz Kantor. Winiarski was a revelation. He created a new way of thinking and creation in painting.

Before the artist undertook his studies in fine arts, he graduated from the Faculty of Precision Mechanical Engineering, Warsaw University of Technology, and mathematics was the first area of his fascination. This makes it easier to understand why he based his creative concept on the probability theory. This field of mathematics is devoted to determination of the probability distribution of random phenomena. Winiarski's creative concept – innovative, breaking the existing rules and criteria in art, based on the reliable and verifiable foundation of mathematics – satisfied the postulates of those times perfectly. At the same time it was ahead of its era since it contained significant elements of conceptualism. Because for Winiarski, as he underlined on numerous occasions, not the work result – i.e. the already completed record of the executed aleatoric actions – was significant but the process of these actions itself. The material objects that came into being as a result of these actions were treated by the artist as a by-product of his concept, hence somewhat deprecated. This is why the author would not designate these pieces as paintings. He called them “Attempts to Visually Represent Statistical Distributions.” For example: each of the objects he created was precisely programmed – as regards alternative sizes of squares into which the operation plane was to be divided, selection of the painting corner where the filling of the squares with colour was to begin, as well as the code type. The rest was governed by chance triggered by the source of the random variable. This could be coin flipping (e.g. heads – black, tails – white) or die casting, as well as tables of random numbers, series of numbers from stock exchange tables, etc. The author's concept initially based on a plane, resembling a chequerboard, with certain squares black and the rest white, filled with colour in line with the results of drawing lots.

But these seemingly purely mechanical records of the function of the random variable were simultaneously a record of the artist's message and an expression of his philosophical attitude. If they displayed order – this was not because the role of chance was reduced in them but because they were a mathematically processed reflection of the image of all reality from macrocosm to microcosm, through the life of nature and humans. The reason is that the prevailing laws or assumed programmes, continually struggling with unpredictable coincidences, fit the superior pattern of their order into the apparent chaos. For Anaximander and the Ionian philosophers of nature, apeiron (the indefinite) was the rule behind the world; for Heraclitus of Ephesus – fire; and for Mondrian – the fight of contradictions symbolised by the plumb and the level; similarly, Winiarski believed that the primary rule of reality was cooperation of programme and chance, whereby the latter sometimes helps and sometimes

prevents the pursuit of the former (like, for instance, a coincidence in human life, which sometimes results in a quicker fulfilment of certain plans, but sometimes thwarts them). This philosophical assumption, implying the fundamental question being ‘determinism or indeterminism’ and constituting the starting point and inspiration for the artistic action, was of primary significance for Winiarski. This was a source of pondering and inexhaustible adventure, in which a remarkable role was played by the ludic game component.

And so, according to the artist’s theory about cooperation of programme factors and chance as the primary rule governing the world, each final product of his action was characterised by perfect harmony. At the same time, contrary to the artist’s assumption, these “final products” proved to be charming with beauty. Perhaps exactly owing to the order and balance contained therein, and also to their simplicity and nearly ascetic scarcity of means of painting. It also turned out, contrary to the artist’s assumption, that his works, although coming into being in an unusual way that contradicted the traditional painting methods, bear such strong marks of individuality of their creator that they are recognisable without mistake in all parts of the world.

Original and exceptional by intention and message, and beautiful from the formal point of view, Winiarski’s pieces quickly gained recognition both in Poland and abroad. The artist was invited to participate in leading exhibitions, such as the International Constructivist Biennial in Nuremberg (1969 and 1971) or the International Biennial in Sao Paulo (1969), in open-air exhibitions and symposiums, such as “Geometry in a Landscape” (1974) in the Netherlands or “Construction in Progress” in Munich (1985). Individual exhibitions of his works were held in the majority of European countries. He belonged to “Arbeitskreis,” an international group of artists. Already in the 1970s did Winiarski become one of the few names of the contemporary Polish artists that were widely known in the global artistic circles, mentioned aside Fangor, Stażewski, Opalka and Abakanowicz.

As time passed by, the initially simple works made by Winiarski – records of the function of random variable executed with the use of black and white squares on the square canvas plane – rapidly became increasingly more complex. First multi-coloured paintings were created by the artist as early as in 1968 and he began working on increasingly more sophisticated programmes. These programmes underlay the development of diagonal configurations forming an illusory space as well as real three-dimensionality in the form of reliefs or spatial forms. Randomly shaped objects, sets with randomly selected empty zone were created and presented in an illusory manner. Also kinetic objects appeared occasionally. The artist created paintings with unusual meandering shapes, and spatial installations, which were initiated by the transfer of decorations for “Medea” by Euripides from the Polish Theatre in Warsaw to the Contemporary Gallery in Warsaw. The author arranged the interiors of exhibition rooms with black and white trusses and placed square piers of varied height on them. In these multi-spatial installations, also the relief zone, i.e. the size of the area and the area it was going to occupy on the ground plane, the height of the relief components (or piers in the spatial arrangement), the point of convergence of lines of perspective and the field it delimited were randomly selected. The spaciousness of the artist’s work was fully expressed

in “Geometry in a Landscape” – two large three-dimensional projects erected in Gorinchem, the Netherlands. Here, the artist entered a different area of action than the original modular structures composed of squares. But both the new manner of creative explorations and the other explorations, pursued simultaneously, had the common basis: meticulous mathematical calculations and exercises for the thoughts and the imagination. They included also concepts derived from the rule of the iceberg, only one seventh of which is visible above the water surface. In Gorinchem, the artist constructed elementary geometric solids protruding from the ground – sphere, cylinder, cone, cube and pyramid – in the city landscape. Another project was executed in 1978 for Chełm – this time a cone emerging from the ground and inclined in three positions. In each of these cases the six sevenths of the solid – the part hidden in the ground – live only in human imagination and may assume far greater sizes, even fill the whole globe. What was important for the artist’s attitude, as he himself stated: “not the deliberate shaping of the appearance but the selection of the mode of conduct, the rules of the game, is what brings that specific result used later as a sculpture with a specified appearance.”¹

Correspondingly, Winiarski’s concept of games originates from the same premises. “In spring 1972,” as recalled by the author, “I managed to transform one of the rooms in the Contemporary Gallery in Warsaw into a game parlour as an event accompanying my exhibition. The viewers joined the proposed game ... At the same time black and white or coloured items were created on the boards ... as a result of various courses of the game which developed according to precise rules. It was an important experience for me.”² This event gave rise to a range of Winiarski’s exhibitions in Poland and abroad, combined with the construction of installations in which the viewers participated creatively. This initiative, valuable primarily in terms of art recipient activation, was the starting point for numerous pieces and series of pieces titled “Games,” wherein not necessarily anyone participated apart from the artist himself. Nevertheless, the concept of interaction with the visitors made him execute an independent “Game,” unrelated to any exhibition, composed of seven boards.

All the projects being either paintings or different pieces made by Winiarski by the end of 1980, such as frames with “blocks” on bars, resembling huge abacuses, were still an exemplification of the same idea that gave birth to “Attempts to Visually Represent Statistical Distributions.”

After 1980, under the influence of the changed situation in art and the new trends becoming more prominent, Winiarski partly departed from the artistic concept he created. He formulated the new standpoint in the most explicit manner in 1991 by stating: “Such trends have emerged in art as new romanticism, post-modernism, etc. One must be really deaf and blind to constrain oneself within the limits of the dogma derived from the times of the civilizational myth.”³ His changed viewpoint resulted in, among others, “Black Square or Flying Geometry” – an installation composed of seven diverse angular forms, which were made of large squares, cut into pieces and combined into new configurations. He arranged a whole wall in a room at “Zachęta” as part of the “Language of Geometry” exhibition opened there in March 1984. As the curator of that exhibition, I asked each participant the question

what geometry meant to them, and the replies of the authors were included in the exhibition catalogue. Winiarski wrote: “A growing wave of emotions is going through the world of art. Wild painting. What can be done in such weather by artists sailing aboard a boat with a ringing name of ‘Geometry’? They can sulk and disembark, they can lower sail, reach for oars and continue the journey slowly, but they might as well put up a struggle and look for adventure, travelling under full sail. And the latter decision seems most reasonable. Geometry has been able to carry emotions and symbols many times. It will carry them again. Geometry under tension.”⁴

In 1985, in RR Gallery in Warsaw Winiarski exhibited plywood sheets, bent to their strength limits, stabilised with heavy stones, while in 1987, as part of a series of installations organised by the editorial board of “Projekt,” the artist created a geometrically designed composition of burning grave lanterns. He executed similar squares of fire in several locations in the same year. Among many other manners of expression of those times, the artist built walls of bricks that were also square in plan. These installations, executed several times since 1987 in Poland and abroad, were titled “Geometry or the Chance of Meditation.”

The evolution arisen in his oeuvre was explained by the artist as follows in 1985: “Over all the past years I rejected an emotional attitude to my own art by principle ... The action programme was not subject to any emotional evaluation. So the change consists in the emotion being granted equal rights at the moment.”⁵

Although they never betrayed geometry, these installations, driven by emotions, diverse in terms of material and form, lacked that strict logic and consistency of “Attempts to Visually Represent Statistical Distributions” or “Games.” Despite their mathematical explainability and certain coldness – it is them, paradoxically, that concealed something from music, secret and sublimity, and perhaps romanticism. This is what determines the greatness of art.

Bożena Kowalska

Fragments of my earlier original studies of Ryszard Winiarski’s oeuvre are used in the text.

Footnotes:

¹ – R. Winiarski /text from a brochure issued on a duplication machine/ Winiarski. Iceberg’s rule. May 1978.

² – R. Winiarski Kunst und Spiel /in the catalogue:/ Internationale Werkbegegnung + Ausstellung Emilia Bohdziewicz, Ryszard Winiarski. Kunstsommer Kleinsassen 1986.

³ – Ryszard Winiarski interviewed by Eulalia Domanowska. /in the catalogue:/ Niech żyje sztuka na początku... BWA Zamek Książąt Pomorskich, Szczecin, February-March 1991.

⁴ – R. Winiarski (reply in the catalogue:/ Language of Geometry, Warsaw “Zachęta,” March 1984.

⁵ – D. Skaryszewska – Interview with Ryszard Winiarski, Projekt 1985 no. 5 (164), pp. 24-25