

Building bridges

A mechanical engineer, artist and painter – Ryszard Winiarski is interviewed by Krystian Brodacki.

Winiarski is one of the leading characters of the artistic avant-garde in Poland. Since 1966, when he won the first prize at the Symposium of Artists and Scientists in Puławy, his “areas” have been displayed at several dozen exhibitions in Poland and abroad, among others, in Bern, New York, Nuremberg, Paris, Sao Paulo, West Berlin, Copenhagen, Malmö, New Delhi, Caracas, London, Barcelona. His controversial oeuvre is anti-emotional and anti-subjective. It is different.

Ryszard Winiarski: - I studied at the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering in Łódź. These were such funny times that only 280 candidates applied for the available 320 vacancies. And 140 students were left after the first year. Because the studies were extremely difficult! Professors had a bit too few, so to say, additional tasks and a bit too much time for us. After two years I relocated to the newly established Faculty of Precision Mechanical Engineering in Warsaw. I was afraid that I wouldn't cope but the studies turned out to be pure pleasure. Not only because our lecturers were very busy people as editors of technical journals or directors of scientific institutes and didn't take their anger out on us. The atmosphere was different, the relations between the professors and us were good.

PT - Innowacje: - There is a quite widespread opinion that studies at an university of technology are sort of hackwork studies...

- This varies from university to university. I had very talented colleagues but anyway they dropped out of Łódź University of Technology. You arrived at 8 am and left at 8 pm there. Generally, I had no problems learning but in Łódź I was close to a breakdown, I passed examinations “on the verge of pain.” In Warsaw I managed to reconcile learning with my “side” interests very well. I became acquainted with the people from the circles of the Students' Theatre of Satirists and we went to the cinema and the theatre together, sat around in “Stodoła” club, we had time for that. But I have to admit that I had a hard time with the interim project supervised by Prof. Obalski. I undertook the topic that I'll remember for the rest of my life: aspiration psychrometer.

- And what was the subject of your diploma thesis?

- Pneumatic-hydraulic relay. I did the diploma under supervision of Prof. Leśniewski, everyone appreciated him much, he was an excellent lecturer. I almost stayed in his department and probably would be a calm teaching employee now... I got an “A” in the diploma thesis; I was less successful during the defence because Prof. Obalski grilled me. Finally I got a “C” and so I parted ways with the university of technology.

- Did these “side” activities have something in common with arts?

- Yes, I've been interested in arts ever since so no wonder that I landed in an Arts Centre, somewhere in Muranów [a neighbourhood in Warsaw - Ed.]. I attended Ms. Matuszczyk-Cygańska's workshop. She found that I was talented in the field of painting and after 2 years she induced Prof. Kobzdej from the Academy of Fine Arts to admit me as an auditing student. I think this happened a year before the diploma defence at the university of technology.

- *What did this auditing at Kobzdej's look like?*

- This was ordinary classes in the workshop, painting nudes, still nature. No distance was perceived between the regular students and the auditing students.

- *Did you think at that moment that your life should be bound up with painting?*

- No! After the studies I began working in a small production plant at ul. Okopowa in Warsaw. It was "Stelmos" Gasket Factory, supplying the automotive industry. There were three of us who came there – the first engineers ever seen by the plant. I became the tool shop manager straight away. The factory carried out the whole production using presses, and we made blanking dies for them. I was in charge of about twenty people and of course I earned the least. My responsibilities included assigning tasks, making sure that work is in progress and calculating pays. Apart from that, me and my friend – engineer Władek Kamiński – built our own various automatic machines, e.g. for producing inserts for beer crown caps. Inserts with applied aluminium film disks were brought from Sweden, so anti-import was the goal. I remember this automatic machine particularly well because it cut a fragment of my finger off during a show in the cork factory in Poznań. And the funniest thing we made was a paper waxing machine: after switching in on it turned out that it was not a machine but a water fountain – it sprayed wax at a distance of a dozen or so metres!

I liked my colleagues very much, they were excellent professionals. I gave special advice to some of them because they knew that outside the factory I was interested in many different things. For example, one of them wrote novels and asked me if it was appropriate to write that the countess travelled by carriage or rather by wagonette. There was also the manager of a group of mechanics, who was in Italy during the war. When the date of pay calculation approached, he would come to me and sing Italian songs...

.... I became the acting technical director overnight. When I was going out of my room, our partners tapped my workers and asked: how old is that director? 16? 18? One day, the head caught me in the corridor: "You are a director now, look how you are dressed! You should wear at least a tie, like me, you know" – and showed me something 20 cm wide and painted in flowers – which was most unfashionable at that time.

- *And what about the Academy? Being a director of a factory and at the same time an auditing student must have been worse than not wearing a tie.*

- I already completed three years of auditing then and decided to take an entrance exam for the Academy. I fulfilled my responsibilities at work for 3-4 hours a day, so I thought I would manage to reconcile the work with the new studies.

- *Did the work in the industry inspire you artistically in any way?*

- No, not at all. The industry saw a struggle for production, for this piece of copper, so that there is something to make gaskets of, a struggle for good orders, so that we can extrude five thousand gaskets, not five. I saw enough for two years of my life. But it had nothing to do with painting. But when I decided to leave the plant, I felt no regret. After three years of auditing I felt that I had to come down a peg and I still had a lot to learn.

- *And how was your entrance exam for the Academy?*

- All good. I painted and drew for a few days, assembled a composition, expressed my opinions on art. I passed but the Ministry of Culture did not accept me because I had already completed other studies. When I moaned in the Ministry that if I had e.g. grazed cows so far, not studied, I would have been admitted, I heard: "Yes, but if you had grazed cows, you would have had untouched imagination!"

Finally Prof. Kobzdej intervened and I was admitted. He was a kind-hearted soul – always tried to help anyone who studied under his supervision. And so I started new studies...

...Some time during my third year I had the so-called successes. This meant that the professors began liking what I painted. Even Prof. Nacht-Samborski, who was a great authority at the Academy, got to like me and praised for that red nude that I painted at that time.

- *But now you don't paint any nudes, do you...*

- A year before the diploma defence I went to a seminar organised by Prof. Porębski (a laureate of the National Prize 1978 – K. B.), a great art theoretician and historian. He already had dealt with such issues as informatics in art. The topic of the seminar was the border of the art and the science. I recall a very stormy meeting, which was attended by plenty of people and almost everyone left after one of the students accused all those who were interested in 'science in art' of the apparent lack of painting skills. Literally a few people stayed at the seminar and during the year we met at Professor Porębski's flat. Someone always prepared a topic for each meeting and then we debated.

What I am doing today came to my mind probably two years before the diploma defence. I was familiar with the theory of information. I even earned additional income by delivering speeches at the Faculty of Automatic Control. Computers, issues of languages, e.g. binary ones, were not unknown to me.

- *You count as those exercising the so-called computer painting...*

- This is not quite correct. The computer is a wonderful tool, but nothing more. I have had certain adventures with computing machines but I'm not interested in it that much. I don't need this.

Getting back to the seminar – it was there that I formulated my theoretical assumptions for the first time. The Professor liked it and I decided to earn the diploma based on these assumptions.

Attempting to defend the diploma with works for which today the critics pat me on the back saying “go on like that” could have been regarded as a provocation at that time. Namely, I made a series of paintings where the chance determined the distribution of elements on the painting surface, e.g. casting a die, stock exchange tables, tapes from accounting machines. I didn't even know that boards of random numbers existed. I remember doing something with use of tram ticket numbers – I searched for sources of the mutable lot. I already knew that this had to be simple, that this had to be black and white, that the decision should be categorical. These have been my guidelines until now. These two colours determine two states: “yes” and “no.”

- But it can be said that something is more or less black, or more or less white...

- Of course, and they taught us so at the Academy. This is important in sensitive, impression painting. But I reject sensitivity and the so-called aesthetic evaluation – I demonstrate a certain process in the painting and this process is more important for me than the final outcome itself. This is what distinguishes me from the so-called painters–manipulators, who use the computer just like the paintbrush. That is, they attach an aesthetic evaluation to the computer's product and e.g. out of one hundred drawings made by the computer they choose the single “best” one. I, in turn, work on the computer language grammar and for me the outcome is not significant, only – I repeat – the process itself.

“When commencing a construction of a painting or an object (I usually call them “areas”, as I am not sure whether the name “painting” corresponds to their nature), I determine the rules of conduct, rules of the game first, and then I invite chance to participate in the project. The source of chance may be a coin, a die, a roulette, a board with random numbers, or even a properly programmed computer. A specific contest subject to the laws of the logic of chance takes place on the surface or in the space” (Winiarski's statement from the catalogue for the exhibition in Łódź in 1974).

- Does what you do still fit in the notion of painting?

- That is a typical question! When I presented my diploma project, a big commotion started. Of course, diplomas were easily received by colleagues who shown three pieces each, which (in no way diminishing anything) showed three bottles, in total 9 bottles. There were perhaps merely three such different ones as I. We stayed at the door for a very long time, several dozen minutes, and

inside there was turmoil between the professors. I finally received the diploma but later Samborski stopped me in the courtyard and said: “You’ve hurt me. Do you remember the red nude?...”

- *Did you not regret to break with such painting?*

- No, because I already felt that great perspectives were opening before me. Today, the situation is the same in art as in science. Let’s say, there is a field, e.g. Cracovian calculus or set theory. Initially it seems that it’s enough to read a couple of books and that’s it. Wrong! This captivates, the horizons become increasingly broader, there are more and more possibilities.

What I exercise can be called, for want of anything better, “systematism,” i.e. – there must be a system, a thought construct – then this is systematic conduct. There are a few people in the world who do similar things to mine – I’d propose the term “systematism,” but they prefer the name “System plus program.”

- *How are your works received by the so-called ordinary passer-by?*

- I think that ordinary passers-by do not exist. Because they are extraordinary either because they don’t know anything, or because they know something, or because they know a lot. I think that the viewers have seen me through and, unfortunately, I am no longer such an irritating phenomenon as 10 years ago.

- *Why “unfortunately?” Was irritating people your assumption?*

- To an extent. I felt very unhappy when receiving bad reviews but at the same time extremely important! That’s why when a year ago someone called me a cheat and a swindler in one of Łódź newspapers, I felt very good – after the period of patting me on the back and saying “go on like that.” Unfortunately, the situation in art is that critics are afraid of criticising. They accept everything because they have experienced many times that something that appeared very dubious and was ridiculed – later proved valuable and permanent. So they are afraid.

- *But is it possible to build a permanent artistic viewpoint on the intention to provoke?*

- No, what I’ve talked about are personal, temporary satisfactions, but I knew anyway that I was doing something important, that this was neither junk nor “root art,” as Witz stung me in a review in “Życie Warszawy.” This was his first review about me, totally unfair, and it hurt me much. But although Witz made up with me in the third one, I preferred the first one. If you do something and know that it’s good, and someone is allergic to a different genre of art, is reluctant and attacks, I perceive this as a certain confirmation that my attempts make sense – because they irritate the critic that much...

Two years ago, a Dutch painter, Herman De Bresse [herman de vries - Ed.], became interested in Winiarski's works. He invited him to a symposium of artists in Gorkum [Gorinchem - Ed.], a small town near Rotterdam.

- There were 15 of us there, we made some experimental undertakings. Recently my exhibition was held in Gorkum, where I presented, among others, "board games." The viewers played and while moving various parts of the system they were making a piece of art for me...

- *I've heard about your important exhibition in Wrocław.*

- Oh, this was a very interesting experience! For a long time my mind had been busy with the so-called anaglyphs, i.e. two-colour drawings that, when viewed through two-colour glasses, give an illusion of three-dimensionality. The exhibition was held at ul. Świdnicka street, at a very busy place, opposite PDT (State Department Store - Ed.). I made large anaglyphs on the walls, presenting various treatments on a cube, and stuck two-colour glasses on window panes, at various heights so that also children could watch. There was nothing that would encourage anyone to do so but whole families of passers-by stuck their faces up to the window panes. I also presented my "abacuses" there – the viewers may move the elements on their own and so to say compose them in that way.

- *At the same time, while doing it, they are being watched by others.*

- I rely on the quote by Tadeusz Peiper of 1922: "Organicity known from physiology will become an inspiration for artistic structures... A piece of art will be the society." On this basis it is possible to build bridges between life, science, technology and art.

... Initially I applied literalness – mirrors with lines, hung at the exhibition, in which the society was reflected. Afterwards I moved towards objective art.

- *How do you commence painting an "area"?*

- I set a programme most often for series of objects, assuming some rule of transition from an object to an object, e.g. that the probability of appearance of the black colour increases by 4% with each transition. Then I set the type of mutable lot and the system of its application. This can be a very simple determination that casting 1, 2, 4 and 6 with a die will mean the black colour, while 3 and 5 – the white colour; these can be also very complex systems based on boards of random numbers.

I intend to make decisions as objectively as possible, and so precisely that they can be recorded. Each of my paintings can be recorded by means of zeroes and ones.

- *Does it not seem to you that it would be horrible if everyone took up painting according to your theory?*

- God forbid! Impressionism took advantage of the colour, cubism – of the cubic form, informel – of the texture, the art of gesture – of the painting gesture. And I have my own path of conduct in relation to the painting. My main proposal is that: just like a newspaper or television can present the status quo using a half-tone screen image – it is possible to make a half-tone screen image which arises for an unforced reason, for an objective reason.

- I presume that your “areas,” composed nearly always of a grid of black and white squares with the side of 1 cm, are not an obsession but a conscious choice, your way of reflecting what is happening objectively.

- It makes no sense that, e.g., a doctor denies a mathematician; it would be considerably better if the doctor takes advantage of the mathematician’s knowledge. I repeat: the situation in art today is the same as in science: there are various realities at equal rights. I am on my own path, although I like works by others – Dobkowski, Starczewski, Mikulski, Nowosielski. But I do not practice what they are dealing with, this is not mine.

Outside people most often want to give a name to everything. Those who “work” in avant-garde, and I consider myself as one of them, avoid the word “art.” They rather prefer speaking of a form of activity and demonstrating attitudes to the world. This is a contradiction to the intuitive creation, the use of imagination, talent...

The words by Winiarski confirm what many critics wrote about him. For example, Bożena Kowalska: “Objects created by him preserve the nature of mechanical coldness and sterility, emotionally indifferent and devoid of any elements in which the human personality is manifested.” Ignacy Witz discerned something more: “I regard him as an interesting individual, who, most importantly, contributes significant moments to our discussion about the reaches and meanings of art of the 20th century. However, I am always pleased and excited when Winiarski betrays his theory, when his work distances itself by its mood from the theory, bringing authentic emotions. Such a situation happened with the stage decorations for “Medea” by Euripides and Parandowski. I think that it’s worth casting a die for such effects.”

The ascetic rhythm to which Winiarski became subordinated, a voluntary member of such a secular artistic order with a strict rule, conceals coldness that deters and at the same time attracts. The time will tell what the result of this adventure with “objective art” for the overall art is.

The interview was conducted and edited by Krystian Brodacki