

Ryszard Winiarski undoubtedly belongs to a small group of Polish artists of the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century whose impact goes far beyond the borders of Poland. His works can be found in numerous renowned museums, art galleries, and private collections all over the world. He is generally considered as the leading representative of concrete art and the so-called the second (young) avant-garde, which renewed its interest in abstraction, geometry and relations between art and exact sciences<sup>1</sup>. In both cases, Winiarski's classification is correct, yet it does not fully reflect the specificity and the real potential of his oeuvre. It still requires in-depth and thorough research which should combine the experience of at least several fields. This is required by the "transgressive" nature of the works by the Warsaw artist, which encompass elements of philosophical inquiries, scientific experiments and synthetic data formatting.

**Multiplied reflection. Artist as a thinker and experimenter.**

One of the greatest Polish post-war historians of art, Mieczysław Porębski, discerned much more than pure art determined by geometrical and mathematical norms in Winiarski's oeuvre. In the early 1980s, he even stated: "this is the only example, known to me, of a methodical philosophical discourse which is neither spoken nor written, but visual. A discourse which becomes, desires to become, a dialogue drawing the viewer into its course as time goes by." These words have a double power. On the one hand, the historian of art, famous for his persistent methodological research on relations between the humanities and exact sciences as well as between art and science, clearly implied that Winiarski's works cannot be discussed only in terms of their purely artistic aspect, and on the other hand, he pointed to their evolutionary and ideologically open character. According to the former observation, the pieces by the Warsaw artist should be perceived in line with the rhetoric of the philosophical discourse, including its whole formal and structural base. Its narrative linear nature (like in the case of any discourse) and the constructive pivotal role of time in the creative/philosophical process also must be taken into consideration. The open and evolutionary character assumes, in turn, the existence of a certain ideological foundation that

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<sup>1</sup> The significance of Winiarski's oeuvre in the stream of concrete art, or the so-called new avant-garde, can be noticed when performing even a rough overview of the relevant literature. Cf. H. P. Riese, *Kunst: Konstruktiv/Konkret. Gesellschaftliche Utopien der Moderne*, Berlin 2008; P. Sztabińska, "Czy można dziś mówić/pisać o abstrakcji geometrycznej?", *Zeszyty Naukowo-Artystyczne ASP we Wrocławiu. Dyskurs*, 4(2006), p. 204; id. *Geometria a natura. Polska sztuka abstrakcyjna w drugiej połowie XX wieku*, Warszawa 2009, pp. 33-39; G. Sztabiński, *Geometrie als Sprache. Zeitgenössische polnische Konstruktiven*, Stuttgart 1991; B. Schröder, *Konkrete Kunst. Mathematisches Kalkül und programmiertes Chaos*, Berlin 2008.

contains both certain permanent elements and a change genotype. Hence, the doctrine itself would need to allow even for seemingly unacceptable threads of changes. When examining Winiarski's works, it is easy to notice the evolutionary rather than revolutionary nature of changes and about-turns, even that one which restored emotions to the area of artistic creation. The brief description by Porębski is also extremely significant for other, more subtle reasons. It can be understood as a symbolic liberation of both of them from the master-theoretician and apprentice-practitioner relationships, where the apprentice's works go beyond the teacher's inspiration and at the same time become a legitimate research field for him. It deserves emphasising that these relationships were critical for the development of Winiarski's artistic doctrine. Nearly every researcher examining Ryszard Winiarski's oeuvre more thoroughly has referred to the influence exerted by his participation in the seminar run by Mieczysław Porębski on the development of his artistic views. The issues of the relations between art and science, which were discussed there, are believed to have inspired the artist to create his own doctrine based on close correlations between exact sciences and art. The problem is that until now there only slight insights have been gained into the actual influence of Porębski's thoughts on Winiarski's art.

In order to comprehend the varying degrees of correlation, or perhaps kinship, between Winiarski's artistic thought and Porębski's theoretical works, one needs to draw attention to the texts of the latter first and confront them, so to say, with individual pieces by the artist afterwards. The type of the classes attended by the young learner of art indicates the final years of his university studies, that is almost mid-1960s. This period is marked also by a series of Porębski's crucial publications on methodology and programme. 1962 saw the release of two texts in which the researcher transplanted the information theory to the ground of the studies of art. These issues are explored also by the paper "Enklawy zorganizowanej informacji" ["Enclaves of organised information"] published in 1964. The problem of transplanting the information theory to the ground of the studies of art and discussing art in the context of science (and in particular exact sciences) occurs also in later publications. All three texts include themes that are important for understanding Winiarski's works, or rather his creative attitude.

Porębski's discussions in *Sztuka a informacja* [Art in light of information] begin with an extensive outline of the historical background for the current "post-revolutionary" times.

The important, according to the researcher, transition from the tradition to the present day takes place through incorporating two crucial streams of the early decades of the 20th century, namely Cubism and Surrealism, into the context of revolution . Both have contributed to a, so to say, separation of the “myth” (mythology) of the broadly defined artistic narration. This draws attention to the informational aspect of the functioning of art. Referring to Leon Chwistek’s theoretical reflections on signs and meanings, Porębski introduces the notion of a message into the area of work definition and, essentially, identifies an artistic product with an encoded (recorded) message (messages) . While guiding the reader through the intricacies of the information theory, he makes the following assumptions:

“ (1.0) There is information (i)

(1.1) There is a receiver (r) who is supposed to obtain information (i)

(1.2) There is a channel (c) through which the information (i) can be received.

(1.3) There is a code (C) which specifies the method of information (i) transmission through the channel (c)”

According to that, the role of an author is limited to certain information management, its formation, and determination of the type and methods of code usage. How is this relevant to Winiarski’s vision of art? The role of the author, which he specified already in the mid-1960s, is defined in considerably broader terms since the area of action itself is not restricted to building and encoding information. Let us have a closer look at the system of constructing his early works and, primarily, at their purpose. The first stage of creation is to define and then delineate the field of action. The selection of an ideal figure, that is a square, enables its metric division into smaller modular and easily positionable sectors. As far as a plane is concerned, there are two principal types of the positioning solutions: using the y-axis, and the linear positioning, where all modules are numbered in accordance with the sequence (1,2,3,4) and are arranged in successive rows. Such an organisation permits a clear record of successive events. Importantly, in the initial years of his creative work, Winiarski applied virtually only the latter solution. Positioning with the use of the coordinate system did not appear in his pieces of art until 1972, marking visible changes of his artistic strategy . What does the initial choice of linear positioning really mean? First of all, it enables performance of

a random experiment simultaneously with recording its course in a legible manner. It can be said that it occurs at a scale of 1:1. The recording rule evokes associations with devices which record changes occurring over time, for instance with a seismograph or an encephalograph. One coordinate axis is responsible there for a graphic illustration of the progress of time. The principal difference is that the other axis is basically redundant in the early pieces by Winiarski, since the recording is cellular and accounts for each event separately. Hence, it is continuous but at the same time is based on points. The author treats the painting as both a field of a cognitive experiment and a plane of a synthetic record of its course, and it needs to be remembered that it is the sequence of the generated (random) events that is the prime mover. In this context, the discursive value raised by Porębski concerns the very process of experiencing and recording the reality rather than every single work. We need to return for a moment now to the stratification of the communication process proposed by Porębski. The real appreciation of the creative process at the expense of the final product significantly disturbs the order proposed by the historian of art and results in the author having power also to shape the channel. How is it possible? The reason is the inversion of the creational strategy, which inevitably leads to assigning the author the role of both the experimenter and receiver-viewer at the same time. In this context, the trails and signals associated with the process of “transmission through a channel” gain a new meaning. What else are the repeated random acts introduced to the work formation strategy if not ephemeral short-lived signals? By analogy, although less directly, the process of recording them is close to traces of transition. Tension emerges between the two stages, permitting a more precise positioning of the object of the discourse raised by Porębski. At this point, the thesis attributing the features of a philosophical discourse, which cannot be encapsulated by a simple definition of an encoded message, to Winiarski’s creative activities becomes real. Yet it must be remembered that in the conditions determined equally by the rigid rules of specifying the field of experiment and the factors determining its course (e.g. the choice of a die, coin or roulette) and by mutable lots, the variation and mutative specificity of the surrounding reality itself becomes discursive. It was so because the author paraphrased, so to say, the thoughts of the master, at the same time inverting and synthesising the roles. But was it only that?

When we examine the times when the foundations of philosophy were formed, the fact that a part of its identity was built by the knowledge of mathematics cannot be overlooked.

This most abstract field of our knowledge was a solid logical foundation for a philosophical description of the laws governing the world on numerous occasions. This was particularly true for the Pythagoreans, who – in their pursuit of discovering objectivised laws – decided to fully rely on numbers. The ideological kinship between the Pythagoreans and Winiarski was noticed by Jakub Jernajczyk. In his brief description of the artist's oeuvre, he wrote:

“His Attempts to Visually Represent Statistical Distributions were a new manner of presenting the reality; they illustrated its other dimension. Winiarski's art did not imitate the world perceived sensually but the imperceptible ideal world – the Pythagorean world of numbers.”

Fixed rules, specified by the abstract language of mathematics, were supposed to contribute to the objectivisation of record, which, through its specificity, was expected to minimise the effects of the existing information redundancy or noise mentioned by Porębski that are negative for its clarity and unambiguity. Their total elimination was impossible at that stage if only due to the static presence of the viewer. This fact caused a certain frustration of the artist observing the superficial, visual reception of his works since for him “it was not the work result, i.e. the already completed record of the executed aleatoric actions, that was significant but the process of these actions itself.” This is where we reach the gist of the problem. The imagery value is a mere resultant of events – an empirical process. It can be said that the “communicative” potential of a piece of art is in fact marginal in relation to the process itself, which permits delving into the secrets of functioning in a reality of two opposite, and at the same time complementary, values: order and chaos. Winiarski's technical and artistic education resulted in a unique synthesis of these two worlds in their most progressive dimension. By transplanting the most recent tendencies in the contemporary mathematics (deterministic chaos) to the ground of art, he made the random behaviours he tested unexpectedly open new functional areas. Jernajczyk, who was mentioned above, pointed to the relation between Winiarski's early probabilistic solutions with the contemporary forms of digital encoding with the use of mathematical functions (e.g. random). The case is similar in later pieces from the Games and Games of chance cycle from the 1980s and the 1990s, where the artist alternately applied the rule of chance for each successive value or the controlled accumulation according to the simplest sequences (e.g. where  $X_n = nX$ ). In order to make the record of the process clearer, the artist divided the

painting area into smaller autonomous boards (with modules 10x10 or 7x7) and recorded the progression on them one by one with the simultaneous repetition of the earlier results. This is how he achieved a gradual transition from white to black. However, it was completely different for individual strategies. While in the case of random structures the filling of square modules with black had all the hallmarks of order only on the quantitative scale, the application of sequence systems generated strictly ordered systems with a specific vector of the progressing accumulation, depending exclusively on the value of the first number, at the same time constituting the chronological numbering of individual works (for example, number 42 for the work *Game.42*). Such a strategy connects all works with each other and allows the creation of analytical diagrams of the behaviours of systems determined by the progression of the base value. These experiences permit becoming familiar with various types of controlled order.

Such seemingly innocent plays with the mutable lot and ordering systems fully reveal Winiarski's research and analytical nature, as his superior goal was, like for Pythagoreans, to recognise and define various states of the reality in a logical manner.

### ***Performativeness as a genetic value of Winiarski's experiments***

A record open to the surrounding reality is in fact another variable, which channels the value of the time recorded in geometric structures in a slightly different dimension. When establishing its presence, the artist inevitably approached full performativeness of his creative actions. A catalyst enabling its absolute liberation was aleatoricism<sup>2</sup>, which was present from the beginning of his mature pieces of art. Although this term (Lat. *alea* – dice, a game of dice) perfectly fits into the nature of artistic and experimental efforts made by Winiarski from the etymological point of view, it requires a certain verification.

Every outstanding artist's biography contains special dates which indicate aesthetic or ideological about-turns, ending some and beginning other significant problematic and thematic threads in their works. For Winiarski, one of such important moments was undoubtedly 1972. This is when he "invited" viewers to participate in his creative

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<sup>2</sup> This is a term used by both Winiarski and some researchers of his oeuvre to characterise his art. Cf. A. Turowski, *Abstrakcja umarła, niech żyje abstrakcja*, <http://www.atlassztuki.pl/pdf/bienkowski2.pdf> p. 14 [accessed on: 20/02/2014].

experiments for the first time<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, organising a “game parlour” opened a completely new chapter of the artist’s oeuvre, which was marked with international successes, and crowned the path of the painting-object idea towards full performativeness. Allowing viewers to shape the visual reality of a record again and again, Winiarski symbolically broke another barrier of a fixed division of roles in the information theory. The receiver became a part of the information itself (as a driving force), its creator and consumer at the same time. Such an accumulation resulted in the information channel, described by Porębski, generating neither noises nor redundancies<sup>4</sup>. To this end, direct game images (the arrangement of elements on the board) had to gain the ephemeral character created and read simultaneously, in a single homogenous reality. This is how Winiarski definitely demolished the border between a finished and unfinished painting. Between the constant and the variable. The final of each game was at the same time a state of transition-rest between successive openings of the unending creation. Fixed, specified rules and tools of the game played the controlling role, they became a guarantor of fulfilment of the framework intentions of the creator-originator. This is the aspect where Winiarski’s board games approached the aleatoric idea of constructing musical works, where the path leading to the final “constructs” a new dimension of the work every time<sup>5</sup>. The superior organisational frameworks of a game, confronted with the randomness of the individual “steps” that is limited by the draw system, highly resemble the so-called controlled aleatoricism developed by Witold Lutosławski, according to which chance fulfils a servile role towards the creator’s intention<sup>6</sup>. However, if comparing the game strategy proposed by Winiarski to the idea of aleatoricism in music, significant ideological differences between the two cannot be ignored. While in the case of music, individuality of each musician exhibits the emotional nature of a performance of the work, in the case of game strategy, the “ephemeral” record does not lose anything of its “cool” objectivity. Emotions

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<sup>3</sup> This experiment was mentioned by the artist in the accompanying catalogue text. Cf. – R. Winiarski, “Kunst und Spiel”, In: *Internationale Werkbegegnung + Ausstellung Emilia Bohdziewicz, Ryszard Winiarski*. Kunstsommer Kleinsassen 1986.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. M. Porębski, *Sztuka...*, 1962, pp. 57-62.

<sup>5</sup> When defining the idea of aleatoricism in music in the 1960s, Bohdan Pocij emphasised that “aleatoricism as a certain composing method arises from comprehending music itself as a game.” Cf. B. Pocij, “Źródła aleatoryzmu (III). Gra”, *Ruch Muzyczny* 1966, Issue 20, p. 12.

<sup>6</sup> M. Dolewka, “Rola przypadku w twórczości Witolda Lutosławskiego w nawiązaniu do myśli Hellera”, *Racjonalia*, Issue 3 (2013), pp. 100-103.

remain only in the closed homogenous “player-viewer” system. This does not mean, however, that they did not appear in Winiarski’s pieces of art. It took place almost a decade later in completely different social, cultural and historical realities:

“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”<sup>7</sup>.

Slightly less impressive, yet not less significant, Winiarski’s attempts at alternative forms of recording the reality determined by the mutable lot were made at the same time (1972). This time, the emphasis was put on the synthetic illustration of the trace leading from one event to another rather than on establishing the structure of accumulation of individual draws. For instance, in *Area 116* and *Area 117*, a square field of action was organised to imitate coordinate axes through two identical numerical scales from 0 to 100. The artist introduced the results of roulette spinning to the reality arranged in this way. Two resulting numbers specified the next ten points on a plane. The lines connecting them created a dynamic geometrical structure which was subject to cropping depending on the successive random values (casting two dice). A record of this process, like in many other cases, was appended to the final product as a sketch and it is the only complete document of the actions taken. Time is recorded here as a linear path - a complicated trace of the actions inspired by the game rather than the game itself (drawing the distance between the randomly selected points). Performativeness reached two levels of visual exemplification here: archival and selective.

The performativeness genotype becoming more and more clearly manifest in Winiarski’s artistic doctrine over time was considered an early, or even precursory, indication of conceptual tendencies in the Polish art by some researchers. Bożena Kowalska can see its significance even on a larger scale:

“Winiarski was another precursor of conceptualism in Poland and an outstanding one on the global scale. His concept of art originated from his inspiration with mathematics – the theory of probability. His works are in fact a record of the function of mutable lot, which he consistently stressed by not calling them

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<sup>7</sup> Ryszard Winiarski (statement) In: *Język geometrii.....*, no pagination.

paintings but ‘attempts to visually represent statistical distributions.’ According to the artist’s idea, they were a result of interconnected factors of chance and programming”.<sup>8</sup>

This opinion was shared also by Grzegorz Dziamski, who added that through the application of pure mathematical rules in the structure of the paintings “Winiarski’s pieces could assume a visual form but could also limit themselves to the numerical form, which is shown by the artist.”<sup>9</sup> Such an understanding of Winiarski’s paintings permits their association with the strategy of the abovementioned board games.

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<sup>8</sup> B. Kowalska, “Protokonceptualizm polski”, *Sztuka i Dokumentacja*, Issue 6 (2012), p. 17.

<sup>9</sup> G. Dziamski, “Spór o sztukę konceptualną w Polsce”, *Dyskurs. Pismo Naukowo-Artystyczne Akademii Sztuk Pięknych we Wrocławiu*, Vol. 7/2008, p. 207.