Eliza Urwanowicz-Rojecka

FOGHORN. The theme of the transformation in works from *Collection II* of the Arsenal Gallery

Collection II of the Arsenal Gallery in Białystok covers the most important phenomena in contemporary art in Poland starting from the year 1989. At the same time, the Gallery's exhibition program makes it illustrate the tendencies and transformations evident in the art of Belarus, Ukraine, the Czech Republic or Armenia. It is not surprising, therefore, that many works in this collection refer to the period of the transformation and to its political, social, economic and cultural consequences. We decided to present those works at the exhibition "FOGHORN. The theme of the transformation in works from Collection II of the Arsenal Gallery". The exhibition presents this subject matter in two aspects: on the one hand, as the systemic reforms that occurred after the fall of communism in Europe and in its Asian borderlands, and on the other, as the "transition culture", that is, as the enforced and premeditated great narrative of the 1990s.

The passage from centrally planned economy to market economy and from the totalitarian to the democratic system, the discarding of socialism in favour of the more or less consciously adopted liberal doctrine; these were the most important processes and institutional vectors[1] that characterized the social reality, as well as the changing social awareness, after the transformation of the political system. Regardless of what exactly, the transition culture or the institutions, structures and social agents – from the World Bank to the creators of the re-privatisation reforms – are regarded as the leading carriers of the social changes the occurred in this period, it is beyond doubt that after the year 1989 the focus was mainly on the drive towards economic and political goals that had been enforced top-down and were often rather distant, namely democracy and the free market, without paying heed to problems emerging in the socio-cultural sphere. It seems that artists attempted to turn the general attention to this deficit; the title of the exhibition, FOGHORN, which originates from a work by Mirosław Bałka and Katarzyna Krakowiak presented therein, suggests that it is indeed worthwhile to listen attentively to art, as it regularly sends early-warning signals, calling attention to problems and providing preliminary compass readings in the frequently obscure and confusing socio-cultural realities.

The messages sent by works that constitute the "FOGHORN" exhibition oscillate between criticism and irony levelled at the main phenomena of the transformation. Yet elements of a balanced nostalgia, as well as the evocation of forgotten narratives or demystification of

[1] The category of institutional vectors originates from the model of social awareness in modernity as proposed by P.L. Berger, B. Berger and H. Kellner in their book *The Homeless Mind. Modernization and Consciousness*. According to these authors, in terms of economics and politics it was industrial capitalism and the bureaucratic state that constituted these vectors in the modern period; they had an indirect influence on the structure and content of the modern social awareness.

dominant ones, make an appearance as well. Some of the works develop concepts that clearly contradict the official discourses of the transition culture or complement it with themes that had been eliminated from public debate. The analysis of the post-Communist order; the examination of industrial modernity and the decline of the social avant-garde; the unconcealed mockery of intellectual stances centring on the West; the distanced approach to the new cultural order; the assessment of the changing systems of values and of symbols; the protest against the radicalisation of the socio-political reality; all these constitute one of the exhibition's thematic profiles.

Another approach is the broadening of the perspective to include other countries. It may be said that the transformation in Europe and in its Asian borderlands was *glocal* in its character.[2] Its chief institutional vectors were similar, to a certain extent arising from the so-called "end of history" and the opening to the global, or at least the "Western", culture. Yet the actual social changes occurred on the basis of events, actions, stances, values and symbols rooted locally, in a specific historical and cultural context. By including works of artists from Romania, Kosovo, Armenia, Azerbaijan or Croatia into the exhibition, it proved possible to demonstrate the diversity of experiences that fall under the – seemingly shared – banner of transformation.

In addition, works of artists from that region of the world demonstrate, often in a markedly ironic manner, the regional character of art world, which had seemingly opened in the year 1989. The need for a "new geography of art" or the call for "horizontal art history" sent out by Prof. Piotr Piotrowski very often foundered on the lack of equal treatment of art originating in Central-Eastern Europe due to the Western-centric paradigm still dominant in the global approach to art. The ostensibly open borders often amounted to eternal nomadism, the dilemmas of emigration or the sense of exclusion, alienation and banishment to the periphery.

This is not the only theme linked with the field of art to be present at the exhibition. The period of the transformation meant also the emergence of contemporary art circulation on the one hand, and its social perception on the other, which unfortunately was often modelled by the sensation-driven commercial mass media. The 1989 caesura and the byword "freedom" called up in all possible contexts and settings coincided, paradoxically, with a period of increased censorship directed against contemporary art (suffice it to mention the lawsuit against Dorota Nieznalska or the attack on Maurizio Cattelan's sculpture in the Zachęta Gallery in Warsaw), which often resulted in self-censoring measures being taken at cultural institutions. It was also a period when expectations towards creators were great, whereas their position was worsening. Consequently, the exhibition touches upon the topic of the condition and status of artists within society.

[2] The term *glocalization* was first used by the sociologist R. Robertson in his book *Globalization. Social Theory and Global Culture* (1992).

A collection is a closed set; hence the works selected for the exhibition certainly do not exhaust the topic of the transformations associated with the 1989 breakthrough in all its complexity. Yet the exhibited works obviously point to some issues which thirty years later, and viewed from today's perspective, still seem not to have been properly worked through. The artists' positions oscillate between the call for the autonomy of art and the postulate of its social involvement, indicating that the realm of art is wide enough to accommodate both these approaches and the effectiveness of art can be assessed not only in the extent of actual social changes, but also in the development of the awareness that such changes are needed.

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