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Reading Nonrepresentational Painting:

An Example from the Village of Strońsko by the Warta River

Doctoral dissertation written under the supervision

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Łódź 2022

Summary

The goal of this dissertation was to confirm or contradict certain views of artists and critics who claim that the cultural area of the village is not a conducive space for contemporary art, especially abstract art. As a result of my observations of the community living in the small village of Strońsko (in the province of Łódzkie), my research into its history and traditions, followed by trips to contemporary art exhibitions, workshops and open-air events for the local people, I carried on individual conversations about abstract painting. Thus, thirteen portraits of native villagers who underwent the experience of nonrepresentational art were created. The interviews also included „source” material in the form of memories: images of the former village and its inhabitants (traditions, rituals, neighborly relations, etc.), as well as thoughts about the present day. The main content of the interviews is the aesthetic opinions of my interlocutors on architecture, natural beauty, folk art objects, sacred and naïve art, as well as works of representational and nonrepresentational painting from across the world, which I presented to my interlocutors one by one, in the form of reproductions. Their reflections and assessments enabled me to determine the extent of the influence of both traditional folk culture and contemporary visual culture (available in the countryside) on the perception of contemporary artworks. My indirect goal was to establish the degree of readiness of the community surveyed in the 21st century to embrace a different, „previously absent” aesthetic area of nonrepresentational art in the rural environment. As a result of my research, animation activities and, above all, conversations about art with local residents, I found that through the process of gradually experiencing works of a nonrepresentational form, my hypothesis can be confirmed that – regardless of the tradition of visual culture and a person’s competence – any potential viewer can overcome the

mental barrier of the „foreignness” of nonrepresentational forms and enter into a dialogue with abstract imagery.

The *Introduction* is devoted to presenting the origin of my interest in the phenomenon of how abstract art is perceived. I describe my fascination with the natural environment of my new place of residence – Strońsko. I briefly report on what I learned about the daily life in this community and the stages of integration that set me on the path of exploration and inspired me to conduct research experiments. In the subsequent section, I explain the research process, describing its successive stages and justifying the choice of techniques adapted to the social conditions, characterizing each of them, including the questionnaire and the visual test containing reproductions of objects of folk art, folk handicrafts, naïve art, sacred painting and recognized works of representational and nonrepresentational painting belonging to the world heritage.

On the basis of primary and secondary sources, in *Chapter One*, I give an overview of the history of Strońsko and I outline the social dynamics, customs, and events shaping the changes in the landscape of the village over a period of about eighty years. I describe the processes of transformation taking place in modern times, with particular emphasis on the state of culture after the political transition, and the current search for remedies in this area by village leaders. I include selected statements of Strońsko residents, which characterize the influence of traditional folk culture and contemporary visual culture on the scope of individual and group aesthetic sensitivity.

Chapter Two explores the changing role of images and imagery that shape contemporary visual culture available in the Polish countryside. Drawing on secondary sources, I describe the importance of imagery in traditional folk culture, focusing on the features and role of sacred imagery in influencing the consolidation of worldview, as well as the formation of customs. I quote the statements of Strońsko residents evaluating the aesthetic beauty of the religious image. Based on conversations with the residents, I present the image culture popularized and shaped by the available media. I point out their role in the individual and collective reading of reality. In this part of the work, I cite the contemporary opinions of Strońsko residents on the works of representational painting, and I attempt to diagnose the influence of aesthetic views as well as individual and collective experiences on the process of *reading* the presented art objects.

Chapter Three overviews the history of the emergence of the main currents and trends in nonrepresentational art. I synthesize the role of abstractionism in the transformation of 20th-century aesthetic views. I offer examples of the direct impact of abstractionism on architecture, design, advertising, etc., as well as 20th-century philosophical thought. I relate the phenomena of this breakthrough to contemporary times. Furthermore, this section discusses the key features of abstract painting. Next, I present selected „portraits” of Strońsko residents, which are an abbreviated transcript

of the interviews: conversations and reflections on art, including opinions on abstract painting.

In the *Summary*, I offer conclusions that bring me closer to understanding the aesthetic attitudes of residents of the modern village.

In the *Conclusion* of the thesis, I show the results of the analysis of the conducted research. On the basis of available reports on economic, social and cultural changes in Polish villages (over the past twenty years), I assess the current state of cultural needs of Strońsko residents. I attempt to diagnose the reasons for the weak presence of contemporary art in rural areas. Finally, I comment on my planned activities to promote contemporary art in the Strońsko area.

The manuscript of the dissertation has been supplemented with an *Appendix*, which contains, among other things: a description of the first meeting of Strońsko residents with abstract painting, which inspired my decision to conduct scholarly research (Report from the workshop „Abstracts in May”); a visual test: a thematically organized set of reproductions, which I presented to my interviewees in the form of individual photographs; an auxiliary questionnaire employed during interviews; and the results of a survey conducted during a visit by Strońsko residents to the Stefan Gierowski Foundation in Warsaw, entitled: „What About Abstraction?”.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Jewicki'.