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Review

Jakub Banasiak, *Proteuszowe czasy. Rozpad państwowego systemu sztuki 1982-1993*,

Akademia Sztuk Pięknych w Warszawie, Muzeum Sztuki Nowoczesnej w Warszawie, Warszawa, 2020, 596 pp.

The impressive length of Jakub Banasiak's book is a result of the impressive scale of the scientific research undertaken by the author. It is not only about the accuracy of the research, the variety and length of the analysed archives, but also about the complexity of the goals set by the author.

On a basic level, the book shows the transformation of the art system from the times of martial law in the Polish People's Republic from 13 December 1981 to the first state laws towards art after 1989. The author analyses the mechanisms of state art trade, financing methods, gallery activities, groundbreaking exhibitions, cultural and art press. The research covers primarily the state circulation of art, but also the "church circulation", which flourished after the introduction of martial law. The research is based on books, press, interviews, state and private archives. His postulate of returning art history to basic research Banasiak carries out very carefully. The result is the art history focused on a material, legal and institutional basis of artistic life. This base is very often overlooked in books dedicated to art, which is seen rather as the area of aesthetic or even metaphysical decisions.

The book also shows the changes within the state circulation of art: the emergence of the first private initiatives, galleries. The author proves that the transition from the socialist to the capitalist model of art did not happen suddenly, in June 1989, but was evolutionary. It was initiated by reforms in the second half of the 1980s, concerning not only art but the state economy system in general. This is another great advantage of Banasiak's book: demonstrating the changes in the art market against a broader economic background.

Doing so, Banasiak proves one of the basic theses of his book, which says that "in relation to the state system of art from 1986–1989 one can speak of a 'second

thaw” (p. 41). The author refers to the so-called October thaw in Poland after Stalin’s death, which peaked in 1955–1956. This is, of course, controversial because it ignores the complexity of the causes, mechanisms and effects of changes in the two political periods. However, this controversy is here conscious and purposeful: it is about giving a new focus to the thesis, which is not as well established in the field of art history as it is in cultural studies.

However, Banasiak’s ambitions go further: it’s not only about a new kind of art history (focused on the economic basis), but also about changing the historical and artistic narrative. He wants to overturn the great national narrative, which makes us believe that back in the 1980s there was a binary opposition between a communist state and a “rebel nation” (p. 30), which resulted in a general boycott of the state circulation of art by artists. Banasiak proves that the cooperation and partnership between artists and operators of the state circulation of art was more than common. It is not, however, about “accusing” the artists. Contrary. Banasiak’s proposal is consistent with the postulates put forward in the field of cultural studies in recent years: to look at PRL in a sober, non-ideological way as a system that apart from totalisation of social life offered also its egalitarisation and modernisation. Banasiak proposes that one should move beyond the moral criteria commonly adopted in historical and artistic narratives, focused on dissident and anti-communist attitudes, presenting the 1980s in a bipolar division: conformism versus heroism. This is where Banasiak’s book becomes truly inspiring and – which is natural – provokes polemics. I will present two topics for discussion.

Proving that the history of art in Poland is a totalitarian history the author draws on the works of Piotr Piotrowski, primarily *Dekada* (Decade). The problem is that this book is devoted to Polish art in the 1970s and was written 30 years ago. Since then, many studies on Polish art of the 1980s were built on various, also “non-totalitarian” assumptions. Banasiak includes them, but mainly in the footnotes. Besides, it’s hard to agree with the claim that Piotrowski was responsible for creating “totalitarian” narration in Polish art history. Even in the last chapter of *Dekada* dedicated to the art in the 1980s he makes “dissident art” a subjects to devastating criticism. It is then exactly the opposite of what Banasiak suggests: hardly anyone has done as much as Piotr Piotrowski to depart from heroic, nationalist narratives in the history of Polish art and to promote leftist, critical attitudes, narratives and methodologies.

I totally agree with Banasiak that looking at Polish art of the 1980s through the prism of moral attitudes leads to its distortion. This is, in my opinion, one of the most important postulates of the art history proposed by the author. However, I understand it differently: as a challenge addressed to the authors of historical analyses, but not as an element that should be excluded from the analysis of artistic life. “I am not interested in the moral attitude [...] of the participants of the state art system,” writes Banasiak, “but the reasons and methods of the participation” (p. 38). There is a question: is it possible to separate the two? It is “moral attitude” – understood as internalised set of social norms, in other words: the kind of self-censorship – that is the key factor in behaviour of the individual and the community. The right

postulate of moving in describing artistic reality “beyond good and evil” does not, in my opinion, mean the negation of the Imaginary order, but its deconstruction, which allows to show the true impact of the Imaginary on reality. The result of its omission by the author is, for example, the lack of gender issues in his book – the issues belonging to the Imaginary order and having a key significance for artistic life in every dimension.

I consider provoking discussions to be a value of Banasiak’s book. It’s not only original analysis of artistic life in Poland in the 1980s, but also the work that offers a fresh perspective on the dynamics and development of both Polish art and Polish history of art. This is “must read” for anyone interested in contemporary and in the methodology of historical research.