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Looking Back at Looking Forward: Art Exhibitions in Poland for the 1975 AICA Congress

In early September of 1975 a crowd of over 140 individuals from 18 countries, including art critics, museum and gallery directors as well as representatives of artistic organisations, descended onto the capital of the People's Republic of Poland to tour the country in the last days of summer. From Warsaw to Cracow, to Wrocław to Łódź and back again, the programme tailored for the occasion was replete with meetings and discussions, but it also abounded with visits to art exhibitions. The 11th Congress of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA), organised in Poland under the watchful eye of Professor Juliusz Starzyński, sent ripples across the sea of local artistic life in the mid-1970s. Some of the presentations and works commissioned for that occasion made art history, others were soon, perhaps undeservedly, forgotten. In what follows, I would like to look at two presentations put together especially for that event: *Voir et Concevoir* (Widzieć i rozumieć) which was developed for Cracow's historic Cloth Hall, a part of the city's National Museum, by Mieczysław Porębski in collaboration with Andrzej Pawłowski, and the exhibition that came to be known as *Critics' Picks* (Krytycy sztuki proponują), which was held at the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions, known as the Zachęta, in Warsaw.

The surge of interest in art exhibitions as a research subject over the last two decades opened up a range of new perspectives from which to view and reassess both the existing art historical writing – including the resulting artistic canon – as well as the current exhibition-making practice. A leading scholar in the field of exhibition history, Bruce Altshuler, observed: "Those engaged in the study of exhibitions frequently come upon little-known documents that enrich, or even radically revise, our understanding of modern and contemporary art. [...] With the growing art historical interest in exhibitions and art world institutions, such documentation plays an increasingly important role in our understanding of the past. Scrutinising the historical presentation of art also illuminates our own experience, prompting a more nuanced

perspective on current artistic and curatorial practice”.¹ Accordingly, the aim of this overview is not so much to offer an in-depth reading of those exhibitions as to frame them within the context in which they originated, i.e. as official surveys of Polish art meant largely for international audiences.

In this sense, the attempt below seeks to shed light on the work of certain individuals as much as on the workings of some of the state institutions – acknowledging their privileged status, their will to experiment as well as their limitations and, last but not least, role in constructing the canon. All of them were active agents in the latter process, producing exhibitions that had the ambition of offering an overview of the art of the People’s Republic of Poland as well as heralding the directions of its future development. This said, an important point of reference for this outline is the call for the development of a “horizontal art history”, as set forth by Professor Piotr Piotrowski, according to which the dominant art historical narratives of the 20th century, created in particular in Western Europe and the United States, should be cast in a different light and subjected to critical reassessment by analyses of the phenomena that took place beyond the centres thus understood.²

The AICA Congress

In 1971 the authorities of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA), in collaboration with the Polish section, made the decision to organise the 11th Congress of its members in the People’s Republic of Poland. The AICA, an institution operating under the auspices of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), was launched as a result of two international assemblies that took place in Paris in 1948 and 1949. The Polish section of the AICA was established in May 1955 during a general assembly held in Oxford, at the initiative of Professor Juliusz Starzyński, who also became the section’s head.³ Starzyński (1906–1974), an art historian, was instrumental in shaping the state structures of art historical research in the post-war period, having paved the way for establishing the Art Institute of

- 1 B. Altshuler, *Salon to Biennial. Exhibitions that Made Art History. Vol. 1: 1863–1959*, New York, 2008, p. 7.
- 2 P. Piotrowski, “On the Spatial Turn, or Horizontal Art History”, *Umeni/Art*, 2008, no. 5, pp. 378–383. Also see idem, “Towards Horizontal Art History”, in: *Crossing Cultures. Conflict. Migration, and Convergence*, ed. J. Anderson, Melbourne, 2009, pp. 82–85; idem, “Towards a Horizontal History of the European Avant-Garde”, in: *Europa! Europa! The Avant-Garde, Modernism and the Fate of a Continent*, eds. S. Bru et al., Berlin, 2009, pp. 49–58; “On the Spatial Turn”, in: *Promises of the Past: A Discontinuous History of Art in Former Eastern Europe*, eds. C. Macel et al., Paris, 2010, pp. 212–215.
- 3 Letter of Juliusz Starzyński of 16 September 1960, Rennes, Archives de la Critique d’Art, FR ACA AICAI THE CON014 2/05. Also see the Bulletin of the Polish National Commission for UNESCO, Warsaw, 2014, pp. 25, 30.

the Polish Academy of Sciences where he served as the head, and remained an influential figure throughout his life.⁴ No more than three years after the Oxford assembly, the Polish branch was entrusted with the task of organising the 7th International Congress which, upon Starzyński's initiative,⁵ adopted the slogan "Art – Nations – World". The congress took place 6–13 September 1960 in both Warsaw and Cracow, and while its programme included visits to exhibitions, these, for the most part, did not feature specially commissioned presentations and involved tours of permanent displays at state museums and current exhibitions.⁶ (A notable exception was *Konfrontacje 1960*, a string of events held at the Krzywe Koło Gallery devoted to a number of different artists).⁷ The primary aim of the congress, however, was to reflect on the title theme through a series of discussions and papers prepared in response to a survey that had been sent to AICA members before the event.⁸

4 See S. Mossakowski, "Juliusz Starzyński", *Rocznik Historii Sztuki*, 1976, vol. XI, pp. 5–8; M. Leśniakowska, "Władza spojrzenia – władza języka. Juliusza Starzyńskiego obraz sztuki i jej historii", *Modus*, 2013, vol. XII–XIII, pp. 27–52.

5 *Bulletin of the 7th International Congress of Art Critics*, Warsaw, 1960, no. 1, unpaginated.

6 For a rare and in-depth analysis of this event, see T. Kodera, "Art – Nations – World': The 1960 International Congress of the AICA in Poland and Discussions on the International Character of Modern Art", *Pamiętnik Sztuk Pięknych: Sztuka Polska 1945–1970* [Fine Arts Diary: Polish Art 1945–1970], 2015, no. 9, pp. 203–216. The author, following the approach proposed by Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann in his *Toward a Geography of Art*, focuses on the congress as an event as well as on the accompanying debate as a means of understanding international trends in modern and contemporary art scholarship.

7 *Konfrontacje 1960*, organised by Marian Bogusz, Stefan Gierowski and Aleksander Wojciechowski and inaugurated on 8 September 1960, featured paintings by Marian Bogusz, Tadeusz Brzozowski, Tadeusz Dominik, Stefan Gierowski, Bronisław Kierkowski, Jerzy Nowosielski, Jan Tarasin, Jerzy Tchórzewski, Rajmund Ziemiński, and sculptures by Alina Szapocznikow, Alina Ślesińska, Magdalena Więcek. The event became arguably one of the key exhibitions hosted by the gallery. See A. Wojciechowski, "Konfrontacje 1960", in: *Galeria Krzywe Koło*, Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie, Warsaw, 1990, pp. 71–77; *Konfrontacje 1960*, ed. A. Wojciechowski, Galeria Krzywego Koła, Starmiejski Dom Kultury, Warsaw, 1960.

8 Noteworthy initiatives addressed during the event included establishing an international centre for documentation concerning the beginnings of modern art which was to be launched by Starzyński under the auspices of UNESCO. See the *Bulletin of the 7th...*, op. cit. The 7th AICA Congress *L'art – les nations – l'univers* was reported on extensively by the professional periodical *Przegląd Artystyczny* which, at that time, carried the masthead "The Magazine of the State Institute of Art and the Polish Section of the International Association of Art Critics". An issue entirely devoted to the congress featured a selection of papers sent by AICA members in response to the questionnaire published by the Polish Section. The survey concerned three points: "Modern art as an international phenomenon", "Modern art as a result and expression of the multiple traditions and artistic tendencies of the different nations", "Modern art and the perspectives for the development of art of different nations". The responses, printed in Polish and in the original language, were dominated by French contributors, among them Jean Bouret,

Thus the congress of 1975 was the second AICA event in history to be held in Poland. Starzyński, still at the helm of the Polish section, set out to work on the programme of the assembly well before, hoping to not only generate a discussion among the participants but also to present a broad overview of the different phenomena taking place in Polish art. The common practice for AICA gatherings was to hold annual gatherings lasting from seven to twelve days in a different country each year. The congress in Poland followed a significant event: in 1974, for the first time, the organisation's members met in East Berlin and in Dresden, in the German Democratic Republic. The GDR section – established and accepted into AICA structures during the Polish congress of 1960 – now played host to an event that enjoyed hitherto unseen popularity,⁹ attracting over 180 attendees from across the world (the USSR, which officially did not belong to the organisation, sent four observers who presented three papers). During a closed session in Warsaw in 1974, Starzyński – one of the five Polish delegates to the East German congress – addressed his fellow members of the local AICA assessing the role of the hosts with the following words: “Possibly, this is a part of a broader effort carried out by the GDR that consists in surfacing, documenting and playing an exceptional role in the cultural field on the international arena”.¹⁰ In saying this, Starzyński saw the East German initiative both as a point of reference, a model, and competition. Noting the exceptional support enjoyed by the GDR section on the part of the state and municipal authorities, he emphasised: “We must present artistic issues of the highest quality. Which is not to say that the congress should be apolitical, it cannot be, and will not be such, by all means”.¹¹ The theme selected for the Polish Congress, which was “Art – Science – Technology as Elements of the Development of our Epoch”, echoed the current policy of UNESCO which connected the realms of culture, art, science and ethics.¹²

Starzyński, however, set out to follow the guidelines in papers and exhibitions in a more “content-oriented than declarative manner”, so as to offer participants an “anthology of the different themes of Polish visual arts of the 20th century”.¹³ It was his will to “eliminate the empty talk of conference

Pierre Couthion, Waldemar George, Jean-Clarence Lambert, Guy Weelen, Joseph Pichard, Georges Pillement, Michel Ragon and Pierre Restany, with one text by a German art historian, Franz Roh. This debate which, in some cases, embraced the concept of modern art as an international language was cut short with the end of the Polish Thaw – a political change in the mid-1950s triggered by the death of Stalin which came to a halt in the early 1960s. See *Przegląd Artystyczny*, 1960, no. 2–3.

9 J. Starzyński, “Zebranie Sekcji Polskiej, 17.09.1974”, transcript, Warsaw, Special Collections, Institute of Art, Polish Academy of Sciences, p. 11.

10 Ibid., p. 12.

11 Ibid., pp. 12–13.

12 Letter of the Polish delegate to UNESCO to J. Starzyński, 12 December 1973, quoted in: idem. Also see W. Balicki, J. Kossak, M. Żuławski, *Cultural Policy in Poland*, Paris, 1973.

13 J. Starzyński, op. cit., pp. 14, 18.

papers written beforehand” and to stimulate an exchange in a different field that led to the inclusion of exhibitions as a contribution in the debate on the shape of the current art.¹⁴

Professor Starzyński did not live to see the result of his efforts – he died in December 1974. At a meeting in February of the following year a new board of the Polish section of AICA was selected, with Władysława Jaworska as the head. Jaworska, working with Małgorzata Sobieraj and Anda Rottenberg, oversaw and implemented the congress plans that had been developed under Starzyński.¹⁵ The assembly itself was initially scheduled for May 1975, a date that was warmly received by the representatives of the Ministry of Culture (in all likelihood due to the accompanying celebrations of Labour Day). However, a vote of the AICA members in 1974 decided otherwise, with 127 in favour of pushing the date to September and only two willing to arrive in May. As a result, the 11th AICA Congress and the 27th General Assembly took place from 9 to 16 September in Warsaw, Cracow, Wrocław and Łódź, after which the delegates returned to Warsaw again. The event enjoyed an exceptionally high attendance, with over 140 delegates visiting the People’s Republic of Poland from 18 countries. Over 30 papers delivered at the time explored two broadly defined fields: the intersection of science, art and technology as well as the potential links between the social space and that of art.¹⁶ At the same time, a number of congress exhibitions embraced the concept of experiment to showcase the current artistic practices of the People’s Republic of Poland, hoping to tie their future to a broader international circuit.¹⁷ The first of them took place in Cracow.

14 Ibid., p. 16.

15 A. Rottenberg, “Recollections from the Congress”, *The Brooklyn Rail*, May 2014; A. Rottenberg, “Kongres AICA (Polska)”, *Projekt*, 1976, vol. 21, no. 1 (110), p. 58.

16 W. Jaworska, “Po kongresie AICA”, *Sztuka*, 1975, no. 6, pp. 1–2.

17 Other important exhibitions presented on the occasion included displays at Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, among them a presentation of works by Alina Szapocznikow, the exhibition *Around Surrealism* organised by Mariusz Hermansdorfer at the National Gallery in Wrocław, and the international exhibition *Terra I* put together by Stefan Müller in the city’s Architecture Museum. Of these, only the latter has received sufficient attention of scholars. See *W kręgu nadrealizmu*, ed. M. Hermansdorfer, exhibition catalogue, National Museum in Wrocław, Wrocław, 1975; *Międzynarodowa Wystawa Architektury Intencjonalnej “Terra-1”*, Stowarzyszenie Architektów Polskich, Wrocław, 1975; S. Müller, “Terra I: Międzynarodowa Wystawa Architektury Intencjonalnej”, *Projekt*, 1975, vol. 20, no. 4 (107), pp. 45–51. Also see “Terra”, *Autoportret*, 2011, no. 2 (34), pp. 42–49; G. Świtek, “Spacesuits, Space Kitchens, Space Cities...”, in: *Kosmos żywy – Cosmos Calling*, eds. J. Kordjak-Piotrowska, S. Welbel, Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw, 2014, pp. 145–159. In 1974 Starzyński suggested organising three solo exhibitions of artists “who[se work] would be known in person by the majority of the participants and who gained international acclaim in the course of the last 15 years, that is between 1960 and 1974”. These were: Piotr Potworowski in Poznań, Alina Szapocznikow in Łódź and Aleksander Kobzdej in Warsaw. Lastly, one of the most interesting congress initiatives that failed to see the light of day was the exhibition entitled *Unidentified Art*, planned for Wrocław’s Hatzfeld Palace by Włodzimierz Borowski

Voir et Concevoir

One of the first exhibitions presented to the members of the AICA upon their arrival in Poland was *Voir et Concevoir*, or *To See and to Understand*, organised by art historian Mieczysław Porębski (1921–2012) in collaboration with artist and designer Andrzej Pawłowski (1925–1986)¹⁸ in the historic Cloth Hall, which was a section of the National Museum in Cracow. Porębski and Pawłowski were approached by Starzyński to develop a concept of the exhibition before 1974, and their proposal was considered among the congress' highlights from the outset (Starzyński even considered inaugurating the event in Cracow).¹⁹ The two produced a presentation which came to be remembered not for its scale but for its non-conventional approach to museum practice. The event brought together work by seven contemporary artists²⁰ in an unlikely setting of the museum's new permanent display of 19th-century art, unveiled to the public in June 1975. The new display, also the result of cooperation between Porębski, the institution's curator, and Pawłowski, involved not only a rehang-ing of the existing paintings, now presented alongside a selection of works from the museum's storage, but also the creation of a comprehensive environment based on historic presentations of art from the previous century gleaned from documentation.²¹ In this setting, complete with such elements as carpets and potted palm trees, the works would be 'perceived as though through the eyes of those original viewers'.²² The concept, Porębski later argued, while essentially focusing on Polish art, also sought to present the broad horizons of the 19th century as a period that was not confined solely to Poland.²³

It was against this historicising backdrop that Porębski chose to stage his exhibition proposal. "Welcoming the members of AICA to this historical and cultural centre of our city" – he addressed the audience at the opening – "in a building that has been the premises of the Cracow National Museum for

and Jerzy Ludwiński. See *Sztuka Niezidentyfikowana*, typescript, Warsaw, Archive of Włodzimierz Borowski, Museum of Modern Art. See also "Unidentified Art", in: *Notes From the Future of Art: Selected Writings by Jerzy Ludwiński*, ed. M. Ziółkowska, Eindhoven, pp. 45–48.

18 For more on Pawłowski, see *Andrzej Pawłowski 1925–1986*, exhibition catalogue, ed. J. Trzupiek, Katowice, 2002.

19 J. Starzyński, op. cit., p. 19.

20 The participants of the exhibition were Tadeusz Brzozowski, Stanisław Fijałkowski, Tadeusz Kantor, Adam Marczyński, Jerzy Nowosielski, Andrzej Pawłowski, Ryszard Wi-niarski. See *Voir et Concevoir*, exhibition leaflet, National Museum in Cracow, Cracow, 1975.

21 A. Olszewska, "Obecność prac humanisty. O Mieczysławie Porębskim w 2013", *Rocznik Historii Sztuki*, 2013, vol. XXXVIII, pp. 23–24.

22 J. Madeyski, "Retro w Sukiennicach", *Życie Literackie*, 27 July 1975, no. 30; "Galeria Malarstwa w Sukiennicach na nowo urządzona w stylu retro", *Echo Krakowa*, 13–15 June 1975, no. 132, pp. 1–2.

23 M. Porębski, *Galeria Polskiego Malarstwa i Rzeźby XIX wieku w Sukiennicach*, guide, National Museum in Cracow, Cracow, 1991, p. 14.

over a century now, we introduce our guests to a certain framework of fixed traditions and significance. These are, essentially, visual frames. [...] Until recently, we were inclined to look at the legacy of the 19th century from one perspective only: that of a struggle for the autonomy of a painter's practice, an independence from iconographic trends and programmes of the day, and of developing a language of pure visual values. [...] Today, however [...] we are interested not only in its formal aspect but also, more and more frequently, precisely in the aspect of iconography. We learn not only how to see it but also to understand it [...] within a system of motifs, subjects and series exploring certain themes in which ideas, myths and obsessions central to the period were expressed. For Polish art, this fact was of special significance due to the role this art came to play at the time when the country lost its sovereignty, precisely in the 19th century. [...] This gave rise to the distinct and sophisticated character of the iconographic programmes pursued by our art, but also to the growing need to escape the vicious circle of venerated motifs and themes and to explore a set of more universal problems, to set foot on the solid ground of facts of a purely visual nature and, through them, to find a common language with the rest – if not the rest of the world then at least the rest of Europe”.²⁴ These opening remarks highlighted both the existence of the hosting institution as well as its underlying mechanisms which Porębski sought to alter, establishing links between the local practice and developments in other countries.

“I should say that the slogan, ‘To See and to Understand’, under which our exhibition was presented is rather accidental” explained Porębski in a text published later.²⁵ The watchword, the scholar went on to explain, appeared at the time when, together with Pawłowski, he started to consider the possibility of confronting the different ways of visualising the ‘intellectual substance’ of our times.²⁶ According to Porębski: “To see means to look and to teach people how to look, to encourage and even to force them to look; it relates to that specific kind of ‘emphatic presence’, to the visual and iconic aspect of the picture, to the sphere of the artists’ manipulations, of their independence and freedom”; while “to understand means to read, to decipher, and to decode. It is a process of reducing the picture to its ‘text’ that one must put in an appropriate context of things and ideas, and relate to implied individual and social meanings in order to explain its origin, conditions and limitations”.²⁷ Such was the reasoning that informed one in the original curatorial concept.

In practice, Porębski, acting on behalf of the museum, commissioned seven renowned contemporary Polish artists (among them Pawłowski),

24 M. Porębski, “Widzieć i pojmować”; a speech delivered at the opening of the exhibition, in: *Pożegnanie z krytyką*, Cracow, 1983, pp. 186–187.

25 M. Porębski, “Widzieć i rozumieć”, *Projekt*, 1976, no. 1 (100), pp. 62–63.

26 Another title considered for the exhibition was “Visual Thought”, J. Starzyński, op. cit., p. 21.

27 M. Porębski, “Widzieć i rozumieć”, op. cit.

to produce works for the recently redesigned permanent display which was engaged in the historical character and artistic tradition of the 19th century in a direct or less so manner.²⁸ The resulting contributions expanded on Porębski's concept of a permanent display transforming the museum into the site of an experiment: the geometric works of Ryszard Winiarski and Adam Marczyński stood in stark contrast to the *Four-in-Hand* by Józef Chełmoński depicting a cart drawn by four horses in full gallop (at times described as the pinnacle of Polish naturalism). Similarly, albeit in a different manner, the patches of vivid colour on Tadeusz Brzozowski's canvases seemed both at home and out of place in the otherwise toned-down museum hall. The austere interior in acrylic paint by Jerzy Nowosielski teetered between abstraction and representation, exuding an aura of mystical ritual. Two smaller canvases by Stanisław Fijałkowski, on the other hand, echoed academic painting in their scale yet carried a similar suggestion of hidden meanings that the viewer was meant to decipher. The three-dimensional, eerie human-like shapes in shades of red by Pawłowski echoed those of humans which had been cast in bronze several decades earlier and placed on plinths inside the room.²⁹ The most striking of these was perhaps the *Emballage of the Prussian Homage*, in which Tadeusz Kantor set out to confront the most eminent figure of Polish historical painting – Jan Matejko – by recasting the latter's monumental work completed in 1882 as a pale, "packaged" four-panel canvas with faint outlines of the figures, two of which bore features of Kantor's self-portraits.³⁰

There is a number of hints that Porębski was aware of the radical character of the project and the potential controversy it would stir among the broader public.³¹ Together with Starzyński they planned to educate potential visitors on the exhibition's character and to emphasise that it was "not a demonstration against Matejko or Chełmoński but a demonstration as such, an expression of our cult of tradition, yet one that is active rather than idolatrous".³² Seen as a clash of new imagery with a wide spectrum of 19th-century works (of varying artistic quality and style, both outstanding and mediocre, academic and independent, pervaded with patriotic meanings or purely personal), *Voir et Concevoir* marked a rift in the traditional museum practice of the day. The institution not only acted as a patron, directly commissioning works from

28 R. Solewski, "Widzieć i rozumieć", *Kresy*, 1997, no. 31, pp. 220–223.

29 "Widzieć i rozumieć", Cracow, Archive of the National Museum, 71/280.

30 See K. Czerni, "Ambalaż 'Hołdu pruskiego' Kantora jako portret metafizyczny artysty", in: *Ambalaż "Hołdu pruskiego". Obraz Tadeusza Kantora w Sukiennicach*, Cracow, 2000, pp. 11–16; M. Porębski, "Ambalaże, ambalaże", *ibid.*, pp. 5–10.

31 Indeed a controversy soon followed, as is testified in the museum's visitors' book, which is replete with comments denouncing the presence of contemporary works in the Cloth Hall rooms. Cracow, Archive of the National Museum, 3/rkp/ks.pam (I would like to thank Diana Błońska and Małgorzata Garlacz of the Archive for their help).

32 J. Starzyński, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

artists,³³ but was also transformed into a site of confrontation with current artistic traditions, which was a bold move at the time, both in the People's Republic of Poland and, possibly, in Europe.³⁴ At the same time, this gesture was only possible within the framework of the AICA Congress, which opened up the possibility to experiment in order to develop a progressive and dynamic image of Polish art – one that linked the past and the present.

Critics' Picks, or 30 Works for the 30th Anniversary of the People's Republic of Poland

The second exhibition, which was organised especially with the members of the International Association of Art Critics in mind and which I aim to explore in this paper, took place in Warsaw's Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions, which is the present-day Zachęta – the National Gallery of Art. Its venue, however, as well as the ultimate shape it took, was not so much a matter of premeditated choice as a result of the unexpected circumstances surrounding the development of the exhibition's concept, which, I would like to argue, only reveals its innovative potential when framed in the context of the AICA event.

While the exact authorship of the original concept remains unclear, it is certain that the presentation in question was conceived as a highlight of the upcoming congress, in collaboration between Starzyński and the art critic Janusz Bogucki (1916–1995). Its idea was based on a survey, developed in 1973 and conducted later among the members of the national section of the AICA who were asked to provide a selection of 30 essential works of Polish artists created after 2nd World War and accompanied by a concise justification. Of the 30 individuals who were approached with the questionnaire, 20 responded with a list of works and one replied with a written explanation.³⁵ The ques-

33 Porębski also saw this role as a way of enlarging the Museum's collections of current art. See K. Czerni, *Nie tylko o sztuce: rozmowy z profesorem Mieczysławem Porębskim*, Poznań, 1992, pp. 177–179.

34 In an interview with Mariusz Hermansdorfer conducted by the author, this long-standing director of the National Museum in Wrocław noted that Porębski's decision was ground-breaking in the European museum practice of the day, "Interview with Mariusz Hermansdorfer", April 2015, in the author's archive.

35 Those who responded to the questionnaire were: Marceli Bacciarelli, Helena Blum, Janusz Bogucki, Szymon Bojko, Ewa Garztecka, Elżbieta Grabska, Irena Jakimowicz, Władysława Jaworska, Bożena Kowalska, Kazimierz Malinowski, Andrzej Osęka, Ksawery Piwocki, Andrzej Ryszkiewicz, Wojciech Skrodzki, Jerzy Stajuda, Juliusz Starzyński, Wiesława Wierchowaska, Aleksander Wojciechowski, Jacek Woźniakowski, and Jerzy Zanoziński. The individual to refuse to submit a list but to offer written feedback was Mieczysław Porębski. Those who abstained from or did not respond for any other reason were: Stanisław Lorentz, Jerzy Sienkiewicz, Mieczysław Wallis, Wiesław Borowski, Urszula Czartoryska, Andrzej Jakimowicz, Jerzy Ludwiński, Piotr Krakowski

tionnaire yielded a total of 590 entries which were then compiled into a list that reflected the popularity of particular artists by proportion.³⁶

Yet this singular method of arriving at a list of works to be exhibited was but the first step in a protracted process. The next projected stage consisted in presenting the results of this survey, i.e. the documentation, in a "preliminary exhibition" that was scheduled to take place at the Współczesna Gallery, run by Bogucki, to be followed by discussions at meetings and in the press which would serve as a basis for the final selection of 30 works to be showcased at a second exhibition set to open at the National Museum in Warsaw.³⁷

In July 1974, however, Bogucki ceased to be the director of the Współczesna Gallery which he had founded in 1965 and headed with his wife,

and Ryszard Stanisławski. "Krytycy sztuki proponują", Warsaw, Special Collections, Institute of Art, Polish Academy of Sciences.

- 36 The top 30 name listed were as follows, with the first number standing for the number of critics who voted for a particular artist and the second the total number of votes received by that artist (the sequence follows the one listed in the materials for the unpublished volume and the published leaflet): Zdzisław Beksiński 4 – 32; Tadeusz Brzozowski 18 – 21; Władysław Hasior 18 – 21; Andrzej Wróblewski 16 – 19; Jerzy Nowosielski 14 – 18; Józef Gielniak 16 – 17; Maria Jarema 12 – 14; Piotr Potworowski 12 – 14; Henryk Stażewski 13 – 14; Jan Lebenstein 10 – 13; Stefan Gierowski 12 – 12; Roman Opalka 8 – 12; Magdalena Abakanowicz 11 – 11; Zbigniew Makowski 11 – 11; Artur Nacht-Samborski 9 – 11; Gustaw Zemła 11 – 11 (with Wojciech Zabłocki 9 – 9); Jan Cybis 9 – 10; Tadeusz Kantor 10 – 10; Władysław Strzemiński 9 – 10; Alina Szapocznikow 9 – 10; Henryk Tomaszewski 8 – 10 (with Wojciech Fangor 1 – 1); Xawery Dunikowski 7 – 9; Stanisław Fijałkowski 9 – 9; Tadeusz Kulisiewicz 8 – 9; Jerzy Tchórzewski 8 – 8; Zbigniew Gostomski 6 – 7; Felician Szczepny Kowarski 6 – 7; Wacław Taranczewski 7 – 7; Tadeusz Trepkowski 7 – 7; Mieczysław Wejman 6 – 7; Wojciech Fangor 5 – 6 (with Henryk Tomaszewski 1 – 1) (with Wojciech Zamecznik 4 – 4); Aleksander Kobzdej 6 – 6; Andrzej Strumiłło 5 – 6; Bronisław W. Linke 5 – 5; Henryk Morel 5 – 5 (with Piotr Perepiłyś 2 – 2); Jerzy Panek 5 – 5; Józef Szajna 4 – 5; Walerian Borowczyk 4 – 4 (with Jan Lenica 1 – 1); Włodzimierz Borowski 3 – 4; Andrzej Pawłowski 3 – 4; design of the Treblinka Memorial: Franciszek Duszenko, Adam Haupt, Franciszek Strynkiewicz 4 – 4; design of the Auschwitz Memorial: Oskar Hansen, Zofia Hansen, Jerzy Jarnuszkiewicz, Julian Pałka, Lechosław Rosiński 4 – 4; Jerzy Rosołowicz 2 – 4; Jan Berdyszak 2 – 3; Marian Bogusz 3 – 3; Zbigniew Dłubak 3 – 3; Eugeniusz Eibisch 3 – 3; Jerzy Jarnuszkiewicz 3 – 3; Zdzisław Jurkiewicz 2 – 3; Jerzy Krawczyk 3 – 3; Jan Lenica 3 – 3 (with Walerian Borowczyk 1 – 1); Adam Marczyński 3 – 3; Zbigniew Pronaszko 3 – 3; Adolf Ryszka 3 – 3; Kajetan Sosnowski 2 – 3; Jonasz Stern 3 – 3; Jan Tarasin 3 – 3; Ryszard Winiarski 2 – 3; Jerzy Wolff 3 – 3; Jerzy Bereś 1 – 2; Mieczysław Berman 2 – 2; Roman Cieślewicz 2 – 2; Waldemar Cwenarski 2 – 2; Jan Dobkowski 2 – 2; Andrzej Matuszewski 1 – 2; Lucjan Mianowski 2 – 2; Edmund Monsiel 1 – 2; Józef Mroszczak 2 – 2; Nikifor 2 – 2; Hanna Rudzka-Cybisowa 2 – 2; Jacek Sempoliński 2 – 2; Leszek Sobocki 2 – 2; Franciszek Starowieyski 2 – 2; Bohdan Urbanowicz 2 – 2; Jacek Waltoś 2 – 2; Anastazy B. Wiśniewski 1 – 2; Stanisław Wojcieszynski (Wostan) 2 – 2; Stanisław Wójtowicz 2 – 2; Wojciech Zamecznik 2 – 2; Rajmund Ziemiński 2 – 2.

37 J. Starzyński, op. cit., p. 31.

Maria³⁸ – the future of the whole endeavour became uncertain. At that point, Bogucki and Starzyński began considering producing a lavishly illustrated volume documenting the process – printed by the RSW Prasa – Książka – Ruch publishing house³⁹ – as well as organising an “analytical exhibition” of some 500 works from which 30 would be selected in the course of an ensuing debate. An alternative scenario involved abandoning the idea of the preliminary exhibition altogether and publishing the results of the survey in the press to open up a discussion that would eventually yield a list of 30 works. Yet doing so, Starzyński noted, “would distort the original idea according to which the exhibition was to take shape in two stages”.⁴⁰

In a meeting that same year Starzyński observed that Bogucki had apparently lost “the will to make this exhibition”,⁴¹ insisting that he pursue the original concept of staging the preliminary presentation at the Współczesna Gallery as an external commissioner. The latter firmly refused to “do anything in the place he had to vacate”,⁴² and suggested that the initial exhibition be organised at the Współczesna Gallery without his involvement, or he himself could be involved in such work in a different venue. Alternatively, Bogucki suggested merging the two exhibition formats into a single presentation that would highlight the 30 top-ranking works and display the documentation meant for the initial show alongside it. At the same time, he indeed seemed reluctant to take up the initiative.

In an attempt to resolve the impasse, the RSW Prasa – Książka – Ruch publishing house, which was the administrator of a network of International

38 Bogucki submitted his resignation on 10 July 1974. See D. Jarecka, “Janusz Bogucki, the Polish Szeemann”, in: *Rejected Heritage: Polish Art of the 1980s*, ed. K. Sienkiewicz, Warsaw, 2011, pp. 13–14.

39 D. Kobielski, letter to B. Płaza, Deputy Director of RSW Prasa – Książka – Ruch, 3 October 1974, “Krytycy sztuki proponują”, Warsaw, Special Collections, Institute of Art, Polish Academy of Sciences. The RSW Prasa – Książka – Ruch Publishing House agreed to produce an accompanying publication for the event still before 1974 and followed through with its development until the very last stage, including the mock-up (I would like to thank Bożena Kowalska for sharing this information).

40 J. Starzyński, op. cit., p. 32. Bogucki claimed, accordingly, that the broader preliminary exhibition, which would offer material for discussion, was more significant than the final presentation of 30 works (J. Bogucki, “Zebranie Sekcji Polskiej...”, op. cit., p. 42).

41 J. Starzyński, op. cit., p. 34.

42 J. Bogucki, op. cit., p. 41. It should be noted that Bogucki’s resignation in the face of the obstacles he faced as the head of the Współczesna Gallery can be seen in the context of his growing disillusionment with the possibility of pursuing the new role he envisaged for his venue following his visit to *documenta 5* in Kassel. In a memo from 31 July 1972, Bogucki wrote of *documenta* as an “attempt at forging new connections between art and society” linked to an effort toward “developing a new model, a new type of a gallery museum as an institution that not only assembles and makes available its collections”, Archives of Galeria Współczesna, Warsaw, Institute of Art, Polish Academy of Sciences. See D. Jarecka, op. cit., pp. 13–14.

Press and Book Clubs operating across the country – and one of which was host to the Współczesna Gallery – came up with an offer of a different venue in Warsaw's Nowy Świat Street in which Bogucki could stage the exhibition on similar terms (with the financial backing of the RSW) and without the need to involve the gallery he had left.⁴³ Bogucki was also approached by a representative of the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions Zachęta with the suggestion to stage the exhibition there but was initially unable to decide due to the fact that, to his mind, the RSW as a supporting institution and designated publisher for the album would expect to host the exhibition as well.⁴⁴

However, following Starzyński's death in December 1974, Bogucki was left alone with the project that eventually found its way into the Zachęta, where it was presented as *Critics' Picks* (also frequently referred to as *30 Works for the 30th Anniversary of the People's Republic of Poland*). There, six gallery rooms showcased over 300 works by more than 80 artists who received two or more votes in the critics' poll, accompanied by documents (detailed lists and comments returned by each critic) displayed on the ground floor. Information on the number of votes received by each artist as well as the names of the critics selecting them was also provided alongside the works in the exhibition space. An additional poll was carried out among visitors to the Zachęta who were asked to indicate the most adequate response submitted by the Polish AICA members.

The resulting formula was thus a compromise between the two originally envisioned formats, i.e. that of a preliminary exhibition accompanied by documentation and the final selection of the 30 most significant works. Bogucki described his decision as follows: "Due to the fact that the same works frequently recurred in the responses of different critics, we [the organizers] have given up the idea of grouping the exhibits in sets reflecting the individual choices. Rather, works by a single artist proposed by different critics were presented together, with particular sets of works combined into larger wholes based on affinities with respect to form and ideas".⁴⁵

Therefore, as much as the initial survey sought to reveal the preferences of particular critics which provided information about their professional practice, the final presentation blurred those distinctions by focusing on strings of works by particular artists.

This arithmetic approach, which superseded the clear-cut personal selections, highlighted, perhaps unintentionally, a number of paradoxes. One of them was the response submitted by Wojciech Skrodzki who, having cast one vote on Józef Gielniak, cast the remaining 29 on Zdzisław Beksiński, as a result of which the latter received the largest number of votes in total and

43 Cz. Kałużny, "Zebranie Sekcji Polskiej...", op. cit., pp. 45–46.

44 J. Bogucki, op. cit., p. 55.

45 J. Bogucki, "Krytycy sztuki proponują", Centralne Biuro Wystaw Artystycznych, Warsaw, 1975, pp. 5–10.

had his works presented in an individual room.⁴⁶ Similarly, due to the fact that on a number of occasions Bogucki chose to present works different than those indicated in the questionnaires (a choice that was dictated by availability as much as the ability to show them in a gallery space), several proposals did not find their way into the exhibition. Many of the critics' responses included works that did not fall into the general category of painting, sculpture or prints (among them were the retrospective exhibition of Włodzimierz Borowski, *Playing Field*, held at the Współczesna Gallery in 1972, the design for the Auschwitz Memorial of 1958 by a team led by Jerzy Jarnuszkiewicz and Oskar Hansen, the performances of Tadeusz Kantor's Cricot 2 Theatre, the Polish Pavilion for the Brussels Expo 58 by Jerzy Sołtan and Lech Tomaszewski, and the decorative frieze designed by Wojciech Fangor for the World Festival of Youth and Students of 1955).

This point was driven home by Porębski, who was the only individual to respond to the survey with only an explanation, refusing to list specific works. His argument was as follows: "The last artworks of the 20th century as far as I can remember were Duchamp's *Large Glass* and *Compositions* by Witkacy [S. I. Witkiewicz]. [...] In the two decades between the wars and, more notably, the three decades after the [2nd World] War there were no other artworks. There was, however, practice that employed a variety of media, relying equally easily on painting, drawing and print as well as spatial planning, stage design, photography and film, spoken word, gesture, lifestyle. In this situation I find it difficult to reply to your survey. I could only point to the practice of certain artists that I find particularly significant in the realm of life as well as art".⁴⁷

Once again, Porębski's voice captured the essence of the survey as well as the resulting exhibition, exposing the assumptions that apparently guided both Starzyński and Bogucki – only cast in sharp contrast before the AICA crowd. An attempt at creating an inclusive, transparent selection process to paint an image of artistic life and production in the People's Republic of Poland exposed both the actual conditions and powers that were at play in its field as well as the paradigms that shaped the thinking of its actors. *Critics' Picks*, or *30 Works for the 30th Anniversary...* has remained largely and undeservedly forgotten as a project, also due to the fact that, following Starzyński's death, plans to publish the extensive volume documenting the whole endeavour stalled. The official reason for abandoning the publication project was dry and prosaic: a lack of paper.⁴⁸

46 Questionnaire of W. Skrodzki, "Krytycy sztuki proponują", Warsaw, Special Collections, Institute of Art, Polish Academy of Sciences.

47 Ibid.

48 Z. Juzwa, letter to A. Turniak, Secretary of the State Publishing House (KAW), 29 May 1976, "Krytycy sztuki proponują", Warsaw, Special Collections, Institute of Art, Polish Academy of Sciences.

Conclusion

In the paper above I set out to shed some light on the circumstances surrounding the development of two exhibitions commissioned for the 1975 AICA congress, framing them in a perspective that acknowledges the active role of the event in shaping their ultimate form. The strong emphasis that was put on experiment yielded a non-conventional exhibition, *Voir et Concevoir*, in Cracow, which re-examined the mode of exhibition-production as well as the framework of the institutional practice of a museum. In *Critics' Picks* in Warsaw the experimental formula was perhaps taken even further, yielding unforeseen results that, in turn, revealed the conditionings of art critical practice. In both cases the need to project a dynamic, inclusive and forward-looking image of Polish art was a driving factor in work on the exhibitions.

Abstract

The above text examines the 11th Congress of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) organised in the People's Republic of Poland in September of 1975 upon the initiative of Professor Juliusz Starzyński, who was the head of the organisation's Polish Section. The congress, whose official theme was "Art – Science – Technology as Elements of the Development of our Epoch", marked the second AICA event in history to be held in Poland, and while Starzyński himself did not live to see the result of his efforts, the intent to commission a number of collateral exhibitions across the country – meant to serve as surveys of Polish art – was successful. Those attending the congress had the occasion to visit the cities of Cracow, Łódź, Warsaw, and Wrocław. The text takes a closer look at two of these exhibitions: *Voir et Concevoir* (Widzieć i rozumieć) which was developed for Cracow's historic Cloth Hall, a part of the city's National Museum, by Mieczysław Porębski in collaboration with Andrzej Pawłowski, and the exhibition that came to be known as *Critics' Picks* (Krytycy sztuki proponują), which was held at the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions, known as the Zachęta, in Warsaw. The concept of each, it is argued, was driven by a need for experiment. While the former exhibition came to be remembered as an innovative, if not radical, way of engaging the permanent museum display in which the highlights of Polish 19th-century art were juxtaposed with several new commissions by contemporary artists, the latter – the result of no less an experimental concept in which a group presentation was based on a survey conducted among local critics – remains largely forgotten – the upshot of a series of compromises, largely enforced by the political situation of the time. Exploring *Voir et Concevoir* and *Critics' Picks* as exhibitions in state institutions within the context of an international event, the paper seeks to shed light on the intersection of official artistic practices and politics in the People's Republic of Poland in the mid-1970s in an attempt to identify the key agents that were active in the field as well as the defining conditions of their activity – or, in other words, to ask the question as to what kind of official statements were made possible at the time and how they were motivated.