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## Much Ado About Nothing? Political Contexts of the *15 Polish Painters* Exhibition (MoMA, 1961)

The phenomenon of the post-war “triumph of American art” has been a bone of contention among art historians for nearly five decades. The man to open up this Pandora’s box was Irving Sandler in 1970. With a zeal worthy of an etymologist, he subjected the main trends of non-figurative art in the United States to formal analysis in his work *The Triumph of American Painting*.<sup>1</sup> Even though he was interested mainly in issues of art, Sandler did not hesitate to put forth a hypothesis concerning the “triumph” of American art over art that was being produced in Europe at that time; in this he followed in the footsteps of the New York art critics, with Clement Greenberg at the fore. Later scholars who were attracted to the same set of topics attempted to expand this vision to include political issues connected with Cold War politics. Max Kozoloff, Eva Cockcroft, Serge Guilbaut and other critics referred to Sandler’s work with some aloofness, but they agreed with him as to the concept of the “triumph” of the Americans and as to the “fact” that the centre of the world’s art had shifted from Paris to New York.<sup>2</sup>

Only recently has this “triumph” of American art that allegedly took place in the 1940s and 1950s been cast in doubt. Based on rich source material and modern-day research tools (e.g. the Artl@s database), Catherine Dossin has demonstrated that the worldwide triumph of American abstract expressionism in Europe may be considered to have happened only in the 1960s, when, after the success of pop-art, art produced across the ocean began to be increasingly

1 I. Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism*, New York, 1970.

2 See M. Kozoloff, *Renderings, Critical Essays on a Century of Modern Art*, New York, 1969; S. Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom and the Cold War*, translated by A. Goldhammer, Chicago, 1983; E. Cockcroft, “Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War”, in: *Pollock and After. The Critical Debate*, ed. F. Frascina, New York, 1985, pp. 82–90.

highly regarded in Europe and to be considered a part of the canon. It must, however, be stressed that although Dossin's work convincingly undermines the imperialistic conception of the "triumph of American expressionism" in the 1940s and 1950s, it is itself not free from political manipulation.

Similarly to Kozoloff, Cockcroft or Guilbaut, Dossin has many times emphasised the role that Cold War politics played in shaping the strategies adopted by American institutions. Yet at the same time she ignores the role that countries from the other side of the Iron Curtain played in shaping the American policy on art. This is odd, since the main axis of the Cold War conflict, which all of the above-mentioned scholars consider the reason why the Americans actively promoted abstract expressionism as the paradigm of modernity, obviously ran not between New York and Paris, but between New York and Moscow.

There is another reason why the fact that Dossin's analysis marginalises the Soviet bloc is very curious indeed. After all, some exhibitions of American art that were presented in Western Europe were also shown on the other side of the Iron Curtain; a case in point is *Modern Art in the United States* in 1956, which, prepared for Vienna, could also be seen in Belgrade. Other exhibitions were prepared expressly with the Soviet audience in mind, e.g. the *American National Exhibition* was to be seen in Moscow in 1959.<sup>3</sup> What the Americans used to see as a unified field for exercises in cultural policy, modern-day art historians seem to perceive as two independent political entities: the West and the East of Europe.<sup>4</sup> The fact that the Eastern bloc is marginalised grows less surprising, however, when we remember that Dossin's research is underpinned by the belief that the two main centres of artistic life that existed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were New York and Paris.

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In this brief essay I would like to bring to recollection an event which amply demonstrates how central was the role which the countries of the Soviet bloc played in the American policy on art in the late 1950s. The topic of my interest is the exhibition *15 Polish Painters* that was presented at MoMA in New York in the year 1961.<sup>5</sup> The exhibition was an unprecedented event not only with regard to Polish art, which had rarely been presented in America, but

3 Porter McCray, "American Tutti-Frutti", *e-flux*, 12/2014, no. 60, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/american-tutti-frutti/> [accessed 1 March 2015]; M. P. Kushner, "Exhibiting Art at the American National Exhibition in Moscow, 1959: Domestic Politics and Cultural Diplomacy", *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 2002, vol. 4, no 1 (Winter), pp. 6–26.

4 See C. Dossin, "Mapping the Reception of American Art in Postwar Western Europe", *Artl@s Bulletin*, 2012, vol. 1, issue 1, pp. 33–39.

5 Besides New York, the exhibition could be seen in Ottawa, Minneapolis, St. Louis, Utica and Montreal.

with regard to Central-European art in general, as the contemporary American audience was effectively ignorant of it.<sup>6</sup>

The exhibition *15 Polish Painters* is remarkable also because it functions in Polish art history as a sort of a spectre. It is usually briefly mentioned as the “success” of one of the fifteen artists who exhibited their works there; in vain, however, would we seek a separate analysis of it in Polish specialist literature.

Eva Cockroft was one of the first critics to write about the *15 Polish Painters* exhibition. In her opinion, the mere fact that the exhibition had been organised was an achievement of the political goals of MoMA’s programme, and hence a victory of the USA in Cold War cultural politics.<sup>7</sup> Piotr Piotrowski attempted to add some nuance to this instrumental image by countering that Polish *art informel* derived from French, and not American, art.<sup>8</sup> Piotrowski’s counterargument suggests that the exhibition was a sort of a Trojan horse that MoMA’s curators happily brought into their own citadel and which plainly demonstrated that, in reality, modern art was universalistic and not uniquely American in character. In the later years, Piotrowski slightly softened his ironic view of Cockroft’s theory. In 2005, in his work *In the Shadow of Yalta*, he quoted Cockroft’s views on the 1961 exhibition and indicated that the question which she had posed as to the influence of American politics on Polish art was problematic, yet at the same time he stressed that she had been correct in saying that the American interest in non-figurative art produced behind the Iron Curtain had a strong political overtone. Piotrowski’s belief that “the truth lay somewhere in between” is repeated by Piotr Majewski in his book *Malarstwo materii w Polsce jako formuła nowoczesności* [The painting of matter in Poland as a formula for modernity].<sup>9</sup> Also Jill Bugajski adopts a moderate approach in her essay on Tadeusz Kantor’s career in America. Her text is particularly worthy of attention for another reason, as in contrast to Cockroft and Piotrowski, in writing about *15 Polish Painters* she referred to the sources, and it is on them that her interpretation is based. Bugajski quotes some official letters and memoranda from the documentation of the exhibition as held in the MoMA Archives, as well as press reviews.<sup>10</sup> Her strategy is noteworthy,

6 A touring exhibition of Polish design, organised by Wanda Telakowska and Czesław Miłosz in 1948, is worth noting here.

7 E. Cockroft, “Abstract Expressionism”, op. cit.

8 P. Piotrowski, *Odwilż. Sztuka ok. 1956 r.* [The thaw. Art circa 1965], Poznań, 1996, p. 12.

9 P. Majewski, *Malarstwo materii w Polsce jako formuła nowoczesności* [The painting of matter in Poland as a formula of modernity], Lublin, 2006, pp. 20–21.

10 J. Bugajski, “Tadeusz Kantor’s Publics”, in: *Divided Dreamworlds? The Cultural Cold War in East and West*, eds. P. Romijn, G. Scott-Smith, New York, 2012, p. 61. The performance that accompanied the exhibition *Podróżnicy* [Travellers] organised by Magdalena Moskalewicz at the Zachęta – National Gallery of Art in Warsaw (14 May – 21 August 2016): “On touring exhibitions. A performance/lecture by Porter McCray” is also worth noting. A performer under the pseudonym Porter McCray based his lecture, just as Jill Bugajski did, on memoranda extant in the MoMA archive.

since her ambition chiefly to fill a narrative lacuna, i.e. to bring to recollection an event which, once considered essential, was later relegated to the role of a minor piece in a puzzle made up of art and history.

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Following Bugajski's strategy of a chronicler, in the following section of my essay I shall present the exhibition's development process and the political context in which this process unfolded. The current text expands the popular science article that Małgorzata Słomska and I published in the brochure *15 Polish Painters. Cztery obrazy najważniejszej powojennej wystawy sztuki polskiej* [15 Polish Painters. Four images from the most important post-war exhibition of Polish art].<sup>11</sup> The materials on which my research is based consist of, above all, large sets of documents held in the MoMA Archives in New York, the American Art Archives at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington and Ryszard Stanisławski's Archive which is currently held at the Art Institute of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw. In my view, a presentation of this exhibition's development process will help to fill in the deplorable gap in research on artistic exchange between the USA and the Warsaw Pact countries.

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Signed on 27 January 1958, a pact on cultural exchange known as the Lacy-Zaroubin Agreement envisaged a four-year course of cooperation between the Soviet Union and the USA in the field of culture and organisation of two large exhibitions. One of them, to be held in Moscow, was to present the culture of the United States;<sup>12</sup> the other, in New York, to present Soviet achievements. The exhibitions, inaugurated in the summer of 1959, concerned not only matters of culture but, perhaps above all, matters of industry, technology and lifestyle.<sup>13</sup> It is noteworthy that not only impressive machines and consumer goods, but also modern art played a central role at both exhibitions. The American exhibition in Moscow, although not strictly art-oriented, may be viewed as another link in the chain of painting exhibitions organised by MoMA from 1952 and by the United States Information Agency (USIA) from 1953 onwards.

11 K. Niemira, M. Słomska, *15 Polish Painters. Cztery obrazy najważniejszej powojennej wystawy sztuki polskiej* [15 Polish Painters. Four images from the most important post-war exhibition of Polish art], Warsaw, 2015.

12 The curator of the art section of the exhibition in Moscow was Edith Halpert. See S. Reid, "The Exhibition of Art of Socialist Countries, Moscow 1958–9, and the Contemporary Style of Painting", in: *Style and Painting, Modernity and Material Culture in Postwar Eastern Europe*, eds. E. Reid, D. Crowley, Oxford–New York, 2000, p. 101.

13 F. C. Barghoorn, "America in 1959: As Seen from Moscow", *The Review of Politics*, April 1960, vol. 22, no. 2, pp. 245–254.



After the Moscow exhibition, the Americans noted with interest that the Soviet societies shared the government's policies and highly valued a "heavily classical, traditional pattern in arts".<sup>14</sup> Abstract expressionism was pronounced to be a symbol of the gap between the cultures of the capitalist United States and of Communist Russia; this must be understood as a great success of the campaign that had been fought for quite a few years by Alfred Barr and Clement Greenberg.<sup>15</sup> In 1960 Frederick C. Barghoorn noted that the Kremlin accused American non-figurative art that the aim of its existence was to warp and deform the taste of the masses and that it was secretly managed by a lobby of millionaires.<sup>16</sup> According to the Americans, abstract expressionism was unacceptable to the Soviets not only for reasons of propaganda, since it was impossible to express Socialist ideas in an abstract painting, but also for reasons of ideology.

In the years 1958 and 1959 the case of Poland occupied much space in American criticism concerning issues of the Soviet reception of abstract expressionism. Poland was one of the few states of the Warsaw Pact to be represented at foreign exhibitions not only by figurative painting, but also by art referring to broadly understood expressionistic abstraction and the painting of matter. A good example of the Polish presence in this area is the exhibition of twelve Socialist countries which opened in late 1958 in Moscow: the Polish section contained paintings referring to abstraction (just a few of them, of course). This fact was noted not only in the Soviet Union (the Polish press reported: "Such was the turnout in the Polish section that on the second day of the exhibition our section's Soviet consultant asked for permission to stretch out protective ropes at some exhibits, e.g. before the paintings by Adam Marczyński"<sup>17</sup>), but also in the United States. On 25 January 1959 the *New York Times* published the article "Moscow Astonished by Polish Modern Abstract Art"; commenting on the success of Polish art in Moscow, its author called the group of painters from Warsaw and Cracow "rebels with a cause" and considered them to be political revolutionaries. Another journalist who had a similar perception of Polish artists was Joseph Alsop, whose texts on Polish culture, written from 1958 onward for the *New York Herald Tribune*, were many times reprinted in other American weeklies.<sup>18</sup>

14 Ibid., p. 252.

15 Ibid.

16 Bearing in mind Nelson Rockefeller's personal involvement in MoMA's policies, the second charge must be considered fully justified. See *ibid.*, p. 253.

17 "Wystawa Polska w Moskwie. Rozmowa z Andrzejem Pawłowskim" [The Polish exhibition in Moscow. An interview with Andrzej Pawłowski], *Życie Literackie*, 1959, no. 5, a supplement to *Plastyk*, no. 30.

18 See J. Alsop, "Despite Regime, Polish Intellectuals Hold Freedom", *Eugene Register-Guard*, 9 June 1959, p. 5; J. Alsop, "Polish Artists Have a Sense of Historic Mission", *The Victoria Advocate*, 9 June 1959, p. 3; J. Alsop, "Poland's Painters Enjoy their Day's Lovely Light", *Eugene Register-Guard*, 4 June 1959, p. 7; J. Alsop, "New Hope's Pale Light Can be Seen in Warsaw", *The Victoria Advocate*, 13 June 1959, p. 3.

At more or less the same time, Polish painting that renounced the standards of official Soviet art began to appear in the United States. In 1958 works by Tadeusz Dominik and Jan Lebenstein were shown at the Guggenheim International Award Exhibition. In April 1959 *Time* magazine published an article on Tadeusz Kantor.<sup>19</sup> Also in 1959, after Aleksander Kobzdej's success at the Fifth Biennial in Sao Paulo, preparations were begun for his solo exhibition in New York. In addition, American curators, museum specialists, critics and art dealers could encounter Polish art while visiting Paris, because this was where Polish artists receiving official grants were directed to (e.g. Tadeusz Kantor went to France in 1947 and 1955), and after 1956, if they were able to sell their works abroad, this was where they sold them.

The fact that the idea to organise an exhibition of young Polish artists associated with abstract art emerged in the year 1958 and in the United States should not come as an absolute surprise. After the thaw of 1956, young Polish art enjoyed a good reputation. In the journalism of the era its existence was understood as proof of continuing political resistance to Communism.<sup>20</sup> It was surrounded by an aura of "modernity" and non-conformism. Experts from the art world were also aware of young Polish art, especially of paintings belonging to the "painting of matter" current, as these were exhibited in Venice, Sao Paulo and New York.

The emergence of the idea to organise the exhibition is also not surprising considering MoMA's programmatic line. René d'Harnoncourt's term as MoMA's director, which had begun in 1949, was markedly Eurocentric, at least until the year 1960. In the period of 1956–1958, MoMA held mainly monographic exhibitions of European artists.<sup>21</sup> An exhibition of Polish art, i.e. one not belonging to the world's canon and not known to the wider public, was exotic, of course, but not enough to be resisted by the Museum's supervisory board. This acceptance was certainly influenced by the political factor: after the exhibition of art from the Soviet bloc countries in Moscow in 1958, young Poles, as has already been said, were regarded as rebels whose works were a slap in the face to the Kremlin.

The concept for the MoMA exhibition was conceived by Porter McCray, the curator who had managed the MoMA International Program initiated in 1952. Jill Bugajski alleges that the idea behind its organisation emerged as early as

19 J. Lattes, "Adventurer in Poland", *Time Magazine*, 6 April 1959.

20 Joseph Alsop and Jean Lattes, as quoted earlier, wrote about it (for *Time*) in this spirit. The phrase quoted by *Time*'s anonymous reporter on the occasion of the *15 Polish Painters* vernissage seems symptomatic as well: "For the mass of the people the stumbling block between themselves and the regime was their Catholicism. For the intellectuals it was abstract art". See "Polish Moderns", *Time*, 4 August 1961.

21 At this time MoMA hosted the exhibitions of Henri Matisse, Julio Gonzalez, Wassily Kandinsky, Auguste Renoir, Balthus, Edvard Munch, Pablo Picasso (who was not invited to the vernissage for political reasons), Marc Chagall, Joan Miró, Georges Seurat, Juan Gris, Jean Arp and the collective exhibition of German art.

in 1957, but any convincing confirmation regarding this seems difficult to find.<sup>22</sup> McCray often acted in a very impulsive manner and the tempestuous history of the projects he managed clearly indicates that some decisions, even ones concerning very serious undertakings, were sometimes taken in a considerable rush.<sup>23</sup> This resulted, to a certain extent, from the fact that McCray had to deal with sensitive matters: the projects he carried out were strictly connected with the United States Information Agency's (USIA) policies and usually depended on subtle political games. It is therefore not impossible that the decision to organise the Polish exhibition was taken only in the first half of 1959, when it was already clear that after his journey to the Soviet Union Vice President Nixon would visit Warsaw. It was in Nixon's entourage that McCray flew to Poland on 2 August 1959. Another argument for moving the date of the emergence of the idea to organise the exhibition from 1957 to early 1959 is the chronology of the process of forming the young Polish artists' reputation in the United States: its key moment came in December 1958, when Polish artists exhibited their works in Moscow. It is unlikely that anyone in the States had thought of utilising the political context of Polish art before that date.

At the time when work on the Polish exhibition began, the art policy of the USIA and MoMA was already well defined. McCray had already worked on organising international art enterprises during the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, in the Office of Inter-American Affairs, where his colleague was the future director of MoMA, René d'Harnoncourt. In that period, the Office of Inter-American Affairs was supervised by Nelson Rockefeller, who since the 1940s had been involved in the actions of MoMA (his mother was a co-founder of the museum) and in politics.<sup>24</sup> After the war, McCray was appointed by Rockefeller to supervise MoMA's touring exhibitions. His task was to prepare the contents and the logistics of exhibitions of American art which were to be presented abroad, and to import foreign exhibitions to the States. In addition, in the years 1954–1962 McCray was among the officials responsible for the American pavilion at the Biennial in Venice. We might even risk the opinion that at the institutional level his role was similar to that which, in the same period, Clement Greenberg and Alfred Barr played in developing the theory of modern art.

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22 J. Bugajski, op. cit., p. 59.

23 When in May of 1956 the *Modern Art in the United States* exhibition that had been organised by McCray was being closed in Vienna there arose an opportunity to transfer it to Belgrade. Initially, the project was discussed backstage. The Americans quickly wrote a letter to Marko Ristić, an official at the Department of Culture in Belgrade (and a Surrealist poet before the war). Ristić not only agreed, but very straightforwardly advised the Americans that if they wanted the exhibition to take place, they would have to act quickly. As a result, all of the formalities were completed in three days and the exhibition was transported to Yugoslavia with lightning speed. Cf. P. McCray, "American Tutti-frutti", op. cit.

24 E. Cockcroft, op. cit., p. 84

Another similarity regarding these two critics is that McCray also tended to walk on thin ice. In the United States, abstract art was associated with Communism. In 1956, an exhibition entitled *Sport in Art*, which was in preparation in connection with the Olympic Games, was cancelled due to protests against the Leftist selection of the artists. In the same year the USIA attempted to censor the “100 American Painters” project. The 1959 exhibition in Moscow did not fail to cause heated debates either. The crux of the discussion was the intended role of non-figurative art in that exhibition. In the end, McCray sent to Moscow an extra shipment of traditionalist paintings and thus moderated the exhibition’s “modern” outlook. In order to evade the sensitive issue of the proportion between abstraction and figuration, exhibitions organised by the USIA and MoMA made use of the “tutti-frutti” approach and presented a broad overview of trends in art.<sup>25</sup>

In Poland, Juliusz Starzyński, the curator responsible for including Polish art that referred to abstraction into the Moscow exhibition in 1958, was famous for having a similar approach. In 1959 Starzyński was appointed one of Porter McCray’s escorts during the latter’s stay in Poland. Together with Bohdan Urbanowicz from the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw and the Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences, they tried to introduce McCray to the nature of Polish artistic culture.<sup>26</sup> McCray visited Warsaw, Cracow, Gdańsk and Sopot. He moved around mainly among a group of museum specialists and art critics, but he also met a few artists. In a letter written after his return to New York he noted that he had been very impressed by the exhibition entitled *Od Młodej Polski do naszych czasów* [From Young Poland to our times] that had been prepared by Starzyński and Irena Jakimowiczowa and which collected almost 350 items which collectively provided an overview of Polish modern art.<sup>27</sup>

Initial decisions as to the profile of the planned exhibition were taken during McCray’s visit in Poland. The Americans declared that they would like to exhibit at MoMA the works of some eight to ten young Polish artists involved in non-figurative art. Already at this initial stage the Americans were discouraged from using such terms as “modern”, “avant-garde” or “abstract” painting.<sup>28</sup> The title of the exhibition was proposed by the Polish side; it would be numerical (“*n* Polish painters”), following the practice that was accepted worldwide at the time. In cooperation with Urbanowicz and Starzyński, McCray prepared a list of artists who were soon to be visited by Peter Selz, an American of German origin appointed to be the curator of the Polish exhibition.

25 P. McCray (performer), *American tutti-frutti*, e-flux, 12/2014, pp. 27–39.

26 Cf. a letter from Porter McCray to Louise Smith dated 30 October 1959, reprinted in: K. Niemira, M. Słomska, *15 Polish Painters*, op. cit., pp. 73–75.

27 Ibid., p. 74.

28 I owe this information to a conversation with Peter Selz held in November 2015.



**Fig. 1.** Peter Selz in front of the Ministry of Culture and Art in Warsaw, photo by K. Karpuszek

Selz had become MoMA's curator only a few months before. Apart from the Polish exhibition, he was at that time entrusted with the *Image of Men* exhibition project<sup>29</sup> and he supervised Jean Tinguely's project "Homage to New York" and a few smaller-scale enterprises linked with new art that was being produced in Europe.

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In August 1959, when Porter McCray was in Poland, the decision that Selz would be coordinating the Polish exhibition project must have already been in force. This is because Selz went on tour to collect material for this exhibition at more or less the same time as McCray was meeting with the Communist officials. He viewed the works of Polish artists, among others of Aleksander Kobzdej and Tadeusz Kantor, in Düsseldorf, Amsterdam and Paris; in Paris he also had a meeting with Juliusz Starzyński.<sup>30</sup>

He arrived in Poland only on 3 November 1959, assisted by the translator and photographer Kazimierz Karpuszek, who a few years earlier had been his

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29 D. Raverty, "New Perspectives on New Images of Men", *Art Journal*, winter 1994, vol. 53, no. 4, pp. 62–64.

30 A letter from Peter Selz to Porter McCray dated 5 November 1959, MoMA Archives, Exhb. Archives, 690.3.



**Fig. 2.** Peter Selz with *Portret Teresy III*  
[Portrait of Theresa III] by Andrzej  
Wróblewski, photo by K. Karpuszek

student at the New Bauhaus in Chicago. On 4–7 November he was in Cracow, where he contacted the Cracow Group milieu gathered around Tadeusz Kantor. He also visited Andrzej Wróblewski's widow (Fig. 2 ). From 7 November he was in Warsaw. He mainly met with artists gathered around the Krzywe Koło Gallery that was being managed by Marian Bogusz, but he also became acquainted with the output of the "official" painters, e.g. Jan Cybis. A screening of Polish short films and animation was organised especially for Selz. It is also a matter of record that he made use of the archive of Polish artistic milieu that had been prepared by Juliusz Starzyński and his team.<sup>31</sup> It seems that during his short visit Selz managed to get relatively good orientation in the complexity and special nature of post-war artistic culture in Poland. A comparison of his journey with the route taken by Virginia Field, an American curator who visited Poland in 1962, leaves us with the distinct impression that Selz went from studio to studio almost like a pilgrim, whereas Field's tour of Poland was made mainly from restaurant to restaurant.<sup>32</sup>

31 I owe this information to a conversation with Peter Selz held in November 2015. It can be confirmed by Porter McCray's letter dated 30 October 1959, MoMA Archives, Exhb. Archives, 690.3.

32 Field's report is as informative about food served in hotel restaurants as about art. See V. Field, "A Visit to Poland", *Art Journal*, spring 1963, vol. 22, no 3, pp. 158–166.



Selz's meticulous notebook and the list of artists he had visited demonstrate that the conception for the exhibition evolved during his journey. Selz visited not only painters, but also graphic artists and sculptors (e.g. Alina Szapocznikow and Alina Ślesińska). Towards the end of his stay he prepared, with the aid of Zdzisław Kępiński, a list with an initial selection of artists to take part in the MoMA exhibition; it included the names of nineteen painters, three women sculptors and five graphic artists.<sup>33</sup>

While compiling the list, Selz was most probably unaware that his selection went against the directive concerning art exhibitions that had been accepted a few months earlier by the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party. The Five-Year Plan regarding the development of various areas of economy and culture, which had been announced in Poland in 1959, in its part referring to culture introduced an obligatory proportion to be held at exhibitions, commonly described as 85% for figurative and 15% for abstract art.<sup>34</sup> Selz's list reversed this proportion. Even before he left Warsaw, the Ministry of Culture and Art signalled to him that the exhibition in the shape he had proposed could not take place and that, according to the People's government, the list should be modified by adding to it some well-received, "official" painters whose oeuvre had been created in the spirit of Realism, and some colourists. The pressure which the officials attempted to put on Selz indicates that the *Wytyczne Sekretariatu KC PZPR w sprawie polityki kulturalnej w dziedzinie plastyki* [Recommendations of the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party regarding cultural policy in the field of visual arts], which had been written out in April of 1960, were not a dead directive issued only to defuse internal tensions and to mollify the Party's hardliners.<sup>35</sup> Attempts were made to put the decrees thereof, in this case its sub-point no. 2, into practice.<sup>36</sup> The object of the attack was "art detached from the problems of life, locked in the frame of aesthetic and formal investigations increasingly tending towards trends derived from the Western abstract currents or ones close to abstraction".<sup>37</sup>

33 Untitled manuscript, MoMA Archives, Exhb. Archives, 690.16. Kępiński's collaboration in compiling the list is confirmed by McCray's letter to Stanisław Lorenz from the National Museum in Warsaw, dated 4 November 1960, MoMA Archives, Exhb. Archives 690.2.

34 A. Rottenberg, "Ministerstwo Kultury i Sztuki" [The Ministry of Culture and Art], in: *Polskie życie artystyczne w latach 1945–1960* [Artistic life in Poland in the years 1945–1960], ed. A. Wojciechowski, Wrocław–Warsaw–Cracow, 1992, p. 201.

35 Ibid., Appendix 10, p. 233.

36 Sub-point 2 reads: "[It has been decided] to revise the plan of exhibitions in the country and those organised by us abroad; to accept as a principle that works realistic [in style], ideologically and socially involved or figurative will be exhibited. Abstract works or works situated on the borderline of abstraction are to be treated as marginal. The same is to be accepted in the poetics of art publications"; *ibid.*, p. 234.

37 Ibid., p. 233.



**Fig. 3.** Peter Selz and Doreen Potworowski, photo by K. Karpuszek

For a few months after Selz's return to New York, the project for the Polish exhibition ground to a standstill. As late as in January of 1960, Starzyński was still trying to convince the Ministry to permit the exhibition to be organised in the shape proposed by Selz. In February, however, the Polish side announced that it was suspending its participation in the project.<sup>38</sup> The official reason concerned the proposed date for the exhibition: it allegedly clashed with the Chopin Contest that took place in Warsaw every five years; MoMA tried to set up a meeting between Kazimierz Karpuszek and the Polish consul in Chicago.

In March 1960 Selz got the idea that he would bypass the official level and organise the show in cooperation with the Krzywe Koło Gallery. But the gallery's animator, Marian Bogusz, dampened his enthusiasm by reminding him that Communist Poland operated along different lines than America: there were no private art galleries there. Krzywe Koło was financed by, and dependent on, the Ministry.

Between March and August 1960 the project remained in a state of collapse. An attempt to restart talks with Poland was made in late August. Karpuszek went to Warsaw first, and was joined by Selz on 2 September. Selz met with Zdzisław Kępiński and Stanisław Lorentz and tried to reschedule the opening

<sup>38</sup> A letter from Kazimierz Karpuszek to Ryszard Stanisławski dated 26 February 1960, Ryszard Stanisławski's Archive, Art Institute, Polish Academy of Sciences, III/1-50.



**Fig. 4.** Peter Selz in Stefan Gierowski's studio, photo by K. Karpuszek

of the exhibition. Memoranda sent by Selz to McCray after his return indicate that at that time the exhibition was planned to be called *13 Polish Painters of Today* and (most probably because of pressure from the Ministry) was to be created in cooperation with Lorentz and Kępiński, who were described as the art commissioners.<sup>39</sup> During the following month it turned out that the project was not viable because the Ministry was still opting for the “tutti-frutti” format.

It seems that it was more or less during this period that Selz began to develop a plan that was to allow him to bypass the Communist authorities. The actions of Beatrice Perry, the owner of a gallery in Washington DC who came from Washington to Warsaw in June 1960 – just when Selz's project had reached the deepest impasse – and bought some fifty paintings from Polish artists, may have been the impulse that suggested a solution to the curator's problem.<sup>40</sup> Considering the fact that Selz wished to exhibit around

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<sup>39</sup> The term “art commissioner” also appears in McCray's letter to Stanisław Lorenz from the National Museum in Warsaw, dated 4 November 1960, MoMA Archives, Exhb. Archives, 690.2.

<sup>40</sup> Perry's successful trip to Poland is interesting, also because it did not alter Kazimierz Karpuszek's slightly condescending view of Perry's actions. In a letter to Ryszard Stanisławski dated 22 October 1960, Karpuszek wrote: “Mrs. Perry – a very nice and affable woman – but she understands nothing as to the balance of artistic and

sixty works, Perry's success had demonstrated that it was possible to gather enough material while bypassing the official circles: the thing to do was to buy the paintings instead of leasing them. All one needed was funds. So, in December of 1960 Selz asked some American art dealers to send him photographs of Polish paintings they had in their galleries. He contacted Beatrice Perry at Gres Gallery in Washington, Arthur and Madeleine Lejwa at Galerie Chalette in New York and Kazimierz Karpuszek, who in the meantime had started working at the Contemporary Art Gallery in Chicago.<sup>41</sup>

Cooperation with the galleries proved frustrating, however. Both Perry and the Lejwas collaborated with the same Polish agent, Ryszard Stanisławski.<sup>42</sup> Also, the Lejwas, who were very ambitious and important players on the New York art scene, always attempted to sign exclusive contracts with Polish artists, thus trying to make other gallery owners understand that they were the leading lights of the project. They even tried to persuade MoMA that its show should be supported only by one gallery – theirs.

In January 1961, Selz approached the Ministry for the last time, asking for its collaboration in organising the exhibition, but all he heard was the proposal to reschedule the project to 1963. Cooperation with the Ministry was therefore terminated and Selz went to Paris, in the hope that the private galleries there might hold the same interesting works by Polish abstract painters (most probably he primarily had in mind Galerie Lacloche and Galerie Lambert<sup>43</sup>).

The decision that private American galleries would act as the intermediaries in organising the exhibition was taken in mid-January of 1961. Apart from the three earlier partners, i.e. Galerie Chalette, Gres Gallery and the Contemporary Art Gallery, Selz invited the Felix Landau Gallery from the west coast to cooperate. He gave the gallery owners photographs of paintings he had seen in Poland and which he wished to bring to the States for the exhibition. The galleries were to purchase the paintings through the intermediation of DESA, i.e. the Warsaw art dealing enterprise (with which Ryszard Stanisławski collaborated), and then to lend these works to MoMA. This arrangement promised

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diplomatic powers in Poland [...] faced with her, I was ready to assume the post of an ambassador myself". Cf. K. Niemira, M. Słomska, *15 Polish Painters*, op. cit., p. 70.

41 Copies of Selz's letters to the gallery owners are held in the MoMA Archives, Exhb. Archives, 690.3, cf. also a letter from Kazimierz Karpuszek to Ryszard Stanisławski dated 16 December 1960, Ryszard Stanisławski's Archive, Art Institute, Polish Academy of Sciences, III/1-50.

42 Cf. letters from Kazimierz Karpuszek to Peter Selz dated 22 October 1960, 9 December 1960, Ryszard Stanisławski's Archive, Art Institute, Polish Academy of Sciences, III/1-50. Stanisławski's Archive contains a separate file of letters described "GRES GALLERY | Karpuszek". Problems with cooperation are referred to in, among others, a memorandum dated 4 April 1961 sent by Selz to Alfred Barr, René d'Harnoncourt and Porter McCray, MoMA Archives, Exhb. Archives, 690.3. In our conversation Peter Selz confirmed information about Stanisławski's connection with both galleries.

43 See Libella. *Galerie Lambert. Szkice i wspomnienia* [Libella. Galerie Lambert. Sketches and memories], ed. M. A. Supruniuk, Toruń, 1997.

to be profitable. After the closing event the canvases – originally purchased for preferential, lowered prices – were to be returned to their owners with the MoMA exhibition sticker on their reverses. Afterwards they would function on the American market not as works of little-known artists from behind the Iron Curtain, but as works whose artistic quality had been confirmed by MoMA; this considerably raised their value.

It is difficult to say to what extent the fact that the exhibition was dependent on the support of the gallery owners influenced its shape. The fact that Selz not only presented his own selection of works to the art dealers, but also asked to be shown the works they already owned may be significant; it may indicate that the curator may have treated the art dealers as more than instrumental to his task. The removal of the women sculptors, Szapocznikow and Ślesieńska, from the list of proposed artists may be viewed not only in the context of alterations in Selz's concept for the exhibition but also as resulting from the logistic problems associated with the involvement of private galleries. Sculptures sold less well than paintings and their transport was more costly. For an art dealer, the purchase of a sculpture was more risky than the purchase of a painting; this may have affected the elimination of the two sculptresses from the list.<sup>44</sup>

While the question regarding the sculptures is only a field for conjecture, it is beyond a doubt that the collages by Teresa Rudowicz and Marian Warzecha were included in the exhibition as a result of Selz's collaboration with American art dealers.<sup>45</sup> Selz could not have encountered either Rudowicz or Warzecha during any of his visits in Poland, as both artists were working in Italy at that time. It is improbable that he had seen any of their collages in either Cracow or Warsaw. In fact, he first saw the works by Rudowicz and Warzecha only as late as in April 1961, when the list of *13 Polish Painters* was already completed.<sup>46</sup> The collages arrived in a shipment of works acquired by the galleries and constituted a bonus: they had been purchased solely for commercial reasons. Selz was very impressed and decided to add them to the exhibition; thus, in May 1961 the title *13 Polish Painters* became *15 Polish Painters*.

44 In the late 1950s and early 1960s, transporting sculptures across the Atlantic was a considerable challenge, as is confirmed by Szapocznikow's unsuccessful attempt to launch her career in the United States. In 1960 Beatrice Perry contacted the sculptress and offered to exhibit three of her works in Washington, DC. The works were damaged during transport, but they were nevertheless shown at Gres Gallery's "Polish Painting" exhibition in December 1961. Perry managed to sell only one of them. Due to the financial risk and high costs, Szapocznikow ceased collaborating with American galleries until the 1970s. Cf. J. Gola, *Katalog rzeźb Aliny Szapocznikow* [Catalogue of Alina Szapocznikow's sculptures], Cracow, 2001, p. 94.

45 See: *Sztuka i jej okolice. Z Marianem Warzechą rozmawia Jarosław Suchan* [Art and its environs. Marian Warzecha is interviewed by Jarosław Suchan], in: *Warzecha*, catalogue, Cracow, 1996, pp. 15–16; a letter from Kazimierz Karpuszek to Ryszard Stanisławski dated 18 May 1961, Ryszard Stanisławski's Archive, Art Institute, Polish Academy of Sciences, signature X/37-1.

46 Ibid.



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The fact that the list of artists was altered several times and that two of them were added to it when even the catalogue was nearly finished clearly shows that Selz's conception for the exhibition was very fluid. Both the process of gathering the materials and the final effect indicate that he focused primarily on exhibiting those works of Polish art which – seen from the perspective of the United States – could be considered pertinent and up-to-date. The decisive factor was, first and foremost, dating. All of the works presented at the MoMA exhibition had been produced in the years 1956–1960 and the artists mostly belonged to the young generation: the youngest of them, Jan Lebenstein and Marian Warzecha, were thirty-one, the oldest, Tadeusz Kantor, was forty-six.

Two artists who stood out from this group of young artists were Henryk Stażewski and Piotr Potworowski (Figs. 5–7), whom Selz treated as the doyens of avant-garde.<sup>47</sup> Their works headed the exhibition and symbolically showed the young generation's connection with the two pre-war currents in Polish art: Stażewski represented Constructivism, derived from the art of Władysław Strzemiński and Kazimierz Malewicz, whereas Potworowski stood for the colourism of the pre-war Kapists.<sup>48</sup> This choice also referred to the two main roots of Polish non-figurative art, i.e. Paris and revolutionary Russia. Yet the works selected by Selz referred to the pre-war traditions only indirectly.<sup>49</sup>

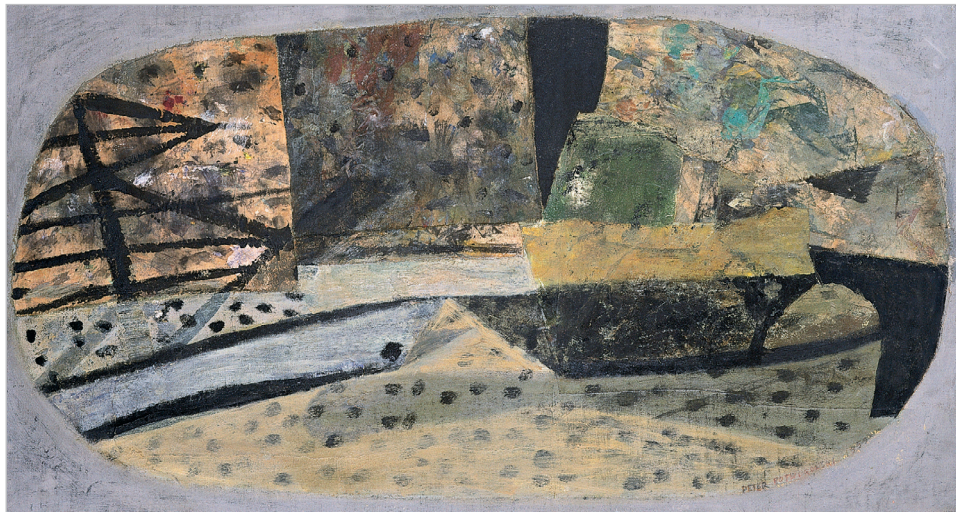
A special place at the exhibition was assigned to the works of Tadeusz Kantor and Jan Lebenstein (Figs. 8–9, 14–15). The former, as has already been stated, was considered a *pars pro toto* of young Polish art. Kantor often used the dripping techniques and in the eyes of the Americans was modern in the same sense as Jackson Pollock. Jan Lebenstein, in turn, had received a double award at the I Biennial of Young Artists in Paris in 1959, and in the late 1950s and early 1960s he was considered a rising star. He was made famous by his *Figury osiowe* [Axial Figures] in relief, which lay on the borderline between figurative and abstract art, and it was precisely the works from this cycle that Selz selected for the MoMA exhibition. A large group of works by Stefan Gierowski, Aleksander Kobzdej and Bronisław Kierzkowski (Figs. 10–11, 13) was situated close to the painting of matter. Tadeusz Brzozowski (Fig. 12) and Tadeusz Dominik represented the expressive current in

47 P. Selz, "Fifteen Polish Painters", in: *15 Polish Painters*, catalogue, New York, 1961, pp. 6–7.

48 Press materials accompanying the exhibition contained information that "the Paris Committee or 'Kapist', whose members migrated to Paris [...], particularly admired the work of Cezanne and Bonnard", [https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press\\_archives/2873/releases/MOMA\\_1961\\_0088\\_86.pdf?2010](https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/2873/releases/MOMA_1961_0088_86.pdf?2010) [accessed 30 October 2015]. The group was formed in 1923, and the Kapists' last joint exhibition took place in Warsaw in 1934. The trend survived the war; after 1945 works in the spirit of Colourism were produced by, among others, Jan Cybis and Eugeniusz Eibisch.

49 Potworowski's works were of gigantic size, which went against the Kapist formula of a painting intended for a bourgeois interior.





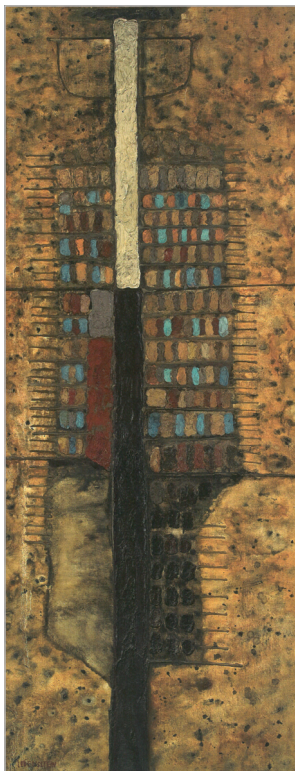
**Fig. 5.** Piotr Potworowski, *Łodzie rybackie w Rewie* [Fishing boats in Rewa], 1959, Grażyna and Jacek Łozowski's Collection



**Fig. 6.** Henryk Stażewski, *Biały relief na fakturalnym tle* [White relief on textured background], 1960, Starmach Gallery



**Fig. 7.** Henryk Stażewski, *Relief czerwony na białym i szarym tle* [Red relief on white and grey background], 1960, Starmach Gallery



**Fig. 8.** Jan Lebenstein, *Figura osiowa 6* [Axial figure no. 6], private collection



**Fig. 9.** Tadeusz Kantor, *Rori*, 1957, Anna and Jerzy Starak's Collection, photo by Maciej Jędrzejewski © Maria Kantor, Dorota Krakowska

Polish abstract art. Works by Teresa Pągowska could be seen as a distant echo of Potworowski's canvases, while those by Wojciech Fangor corresponded to Stażewski's. Jerzy Nowosielski, Jerzy Tchórzewski and the juxtaposed collages by Teresa Rudowicz and Marian Warzecha were presented as curios.

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In a review of the exhibition written for *The New York Times*, John Canaday pointed out that Selz's project did not aspire to be a comprehensive overview of young Polish art.<sup>50</sup> At the very beginning of his text, Canaday noted that the Poles whose works were to be seen at MoMA were only slightly different from artists from any other part of the world. It is crucial that Canaday did not associate the universal quality of the artistic language used by the young

<sup>50</sup> J. Canaday, "75 Works by Contemporaries go on View Today at the Modern Museum", *The New York Times*, 1 August 1961.





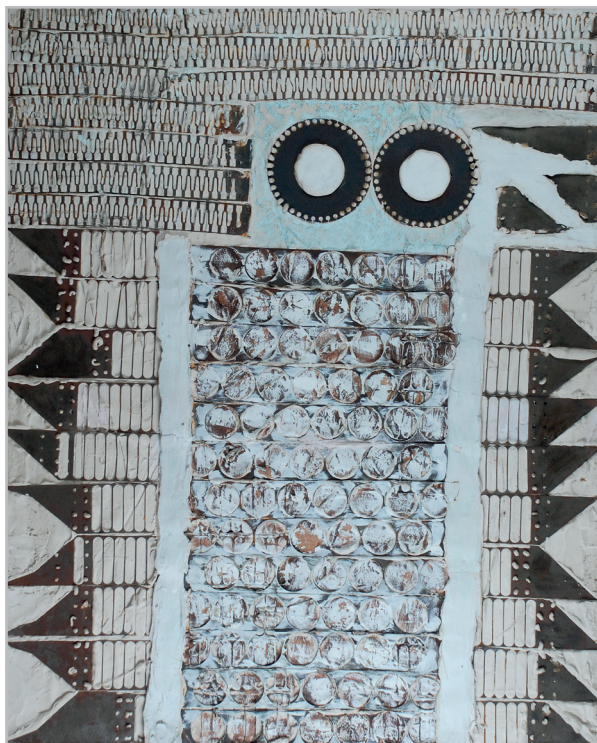
**Fig. 10.** Stefan Gierowski, *Obraz LXXV* [Painting LXXV], 1959, Anna and Jerzy Starak's Collection, photo by Maciej Jędrzejewski



**Fig. 11.** Aleksander Kobzdej, *Południowy* [Southerly], 1959, private collection



**Fig. 12.** Tadeusz Brzozowski, *Fraucymer* [Ladies-in-waiting], 1959, private collection



**Fig. 13.** Bronisław Kierzkowski, Kompozycja nr 402 [Composition no. 402], 1959, Rempex Auction House Archive

Polish painters with American art, but simply with Western art. The only one of the fifteen artists who could have been viewed as slightly “Americanised”, i.e. Kantor, was described as mediocre.

The review of the exhibition in *Time* magazine was held in a similar tone: “Of all countries behind the Iron Curtain, Poland has most successfully kept alive its cultural ties with the West. One of the hardest roots has been the long Polish tradition of abstract art, some of whose practitioners date their conversions back to the days of early cubism and Russian constructivism”.<sup>51</sup> It was said about the young painters that “they are swiftly aware of art events, whether in New York or Barcelona”. Also, the reviewer observed that in a country where being educated meant being fluent in French, the artists did not always manage to escape the elegant manner typical of the Paris School, but “if the splashy oils, crumpled collages and floating ambiguous forms often suggest bolder experiments by better-known painters in the West, the passion and verve behind the paintings is purely Polish”.

The last sentence clearly indicates the problem the American press had regarding the exhibition. The journalist, just like the curator,<sup>52</sup> noticed the

<sup>51</sup> “Polish Moderns”, *Time*, 4 August 1961.

<sup>52</sup> P. Selz, “Fifteen Polish Painters”, in: *15 Polish Painters*, catalogue, New York, 1961, p. 11.





**Fig. 14.** Peter Selz working on the exhibition at MoMA, Peter Selz's Archive



**Fig. 15.** Peter Selz with works by Jan Lebenstein and Tadeusz Kantor, photo by Walter Daran, *Time*, 4 August 1961, p. 44

belongingness of Polish abstract art to Western-European art and, at the same time, its individual character. Yet in his eyes, the distinctiveness of Polish art was not based on formal innovations, but on aspects which went beyond the domain of art, i.e. its passion and verve; its energy. This clearly shows that what was assessed were not only the works of art as such, but also the emotions the critics had discerned in them. The plainly political aspect of the assessment of young Polish painting is equally obvious in an essay Selz wrote for the exhibition catalogue (which Bugajski described as “a masterpiece of political walking on eggs”<sup>53</sup>).

Both the narration of the exhibition – which began with the “old hands”, i.e. Stażewski and Potworowski – and Selz’s essay which accompanied it strongly emphasised the role that the pre-war avant-garde had played in the formation of Polish modern art. Thus constructed, this narration suggested a continuity of artistic phenomena that had to be backed by an ideological and political continuity. In this approach, the existence of non-figurative art in Poland under the rule of the Polish United Workers’ Party proved that Communism – and the realist art associated with it – had been introduced into Poland artificially and did not express the “Polish spirit”. This spirit was presented as expressing itself most fully in non-figurative art. Thus, abstraction became a manifestation of not only emotional substance (as was in the case of Pollock or Wols), but also of substance, which Selz had described as “national”.<sup>54</sup>

Selz’s belief in the existence of a Polish *Kunstwollen* seems to be the exhibition’s ideological axis. This essentially romantic conviction – in addition to political issues – seems to have stood behind his stubborn resolution to have abstraction as the key to the selection. Eliminating conservative realism (e.g. Kulisiewicz), the art of the colourists (e.g. Eibisch and Cybis), abstraction with a tendency towards cubism (Marczyński) or surrealism that was still alive in Poland (e.g. the works of Bogusz that had been created under the pressure of concentration camp trauma) from the exhibition made it possible to present a relatively homogeneous – although, of course, false – picture of young Polish art. Also, Selz’s selection is a manifestation of MoMA’s consistent but, at least from the perspective of European art of the era, already slightly conservative programme, in which abstraction was treated as the *pars pro toto* of modern art.

It is also noteworthy that Selz’s exhibition created a false opposition between the “young artists” presented therein and the non-presented (and, after all, unfamiliar to MoMA’s audience) “remainder” of contemporary Polish art; for instance, on the basis of works shown at MoMA in 1961 it would be very difficult to judge what exactly the young Polish artists were supposed to be rebelling against. By not showing anything that would have been a negative

53 L. J. A., “Polish Painters of the New Order”, *The Washington Post*, 22 October 1961, cited by J. Bugajski, “Tadeusz Kantor’s Publics”, op. cit., p. 62.

54 P. Selz, “Fifteen Polish Painters”, op. cit., pp. 5, 11.



reference point to the Polish “angry young men”, Selz obtained an image of their categorical isolation. In the case of some of the exhibited artists, e.g. Kantor, this was unavoidable, of course, as their art emphatically rejected the native tradition. In the case of others, e.g. Kobzdej, Gierowski and other artists who made use of the painting-of-matter formula, the issue seems more complex. This is because Polish painting of matter owes much to the tradition of Colourism, which Selz had clearly marginalised. It is not by accident that he selected Potworowski and his monumental abstract works to represent Colourism, instead of Cybis and his small-scale figurative compositions which were far more characteristic of this current. Through his choices, Selz consistently attempted to de-contextualise young Polish art, i.e. to show it in the context of avant-garde trends in art and, through this, to more strongly emphasise the correctness of its political reputation.

The turbulent history of its organisation, which was presented earlier in this essay, plainly shows that organising the exhibition in the “modern” form required a considerable amount of hard work, diplomatic machinations and financial expenses. The question arises as to why Selz, McCray and the MoMA supervisory board were so adamant about exhibiting Polish non-figurative art in New York. The efforts invested in organising the exhibition of Polish art at MoMA make it clear that this was not a whim of a few aficionados of modern art, but the result of a cultural policy that had been conceived broadly and higher than at the curatorial level.

The obvious context seems to be the reputation of Polish abstract painters, who in the United States were considered to be in opposition to the Communist camp. Hence the fact that their works were exhibited at MoMA could be understood as an American triumph: firstly, they confirmed the anti-Communist stance of the Polish intelligentsia, and secondly, they were exhibited to spite the Communists. In effect, one way to understand the exhibition would be as was done by Eva Cockcroft, who was quoted earlier, i.e. as a kind of political demonstration and the success of the Cold War policy of the United States.

Yet at the level of art the *15 Polish Painters* exhibition demonstrated beyond any doubt that Polish art of the latter half of the 1950s was leaning towards Paris. It would be hard to discern American inspirations in the exhibited paintings, perhaps with the exception of Kantor’s *informel* works and works by Dominik. On the other hand, even the most American of Polish painters, Tadeusz Kantor, may be viewed as a *par excellence* European artist. Writing about the reception of Tachism in Cracow, Mieczysław Porębski aptly observed that “it was closer to the experience of matter than that of gesture”, which means it was closer to Paris than to New York.<sup>55</sup>

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55 Mieczysław Porębski, cited in: K. Czerni, *Nie tylko o sztuce. Rozmowy z profesorem Mieczysławem Porębskim* [Not only about art. Conversations with Professor Mieczysław Porębski], Wrocław, 1992, p. 105.

In 1946 Clement Greenberg, having viewed an exhibition of French painting, smugly congratulated the American painters on their surpassing French artists (“now I see that we have good reasons to congratulate ourselves on being as good as we are”<sup>56</sup>). A dozen or so years later, European art stirred up quite different emotions. In the late 1950s it was no longer viewed on the other side of the Atlantic as only a negative reference point; it became an interesting formula of modernity. In an interview, Selz himself cited curiosity as one of the reasons for organising the exhibition: in his view, the presentation of Polish art was intended to disprove the belief that “nothing good was happening behind the Iron Curtain”.<sup>57</sup>

The fact that the *15 Polish Painters* exhibition came into being reveals that the approaches of New York art institutions in the late 1950s and early 1960s varied and that they cannot be limited to only one category, i.e. to the implementation of Washington’s Cold War policies. Yet the political aspect of the exhibition is, of course, indisputable. The curators did all they could to present Polish art as belonging to Western currents; hence the key to selecting the works. Their ambition was motivated by the belief that the abstract quality in art is grounded in its anti-totalitarian character. At the same time the American press, and Selz himself, did notice the individualistic element of the *15 Polish Painters*. The exhibition proved not only that Polish artists were creating art which opposed the Soviet standards, but also that this art could be both comprehensible and interesting to the Western viewer. The commercial success of some of the exhibited artists (Lebenstein, Kantor, Fangor, Kobzdej) in the United States shows that *15 Polish Painters* was not a one-off episode, but a symptom of a wider, although naturally short-lived, phenomenon.<sup>58</sup> Although to speak of a “triumph” of Polish painting would be an exaggeration, it is a fact that the exhibition presented in 1961 at MoMA proved that interesting things were happening in art – not only in New York, Paris or London, but also on the other side of the Iron Curtain.

(Translated by Klaudyna Michałowicz)

56 C. Greenberg, “Review on the Exhibition Painting in France 1939–1946”, cited by M. J. Borja-Villel, “The Triumph and Failure of American Painting”, in: *Be-Bomb: The Transatlantic War of Images and All that Jazz. 1946–1956*, ed. E. Capdevila, Madrid, 2007, p. 9.

57 Interview with Peter Selz, p. 37. The interview is available for consultation through the MoMA Internet site: [https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/learn/archives/transcript\\_selz.pdf](https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/learn/archives/transcript_selz.pdf) [accessed 1 March 2015].

58 On Kantor’s American career, cf. the already quoted Jill Bugajski. On Kobzdej, cf. K. Niemira, M. Słomska, *15 Polish Painters*, op. cit., p. 37. Lebenstein’s American career has not been researched so far; materials that may provide a starting point for the analysis are located in the archive of Galerie Chalette in the American Art Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

## Abstract

The essay concerns *15 Polish Painters*, the now slightly forgotten, but once famous exhibition of Polish contemporary art that took place at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1961. Initially, the exhibition was conceived as an expression of a thaw in relations between the United States and Poland, and it was organised at the diplomatic level. Organisational works began during Vice President Richard Nixon's visit to Warsaw in August of 1959. They were coordinated by Porter McCray (who was responsible for MoMA's touring exhibition programme) and Peter Selz (an art historian of German origin and a curator cooperating with MoMA). The Polish side withdrew from the project because of the abstract character of the works that Selz had selected and his disregard for the "official" artists of the People's Republic of Poland. The project was completed with the collaboration of American private galleries which bought the paintings in Poland and then loaned them to MoMA to be exhibited. The essay presents the behind-the-scenes history of organising the exhibition and its political context. It discusses the artistic message of the exhibition and the key used in the selection of its works. Finally, it touches upon the issue of Polish art's reputation in the United States and the question as to why the Americans, wishing to present modern art from behind the Iron Curtain, decided, of all the countries of the Soviet bloc, to focus on none other than Poland. The aim of the essay is to fill the gap in the historiography, since the *15 Polish Painters* exhibition is usually referred to only briefly and has never been the subject of a scholarly enquiry. The event seems worth recalling also because it adds a nuance to the still current – as was confirmed by Catherine Dossin's much-talked-of book, *The Rise and Fall of American Art*, 2015 – and yet schematic view that in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there existed only two art centres, New York and Paris, thus completely overlooking the distinct character of the countries of the Communist bloc.