

*Andrzej Pieńkos*

INSTITUTE OF ART HISTORY, UNIVERSITY OF WARSAW

## The Crisis of Impressionism or Claude Monet's New Realism?

The book *Postimpresjoniści* [The Post-Impressionists] by Wiesław Juszczak, a small volume first published in 1972 in a popular series, contained inspiring and sometimes eye-opening proposals for approaches to the art of, among others, Edgar Degas and Georges Seurat. In this book, Juszczak pointed to the option of locating their oeuvre differently in relation to Naturalism and Symbolism than was generally accepted at the time.<sup>1</sup> This was most probably the first such decisive attempt to revise the traditional perception of Impressionism and its consequences to have been made in the history of art. The book begins with a chapter titled "Claude Monet a kryzys impresjonizmu" [Claude Monet and the crisis of Impressionism] – which is a long examination of this artist's oeuvre analysed, quite paradoxically, as consistently and throughout Impressionist and yet, at the same time, Post- or even anti-Impressionist.

According to Juszczak, the Naturalist concept of a painting as a window opening to the depth beyond acquired in Monet's late works an extraordinary realisation, one that was consistent and yet undermined this very concept:

The plane of the canvas ceased to exist, it was a pane of glass, in a sense – a transparent thing through which the viewer would see the "continuation" of the same space in which he found himself. This impression, sometimes carried out so far as to attain the power of illusion of a kaiserpanorama, is united with a dematerialisation of objects located in this "tangible" space: the illusory space is filled with a multicoloured, iridescent mist, in which materialise the ghosts of objects, as if gossamer curtains moving in the breeze [my underline – AP], upon which vibrate blurred shadows of edifices, trees and human figures devoid of substance, volume, weight, their matter not diversified.<sup>2</sup>

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1 I attempted to make use of Juszczak's proposal in reference to the oeuvre of Degas in my essay: "Degasa i nabistów intymizm – mała burżuazyjna stabilizacja?" [The Intimism of Degas and the Nabis. Small Bourgeois Stability?], in: *Od Maneta do Gauguina. Impresjoniści i postimpresjoniści z Musée d'Orsay w Paryżu*, catalogue of the exhibition at the National Museum, Warsaw, 2001, pp. 128–144 (also a French edition).

2 W. Juszczak, *Postimpresjoniści*, Warsaw, 1985 [3<sup>rd</sup> edition], p. 34.

In the following part of his argument, Juszczak wrote, startlingly:

With Monet, this conflict assumed an extraordinarily dramatic scale. It is possible to notice concurrent almost-attempts at fighting it and of making use certain artistic benefits springing from it; moments of full surrender to it and moments of forcing a way through all those contradictions (with an acceptance of them that is, perhaps, deceptive) towards other conceptions of form, which even to Monet himself may have been difficult to name.<sup>3</sup>

Let us highlight this intuitive observation and the equally emphasised co-existence of Monet's approach: his uncertainty towards the creative process that unfolded in an unknown direction.

Logically, the recognition of "impression" led to the cancellation of the subjective/objective dichotomy. The cognising subject and the cognised object/reality were to disappear as separate spheres; "reality was considered identical to awareness ! and impression was the fundamental act of awareness; an impression is neither subject nor object, but the source of their identicalness and the product of their interpenetration".<sup>4</sup> Let us recall Monet's confession: "[M]y reflexes compelled me to take unconscious action [my underline – AP] in spite of myself, and it was the daily routine of my life". Let it be stressed (if we accept the approach proposed by Juszczak and Shiff) that we are absolutely not dealing with sensual cognition. We shall consider later on whether, logically, the belief in "impression" led to the cancellation of the extra-image reality/painterly image dichotomy as well.

Monet's late oeuvre, extending all the way to the 1920s, constitutes – without any discernible breakthrough – a continuation of his Impressionist assumptions from the 1870s. But, beginning from the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Monet was interested in fewer and fewer things.<sup>5</sup> He obsessively investigated a few motifs; the majority of motifs he had painted earlier (mainly scenes from human life: regattas, garden parties, walks) vanished from his work. In 1897, on the eve of his beginning the great garden/art/life opus at Giverny, Monet embarked on the *Mornings on the Seine* series. Fourteen canvases were produced at his atelier barge anchored on the river near Giverny. Numbered from the commencement of the project and exhibited in a sequence at the Galerie Georges Petit in Paris the following year, they astounded even those

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>4</sup> R. Shiff, *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism. A Study of the Theory, Technique and Critical Evaluation of Modern Art*, Chicago, 1984, p. 117.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. interesting observations on Monet's selection of motif with reference to the image in: K. Berger, *Japonismus in der westlichen Malerei 1860–1920*, Munich, 1980, pp. 92–93. It must be noted, however, that Monet was increasingly more interested in those few things which had not been painted before, the mist among them. On this issue, cf. an essay by M. Poprzęcka, "Obraz za mgłą" [Image behind the Mist], in: eadem, *Inne obrazy. Oko, widzenie, sztuka. Od Albertiego do Duchampa* [Other Images. The Eye, the Perception, the Art. From Alberti to Duchamp], Gdańsk, 2008, pp. 109–113.

viewers who were already used to the earlier series.<sup>6</sup> Such was the surprise that the paintings were even linked with Symbolism, which was an astounding association at the time. In comparison with earlier works, *Mornings*, painted on the Seine, in a universe of river mists and lights, are almost entirely devoid of compositional structure. This is especially true with reference to five of them which had the word "mist" in the subtitle; indeed, the phantoms of clouds and riverside trees lost in the mist may constitute the only association with the extra-image reality there. Monet's conception of "immersion" in an image/reality perceived not only in artistic categories – in effect, an immersion in reality – was already budding. In this series, Monet for the first time consistently used the square format. It is a format in which the perception of the canvas in the categories of a landscape is instinctively impeded and which therefore furthers the autonomy of the work; also, this format is not associated with conventional painting in general. This idea would be used again in the *Water Lilies* series. Yet Monet did not follow a straight path towards "objectlessness" and "pure" painting. In the following years, the views of London (1900–1903) and Venice (1908) will show, with varying regularity, concrete representations. In fact, also the first views of the garden at Giverny, i.e. those from before 1900, clearly show the famous Japanese bridge and often even particular shrubs and trees. Twelve of these views were shown, as a discrete series, at the Durand-Ruel gallery in Paris in 1900. Yet even though concrete images are in evidence in those works, Emile Verhaeren perceived in them the contours of an "alternative world". In the following years, the level of "unrealness" (or, conversely, realness; we shall come back to this question) in the images of the pond and the garden increased considerably.

Monet's garden creation at Giverny, which commenced in 1890 and intensified after the enlargement of the garden in 1893, continued until his death. Initially, Monet's decision might have seemed related to the ideas of his older colleagues from Barbizon, to Giovanni Segantini's project that was undertaken in the same decade of the 1890s, or to the notions professed by other artists who had settled in rural environments in order to *experience*, and then of course to represent, nature.<sup>7</sup> After all, Monet was very well acquainted with the Barbizon painters. Yet at Giverny it was evident from the beginning that the exquisite garden dominated over the artist's house and that this garden was increasingly more isolated from the surroundings; it was also evident that the place was being created as a private retreat and according to the owner's own rules.<sup>8</sup> Initially, Monet became involved in this garden creation for pure

6 Cf. *The Age of Impressionism at the Art Institute of Chicago*, exhibition catalogue, ed. G. Groom and D. Druick, New Haven–London, 2008, p. 161.

7 I discuss this issue in Chapter 17 of my book *Tracona moc obrazu czyli epizody nowoczesnego realizmu* [The Lost Power of Image, or Episodes from Modern Realism], Warsaw, 2012.

8 It has been suggested that a blot of colour visible in some of the early *Water Lilies* is the shadow of Monet standing at the edge of the pond (V. Stoichita, *A Short History of the Shadow*, London, 1999, pp. 108–109). Is it possible that Monet wished to impress

pleasure; at least that is what he declared and it is not unbelievable. After all, this pleasure came mostly from the feeling that he was creating reality and immersing himself in it, and perhaps also from the sense of his participating in nature's "performance" that was unfolding by itself.

The garden at Giverny is undoubtedly the best known and the most thoroughly researched garden of an European artist.<sup>9</sup> Being very consciously formed, it became an "alternative world" to this allegedly extreme naturalist. Monet consulted his gardening projects with specialists and commissioned them to carry them out, but at the same time he sought the advice of his friend, the writer Octave Mirbeau, as to the conception of the whole. With regard to gardening, the painter's huge undertaking was undoubtedly developed in a most professional manner. Initially, the garden provided Monet only with motifs to be painted; but the large-format works produced after 1900 were devoid of any spatial references – the Japanese bridge he had painted earlier, the implied line of the horizon or the trees simply vanished. Only a contour of the house among the greenery would appear, indistinctly and no more than occasionally, in canvases produced ca. 1902. By then, the water and the lilies, sometimes a reflection of the sky in the water, would occupy the entire space of the painting, but only seemingly: in fact, most often we are not certain what we are seeing – whether the painting is about water lilies at all. Several times Monet considerably altered the layout of the garden; in 1901 he expanded it again, altered the course of the stream (having obtained permission from local authorities), changed the shape of the pond, remodelled the bridge etc. Also, he painted images of the water lilies – constantly, tirelessly, in various formats. After a personal crisis – his second wife died in 1911, his son in 1914 – he finally decided to complete a project (the idea for which, it seems, had been budding in him for a while) of painting a vast, homogeneous image of the natural scenery he had created in the garden. Perhaps inspired by the still-popular 19<sup>th</sup>-century panoramas, in June of 1914 Monet decided

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the mark of *his own person* on the world he had truly created himself, and not once, but twice: as a model and as its image in painting?

- 9 The issue of gardens created by artists is discussed more extensively in my text: "Ogród artysty, poety, myśliciela. Terytorium tworzenia" [The Garden of an Artist, a Poet, a Thinker. A Territory of Creation], *Rocznik Historii Sztuki*, 34, 2009, pp. 171–198. There is a huge and recent specialist bibliography regarding the garden at Giverny. Cf. e.g. *Monet's Years at Giverny: Beyond Impressionism*, catalogue of the exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, ed. Ch. S. Moffet et al., New York, 1978; K. Sagner-Düchting, *Monet in Giverny*, Munich, 1994; P. H. Tucker, "The Revolution in the Garden: Monet in the Twentieth Century", in: *Monet in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, catalogue of the exhibition at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and the Royal Academy of Arts in London, ed. P. H. Tucker, New Haven–London, 1998, pp. 14–85; *Monet et le cycle des "Nymphéas"*, catalogue of the exhibition at Musée de l'Orangerie, ed. P. Georget et al., Paris, 1999; *Monet's Garden*, catalogue of the exhibition at Kunsthaus in Zürich, ed. Ch. Becker, Zürich, 2004; S. Patin, *Regards sur les 'Nymphéas' de Paul Claudel à André Masson*, Paris, 2006.

to arrange a continuous, uninterrupted exposition of *Water Lilies*.<sup>10</sup> It was to be a rotunda where the viewer, cut off from the outside world (which in itself merits underlining), would immerse himself, so to speak, in the water and greenery shown in the paintings. In order to implement this vast project, a second, special atelier of massive proportions was constructed at Giverny.<sup>11</sup> Painting colossal canvases for his "Grand Decoration", as he immodestly called his project,<sup>12</sup> Monet refrained from showing any actual elements of the garden – the bridge, the tree branches or the shrubs. This was because this homogeneous image was to have neither a beginning nor an end. The actual garden at Giverny was to be entirely unrecognisable. While working on the "Grand Decoration", however, Monet kept producing *Water Lilies* in smaller formats. These do not seem to have been preparatory studies or *plein air* exercises for the larger paintings (which, of course, never left the atelier because of their size).<sup>13</sup> It is not improbable that Monet conceived the "Grand Decoration" not as a crowning effect of the many years' work on the garden and its image, but only as a side effect, so to speak, of his exploit.

In this case, the territory of creation was the natural environment; in contrast to many other cases, however, this did not mean the artist's moving away from the field of art that he generally practised. Outwardly, this territory was subordinate to painting; but in reality in the last two decades of Monet's life his painting would not have existed without the garden he had created. The symbiosis was absolute. On the contrary: *Water Lilies* painted "in the face" of the garden at Giverny constitute an even more radical continuation of the artistic explorations he undertook in the 1890s. The difference is, after all, fundamental: the Rouen cathedral, the haystacks in the fields at Giverny or the mists over the Seine had not been *made* by Monet, while the water lilies he had created, to a large extent, himself, an "objective reality" at which he afterwards (?) gazed from the window of his house. It is known from contemporary accounts, however, that the last large canvases in the series were painted not from nature, but in the atelier located near the garden. From what, then? It is now impossible to establish on which "side"

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10 The hypothesis that the panoramas provided an inspiration is strongly supported by John House, "Monet: The Last Impressionist?", in: *Monet in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, op. cit., pp. 11–12.

11 It must be noted that no artist from the Impressionist circle had similarly monumental ideas. Yet Segantini's never accomplished project of a landscape, the Alpine Panorama, for the Universal Exhibition in Paris in 1900 is worth remembering in this context. Monet's closer acquaintances, e.g. Henri Gervex and Alfred Stevens, executed the *History of the Century* panorama for the Paris exhibition in 1889.

12 Perhaps referring to Maurice Denis' conception of the great decorative art of prehistoric cultures as being identical with religious art.

13 Cf. the suggestions as to the mysterious purpose of these smaller canvases dating from the years 1917–1923, in reference to the canvas at the Art Institute of Chicago, in: *The Age of Impressionism at the Art Institute of Chicago*, exhibition catalogue, ed. G. Groom and D. Druick, New Haven–London, 2008, p. 177.

of reality the painter stood; it is impossible to establish the sides, because by then they had begun to merge. All that is possible is to attempt to trace the parallel processes of creating what may, in the end, prove to be a single work: the garden set in a natural environment and the garden represented in painting.<sup>14</sup> The consecutive transformations of the garden, as well as the episodic obliteration of unsuccessful paintings (several times, several dozen pieces each time) were crucial to this process, as were the exhibitions of *Water Lilies*. These exhibitions are very well documented, also in Monet's letters, but so far they have not been researched comprehensively with regard to which pieces were selected and how they were exhibited. It is known that already in the period of the *Haystacks* and *Cathedrals* series Monet considered the interaction between particular paintings in the series to be of crucial importance and arranged them side by side in his atelier. The subsequent idea of creating the "Grand Decoration" of *Water Lilies* seems to continue his view of painting as a totality or a process instead of as detached works, and the view of the acts of painting and of responding to a painting as immersion.

Scholars, such as Gaston Bachelard, writers, such as Marcel Proust, poets, like Paul Claudel, artists, such as André Masson, and countless historians of art tried to explain the phenomenon of *Water Lilies* – Monet's last, many years-long work.<sup>15</sup> When writing about *Water Lilies*, they usually stressed the series' revolutionary artistic quality and the importance of Monet's discovery of the colour surface. Michel Butor went further and highlighted the new, truly spatial effect deriving from the paintings themselves. Monet's concept of "environment", partially employed during the Paris exhibition, has been much discussed as well, always with emphasis being placed on the consistency with which Monet's painterly experiment had been developed. Of course, Giverny was also analysed as a garden creation. It is not impossible, however, that the combination which had unexpectedly emerged there was much more complex, not so evidently deriving from the experience of creating the *Haystacks* and *Cathedrals* series.

Wiesław Juszczak wrote that Monet "made visual reality acquiescent to himself".<sup>16</sup> According to Linda Nochlin, he equated "truth with physiological concreteness".<sup>17</sup> The question to ask is whether that reality was only visual, and whether exclusively the visual aspect of this physiological quality was of

14 Rainer Maria Rilke in a 1902 text on his friend from Worpswede, the painter Heinrich Vogeler, calls his garden at Barkenhoff "his own quiet, blooming and sprouting reality" and sees an analogy between the nature of Vogeler's art and his gardening. Quoted after: R. M. Rilke, "Heinrich Vogeler", in: idem, *Worpswede*, Frankfurt am Main–Leipzig, 1987, pp. 207–217.

15 Cf. e.g. the anthology *Monet vu par...*, ed. Th. Schlessier, Paris, 2011. A more recent example of a quasi-poetic text on Monet is the essay by the Belgian writer Stéphane Lambert, *L'Adieu au paysage. Les Nymphéas de Claude Monet*, Paris, 2009.

16 Juszczak, op. cit. p. 40.

17 L. Nochlin, *Realism*, London, 1991, p. 64.



importance. After a visit at Giverny, one begins to doubt whether such limitations are truly valid. A personal experience, a multi-sensual involvement in such places of creation – for instance, the process of squeezing through John Soane's collection/house or Kurt Schwitters' Merzbau, even though the latter is reconstructed only in a small part – forces us to be circumspect in our elucidations and to view interpretations in terms of constant mutability, i.e. precisely that: experiences. A visitor at Giverny would breathe in, smell, touch and listen to Monet's work. This, of course, is largely impossible today. The contemporary experience of the garden at Giverny may lead to mistaken conclusions, because not only has the garden itself changed, as was natural, but also the paintings are not there. It is therefore necessary to limit ourselves to a general postulate that the domain of Giverny and the painting of the *Water Lilies* lie in categories broader than just visual ones.

Małgorzata Szafrąńska suggests (even though she refers to Renaissance gardens) that today they must be examined, and co-created, with attention to various sensual factors and to the intellectual factor at the same time.<sup>18</sup> Giverny would deserve an analysis similar to those which she conducted with regard to some of the 16<sup>th</sup>-century humanist gardens. Research on this work by Monet may also be inspired by methodological conceptions of analysing gardens as proposed by Mateusz Salwa: "We should think of gardens in terms of performance".<sup>19</sup> Viewed as a performance, a garden is an event that makes nature and art identical, or at least similar. Monet and Nature cooperated and exchanged experiences in his – and Nature's – garden. The dynamism of both of these processes of creation results in the painter not having full control over the creative process, but only encouraging it; Nature, in turn, participates in his display. During the exhibitions, so carefully devised by Monet, the paintings generated further images by their adjacency. The garden was doing the same, moving away from the state imposed on it by Monet. The creative effort was undertaken anew, and so forth.

As a painter, Monet needs a place to look. A place where he could look at beauty. And after many years, having so long and so often been changing the places of his looking, he feels the need of space that would become his final space. [...] The place of painting contains everything. [...] Monet wished to create a place for himself. [...] Giverny is the new and ultimate homeland, the free space where an as yet unprecedented vision that preceded even painting would be created [my underline – AP].<sup>20</sup>

Yet this "final place" may be understood in broader terms than the terms of visual categories only. Monet's periods of residence on the atelier boat cannot

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18 M. Szafrąńska, *Człowiek w renesansowym ogrodzie* [A Man in a Renaissance Garden], Cracow, 2011.

19 M. Salwa, "The Garden as a Performance", *Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics*, 5, 2013, pp. 372–387.

20 M. Goldin, "La natura inventata", in: *Monet. I luoghi della pittura*, catalogue of the exhibition at Casa dei Carraresi in Treviso, ed. M. Goldin, Conegliano, 2002, p. 255.

be overlooked. The fact of his living by the water, even though ancillary to an artistic goal, must have influenced Monet's thinking about art and his existential and ontological reflections.

The present-day experience of Giverny and Orangerie, although defective, suggests that Monet's realism was not limited to painting alone, or rather that it acted as an inescapable conductor to the realm outside the boundaries of a canvas. Monet, just as the Chinese painter Wang-Fô in a tale by Marguerite Yourcenar,<sup>21</sup> enters a painting and exits from it; the image merges into one with what even the Barbizonians still regarded as only a place for living and for *plein air* painting, observed with a distanced mind-set, even if that distance was lessened by nostalgia. To continue the analogy, we would have to agree that this act of entering the reality/image occurs not only in the visual aspect, and not only on the metaphorical level; it constitutes an act of experiencing the essence of being.

When writing about the *Cathedrals* series and the "ghosts" of objects, Juszcak assumed that Monet had achieved something he had not intended; that he was not aware what he had achieved; that he was heading towards "conceptions of form which were difficult to name". Having visited the newly opened Orangerie, Paul Claudel noted in his diary, under the date of 8 July 1927, his impressions from seeing the paintings by Monet and referred to a comparison of his works with medieval stained glass windows, writing:

Claude Monet, au terme de sa longue vie [...] a fini par s'adresser à l'élément lui-même le plus docile, le plus pénétrable, l'eau a la fois transparence, irisation et miroir. Grâce à l'eau, il s'est fait le peintre indirect de ce qu'on ne voit pas. Il s'adresse à cette surface presque invisible et spirituelle qui sépare la lumière de son reflet.<sup>22</sup>

As is usual with this excellent poet and art critic, each word is valid and not easy: the transparency, the mirror, the spiritual surface... And that apt if enigmatic phrase: *le peintre indirect*.

Concluding the aforesaid chapter, Juszcak called Monet's *Water Lilies* "a colossal frieze that has the resonance of a solemn, pantheistic hymn" and cited René Gimpel's impressions from a visit at Monet's garden in 1918:

[...] a strange artistic spectacle [...] a panorama of water and water lilies, of light and sky. In this infinity, the water and the sky had neither beginning nor end. It was as though we were present at one of the first hours of the birth of the world. It was mysterious, poetic, deliciously unreal. The effect was strange: it was at once pleasurable and disturbing to be surrounded by water on all sides and yet untouched by it.<sup>23</sup>

21 M. Yourcenar, "How Wang Fô Was Saved", in: eadem, *Oriental Tales*, translated by A. Manguel, New York, 1985. In the story, the great painter is naturally able to cross the boundary of the painting.

22 P. Claudel, *Journal 1904–1932*, Quoted after *Monet vu par...*, Paris, 2011, p. 28.

23 R. Gimpel, quoted in: *The Grove Book of Art Writing*, ed. M. Gayford, K. Wright, New York, 1988, p. 11. Cf. Juszcak, op. cit., p. 41.



It is noteworthy that Gimpel did not mention the paintings themselves, but a spectacle, "a panorama of water and water lilies", and that he highlighted the sense of participation. The path towards the appreciation of *Water Lilies* to which he pointed, and to which Juszcak only alluded, should, transcendently, remain no more than a suggestion.

*Water Lilies* are not "impressions", records of some particular transitory phenomena of light and colour [...]. Neither are they purely decorative paintings [...], ultimately, *Water Lilies* are not subjectless compositions. [...] What are Monet's *Water Lilies*, then? It seems to me that they are best interpreted as great cosmic visions [my underline – AP], visions of the infinite and eternally changeable sky reflected in the infinite and eternally changeable depths of water...<sup>24</sup>

This is what Mieczysław Wallis wrote in his analysis of the late oeuvres of great artists. If we substitute the word "visions" with the word "objects", and if we refer Wallis' assertion not only to the canvases, but also to the garden, we shall obtain one more valuable suggestion. After all – this must be realised despite the raptures experienced at Orangerie de Tuileries – when one enters the Giverny garden, the painted water lilies turn out to be no more than a semi-finished article. Perhaps Monet himself, in his haste to secure the monumental rotunda display, did not realise this.

"I have again undertaken things impossible to paint: water with plants [...]. It is wonderful to see, but it is sheer madness to want to paint it. But I am always attempting such things", wrote Monet.<sup>25</sup> Often speaking about painting the impossible, he was a realist. Thus, a painter described as "only an eye", the creator of the most entirely visual painting that can be imagined, was also the author of a creation in which he achieved a total transformation (deformation?) of the existing world. He may have subverted the principle of realism or he may have applied the only possible principle.<sup>26</sup> He undertook the impossible – but not only at the level of just painting, perceiving an image or arranging a garden, but rather on the level of transcending all those "earth-bound" ambitions.

The essence of his work seems to be located on the boundary between experiencing a garden and painting an image. It is a one-off, inimitable act, even though the effort was constantly repeated, because Monet did not know whether he had managed to achieve his goal. In this it resembles the act of parting the curtains in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, a text which, in fact, comes from a similar period. The way towards understanding this fact is pointed out by Juszcak in another one of his brilliant interpretations. Juszcak

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24 M. Wallis, *Późna twórczość wielkich artystów* [Late Oeuvres of Great Artists], Warsaw, 1975, p. 79.

25 C. Monet in a letter to Gustave Geffroy written in June 1890, after the purchase of the Giverny house.

26 I have investigated, from a slightly different angle, the possible interpretation of Monet's experiment in terms of realism in my book on the subject of this concept.

devoted an entire book to several key sentences of this novel, interpreting it as focused on the significance of attempts to capture the essence of the creative process.<sup>27</sup> The party being thrown by Clarissa is her “performance”, fulfilled as a creative work, and it assumes a form in a way that is not foreseen or controlled by the “artist” herself. This is indicated by the superb motif of the curtains parting or flapping in the wind, each time repeated with a slightly different emphasis. Clarissa strives towards a masterpiece, but she is not sure when and how it will occur. The creative process comes together in an amalgam of circumstances that are not fully under control and it does not reach a state of completion – it is an event.

To return to Giverny: all of the senses must have participated in this feat of creation, even though, in essence, the act itself did not have a sensual character. This, perhaps, was what Claudel had in mind when he called Monet *le peintre indirect*. The condensation of reality in an ungraspable sensation delivered by all the senses, which occurs in the garden’s universe of water and vegetation, was most probably not planned by the painter/gardener, just as Clarissa, even though she was the hostess, did not have power over her party as a whole. Monet could not control the garden’s universe; what he could and did do was to help the curtains to part (even though Nature’s share in this parting cannot be overlooked).

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*Water Lilies* transcend our image of the art of the period.<sup>28</sup> When Monet was beginning to paint them, Vincent van Gogh and Georges Seurat were dead, *les Nabis* were already past the heroic age of their artistic dispute with Impressionism, and Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian were making their first attempts to depict nature. His colleagues from the Impressionist circles were passing away, one by one. Monet was painting *Water Lilies* as the entire period of *les Fauves* and the successive phases of Cubism came and went, and as the so-called first abstract paintings were produced. He lasted through the iconoclastic demonstrations of Marcel Duchamp and the Dadaists and through the appearance of the Surrealists. None of the succeeding avant-garde revolutions turned out more radical than his, not even the final eschatological

27 W. Juszcak, *Zaślona w rajskie ptaki albo o granicach „okresu powieści”* [A Curtain with Birds of Paradise, or on the Boundaries of the “Period of the Novel”], Warsaw, 1981, esp. an analysis of the “yellow curtains” motif in the context of, among others, passages of another novel by Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (pp. 28–37).

28 Try looking for *Water Lilies* in the handbooks of 20<sup>th</sup>-century art – it is a difficult task! Take the two excellent syntheses by recognised authors coming from different generations and representing different methodological approaches, e.g. H. Read, *A Concise History of Modern Painting*, London, 1959 (and the successive amended editions up to the year 1980), and U. Schneede, *Die Geschichte der Kunst im 20. Jahrhundert*, Munich, 2001; neither of these features Monet.

attempts of Ferdinand Hodler. The last few canvases with the Giverny water lilies, which Monet painted after 1923, when his failing eyesight had improved after an operation, were described as Expressionistic. This does not mean, of course, that they belonged to that trend. In 1927, when the "Sistine Chapel of Impressionism" – as the Surrealist painter André Masson would call it in 1952 – was opened in the specially arranged rooms of the Orangerie de Tuileries, public response was insignificant. Monet, who had died a few months earlier, was a recognised "old master", but one recognised mostly as the author of Impressionist paintings without any pretence to profundity. The audacity of his proposal of total realism went almost unnoticed. Disappointed with the Orangerie, the painter André Lhote wrote of Monet's "artistic suicide". This summary of Monet's profound detachment was very apt, although presumably unintentionally so; after all, being a painter who thought exclusively in post-Cubist terms, Lhote had analysed *Water Lilies* as images only.<sup>29</sup>

The garden at Giverny was also quickly forgotten.<sup>30</sup> Only towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century did sightseeing tours "in the footsteps of the Impressionists" make it a focus of their interest, and soon it received scholarly attention as well.

(Translated by Klaudyna Michałowicz)

## Abstract

The question whether Monet's *Water Lilies* are a separate phenomenon, a manifestation of "the crisis of Impressionism" or a simple and consistent continuation of his research has long been present in the history of modern art. In his book *Postimpresjoniści* [The Post-Impressionists] (1972), Wiesław Juszcak posed the problem in a radical manner and, by blurring the traditional opposition of naturalism and symbolism, offered one of the most interesting possible interpretations of Monet's art. Juszcak perceived Monet's experiment as a tentative search for an entirely new conception of form, not only in painting, as well as a search for the boundaries of the creative process. Referring to these considerations, the author of the current essay considers *Water Lilies* (conceived integrally as the paintings and the creation of the garden in Giverny) and proposes their perception as a construction of an "alternative world" (Emile Verhaeren). In the last years of his life, Monet enjoyed the sense of participating in nature's "performance" that unfolded by itself at Giverny. The "Grand Decoration", as he called the works in this series, was probably not intended to be the final result of his many years' work on the garden and on its painted image; it was

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29 Quoted after Patin, p. 28.

30 It is usually underlined that interest in Monet's art revived, in Europe and in the United States, only in the 1950s, in connection with the increasing popularity of Tachisme and action painting. As a result, restoration works at the seriously dilapidated estate at Giverny commenced, and several dozen lost or forgotten canvases from the *Water Lilies* series were rediscovered. On their reception in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, cf. the monumental book *Monet and Modernism*, op. cit.

rather a byproduct, so to speak, of this performance. The concept of a garden as a performance means the identification or assimilation of nature and art. In the Giverny garden, Monet and nature exchanged their experiences. The dynamics of both processes of creation meant that the painter did not wholly control the creative process, but he encouraged it; Nature, in turn, participated in his display.