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Art, Memory and *Angel* by Czesław Dźwigaj

In this paper, I am interested in urban public space as an area of interplay of symbols of memory. In my discussion of “invisible” and “visible” objects of contemporary art on the squares and streets of Szczecin, I focus on a specific case – the implementation of the idea of commemorating the victims of December ‘70 (i.e. the victims who died in protests against the authorities of the PRL in 1970 in Szczecin) in today’s Solidarity Square. The disputes, discussions, decisions and their changes, which took place in Szczecin over the course of one and a half decade after 1989, and which concerned the symbolic marking of public space, are symptomatic in a dual dimension: firstly, they reflect the problem with the presence of contemporary art in public space and, secondly, they highlight the issues of the intended purpose and audience for commemorative sculpture.

As far as the former issue is concerned, one should take into account the unsteady status of the Szczecin agora: after 1989, as in other Polish cities and other countries of Eastern and Central Europe, this is the space of political transformation. The democratic and capitalist breakthrough meant free contestation of previously cherished monuments that had political and ideological functions. If considered from the perspective of its media representations, the period of political transition of 1989–1990 was pictured as much through the images of scenes related to the sudden access to the Western consumer goods as it was through scenes associated with demolition and destruction of monuments of hated communist leaders or symbolic buildings, with the Berlin Wall at the forefront. In Szczecin, such a symbolic, visually significant and remembered gesture was the removal of the Soviet star from the top of the column that worked as a monument of gratitude to the Red Army’s military deed, which, according to the Polish communist interpretation, liberated Polish Szczecin from the hands of the German fascists. Incidentally, the rest of the monument, a devastated column standing in Szczecin for the next quarter of a century, was left undisturbed, and was eventually dismantled in 2017, which did not raise significant emotions among the residents of Szczecin. They did not feel an emotional connection with it, which was received with some surprise by our closest neighbours, Eastern Germans.

After 1945, public space in Poland was saturated with unambiguous and politically one-dimensional symbolism. For decades, people have been forced to recognise and accept that public rather than private space was the domain of power and the space of its expression. In contrast to the invisible power analysed by Michel Foucault on the example of a panoptic prison, communist rulers wanted visual manifestations of their domination. As we know, they guarded this monopoly very closely. It was not only about monuments, murals, mock-ups, propaganda posters, but also about giving patrons to schools, workplaces, scientific institutions, and above all squares and streets. One of the most distinct processes was the change in naming of public spaces. This process continues in Poland uninterrupted, but today, it seems, it only caricaturally repeats spontaneous gestures, releasing communism shortly after its fall. Today, this is done for the purpose of strengthening the domination of the right-wing national discourse.

As Piotr Piotrowski wrote in his book *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe*, in post-communist spaces, “certain events were wilfully forgotten, while others were wilfully remembered. As a matter of fact, every city is saturated with the discourse of power and its ideology, which undergoes change according to the political system in effect; the buildings in general do not disappear, streets [...] remain the same [...]” (Piotrowski, 2012: 66). Practice shows that the democratically elected authorities, in place of symbols thrown into the trash, usually insert their own, new, but equally unambiguous ideological ones.

In fact, one of the manifestations of the post-communist condition is a tacitly accepted assumption that the symbolism of functioning in public space should be socially integrating, clear, uplifting consent, while political power should work as the guarantor, guardian and a provider of fixative consensus and order. The illusion, and perhaps even naivety of artists in Poland and other post-communist countries was the conviction that democratic freedoms would guarantee the independence of creative expression in public space from orders of current politics, or more strictly – the right to show or inspire dispute in public space. This antagonism applies in general to the function that shared space should play for society. Is it to be an arena of agreement or confrontation in a democracy? In the context of the duties of contemporary artists, this dilemma was solved programmatically by Piotr Piotrowski (2010: 63):

On the one hand, in the light of “deliberating democracy” (Jürgen Habermas) public space is subject to consensus, on the other hand, according to critics of liberalism and advocates of radical democracy, or “agonistic” (Chantal Mouffe), public space is above all a place of and permanent and endless dispute. It guarantees democracy; its constant maintenance is a condition for eliminating exclusions from the agora space. Rosalyn Deutsche [...] even believes that constant problematization of public space is a condition of democracy. [...] democracy in post-communist countries encounters many problems. Therefore, it is even more important to participate in the debate about public space of artists who, with their often provocative projects, are able to create conflicts without which democracy wilt. The dispute, the competition of views in the

space of the agora – and not the consensus, which by definition eliminates radical voices from the public space, excludes them – is an indispensable condition of a democratic society.

Many artists, especially those who wanted to make artworks commemorating historical events (tragic in the case of Szczecin, which I will describe), while giving them a universal dimension, were deeply surprised that their actions were perceived in political terms and became involved in the political dispute. However, as Chantal Mouffe (2013: 51) writes in the text *Critical Artistic Practises as Counter-hegemonic Interventions*, there is no other option:

[...] I do not see the conflict between art and politics as a conflict between two separate fields – art on the one hand, politics on the other – between which there is no relationship. Politics have an aesthetic aspect, just as art has a political aspect. From the point of view of hegemony theory, artistic practices play a role in creating and maintaining (or questioning) a certain symbolic order, and hence their political aspect. The political is about the symbolic ordering of social relations, and this is what its aesthetic aspect is all about. Therefore, I think that the division into political and non-political art is useless.

Among other post-communist Polish cities Szczecin is additionally distinguished by its “short duration” complex, which makes it impossible for it to reach for older Polish traditions other than the communist past. Its local identity, connecting the place with a sense of belonging to larger social groups, headed by the national group, has been under construction since 1945. Reflection on the space of post-German Szczecin led to the interpretation of the city as a palimpsest or Atlantis. We owe this view mainly to the literary creativity of the writer of Szczecin, Artur D. Liskowacki, in whose books his hometown appears as a multi-layered text, where older entries in a foreign language can be seen under new records, or as a land shrouded by the sudden disappearance of its old inhabitants, and settled by unrelated newcomers.

This particular condition of Szczecin after 1989, where there is nothing that could be restored in public space that would be “ours” (Polish) and non-communist, opens up a field for action for contemporary artists. Their work, apart from being often used as an instrument of responding to the needs of social inclusion, of revitalisation and gentrification, is primarily perceived as a tool for the production of identity, “marking the terrain” for the use of us, citizens, by inserting politically handy objects with clear meaning. The longing for an aesthetically and socially synthesising object, however, falls apart, and often painfully collides, with the practices and projects of contemporary art. Currently produced artifacts, operating in a subversive language, created with the intention of introducing semantic tremors, ambiguities and metaphors, perversely revealing uncomfortable truths and paradoxes of transparent discourses, are subject to political repression and social rejection. Sometimes, as little as a proposal for a monument can trigger a media scandal and

launch an intense, emotional reaction and resentment-driven political dispute. In this sense, Szczecin can be analysed as an arena of repetitive social processes related to contemporary art.

The second area of consideration is the analysis of the relationship between the commemorative function (desired by the founders) and the potential and impact of contemporary art, seen in reference to the theory of cultural forms of memory. Polish Szczecin, looking for specific identity anchors in the past, could not find them, as I mentioned above, either in the German past or in the communist narrative. The solution was to turn towards dissident and oppositional cards in history. An expression of this is the creation of a new pavilion of the National Museum – the Dialogue Center “Upheavals,” with a permanent narrative exhibition documenting the fate of the city of rebellions and political solstices. Among several crucial events that took place in Szczecin in the years 1945–1990, it is December 70 – January 71 that is particularly extensively covered by local historiography and addressed through symbolic practices of commemoration. It is not my intention here to report the course of the tragic December and political January in Szczecin. Suffice it to say that the Szczecin workers, in protest against the communist rule, rising prices and anti-democratic practices, took to the streets, burned the party committee building, and then gathered in the square in front of the militia, who opened fire, killing sixteen people. In January 1971, Edward Gierek, a new leader of the Polish People’s Republic met with the workers, which was a sensation.

It took fifteen years for the concept and ultimately the created sculptural form of the monument to finally emerge, commemorating the events of the December ‘70 in Szczecin, on the very square where people died. The monument revealed universal dilemmas, functioning in a place where an individual artistic concept meets collective memory¹, which looks for a suitable cultural form. How can art comply with the commemorative role without losing its unique character? And, on the other hand, to what extent are those who demand the creation of a symbol expressing their collective memory able to universalise what is their individual and historical experience?

The case of the Szczecin monument proves that not only the relationship between authors and their art and the holders of collective memory is a source of potential tension, but the conflict is already on the level of authorities or political power, who, by using a visual symbol, want to find expression for the importance of a historical event. The conflict would stretch between the will to commemorate in a unique (artistically) groundbreaking moment, giving it a timeless importance, and the desire to meet the common expectation of the creation of a SINGLE symbol, giving justice to the commemorated.

¹ Using the terms of collective, cultural, as well as individual and communicative memory, I refer to the theoretical writings of Jan and Alaida Assman. In Poland, they were published in the volume: M. Saryusz-Wolska (ed.), (2009), *Pamięć zbiorowa i kulturowa. Współczesna perspektywa niemiecka*, Kraków: Universitas.

This urban game of visibility (art and memory) was played out around three sculptures: two awarded but unrealised designs, and the final work by Czesław Dźwigaj. Those are:

1. *Phantoms (Fantomy)* by Jerzy Lipczyński from 1998/1999;
2. *Paths (Ścieżki)* by E. Maksymiuk, N. Białek, T. Maksymiuk and J. Szparadowski from 2002;
3. *Angel of Freedom (Anioł Wolności)* by Czesław Dźwigaj from 2005.

The first two concepts displayed significant artistic values. The one selected as the final winner of the competition, although it did not arouse aesthetic enthusiasm, but rather criticism and protest in professional art circles, was selected as a design that best expressed the wishes of those who represented the victims.

I will start chronologically with the first one. Jerzy Lipczyński's *Phantoms* was created in response to a competition announced in 1998 by the Social Building Committee of the "Social Protest of December 70" Memorial, established by the city of Szczecin. The jury chaired by prof. Konrad Kuczy-Kuczyński, architect, selected a concept by a Szczecin sculptor and his team from the Szczecin University of Technology. The monument was conceived as a horizontal structure consisting of about 110 elements in the form of silhouettes, resembling shadows rather than human figures. Made of rough metal and inclined at the same angle, the figures were to measure from 1.8 m to 4 m. The passage between them was supposed to create an illusion of participation in the protest (Klim, 1998).

Jerzy Lipczyński recalls his design as follows (2006: 17):

The idea of the monument was based on authentic photos from events taking place on the streets of Szczecin in December 1970. The authors of the design, under my guidance, in the most concise form tried to reflect the atmosphere resulting from social dissatisfaction. The results of this dissatisfaction were demonstrations, marches, and often riots. By showing the other side of the Polish system, i.e. protests, through objects resembling unorganised crowd-phantoms, the authors clearly defined their point of view about the past system.

According to the press, the work provoked controversy from the very beginning². The chairman of the jury commented as follows (hal, 1998): "This is certainly not a classic solution. We are not dealing with a monument, but with a spatial composition."

Initially, the chairman of the social committee, Marian Jurczyk, who reluctantly referred to the proposed design (at the time when the contest was resolved also by the President of Szczecin), two years later became its main critic. What was earlier an advantage in the eyes of the Jury, now became aggravating. To justify his shift of

² After the results were announced, no criticism was raised of the awarded project. The other participants of the competition accused it of lacking details, copying the design of the monument prepared earlier for Gniezno and not taking into account the symbol of the cross. A. Klim, *Ibidem*.

opinion Marian Jurczyk (2001), the leader of Solidarity protests in Szczecin, wrote, among others:

We believe that it is a great misunderstanding to express our feelings for those events in such a terrible way. The design of the monument, in its incomprehensible form, seems to be the epitome of the overstepping of artistic ambitions over common sense. God will be sorry comparing the Gdańsk crosses, so monumental in their expression and evocation of pathos, to the lack of ambition and misery of our Szczecin spirit.

This statement, signed by the legendary leader of the Szczecin strikes, the future first president of Szczecin, chosen directly by the citizens, in practice, determined the fate of the monument. In their comments, right-wing politicians focused primarily on one aspect, namely that the families of the protesters did not accept the proposed monument on the grounds of its failure to form a consistent relationship with the memory of the participants.

It is worth stopping at this point the report about the fate of the monument, sealed as a result of quarrels of politicians, and focus on the arguments of both sides regarding the specificity of the work.

An apt diagnosis made by right-wing politicians about the anti-communist past concerned the memorial's lack of monumentality, patience and values symbolised by the Christian cross. Lech Karwowski, director of the National Museum in Szczecin and art critic, answered questions posed by the members of the social committee, explaining that: "The vertical form of the monument belongs to the rhetoric of power, while horizontally organised form better reflects the collective hero." Analyses evaluating the design, presented by professional critics, using the language of academic aesthetics, were not compatible with the competences of the communities representing the victims. It seems that the voices of professionals were addressed rather to politicians (city councils, presidents), legally responsible for decisions about public space. Meanwhile, Marian Jurczyk's statement proves that the collective memory of the participants of the December protests expected to be expressed with forms suggestive of a heroic act. Contrarily, sculptor Jerzy Lipczyński was looking for a different meaning. He wanted to show the strength of the community, the alternative and the threat posed to the political power by people who were grouping around a libertarian idea, indeed, something in the spirit of Elias Canetti's deliberations in the essay *Crowds and Power* (1960). The local event was supposed to be universal in the spirit of timeless relations between the power elite and a group of citizens, while maintaining the existential perspective – despite more than one hundred phantoms, they kept their distinctiveness.

However, the disponents of individual memory located its adequate expression in a different type of symbolism, conveyed through an expected, solemn dimension. This symbolism can be considered martyrological-religious, combined with the desire to gain visibility by dominating the surroundings with a vertical monument. The religious and martyrological codes were well known and

understood among the participants of the events. The first, religious, is associated with the peasant origins of the working-class society in Szczecin, the second was consistently inculcated as an identity narrative after the period of partitions from the 19th century through the 2nd World War, mainly in schools and public events. In post-German and post-Protestant Szczecin, a cross, or a vertical monument containing a cross, clearly denotes the belonging of space, its imperious subordination. People expected the monument to clearly express the nature of their participation in the past, not a reflective or critical work. The dispute surrounding the monument of December '70 victims only superficially seemed to be concerned with aesthetic preferences. In essence, it was about interpreting the past and giving it the desired status.

On the one hand, there were artists, critics, and people of culture who used aesthetic and substantive arguments. On the other hand, there were emotionally driven people who, in large part, would be difficult to define as material beneficiaries of the transition period of 1989. Therefore, the conflict of these two groups produced an impression that a martyrological and religious monument worked for the latter group as a kind of symbolic compensation, or at least a way to confirm the conviction that their sacrifice had a deeper meaning, fitting in with the Polish martyrological tradition.

A confirmation of these theses can be found in the subsequent fate of the December '70 victims' monument. The *Phantoms (Fantomy)* design was rejected by the local government, and a new competition was announced, resolved in October 2003. A design by four architects: Elżbieta Maksymiuk, Norbert Białek, Tomasz Maksymiuk and Jerzy Szparadowski was selected. It bore the title *Paths (Ścieżki)* and was a kind of wide belt separating the square, made up of smaller iron bands. Sixteen of them, each of different length, stop abruptly with a distinct break. They symbolise the victims of December '70. The co-author of the work, Tomasz Maksymiuk, explained the concept as follows: "The victims of the events were not some heroes, but ordinary people. Hence our aversion to great pathos. We simply show the paths of life: some break off, while others roll on" (after Rembas, 2003).

It is worth noting the convergence of these two, awarded designs, with the concept of Oskar Hansen's team, which was submitted to an international competition for a monument commemorating the victims of Auschwitz. As Filip Springer (2013: 24) writes in his book *Zaczyn (Leaven)*:

The assumptions of the winning work are shocking. The authors do not offer anything more than crossing the whole area of the camp with a sixty-metre-wide and a kilometre-long asphalt belt. In it, barracks, wires, watchtowers and remains of crematoria are to be sunk. [...] The road – a closed wound from the beginning to the end, elevated just above the camp area, so as not to touch the cursed ground with the feet. One could only look, be silent and hope that all this nightmare will soon fall into dust. Only black asphalt will remain, after which we will be able to go further. A road that will allow us to go, but will not let us forget.

Jerzy Lipczyński, author of *Phantoms (Fantomy)*, admits to drawing his inspiration from the work and person of Oskar Hansen. In this design by four architects, the belt of *Paths (Ścieżki)*, a correspondence with Hansen's idea for the Auschwitz memorial is clearly visible. The belt was to "cross out" the square horizontally, showing, at the same time, the tragedy of death and the continuity of life, a path towards freedom. Playing with space and the universal meanings of unnatural forms was common to both Hansen's design and the Szczecin memorial concepts.

There is, of course, yet another common element – the story of their fate. The three designs were selected by respective competition juries, aroused admiration of professional critics and were rejected by the participants of the events or their discursive representatives. Ultimately, the authorities, under the pressure of individual memory managers, decided to give up the winning concept and implement a compromise.

The *Paths (Ścieżki)* design proposal met with a similar reaction as *Phantoms (Fantomy)*. Finally, on January 10, 2005, the Szczecin City Council resolved the issue of the monument between the four concepts: the two concepts mentioned above and the two submitted by Marian Jurczyk, the mayor of Szczecin. One of them was the so-called working class *pieta* by a Szczecin-based sculptor Ronin Walknowski, which was rejected from the outset (the work was ridiculed as a bastard of socialist realism, an image of drunks returning from an event, and even as a figure of homosexual relationship); another was the *Angel of Freedom (Anioł Wolności)* by Czesław Dźwigaj.

Eventually, the *Angel* won, which was considered an unsatisfactory, but necessary, compromise. The *Angel of Freedom (Anioł Wolności)* was unveiled on August 28, 2005. At first, it was exposed in the central part of the square, which focused on it. It is a figure with a transparent, uncomplicated symbolism. Unsurprisingly, the monument met with crushing criticism of professionals, artists, and architects. It was accused of being derivative, ridiculous (compared to Chopin carrying a cake), and gaudy (a candle was to burn in the inscription December '70, but I have never seen it).

The visibility of the monument changed after the construction of the new building of the Szczecin Philharmonic, in particular the Dialogue Center "Upheavals" (DCU) – the new Pavilion of the National Museum. The monument by Czesław Dźwigaj was moved from the central position closer to the eastern side of the square. Due to the correspondence of modern forms of the DCU and the philharmonic hall, the monument disappears, it is not perceived. It is treated as a phenomenon, but not as a focusing object. Contemplation and reproduction (which preserve memory and knowledge) are determined by the shape of buildings and the content of a permanent exhibition inside the DCU, which narrates in a political manner the breakthroughs in Szczecin's history after 1945.

Unrealised designs for the December '70 memorial have joined the collections of the National Museum in Szczecin. They are still of interest as proposals that universalise tragic historical events, conveyed in a valuable aesthetic form. Although

hidden, they are still visible. The monument, made under the pressure of memory managers, enjoys the spotlight only during the celebrations of official anniversaries. On other days, it fails to fulfill the function of the memory medium. Its message escapes in the banality of the figure, which resembles a scaled-up serial funeral production rather than an artistic achievement.

The members of Szczecin's local government and its elites were involved in this "game" of showing and hiding contemporary art, ultimately deciding not to let forms of contemporary art with a commemorative function to exist in public space. They chose a traditional solution, which fails to inspire deep reflection or further searching. 13 years after this decision was made, we can see that a wrong choice has been made. The will and taste of those who remembered were honored, forgetting that monuments are created primarily for the future. With the help of an artistic symbol, they are supposed to arouse vivid emotions in the next generations, allowing them to touch the tragedy of history.

As a post-scriptum, I would like to add a comment about the authors of unrealised designs. Jerzy Lipczyński withdrew from active participation in the artistic life of Szczecin and focused on academic work. Four architects successfully implement commercial designs as part of a jointly created office. In conversations with them, I sensed the resentment of the lost opportunity for contemporary visual art with commemorative function in Szczecin and, at the same time, the satisfaction that their works are still remembered and described. Their works live in historical and critical discourse, although they do not exist as visible objects.

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Abstract

The article analyses the process of implementing the idea of commemorating the victims of December 70 in Szczecin. Disputes, discussions and decisions accompanying this monument are doubly symptomatic: they reveal a problem with the presence of contemporary art in public space, and the question of who and what should be the main purpose of commemorative sculpture. After 1989, the Szczecin agora reflected the political transition of the state, additionally characterised by the "short duration" complex (existence as a "Polish city" only after 1945). Art plays a role in ordering (and subordination) of public sphere, and, as such a tool (building politically handy identity symbols), it is perceived by the authorities. Its specificity, however, allows it to escape social and political control. The second area of consideration is the analysis of the relationship between commemorative function (desired by the founders) and the operation of contemporary art, in reference to the theory of cultural forms of memory. The three-dimensional urban game of visibility was played out in Szczecin around three public sculptures: two unrealised designs, and the final work by Czesław Dźwigaj.

Keywords: contemporary art in public space, art after communism, commemorative sculpture

Słowa kluczowe: sztuka współczesna w przestrzeni publicznej, sztuka po komunizmie, rzeźba pomnikowa

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