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Pushing the Limits

– Multilateral Relations

of Art and Ethics

The work of art, reaching out towards the future, somehow hovers it up and retains within itself, just as the living organism retains light and turns it into vitamins. Art hovering up the future is a secret photosynthesis.

Alicja Kępińska¹

The links between art and ethics have had a long tradition. We all perfectly remember the Pythagorean observation about the influence of music on the upbringing of a human being, or the relationship of a triune chorea and catharsis. Above all, however, we remember the views of Plato, who clearly linked art and morality, and very seriously required the exercise of control over all its manifestations. Art had to be unquestionably subjected to morality. Since art had its role to play in creating the perfect state, then it had to be right and proper. Jacques Rancière writes that Plato's position corresponds to the order which he describes as the "ethical regime of images". In it, we do not talk about art, but rather about images themselves, what they can depict and, above all, what purpose they can serve. In Plato, the right and proper reflect reality, whereas the inadequate represent the world of phenomena. "He has to determine what way of existence of images relate to ethos, that is, the mode of existence of individuals and communities. This question prevents 'art' as such acquiring an independent identity".² In antiquity and long before, it was obvious that art does not

» 1 A. Kępińska, *Sztuka w kulturze płynności*, Poznań 2003, p. 170.

» 2 J. Rancière, *Dzielenie postrzegalnego. Estetyka i polityka*, transl. M. Kropiwnicki, J. Sowa, korporacja ha!art, Kraków 2007, p. 80. For contrast, the author would often recall Plato's philosophy to illustrate the changes taking place. In addition to Rancière's ethical regime, there are two more orders: poetic and aesthetic.

have autonomy and should be subordinated to the prevailing ethics and vision of reality. The constraints it was subjected to came from the world outside of it. Attempts to look for independence, even worthwhile³, did not bring about a lasting autonomy. This emerged only in the eighteenth century with Immanuel Kant's principle of a selfless taste of judgment and the famous "purposeful purposelessness" of art.⁴ The autonomy of art was, on the one hand, very much needed, and on the other hand, it caused the separation of artistic practice from other aspects of life, fought against by the avant-garde, as we know according to Peter Bürger.

However, ethics did not cease to matter. The twentieth century, along with its numerous revaluations, also put ethical issues at the centre of attention of theoreticians dealing with culture, and in particular with art. This is strongly related to history and, above all, to the difficult experiences of concentration camps. Theodor W. Adorno will ask helplessly about the possibility of creating poems after Auschwitz.⁵ Later on questions are asked about artists' duty and about their adequate involvement; moral value becomes the basic criterion of work evaluation.

The "ethical turn" will be revealed in many disciplines of the humanities; in literary studies it will manifest itself with questions posed with respect to the works themselves as well as to their creators and researchers. Issues related to human behavior, demands of a moral novel, questions about the role of individual works and the consequences for the reader are frequently discussed problems.

Development of ethical criticism⁶

In art, the above turn is connected with the actions of artists in the social space, in cooperation with ordinary people. "The turn which occurred in

- » 3 As we know, one of the first thinkers who pointed out the autonomy of art was Aristotle, who spoke about the subordination of art to morality. However, he noted that it is not absolute, art being primarily intended to fill out our free time.
- » 4 Here, I only invoke well-known and well-described facts.
- » 5 J. Rancière understands the "ethical turn" as seeing art by Extermination; art is to give testimony to Unhappiness. In this context, he also discusses the aesthetics of Jean François Lyotard's sublime.
- » 6 The Polish reader can find the main manifestations and representatives of the ethical turn e.g. in A. Burzyńska, *Krajobraz po dekonstrukcji*, "Ruch Literacki" 1995, vol. 1, M.P. Markowski, *Zwrot etyczny w badaniach literackich*, "Pamiętnik Literacki", no. 91/1, 2000. It is also worth to read N. Carroll's *Sztuka a krytyka etyczna: przegląd najnowszych kierunków badań [Art and ethical criticism: an overview of the latest research trends]*, "Teksty Drugie", No. 1/2, 2002, in which the author presents allegations against ethical criticism, polemicizes with them, and at the same time points to the discrepancy existing in the 20th century between theory and practice in the interpretation of art. Some fundamental texts related to the ethical turn in various fields are collected in: *Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory*, ed. T.F. Davis, K. Womack, 2001. The ethical turn is also interesting in anthropology, where it is understood as the duty of researchers to the "subjects" of their research.

a serious criticism under the influence of art based on social cooperation was summarized as follows: the social change in contemporary art caused an ethical turn in art criticism. This can be seen in the increased attention devoted to how a given collaboration comes about. In other words, artists are more and more often evaluated for the process of action – for the extent to which they provide good or bad models of cooperation – and criticized for any sign of possible use of participants that does not provide a ‘complete’ representation of the individuals involved in the project (as if this were at all possible).⁷ In Poland, the issue of artists’ morality was also raised with respect to critical art developing in the 1990s. It was most often attacked for its lack of morality and violation of religious feelings; both the works themselves and the exhibitions displaying them were subject to censorship. I will not recall particular situations or describe the accusations and their refutation; let me refer you to other texts, instead.⁸ It is worth noting that a few years later, Paweł Leszkowicz, who is by no means a supporter of censorship or a representative of conservative thinking, revisits the question of the links between art and ethical issues. Under the influence of Susan Sontag’s book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, having clearly defined his position, he looks at selected examples of critical art. This text triggers the resumption of important questions and a reflection on the relation of art and ethics.⁹

One of the basic postulates of the ethical turn is the assessment of the artist’s behavior or attitude. This assessment is often made from a specific point of view, in which the evaluators, convinced of being in the right, proclaim a specific ethical order. Although reflection on the actions of artists is essential, it should not become a pretext for censoring or restricting their activities.

» 7 C. Bishop, *Zwrot społeczny: współpraca jako źródło cierpień* [*Social turn: cooperation as a source of suffering*], [in:] *Stadion X. Miejsce, którego nie było*, ed. J. Warszawa, Warszawa-Kraków 2009.

» 8 A. Szyłak, *Relacja z dyskusji o moralności sztuki w Polsce*, “Exit” 1997, R. Kluszczyński, *Artyści pod prężer, krytycy sztuki do kliniki psychiatrycznej, czyli najnowsze dyskusje wokół sztuki krytycznej w Polsce*, “Exit. Nowa sztuka w Polsce” no. 4 (40), 1999; P. Piotrowski, *Sztuka wobec polityki*, I. Kowalczyk, *Sztuka i moralność – funkcjonowanie twórczości lat dziewięćdziesiątych w sferze publicznej, cenzura i krytyka*, “batalie o nową sztukę”.

» 9 “Therefore, I emphasize that my criticism is only a single opinion in the name of reflection and freedom of reflection, not censorship. It is also an attempt to signal a certain re-evaluation of the so-called critical art. Just as there is a critical art, there is also a critical art history that does not consist in writing eulogies. I emphasize this so that my words will not be used against the artists mentioned below, whom I value. I only put forth a problem. I deliberately chose stars of Polish art, whose position is strong enough domestically and abroad. I believe that my voice can only enrich the multiple interpretations of their work. I want to stress that I do not identify these artists with any political group. Rather, I treat their art as a symptom of the state of public awareness shaped by those systems. I also write about specific, individual works rather than about their entire oeuvre.” P. Leszkowicz, *Czy twój umysł jest pełen dobroci?*, 2006, Obieg archives.

Art and the challenges of the modern world

In this text, I am also interested in another aspect of links between art and ethics. Maybe this is a slightly naive and simplistic approach, yet I would like to provide some examples of works that confront us with, and even promise us, problems and opportunities (positive and negative) of the world around us. My simple approach stems from the numerous connections between art and everyday life, theory discussed as relational art, engaged art, or the art of cooperation, through to the demands of using art to solve problems. This is in a way the fulfilment of Jacques Rancière's postulates. "Ethics is often regarded as a normative point of view from which values and practices of other spheres (*art, politics, etc.*) can be judged. I think that this is not what we are confronted with today. We are now facing the confusion of political and aesthetic distinctions in one and the same vague point of view. That's what ethics means".¹⁰ It moreover means to seek allies in a difficult situation, without specific ethical codes and inviolable norms. As Zygmunt Bauman writes: "We are therefore asked to learn how to live without such a guarantee, moreover, how to live with the knowledge that guarantees will never be obtained, that there are no realistic hopes for a 'perfect society', nor for a perfect human being and that all attempts to prove that such hopes are not vain can end terribly, and certainly will not add morality to human life".¹¹

I will slowly move on to point out specific examples... In 2002, a billboard in Warsaw featured a work by Grupa Twożywo. It was a kind of "advertisement" of a new chocolate bar called Plato. The work could be treated as a joke and thus quickly forgotten. However, in the recesses of my thoughts, it has remained a constant admonition about the necessity of asking questions about the validity of theory. What does Plato's philosophy mean for us? Is it important? Do we learn anything about life from it? We remember the famous triad of truth, beauty and good - what is the value of each of its elements today? A chocolate bar is an unnecessary product, related to pleasure; this is the pleasure of consumption. Does it mean that we have dissolved the great values in mindless consumption? Have they become unnecessary or imperceptible? We no longer have to improve ourselves morally and strive for good, because it has turned into a commodity, an item available on store shelves. Maybe popular culture has taken over the philosophical ideals of old and uses them in every possible way.¹²

» 10 J. Rancière, *Dzielenie postrzegalnego...*, p. 53.

» 11 Z. Bauman, *Etyka ponowoczesna*, transl. J. Bauman, J. Tokarska-Bakir, Warszawa 2012, p. 19.

» 12 Discussing this work, as well as all the aforementioned ones, touches on many topical

Art provides many examples of interfaces between ethics and art. It shows the complexity and ambiguity of moral actions. It puts us in the centre, confronting us with problems or anticipating future ones. The art of Australian Patricia Piccinini is a case in point. Her interests relate in general to the human condition, both to the consequences of human activity and the possibilities generated by science. Starting from her early works, she has been interested in the possibilities, not only positive ones, offered by the development of genetic research. At the same time, she strongly emphasizes the overlap of biological and technological life.¹³ Creating her vehicles, spaces, objects or characters, she puts us in the field of ethical issues. She shows the possible future and asks: What is life? Who is responsible for the changes taking place? How does a person change? However, Piccinini is not a moralizer warning against the “terrible” world. Jacqueline Millner emphasizes that her work does not suggest that human intervention in the essence of life is morally wrong. She pays more attention to consequences that are not obvious and remain unknown so that “we can see the effects of technological innovation with clear eyes. With clear eyes, but also with a look of love”.¹⁴ The love, which the artist often speaks of, is directed towards created hybrids; it is also evident at the exhibition prepared at the Venice Biennale in 2003. The cycle was significantly entitled: *We are Family*. The family, relationships with our loved ones, but also a vision of the future and the corresponding responsibility for the present are the problems with which Piccinini confronts the recipients of her art. This is what she says about one of her last works, titled *Embryo* (2016): “This essential mutability of life is something that I find very interesting, and I see it as very much a hallmark of how we see the world. Human beings change things. It is what we are most proud of. Sometimes we do it for the good, but not always. The medium of this change, more often than not these days, is technology. That technology is becoming increasingly amorphous itself; straddling the biological, the

issues that have been repeatedly addressed by theory. Therefore, I will only give references to a specific text that I will use. I should also point out that the work of artists that I am writing about has been discussed many times; it is worth reading these studies, but I will not indicate specific titles.

- » 13 D. Haraway calls her “sister in technoculture”, serious about naturoculture, *Speculative Fabulations for Technoculture’s Generations*, <https://www.patriciapiccinini.net/writing/30/245/55> [access: 12.02.2018].
- » 14 “Piccinini’s work does not suggest that human intervention in the essence of life is morally wrong; exuding as it does the sophistication of high-end technology, her work partakes in a discourse of first-world progress founded on the commercialisation of scientific and electronic innovation. Piccinini rather forces us to confront that this intervention is well and truly with us, that the implications are not clear-cut but ambiguous, even contradictory, and that it is therefore vital that we see the consequences of technological innovation with clear eyes. With clear eyes, but also with a look of love”. J. Millner, *Patricia Piccinini: Ethical Aesthetics*, 2001, (original publication in Artlink).

physical and the mechanical”.¹⁵ Hans Jonas, noticing the impact of technology on human life, makes it responsible for the future, also for what will happen to others. Piccinini shows different variants of the further development of the human world, the hybridization of this world, and does not shun difficult questions about responsibility. “The action is taken here in the name of the future, which neither the perpetrator nor the victim, nor their contemporaries will be able to enjoy anymore. Obligations towards the present arise from this distant goal rather than from the good or evil of the modern world, whereas the standards of action are equally temporary, and thus equally ‘inauthentic’ as the conditions which it is to transform into a higher state”.¹⁶

In Patricia Piccinini’s projects the human being or his hybrids are the focus of interest. Contemporary art goes further; ethical issues are not only a matter of the future of man, but also questions about our behaviour towards other beings, the Other. Do we agree with Janusz Majcherek, who in an interesting publication notes: “Ethics concerns only some of our duties towards people”.¹⁷ Or perhaps, after Peter Singer, we will treat animals as moral beings and thus accept the obligation to treat them properly. The human-animal relationship is very complex and ambiguous. In addition, there are variations in our treatment of particular species: we treat the dog differently than laboratory mice. Animals can be divided into those that can and those that should not be killed.¹⁸ Is it right?

Sometimes it is difficult for us to notice the complexity of the problem, while art penetrates deeper, draws our attention to new situations until we start thinking and talking about them, and solve difficulties in the future. Of the many works that touch on animal issues, it in order to consider Kathy High’s *Embracing Animal* (2004-06). The artist purchased rats which had been injected with human genetic material to fall ill with various diseases, similar to human ones. After the experiments were carried out, the rats were no longer necessary / disposable in the laboratory, and they were to be killed. High provided them with a good life, gave names to emphasize their individuality, and took care of appropriate conditions during the exhibitions. The rats she bought off a laboratory became subjects, not just objects, or research material, which should be removed afterwards and which is kept alive solely when it is needed. Rats are non-human workers, to whom we have some obligations and we can

» 15 P. Piccinini, “Some Thoughts about Embryo”, <https://www.patriciapiccinini.net>.

» 16 H. Jonas, *Zasada odpowiedzialności. Etyka dla cywilizacji technologicznej*, transl. M. Klimowicz, Kraków 1996, p. 45.

» 17 J.A. Majcherek, *Etyka powinności*, Difin SA, Warszawa 2011, p. 62.

» 18 D. Haraway, *Zwierzęta laboratoryjne i ich ludzie*, transl. A. Ostolski, “Krytyka Polityczna”, no. 15, 2008. See also chapter “*Powinności wobec innych istot*” in: J.A. Majcherek, *Etyka powinności*,

also ask about their rights. Monika Bakke notes that what is at stake here is not sentimentalism and romantic visions of the world without violence. Artists who use transgenic animals or plants created for commercial or research purposes “want to draw attention to the ethical aspect of biotechnology... On the one hand, artists are interested in the good and respect of specific animals, and on the other in a wider perspective of interfering with the molecular foundations of life”.¹⁹ Kathy High’s work allows you to ask questions about species chauvinism – have we not got used to the fact that mice or rats as not very pleasant rodents can be used in laboratories and we do not ask what happens to them later, when they stop being useful. We treat them as data rather than as living beings. Meanwhile, “ample scientific evidence based on neurological, behavioural, biological, and biochemical data supports the view that many nonhuman beings can feel pain and despair in the same way as human beings. Considerations on intelligence, complexity, autonomy, or species differences are morally irrelevant. What is morally important, we argued, was the despair and pain of others, regardless of the species (Goldovitch et al. 1971, Singer 1975, Ryder 1975, 2001). If animals that do not belong to the human species are sufficiently similar to a human being to be used as research subjects, then they are similar enough to be offered a similar moral status”.²⁰ This is a task for the scientist as well as for all of us, who use the results of their research.

In her debut novel *Ludzie na drzewach*,²¹ Hanya Yanagihara creates a biography of a scientist Abraham Norton Perin, who was tasked to kill no longer necessary mice in the laboratory he worked in. Mice are a material which, as any other, is removed once it has been used. The only problem was to complete the task as best as he could. The protagonist describes his pursuit of the most efficient way of putting down the mice, one that would be the quickest and the least involving for him. He is not really concerned about inflicting as little pain as possible or about improper gestures. This is standard procedure, a bit cumbersome, and therefore entrusted to the youngest and least important members of a research team. However, to

» 19 M. Bakke, *Bio-transfiguracje. Sztuka i estetyka posthumanizmu*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, Poznań 2010, p. 174.

» 20 R.D. Ryder, *Szowinizm gatunkowy w laboratorium*, [in:] *W obronie zwierząt*, ed. P. Singer, Wydawnictwo Czarna Owca, Warszawa 2011, p. 131.

» 21 In Poland it came out as her second publication. H. Yanagihara, *Ludzie na drzewach*, transl. J. Kozak, W.A.B, Warszawa 2017. There are many reviews of this book, but from the point of view that interests me it is worthwhile to read P. Majewski’s, *Powieść antropologiczna. O “Ludziach na drzewach” Hany Yanagihary*, published in “Kultura Liberalna”, <https://kulturaliberalna.pl/2017/09/19/powieść-antropologiczna-o-ludziach-na-drzewach-hanyi-yanagihary/>.

day we can reiterate Janusz Majcherek's question: "Can the Face of the Other be a gob, snout or mug?"²²

Or perhaps, taking one step farther, we might follow contemporary art and ask about plants.

One increasingly hears about plants and their ties with humans. The classic of bio art, or rather transgenic art as he himself prefers to identify it²³, Eduardo Kac mixed his DNA with the biological material of a petunia, giving life to *Edunia* (as one section of the project *Natural History of the Enigma*, 2003-2008). Some other artists draw attention to the autonomy of plant life, our treatment of them or coexistence of humans and plants²⁴. Such works help to consider plants in a number of contexts and ask questions about their dignity²⁵ and place in the entire ecosystem. It moreover provokes questions about our relations with and impact on plants and the environment, as in *transHumUs* by Céleste Boursier-Mougenot. The moving pines were slightly scary, dancing with the viewers. It is moreover worthwhile to consider very young art, making its first steps in the mainstream, such as Małgorzata Kaczmarek's work *Cyborg Species*.²⁶ The author indicates the versatile existence of plants in the human environment and places herself within it, indicating interrelations. Rosi Braidotti, one of the leading theoreticians of posthumanism, writes: "In the case of posthumanist subjects, the ethical imagination becomes an ontological relationship, which allows it to remain viable. The ethics of permanence, tailored to non-homogeneous entities, draws on the strong sense of linkages between myself and others, including non-human or natural others. As a result, it eliminates two principal obstacles: egoistic individualism

- » 22 J. Majcherek, *Etyka powinności...*, p. 182. The author refers to Emanuel Levinas's ethics, where the face of the Other was the fundamental criterion for human conduct. Further on the excerpt quoted reads as follows: "First of all, it is controversial to act in a manner violating the dignity of an animal, as animal dignity is dubious and thus to mandate a respect for this dignity is dubious, too, if we admit that dignity is unique for human beings only [see Moleszta 2006, 50]"; this is a rather unambiguous answer to the question posed.
- » 23 E. Kac, *Bio Art: od "Genesis" do "Natural History of Enigma"*, transl. M. Sułkowska-Janowska "Folia Philosophica" 28, 2010. The text is available at bazhum.muzhp.pl.
- » 24 For examples see: M. Bakke, *Bio-transfiguracje...*, M. Kurzac, *Empatyczni ogrodnicy. O roślinach w sztuce współczesnej*, [in:] "Czas Kultury" no. 5, 2008; it is moreover worthwhile to consider particular examples in the context of the art of the 1970s, Marcel Broodthaers' oeuvre, earth art, and part of ecological art.
- » 25 The dignity of plants was addressed by the Swiss Federal Ethics Committee on Non-Human Biotechnology (ECNH). In 2008 it compiled a report pt. The Dignity of Living Beings with Regard to Plants. Moral Considerations of Plants For their Own Sake. See: <http://www.ekah.admin.ch/en/homepage>. The question of plant dignity in the context of artistic endeavours is addressed by M. Bakke, *Sztuka w obronie "godności roślin"*. *Oddolna etyka w erze biotechnologii*. [in:] *W stronę trzeciej kultury. Koegzystencja sztuki, nauki i technologii*, R. Kluszczyński, (ed.), Narodowe Centrum Kultury, Warszawa 2011.
- » 26 The title is a deliberate reference to D. Haraway's text *A Cyborg Manifesto*.²⁰

and the constraints of negativity.”²⁷ Therefore, human co-existence with other non-humans is a daily experience and art demonstrates it in a host of different ways and allows us to ask questions and extend the space of their adequacy.

The examples provided in the text are but an illustration of the trends we can identify in contemporary art; this is a subjective selection, though. The works demonstrate that it is worthwhile to reflect on the assumed and espoused values, possible diverse consequences of scientific processes, and to answer the question about who we owe an ethical response to: humans, animals, plants? In the face of major ethical questions, art is a field of challenges, an area for asking questions and pushing the limits, without relying on unambiguous codes or inviolable norms. An approach from the point of view of ethics need not only ask about the position of the artist, although this continues to remain important, especially with respect to delegated performances, or point out irrefutable values. It must also ask questions and constantly formulate new ones. Therefore ...

Let me ask at the end: “Can ethical considerations in the context of the contemporary world be left out by art?” ●

» 27 R. Braidotti, *Po człowieku*, transl. J. Bednarek, A. Kowalczyk, PWN, Warszawa 2014, p. 350.