

Marta Smolińska

Prof. Dr. Habil., is a Polish art historian, art critic and freelance curator of many exhibitions of modern and contemporary art. 2003-2014 she was an assistant professor at Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń (Faculty of Modern and Contemporary Art). Until 2014 she is a professor at the University of Arts in Poznań. She has been awarded by Foundation for Polish Science grant three times, DAAD scholarship at Humboldt University in Berlin (2012), Graduate School for East and Southeast European Studies at Ludwig-Maximilians-University in Munich fellowship (2014), Hans Arp Foundation in Berlin fellowship (2015) and DAAD scholarship in Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte in Munich (2018). She is a member of Polish Section of AICA. She has published numerous publications on modern and contemporary art, including four books „Puls sztuki [The pulse of art]” (Poznań 2010), „Młody Mehoffer [Young Mehoffer]” (Kraków 2004), „Otwieranie obrazu. De(kon)strukcja uniwersalnych mechanizmów widzenia w nieprzedstawiającym malarstwie sztalugowym II połowy XX wieku [Opening the painting. De(con)struction of universal seeing mechanisms in non-representational easel painting of the 2nd half of the 20th century]” (Toruń 2012), „Julian Stańczak. Op Art and the Dynamic of Perception” (Warszawa 2014).

When Nature Becomes Plastic and Plastic Becomes Nature: Paintings by Marta Antoniak and Marcin Zawicki

If we build something new, we will do it out of waste, refuse and plastic, as we have grown on this. A lost generation, growing on an infertile soil of plastics, will sprout ostensibly plastic flowers.

Dorota Masłowska¹

The materials used at a particular moment in time, by the human race in general and artists in particular, are a reflection of social sensitivity. According to Monika Wagner, a scholar who sees art history through the prism of various materials, these elements accumulate their history of use and through this best mediate social codes.² In 1866, Alexander Parkes started the bulk-production of synthetic materials. In 1915 these materials entered art via the Constructivists, who regarded them as unencumbered by history.³ At present, such materials, especially plastic, have their complex history and are commonplace in art. What, then, do we learn about present-day social sensitivity from the works of Marta Antoniak

» 1 Dorota Masłowska, *Przyszkoleni do jedzenia*, *Gazeta Wyborcza*. *Gazeta Świąteczna* 233 (2002).

» 2 Monika Wagner, "Materialien als soziale Oberflächen", [in:] *Material in Kunst und Alltag*, ed. Monika Wagner und Dietmar Rübel, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2002, p. 101.

» 3 *Lexikon des künstlerischen Materials. Werkstoffe der modernen Kunst von Abfall bis Zinn*, ed. Monika Wagner, Dietmar Rübel und Sebastian Hackenschmidt, München: CH Beck Verlag, 2002, p. 162.

and Marcin Zawicki, painters who subversively play with the nature of this material in the age of overproduction?

Roland Barthes intuitively grasped as early as 1962 that plastic was the stuff of alchemy, the first such material to correspond to everydayness: “For the first time the artificial aims at the ordinary, not the extraordinary.”⁴ What happens, however, when the stuff of alchemy that “embodies” the impermanent nature of mass-produced objects returns to the realm of art to be used literally, as in Antoniak’s works, or to be represented on canvas as municipal waste dumped in a forest, as in Zawicki’s?

At the end of the 1970s, British artist Tony Cragg was the first to use plastic in his works.⁵ The relics and fragments of mass production were dubbed by the artist “the new nature”; in 1981 he depicted himself collecting plastic in a self-portrait. According to Cragg, plastic is a material that human beings must take full responsibility for as it does not originate in nature. It bears no traces of wear and tear, does not rust, and even after the demise of the object it may remain shiny, smooth and colourful, with no history and identity.⁶ The initially recognised advantages of plastic such as durability and sturdiness have over time grown to become an insoluble problem for the human race. However, let me offer a rather obvious observation in relation to contemporary art – this material has over time gained an identity, a history and even a soul, as is demonstrated in the works of artists like Antoniak and Zawicki. I would add that the artists’ use or demonstration of plastic elements in art not so much precludes any hope of breaking free from history and the spectre of an ecological disaster, but – on the contrary – helps one get immersed in history and evokes a kind of nostalgia. This is a nostalgia for the 1990s, when Poland, after the change of the political and economic system, was inundated by colourful plastic, as Agata Nowotny superbly indicated: “Behind the iron curtain we had to be men of iron or marble; we plunged joyfully and somewhat coyly into the colourful 1990s to satiate our inflated consumer needs in a breakneck speed of capitalism ... There was more and more colour everywhere. Everything, including gold, was made of plastic. Starting with the shabbiest sets of bathroom accessories ... through the artsy wine openers and ghost-shaped vegetable peelers displayed in the window of the first Alessi store in Warsaw in Krakowskie Przedmieście Street, as if in a museum display case. ‘Life In Plastic, It’s Fantastic / You Can Brush My Hair, Undress Me Everywhere / Imagination, Life Is Your Creation’,

» 4 Roland Barthes, “*Plastik*”, [in:] Idem, *Mitologie*, transl. Adam Dziadek, Warszawa: Aletheia, 2000, p. 216.

» 5 Abfall wird Kunst, ed. Susanne Casser, Heiner Hachmeister, *Münster: Hachmeister Verlag* 1992, p. 142.

» 6 Abfall wird Kunst, p. 142.

sang the frontwoman of Aqua in 1997 (the group having become famous for their one, tacky, we might say today, Barbie Girl video clip.) The lyrics of the song are a sign of the times, as is the video clip itself ... Plastic ... became an informal icon of the 1990s, the period of transformation and the shifting form; it was a magical time, a carnival of celebrating a re-gained freedom.”⁷

Antoniak, born in 1986, and Zawicki, one year her junior, grew up in the 1990s. At that time, however, transformation of plastic did not solely apply to the process of its production, insightfully indicated by Barthes, who stressed that in the course of its production plastic transforms into an idea of its infinite transformation⁸, but also of the transformation from an object of desire into waste. As Sonja Windmüller aptly observes: “Waste is not produced, but socially constructed.”⁹ The owner of a given object makes a decision whether it is still valuable or becoming worthless and thus disposable. Waste is a cognitive phenomenon, as it offers a chance to analyse affectations arising in the relationship between man – thing – waste¹⁰. This relation, in turn, offers an image of contemporary culture and its symbolic capital. The phenomenology of preservation or non-preservation of a given object is tied with the articulation of one’s own identity in the world.¹¹ Waste generates social phantasms, projections and fears as well as powerful affectations triggered by a loss of function and a slide into chaos and entropy. Windmüller also refers to a melancholy of waste¹², the phenomenon of which, as I will endeavour to prove further on, is closely correlated with the approaches of Antoniak and Zawicki, inspired in a plethora of ways by plastic objects, especially toys. As Marek Krajewski has it, material objects “never die once and for all; they are like material zombies which, having visited storage boxes, attics, second hand stores, Flohmärkte, or landfills are brought back to life and start to circulate again as old-school, vintage items, or ‘objects with a soul’ and thus unique”¹³. This is what happens to Antoniak’s plastic, colourful toys from surprise

» 7 Agata Nowotny, “Lata 90.: Plastik – prawdziwa sztuczność”, [in:] <http://www.dwutygodnik.com/artukul/2312-lata-90-plastik-prawdziwa-sztucznos.html> [access: 21.09.2017].

» 8 Roland Barthes, “Plastik”, p. 214.

» 9 Sonja Windmüller, *Die Kehrseite der Dinge. Müll, Abfall, Wegwerfen als kulturwissenschaftliches Problem*, Münster: LIT-Verlag, 2004, p.30.

» 10 Sonja Windmüller, *Die Kehrseite der Dinge. Müll, Abfall, Wegwerfen als kulturwissenschaftliches Problem*, p. 242.

» 11 Tim Putnam and Valerie Swales, “Between Keeping and Not-Keeping”, [in:] *Sammeln – Ausstellen – Wegwerfen*, hrsg. von Gisela Ecker, Martina Stange und Ulrike Vedder, Königstein / Taunus: Ulrike Helmer Verlag, 2001, p. 294.

» 12 Sonja Windmüller, *Die Kehrseite der Dinge. Müll, Abfall, Wegwerfen als kulturwissenschaftliches Problem*, p. 45 and 314.

» 13 Marek Krajewski, *Są w życiu rzeczy... Szkice z socjologii przedmiotów*, Warszawa: Fundacja Bęc Zmiana, 2013, p. 93.

eggs and to Zawicki's painted, discarded and fragmented faithful companions of childhood days, such as dinosaurs, dolls and cars, regaining their soul and energy in *The Fall* series from 2011-2013.

“Contemporary culture is a culture of excess, overabundance and overload which sociology calls post-deficiency. We actually live at a time of the dictatorship of excess and the hegemony of cultural overproduction which cannot be coped with at a time of deficiencies and demise of selection tools.”¹⁴ Both artists work in an era of excess and overproduction, when consumer society buys, collects and throws away without end. Thrown away, plastic is never biodegradable. According to Zygmunt Bauman: “A spectre of redundancy hovers over the inhabitants of the world of liquid modernity, over each of their deeds and each product of their hand. Liquid modernity is a civilisation of excess, redundancy, waste, and its disposal.”¹⁵ After all, we live in a culture which Stephen Bertman calls a culture of today, marked by an insatiable desire to possess and gather things, and first of all to replace old things with new ones.¹⁶ In turn, the author of the essay “The Miracle of Excess”, Guglielmo Ferrero, defines this phenomenon as one where the “possibility of possessing more than our needs and desires is a state where one never feels the anguish of having a desire unfulfilled”¹⁷. In their works, Antoniak and Zawicki, literally and figuratively, recycle plastic, no longer used objects, providing visual reflections on the present era, so deeply marked by the syndrome of consumerism.

In his paintings from *The Fall* series, Zawicki makes us aware that today we no longer deal with pure nature, the hybrid creatures, plants and organisms we see in his canvases being products of natureculture¹⁸. Following Donny Haraway, Monika Bakke observes: “We should finally come to terms with the fact that there is no ‘return to nature’”¹⁹. In some of Zawicki's paintings rhizomes tear through the soil, mix with the refuse of our civilization, discarded toys and offshoots of spawn, expanding in some eerie light from an unspecified source. This is contemporary melancholy tenebrism. Lion, dinosaur, hippopotamus, dog, beetle, crocodile,

» 14 Tomasz Szlendak, *Kultura nadmiaru w czasach niedomiaru*. Podsumowanie i wnioski z obrad III Elbląskiego Forum Kulturoznawczego, http://www.bibliotekaelblaska.pl/forum-kulturoznawcze.html?file=tj_files/biblioteka/dane/kultura_nadmiaru_web.pdf [access: 22.09.2017].

» 15 Zygmunt Bauman, *Życie na przemiał*, transl. T. Kunz, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2004, p. 152-153.

» 16 After: Zygmunt Bauman, *Konsumowanie życia*, transl. M. Wyrwas-Wiśniewska, Kraków: Wydawnictwo UJ, 2009, p. 39-42.

» 17 Guglielmo Ferrero, *Przemowy do głuchych*, transl. J. Kuryłowicz, Poznań 1926, p. 61. After: Marian Golka, *Aparacje współczesności*, Warszawa: Oficyna Naukowa, 2015, p. 21.

» 18 The term natureculture after: Donna Haraway, *How Like a Leaf. An Interview with Thyrza Nichols Goodeve*, Routledge 2000, p. 105..

» 19 Monika Bakke, *Bio-transfiguracje. Sztuka i estetyka posthumanizmu*, Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2010, p. 60.

fish, rhinoceros, elephant, bird, and dragon fly – all the plastic creatures, companions of someone’s childhood, meet one another on canvas, inextricably intertwined with the organic world which absorbs them as another kind of organic matter. Paradoxically, however, as we know, plastic has nothing to do with nature and is entirely artificial. Yet Zawicki creates enticing hybrid ecosystems which show plastic not only in the role of new nature, but as an integral part of ground cover in the forest. Plastic toys, often turned upside down, stand proudly next to rhizomes and offshoots, subject to camouflage and mimicry. They become part of nature, feeding the natureculture, becoming a sign of our times.

Some are slimy in an organic way. They abound in particular compositions, resembling the entrails of predatory “nature”, pulsating with life, wet and swollen. In all likelihood, the protagonist of Jean Paul Sartre’s *Nausea*, published in 1938, Roquentin, would define his experience vis-à-vis the canvases in the following manner: everything is “like an oozing—and something else, an odour, for example, it melted into the odour of wet earth, warm, moist wood, into a black odour that spread like varnish over this sensitive wood”²⁰. Sartre’s protagonist was afraid of what was back then “true” nature, imagining that “The Vegetation has crawled for mile after mile towards the towns. It is waiting. When the town dies, the Vegetation will invade it, it will clamber over the stones, it will grip them, search them, burst them open with its long black pincers; it will bind the holes and hang its green paws everywhere.”²¹ In Zawicki’s paintings the vegetation rips the soil open, mixes not only with it and with the skeletons, but with plastic waste generated by humans and with bizarre organs which expand in some eerie light from an unspecified source to make up a blurry haze²². The eighteenth-century anthropologist Karl Rosenkranz observed that we abhor excessive writhing and swarming, similar to decay processes.²³ This is, then, similar to Zawicki’s paintings, where everything, plastic included, seems to be teeming with slimy life, which is too often composed of death: we see in them crawling extremities, coiled intestines, severed plastic abdomens, and wide-open gobs.

Such “self-propelling” beings are especially bothersome, since their peregrinations lay bare the fragility, haphazardness and arbitrariness of an established order.²⁴ Death is waste. As William J. T. Mitchell observes:

» 20 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Mdłości (La Nausée, Paris 1938)*, transl. Jacek Trznadel, Warszawa: Zielona Sowa, 1974, p. 184-185.

» 21 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Mdłości*, p. 215.

» 22 The term whirlpool derives from texts by Roger Caillois.

» 23 Winfried Menninghaus, *Wstręt. Teoria i historia*, transl. Grzegorz Sowiński, Kraków: Universitas, 2009, p. 26.

» 24 Zygmunt Bauman, *Ponowoczesność jako źródło cierpień*, ed. II, Warszawa: Sic!, 2000, p. 14.

“‘Things’ no longer passively await an idea, theory or an external subject which would assign them to object classes. A ‘thing’ raises the head: it is a wild beast or a monster we know from science fiction, a return of the denied, resistant matter, a block, a lesson offered us by an object.”²⁵ Palpable in *The Fall* series is an awe related to the ambivalent status of discarded plastic toys: on the one hand they are waste which will never in fact disintegrate and will never reintegrate with the natural environment; on the other hand, Zawicki presents them as agents, wild beasts, which actively contribute to the creation of natureculture, as our reality is called. What Roland Barthes said about plastic seems no longer adequate to the situation: “It has nothing to do with the texture of real objects of mineral origin, with foam, fibres and layers. It is a corrupt substance ... something powerless ever to achieve the triumphant smoothness of nature. But what best reveals it for what it is, is the sound it gives, at once hollow and flat; its noise is its undoing, as are its colours, for it seems capable of retaining only the most chemical-looking ones.”²⁶ In Zawicki’s paintings plastic achieves the triumphant smoothness of nature. Chaos and entropy which creep in when the plastic toys lose their designated function and relation with the owner, lead in *The Fall* to the birth of completely new “self-propelling” beings of a heterogeneous nature: a tangle of plants and waste of human civilization or the culture of now. Zawicki demonstrates the processes of the integration of nature and culture which take place in the background of our civilization. The artist simultaneously diagnoses, with sentimental irony, our great collective fear of death and destruction, since waste, and all the more so toys of childhoods experienced in the colourful and plastic Poland of the 1990s, exorcise the end.²⁷ The discarded toys are “the background noise”²⁸ which, within the framework of exploring what is pedestrian, mundane and ordinary, stress our existence. Zawicki’s paintings contain phantasmagoria and artistic imagery; they both fascinate and scare. Plastic, while it irreversibly damages and pollutes nature, becomes part and parcel of nature in *The Fall*, and due to its mimicry, lures us with its varicoloured charm. In turn, Antoniuk in her series *Polikolor* (2013) and *Plastic Throat* (2013) uses plastic in the literal sense, as a painting material. We can surmise that regarding these works Barthes would quote an excerpt of his essay from the 1960s: “Plastic, sublimated as movement, hardly exists as sub-

» 25 William J. T. Mitchell, *What do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004.

» 26 Roland Barthes, op. cit., p. 215.

» 27 See: Lea Vergine, *When Trash Becomes Art. TRASH rubbish mongo*, Milan 2007, p. 16.

» 28 Lea Vergine, *When Trash Becomes Art. TRASH rubbish mongo*, Marta Smolińska 271 p. 13.

stance.”²⁹ Antoniak has developed her own technique of melting plastic and “baking” it in a manner which makes it a plastic mixture, out of which new visual wholes are created. As early as the 1960s artists such as César and Arman discovered the amorphous form of plastics and the fact that their ephemeral, liquid shape could be preserved.³⁰ Antoniak describes her technique as follows: “I use a heat gun and roast both the plastic and the paint, which swell under the impact of temperature and begin to come in tiny bubbles. I place dinosaurs and pigs like cookies in a baking mould, which I insert into the oven. I pour acrylic paint into silicon baking moulds and wait until it sets. I use phthalic enamel over a structure made up of plastic and pour it over it, as if it were a coating. I decorate it with sprays. I paste plastic figurines as decorations on a cake.”³¹

Antoniak moreover sees plastic as a material with substantial history related to her childhood spent among blocks of flats: “My childhood among blocks of flats. A huge, eleven-storey high block next to which I played every day offered unobvious attractions. Every now and then it spawned colourful fleas out of sunlit balconies. I frittered away summer afternoons meticulously rummaging through cool ground floor niches reeking of feline urine and basements in search of plastic scraps. The single hair pins, building blocks, ribbons, or figurines I came across were of paleontological importance to me. They were prehistoric finds, such as bones of an unknown creature whose entire skeleton I will never find. I knew that its remaining parts are hidden from me on upper floors, behind the curtains of rooms large and small, smelling of dinner. I brought them home, slightly nauseated, the way you feel when grafting foreign organs onto one’s own tissue. I would initially hide them from my mom and after a while, without arousing unnecessary suspicions, triumphantly incorporated them into my collection.”³²

Referring to a Walter Benjamin term, I would define Antoniak as a Lumpensammler. Benjamin sees waste and refuse as a vehicle of an unofficial history and an indispensable material of social practices, with which hopefully one will be able to change history and to conduct a critical dialogue with things.³³ I do not think that Antoniak believes in the possibility of changing history in the 21st century, but I have no doubt that the

» 29 Roland Barthes, “Plastik”, p. 215.

» 30 Lexikon des künstlerischen Materials. *Werkstoffe der modernen Kunst von Abfall bis Zinn*, p. 163.

» 31 An excerpt from a doctorate *Plastikowe gardlo* by Marta Antoniak (2017). Courtesy of the Author.

» 32 Marta Antoniak, *Plastikowe gardlo*.

» 33 Dietmar Rübel, “Abfall – Materialien einer Archäologie des Konsums oder: Kunst vom Rest der Welt”, [in:] *Material in Kunst und Alltag*, ed. Monika Wagner und Dietmar Rübel, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2002, p. 123.

collection and processing of plastic gives her the opportunity to conduct a critical dialogue with both things and modern art or the culture of excess in general. The artist passionately searches and buys toys from surprise eggs via the Internet, and moreover visits various kinds of markets and toy sections in hypermarkets where you can buy everyday plastic flora and fauna.

The manner in which Antoniak uses these plastic relics correlates with the observation of Italo Calvino, who, in one of his short stories, suggests that there is no disparity between the categories of useful and valuable objects on the one hand and garbage on the other. The writer goes further and gives waste a metaphysical overtone: throwing away is the first necessary condition for being, because you are always what you do not throw away.³⁴ Antoniak, accumulating in her paintings what others throw away or sell, defines herself as the one that creates a new plastic world out of plastic waste and unnecessary toys. Both collecting items and throwing them away involve making choices, which are underpinned by similar logic.³⁵ In the era of excess, Antoniak is voracious and greedy as a collector, and restrained if she were to get rid of anything that could make it to the surface of her paintings. Plastic is a fetish and artificial matter that turns into a quasi-organic form in the series *Plastic Throat*. The artist, like Zawicki, moves plastic from the zone of the artificial into an area where the boundaries between nature and culture are not only questioned, but may even cease to exist at all.

In the *Polikolor* series, the surfaces of the paintings are covered with partly molten plastic toys, which, as a result of high temperature, become amorphous, lose their fixed shape and indicate an inherent ability of this substance to both infinitely transform and change from a desirable object into waste/death. "I go to art stores and hypermarkets to visit children's departments. I choose affordable toys, because it's about a mass holocaust. Soldiers are the most economical to exterminate. Prices start at about 1.50 zlotys per packet of the poorest sort. Ordinary plastic melts in a relatively short time. You need to be vigilant not to dissolve it completely into a single large khaki-coloured patch."³⁶ Other images feature deformed, scary faces of clowns or small animals that we could also imagine in the world of natureculture, so convincingly painted by Zawicki in an illusionist manner.

» 34 See: Italo Calvino, *Die Mülltonne und andere Geschichten*, München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997. See: Gisela Ecker, "Verwerfungen", [in:] *Sammeln – Ausstellen – Wegwerfen*, ed. Gisela Ecker, Martina Stange und Ulrike Vedder, Königstein / Taunus: Ulrike Helmer Verlag, 2001, p. 175.

» 35 Erik Porath, "Von der Vernunft des Sammelns zum Irrsinn des Wegwerfens", [in:] *Sammeln – Ausstellen – Wegwerfen*, ed. Gisela Ecker, Martina Stange und Ulrike Vedder, Königstein / Taunus: Ulrike Helmer Verlag, 2001, p. 277.

» 36 Marta Antoniak, *Plastikowe gardło*.

Antoniak titles some of the works *Apocalypse*, connoting an ongoing extermination. Zawicki implies a decline through the title *The Fall*. Their art, then, reverberates with catastrophic echoes, muffled by phantasmagoria and a whirlpool of colours and a gloss of plastic which appear close to the triumphant smoothness of nature. In love with plastic, the author of *Polikolor* brings out and celebrates its similarity to nature, rather than something artificial. On the surfaces of her paintings, the matter spills out like lava, parodying, as if in passing, the painting of matter or the masterpieces of abstract expressionism. In *Plastic Throat* this phenomenon reaches its apex, because the fixed fluidity of plastic imitates and embodies internal organs, body fragments, tendons as well as blood and lymph vessels. It oozes from the mouth, or rather, it gags it and hampers breathing. When we look closely, it turns out that man has building blocks and different series of animals and fairy-tale characters from surprise eggs. The human body – as shown by Antoniak’s works – is therefore not only a waste collection, one large landfill, but also something plastic. Is it still biodegradable, one might ask? Such a question in relation to the non-deposition of corpses of people who ate food rich in preservatives is fully justified. Antoniak diagnoses and exposes our plasticity but does not classify us as “artificial”; at present these Modernist models seem totally incongruous and unfit to describe our hybrid reality. Plastic batch, paradoxically, may be in those images interpreted as foreign and as something inherently connected with the human body. It strangles and chokes, but also builds tissues and organs, creates conditions for the flow of blood and lymph.

“I open up another Kinder Surprise, but instead of chocolate, I put in my mouth a penguin ripped out from within it. I roll it with my tongue, suck like candy and bite. A rumbling sound of plastic smashed by my teeth makes my temples explode. I feel the paint flake. I am waiting for the taste of filling. It melts in my mouth. It covers the esophagus with the colours of the rainbow, a bliss resembling that in Bernini’s Saint Teresa’s Ecstasy. A plastic arrow pierces my stomach, causing pain and joy at the same time. A wall unit popular in communist Poland bursts at the seams and takes up half of my room. Cardboard boxes and containers filled with trash are everywhere.”³⁷ Plastic is therefore a foodstuff that in the era of excess and overproduction feeds the imagination of the artist; it is recycled so³⁸ that this new nature or substance, for which man takes sole responsibility, can assume a completely novel, subversive and ambivalent status. Moreover, plastic in Antoniak’s paintings has eyes, often many pairs of

» 37 Marta Antoniak, *Plastikowe gardło*.

» 38 Herbert Wittl observes that recycling is not only a re-assignment of value, but a re-birth. See: Herbert Wittl, *Recycling. Von neuem Umgang with Dingen*, Regensburg: Roderer, 1996, p. 163.

eyes, which stare at us. They can see us. Colourful matter is all the more an agent in this case, a wild beast or a sci-fi monster; it raises its head and gives us a lesson, all the more acute since it is not passive. Although it was completely created by man, in time it has turned against us, not only by changing aesthetic categories, but also by irreversibly degrading our natural environment.

In turn, in relation to the childhood of both artists, i.e. the 1990s, or a decade of plastic in Poland, I would also consider their work to be marked by nostalgia. One of the conditions for the emergence of nostalgia is the material presence of things, artefacts from the past³⁹ – in this case – plastic toys. Culture scholars say that we deal with a “global nostalgia epidemic”. This is an “affected nostalgia for a community with a specific collective memory, a need of continuity in this fragmentary world of ours. Nostalgia inevitably revives as a defence mechanism at a time of accelerated rhythm of life and historical upheavals.”⁴⁰ The nostalgia we deal with in Antoniak’s and Zawicki’s paintings removes and puts aside this aspect of the functioning of plastic, which is associated with the spectrum of ecological disaster, establishing the impression of continuity from childhood to the present. It has long been known that garbage or waste are vehicles of collective and individual memory⁴¹. Liz Bachhuber and Leonie Weber, when analysing the relations between art, waste and entropy, proposed the concept of “entrophy”, a pun, a combination of entropy and trophy. In their compositions, both Antoniak and Zawicki celebrate such an ambiguous condition of plastic toys, which can be described as “entrophy”. These are trophies which the artists grab somewhere on the border of entropy, in the world of natureculture.

If I accept the observation of Lea Vergine, who states that waste has the ability to enlighten since it is metaphorical, an expression of the spirit of the time and of the worldview of a given era⁴², I can recognise that in choosing plastic, Antoniak and Zawicki have indicated that it is the iconic waste of our civilisation. If one is to believe Calvino, that you are always what you do not throw away, both artists are the Lumpensammler of our time, who compose their painted worlds between the threat of an ecological disaster and nostalgia and melancholy. They treat artificial material completely differently than the Constructivists did around a century ago, or Cragg in the late 1970s. In the oeuvre of both artists, plastic becomes a quasi-organic material rather than something artificial and alien to na-

» 39 Wojciech Burszta, “Nostalgia i mit”, [in:] *History: one world too far*, ed Ewa Domańska, Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 1997, p. 124.

» 40 Wojciech Burszta, “Nostalgia i mit”, p. 124.

» 41 Liz Bachhuber und Leonie Weber, “Müll, Kunst und Entropie”, [in:] *Entropy. Müll und Kunst*, ed. Liz Bachhuber, Erfurt: Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, 2011, p. 71.

» 42 Lea Vergine, *When Trash Becomes Art. TRASH rubbish mongo*, p. 15.

ture. Antoniak and Zawickis' paintings make us aware that in the era of overproduction and natureculture one cannot return to the bipolar divisions of Modernism and describe the world in unambiguous terms. What has not changed, however, is the perception of plastic as a metaphor for incessant transformation. The artists make use of plastic, the new nature of our environment and imply that the transformation is going to further obliterate the differences between the natural and the artificial.

Plastic, then, is a material which, due to its ambivalence, is a kind of bridge between the visual and expressive worlds of Antoniak and Zawicki and contemporary philosophy, connected with post-humanism, the agency of objects, new materialism, natureculture, overproduction, the syndrome of consumerism, and multiple other trends. Who is the inspiration here: the artists for the philosophers or the philosophers for the artists? Or perhaps there is individual experience between art and philosophy? What if this experience is increasingly a plastic one? ●