

#43

Zeszyty Artystyczne

Misteria – rytuały – performanse.
Wymiar estetyczny

Mysteries – Rituals – Performances.
The Aesthetic Dimension



Uniwersytet Artystyczny
im. Magdaleny Abakanowicz
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Zdjęcie na okładce

Koncert wizualny Adama Garnka, Kielce 2013

fot. K. Peczański

Introduction

Jakub Žmidziński

Not long ago, a group of students from one of the UAP's student research groups invited me to take part in a discussion around Ron Fricke's film *Samsara*. I thought it is interesting that a movie from 11 years before (the world premiere took place on 11 September 2011), still arouses keen interest in young people. The stunning beauty of nature, humans and some of the creations of their culture alternate with the horror of the dark side of civilisation (poverty, waste, crime, militarisation, sexualisation, mass animal breeding) and guide viewers seduced by the mysterious music around the more and less familiar corners of our planet without a word of commentary. Apart from the indisputable artistic quality, Fricke's *Samsara* and other movies (mainly *Baraka* from 1992) show a most acute image of our present-day civilisation. Among the various contrasts on which the film narrative is founded, the juxtaposition of the image of tribal peoples practising ancient forms of life and traditional rituals with the life of the inhabitants of large metropolises, with all their conveniences and curses, is extremely powerful. The recording of *Transfiguration*, a performance by the French artist Olivier de Sagazan, can be seen as a climax. It stands in stark contrast to both the life of tribal peoples and the contemporary religious Buddhist, Christian, Jewish or Islamic rituals depicted in the film. However, it nevertheless has something in common with them, i.e. essential if divergent references to the aesthetic. The problem, however, is how to capture and describe it, how to understand the aesthetic functions in such disparate activities.

The proposed theme for this issue of "Zeszyty Artystyczne": *Mysteries – Rituals – Performances. The Aesthetic Dimension* is born out of the anthropological reflection on our culture and the arts within it. This reflection addresses both their past and present state, as well as the dynamic transformations taking place within the arts. Thematically, it refers back to the 29th issue of our journal from 2016, titled *Ritual and the Correspondence of the Arts*. However, these last six years and especially the last few months have brought a lot of changes. They have made us ask new or old, but differently posed, questions about the world, humans and the effects of our behaviour. We are affected by a multitude of anxieties: political persecution just across Poland's eastern border and the very real war going on there, migrations, climate threat, ideological disputes, political

tensions, pandemics and the ensuing crises. All of this is likely to reshape culture and generate new themes and solutions in art.

The intensification of disputes and radicalisation applies to the humanities, too. At times, language takes on forms rife with aggression and dialogue is often more difficult. Suffice it to mention here the words written in 1967 by Leszek Kołakowski in his treatise *The Presence of Myth*:

The starting point of culture is always a conflict of values [...] culture thrives on both the desire for an ultimate synthesis between its conflicting components and the organic impossibility of securing this synthesis. [...] The uncertainty of intentions and the fragility of achievements prove to be the condition for the creative persistence of culture¹.

With this in mind, we propose to start precisely with dialogue. The “Editorial Conversation” involved representatives of several academic centres and various professions from the fields of science and art. Here one witnesses a dialogue of different positions exploring the traditional and virtual circulation of culture, as well as a dialogue of different approaches: sociological with ethnographic, theoretical with practical, scientific with artistic, musical with visual. One of the most interesting themes was probably the dilemma as to which of the proposed concepts describes contemporary reality more adequately: ritual or performance, which is related to the rather imprecise definition of their scope and differences. Traditionally, the concept of ritual was reserved for the realm of the sacred, while performance was the domain of artists (hence the cover of our magazine features a photograph from Adam Garnek’s *Visual Concert*). In the conversation, therefore, it was impossible to avoid both issues of spirituality or religion and the attitudes of artists in the face of war.

The series of articles opens with an extremely interesting essay by Maryia Pruzhanets, who draws a picture of Belarusian performance art in recent years and its opposition to political persecution and sometimes even to naïve rebellion. A distinctive feature of the bloodily suppressed Belarusian protests of 2020-2021 was the particularly numerous and active participation of women. Paweł Możdżyński devoted his extensive article to the phenomenon of women’s artistic performative actions in Poland. The next article, by Weronika Piróg, stays within the circle of women’s art of performance and examines the performance *Seed* by Teresa Murak in the context of posthumanism and post-secular spirituality. Agata Myjak’s article addresses the past of Polish art theatre and focuses on Krzysztofa Jung’s art. The performative nature of the art of light is discussed by Izab-

» 1 Leszek Kołakowski, *Obecność mitu* (Warszawa: Prószyński i S-ka 2005), 199.

ela Franckiewicz-Olczak, who places its history “between the elitism of art and the egalitarianism of mass spectacle”. A radically different perspective on ritual is offered in the article by Olga Pankalla and Andrzej Pankalla, who interestingly show the relationship between linguistic rituals and the judicial system. Equally engaging are the examples cited by the authors of various types of performances which transgress or balance on the edge of the law. In Sebastian Lesiczka’s ethnographic text we enter the world of the sonosphere of funeral rites of the past and often still today in various rural regions of Poland. The set of texts concludes with a piece by the undersigned, defending the controversial stage behaviour of jazz pianist Keith Jarrett as a prerequisite for the improvised creative process taking place within his musical mysteries.

In many of the articles, the authors emphasise the relationship between art and spirituality. At the same time, where the subject of traditional rituals is addressed, their aesthetic dimension is highlighted, often supported by the activities of artists, especially musicians. The connections between ritual activities and art are unquestionable, even if their goals and functions may be defined differently. They both arise out of human needs. Art often fills the void left by religion, providing “spiritual nourishment” for contemporary audiences. In various contexts, it can also be an expression of rebellion and struggle. In a gripping essay further on in the issue, Lithuanian artist Paulina Pukytė juxtaposes two contemporary performers of the same generation: the well-known Serbian Marina Abramović and the Russian Yelena Osipova, “unknown to anyone”, repeatedly arrested for anti-Putin and anti-war protests. In fact, the last words of this text pose a very important question about artists’ attitude towards the war: “Perhaps Marina could sit on a Russian street after all, next to Yelena, for a long performance of endurance? She could hold one poster, as Yelena is already finding it hard to hold both”. Perhaps this all-too-real war taking place so close is a test not only for artists, and will force us to engage in a liminal search for a *communitas*? ●

Jakub Żmidziński



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