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Nursing and Reading.

Affective Realism in Andrzej Wróblewski's Painting

The class struggle, which always remains in view for a historian schooled in Marx, is a struggle for the rough and material things, without which there is nothing fine and spiritual. Nevertheless these latter are present in the class struggle as something other than mere booty, which falls to the victor. They are present as confidence, as courage, as humor, as cunning, as steadfastness in this struggle, and they reach far back into the mists of time. They will, ever and anon, call every victory which has ever been won by the rulers into question. Just as flowers turn their heads towards the sun, so too does that which has been turned, by virtue of a secret kind of heliotropism, towards the sun which is dawning in the sky of history. To this most inconspicuous of all transformations the historical materialist must pay heed.

Walter Benjamin¹

For him it's impossible to simply describe the world.

Éric de Chassey²

Andrzej Wróblewski's painting has already achieved the status of a cult classic. His works are usually interpreted as a confrontation with war, the system, or totalitarianism—that is, as “political.” Understanding politics in this way—separating its “public,” “general,” or institutional aspects from direct, lived experience—is at odds with dialectics, whose complex trajectory the young Warsaw-based painters attempted to follow shortly after the war. Zbigniew Dłubak quoting György Lukács, the manifestos of the first exhibitions of modern art, and Wróblewski's notes and texts all clearly indicate the necessity of moving beyond the classical (at least in liberal-conservative political thought) division between the public and the private

¹ Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*. Gesammelte Schriften I:2, 1940 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974), trans. Dennis Redmond, available at: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm>

² Éric de Chassey, *Wróblewski did impossible things in his time [interview]*, <https://culture.pl/pl/artykul/eric-de-chassey-wroblewski-robil-rzeczy-niemozliwe-w-jego-czasach-wywiad>, accessed June 26, 2019.

in the analysis of avant-garde art of that period.³ From a feminist perspective, which I will develop here, I can only applaud the overcoming of this separation.

When I was asked to write about Wróblewski's yet to be discussed artworks, I was drawn to the paintings and sketches depicting his family life—created at home, portraying his wife and children. In many respects, starting a family life must have been unbearable for this declared anti-bourgeois nonconformist. Although in his notes he repeatedly ridiculed married colleagues, Wróblewski eventually settled down and became a father. Of the many works that I reviewed when preparing this essay, the most interesting was an undated work depicting a young woman, the artist's wife, while nursing and simultaneously trying to read a book (*[Figural Composition No. 513]*). This ink drawing is part of an unintentionally assembled series of figural compositions depicting the artist's wife and child, most likely created in 1954; it is the main subject of this text. As I interpret it, I would also like to point to the possibility of examining the work of this outstanding artist through a somewhat less "monumental" lens. I will try to show that returning to what is private and looking at it as, after all, an element of the political—rather than some kind of allegedly apolitical alternative—is necessary for understanding Wróblewski's work, and also (perhaps) art as such.

The drawing depicts a young woman, breastfeeding and gazing—tenderly, but probably also wearily—down at her baby. In the other, unoccupied hand, she is holding a large book, which remains—in relation to the baby—in the background, sliding slightly out of her hand. A piece of white fabric, a quilt or a blanket on which the infant is resting, occupies a large part of the image. The woman is wearing a partly open, patterned sleeveless dressing gown that reveals a protruding breast. The unobtrusive sensuality of this image, the tenderness emanating from the figures of the woman and the baby, and the subtlety of the sketch suggest fondness and affection not only between the mother and child, but also on the part of the artist. Her position—and the fact that the book has still not fallen out of her hand—testify to the fact that not only is she awake, but she is also fighting a kind of internal struggle between the desire or need to read and the obligation to feed the infant. Because most of the image is white and gray, with just a little black, and the dominant colors are the beige of the background and the white of the blanket and the child's clothing, this is one of Wróblewski's most cheerful paintings.

Classical art theory would probably consider this image "private," without trying to find any politics in it. Nevertheless, in terms of feminist analysis and, specifically, the analysis I would like to propose here, there are at least two ways in which one might interpret this piece as political. First of all, of course, there is a lot of affect here, which is, also for political reasons, an inseparable and necessary element of in Wróblewski's work. As he wrote in his notes, "Even a stellar system possesses

³ In "Remarks on Modern Art," Zbigniew Dłubak directly writes that young Warsaw-based painters (meaning himself and Wróblewski) accept Marx's historical materialism as their theoretical background. Dłubak initially delivered his *Remarks* as a paper during the opening of the *Exhibition of Modern Art* in Kraków, December 18, 1948. See Zbigniew Dłubak, "Remarks on Modern Art," in *Andrzej Wróblewski. To the Margin and Back*, ed., Magdalena Ziółkowska, (Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum, 2010), trans. Krzysztof Kościuczuk, pp. 24–28.

a certain temperament.”⁴ Looking at this work today, bearing in mind the years that have passed, but also the evolution of art in the first half of the twentieth century, I get the impression that while the Russian avant-garde (Futurism and Suprematism) strived—above all—to “abolish the subject,” Wróblewski and his peers attempted to “abolish reification.” I understand such “abolishment” in Hegelian terms: as a process of developing history and dialectics, rather than simply as annihilation.⁵ The method of artists from Wróblewski’s generation seems to preserve humanistic and figurative elements—not to support realism, but rather to launch ideas leading toward abstraction and avoiding intermediary states. In 1918, Kazimir Malevich wrote: “We must go further – towards a complete liberation, not only from objects, but also from individuals, so that we can focus exclusively on elements of color, and through them give color to the new form created by us, the new body.” And he continued: “with a sharp boundary we divide time and on its forward-facing plane we place the square, black as a secret. It looks at us darkly, as if hiding within the new pages of the future.”⁶ I cite these fragments to emphasize the accumulation of similarities and differences in Malevich and Wróblewski’s artistic strategies. The latter no longer has to propose disregarding individuals—the fascist reality and Bolshevik ideology have done that already to an extent that, as was commonly believed, could not be described. Meanwhile Wróblewski, probably as a result of his experience from the Second World War, restores figuration, but assigns it additional meanings—having endured mass murder and genocide, human beings have become objects, so their silhouettes might as well become symbols. Paradoxically, the extreme forms of objectification at the hands of the Nazis and Stalinists open up a fragile, precarious, but also extremely moving possibility of treating human figures as symbols. Hence, each *Execution* or *Chairing* is a metaphor, and every person depicted in these images is an *everyman*—anyone, any possible person. Therefore, I think one can hardly speak of Wróblewski’s paintings as humanist. Their protagonists are organisms rather than particular, identifiable people—the painter seems to focus on the ability to feel (what’s significant is that the silhouettes depicted in the paintings have feelings or could have feelings), rather than the distinctiveness of specific people. In this sense, Wróblewski’s work takes a sort of Spinozian, materialist turn away from the over-intellectualized European culture that fetishizes individuality and is, in turn, capable of disregarding pain entirely.

While Wróblewski’s *Executions* (although there are also some women and children there) are dominated by male figures, his *Chairings* depict a kind of equality—a series of female silhouettes do appear. The artist shows—as if in slow, unreal motion—a ghostly rigidity of the shaping of sexual *habitus* and its attendant figures.

⁴ Andrzej Wróblewski, quoted in Ziółkowska, *ibid.*, p. 38.

⁵ For more on the role of the category of objectification for Wróblewski’s work, see, among others Branislav Dimitrijević, “Folklore, Modernity and Death. Wróblewski’s visit to Yugoslavia”, in *Avoiding Intermediate States. Andrzej Wróblewski (1927–1957)*, eds., Magdalena Ziółkowska and Wojciech Grzybała, (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2014), pp. 482–525.

⁶ Both fragments come from the book: Kazimir Malevich, *Wiersze i teksty* [Poems and Texts], trans. Agnieszka Lubomira Piotrowska and Adam Pomorski, (Warsaw: OPEN Wydawnictwo Naukowe i Literackie, 2004), p. 70. Translated here from the Polish by Joanna Figiel.

The nursing mother from the aforementioned [*Figural Composition No. 513*] constitutes a kind of reversal of this rigidity—and here the imagery is expanding, from what is female toward the universal. After all anyone, not just women and children can become “un-chaired” thanks to emotions. Lurking within the affect is not just the risk of lasting formation, but also above all the incredible flexibility that allows us to grow and the species to evolve and come to terms with even the most incredibly painful experiences.



Andrzej Wróblewski, *Execution (Poznań Execution II)*, 1949, oil on canvas, 200 × 245 cm, National Museum in Krakow. Courtesy of the Andrzej Wróblewski Foundation, www.andrzejwroblewski.pl

In *Aesthetic Theory*, Theodor Adorno recalls GeorgW.F. Hegel's statement that “Truth is Concrete,” which in turn became the motto of the contemporary German playwright, Bertolt Brecht.⁷ Brecht was not a sentimental or humanist playwright, he was an artist whose will to get to the heart of the historical process led, paradoxically, to his great ability to describe affective structures and shape the affective responsiveness of viewers. With virtuosity, this seemingly frosty and dour communist allowed his audiences access to affective registers that, after all, form a significant part of interpersonal relationships in the world of inhuman capitalism. A lofty critic of catharsis understood as an ideological illusion of reconciliation, Brecht also proved—ironically—to be a genius at representing the structures of affect, almost performing a V-section on human passions. In Wróblewski, this concreteness reaches beyond forms and silhouettes, and also includes a solid serving of traumatic experience,

⁷ Cf. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, eds., Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, translated, edited, and with a translator's introduction by Robert Hullot-Kentor, (London, New York: Athlone/Continuum, 2002), p. 18.

common in postwar Poland and strengthened mercilessly by the ideological and political proscriptions of the time. Questions concerning the ghetto and the role played by Poles in the atrocities of the Holocaust, the Warsaw Uprising, and the AK (Polish Army) underground are just a few of the most visible themes with which the culture of postwar Poland had interacted—despite complications resulting from the party political line, censorship, and prohibition. There, the labor of mourning and trauma that even in its basic reiteration refuses linearity, was complicated by additional sanctions, displacements, and transfers resulting from state policies. This entanglement of passion, pain, trauma, unspoken hopes, mourning, and injustice certainly constitutes the socio-political setting of Wróblewski's artistic choices.

However, this setting also comprises his everyday life, workshop, and the specificity of his own artistic practice and personal circumstances. Contrary to the recently popular logic of “event,” I would propose to look at Wróblewski's legacy through the lens of quotidian experiences, sketches, and trials that he performed in his everyday artistic work, far removed from exhibition showcases. According to one of the Polish Wróblewski scholar, Magdalena Ziółkowska, the artist consciously prepared himself for just one, 1956 exhibition—otherwise, he painted and sketched without any particular audience in mind. The composition with a nursing woman undoubtedly belongs to this repertoire of sketches and trials, typical for each artist who—even if they choose a particularly abstract form or the use of rich, oil paints, vivid colors, and so on—most often perfect their skills *via* sketches or watercolors, aiming for the most precise strategy of expression. This aspect of artistic work—perhaps primarily available to artists themselves and those who commune with them on a daily basis—is revealed in this particular piece and forces one to verify the approach to this allegedly “private” portion of the artist's legacy, the intimacy, kinship, and “attempt” understood as an incessant repetition in pursuit of the desired effect. A certain imperfection or inaccuracy in Wróblewski's paintings has already been described by critics as an element of his method rather than as a coincidence. Éric de Chassey described it most emphatically, saying: “However, his painting is extremely honest, his utopias are always uncanny, and these paintings never reach a state of completeness, harmony, permanence. Sometimes they look like Mondrian's works, except they are clumsy. Clumsy not because Wróblewski could not paint, but because he was also recording the failures of his utopian dream.”⁸ The sketch-like quality or inaccuracy features not only in Wróblewski's sketchbook—his “private” works, a large collection of which is presented by the editors of *Avoiding Intermediary States*—but also in his more “official” works.

The German choreographer and theoretician Sibylle Peters, provides interesting insight from the point of view of political and aesthetic theory. In the text “Introduction (Being Many)” she writes about the strategic dimension of the rehearsal, understood as theatrical or choreographic practice. She argues that, above other things, “Being Many” in particular, must be practiced and rehearsed or otherwise it will not emerge.⁹ With such an approach, we may give up the metaphysics

⁸ Cf. Éric de Chassey, *Wróblewski Did Impossible Things in His Time*.

⁹ Sibylle Peters, “Introduction (Being Many),” in *Truth is Concrete. A Handbook for Artistic Strategies in Real Politics*, ed., Florian Malzacher, (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014), pp. 129–131.

of society or creativity in favor of a material recognition of lived experience. Such a move is only possible when we steer away from the concept of avant-garde as a programmatic implementation of absolute novelty toward a vision of the avant-garde that emphasizes weakness. In his essay *Weak Universalism*, Boris Groys proposes just such a perspective, highlighting the effort of building a common experience, a kind of a “weak messianism” of the avant-garde.¹⁰ Wróblewski built this community of experience based on his experience of trauma. Unlike Adorno, not only did he not look away from suffering, but also did not hesitate to process it artistically after the war, when so many artists and intellectuals saw it as impossible to do so.¹¹

The “weak community” built by Wróblewski in his [*Figural Composition No. 513*] is undoubtedly an experience of art constructed upon affect. In his paintings, the suppressed feelings, repressed traumas and unprocessed mourning are invoked and invited to the surface, not to be confronted, but rather as participants of this emerging *ad hoc* community/collective. This approach is different to that of psychoanalysis—here, no one promises health, healing, or salvation; rather, we can all be who we are, with all our affects.

A weak community would not be possible without a weak universality. Explaining the difference between what is private and what is public, political philosophers, from Aristotle to present-day thinkers, enchant social reality, claiming that the private sphere is the triumph of particularism.¹² But, after contemplating a nursing mother in a dressing gown, you, I, and most viewers will see something that is commonplace—a mother feeding a baby, maternal tenderness, and the attempts endured by so many mothers—that is, to have, in addition to motherhood, a life of their own. The universality of this most special bond connecting the child and the mother that leaves behind, as Luce Irigaray rightly emphasizes, all patriarchal community, is the matriarchate that the male-centric culture must perpetually exclude and marginalize.¹³ In this sense—what can be seen, perhaps even by the artist himself, as a “private” image of his wife feeding their child—appears today, from the perspective of time and theoretical and moral transformations—to be the most universal depiction, showing something so universal that it evokes our own memories from a different time, place, and context.

¹⁰ Boris Groys, *Weak Universalism*, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/15/61294/the-weak-universalism/>, accessed June 26, 2019.

¹¹ Adorno's famous statement about the impossibility of practicing poetry after the Holocaust is generally read as a refusal or even a ban on creativity, which, in light of the theses contained in his *Aesthetic Theory* should be read as a demand to overcome this disability rather than an actual statement against poetry. Cf. Theodor Adorno, “Cultural Criticism and Society Today,” in Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997).

¹² See, for example, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed., Allen W. Wood, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT 1991).

¹³ See Luce Irigaray, “The Bodily Encounter with the Mother,” trans. David Macey, in Margaret Whiteford, *The Irigaray Reader*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), pp. 34–46.



Andrzej Wróblewski, *Waiting Room II (Chairing I)*, 1956, oil on canvas, 155 × 125 cm, National Museum in Krakow. Courtesy of the Andrzej Wróblewski Foundation, www.andrzejwroblewski.pl

After all, universality cannot be built out of context, as that which Hegel described as “bad abstraction.” Good abstraction must contain some elements of that which it generalizes, which becomes the context for collective experience. And this is exactly what Wróblewski managed to achieve—not only in his explorations of executions, war experiences, or collectivization, but also in those everyday, ordinary sketches, gouaches, and watercolors created at home. They remind us where, perhaps, the “real heart of the people”—absent, as the artist wrote to Andrzej Wajda, from the party-led celebrations and rallies – is beating.¹⁴

¹⁴ Cf. Andrzej Wróblewski, *Letter to Andrzej Wajda*, in Ziółkowska and Grzybała, *Avoiding Intermediary States*, p. 395.

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Abstract

Andrzej Wróblewski's painting has already achieved the status of a cult classic. His works are usually interpreted as a confrontation with war, the system, or totalitarianism—that is, as "political." Understanding politics in this way—separating its "public," "general," or institutional aspects from direct, lived experience—is at odds with dialectics, whose complex trajectory the young Warsaw-based painters attempted to follow shortly after the war. Zbigniew Dłubak quoting György Lukács, the manifestos of the first exhibitions of modern art, and Wróblewski's notes and texts all clearly indicate the necessity of moving beyond the classical (at least in liberal-conservative political thought) division between the public and the private in the analysis of avant-garde art of that period. From a feminist perspective, which I will develop here, I can only applaud the overcoming of this separation.

Karmiąca i czytająca. Afektywny realizm w malarstwie Andrzeja Wróblewskiego

Streszczenie

Malarstwo Andrzeja Wróblewskiego osiągnęło już status kultowy. Jego prace są zwykle interpretowane jako konfrontacja z wojną, systemem lub totalitaryzmem – czyli „polityczne”. Takie rozumienie polityki – oddzielanie jej aspektów „publicznych”, „ogólnych” czy instytucjo-

nalnych od bezpośrednio przeżywanego doświadczenia – kłóci się z dialektyką, której złożoną trajektorią młodzi warszawscy malarze próbowali podążać tuż po wojnie. Zbigniew Dłubak, cytując Györgya Lukácsa, manifesty pierwszych wystaw sztuki nowoczesnej oraz notatki i teksty Wróblewskiego, wyraźnie wskazał na konieczność wyjścia poza klasyczny (przynajmniej w liberalno-konserwatywnej myśli politycznej) podział na publiczne i prywatne w analizie ówczesnej sztuki awangardowej. Z perspektywy feministycznej, którą tutaj rozwijam, mogę tylko przyklasnąć przewycięzeniu tego podziału.

Key words: feminist theory, art theory, critical thinking, Polish art and architecture

Słowa kluczowe: teoria feministyczna, teoria sztuki, myślenie krytyczne, polska sztuka i architektura

Ewa Majewska – feminist philosopher and activist. Author and co-author of numerous books and nearly 70 academic articles and essays devoted to critical theory and cultural practice. She was a visiting fellow at the University of California, Berkeley (BBRG), a stipendiary fellow at the University of Örebro (Sweden), IWM (Vienna) and ICI Berlin. She is the author of three monographs (*Tramwaj zwany uznaniem*, Warszawa 2016; *Sztuka jako pozór?* Kraków 2013; *Feminizm jako filozofia społeczna*, Warszawa 2009); co-editor of four volumes on neoliberalism, politics, gender and education; she published articles and essays in: *Signs, e-flux, Public Seminar, Nowa Krytyka, Praktyka Teoretyczna, Przegląd Filozoficzny, Przegląd Kulturoznawczy, Kultura Współczesna, Le Monde Diplomatique* (PL) and multiple collected volumes. Her main focuses are: weak resistance, counterpublics, and critical affect studies.



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