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Unintentional Reprise: Museum as Archive

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Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.
I have written the present paper as a researcher involved in the subject of my own research. As the head of the Department of Education I have co-created the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź since 2008. The beginning of my work at the museum coincided with the opening of a new exhibition space called ms2 in Israel Poznański’s former tall weaving mill turned Manufaktura, a giant commercial complex.

It is a completely unique location among Polish museums. This location and the confidence of the museum board – Director Jarosław Suchan and Deputy Director Małgorzata Ludwisiak made it possible to start the entire educational activity once again. In any case, this is what I originally thought. As a newly born museologist, I was possessed by the spirit of museology. I was convinced that the whole museum is educational in principle. I was convinced that the viewer’s experience of art is not aimed at gathering knowledge about art, or at least not exclusively, but mainly at knowledge about their own subjectivity and their relationship with the world. I was convinced that the aim of a museum is ultimately the emancipation of their guests.

I was constructing educational activities inspired by the philosophical thought coming from American pragmatism and constructivism, with regard to namely John Dewey, Nelson Goodman, and George E. Hein. I rarely referred to the educational heritage of the Muzeum Sztuki Łódź while searching for new ways to work with the audience. It constituted just an archive for me.

The only idea that seemed still vital was the concept of “an open museum” by Ryszard Stanisławski, the director of the museum between 1966 and 1990. He explained the meaning of this slogan as follows:

Our main customers are industrial and working town residents and this imposes special duties on our institution and its Educational and Research Department. I think we should get those viewers. We should try to meet them by didactic and thematic exhibitions organized in other educational and cultural institutions above all, in the workplaces in Łódź and its region. We organize about 200 of these meetings a year, by an extensive campaign of lectures and consultations in cooperation with schools, which is very much appreciated by them and finally by lectures, concerts and evening talks with artists and poets at the museum1.

At that time, I interpreted the museum opening by Stanisławski rather simply. I thought he regained a certain degree of autonomy for the museum after the Stalinist period that regulated every aspect of cultural life by central policy. To me, the cultural thaw seemed a functional explication for the popularity of some of the museum’s educational initiatives of the 70s. What it made especially eligible was the phenomenon of Sunday at the Museum, a program launched in 1972 that attracted mass interest annually until 1981.

Sunday at the Museum was a series of mass meetings during the summer, organized annually between 1972 and 1981. It offered “free access to the museum collection, a fair, an orchestra of fireman
and a band from the industrial plants of Łódź, an exhibition of textiles from the Teofilów weaving mill... maybe, what it only lacked were hot sausages and beer” as Magdalena Hniedziewicz wrote in 1975\textsuperscript{2}. The journalist reported it only partly ironically and at the same time with admiration for its open structure, for this “risky and daring combination” of picnic mood and modern art. During the said picnic the Muzeum Sztuki Łódź opened 	extit{Emballage}, a Tadeusz Kantor exhibition, and the artist himself conducted a museum lesson for students of High School No. 29 in Łódź.

Apart from typical museum attractions Sunday at the Museum usually consisted of performances by brass and folk bands, jazz and big-beat groups and also chamber quartets. Actors recited poems in the open air. There were fashion shows and jewellery, raffles, auctions, art reproduction and goods fairs. A mass audience of labourers was attracted even if only once a year. The success of this program was understandable not only due to the limitations of the Stalinism period, but also the limitations of the Polish romantic tradition of celebrating art. It was a revolution in comparison to previous forms of museum activity, e.g., guided tours and through the combination of many diverse leisure activities it proposed a unique approach to museum policy. It can be interpreted currently as a form of deliberate audience development years before the new museology impact on Polish museums. And it was deliberate. Ryszard Stanisławski, the director of the Muzeum Sztuki Łódź at that time, was aware of this unique way of working with the audience. He presented it as early as in 1969 during the International Council of Museums (ICOM) meeting in Brussels. Another significant lecture of his on the same issue took place during a meeting of the UNESCO Committee in 1974.

To appreciate the participatory aspect of the Sunday at the Museum program, we even made a kind of re-enactment and in 2013 we did it twice in one summer during the holidays. In contrast to the picnics during the 70’s, we decided to combine events of a similar mood. The first time the keynote was humour and the second time it was a funny reactivation of the reality of the People’s Republic of Poland. However, I was primarily interested in a much more “open” project aiming at the emancipation of the audience.

\textit{ms}\textsuperscript{3} Re:action (\textit{ms}\textsuperscript{3} Re:akcja) was my initiative and probably the most radical educational experiment of a “new” museum. After the permanent collection of 20\textsuperscript{th} and 21\textsuperscript{st} century art had been moved in November 2008 into the revitalised weaving plant called \textit{ms}\textsuperscript{2} in the Manufatura complex, the said project confronted it with its new environment. We were aware of the new museology framework. We wanted to open the museum as an institution to its social environment. The whole project was based on relational aesthetics by creating a context which activated the viewer’s creativity rather than presenting them with proper works of art.

It was a two-month activity. The \textit{ms}\textsuperscript{2} temporary exhibition room constituted the museum’s DIY kit, providing the visitor with all the means of artistic expression and curatorial arrangement of artworks used by the Muzeum Sztuki Łódź, from charcoal to spray and from traditional paint to modern video means. \textit{ms}\textsuperscript{3} Re:action participants, as artists and curators, created a growing display by negotiating the value of their works and of their museum concepts in confrontation with others. A valid part of the project was a series of workshops intended directly for the museum’s neighbours, carried out in cooperation with local activists. As a result, the exhibition showed what kind of museum of what kind of art was expected by its public.

\textit{ms}\textsuperscript{3} Re:action was intentionally rooted in the heritage of the Muzeum Sztuki Łódź. As the museum had been created by friends forming the a.r. group for inhabitants of Łódź, the idea was to amplify that gesture and to hand the museum over to its public.

But the past of the Muzeum Sztuki occurred to be more complex. An important component of \textit{ms}\textsuperscript{3} Re:action was the exhibition entitled \textit{Inwentaryzacja (nie)możliwości (An Inventory of the (Im) possible). Its curator, Marta Sładowska showed archive photos of artworks that did not survive World War II. They were put on display in shop windows in Gdańska St., combining two buildings of the Muzeum Sztuki Łódź: the old one, \textit{ms}\textsuperscript{1} at 36, Więckowskiego St., and the new one, \textit{ms}\textsuperscript{2} at 19, Ogrodowa St. I interpreted this initiative as a phenomenon just like the customers of local shops did.

A few years later, after a little archive research into the activities of the educational department of the Muzeum Sztuki Łódź, I found out that we had unconsciously repeated gestures from the past. In 1954 and 1956, a special edition of the museum exhibitions was organized. According to tradition, paintings hanging in shop windows along Piotrkowska St. aroused huge interest. A decade later in 1964, the reproductions of Polish paintings were hung on rural fences in the countryside in the Orava region (Jabłonna Orawska) and Masuria (Stare Juchy); this initiative could be linked with repolonization of those regions. And for the third time a slightly similar event was organised in May 1970 under the slogan of “Art closer to the workers”. In eight plants solo exhibitions were displayed and workers employed there visited the museum on guided tours after a day of work\textsuperscript{3}.

This discovery gave impetus to more archival research. Could it be that in the Muzeum Sztuki’s
cells are hiding more amazing educational archives in the literal sense? Can a museum itself be
interpreted from today’s perspective as an archive? My intuition suggested me towards the very core of
the museum – the Neoplastic Room environment by Władysław Strzemiński.

On 13 June 1948, the Muzeum Sztuki Łódź, which was previously housed in a dozen or so rooms
of the former city hall, opened a new space in the 19th-century former palace of the industrialist Maurycy
Poznański, at 36 Więckowskiego St. The museum’s then director, Marian Minich, asked Władysław
Strzemiński, the painter and theorist of art, as well being the founder of the a.r. group, to help design the
interiors. The artist was assigned the task of designing the second-floor space that enclosed a sequence
of exhibition rooms, while also including a narrative designed by Minich in order to educate the viewer on
the history of European art.

The idea of the museum by Marian Minich was essentially educational. The most unique part
of the museum collection was the corpus of the International Modern Art Collection of the a.r. group. It
included works by the most progressive representatives of the European avant-garde such as Fernand
Leger, Max Ernst, Hans Arp and Kurt Schwitters who donated their works to the a.r. group. Although
so far exhibited at the Julian and Kazimierz Bartoszewicz Museum of History and Art (Muzeum Historii
i Sztuki imienia Juliana i Kazimierza Bartoszewiczów) located at 1 Liberty Square that had opened on 13
April 1930, it had remained unrecognized by a wider public.

Minich found supporting the collection of the a.r. group an essential issue. He estimated that
the Bartoszewicz’ set was collected randomly while the a.r. group collection was in his opinion, “a logical
synthesis, mainly illustrating the steps of the development of Cubism and here and there – in various
forms – works of futurism, purism, constructivism and neo-plasticism”; this fabric does not involve only
a few surrealist works.4 Years later, Ryszard Stanisławski shared the same opinion that Strzemiński had
not created an aggregation of his own taste, but a coherent collection in accord with a cohesive image of
European art from the late 20’s and 30’s, so that the collection was and still remains unique.5 Iwona Luba
suggested that the creation of the International Collection of Modern Art was for Strzemiński identical
with the establishment of the museum of modern art as a modified version of the Kazimir Malevich’s
(Kazimierz Malewicz’s) concept of the Museum of Artistic Culture.

Hence, Minich separated the archives of historical and literary antiques from the art collection.
The remaining aggregation was divided into three parts. The museum narration was begun by foreign
art belonging to the former centuries with early and mature works of the Renaissance succeeded by the
Italian, Dutch, and Flemish baroque. The second section was devoted to Polish art from the eighteenth
and nineteenth century, supplemented by related works of the twentieth century. Then followed the third
section, namely modern art, occupying almost half of the total exhibition space.

The modern art section was introduced by a small room with French impressionism and works by
Cézanne, Gauguin and van Gogh presented as facsimile reproductions and as purely educational support.
This was the original idea of Minich who was conscious that it broke the tradition of museum practitioners
in those days, prohibiting making reproductions for exhibition halls. Minich believed however, that you
could not “explain” the diverse and complex problems of modern art without reference to a corpus of
work that he could not afford by any other means. Therefore, he intentionally created a database for
“artists, researchers and school children”. It’s final “entry” was the Neoplastic Room by Strzemiński,
a materialisation of the theoretical postulates of neoplasticism and constructivism while also a functional
exhibition “device” created for the International Collection of Modern Art by the a.r. group.

The purely educational principle of the whole exhibition layout designed by Minich with the
stress, as I have mentioned, on contemporary art of that time was a novelty. This extensive quotation
proves that Minich was strictly aware of the pioneering nature of their work:

The systematic arrangement of this section was mostly to show the development of vision
and artistic thinking, to demonstrate in what forms the artist imposes his consciousness on
the surroundings, how they attempt to organize their relationship to nature. To show the
road leading from the style of vividly sensed specificity in linear terms to the discovery of the
world of colour blurring the tactile features of objects. It leads from a break in the continuity
of space in neo-impressionism to the cubist disavowal of the naturalistic recognition of
reality in representing it according to the laws of stereometry, then plane geometry. It leads
from the sensual base of the impressionists’ concept to the symbolic and imaginative colour
stain of expressionism proclaiming a “life of the soul” in its subconscious evolutions, which
seems to announce a confusion of literary unreality of the surrealist creations.

Minich applied the same method of “systematics of style” to the museum arrangement after
regaining custody of the collection of the Muzeum Sztuki, interrupted by World War II. Minich perceived
"the law of stylistic transformation" as the theoretical framework for both researching and exhibiting
art. Minich claimed already in the 30s that naïve contact with avant-garde art is impossible. He claimed
only the discovery of its formal principles and then an ability for emotional lecture of them allows the viewer the sum of intellectual and emotional experience.

Minich museological thought was fully compatible with the views of Władysław Strzemiński. The latter shared Minich’s view based “on the closest possible elimination of randomness”\(^\text{10}\). In 1936, Strzemiński clearly enumerated the differences between an exhibition and a museum. An exhibition “gives the characteristics of one moment among many within the artistic life” offering “a single aesthetic impression”, while a museum “displays the evolution and interdependence of individual art trends” existing “mainly for educational purposes” enabling the showing of “trends developed during every period” and avoiding “dazzling the viewer”. Strzemiński stressed the importance of selection, as well as of the deliberate location of exhibits\(^\text{11}\).

Moreover, Strzemiński’s vast essay entitled Teoria widzenia (A Theory of Vision) written at the end of the 40s and published posthumously in 1958, seems to be a dialogue with Minich’s idea. Strzemiński proves that sight is not a neutral and objective sense dependent only on the physiology of the eye. He shows on the basis of historical materialism that changing the ways in which man recognizes visual phenomena – that is “types of visual consciousness” – is closely connected with the change of living conditions. According to Strzemiński, for example, the Stone Age artists used only an outline to represent the subject of an approaching animal, while the creators of the Renaissance introduced the impression of a three-dimensional solid by association with the growing trade in goods. In his final argumentation Strzemiński constructed the avant-garde tradition that was working with new “types of visual consciousness”, aptly recognizing the most current social changes\(^\text{12}\). Both Strzemiński and Minich (the latter not as radically as the former) were rejecting the old art forms recognized by them as inadequate to the new times.

The Neoplastic Room, as Marcin Szelał concluded, was the essence and the real climax of Minich’s entire expositional arrangement and total realisation of his idea of a didactic museum. At the same time, it was didacticism present inmanently within the logical sequence of the interrelated forms of Strzemiński’s design and works of art displayed and not in comments or labels accompanying the objects\(^\text{13}\). This kind of conviction that the museum as a whole is an educational machinery, seems to be extremely modern and foreshadows the new museology paradigm.

The Neoplastic Room, as an educational project in which the static contemplation of a single work of art was replaced by a dynamic experience of the exhibits unified with the expositional space, was the essence of Minich’s “systems of style” approach. Strzemiński designed the Neoplastic Room in full accordance with Minich’s conviction that the essence of art exists in forms of perceptions and not in its iconographical content\(^\text{14}\).

The history of the Neoplastic Room argues that even the communists were perfectly aware of its potency. In 1949, on the orders of the Deputy Minister of Culture Włodzimierz Sokorski, socialist realism was officially decreed in Poland as the state artistic style. Under the doctrine, only art that was socialist in content and realistic in form was allowed. Consequently, the Neoplastic Room and the avant-garde, abstract – and thus “reactionary” and “formalistic” – works housed in it, became the subject of official scrutiny. On 19 January 1950, Sokorski personally signed Strzemiński’s dismissal from his teaching job at the State College of Fine Arts in Łódź (PWSSP) as a matter of urgency “for the sake of the service”. On 1 October the same year, the exhibition was closed down, the modernist paintings and sculptures were locked away in the storerooms and the Neoplastic Room itself was painted over. A few weeks later it became a stage for propagandistic art exhibitions of socialist realism. His apprentice Bolesław Utkin reconstructed Strzemiński’s design posthuminously in 1960.

It is worth mentioning that both Strzemiński and Minich referred to Marxism implicitly, being both influenced by historical materialism. However, they both interpreted it in a quite unorthodox manner. Although Minich appealed to the Marxist typicality as he searched for “the correct interpretation” of museum objects, at the same time, he understood them not as particular works, but rather as the historical-chronological sets of works by individual artists, determining the appropriate idea of the evolution of artistic problems\(^\text{15}\). Contrary to Marxism’s belief that art is a reflection of reality, Strzemiński stressed the opposite direction, namely the ability of art to have a performative impact on social reality. And this reveals the most interesting part of Strzemiński’s activity – the educational offensive.

Strzemiński was aware that the a.r. group collection with the core component of abstract painting decades ahead of audience tastes had very little chance to be recognized. Minich was aware of that too. In the archival guestbook for the years 1948-1950 among the many appreciations for the museum organizers, there are such remarks as the following:

„In contemporary art we can see a lack of artistry and in our opinion behind it there is the lack of talent for painting. A sane man can barely imagine what a picture shows” (an inscription from 7 May 1949 signed by “Schoolgirls of State High School No.8”)\(^\text{16}\). Under the date 27.11.1949 a couple of unknown viewers (signatures are illegible) wrote a more radical review: “Art is beautiful and has long been used to raise
the nation’s culture while Neoplastic art is degenerate art which decreases the culture”. On 15 April 1950 someone (signature illegible) appealed to the director: “Sir, if you want us to keep visiting the museum, then please take off the images of Picasso (original spelling) and other lunatics like him”. 28 May 1950 another guest (signature illegible) noted boldly: “[...] Works of Hans Arp, Strzemiński, Katarzyna Kobro are sick creations of people, if not sick then straying into an abstraction far from reality, rather unrelated to life and therefore unable to interest people. It is nonsense that will be removed from the walls sooner or later. And in art history, it will be defined as the transient fall”.

The same guestbook can testify that Minich’s and Strzemiński’s educational treatments were convincing. On 13 March 1949, visitors form ‘the preparatory course at the university in Łódź’ left a review as follows: “The history of the development of painting reflects the development of human thought and its ways of looking at the world”. I would like to emphasise the phrase “the development of human thought” as bearing witness to the deep reception of Minich’s exhibition narrative. There is another slightly longer quotation from an inscription on 15 March 1949 by M. (H.?) Stryjewski:

I have been interested in painting for several years and I am able to explain the Neoplastic Room for myself and the statues and images it contained. But I’m sure that the majority of people visiting the museum do not understand most of the phrases like heliographic, unistic and lyrical composition. Given this state of affairs, it is desirable that there should be more explanations throughout the entire second floor, so that everyone can understand and fall in love with art. Without understanding no one can enjoy it.

Below there is Minich’s reply: “These deficiencies will be removed in the near future”. Of course this required more than sticking on a label.

Minich and Strzemiński knew that the social condition of the Muzeum Sztuki Łódź required far more than a modern and refined narrative of exposition. They introduced a complex project of museum education. In fact, Minich began a series of lectures on art for workers once a week as early as in 1937 and continued them also in 1938. In his memoirs, he noted that at first the labourers did not appreciate a refined idiom of art history and forced him to stop by constantly moving about. The delegation of workers, however, demanded the lecturing be continued, but with language altered and adapted to the conditions of audience, which Minich did17. It seems to have been an extremely modern gesture in the 30’s and years before the new museology movement. The museum as an institution waived the right to possess the only and reliable truth. The museum as an institution agreed to translate the knowledge from the dialect of art history into other tongues owned by the museum public.

After World War II, Minich continued the educational mission of the museum. He created an educational department in November 1950. He was also delivering lectures on art history in the State Institute of Theatrical Art (PIST) until 1946/47 and then at the University of Łódź until 1951/52 when the whole cathedral of the history of art had been dismantled as a consequence of Social Realism imposed on Polish cultural life.

Strzemiński’s educational activity spanned a larger scale. The a.r. group was founded as a transdisciplinary team of theoreticians, visual artists and poets aiming at a greater impact for social and cultural change. It affected an educational project with a holistic approach, teaching recipients of contemporary art during that time through the fields of many cultural domains such as the philosophy of art, art history and poetry. The a.r. group released a series of publications on art and poetry labelled the a.r. group Library from the late 20s. Simultaneously by campaigning for the a.r. group ideas on the international stage, through papers printed in the most important European avant-garde magazines, Strzemiński himself taught art theory and history at all levels of institutional education, at the same time indirectly raising the level of both society’s self-awareness and creativity through the implementation of art. He believed in the transformative power of art that modernises not only the artistic taste of the public, but also modernises the public itself. And this is another extremely contemporary thought.

On 27 June 1929, Strzemiński wrote in a letter to Julian Przyboś, a poet and a member of the a.r. group, a remark on the necessity of establishing the museum of modern art:

I am certain that this could also have been said by Nelson Goodman, proving that making “works work is the museum’s major mission”19.

Today the art museum institution’s mission is, according to Jarosław Suchan, the present director of the Muzeum Sztuki Łódź, “the socialization of art”, namely to allow the spectator to use the art in order to become independent in their views and free themselves from the power of the spectacle. This involves not only the capitalist spectacle. The museum should promote independence from the spectacle, even if
the source of such is museum discourse itself, with its range of attractive contemporary art roles, such as being “engaged” or “critical”. The museum should provoke the audience to experience art in their own way. The aim of a museum as a pedagogical tool is simply the emancipation of the guest20.

It does not sound trivial even in 2015 when, fortunately, thanks to the new museology paradigm, it is hard to imagine the museum even without a professional educational department providing a wide range of educational activities and forms of audience development.

The paradox is that the new approach to the museum as an educational machinery has in fact been existent for decades in archives. The new museology has not invented a novelty. A conviction that the museum is essentially educational has existed in the Muzeum Sztuki since its very beginning in the 30’s. And what is actually left for us is the unintentional reprise of our founding fathers’ gestures. So, reading the museum as an archive, apparently a forgotten archive should be a mandatory exercise not only for me, but also for new museology.
ENDNOTES
6 Ibidem, 59. This text is sometimes attributed to Bolesław Hochlinger.
8 Ibidem, 82.
9 Ibidem, 153.
11 Ibidem, 59.

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