

Art as a Fingerprint

an interview with Zdzisław Beksiński, by Waldemar Siemiński

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In your opinion, what do you owe to the literature?

I haven't read much since a long time. Sometimes I browse „Dialog Magazine” and that's it. Books have ended for me, somehow. I had a period of intense reading probably between 24 and 30 years of age – a kind of a late spiritual maturing. I was evolving from an engineer to a painter, still working in construction at that time. Those days I used to read insane amounts of books. I spent every free minute on reading, even during a time stolen from work or family. Then I got deeper and deeper into my own creative work, which consequently led to a complete abandon of architecture, my learned profession. I still read a little between 1963–1970. It was a period of my amazement with esotericism, encouraged by Andrzej Urbanowicz. Study papers, discussions, essays, polemics. Finally, sutras and Sadhu quotes. It wasn't a pure literature. It would be difficult to find traces of those books in my paintings, the older ones, not later. Kafka, Dostoyevsky, Borges, Thomas Mann, Schulz, Gombrowicz, Witkacy, Rob-Grillet, Ionesco, Kubin, Orwell, Meyrink, etc. A crazy tangle of names. The great ones, average, visionaries and classics. How to find distorted echoes of those readings in my paintings? A book I have read, in 1968-1970 “The Sibyl” and „Pilgrim at Sea” by Pär Lagerkvist. I found it when I was sick, had nothing else at hand. It was a tough and resistant read. This book, however, in a strange way grows in my memory, to the point that today I would fear confrontation with the original. The harder it was for me to read it, the more beautiful it seems as a memory. In this case, probably I wouldn't have a problem in demonstrating the impact on what I paint. However, I do not exclude a certain paramnesia here.

You said you read "Dialogues" magazine. Is it because of no access to living theatre in Sanok?

I hate theatre really! Can't stand it! I hate it more the more it breaks the border between an actor and the audience. That's my deeply rooted resentment and fear, several-layered objections which are perhaps merely the rationalization of subconscious complexes or even traumatic injuries – I don't know. Of course, a predilection for performing arts in the form of reading is quite another matter. I know more contemporary play scripts than contemporary novels. A live theatre is mainly an actor. Contact with a live performer is for me something as embarrassing as a contact with someone who every now and then grabs my hand. I hate being grabbed by hand. It's like a contact with someone who rests on my shoulder, which I don't appreciate. Or like meeting an ex-school mate who tries to give me a hug. I hate being kissed by old school mates! I don't want to offend anyone by what I said. This is just my great disability, not to blame the theatre, actors, etc.

Are there any painters – modern or earlier, who are especially close to you. If so, why do you appreciate them?

I am hardly interested in painting! For years I have not seen an exhibition, including my own. One shall not pull out too far-reaching conclusions just because I paint myself! I got less than a vague idea about history of art: a soup in which something less amorphous emerges from time to time. Surely, I wouldn't be able to name and recognize more than three Leonardo paintings, and same number of Picasso. That leaves me rather indifferent. I see no more than two original images a year and a couple of reproductions. This statistic can also, of course, mean that once every five years I attend an exhibition. Also, once a few years I see an odd album with reproductions, at the dentist's waiting room. Provided there is an interesting one in the waiting room, of course. Sometimes I get attracted by something, but just by a pure coincidence. Anyway, I struggle to remember names. What for? Between ten thousand things that I have never seen and will never see, is certainly at least a hundred things much more worth remembering. In a nutshell, I'm not interested in other's painting, not searching for them. I come across them occasionally, in a natural way like you see a tree or a cow. If I look for something to use with passion, it would be mostly music. Besides, I'm bit interested in films...

So, do you go to the movies? I didn't know that.

No, I barely go to cinema for years now. My dream, still actual today, was to become a film director. Life somehow didn't let me do it. Hence my interest in the film, or rather a whole series of cinema concepts. Motion pictures are potential power, rather unused for many reasons. From my point of view of course. My ideal film would evolve into music, but not with pulsating colours or floating forms. A film whose dramaturgy depends on musical structure, not a literary story. Both in chronological and visual sphere. A screenplay in the film to me is something so uninteresting, almost annoying. At best, I would consider it as a necessary evil. Maybe with an example I can explain what I mean by film in the sense of music structure. For example, excerpts from "Roma" by Fellini. The scene with truck and camera crane and the director's car entering the town. It made me want to applause when I saw that. Or the night motorbike rally scene... Fellini at times becomes pure music, then plunges into literature. It seems he is afraid of a plea of having too little to say, so he has to communicate sometimes, unfortunately. Every TV art critic has so much to say, that it would be best to crown those who have nothing to say. Nevertheless, I depart from the subject. In my case it is more about music than a film. Usually I listen to music 10-14 hours a day. Of course, tapes, radio and LP's which I have hundreds. They perfectly replace not only need to see images but also reading books.

Allegedly, you like only pop music?

Where are these questions from? I listen to pop-music, but not exclusively! I completely don't know music theory. A few years of plinking on piano, my tutor didn't teach me anything. She used to pay attention to a properly relaxed joints rather than explaining me what I was doing. I remember it as a nightmare, which ended when I lost my left fingertips in

an explosion. So, I am kind of a Howling Dog Club man, and I perceive music through my guts, like Witkacy would have said. I dose it a lot, for hours. I'm familiar with music, although of course not systematically, except everything that I am constantly mistaken. So, for God's sake don't examine me here with names, styles, influences. Generally, I like music, especially when I can gut-receipt it. So, second half of 19'th century, and early 20'th. Contemporary classic music too, with some exemptions. I love the sound, instrumentation, while the works as a whole are not quite expressive for me, not quite charged enough with feeling. Of course, this is not a criticism on my part. I just don't get this type of perception I need and to what I used to. My studio's amplification helps me significantly in emotional perception of the music. Everything is not quite loud enough for me, so I am in a constant search for an ideal amplifier, which would blow the windows out, not distorting the sound at the same time. It turns out, however, that after fourteen hours of uninterrupted listening, only music allows me to paint standing up at the same time, not worrying about fatigue. Music is a stimulator stronger than coffee! Obviously, there are whole zones of music inaccessible to me. Almost everything from before the mid-19'th century is too distant and too difficult to receipt. Beethoven bores me, well maybe except some piano and violin sonatas which bore me to a lesser extent. But I completely can't stand his symphonies, despite I tried them several times and I know them almost by heart. Baroque is even worse. I constantly listen to everything available. I'm just trying to get used to it, in my own interest. Because music is never enough for someone who listens to it 10 hours a day. I would like to access some new fields available for exploration. I treat it almost like food. But the grass in some of them is inedible, transparent construction and lack of feeling, which surely is somewhere. But I don't have the key and forcibly getting used to it doesn't change anything. When I hear Scriabin, my whole body immediately connects to the sounds filling up my studio. Listenable music is no more, while me and the sound become unity. I feel like a snake hypnotized by fakir's flute, or like a dog reacting to harmonica. Beethoven's Diabelli variations leave me indifferent and critical. I know what's going on, follow composer's idea. But it is just boring to me, that's it. There's no way to associate with his music – just a reception, nothing else. Of course, as part of what I like and what I like to a lesser extent. And even among the things that I do not really like, eg. Bach. There are tracks I listen to more or less willingly, and music which I don't listen to at all. What I just said apparently contradicts. Basically, my favorite music is sad, tragic, pathetic, ecstatic, powerful, melancholy, neurasthenical, and even grotesly and persified. On the other hand, I hate cheerful music, gritty, light, humorous, folk-jumping and so on. I can't help myself with it. I do not have to explain my tastes, but people don't understand. In addition, I also really like sharp music, rhythmic, stereotypical, formerly jazz. For many years pop music and top heavy rock and hard rock bands. I can move from Bruckner to Budgie or Nazareth. It is much harder to switch from Bruckner to Beethoven, even though it is a more trodden route.

Do you consider yourself an avant-garde painter? What do you think of avant-garde art?

I am not interested in disputes between avant-garde and traditionalists. Moreover, I believe that these disputes do not affect me at all. I treat it like I was a gnostic who came across European philosophy of the past two centuries. Once again, I emphasize that art creation does not necessarily result in interest for aesthetic issues. A man who fell into the sea must

swim, but it does not mean that he would suddenly raise an interest in world swimming styles, techniques and history. Swimming in order not to get drowned. One will do, eventually. So, it's just a reflex, self-preserved instinct or other unknown cause. I paint, and I will do it for two reasons. The first is the cause, the second is the goal. A cause is something that is not to analyze, mysterious and dies in the darkness of early childhood. I can only guess why I had a passion for painting since early childhood. I can guess what caused that. Since earliest childhood I was eager to draw anything that comes to my mind. Years of habit and affirmation in the stereotype have created a non-replaceable desire to paint. The goal of creating is a little hopeless and cynical. Hopeless, because I would like to fight death in a unique way, to survive in a form of images. Cynical because I realize that a work of art is the only "sacred cow" of European culture. It has a better chance for respect, protection and survival. More than anything else.

What would you consider as kitsch in art? What is your attitude to kitsch.

Calling something as kitsch is foreign to me. From my point of view, kitsch does not exist. For me, the fruits of creativity are more perfect, the more they define the unit that created them. I would compare it to studying fingerprints. Once the aesthetics are abandoned, there are no more better or worse fingerprints. Only the identity survives. This does not mean that I would like to spend an annual vacation on a lonely island with anyone who leaves fingerprints. Sometimes a five-minute meeting on a tram might be too exhausting. Similar valuation is only sociable. Same is with "kitsch" for aesthetes. What's bad for some, isn't for others. What is the term that is just an inversion? I realize that the question you have raised has its own subtext: one can guess that judging my point of view, my images may be considered as conscious use of kitsch, that I am enthusiast of so-called aesthetics of kitsch. I swear none of these ...

So, now we are confronted with graphomania and pictomania, a fingerprint you also postulate.

Yes, this is the fingerprint. So what? Of course, it is difficult for pure graphomania, because it does not appear in a totally selfless state. We can therefore only talk about the tendency. But if in any work of the world is something valuable for me, then this would be graphomania above all. I can specify what does the term mean to me. An irrelevant necessity, even the compulsion of expressing one's own, or considered one's own spiritual content. Regardless of the surroundings, whether it affirms or denies them, whether they are fashionable or unfashionable, whether medals are hung on chests or put in prison. I see a spiritual brother in every grapheme, although not always an intellectual brother. Besides, I already mentioned it. Perhaps you still understand me inaccurately, so I will use negation. There is nothing more foreign to me than an artist using his art for purposes that are not his own goals, but on request from certain patrons. Regardless if they are private or the state. Such attitude arouses my revulsion and is inconceivable, like breathing using gills under water. For me, artists of this type are beings from another dimension. Nothing connects me with them except for some technological similarities in the very mechanism of creativity.

What do you think about the role of artistic criticism?

I don't ask myself these questions as I am not a critic. If you believe that God speaks through every human being, I trust that. I mean people, including critics, from whom you can hear your own thoughts that you have not imagined. With such an approach, a critic would be the consciousness of the creator.

As an observer, what art societies seem to you the most interesting?

It may sound comic, if we call something painting current. I want to agree on all your divisions, so maybe from your point of view I am speaking not on the subject. I saw a TV discussion of frightened novel writers about the fight against comics. One should probably talk about how to use it for their goals! This is the language suitable for the most common perception. And the eggheads want to fight it already but don't know if to fight it from the position of the Avant-Garde or from the position of the Holy Trinity Fortress, or even the "viribus unitis"! No doubt comic hasn't had yet their Dostoyevsky style yet, but that does not mean we're unable to do a comic on that. It also doesn't mean that his "Possessed" is what I had in mind. Simply, a comic is a tool of many possibilities. Today the obstacle is the illustrator's working time, making it difficult to improvise, to imagine creatively. But if the process of drawing was partially automated or computerized, as is already with animated movies, then the drawing speed might be similar to book writing process.

Why do you still live in a small, distant town, not planning moving to a bigger urban center?

You're asking two questions as one. And the more important one it is hidden, so I will answer it first. What does "distant" mean? Distant from the centre of the world. Haven't I told you that I discovered that the centre of the earth is in my room. I had even hammered a nail into the floor? Warsaw is away from this nail, not Sanok. Coming back to the hidden question. If I dared to accuse Polish culture of something, it would be a sense of distance from something where we should see and praise or recognize our own. Such an eternal, strongly rooted complex of a good student or obedient son, whom parents don't want to admit. No one will ever be himself by constantly worrying if those from the Centre of the World notice him or not. The center of the world is where I sit. And it is not parochialism, isolationism, xenophobia, but a sense of own unity and authenticity. Gombrowicz wrote something similar ...

Gombrowicz said that a true writer reveals his ridiculousness and shame. Does it matter in painting?

Perceiving art as a fingerprint, exposing oneself is a step resulted from adopted assumptions. But it is a heroic attitude with a little chance for a partial implementation. In addition, it requires a specific split of personality. A division into "self - observer" and "self - observed". A kind of neurosis. I am not sure if it occurs in all people. I risk being misunderstood talking about it. Of course, extravaganza is usually not about exposing yourself, but about wearing an appropriate self-exposer mask... As someone who pays attention to own paintings, it would not be hard to notice the enclave of astonished ridicule and shame. Maybe one of

many. I have a deeply rooted taste for theatricality, almost infantile pathos. If I had to visually associate the word "art", I immediately see a 19th century engraving showing a young man in a colourful coat, theatrically standing on the rock. It is either Byron or Pushkin. Also something that reminds Napoleon on Elba. Certainly, I have never seen such an engraving, but it is a compilation of several memorized images supplemented by the imagination. On the horizon you can see raging sea waves and a sailing ship. The sky is covered with whirled clouds cut by a lightning. Black birds in the background, and a hangman could dangle on the branch of a dead tree. As you see, I am deprived of all so-called brakes of a "good taste". Of course, as me "observed", because as "observer" I have too many brakes! All my upbringing contributed to their formation, as 19th century saw the extreme fall of art in my opinion. However, there has been a deep conviction in me for years, perhaps on the basis that art starts only where when seven suns ignite at the zenith and black clouds cover the rest of the sky, lightning strikes, the curtain drifts in the temple, bloody rain falls. Millions of snakes everywhere and dead will rise from the graves. In addition, a voice from heaven or ground and others are welcome. I tried to add for example a phone or tennis racket or some more obvious and precise designation of the present - it did not work. So I thought archetypes are the ones. Cloud, sun, lightning and the ocean would be okay to swallow, but what to do with the coffin, the sailing ship, the cloak, the halter? They are not archetypes, but simply a relay from a garbage dump in all those the years of education. Me "the observer" can perfectly spoil "myself - observed" the appetite for own vision. Own in quotes and even double... First, even an archetype is not something of its own, whereas a relay is taken over from the second or third hand ... It's a shame talking about it. But how to explain not only the desire, but need with which "me - the observer" constantly work in the garbage dump, with snakes, dead bodies, poisonous weeds and dead witches, not a place of blooming flowers and children playing? The question is rhetorical because "I - the observer" is ready to give you a rational explanation, etc. This duality, ambivalence, attraction, as well as shame and lack of certainty as to whether others react as strongly as I do to all of this witches' macabre soup, have caused me a long-lasting distance to everything that is connected with the phenomenon of my own expression outside. On one hand, I dream about speaking honestly without concealments, so in the Old Russian style, tearing the shirt on my chest and bowing to the ground. On the other hand, as it sometimes happens in my dreams, I would prefer to stand aside and animate the dummy, which would do it for me, in an "artificial" way. I could always get away: it's not me, it's the doll after all, I use it for completely different goals than you think - do not identify with me, please. It seems to be striking in absolutely every picture. And here's buried Gombrowicz's child...

You are famous for technical perfection in painting. Do you feel you still improve your skills?

Am I known for that? Just yesterday, a radio asked me same question. I guess so... But this is a great matter for reflections on technical blindness in so-called art enthusiasts. After all, I'm worse than a whole bunch of secondary painters of the late 19th century. I have enormous technical struggles in painting - literally tough. I would really like to agree with everyone who says that I just paint badly, if they would just tell me what good is. Very often when others consider something a good painting, it is bad to me, sometimes even worse than my own. Once cannot separate achievements or lack of them from the goal I set myself and for

which I have no intention of letting anyone question. So, when it comes to the goal I have set, I strive to make the picture a colourful photograph of a vision. Development of the workshop in my case would only get close to an idea of photographing a dream in colour.

What do you understand by "vision." Is it simply a conscious idea or a subconscious impulse?

For me, a vision occurring before a painting or drawing, also called an idea, is like an image of something that exists in a kind of reality. Vaguely, it appears suddenly in mind as an entity. All those years of experiencing them, vision to me is like a finished drawing or an oil painting. Sometimes I even know must be painted smoothly or thickly. So, at first glance, a vision is something already evolved and almost utilitarian. Just get down to paint it. Unfortunately, you can clearly see only few elements, sometimes visually incomplete as "movement full of fear" or "gesture full of pride." You can usually see more, but often there is nothing or something under-defined, which could not be accurately recorded in the memory. A vision is usually extremely short, at most a second. So, there is a problem with "photographing" it. Should you leave empty spaces in black as in Caravaggio or fill with colour fog as in Turner's paintings. Or simply add invented details that would not destroy the atmosphere and expression of the original vision? A place created for these skulls, coffins, snakes and witches, which are waiting only for the horror vacui to penetrate into every spare part of the picture. Additionally, I am ashamed of them. Before I let them penetrate, I need to somehow take them in quotes, overemphasize, and lie. There's no way of thinking about it, and my paintings, those Turner-like ones, or those more pedantic and overloaded, are a constant disgust of trying, the consequence of which is always a failure. By the way, it's not correct to search in my art symbolic content in the historical and aesthetic meaning of symbolism. My vision won't change even if the queen is replaced by a cow, and the forest by a flock of birds. The identity doesn't exist within the meanings of the subject, but in the mood or rather an expression that I would like to convey. If it still contains the message, that's another matter.