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The Radzionków Gallery. The periphery as a text of culture

In a way, the area of research encompassed by my artistic work constitutes its essence. Within it, through various kinds of artistic practices, I try to understand the phenomenon I refer to as *a small town*.

I have divided the issues discussed in the text and presented in the visual form in three areas, which intertwine both in the theoretical and the artistic part. The first issue concerns the attempt to create a concept sufficiently extensive to encompass the study area and to delineate the components that distinguish it from the remaining space. To put it briefly, it is a description of a phenomenon I focus on and the *place* that defines it. The second refers to the methodologies and ways of description, used for the interpretation of the discussed subject. The third issue concerns the problems arising from the relationship between the active artist and the researcher, who, at the same time, belongs to the context he describes.

The identity of the phenomenon I am investigating is complex. In its ambiguity it resembles the word 'art'. For the sake of simplicity, I decided to use the phrase *small town*, which I have been using for some time in my artistic practice. For the purposes of this paper, the term is italicised. The term has been used not only to define a place delimited by a measurable, physical space, understood as a set of mathematical values, length, width or administrative regulations of urban areas. Above all, I interpreted the space that can be described as cultural, social and content one.

In the chapter entitled *The Surroundings of a Small Town*, in order to clarify the notion of *place* I am interested in and to distinguish it from the remaining space, I refer to the linguistic ideas associated with the words *town/city*. In English, the word *city* derives directly from the Latin *civis*, meaning inhabitant, and *civitas*, denoting not only a city but a society in general. Usually, the word *city* is used to refer to larger centres, for example Warsaw, to which the expression *City of Warsaw* is applied. If I were to describe Radzionków to a foreigner, calling it the *City of Radzionków* would seem a bit excessive, I would rather choose the other word – *town*. In English, it fills a gap that exists in Polish, where there is no word that immediately indicates smaller

locations. A definition found on the English-language version of Wikipedia explains this difference simply and logically: "Towns are generally larger than villages but smaller than cities"¹. Town does not have its counterpart in Polish, so we are forced to use the diminutive form of *miasto* [city]: *miasteczko*, which inevitably evokes associations with mythical places depicted in postcards or children colouring books.

Another kind of distinctive features constituting the space I am interested in is described in the subsection titled *Common Things*. Referring to Martin Heidegger and his notion of *Zuhandene*, i.e. "the world of things at hand (translation of the term proposed by Hanna Buczyńska-Garewicz),² I try to define our everyday environment shaped by the things we use every day. The philosopher defines such objects relatively precisely, pointing to tools rather than artistic creations, architecture or nature. Such objects become *things at hand* only when they are deemed useful by man, not least because of their certain potential for availability. This availability, or simply usefulness, can be spoken about only if things have their own place, which – in turn – is linked to the space they define. Things precede the place. In a methodological sense, the notion of a *world of things at hand* can prove useful if we decide to use it in an unorthodox way and extend it to include those elements of the landscape that are so commonplace for those living in a particular place that they become certain tools by virtue of their ability to delimit space. Therefore, what seems more important than pointing to a particular thing is the very act of pointing, i.e. the process of getting to know a given place through reading the its defining elements.

One of the phenomena I refer to while providing an example of things that constitute space is non-professional art. The importance of such works lies not only in their aesthetic value, but in the fact of them being associated with deepened self-knowledge and a particular approach to the world around us.

Apart from their obvious functions, the created objects that we can see in home gardens or in a more official context in urban spaces, such as hand-made sculptures, ornaments or fences, represent a strong symbolism referring to the history, status and beliefs of their creators and owners.

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Town>, [accessed: 19.09.2021].

² Hanna Buczyńska-Garewicz, *Miejsca, strony, okolice. Przyczynek do fenomenologii przestrzeni*, Universitas, Kraków 2006, p. 95.

The term *small town* definitely goes beyond the text and favours visual themes and action in itself. In order to understand it more fully, a holistic approach should be taken. It involves referring to other spaces, problems, cultural texts and combining different practices, which include observing, interpreting and using a specific form of discourse, that can be represented by *walking*³. While discussing various traditions of research and interpretation of the town, Rafał Koschany mentions semiotic and hermeneutic approaches: “The town is a kind of book that we want to read, although it must be remembered that the reading mode will understandably be different here, and in each of these modes the city itself (sometimes even the same city) will simply be a different book.”⁴ The fluid boundaries of a *small town* elude quantitative and qualitative tests, going beyond the rigid framework of well-known patterns. It is partly for this reason that in the subsection titled *A Hasty Passage through a Diverse Environment*, I try to provide an account of what I consider to be an adequate methodology and description of the method I have used in interpreting the presented subject. I refer particularly to the *Theory of Dérive* [drift] proposed by Guy Ernest Debord. Drifting implies adopting a particular mode of operation, which Debord describes as follows: “The drifting person or persons for some time give up their usual reasons for moving and acting, their daily acquaintances, activities and pastimes in order to surrender freely to the attraction of places and to welcome the encounters connected with the places.”⁵ In the context of this work, the most important result of drifting is the possibility to look at the real shape of the town, quite different from the one resulting from administrative divisions. In my research I have been trying to precisely determine the analysed area. Due to the complexity of the subject, the method that proved most effective was to set a reference point, which allowed carrying out a simplified comparative analysis. The role of the reference point was played by the town of Radzionków.

³ Paweł Mościcki, *My też mamy już przeszłość. Guy Debord i historia jako pole bitwy*, Fundacja Bęc Zmiana, Warszawa 2015, p. 100.

⁴ Rafał Koschany, *Zamieszkiwanie jako interpretacja. Uwagi na temat hermeneutyki miasta*, „Studia Kulturoznawcze” ROK, no. 1 (5), p. 65.

⁵ G.E. Debord, op.cit., p. 122.

The visual notes I made and called *Greetings from a Small Town* are not only a stimulus for developing them in textual form, but become a description in themselves. Recalling the words of William John Thomas Mitchell: "[...] images want the rights of language, not transformation into language. They do not want to be reduced either to a "history of images" or to a "history of art", but want to be seen as complex entities occupying their own diverse positions and identities."⁶

While working on the visual material, I was guided not only by intuition but also by a few predetermined principles, the most important of which was the choice of an *existential object* that seemed representative of the place. As part of my work, I decided to resign from trying to capture the Bresson's decisive moment and focused on things, artefacts and buildings. I photographed such objects which, in my opinion, create a visual story about a place and constitute its *small-town* character. Although this method involves complete subjectivity, it is the only way I can convey experiences that best reveal the nature of the subject I focus on. A *small town* is always associated with subjective impressions.

In the chapters *The Colonizer-Observer* and *Something Really Beautiful*, I address the dangers associated with objectifying the *Other*, as well as with the colonising look, stereotyping, pre-judgement, paternalism and valuation typical, for example, of the Frazer's evolutionary model. Within the visual representation of *otherness*, it is easy to succumb to exoticisation, a practice originating in superficial analysis of a particular subject, which ultimately leads to false conclusions. The choice of the subject was determined by the empirical knowledge I gained during both the field research and the artistic practice directly related to it. My situation is all the more complicated that I situate myself in relation to the spaces described both as a researcher, who stands, as it were, in front of the *Other* and his culture and a participant in the everyday life of the local community, which is at the same time my everyday life as an inhabitant of a *small town*. This creates a certain dissonance and leads to the creation of an unusual space stretching between the academic world and the field of professional creativity and everyday activities.

⁶ William John Thomas Mitchell, *Czego chcą obrazy? Pragnienia przedstawień, życie i miłości obrazów*, translated by Łukasz Zaremba, Narodowe Centrum Kultury, Warszawa 2015, [ebook, ePub format], p. 92.

The chapter *Peripheral Vision* and several other sections of my work refer to the identity and individuality of the actions I have taken. In his *Uwagi na temat hermeneutyki miasta/Notes on the Hermeneutics of the City*, Rafał Koschany notes that "the interpreting subject always belongs in some way, if only because of its spatial relation, to the object of its interpretation".⁷ Radzionków is a place very important to me, but I am aware that this is due to my experiences of living there. It has its local character, just as any other *small town* I have been to during my research. Although the nature of all these places is different, I believe that it is possible to identify their *small-town* common denominator that cannot be described by text alone. The artistic objects that accompany this essay complement each other and broaden the definition, but the many years of research I conducted before I began preparing my doctoral dissertation reinforced my conviction that neither text nor image can exhaust the subject. The complementing factor that enables one to understand the *small-town* character is the experience of the place.

I ended my theoretical work with a symbolic *Farewell to a Small Town*. I moved out of Radzionków on 31 March 2021. Although I live only six kilometres from my family home, the experience of living in a much larger city has allowed me to verify my previous ideas. As a kind of artistic action, I decided deliberately not to change my registered address, which was to be indicated on my identity card for as long as possible. It turned out, however, that this was no longer relevant, as the registration address box was removed from the new type of identity card, transferring it into a more speculative area, outside the administrative framework. Its boundaries are fluid, and their shape is determined not by lines drawn on a map, but by our experience of everyday life. Wherever we might be, in some sense we are all residents of a *small town*.

⁷ R. Koschany, op.cit., p. 65.