

## ***Silence is golden – dematerialization of the object in the avant-garde art.***

### **ABSTRACT**

#### **A. Introduction**

One of the basic principles of the functioning of society is the exchange of goods and services. Gold was the material equivalent of all possible objects of exchange. A durable material, seducing with colour, which at some point, in order to facilitate the exchange, was replaced by a paper proof of value – money. To a certain point, individual countries stored gold in their vaults as a material equivalent of the money in circulation. In the end however, even this form of securing the value of cash in circulation has been eliminated. Currently, there is no material security of the money in circulation. The financial economy has grown to an enormous size, which is so big that any protection of wealth in a material form would not be possible. The flow of capital within the financial system is based on a kind of agreement which is protected by the authority of the state and the financial institutions, as well as by the unexpectedly high level of optimism of its users, unsupported by anything that would fit into rational categories.

In the '60s, in the United States of America – the leading country in the development of capitalism, where consumerism was born – the conceptual discourse in art is brought to light. It develops in a difficult time for the American society, as these are the times when African Americans begin to intensively fight for their rights – just like other ousted and humiliated communities. The golden fifties, full of consumer glamour and the feeling of happiness of the American white community, transform into the time of the revolution of the Afro-American community which until now lived in the shadow. The '60s were also marked by the rebellion of the American youth against the imperial policy of the United States. In the avant-garde art of that time, arises an idea that challenges the capitalist status quo, idea that is inspired by the energy and revolutionary force of the emancipating communities. This idea dematerialises the object of art, calls for immateriality, lack of objects of exchange – but not for the lack of exchange itself. Now, art exists as a word, concept; parable, legend, a text written on a piece of paper, radio play. These are no longer expensive paintings or sculptures adorning the walls of the wealthy part of the society, but catchwords, instructions, absurd sentences written on the walls or telegrams transmitted by radio sets. Art becomes invaluable and immaterial.

The artistic proposals of the neo-avant-garde of the '60s and '70s, supporting the desire of emancipation of art from commoditization, consumption and exclusivity, are also proposals to go beyond the institutional, autonomous sphere of a gallery or museum, into an open space, a landscape, scenery. The works of some artists (e.g. Robert Smithson, Gordon Matta Clark) were based on making modifications of gigantic structures: houses or geological structures, in order to create an artistic sign on an enormous scale, which

also would be impossible to sell. Giant interventions in rock structures by Smithson or Michael Heizer are human interventions in the nature, which effect of artistic strategies is the expansion of the field of art.

The artists were coming out of the galleries – a privileged place – into the public space or scenery. They were creating works which were ephemeral and highly susceptible to destruction; they passed concepts orally or on paper; and believed that art exists outside the capital. They believed that the equivalent of exchange does not have to mean gold, but can be an idea, idea of art, present without an object. Lucy Lippard, author of the book “Six Years: The Dematerialization of an Art Object”, who participated in the formation of conceptualism in the ‘60s, also indicates how the neo-avant-garde ideals have been fairly quickly absorbed by the system, and how they eventually surrendered to the power and authority of the institution and the capital. Slowly, the art market took over the pages of written instructions, catchwords of conceptual artists, photographic and film documentations of their activities, just to capitalize and re-position the art within the capital and de facto the object.

Even so, the influence of the ‘60s neo-avant-garde on art is tremendous. In the chapter entitled “Walk on the Spiral Jetty” [*Polish: “Spacer po Spiralnej Grobli”*], based on the realizations and ideas of Robert Smithson, I try to demonstrate how moving beyond the institution of art and working on the reality changed the discourse of modernistic art, enclosed within an autonomous work of art, into a postmodernist discourse, based on language and reality as a sign. Language, which is a universal and free medium with which the community communicates and makes mutual exchange, becomes a key means for the distribution of works of art. Thus, the first magazines and art-books, addressed to the general public and communicating non-institutional artistic content, appear in the ‘60s. In the chapter “Hologram”, I compare this aspect of free flow of information with economic phenomena, the abandonment of the gold standard and the birth of a diversified consumption. I try to present how the diversity of the sign and meaning, which was a result of standing against the hegemony of power, based on a homogeneous system of values and “one truth”, becomes absorbed by the capitalist system.

In the chapter “Equation” [*Polish: “Wzór”*] I indicate the way in which the alternative form of social organization, which originated in opposition to the existing form of political power, turns into a new form of control. Cybernetic concepts of the ‘60s, based on the egalitarian idea, self-stabilizing and controlled by computers network in which individuals make up a system of diverse relation and exchange, compose our contemporary reality.

A key aspect of my reflection in both theoretical and practical work is the clash of ideas, which have an utopian character (e.g. the new concept of the organization of reality) with materiality. This tension expresses the specificity of our times based on information and the text as a code which constructs programs, the Internet network or the movement of capital which is an entry in the computerized accounting records. At the end of the chapter “Equation” I describe the modern form of capital organization

within the Internet network, where individual users are involved in its creation, and big companies, acting as a new form of authority, become the owners of the means of production. I also point out new, alternative forms of organization of the exchange and production network. What is more, the presence of art on the Internet is a fulfilment of the dream of a non-institutional, free from the market, distribution of information and images.

The organization of information in the theoretical work has a more dispersed than linear form. One issue does not lead to the consideration of the next one, discussed in the following chapter. The chapters and discussed issues correspond to particular works in the exhibition. The work in its entirety is not an attempt to prove a particular thesis, but rather an attempt to outline the relation of culture – art, philosophy, etc. – understood as an expression of idealistic human needs and its concept of reality – to the economic organization of life. The text describes the areas and phenomena which are the source and inspiration for my artistic reflections over the past few years.

The title of the whole work<sup>1</sup>, which is a part of a proverb, means roughly that sometimes it is better to remain silent, and that silence and the ability to keep a secret is a virtue. A key issue in expressing thoughts about a particular form of authority, in a rebellion or resolution, is speech – articulating one's own demands. Modern man, living in a capitalist world, can express himself freely. But does the opportunity to speak bring some results and by this do we live in a more free world?

Today's wealth does not have to be a result of physical extraction of a valuable ore or its skilful appropriation. The capital of the biggest modern corporations, such as Google, is generated by a network organization of information. Thus, silence was golden, and now the conversation, the flow of information, is a new form of generating capital, stored in the virtual bank register.

The following text is primarily a detailed analysis of the exhibition entitled: "Silence is golden" [*Polish: "Milczenie jest złotem"*]. It describes both what is visible and legible in the exhibition and what requires a comment, because it is embedded in a network of contextual relation with different areas of culture: contemporary art (especially conceptualism of the '60s and '70s), sociology and the history of society (different models of social relations), literature and film (such catchwords as "black ice" [*"czarny lód"*] and "dim mak" [*"wibrująca pięść"*], which were used in the exhibition as a metaphor, were taken from the science fiction literature) and philosophy (in particular its post-structuralist form which treated culture as a text).

Individual works gathered in this exhibition are a pretext to speak about separate and sometimes very different issues from the field of culture and history of the second half of the XX<sup>th</sup> century. The starting point is the special moment in the history of the previous century, when various social movements have aimed for the emancipation and liberation from the yoke of the existing political power.

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1 "speech is silver and silence is golden"

## B. America

I would like to emphasize why the examples which I refer to in this text and the phenomena which I describe relate mainly to the United States. The post-war situation of the country was special. The American economy has improved dramatically as a result of the production of weapons for the conflict-stricken countries and by the loan aid for the Western Europe. The USA was also the place where multitude intellectuals escaped. This resulted in gaining by the USA the position of a leader and as a CENTRE. Consumerism defines the XX<sup>th</sup> century, and the USA is a country of its birth and the place where it reached an extreme level. Phenomena from the area of the country's culture and economy are the matrix of processes and phenomena which then affect all societies in the peripheral countries, which in the era of globalization become infected with the American way of life. Through the enormous film industry, certain patterns and styles are distributed to the periphery, thus I decided to interpret and describe the phenomena in art, economy and ideological struggle of this country. The important thing is that this Centre itself has raised all antagonistic movements towards its own system: the entire counterculture of the '60s, including neo-avant-garde in art, emancipation movements of the Afro-Americans, Indians and people of other sexual orientation, hippie and pacifist movements. It is also the country in which the visual world and a widely available Internet network emerge – a new form of social life organization, which from the industrial and mass production enters into the post-industrial world, focused on a variety of products and the flow of information in a hyper scale.

In my opinion, it were the changes in economy that affected the changes in the visual culture. The introduction of mass production of goods in the XIX<sup>th</sup> century had an impact on such trends as Soviet Constructivism, de Stijl and Bauhaus, and consequently on minimalism and pop-art. Fear of the capitalist corporations of satisfying consumer needs and the decline in demand for their products (which the consumer already has) was averted by creating mechanisms of consumption based on the everlasting dissatisfaction stimulated by further phantasms transmitted through advertising. The implementation of techniques from the field of Freud's psychoanalysis by his nephew Edward Bernays, the founder of Public Relations, had a crucial impact on the next phase of consumerism<sup>2</sup>. Bernays believed that by using the strategy based on the discovery of Freud's unconscious drives, one can control the masses and sell them new products infinitely. Against such model of life, inter alia, rebelled the young people who questioned the consumerist lifestyle. On this basis the anti-institutional reversal in art was born in the '60s.

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<sup>2</sup> An exemplary strategy, based on the concept of unconsciousness, takes advantage of sexual desire. Bernays showed that when selling for example a car, one does not have to advertise its technical assets, but should present it as a materialization of a sexual desire. To have a bigger view of the topic, I would like to recommend "The Century of the Self" by Adam Curtis, which analyzes the process of implementation of psychoanalytic strategies into the American society.

### C. "Silence is golden"

The exhibition "Silence is golden" consists of two separate parts. The first one, having an autonomous title: "Dim Mak", is basically an installation which consists of 5 cuboids made of black-painted plywood and of black ice. Black-painted wires are placed in them. These wires also protrude from the walls at different locations of the exhibition space. The installation is documented by means of photography and film. These forms of presentation, enriched with a collage entitled "Equation" are presented during the thesis defence.

The second part of the exhibition consists of works entitled: "Hologram" and "Walk on the Spiral Jetty", which are different when it comes to the formal sense, but which discuss issues that are crucial for the exhibition.

"Hologram" is a meter-per-meter glass leaning against the wall, on which a video is projected. "Walk on the Spiral Jetty" is an album made in an impermanent material with a field recording from the "Spiral Jetty" by Robert Smithson.

The first part of the exhibition, „Dim Mak“, is formally a text "per se". Individual black cuboids represent particular characters (a dash, an equals sign, a vertical line and a slash) in a three-dimensional space. The wire elements protruding from them, in a proper perspective, arrange into letters: T, R, E, A, P, which together form the word TREAP. Individual elements of the installation are therefore objects that represent text characters, in a way transmitting text elements into the material world and into the third dimension. On the one hand, we have large cuboids which depending on their position in the space of the room (and the prevailing forces of gravity) denote a different character: the lying cuboid – a dash; the one standing like a pedestal, and ultimately levitating – a vertical line; the cuboid leaning against the wall – a slash; and the one hanging horizontally on the wall – an equals sign. On the other hand, black wires, which in an appropriate relation to each other form letters, are attached to the rectangular elements. In the first case (the cuboids), the materialized text characters refer to strictly abstract meanings in the text – stopping the text (dash), interrupting the text (vertical line and slash). In the second case, we are dealing with letters which in a mutual relation can create a word of a certain meaning which in turn evokes a particular status quo.

On the floor, there is a display case standing by the wall, in which we can see a collage created with black letters and characters glued to a white paper, with some of them lying at the bottom of the case, thus creating the impression that they have detached from the paper. As a whole, these characters form an equation for the force of gravity. The choice between the characters that have been glued to the sheet and those which "fell" on the bottom of the display case, was made by rolling a dice.

Within a short time, the installation is deformed. Due to melting of the ice that was holding one of the cuboids, it leans towards the wall. Another cuboid seems to be levitating above the ground because the melting ice removes its base. The top line of the equals sign is made of black ice and after some time it

disappears, leaving only the bottom line, which more accurately denotes a minus than an equals sign. The installation is put in a minimal motion. Parts of letters are fully legible only in the second phase. The gravitational force and heat make small shifts within the materialized text.

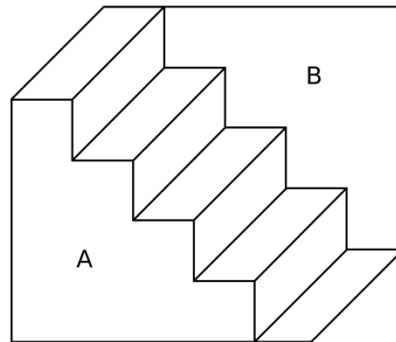
In both phases, the installation was documented on a 35mm analogue film. Photographs of particular cuboids were taken from different angles in such a way that the wires protruding from the cuboids and the wall are formed into letters: T R E A P.

In addition, the entire installation was photographed as a whole, frontally. In this photograph, the protruding wire elements do not resemble sculptures-letters placed on pedestals, but form rather vague patterns, reminding (by their shape) dust, which usually can be found on analogue films and photo prints.

The main issue presented by the exhibition "Silence is golden" is the relation between the abstract idea and the real matter. The work "Walk on the Spiral Jetty", an album with an audio recording, points to the issues related to the transfer of certain phenomena and states of things from the reality to the area of the medium. This production becomes an excuse to discuss the issue of the representation of reality in a work of art, transferring in scale, as well as expanding the field of art within reality. The collage entitled "Equation", which presents the equation for the force of gravity, in an object subject to gravitational force, opens a field of reflection on the idea as a utopian concept that reorganizes the reality. The installation "Hologram", representing a burning gold bar, is the key figure of the entire exhibition. On the one hand, the gold bar, which disappears due to burning, refers to the problem of the disappearance of a material certainty in the circulation of capital in the financial system; on the other hand, the gold bar, which image is projected on a glass, refers both to the issue of dematerialization of the artistic object, and to a specific, based on a digital recording, contemporary "materiality". The problem of dematerialization and shifting the focus on information – text, becomes crucial in the second half of the XX<sup>th</sup> century. However, I would like to note that the analogy between the disappearance of the gold standard in the sphere of economy and the shift of the work of art into the area of an immaterial text, is treated very freely by me. Nevertheless, this analogy allows me to deal with the economic problems that determine our reality and fulfil a vital role on the idea-matter axis.

The installation "Dim Mak" allows to address more closely the issue of conceptual art, its affirmative attitude towards the free exchange of information in an egalitarian society devoid of fetishist desires of an elitist work of art. The installation consists of black elements that resemble pedestals without works of art. They are materialized text characters (dash, slash, etc.) which are displaced in the gallery space as a result of melting of black ice which is their integral part. Firstly, by this installation I wanted to present a small disaster which in a reduced scale shows the way in which utopian concepts yield to reality. Secondly, it deals with aspects of a mutual relation between the characters, which refer to each other. The spatial installation, located originally in a commercial gallery, was documented on photographs and on a film, which were then presented on the exhibition "Silence is golden". The wire elements which are part of the

installation and which from certain locations in the gallery arrange in letters, on the photograph of the entire installation resemble dust which was not removed from the photographic film. In this formal measure, both of these spaces – the reality of the gallery and its representation on film and photography – are subject to mutual exchange. I mean such kind of relation, in which we are unable to determine where the source is: do the dust rods arrange in letters on a flat photography, or do the installed wires in the photographed reality look like letters which are shattered in space. The essence of this relation is very well illustrated by Schroeder's stairs:



Through the materialization of the text in the installation „Dim Mak” I direct the attention of the beholder to the source code, which is the „material” basis of our modern times based on participation in the Web or the everyday use of countless life-facilitating applications. Therefore the letters, which are formed by the wire elements, arrange in the inscription TREAP, referring to the algorithm organizing information, and the characters which represent the pedestals, are very often used in all kinds of programming languages.

#### **D. Post scriptum**

As part of preparation for the realization of the exhibition and the theoretical text, I have been running a blog entitled “My Spirit is Black”<sup>3</sup>. It is a collection of visual materials relating to revolution, which is strongly present in my realization, and which were searched by a colour key, identical to the colour of skin or the Suprematist revolution inspired by Kazimierz Malewicz.

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3 <http://myspiritisblack.tumblr.com> , from 01-04-2016