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**'I AM A VERY SENSITIVE MEDIUM'.
ON THE ONEIRICALLY POETIC
OEUVRE OF MARIA ANTO**

In an exhaustive conversation with Małgorzata Bocheńska (2004), Anna Anto delivered a statement, somewhat akin to an artistic credo, that included several keywords with the potential to help elucidate her artistic practice and interpret her art: 'I am a painter, an inspired painter. In this world, where there is no tranquility, no sense of safety, no certainty, where joy is brief, hope endures, and demons nonchalantly stride the pavements, in this journey – I find painting indispensable. Poetry stirs my imagination, I carry in my pockets individual pieces of paper with my favourite poems. My head is full of poetry.'¹

The passion for inspiration, the experience of a very real apprehension and the sense of unreal/surreal reality, poetic matter, and imagination work, and above all the perception of art as a movement through the internal and external world – these are some of the elements constituting the mosaic of motifs and categories that ground the oneirically poetic oeuvre of the Warsaw-based artist. The idiomatic character of her painting – eluding all conventional classifications created by art critics – is predominantly confirmed by its early reception and its reinterpretation today. Following her international success, which sped things up with her individual exhibition in the Zachęta Gallery in 1966,² the style of Anto, only 30 at the time, was labelled as 'fantastical art', 'enchanted poetry', 'surrealist theatre', 'a «recorded» tale, a captured dream'; there were voices claiming it was 'painting [that has] great power of expression', representing 'dreams, memories, fears' and approaching the aesthetics of 'primitivism, fantasy, and naive realism'.³ It was compared to the works of Henri 'Le Douanier' Rousseau, Nikifor Krynicki, Max Ernst, Yves Tanguy, and Giorgio de Chirico. This catalogue of art historical associations is not unfounded, as in Anto's oeuvre one can indeed find many elements of the said stylistics or specific aesthetics, even though today her art is not situated at the centre of the metaphoric painting movement,⁴ among artist such as Kazimierz Mikulski and Erna Rosenstein, and even less so among the representatives of lyrical abstraction, besides the symbolic works of, say, Stanisław Fijałkowski. In the works of Anto, who – much like

1 'Z Marią Anto rozmawia Małgorzata Bocheńska', in *Maria Anto*, E. Olszewska (ed.), Warszawa: Muza, 2004, 55.

2 See *Wystawa malarstwa Marii Anto, styczeń 1966*, exhibition catalogue, Warszawa: CBWA Zachęta, 1966, <https://zacheta.art.pl/public/upload/mediateka/pdf/57bec5d08ddb7.pdf> [accessed 02 Aug. 2021].

3 See M. Ujma, 'Świat nowy i uroczy', in *Maria Anto. Malarka*, exhibition catalogue, 7 Nov. 2017 – 4 Feb. 2018, M. Jachūła (ed.), Warszawa: Zachęta – Narodowa Galeria Sztuki, 2017, 41–57.

4 Much like the painting of Maria Korsak – classed as 'naive painting' – who had her individual exhibition in the Zachęta Gallery in the same year as Maria Anto (1966) and is completely forgotten today.

Rosenstein – never identified herself as a surrealist painter, particularly noticeable are the references to the pre- and post-war Italian *à la pittura metafisica*, the North Italian Quattrocento, and the inspirations drawn from the Renaissance art, which the artist herself confirmed, saddened by the oversimplifying schematism of critical pronouncements. Anto's works are also worth situating along the oeuvres of, among others: Frida Kahlo, Gertruda Abercrombie, Helen Lundeborg, Rosa Rolanda, Leonora Carrington, or Dorothea Tanning,⁵ whom, accidentally, the Polish painter met in person during her [Anto's] exhibition at the Galleria d'Arte Cortina in Milan in 1971.⁶

For Anto, the creative act constitutes the process of 'establishing the painting'⁷; in it, the artist has the role of 'a very sensitive medium',⁸ yielding to the affective, reflexive, and almost-semi conscious expression; however, this expression is very deliberately transformed with the use of specific stylistic means to visualise and at the same time to camouflage the personal content. What transpires in this exploration of the ways to anti-mimetically record her oneirically poetic visions is the reconstruction of Maria Anto's attitude to the material and metaphysical world, to life and death, to memory and imagination. The process of expression becomes possible thanks to the synthesis of poetic metaphors, for it is the metaphors that are the source and the heart of these phantasmagorical, mystical, symbolic and surreal paintings.

In the early 1960s, when colorism was the dominant movement at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, imposed by Eugeniusz Eibisch and Jan Cybis, and outside the Academy, advocated by the likes of Henryk Stażewski and Edward Krasiński, abstractionism reigned supreme, Anto defied both trends and developed her own style of instinctive painting. Even though Anto's oeuvre has not been classified as neo-avant-garde art, traits of this style can be traced for instance in the artist's efforts to establish her individual idiolect, distinct from the artistic language of the (be it non-academic and avant-garde) mainstream at the time. Were we to apply to Anto's lyrical painting the assumptions related to the metaphorical character of poetry, which creates equivalents of feelings,⁹ we would

5 See A. Corral, '8 Female Surrealists Who Are Not Frida Kahlo – from Meret Oppenheim to Dorothea Tanning', *Artsy.net* (2016) 31 Mar., <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-8-female-surrealists-who-are-not-frida-kahlo> [accessed 26 July 2021].

6 In the archive of Maria Anto, there is her photograph with Dorothea Tanning and Zuzanna Janin, the latter only 10 years old.

7 'Z Marią Anto rozmawia Małgorzata Bocheńska', op. cit., 55.

8 Ibid.

9 See S. Jaworski, 'Wstęp', in T. Peiper, *Pisma wybrane*, S. Jaworski (ed.), Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1979, III–LXXX.

be able to find some common traits cumulated in the effort to replace naming/reflecting the reality and sensations with an ambiguous circumlocution or a visual synonym, a key characteristic of Tadeusz Peiper's notion of avant-garde poetry.¹⁰ This notion of metaphorised intimacy may be among those enabling the decipherment of the imaginative structures constructed by Anto, while a comparative analysis of private notes from her archive, her recorded dreams,¹¹ poetic efforts and paintings may facilitate the understanding of the creative mechanisms at work here.

Yet, what would be the way to interpret dreams, hypnotic visions, humanised images of animals and animalised representations of people, fantastical hybrids, items and plants in bizarre shapes, disturbing landscapes, etc., in the context of the admiration and practice of poetry, and the accounts recording actual experiences, memories, emotions (claustrophobia, sleepwalking, an obsessive sense of extreme danger),¹² which constitute the source of the artist's energetic albeit tangled temperament?¹³ How is Anto's desire to be herself and remain distinct in art and in life linked to her strategy of creating reports of experiences and at the same time shielding the vulnerable, fragile, and sensitive spiritual part of her 'self'? It is worth investigating whether – without calling into question the indisputable originality of Maria Anto's art – her expressive aesthetics could be analysed in non-traditional contexts, a little beyond visual arts, and referred to such phenomena as: mysticism, esotericism, spirituality, and above all literature (poetry and rhetoric), and the culture of language (symbols, archetypes, myths).

INTIMATE BESTIARY

'Symbols recur in my works incessantly. The symbols of infinity, the symbols of spiritual power: animals. A unicorn, shells, keys, tarot card signs, angels.'¹⁴ As well as, among others: the Babylonian sphinx, a cat in crinoline, sirens, a monkey with human eyes, figures with bird heads, man-animal hybrids, centaurs, 'the ghosts of Białowieża', geometric forest creatures, gigantic flower-trees. All these contribute to Anto's visual

10 I have written on the issue, though in another context, in the chapter 'Praktyki artystyczne w polu autobiograficznym' of my monograph *Matki i córki. Relacje rodzinne i artystyczne w autobiografiach kobiet po 1989 roku*, Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UMK, 2020, 155–86.

11 In the archive of Maria Anto, entrusted to Zuzanna Janin, there are 42 written accounts of dreams. The family claims that in the 1980s and 1990s Maria also recorded her dreams on tapes; however, the works on finding these have not been completed.

12 'Z Marią Anto rozmawia Małgorzata Bocheńska', op. cit., 54.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid. 90.

lexicon with which the artist communicated her intimacy, while at the same time coding it. Here, painting serves as a ritual to reveal deeper meanings, while the bestiary becomes a catalogue of vivid metaphors. However, besides the mechanics of psychoanalytical interpretations, it is the cultural and literary context that appears to be of utmost importance. The staffage repeated numerous times in the paintings is filled with cultural figures and characters from mythical, religious, and literary narratives. Their provenance varies: from Judaism and Christianity, through European mythologies and Far Eastern beliefs, all the way to folklore and esotericism.

The artist declared that she had come up with the animals in the paintings herself, but she also divulged that she had been assisted in the task by the poetry of Arthur Rimbaud, among others; Rimbaud frequently emerges in her remarks and poetic allusions. Particularly stimulating for her grotesque-malleable imagery were his *Illuminations*, which she could cite from memory (slightly altering individual phrases):¹⁵ ‘There’s a bird in the woods, its song makes you stop and blush. There’s a clock that never chimes. There’s a hollow with a nest of white creatures. There’s a cathedral that descends, and a lake that rises. ... O my Good! O my Beauty! Atrocious fanfare in which I never falter! Enchanted easel! ... That idol without ancestors or court, black-eyed and yellow-haired, nobler than legend, Mexican and Flemish: his land insolent azure and green, skirts beaches named by the waves, free of vessels, with names ferociously Greek, Slav, Celtic.’¹⁶

The admiration for the French *poete maudit* does not seem surprising as her choice for a series of reasons. Indeed, as the icon of rebellious personality as well as modern and visionary creativity, the poet-seer deliberately pushing the boundaries of experience and knowledge was in his artistic attitude similar to an alchemist in the laboratory of language. The intensity of his highly metaphorised poems, rife with drama and movement of images, must have been creatively attractive for Anto. Also of significance is Rimbaud’s special position in French culture, important in the education of the Warsaw intelligentsia rooted in the nobility, from which Maria Antoszkiewicz – the daughter of Tadeusz Maria Czarnecki and Józefina Nelly, née Egiersdorff – emerged and of whom she spoke at home and corresponded with in French.¹⁷

15 See *ibid.*

16 A. Rimbaud, *Les Illuminations*, transl. by A.S. Kline, Scotts Valley (CA): CreativeSpace, 2002, 137, 138, 152.

17 In the archive of Maria Anto, there are letters between the mother and the daughter written – in their entirety or in parts – in French. Also Natalia Egiersdorff, née Rosińska (M. Anto’s grandmother), and Józefina Nelly Egiersdorff (Anto’s mother) exchanged correspondence in Polish and French,

Anto's intimate bestiary not only materialises on canvas but is also projected in the dreams recorded by the artist and formulated in her amateur poetry. One of her dreams features a sombre image in which flora and the surrounding space come to life and stir in the character suggestive and unnerving experiences. (I believe the flower described in the dream may be akin to the flower-trees represented in the paintings *Green Trees* [1973], and *An Evening Walk* [1983], among others).

'There is a road to the horizon, soft bushes around, plain terrain, the Moon, glaringly blue, burns with its crescent. I am left alone in this part of the road, I cannot get through – there stands a growing flower. It does not block the road, it moves and it is impossible to pass by it. ... I ask [Roman] «Do you think that a flower can be killed or sedated?» The flower is composed of a bunch of light – cream-coloured leaves, it grows directly out of the shiny surface of the road, reminiscent of a carpet made of shards of dark glass. The flower undulates as a calm flame, only occasionally, when I am really close, it reveals my helplessness with a single delicate tremor.'¹⁸

UNICORN BY THE SEA

Around the tree thick shade lay
Suddenly touched by whiteness
The perfect gesture
Stirred the image
The branches rustled
A bell deep underground tolled
On the water
A silver silhouette stilled
So unfathomable
So strong
Kneeling gently
Rises
The barrel – lifts the fair chest
Neck – the head
Slender gaze
Nostrils touched the bark
Once
In silence

as corroborated by the letters deposited in the family archive of Zuzanna Janin. For more on the relationships between these four extraordinary women hailing from one family, see my essay 'Rodzina siłaczek: Natalia Rosińska, Nelly Egiersdorff, Maria Anto, Zuzanna Janin', *Znak*, 761 (2018): 90–7.

- 18 An unpublished account of a dream by M. Anto, dated 'Thursday, 24 May 72[?]', the archive of Maria Anto, courtesy of Zuzanna Janin (original spelling).

He rose darker now above the shade
 Rolling and unfurling light with its horn
 Silenced the mane with a tremor
 The alien mirror of water recognised him
 Confirmed the contradicted mystery
 Again the bay silver music
 And a grey bird – a small angel
 Weeps [?] and sings in the haven.¹⁹

The image of the unicorn emerging in the poem might be akin to the one in the painting *For Andrzej* (1979). This animal, much like angels, became a kind of an obsession of the painter,²⁰ as confirmed by her words and private notes. In the latter, she meticulously analysed the sources of the legends about this magnificent creature,²¹ thus placing her ideas and fascinations as well as the visions from the open-air painting workshops in Białowieża recorded in her paintings in a wider anthropological and cultural context. The artist explained that she usually painted the unicorn ‘from the tapestries of the Cluny Museum in Paris’, considered to be the guardian of the house and an embodiment of the good, additionally symbolising sensual experiences (including taste, sight, hearing, touch). Besides this particular medieval reference, however, it is worth pointing to an early Christian Greek text that the artist was also familiar with, titled *Physiologus* (Gr. *Physiologos*), which constituted the main source of the Christian symbolism of nature and served as the basis for creating medieval bestiaries (Chapter 22 of the *Physiologus* is devoted to the unicorn).²² Apart from the above, there are several other literary sources of the paintings realising the artist’s passion, such as the *Sonnets for Orpheus* by Reiner Maria Rilke,²³ another work she quoted from memory. Additionally, even though I cannot find any direct corroboration, to me it seems almost certain that Maria Anto – as a widely-read person fascinated, among others, by the Ibero-American literature that was powerfully influenced by magic realism and already growing in popularity in Poland in the 1960s – must have used the work by her beloved writer

19 *Maria Anto*, E. Olszewska (ed.), op. cit., the poem on the inside of the catalogue cover.

20 ‘Z Marią Anto rozmawia Małgorzata Bocheńska’, op. cit., 83.

21 On 3 February 2018, in the Arton Foundation in Warsaw, the exhibition *Maria Anto. Ja ulatuję, jak leżę* (Maria Anto. I fly away when I recline) was inaugurated presenting selected accounts of the painter’s dreams read by Zuzanna Janin. Curated by: Marika Kuźmicz, design: Kasia Rzepka, display: Agnieszka Lasota.

22 See *Physiologus: A Medieval Book of Nature Lore*, transl. by M.J. Curley, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009, 108.

23 See R.M. Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus*, transl. by J.B. Leishman, London: Hogarth Press, 1949 (i.e., *Sonnets to Orpheus*, pt. I, IV).

Jorge Luis Borges, published in Polish in 1967, titled *Zoologia fantastyczna* (Fantastical Zoology), and subsequently republished as *Księga istot zmyślonych* (in line with the title of the original and its English translation).²⁴ Indeed, on the pages of this extremely erudite book, one finds strange creatures that have captured human imagination for centuries now, and among them, of course: the unicorn, the Chinese unicorn (*qilin*), sirens, centaurs, the monkey of the inkpot, and Swedenborg's angels.²⁵ My thesis of the artist being bewitched by Borges' book may be corroborated by the frequent and recurrent presence of the aforementioned beings; for instance, in these paintings: *Unicorn and Symbols* (2002), *Qilin – Far Eastern Unicorn* (ca. 2002), *With the Angels* (1986), *The Polish Angels ii* (1982), *Blue-eyed One* (1975), and *Anniversary ii* (1972).

POETRY-VISIONS

'When I paint, I recite poems. I do not illustrate poems, obviously. Their atmosphere, as it is not even their content, I find a necessary stimulus. This can be poems by Éluard, Rilke, Rimbaud, Walicki, Leśmian, Miłosz, Szczepański, Iwaszkiewicz, Gałczyński. I've just said that I do not paint poems, but there is an exception: Paul Éluard's 'The Dream of 12 November',²⁶ which I painted many times'.²⁷

In line with the artist's confession, it is actually possible to find specific bibliographic addresses for her literary inspirations. In Anto's painting, there are references to the aforementioned *Illuminations* by Arthur Rimbaud,²⁸ 'Duży koncert skrzypcowy' (Grand Violin Concerto) from Konstanty Ildelfons Gałczyński's long poem *Niobe*,²⁹ the poetry of Teodor Szczepański, whom she honoured with the paintings *For the River, the Bridge and the Sky* (1970)³⁰ as well as the *Portrait of Teodor Szczepański*

24 See J.L. Borges, *Zoologia fantastyczna*, transl. to Polish by Z. Chądzyńska, Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1983, republished as *Księga istot zmyślonych*, Warszawa: Prószyński i S-ka, 2000.

25 Interestingly, E. Swedenborg was a Swedish philosopher and mystic who wrote the *Journal of Dreams 1743–1744*, transl. by Rev. C.Th. Odhner, Bryn Athyn (PA): Academy Book Room, 1918.

26 M. Anto meant P. Éluard's poem 'Sen z 12 listopada 1943', transl. to Polish by J. Kott, in P. Éluard, *Wiersze*, A. Ważyk (ed.), Warszawa: PIW, 1959, 106–107.

27 'Z Marią Anto rozmawia Małgorzata Bocheńska', op. cit., 67.

28 See 'Childhood', in A. Rimbaud, *Les Illuminations*, op. cit., 137.

29 See K.I. Gałczyński, *Szarlatanów nikt nie kocha. Wiersze zebrane*, vol. 1, Warszawa: Prószyński i S-ka, 2014.

30 The title of the painting is at the same time the title of a poem by T. Szczepański, *Wiersze*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1967.

(1964), and Cyprian Kamil Norwid's 'Do Bronisława Z.' (To Bronisław Z.) from which the artist drew her credo.³¹

But that is not all; many more not as overt or merely vestigial literary associations can be found here. One of them is related to Anto's long-standing friend, the journalist, writer and painter Dino Buzzatti, who was associated with the Milan Galleria d' Arte Cortina, where the artist first met him. Buzzatti wrote for Anto a personal essay about her oeuvre which – much like the text by Michał Walicki – fixed the interpretation of her art for a long time. The relationship, however, may have had a greater dynamic – the Italian author, though untranslated and not popular in Poland, is a representative of literature within the broad genre of fantasy and magic realism. His best known collection of 60 short stories – appropriately titled *Sessanta racconti* (1958), which earned him the prestigious Italian Strega Prize – touches on themes of the existence and metaphysics of man in a modernised city, evoking the atmosphere of horror and surrealism. My hypothesis is that Anto read or was familiar with the writing of her friend and that it may have served her as a creative stimulus.

Meanwhile, other tropes are indicted by Anto herself through the titles and dedications of the paintings. The first of these – *Explosion in a Cathedral* – created in 2005 bears an annotation on the back: 'Maria Anto | FOR A.C | MNV | 1120'. The initials point to Alejo Carpentier, regarded as the originator of *lo real maravilloso*, whose novel of the same title as the painting is the third part of a triptych, besides the earlier novels: *The Kingdom of this World* and *The Lost Steps*.³² The other poetic trope, which requires a little more deciphering, is evoked by the painting titled *He knew that golden beaches far away...*, signed, dated and annotated on the stretcher and on the canvas: 'Maria Anto 26.viii | 1975 | AFTER ALL HIS ARE THE TREASURES | BURIED. IT WAS EASIER FOR HIM | TO BEAR THE BURDEN OF FATE. | 657'. It was difficult to find the reference to a specific work and author based on the two phrases because they are somewhat distorted – Anto must have cited them from memory or in an unofficial translation. The source turned out to be a poem by the aforementioned, strongly present in the artist's life/work, Jorge Luis Borges, titled 'Blind Pew', from which the passage in question Mildred Boyer and Harold Morland translated thus: 'He knew that golden beaches far away / Kept hidden for

31 'Varieties of opulence will crawl away and vanish, / Treasures and powers blow away, whole communities shake, / Of the things of this world only two will remain, / Two only: poetry and goodness... and nothing else...' see C.K. Norwid, *Selected Poems*, transl. by A. Czerniawski, London: Anvil Press Poetry, 2004, 92.

32 The three novels, translated to Polish by K. Wojciechowska, were recently (2018, 2020), republished by PIW.

him his own treasure, / So cursing fate's not worth the breath'.³³ From a conversation with the family, I learned that Anto may have been referring – albeit indirectly – to the character from Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. Let us complement this net of condensed and palimpsest-like layered interpretive levels with an account of a dream of 26 June (Tuesday, no yearly date), the protagonists of which are the artist's children: 'We are leaving the garden with Krysia and Zuzia, looking for traces of the fire, but the forest is nowhere to be found either. We are walking among ugly buildings, decaying landscape, periphery, as though in the vicinity of a railway station. ... Hidden under the lush greenery of the bushes, Edek is drawing and carving with his penknife a portrait of a great turtle. Some woman, pale and overdressed, is staring at him through the leaves. I cannot push or scare her away. I worry about Edek. He says: «Mum, this is Mrs. Serenade. Closed Serenade, she'll sing no more». «Is she spying?» «The magical eggs of the Great Turtle». It is then that I notice in the grass in [?] great and beautiful eggs, silver as moons. They belong to the hidden turtle and Edek is in no danger, the two of simply must protect the treasure together'.³⁴

Of all the literary constellations, however, I am interested the most in the visual inspirations Anto drew from the poetry of Bolesław Leśmian, not as though she had been a pioneer in using such tropes; quite the opposite, the poet's works has been widely used in visual arts. What caught my attention in the relationship between Anto's paintings and Leśmian's poems is the Freudian category of the Uncanny (*das Unheimliche*) and its importance for horror literature. In the context of efforts and pitfalls of this unique painting, interpreting Anto's oeuvre in reference to Polish Gothicism seems more adequate than classifying it solely within the context of Ibero-American magic realism.

The Polish take on the uncanny, i.e., the Slavonic Gothicism – (contrary to the tradition of German or English horror) signalled by its fascination with profuse nature, tragic death, melancholy, the borderland between reality and its fairy-tale character – evolved from the romantic paradigm to modernity towards the interest in, among others, exploration of the unconscious (dreams), occultism, hypnosis, and catastrophism. In the modernist era, among the favourite motifs were altered states of consciousness, and dreams, attractive because of the nirvanic quality of dream visions and their being strongly connected to death, crossing into another dimension, and entering the afterlife. For the modernists of the

33 See J.L. Borges, *Dreamtigers*, transl. by M. Boyer, H. Morland, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964, 72.

34 An unpublished account of a dream (original spelling), the archive of Maria Anto, courtesy of Zuzanna Janin.

Young Poland movement, with Zenon Przesmycki (Miriam) as their patron, dreams were connected to symbols, while their exploration led to the discovery of intimate desires and the so-called boundless spheres, attractive for the artists and writers at this time.³⁵ One of them was Bolesław Leśmian, who was soaking up Miriam's metaphysical concepts and adoring the poetics of Edgar Allan Poe, consistently imitating in his works modernist styles and combining these with the elements of metaphysical and existential philosophy (Nietzsche, Bergson). One of Anto's favourite poems of Leśmian was 'Pan Błyszczącyński' (Mr. Błyszczącyński) from the collection *Napój cienisty* (Shadowy Drink; 1936). In the poems from this book and from the preceding one, titled *Ląka* (Meadow; 1920), we are able to observe that Leśmian-symbolist was particularly drawn to the uncanny within the psychic reality of man, hidden in the subconscious and in the imagination, which resulted in his interest in mediumism and spiritism. I assume that the artist was above all pulled by Leśmian's ability to balance imperceptibly between the dream and the wakened states, crossing between the worlds the dead and the living, experiencing supernatural phenomena and sensual coexistence with nature, as well as his extremely visual formulation in language of the respective elements of the external and internal world. This trope is indicated not only via the spaces in Anto's canvases, which evoke terror and mystery with their characteristic sombre, often blood and fire red, cloudy sky (e.g., *Your Encounter*, 1976; *The First of August*, 1976; *The Second Ghost*, 1975), but also in her poetic endeavours and dreams written down:

From outside the globe a storm
Lurking fields
A bush repeats in a whisper
The terror awaited
A bird calls
The wind has fallen
Before it springs up like a devil
Every grey piece of green it touches
Instills fear in trees
At last it returns to the ground
In the final second
When the hunched sky
Its breast leaning on the field
Takes the First Lightning.³⁶

35 For more on the issue, see P. Paziński, 'Gotycyzm cudzy i własny', in *Opowieści niesamowite z języka polskiego* (5), idem (ed.), Warszawa: PIW, 2021, 10–35.

36 *Maria Anto*, E. Olszewska (ed.), op. cit., a scan of the poem on the inside of the cover.

‘One must climb a mountain overgrown with tropical forest. The mother walks behind me. We are climbing branches, leaping over ravines. On the left hand side, we are accompanied by a red wall of a hospital complex looming behind the greenery, brick surface, roof railings, as though a castle wedged into a mountain ridge, coalesced therewith, as large as the mountain itself. Suddenly, there is an unstable tree trunk, stripped of all branches but entwined with lianas. One has to climb it up like the rope, swing the way savages do, cover a great height. «It is out of the question, Mother, this place is impossible to cross, you have to turn back...» I was to go back, but here I am already at the top, I am scrambling through the mountain ridge in thickets of tall grass.’³⁷

Continuing in the transcendental register, following Leśmian, one can interpret the paintings by Anto in which the artist presents a family gathered around a table. I consider these group portraits as an attempt to organise imaginary *séances*, which enable one not only to establish contact with the dead and no longer here, or with non-human beings (angels, animals), but also the communication among the closest, often conflict ridden, family. I was led to this interpretation not only by the cycle of paintings featuring such works as *At the Table* (1986, 1992), *Christmas Eve* (1969), *Vive le plein-air* (1969), and *Evening Walk* (1983), but above all by a disclosure of the very artist who showed a penchant for the themes of mediumism and divination: ‘Once, wishing to reconcile my feuded family, I created the painting *At the Table*. I sat around the table the deceased ancestors, the children, cousins, both granddaughters in the laps of my daughters, while between the sitters – two angels. In this way, I divined the future generations. Most importantly, the family made peace over time. It took a while. I have a great fondness for this painting.’³⁸

Yet, the most suggestive expression of Anto’s esoteric exploration appears to be the series of tarot sets she created, particularly that of *Tarot – Major Arcana* (Sept. 1990 – May 1992), which provides a visual representation of human experiences as the path through life, using archetypal figures and roles. The artist’s interest in this form of divination along with its iconography led to her developing major health problems when, having suffered a stroke, she experienced a bout of paralysis, aphasia and amnesia. The issue of human destiny and the need to organise her own fate became Anto’s priorities then, while the crisis stemming from the inability to continue her painting work directed her attention first to the issue of her own body (the paintings *January*, and *January ii*, both 1992), and subsequently to the cultural significance and iconographic tradition of the very tarot. A

37 A passage from an unpublished account of a dream dated on ‘Piątek. 13.VII.73’ (original spelling; [Friday 13 July ’73]), the archive of Maria Anto.

38 ‘Z Marią Anto rozmawia Małgorzata Bocheńska’, op. cit., 59.

In the early 1960s, when colorism was the dominant movement at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, imposed by Eugeniusz Eibisch and Jan Cybis, and outside the Academy, advocated by the likes of Henryk Stażewski and Edward Krasiński, abstractionism reigned supreme, Anto defied both trends and developed her own style of instinctive painting. Even though Anto's oeuvre has not been classified as neo-avant-garde art, traits of this style can be traced for instance in the artist's efforts to establish her individual idiolect, distinct from the artistic language of the (be it non-academic and avant-garde) mainstream at the time.

eureka moment for the artist must have been the sophisticated and elegant deck of tarot cards designed by the Italian Renaissance painter Bonifacio Bembo, commissioned by the Visconti and Sforza families halfway through the fifteenth century. Anto took up the formal challenge entailed by this project, which ended up having a twofold personal dimension, as it involved both her artistic ambitions and somatic and phantasmal experiences: 'I invented a colour, somewhat akin to Chinese orange, which in itself proved to be magical. I used it as a prosthesis.'³⁹

An intriguing element in this context is Anto's need to confront her design of tarot cards with representatives of two radically opposite spiritual milieux. The artist contacted both Jan Witold Suliga, known for having established and run the Cabbalist School of Tarot,⁴⁰ whose books she read, and Reverend Wiesław Aleksander Niewęłowski, a familiar Chaplain of the Artistic Community.⁴¹ These deliberate encounters and dialogues may be a testament to the heterogeneity of the artist's spiritual life.

SELF-UTOPIAS

As a conclusion about the oneirological foundations of Anto's art, it is important to also indicate the relationship between mysticism (experience), and aesthetics (visual rhetoric). Anto minutely and vividly reproduced the space and plot of the dream as well as the emotions she felt towards it. Colours, sounds and feelings are intense and they are almost palpably recorded. The painter explained that her habit and process of recording dreams so vividly were spontaneous, that she worked in a state of exaltation and incapacitation, submerging herself in the visions 'coming to her' and noting them down using her own code as potential subjects ('green horse against bright yellow silence; a table and the stars fly; a brilliant lady walks to the right'),⁴² which helped her return to the visions. This is what the mechanics of Anto's autobiographical artistic practice consisted in, grounded in the interrelation between the image and the word, recorded both in the artistic and the poetic form.

In her poetic painting, the artist personified her own emotions, fears, and desires, but also expressed the affective aspect of experiencing poetry (whether read or created), which turned into a creative stimulus. By no

³⁹ Ibid. 88.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 86, 88. Cf. the author's website of J.W. Suliga: <http://www.jws.net.pl/> [accessed 11 Aug. 2021].

⁴¹ 'I asked my Chaplain for the Artistic Community for his opinion about my tarot. He knew I am involved in black magic; he did not see it as a threat to my soul. My fascination with this painting trope was given absolution.' 'Z Marią Anto rozmawia Małgorzata Bocheńska', op. cit., 88. M. Anto declared to be a practicing Catholic.

⁴² Ibid. 47, 54.

means is it merely the illustration of poetry, but rather a visual result of creating poetry-visions. It is structured by an interrelation of sorts between ekphrasis (as a verbal representation of visual representation) and hypotyposis (as a variation on the work perceived as dynamic matter receiving a visual form),⁴³ which further overlaps with the relationship between literature and art, the author's 'I' and the receiver's 'you'. It is, as it were, a transplantation of poetic language to a painting metaphor, pinning down the emotional sensations within the space of an artwork, an anti-mimetic and non-narrative projection of imagined reality, filtered through the body, driven by the senses. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Anto referred to her artistic practice as 'applying [the image] to the canvas',⁴⁴ as though her body, mind, and vivid language served precisely as the medium, able to communicate her internal, ciphered and alternative reality.⁴⁵

With such an understanding of the meaning and the role of art, Maria Anto – though individual, distinct and far from introducing borrowings – appears to be corresponding to the artistic stance of Erna Rosenstein, who she, incidentally, knew in person and admired, and with whom she exchanged reflections on art (for instance, during open-air painting workshops, such as the one in Osieki in 1965). The author of objects-talismans, regarded as a visionary, treated art as a constant exploration and discovery of new external/internal worlds, and claimed: 'Often when I am painting I have a sensation that I only make visible what is flowing through the air anyway. I see to it that it is well reflected in the canvas, that it is true.'⁴⁶ Both artists – though so different on many accounts – were far from locating their own oeuvres within the surrealist genre, both in their works profoundly immersed in the unconscious and the transcendent, both creating poetry and – the most intriguing of these correlations – both noting down their dreams.⁴⁷

43 On ekphrasis and hypotyposis, see, for instance, A. Dziadek, 'Ekfrazja i hypotypoza', in idem, *Obrazy i wiersze. Z zagadnień interferencji sztuk w polskiej poezji współczesnej*, Katowice: Wydawnictwo UŚ, 2004, 76–109; R. Słodczyk, *Ekfrazja, hypotypoza, przekład. Interferencje literatury i malarstwa w prozie włoskiej i eseistyce polskiej xx wieku*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo UJ, 2020.

44 From the conversation with Zuzanna Janin.

45 Perhaps the mirror signature that M. Anto used for signing many of her canvases is an emblem of this.

46 'Rozmowa Łukasza Guzka z Erną Rosenstein (przeprowadzona w połowie 1992 r.)', in *Erna Rosenstein*, J. Chrobak (ed.), Kraków: Stowarzyszenie Artystyczne Grupa Krakowska, 1992, 17–18. For more, see D. Jarecka, B. Piwowska, *Erna Rosenstein. Mogę powtarzać tylko nieświadomie*, Warszawa: Fundacja Galerii Foksal, 2014.

47 See *Erna Rosenstein*, J. Chrobak (ed.), op. cit., 112–28.

However, this non-obvious duo may be extended by one or own two other distinguished female artists. I mean Urszula Broll and Ewa Kuryluk. The former, a member of the esoteric and Buddhism (Zen)–oriented Oneiron group, is known for creating meditative art that combines introspection, the relationship with nature, and the metaphysical experience of multidimensional reality.⁴⁸ Meanwhile, the latter – a spatial artist, painter, illustrator, poet, prose writer and essayist – with the background in the new figuration and hyperrealism movements, is guided in her artistic practice by total autobiographism, understanding art as a unique copy of an individual fate, recorded on a sensitive film ‘in a pure state.’⁴⁹ I allow myself to outline this artistic constellation from the point of view of artistic manifestoes of the said artists (obviously, being aware of the formal differences between their oeuvres). What they share, however, is the belief and the desire to create utopian spaces in their autobiographically-artistic projects that would enable them to capture in words or visual art the complex and perfectly intimate relations between the internal and the external, between the imagination and the perception, between matter and spectrality, between dream and wakefulness. In this utopian, avant-garde and audacious concept of one’s artistic role, all the aforementioned female artists are uncompromising and consistent. Their non-obvious and potential relationship deserve to be problematised and discussed in a separate essay.⁵⁰

48 For more, see *Urszula Broll. Atman znaczy Oddech*, eds. K. Kucharska, J. Hobgarska, Warszawa: Fundacja Katarzyny Kozyry, 2019. I am grateful to Dr Kubiak for this interpretative hint.

49 E. Kuryluk, ‘Posłowie: O moich własnych utopiach’, in eadem, *Podróż do granic sztuki. Eseje z lat 1975–1979*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1982, 204–11.

50 I leave the text open-ended, indicating at this juncture the need to perform wider-scale research and interpretation of the works by the said female artists in the context of their self-utopian artistic projects. The essay is predominantly focused on the oneirically poetic oeuvre of Maria Anto, and the deeper perspective, outlined in its conclusion, of a complex artistic constellation is aimed to indicate that the practice of constructing autobiographical artistic manifestoes of the said artists, based on utopian attempts at representing their internal states, is not an isolated case of Maria Anto but a tendency characteristic of a larger group of contemporary female artists pursuing various genres of art. However, my suggestion, included here merely as a hypothesis, requires more exhaustive studies of the artistic output of Rosenstein, Broll, Kuryluk and presumably many other female artists, to allow drawing specific conclusions on the issue, a task I intend to perform in separate works.

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Abstract:

The paper focuses on the oeuvre of Maria Anto, comprising both her paintings and her private accounts of dreams, as well as the artist's amateur poems. Anto's works were analysed in the light of her oneirically poetic artistic practice. The author studies not only the transfer/transformation of poetry into oneiric visions and their visual representations, but above all the interrelations between the word and the image. Anto's painting, regarded as surrealist, through the recurrent elements constituting an intimate bestiary and non-mimetic projection of autobiographical experiences (dreams, visions, fascinations, fears) is brought closer to the genre of avant-garde poetry. Anto's artistic attitude was also interpreted in the context of the transcendent, mediumistic and utopian art of such artists, as Erna Rosenstein, Urszula Broll, and Ewa Kuryluk.

Keywords:

Maria Anto, painting, oneirism, poetry, utopia, intimacy

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