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**THE 1992 EXHIBITION IN THE  
'LABORATORY' AT THE CEN-  
TRE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART  
– GNOSTICISM IN THE OEUVRE  
OF ZBIGNIEW LIBERA<sup>1</sup>**

Zbigniew Libera referred to gnostic beliefs in his works displayed at the individual exhibition, curated by Marek Goździewski, which was held at the Laboratory Building of the Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art in 1992. It is evidenced by the form of these works, as well as the texts accompanying the exhibition, which I am going to discuss below. According to Jerzy Truszkowski,<sup>2</sup> the artist turned to gnosticism, having read one of the 1987 issues of *Literatura na Świecie*.<sup>3</sup> The issue edited by the main promoter of alternative spirituality in Poland, Jerzy Prokopiuk, was devoted to gnosis. The said exhibition is never mentioned in publications on the history of art, while the works presented<sup>4</sup> have never been commented on, with the exception of the installation titled *Le baigneur* (The Bather). In this text, I suggest their interpretation informed by the classic iconic method developed by Erwin Panofsky.<sup>5</sup> As the iconographic context, I point to gnostic beliefs, which allow for a broader understanding of the message of the installation, whereas the iconological layer encompasses three aspects. The first of these is the trauma of the absence of mourning in the modern world and the institutionalised procedure of dealing with death. In the context of contemporary studies on this difficult heritage, the analysed works may also constitute a commentary on historical traumas, associated with the numerous places of genocide and burial scattered throughout Poland, as well as the Polish obsessive preoccupation with death. I further suggest that, because of the relationship between Christianity and Gnosticism,

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- 1 The article is based on a fragment of my doctoral dissertation; however, it has been much edited and extended: W. Koziół, *Polska sztuka krytyczna na tle transformacji po 1989 roku*, Faculty of History UJ, Krakow, 2019, MS, Dissertation Advisor: Prof. W. Bałus, reviewers: dr hab. I. Kowalczyk, Prof. UAM, Prof. A. Kutaj-Markowska.
  - 2 J. Truszkowski, 'Allez Liberales!', *Magazyn Sztuki*, 1 (1993): 42–52.
  - 3 The notion of 'Gnosticism' – as a label to describe the beliefs held by Gnostics – is anachronistic, as it only emerged in the eighteenth century, but it allows us to differentiate between the system of beliefs and the crucial experience of the said system, i.e. that of gnosis or (self-) knowledge.
  - 4 Dissatisfied with their form, Libera decided they were too ambiguous, as their receivers had proven unable to recognise his intentions. *Model końca and Minuta milczenia – Minuta milczenia* no longer exist; they remained in the storehouse of the Centre for Contemporary Art (CSW), where they subsequently had to be removed from. *The Bather* belongs to the collection of the CSW (alongside another work from around this period, *Kaczki* [Ducks]); it was restored in the Netherlands, at the time when M. Ludwisiak was the Director of the Ujazdowski Castle; this last piece of information was obtained during a telephone conversation with the artists on 26 Jan. 2022.
  - 5 See E. Panofsky, 'Iconography and Iconology: An Introduction to the Study of Renaissance Art', in idem, *Meaning in the Visual Arts: Papers in and on Art History*, Garden City (NY): Doubleday, 1955, 26–54; E. Panofsky, G.S. Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology. Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance*, New York: Routledge, 1972.

the works displayed at the exhibition in the Laboratory become a veiled criticism of the Roman Catholic Church as an institution. The final interpretation is related to the interest in New Age movements and alternative spirituality, strongly present in the culture of the 1990s. I will start my reflection by discussing the pre-iconographic and iconographic layers, with a brief presentation of Gnostic beliefs. I will go on to describe the iconological layer, encompassing the three said nexuses of issues.

At the exhibition held at the Ujazdowski Castle, Libera presented three installations, which depict certain sinuous structures. *Minuta milczenia – Minuta milczenia* (Minute of Silence – Minute of Silence) (1992) comprises an aluminium angle, some springs, bolts, rubber and plexiglass, as well as a heating coil and a fan (the catalogue features an additional piece of information, namely, that the warm air constituted an element of the work), and a time switch. The installation was assembled of a short, narrow ‘tail’ attached to a circle, filled with increasingly narrower spirals. The form was reminiscent of a flower, with the heating coil at its centre. The circle had 180 cm in diameter, which is of importance, as it marked a reference to the human height, particularly that of an average man. The second installation, *Model końca* (Model of the End), was constructed of aluminium angles – in double, and in places triple lines, comprising five separate loops, reminiscent of a Möbius strip. The bands radiating from the third loop are joined towards the end into a single line, ending with a cathode-ray lamp, while the entire structure is connected with wires to a small TV set. The installation was 130 cm x 130 cm x 250 cm.

The final, and the best known object, *Le baigneur* (The Bather, 1991), was composed of plexiglass, rubber, aluminium, bolts, cathode-ray tube, wires, TV set, and a video tape on a loop (250 cm x 60 cm x 60 cm). The film showed dirty water flowing into an inlet similar to a metal drain of a washbasin. The TV set, displaying the opening of a draining pipe, transformed into a milky-white, translucent pipe made of plexiglass. The pipe ‘protruded out’ of the TV set, serving as its floor stand, to subsequently turn into three full loops of a left-handed spiral. The respective parts were put together using black connectors.

Besides these three-dimensional objects, there were two simple drawings in pencil on cardboard (152 cm x 102 cm), labeled as *Bez tytułu [Pathos]*, 1992. They were fixed onto a whiteboard. The first (placed on the left) presented a series of five-pointed stars placed one on top of the other, each subsequently smaller. These stars wind, evoking associations with a human spine, left bent, with characteristic sections of kyphosis of lordosis. The drawing on the right appears much like the actual vertebrae and discs of the backbone. Marek Goździewski interpreted these as cups, ending in a saucer. ‘The spine’ was presented as right-sided (based on its structure, I assume the chest would be turned to the right). Thus, these constitute two

outward-opening axial forms. Between them, Libera placed a sheet of paper with six citations from the authors of early Christian doctrines, who argued against the teachings of Gnostic sects.<sup>6</sup> These passages provide an account of Gnostic cosmogony, discussing the creation of the material world. The fullness of the divine being – *pleroma* – emanates energy of which smaller entities are formed – *aeons*. In line with these principles, *pleroma* consists of a defined number of *aeons*, which, the further away they are from divinity, the lower their position in the hierarchy of beings; moreover, the lower levels contain greater numbers thereof. According to some interpretations, on the lower *aeons*, due to their remoteness from the divinity, a potential of error emerges. Various Gnostic schools had different views on the nature of *pleroma*, Valentinianists believed the 30 *aeons* to be the divine attributes, through which the divine unity manifested itself in the world. Serpentinians claimed the it is of one of the *aeons*, the Serpent, that the spirit and soul had originated. The Serpent was identified with the being from the Genesis that made first men sin; however, the fact was valued positively: Adam and Eve had experienced gnosis; they had thwarted the plans of Yahweh, the evil god, the Demiurge. Perhaps due to the reference to a serpent, the work *Le baigneur* (The Bather), being a reflection on dead body, has a serpentine, spiral form, reminiscent of the DNA structure. The fragments of texts selected by Libera and presented on the boards provided an account of Gnostics' beliefs about the creation of matter as a result of an error. They present elements of a cosmogony of one of the Gnostic sects, a cosmogony associated with the development of *aeons*, opposed to the highest spiritual reality.<sup>7</sup>

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6 The texts cited by Libera contain chronological accounts of the history of creation. The first is an account by J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, San Francisco: HarperOne, 1978, as cited in Zbigniew Libera, exhibition catalogue, Laboratorium of the Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art, curated by Marek Goździewski, Warszawa, 1992 [n.pag.]. Unless indicated otherwise, all texts are cited following the catalogue, as the publications used by Libera (there were some Polish editions, which Libera did not use). Below, there are passages from the following texts: Irenaeus of Lyons, 1.1–8.5, *Zdemaskowanie i odparcie fałszywej gnozy*, 1.1–8.5, transl. to Polish by M. Michalski, in M. Michalski (ed. and transl.), *Antologia literatury patrystycznej*, Warszawa: ATK, 1975; Tertullian, *Przeciw walentynianom*, 9, transl. to Polish by J. Zieliński, in: J. Zieliński (ed.), *Konkordancja z dzieł Ojców śś. i Pisarzy Kościoła*, Poznań, 1908; G. Quispel, *Gnosis als Weltreligion. Die Bedeutung der Gnosis in der Antike*, Bern: Origo, 1972; C.G. Jung, *Psychologie und Alchemie*, Zürich: Rascher, 1946; transl. to Polish by J. Prokopiuk as: *Rebis czyli kamień filozofów*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1988.

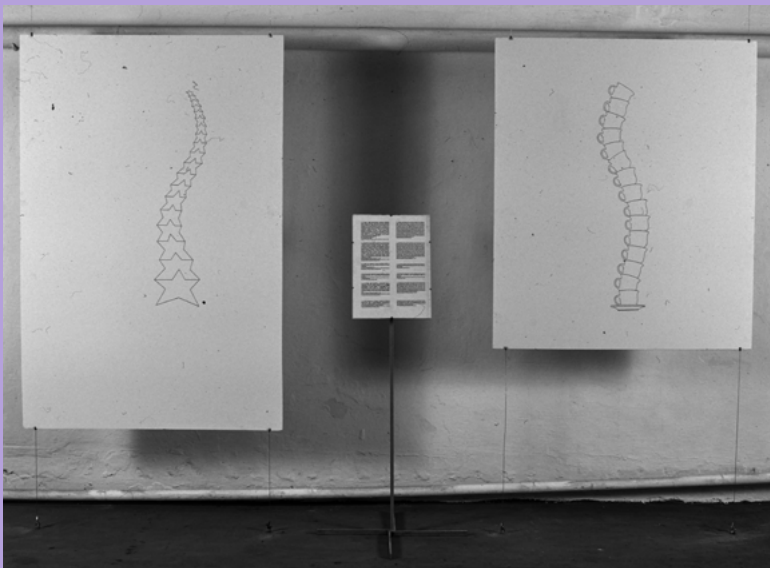
7 Irenaeus of Lyons, *Zdemaskowanie i odparcie fałszywej gnozy*, op. cit.

1. Zbigniew Libera, *Le baigneur* (The Bather), 1991;  
plexiglass, rubber, aluminium, bolts, cathode-ray tube,  
wires, TV set and a video tape in a loop, 250 cm × 60 cm × 60 cm,  
photograph by Mariusz Michalski and Barbara Wójcik, courtesy of  
the artist and the csw Ujazdowski Castle in Warsaw

2. Zbigniew Libera, *Bez tytułu* (*Pathos*), 1992;  
drawing, pencil on cardboard (152 cm × 102 cm), drawing, pencil on  
cardboard (130 cm × 102 cm), aluminium stand, text  
photo by Mariusz Michalski and Barbara Wójcik, courtesy of the  
artist and the csw Ujazdowski Castle in Warsaw



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3. Zbigniew Libera, *Minuta milczenia – Minuta milczenia (Minute of Silence – Minute of Silence)*, 1992;  
aluminium angle, springs, bolts, rubber, plexiglass, warm air (heating coil, fan), time switch, diameter of the circle – 180 cm, the work has been demolished;  
photograph by Mariusz Michalski and Barbara Wójcik, courtesy of the csw Ujazdowski Castle in Warsaw



These differ in detail; according to the Ophites (Ophians, Serpentinians, Sethians), the world was originally made up of the divine being (the Father), and the beings that accompanied it (him?), known as *aeons*. One of the *aeons*, Sophia (Wisdom), fell prey to *Pathos*, for it wanted to get to know and understand the might of the Father, which resulted in an explosion and the creation of material reality. In the narrative sense, Sophia left her husband and – because of her ignorance – ended up having intercourse with *Pathos*. This resulted in the spiritual reality being trapped inside the material one. As supposed counterparts of the perfect *pleroma*, the material world contained *pleromata*, which were created due to the mistake committed by Sophia. The consequence of this philosophy was a parallel (positive and negative) attitude towards the body and the immaterial realm (partly valued positively): according to the Sethians, the Father was equivalent to man's telencephalon, the Son to cerebellum, whereas the Holy Spirit – to the spinal cord.<sup>8</sup> Worth mentioning is the misogyny of this history, since Sophia is presented therein as a woman who betrayed her husband and whose error had far reaching, negative consequences, much akin to the actions of Eve in the Old Testament. Were we to believe the author's intentions, the artist chose the title *Pathos*, motivated by associations with the English meaning of the word pathetic as 'miserably inadequate.'<sup>9</sup> The poorness of the physical aspect of life was to be confirmed by the association between the spine and teacups, which made up an unstable, wobbly spire.

The entire exhibition is set in the context of various aspects of the psycho-physical dilemma, referring to the dualism or even the tripartite division of the Universe into three separate kinds of substances: the body, the psyche (the spirit), and the *pneuma* (i.e., the divine spark); and the presentation of hypothetical relations between them. The passages selected by Libera indicate why the artist decided the exhibition should feature a drawing of stars transformed into a human spine, placed next to the image of cervical vertebrae. Besides the material order, there also exists the order referring to the divine *pneuma*, the supramaterial element, yet not directly associated with the phenomenologically given consciousness, the spirit. The place of the spirit is on a higher level than that of matter, but it also serves to create the illusion of the physical world. People represent various ranks of self-discovery. Those who focus solely on the material world are never going to experience illumination, thus remaining subject to constant reincarnation. The other group focuses on the spirit, and their situation is far better. However, only the enlightened ones, who recognise the existence of the divine element (*pneuma*), get to know the true nature

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8 Some of the doctrines professed by Gnostic sects were influenced by Christianity; hence, the reference to the Holy Trinity.

9 Telephone conversation with Z. Libera of 26 Jan. 2022.

of reality and shall avoid subsequent incarnations. Libera's work is titled *Pathos* (initially, *Untitled*, 1992) and refers precisely to the *aeon* of Suffering, which exploded in Sophia. The exhibition is related to the reflection on the parallel status of the human body and the mental reality (i.e., consciousness), as well as the structure of the Universe. Stars may be interpreted as a hint – they bring to mind the system of seven stars, the conviction held by ancient Gnostics that the cosmic universe is constituted of seven star-planets, with an archon, an evil demon, corresponding to each: Yaldabaoth, also called Saklas and Samael, identified with Saturn; Iao, associated with Jupiter; Sabaoth, associated with Mars; Astraphanos (Astraphaios), associated with Venus; Elaios (Ailoiios, or Ailoein), i.e., Mercury; as well as Horaios – the Moon; and the Sun – Adonaios. Each archon had a female counterpart, with Astraphanos being lined with Sophia (*phanos* comes from the Greek verb 'to appear', whereas *astra* in Latin means stars, which in this context symbolise the emergence of matter as such).

As an intellectual current, Gnosticism encompasses doctrines and religious movements established in the first and second century AD. During the third and fourth centuries AD, these grew in popularity in the Mediterranean and in the Middle East. Some Gnostic ideas may possibly have been older than Christianity, with which Gnosticism came later to compete to ultimately be declared a heresy. Gnostic beliefs are far from coherent; they span numerous fractions which differ in detail; furthermore, researchers have access only to fragments of text presenting these beliefs.<sup>10</sup> Material reality was to have been created by the Demiurge, the evil creator (identified with Yahweh of the Old Testament), and by a number of evil beings possessing supernatural qualities, or as a result of an error committed by one of the *aeons* (divine beings), named Sophia. The human goal is the exploration of the secret knowledge (gnosis), spiritual awakening and liberation from the material world, in which man was trapped. The essence of Gnosticism, the true knowledge, available solely to the initiated – that is, gnosis – is about 'man's trans-rational cognitive experience of himself (that is, his own self), and through it – about the material world, the world of the soul, and the world of the spirit.'<sup>11</sup> Trans-rationality means combining rationality (reason, mind) with irrationality (the senses, feelings, will).<sup>12</sup> Jerzy Prokopiuk divides Gnostic movements into: Luciferian, Christian, and Ahrimanic fractions.<sup>13</sup> The first of these, represented by ancient currents, strove to liberate itself from the material world. The other, emerging at a later stage, is related to the assumption

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10 Before the nineteenth century, the main source constituted opponents of Gnosticism, such as: Tertullian, St Irenaeus.

11 As cited in: J. Prokopiuk, *Gnoza i gnostycyzm*, Warszawa: Daimonion, 1998, 13.

12 Idem, *Manifest wolności*, Białystok: Studio Antropologii, 2014, 20.

13 Idem, *Gnoza i ja – raz jeszcze*, [https://www.gnosis.art.pl/e\\_gnosis/aurea\\_catena\\_gnosis/prokopiuk\\_gnoza\\_i\\_ja\\_raz\\_jeszcze.htm](https://www.gnosis.art.pl/e_gnosis/aurea_catena_gnosis/prokopiuk_gnoza_i_ja_raz_jeszcze.htm), [accessed 16 Oct. 2021].



that man has been saved on Earth; it can be traced to the beliefs embraced by Rosicrucianism and Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy. The third aims to dehumanise man and transform him into an animalistic and machine-like being. The exhibition was ascetic and technologised, with installations featuring electric and electronic devices, which may indicate references to Ahrimanic motifs. I interpret the subsequent vehicles for human sensory experience as an illusion, isolating man from the true knowledge. Such a context gives the works a techno-sceptical air. However, the source texts displayed at the exhibition suggest that Libera predominantly referred to ancient Gnostic movements, and this reading of the exhibition appears to be the most grounded if we wish to take into consideration all its elements.

In the work *Minute of Silence – Minute of Silence*, the flow of warm air may symbolise *pneuma*, that is, the spirit – one of the three substances of which, according to Gnostics, man was supposed to have been created. *Pneuma* is derivative of the divine consciousness (not the evil Demiurge, the 'craftsman'; nor is it a byproduct of Sophia's capricious actions), it is the divine element in man. It is closely related neither to the spiritual, nor the material world, including psyche (mentality, consciousness), but to the initial fullness, which constitutes a substance separate from consciousness.<sup>14</sup> *Model of the End* focuses on the negative scenario of human life. The fact that the loops are joined to one another, read alongside the work's title, suggests that it refers to an uninterrupted series of reincarnations. People who have not been initiated, that is, who have not experienced gnosis, are trapped in their material bodies, while their journey does not end in the ultimate liberation from the physical reality.

*The Bather* was accompanied by a quotation from the text *Le cadavre: De la biologie à l'anthropologie* by Louis-Vincent Thomas, describing, how employees of funeral parlours distance themselves from the deceased person by referring to her or him as 'the bather.' Thomas's book studies anthropological attitudes towards death. The context allows us to determine that *The Bather* is a work about the psycho-physical dilemma,<sup>15</sup> that

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14 W. Myszor, 'Gnostycyzm', in *The Universal Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*; <http://www.ptta.pl/pef/pdf/g/gnostycyzm.pdf> [accessed 30 Oct. 2019].

15 The dilemma consists in the missing discovery of links between the sphere of the spiritual or the consciousness and the biological (the material) in contemporary science. There are also indications of an explanatory gap, especially in natural sciences (neurobiology, cognitive science). On the ground of philosophy, D. Calmers, among others, has identified the 'hard part of the problem of consciousness', regarding the question wherefore people experience phenomenologically varied states at all. 'The more tractable part of the problem of consciousness' refers rather to the technical mechanisms responsible for specific sensations. See D. Chalmers, 'Facing up to the Problem of Consciousness', *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 2 (1995): 200–19.

is, the approach taken by consciousness (thought, soul, spirit) towards the body, as well as the fear of death and methods of neutralising it, contemporarily as well. As pointed out by Anna Markowska, in the institutionalised world where funerals are organised by funeral parlours, the only element left of man is the dirty water running down the drain in Libera's video.<sup>16</sup> Markowska wrote: 'In *The Bather*, the baptism of being accepted into the community of saints transforms into the issue of the blockage of the drain',<sup>17</sup> for the only trace left of the human body is the dirty water we see in the inlet. In thanatological studies, it was often assumed that in the modernist world death had been eliminated from sight. Set against such a context, death seems to be breaking out, in an unwelcome manner, in spite of the actions intended to camouflage it. In the said passage, the researcher has pointed out the ritual element (washing of the deceased person's body) as analogous to Christian baptism at the beginning of life. Within the Gnostic framework, *The Bather* represents the wretchedness of man's material substance, his insignificance or even ridiculousness (after all, the dead bodies are referred to jokingly, they are trivialised). The installation is reminiscent of a simple organism, a 'primitive' creature, in a thread-like form – operating in the water or filled with water – in which a tube serves as the digestive tract, with a drain as the mouth and the excretory opening. Whereas *The Minute of Silence* was related to the element of air, *The Bather* refers to water, and *Model of the End* is permeated with metal objects. These references are associated with the elements, of which the entirety of matter was believed to be made up of.<sup>18</sup> The French title, in all likelihood chosen not solely as a reference to literature, evokes connotations with the works by surrealists, introducing nihilistic tropes and at the same time emphasising the absurdity of human existence.<sup>19</sup>

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16 A. Markowska, *Dwa przełomy. Sztuka polska po 1955 i 1989 roku*, Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UMK, 2012, 333.

17 Ibid.

18 Even though the meaning of metal in the culture of ancient and medieval Europe was unclear and it used to be ranked among various elements, it tended to indeed have the status of a separate element in Chinese culture.

19 Winceny Myszor pointed out that the feelings of absurdity, pointlessness, and nihilism at the time when Gnosticism was emerging in the second century AD is highly instructive for the man of the 'age of crisis'. This would mean that he regarded the latter half of the 1980s in Poland as a moment of crisis, because of the terminal phase of the political regime, economic scarcity, internal conflicts, and the uncertainty of the future. Seen in a broader perspective, the 'age of crises' dates back to the end of the nineteenth century, it determines the sense of decadence and the end of human civilisation, or its temporal decline, constituting another instantiation of apocalyptic moods; W. Myszor, 'Wprowadzenie. Na tropach tajemnej wiedzy', in G. Quispel, *Gnoza*, transl. to Polish by B. Kita, Warszawa: Pax, 1988, 13.

Funerary rituals are intended to anthropologically separate the realm of the living from the realm of the dead. In Poland, the issue is historically framed. Bathing is associated with genocide in gas chambers. Because of the Holocaust, bodies of the deceased oftentimes lie in unspecified spaces, while the Polish culture of remembrance is marred by an almost obsessive preoccupation with the dead. It is impossible to live a life without separating the realm of the living from the realm of the dead. The living have two options. The first involves activities enabling them to maintain the border and keep the distance (specialised funeral parlours, referring to the deceased person as ‘the bather’, washing the bodies, while in the case of historical remains – solemn repeated funerals, exhumations, erection of statues). The other entails dividing bodies into those worthy of commemoration and those unworthy thereof, that is, refusing the status of members of humanity to a group of dead persons – a procedure which makes it possible again to live ‘among them’. This, however, points to the existence of two divergent currents: the humanisation and dehumanisation of the moribund.<sup>20</sup>

Referring to Gnosticism, Libera reminds us that that the contemporary dominance of Christianity in Poland, seemingly natural and self-evident, was far from being a foregone conclusion two millennia ago. In an age when there were numerous factions of sects and preachers-mystics providing their own teaching, the message of Christ was perceived merely as one of very many offers in the religious market. The first Christians made decisions, amounting to propaganda, which determined the future of their confession; meanwhile, Gnosticism would often influence Christians, and the other way around. It is partly because of this that the first Christian sects adopted a negative attitude to matter; some even seriously considered completely abstaining from having progeny.<sup>21</sup> It is also significant that it is the victors in disputes who tend to shape the narrative; hence, we know today Gnostic beliefs mainly from the writings of Church Fathers. Even though fragments of texts written by Gnostics themselves had been found, Libera does not refer to them, which indicates that he found it important to address the institution of the Roman Catholic Church. The debates about Gnosticism served as the stimulus to distinguish between the correct and the erroneous interpretations of Christianity, to separate the ‘pure’ beliefs (orthodoxy)

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20 R. Sendyka, *Poza obozem. Nie-miejsca pamięci – próba rozpoznania*, Warszawa: IBL PAN, 2021, 200–25. Such framing of the reception of *The Bather* proves significant to understanding contemporary social and political phenomena associated with the culture of remembrance (for instance, the death of migrants at the border with Belarus).

21 J. Sawicka, ‘Ciało jako pułapka na drodze do wyzwolenia. Zarys problemu w kontekście refleksji niektórych myślicieli antycznych i wczesnochrześcijańskich’, *Idea. Studia nad strukturą i rozwojem pojęć filozoficznych*, 25 (2013): 47–68.

from those that seemed misleading and wrong, and for theologians to warn their brethren against ‘harmful’ doctrines.<sup>22</sup> The choice of Gnosticism in this context would appear to not have been accidental: during the 1990s, Catholic priests would often depict heresies, religious sects and other associations of worship as unorthodox and dangerous; what Libera did was merely reach back to the origins of this practice. As written by the publisher of the book titled *Gnoza* (1988): ‘For many Christians, this «deeper» faith, i.e., gnosis, basking in the mystery of private revelations, asceticism, and especially elevating them far above the multitude of ordinary Christians, may have been equally alluring then as some elements of the wisdom of the East, transcendental meditation, and «the new religions» in general are today.’<sup>23</sup>

Yet, since the time of polemics against Gnosticism, Christianity has condemned excessive rationality and the possibility to explore the profundity of faith by force of reason alone, probably – among other things – to keep the Gnostic heresy at bay. The temptation of salvation or self-salvation through knowledge seems to be a perennial human desire.<sup>24</sup> Christian self-reflection, which we would refer to today as theology, in the first centuries was also known as gnosis, and thus a true knowledge, as oppose to the false gnosis. Since the very beginning, it was developed in opposition to Gnosticism and was of polemical nature,<sup>25</sup> therefore it turned into a hermeneutics of suspicion, tracing manifestations of false knowledge. The counter-Catholic character of the works is apparent also in the book *Zbigniew Libera. Art of Liberation*, in which photographs of the said exhibition<sup>26</sup> accompany a reprint of a 1991 interview with Adam Michnik conducted by Wojciech Karpiński.<sup>27</sup> As Michnik observed, after the collapse of communism: ‘The Church was faced with the question: what now? It seems to me that it was decided that the foremost threat is posed by the pluralist, lay, Western civilisation. Merely because it is a civilisation based on the principle of pluralism, permissiveness, in which there is room for drugs, divorces, abortion, homosexuality, pornography; in brief, all this syndrome which is

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22 W. Myszor, ‘Między ortodoksją a herezją’, *Teologia Polityczna* (2017), 20 Feb, <https://teologiapolityczna.pl/ks-wincenty-myszor-miedzy-ortodoksja-i-herezja> [accessed 05 Nov. 2021].

23 M. Myszor, ‘Od wydawcy polskiego’, in G. Quispel, *Gnoza*, transl. to Polish by B. Kita, Warszawa: Pax, 1988, 7–8.

24 Idem, ‘Na tropach tajemnej wiedzy’, op. cit.

25 Ibid. 7.

26 S. Breczko (ed.), *Zbigniew Libera. Art of Liberation. Studium prasoznawcze, vol. 1: 1988–1997*, transl. E. Frątczak-Nowotny, M. Wawrzyńczak, Warszawa: CSW Zamek Ujazdowski, 2019, 41–2.

27 Ibid. citation from: W. Karpiński, ‘Nowe wyzwanie. Rozmowa z Adamem Michnikiem’, *Zeszyty Literackie*, 36 (1991): 68–78.

profoundly alien to the Church. And at the same time, it is a civilisation systematically striving to separate the Church from the State.<sup>28</sup>

Poland was to re-Christianise Europe and be the country in which there was no separation of the State from a religious institution. The global message of Libera's exhibition seems to suggest that the Roman Catholic Church uses existential fear of death in order to gain actual political influence. Since the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, Libera followed the propagandistic aspect of the institution's activity and made efforts to comment on it in several of his works (*Monstrancja; Christus its mein Leben*). The installation displayed at the CSW also belong to the group of objects, which the artist later came to see as inefficient because of their veiled message.<sup>29</sup>

Today, a growing number of critics and curators frame the final decade of the twentieth-century art in contexts other than critical; take, for instance, Jakub Banasiak, who focuses on the issue of modernisation and decay of the State-run system of art.<sup>30</sup> Aleksandra Grzonkowska researches the archives of the institutions of Tricity.<sup>31</sup> Daniel Muzyczuk is interested in the influence that anarchism had on art during this period. Some theorists concentrate on spiritual tropes (Paweł Możdżyński,<sup>32</sup> Maksymilian Wroniszewski,<sup>33</sup> Marta Kudelska,<sup>34</sup> and – already mentioned in the footnotes – Karol Sienkiewicz, Anna Batko). The beginning of the 1990s in Poland was marked by an increased interest in broadly

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28 Ibid.

29 He decided that these motifs were not well-recognised as his peers from the Solidarity generation were unable to accept any criticism of the Church, which used to be considered an unequivocally positive institution. Libera stated that during the period when the work was created, he read numerous books on the history of religion, including the writings by Origen and other Church fathers.

30 See, for instance, J. Banasiak, *Proteuszowe czasy. Rozpad państwowego systemu sztuki 1982–1993*, Warszawa: MSN and ASP in Warsaw, 2020; idem, 'Normalizacja i dwie modernizacje. Pole sztuki w Polsce po 30 latach przemian', *Szum*, 27 (2019): 92–109. I wish to express my gratitude to the author for the conversations and his substantive comments about this text.

31 See, i.a., the activity of CHMURA Foundation.

32 P. Możdżyński, *Inicjacje i transgresje. Antystrukturalność sztuki xx i xxi wieku*, Warszawa: UW, 2011.

33 M. Wroniszewski, 'Wątki gnostyckie w gdańskiej sztuce alternatywnej i krytycznej', a paper delivered at the conference *Gdańsk 90.*, 14 Oct 2021, online, CHMURA Foundation [accessed 02 Feb. 2022]. Artists using similar means of expressions may have had entirely different inspirations. Z. Libera was aware of the interest in gnosis in the milieu around Wyspa Gallery in Gdańsk; telephone conversation with the artists, 23 Jan. 2022.

34 N. Grygny, 'Czarownice i duchy znów wypadły z szafy [rozmowa]', [https://lovekrakow.pl/aktualnosci/czarownice-i-duchy-znow-wypadly-z-szafy-rozmowa\\_41627.html](https://lovekrakow.pl/aktualnosci/czarownice-i-duchy-znow-wypadly-z-szafy-rozmowa_41627.html) [accessed 05 Nov. 2021].

understood spirituality (New Age movements, non-European religions, religious syncretism, personalisation of religion, esoteric, gnosis, divination, neopaganism, magic). These topics emerged as content representing various levels of complexity; they could be commercialised or simplified as, for instance, in Zbigniew Nowak's TV Show *Ręce, które leczą* (Hands that Heal), or in tele-fortune-telling programmes,<sup>35</sup> while at the same time they were less commercially approached to in the writings of researcher-enthusiasts (such as Jerzy Prokopiuk), or opponents of the phenomenon, analysing it from the point of view of Catholic theology and the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>36</sup> The phenomenon found its reflection in visual arts, in the works, i.a., by: Paweł Althamer,<sup>37</sup> Barbara Konopka (e.g., *Indyferencje – fluktuacje Księżycy*, 1992), and Ewa Ciepiewska.<sup>38</sup> Zbigniew Libera observed that the tendency may not have necessarily resulted from consumers making conscious choices, but merely from the realisation that these topics may prove profitable and as such find a presence on a welcoming and receptive market and, therefore draw the attention of readers. The focus on alternative forms of spirituality was related to the visits of Polish artists in Western Europe, particularly

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- 35 The phenomenon of the popularity of the notion of supernatural powers in the 1990s was presented, among others, in reportages: P. Lipiński, 'Strzeż się «szaraka»', in P. Lipiński, M. Matys, *Niepowtarzalny urok likwidacji*, Wołowiec: Czarne, 2018, 8–15 (the author focused on Poles claiming to have been visited by extraterrestrials); B. Przybyszewski, M. Witkowski, the series: *Podcastex – podcast o latach 90.*, episode 8 'Zbyszek Nowak i «Ręce, które leczą»', 12 Aug. 2021, [https://youtu.be/V9\\_v1c2F1ts](https://youtu.be/V9_v1c2F1ts), [accessed 26 Oct. 2021]. In parallel, the issue was discussed by scholars: see, for instance, D. Hall, *New Age w Polsce. Lokalny wymiar globalnego zjawiska*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne, 2007; B. Dobroczyński, *New Age*, Kraków: Znak, 1997.
- 36 A. de Lassus, *New Age. Nowa religia?*, transl. to Polish by P. Kalina, Warszawa: CEIR im. Bpa Kajetana Sołtyka, 1993; M. Pawlik, *Utopijny raj New Age*, Sandomierz: Wydawnictwo Diecezjalne, 2013; not as frequent within this approach were more objective attempts to understand the phenomenon: J. Drane, *Co New Age ma do powiedzenia Kościołowi?*, transl. to Polish by K. Stankiewicz, Kraków: Signum, 1993.
- 37 On Althamer's ties to New Age, see W. Kozioł, 'Kosmici, czyli my. Filozofia Nowej Ery jako trop interpretacyjny twórczości Pawła Althamera ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem koncepcji Carla Gustava Junga', *Miejsce*, 3 (2017): 320–55. The issue was exhaustively explored by K. Sienkiewicz, *Patriota Wszechświata. O Pawle Althamerze*, Kraków – Warszawa: MSN and Karakter, 2017.
- 38 Cf. the exhibition of works by E. Ciepiewska, *Chodziłam do zoo patrzeć na czarne pantery... Ale nie wiem czy chciałabym mieć z nimi jakiś bliższy kontakt fizyczny...*, curated by A. Batko, Shefter Gallery in Krakow, 26 Aug. – 23 Sep. 2018; A. Batko, K. Śliwińska, 'Rowek. Rozmowa z Ewą Ciepiewską', *Szum*, 33 (2021): 148–65.

Germany, after 1989, for it enabled people to come into contact with New Age movements through articles in the press, books, exhibition catalogues, and during the very exhibitions devoted to spirituality, including in the works by Joseph Beuys, who was inspired by the anthroposophy of Rudolf Steiner.<sup>39</sup> Another kind of motivation may have been brought in by attempts to find new themes in the re-shaping of the reality of the breakthrough time, as it was impossible to predict the principles of the field of art, then still in the process of construction.<sup>40</sup> In the oeuvre of Libera, the aforementioned installations fall within a cycle of no longer extant objects created in the years 1991–1993, some for the Polish Pavilion for the Biennale in Venice. Large in size, they used, among others, a magnetic field, in one of the works the artist installed an oscilloscope lamp with an electric circuit ‘generating chaos’, visualised via the lamp. Zbigniew Libera does agree that the works created during that period are an expression of certain general trends, although at the level of personal motivations; rather, they were intended to use Gnosticism as an instrument chosen with a specific purpose in mind. The subject was to be a manifestation of anarchism, avoiding direct references thereto, and of an interest in heresy. Ultimately, the artist was dissatisfied with the results of his work, because the created pieces of sculpture were unsettlingly artistic, aesthetic, sculptural, distant from the counter-cultural activities of the 1980s. He was awarded the UNESCO Prize and ended up worrying he might be classified as a producer of ‘pretty things.’ They seemed to express an intoxicating hope that in the new political reality ‘one can now be artistic’, therefore, Libera started to seek methods to alter his artistic idiom, and ‘1994 proved to be a wake-up call’, related to the change of convention.

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39 Cf. A. Holland (ed.), *Joseph Beuys & Rudolf Steiner: Imagination, Inspiration, Intuition*, exhibition catalogue, National Gallery of Victoria, 26 Oct. 2007 – 17 Feb. 2008, Melbourne 2007.

40 The two presented above motivations typical for this generation of artists were suggested to me in conversation by R. Rumas, Nowa Wieś near Warszawa, 14 Oct. 2021.

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### Abstract:

The paper discusses the first individual exhibition of Zbigniew Libera (curated by: Marek Goździewski, Laboratorium Building at the Zamek Ujazdowski Centre for Contemporary Art, 1992). The artist decided to display three installations: *Minuta milczenia – Minuta milczenia – Minuta milczenia*; *Model końca*; *La baigneur (The Bather)*, as well as two drawings, *Bez tytułu* and *[Pathos]* with fragments of texts. The main objective of the article is to provide an interpretation of these works. It applies the classic iconological method developed by Erwin Panofsky, with gnosis and Gnosticism indicated as the iconographic context. Meanwhile, the iconological layer encompasses three major aspects: 1) the trauma of the absence of mourning in the modern world, and the philosophical issue of the mind-body relationship, dealing with the difficult heritage of the past; 2) the criticism of the operation of the Roman Catholic Church as an institution in the context of institutional responses to heresies; 3) the 1990s fascination with alternative spirituality.

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### Keywords:

**Gnosticism, gnosis, political transformation, Polish art of the 1990s, Zbigniew Libera**

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