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WHAT HAPPENED TO THE CIVILISATION OF OLD TIGHTS?

‘Today, we are still coping with the civilisation of septic tanks; we still have to manage, on our Polish scale, the growing civilisation of old tyres, old jumpers, old tights; all of this is still subject to spontaneous and unspecialised processing and absorption or reuse’,¹ wrote Roch Sulima in his well-known essay on the symbolism of the FSO Syrena car, in which he traced its life and death, from faithful companion of (especially) the farmer to the ‘miraculous junk or object of joyful, ritualistic destruction, when Poland was flooded by imported used cars arrived after the political transformation. The old car nicknamed ‘Sock’ literally grew into car parks, gained a new life as a chicken coop or a canopy in a timber yard, but was sometimes also set on fire or covered in graffiti – the time of the ‘burning Syrenas’ coincided with an explosion of subcultural youth activity and the peak of often aggressive expression. Visually, on the level of simple cadres-
-icons, this period is perfectly illustrated by the legend of the Warsaw music club Fugazi, which operated for less than a year in the building of the former w-z cinema. It provided the setting for the explosion of underground creativity, which consisted not only of the facility (cinema) deprived of its original function, but also of the characteristic decoration in the form of souvenirs of the just-ended communist era, transformed through joyful destruction. Syrenas, East German Trabants, as well as the Jelcz buses nicknamed ‘Cucumber’ with removed equipment and painted in expressive patterns became an iconic element of the club’s décor and a symbol of the energy of Poland at the beginning of the decade called by Rafał Książek ‘a wild thing’.²

Sulima wrote down his observations in the 1990s and at the turn of the millennium. Indicating this timeframe is important, as it allows us to follow more closely the evolution of attitudes to the object and its reuse, ranging from practical necessity, imaginative ad hoc recycling, the luxury of destruction or, finally, a hobby: useful but not necessary. The sequences of smaller and larger ‘ends of the world’ that can be traced in Poland’s recent history – having a symbolic, social, economic or geographic nature – were the background but also the modelling factor for this evolution. The administrative reform and the dismantling or downsizing of numerous industrial centres redefined the relationship between the ‘centre’ and the ‘periphery’, when once important localities lost much of their importance. At the same time, economic uncertainty, caused by protracted high unemployment and loss of financial stability, prolonged the persistence of the ‘civilisation of old tyres and tights’. Abandoning the state, industrial or state farm property made large areas of towns and villages become a ‘no-man’s land’, which was invaded by scrap collectors, DIY enthusiasts, collectors, young beer lovers or graffiti artists and, finally, by nature. In such areas, objects were given all sorts of new uses.

1 R. Sulima, *Antropologia codzienności*, Kraków 2000, p. 48.

2 Cf. R. Książek, *Dzika rzecz. Polska muzyka i transformacja 1989–1993*, Wołowiec 2020; M. Podolec, *Fugazi Music Club*, Warszawa 2013.

BOUNDARIES OF ONE'S DISTRICT

When we speak nowadays of the 'ends of the world', 'edges', 'margins', it is easy to feel ambivalence or disorientation in terms of time and space. Post-war Poland in general and post-communist Poland in particular is inextricably linked to the blurring of boundaries, the coexistence of different orders, the non-obvious. Since the times of the Polish People's Republic, following the human migration and the homogenisation of culture, the relationship between town and country has been intensely blurred, enclaves of rurality have been created in the cities and the urban lifestyle has spread to the countryside. In the 21st century in Poland, we are increasingly moving towards the inter-urban (*Zwischenstadt*),³ a space that blurs the boundaries of city, suburb and province, of the global and the local. The aforementioned Roch Sulima paid much attention to gardening at allotment gardens treated as enclaves that allow, or even invite, the re-evaluation of categories. 'Workers' Allotment Gardens are ultimately the world of degraded man, in the sense in which one can speak of man being pushed not only to the periphery of industrial civilisation, but also to the periphery of the natural world. This man, today, cannot define his identity solely in a natural environment ('rurality') or in an exclusively urban environment ('urbanity'),⁴ writes Sulima. 'Everything can turn out useful one day' is one of the principles that, according to the same author, governed the semiotic universe of allotment gardens, a 'paradoxical space': both urban and rural, neither fully belonging to the natural world nor to the culture, neither to rest nor to work, one in which 'the industrial builds the natural',⁵ and where unused objects gain new life.

Spontaneous invention and creativity in a sort of a way automatically leads to associations towards an imagined, ideal rural world, where nothing can be wasted, and where thriftiness is the exemplary attitude. Hence my call for caution in the use of the tempting – and popular in the contemporary discourse – terms of 'province' or 'periphery', as each of them is associated with the risk of a self-fulfilling prophecy of some kind of opposition, whereas the reality is sometimes more complicated. 'Let us remember: the province is the middle, my middle. Moreover: province is some kind of a close, concrete "here", contrasted with a more indefinite "there" (...) because if the inhabitant of a province knows one thing with an unshakable certainty, it is for sure that "life is elsewhere"', wrote Sławomir Mrożek, pointing to the tension made of nostalgia and claustrophobia which impregnates the discourse about the province. However, he later

3 T. Sieverts, *Cities without Cities: An interpretation of the Zwischenstadt*, London 2003, p. 49.

4 Ibidem, p. 24.

5 Ibidem, p. 26.



added that the borders of these worlds are sometimes fluid. ‘Meanwhile, every person, originating from the province or not, is a province himself. The area of each individual consciousness is a province. Wherever the man goes, he always carries the boundaries of his district with him.’⁶

So, let us stretch these boundaries a little and try to swim with the current of ambiguity. Ingenuity and recycling, whether motivated by necessity or choice, is the domain of not only the farmer or the allotment holder, but also the artist, while the spontaneous engineering, architectural or decorative activities spread across the cities, including the largest ones. This has been evidenced, among other things, by the research carried out by a team led by Marek Krajewski, later included in the collective publication *Niewidzialne miasto* [Invisible City]. The research was carried out in several localities and consisted of looking for their hidden, unprogrammed and ad hoc dimension, manifested in amateur gardens, spontaneously arranged rest and meeting places, balcony decorations. The results revealed a map of a ‘parallel world’, present in courtyards, passages, on wastelands, in the third landscape, filling the urban space in its discontinuities, breaches and gaps. Similar explorations of the ‘inter-urbanity’ can be found in the work of artists who openly admit their rurality, provincialism or at least their spiritual solidarity with this ambivalent and often misunderstood space. Andrzej Tobis in his project *a-z. Educational Displays* presents captioned objects from the eponymous dictionary encountered ‘somewhere outdoors’, everywhere and nowhere, although enthusiasts of explorations and expeditions are able to locate them. Whether in the countryside or in the city, the decision of adding an object to the *Dictionary* is usually motivated by the absurdity, the paradox, the stubborn persistence of temporary solutions, the ad hoc ingenuity. Maciej Cholewa, a native of the Silesian town of Radzionków, emphasises the uniqueness and richness of his hometown, a typical rural-urban locality, as evidenced by the alternating exclusion of the village from the boundaries of the city of Bytom and its reincorporation. Cholewa photographs local symbols and peculiarities, makes wickets inspired by the self-welded fences common in the allotment gardens, and finally makes a symbolic connection between Radzionków and the sea (using the town’s synecdoche in the form of a model of the once actually existing general cargo ship *MS Radzionków*). Bartosz Zaskórski, on the other hand, explores the incredibility of a

6 S. Mrozek, *Małe listy*, Kraków 1982, p. 15.

seemingly idyllic rural space, but also the potential for the development of the imagination of a man living in relative isolation and exposed to random inspiration. His exhibition, organised together with his father Tomasz, *Spaceship as Big as Half a Village*, presents the possibilities for the development of such an imagination and its surprising mutations, which are possible when it is left with sufficient leeway, with space for randomly chosen books from the library, computer games and the forest. Zaskórski's current artistic work is extending the uncanny to wider territory, as evidenced by his comic book with action set in the alternative Postapoland. All of these are visions of a world which is most comfortable for, on the one hand, the 'degraded' man: a scrap-collector or a rural outsider, and, on the other, a flaneur or an artist. These categories of people have different economic status, they differ in the extent of what they can afford their degree of comfort in life, but they happen to appear in one and the same person or community.

SELF-RESOURCEFUL LIFE

'Ends of the world' can represent places and non-places, but also transitions from one reality to another, caesuras in life, private apocalypses. Such fates are represented by the protagonists of Tomasz Rakowski's book *Łowcy, zbieracze, praktycy niemocy* (Hunters, Collectors, Practitioners of Impotence) – people whose stable world came to an end with the processes of privatisation after 1989 and who were condemned by the ruthless logic of narrowly understood profitability to functioning outside society, where, relying on self-reliance and mutual aid, they had to organise life on their own terms. These are farmers from the Kielce region who, faced with the liquidation of the cooperative that used to buy their crops, have turned into herbalists, miners from Walbrzych, extracting coal in illegal bootleg mining after the mines were closed, and finally scrap collectors – outsiders in one of Poland's richest municipalities (Kleszczów), living in makeshift houses on the border of a large opencast mine and living off materials found in the dumps of the Bełchatów mine. Living close to his protagonists, Rakowski consider their ways of coping as signs of entrepreneurship and resourcefulness (and not pathological behaviour or ineptitude, contrary to the one-dimensional model of the 'successful man' favoured by the spirit of the times). Forced by necessity, they became ad hoc inventors, builders, explorers.

Objects gaining second lives played a significant role in the universes of the 'degraded people'. Above all, they were a source of income, as in the case of the Walbrzych miners forced by the dramatic situation to participate in the demolition of their former workplaces in order to collect scrap metal. On occasions, however, discoveries awakened the collector, the enthusiast, and it happened that post-industrial objects from the abandoned mine facilities, which bring to mind the times when the city had

German name of Waldenburg, ended up in the miners' homes as private treasures. The life of the inhabitants of the Bełchatów mine outskirts, on the other hand, is reminiscent of typical cyberpunk plot solutions, with a division between the modern city or plant – for a select few only – and the outsiders living outside it, using – and often building self-made equipment – from the waste discarded by the 'better world'. Scrap metal from the huge mine dump, which the villagers call a stock exchange, goes to a recycling centre, waste is used for fire, while small appliances, furniture and everyday devices are collected in houses, or rather house-worlds, because, as Rakowski notes, in this 'self-resourceful' living the boundary between home and world becomes blurred. Items fill the houses and spill out, either gaining a new purpose or just waiting for it, as something that might be useful. 'I feel that this accumulation becomes more important than the need itself, it is an imperative to keep using what is, developing it',⁷ the author explains. Such 'self-resourceful' living is a constant process including both searching and reworking.

Rakowski's widely-commented book brings to mind similar records of life after a catastrophe, especially after World War II – for example, the accounts of the 'Robinson Crusoes of Warsaw' sheltering in the ruins after the suppression of the 1944 uprising and organising makeshift daily life there; one of Kazimierz Karabasz's documentaries in which we see a housewife carrying water for the animals in a German helmet she found, or in the studies of self-made architecture published by Jan Minorski. In 1963, this author analysed the houses built from found materials in the still undeveloped ('ownerless') areas of Warsaw. Despite intensive reconstruction work, the capital remained largely ruined after the war, and the need for places to stay was enormous. Architecture, which, according to Minorski, was: 'spontaneous, as the result of vivid, concrete action arising without design, changeable, Tachistic',⁸ resulted from the pure necessity arising from post-war poverty and the influx of new residents. The countryside was thus transformed into an ever-widening suburb with inhabitants working in small repair workshops, handicrafts, services and the production of plaster decorations, which were fashionable at the time. Poets Miron Białoszewski and Stanisław Swen Czachorowski described such a (no longer existing) landscape of the rural-urban Warsaw, full of makeshift cottages surrounded by well-tended gardens, with their uncouth poetics.

Moving to the outskirts of what was then Warsaw often involved changing one's lifestyle from rural to urban, although residents did not give up having their greenhouses or vegetable gardens. 'The builder, when breaking with the traditional notion of a house, is not doing so for intellectual

7 T. Rakowski, *Łowcy, zbieracze, praktycy niemocy*, Gdańsk 2009, p. 115

8 J. Minorski, *Architektura samorzutna*, "Architektura" 1963, No. 4, p. 114.



photograph by Olga Drenda

reasons. He specifically takes and simply incorporates those elements that are achievable for him. Satisfied with the lowest-grade materials, “sorted” from the state-planned construction sites, employing the least qualified labour, and following the ideas of the local site manager, usually a member of the family, he does not, however, reject technical advances, such as the use of fused panels, he intensifies the use of small spaces by using the electric washing machine or an additional window open not only to the surroundings, but to the whole world: the radio receiver or, even more so, the TV set. He can absorb also other new materials and new ideas’, wrote Minorski with kindness about the ingenuity of the inhabitants of small single-family houses, adding a reflection somehow similar to ideas raised by Rakowski: ‘The construction is never completed. It is always ready for further changes, divisions, additions.’⁹

THIRD WAVE

As mentioned in the introduction, periods of ambiguity and the blurring of boundaries have also fostered an evolution in the status and function of objects. The bootleg miner was discovering in himself a collector; the faithful FSO Syrena car was transformed into a chicken coop or an abandoned object serving for the fun of destruction. ‘The civilisation of tyres and old tights’ can have different faces: a purely utilitarian and

⁹ Ibidem.

rudimentary one, where the object plays a substitute role in a situation of economic collapse, but also one in which it transforms itself into an artefact of resourcefulness. Tyres can, unfortunately, be used as an annoying, poisonous fuel when one cannot afford cleaner, legal fuel. However, they can also be transformed into a child's swing or a garden decoration. Tights can serve as a cover for collecting leftover soap when even such a basic commodity proves too expensive or when goods are rationed. At the same time, they can suddenly turn out useful for express car repairs, to replace a v-belt, or for decoration and fun, e.g., used to braid a rug.

Today, this way of living is sometimes called 'zero waste' and is associated with a conscious choice motivated by self-sufficiency or care for the environment. In the United States, the attitude of the conscious consumer was described and recognised in the late 1970s and early 1980s; it was fostered by the economic crisis of the time, but also by the awakening environmental awareness. Alvin Toffler, in his book *The Third Wave* (1980), in which he provided a characteristic of the post-industrial society, announced the re-evaluation of manual labour. 'Where working with one's hands was looked down upon (at least by the middle class) it is now a sign of pride. People doing their own work are proud of it,'¹⁰ he explained. This change was supposed to stem from the weariness with alienation and automation of work and become a search for the added value that such effort (non-compulsory, voluntary) and the satisfaction of the visible result of one's effort can provide.

A little earlier, in 1972, Charles Jencks and Nathan Silver proposed a concept of 'ad hocism'. The book-manifesto of the same title is a reminder of the utopian optimism of the era, symbolised by the Whole Earth Catalog, Buckminster Fuller or the hippie Drop City: projects based on a belief in technology in service to environmental consciousness and, equally, in the self-control of human beings liberated from hierarchical systems. Jencks and Silver proposed solutions to what Claude Lévi-Strauss would call bricolage, i.e. the use of currently available materials, 'radical democracy and pragmatism'¹¹, creating something out of nothing.

At the time of the book's publication, unbeknownst to its authors, these principles were already put into practice by the Beskids highlanders, who on their own, using car and motorbike parts, built tractors suitable for mountain use, as the machines offered by the state-owned factory Ursus did not guarantee such a feature. Even after they had ceased to function, they were still a source of pride for the resourceful constructors portrayed by Łukasz Skąpski in his project entitled *Machines*. We can

10 A. Toffler, *Trzecia fala* (The Third Wave), Warszawa 1986, p. 318.

11 W.C. Holman, *Adhocism*, <<http://objectguerilla.com/blog/2013/9/26/ad-hocism>> [accessed on: 20 April 2022].

venture with some measure of certainty that on the other side of the Iron Curtain a similar process was taking place; the 'self-resourceful' life was somehow forced by the economic conditions, imposing a top-down modesty and reliance on the work of one's own hands, but at the same time providing a reason for pride or a pretext to develop passions. This phenomenon did not apply only to Poland, as evidenced, for example, by the Domáci umění project,¹² dedicated to DIY and grassroots artistic creativity in Czechoslovakia. The do-it-yourself enthusiast, the practical housewife, the allotment gardener – such lifestyles, although produced by economic necessity, have become part of the voluntarily assumed identity of the thrifty, inventive but also creative man. After 1989, the palette of attitudes towards the object was supplemented by the gesture of luxury, manifest extravagance or symbolic abandonment, farewell. It was no coincidence that the 'spring of burning Syrenas' came at a time when buying a used Western car on the market place became considerably easier and, above all, direct, without having to rely on a system of subscriptions and vouchers.

The exhibition at Olsztyn's BWA gallery *Where Do the Tyre Swans Fly Away* (2021) shows well the transition from pure practicality to creativity as described in *The Third Wave*. It explored the relationship between industry, in this case tyre manufacturing (for which Olsztyn is known), and creativity. It purposely features works by artists who refer to the creative upcycling of recyclable materials or individuals who document such endeavours. 'UTILITARIAN WASTE ARE AN ADDITIONAL WEALTH OF THE NATION' – such a slogan, representing 'charm' typical for the communist period, was perpetuated by Władysław Hasiór in his *Notatniki fotograficzne* [Photographic Notebooks]. In his times, used tyres were mainly turned into swings or low fences. It was not until the new millennium that an explosion of creativity involving this material took place and the garden swan made of tyres, which in the 1960s was a symbol of Australian suburbia and the idyllic life of the growing middle classes, arrived in Poland and, more broadly, in the whole of Central and Eastern Europe. Nowadays, detached from this context, it is associated with our region of Europe to the extent that it is sometimes considered an endemic rubber fauna. The case of the swan shows best the tangles of ambiguity that accompany spontaneous, voluntary invention and creativity. It crosses not only the boundaries of city and village, but also of continents. Today, the sentimental shadow of the swan hovers over the remnants of civilisation of old tyres and tights, which have been transformed into ingenious handicraft material for the 'less waste' enthusiasts.

12 <http://www.domaciumeni.cz> [accessed on: 7 October 2022].

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Abstract:

The paper explores the ambiguity and ambivalence of the terms 'ends of the world' and 'peripheries' from the perspective of spontaneous creativity as a characteristic of these locations in both geographic or symbolic terms. By pointing to instances from different places and times, as well as citing conscious, artistic references to them, the author draws attention to flows, grey areas, osmosis and dynamics: both of contractual 'peripheries' and of the spontaneous invention associated with them.

Keywords:

**vernacular aesthetics, do-it-yourself, diy,
zero waste, self-generated creativity, products,
adhocism**

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Born in 1984, writer, essayist, translator. She graduated in Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology from Jagiellonian University. Author of the books *Duchologia polska. Rzeczy i ludzie w latach transformacji* [Polish Hauntology. Things and People in the Years of Transformation], and *Wyroby. Pomysłowość wokół nas* [Self-made Goods. Ingenuity Around Us] (for which she received a nomination for the Polityka Passports and the Gdynia Literary Award in the essay category). She hosted a podcast about folklore, *Ducholożka na tropie* [Hauntologist on the Trail]. She is also involved in educational activities as a lecturer in visual anthropology at the School of Form and of vernacular aesthetics at IHS PAN. She has been a guest lecturer at the University of Silesia and Universität Wien and has conducted workshops for, among others, the Museum of Art in Łódź and the University of Gdańsk. Since 2013, she has been running Facebook.com/spirituality, a page dedicated to the spectres of the times of Polish political transformation.