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Editorial board

# SELF-CONTAINED WORLDS? EDITORIAL DEBATE

## CIRCULATIONS

**Magdalena Ujma:** While working on the issue of *Elementy* devoted to the alternative systems of art distribution, I kept wondering what their alternative status would actually consist in and whether or not we could speak of their marginalisation compared with what we consider to be the mainstream. After all, if we take comic book art, drawing, or even bookplate art, each of these 'niches' has a circle of devout followers, with their distribution systems operating according to the predictions made by sociologists of culture in the early years of the Internet, namely, that we would live in the world of niche distribution systems and there would no longer be a single centre. Indeed, our speaking of marginalisation implies the existence of a centre. What is it?

**Jakub Woynarowski:** The 'centre' is someone who sets the hierarchy – the distribution system that purports to be the mainstream. Thus, we refer to whatever the people who organise that system consider to be the centre and periphery. Alternative systems we are interested in are poorly represented in or downright absent from the official institutional discourse. And even if they do surface there, it is only sporadically, as presentations in the spirit of 'let's see how are they doing now'.

**MU:** In our art history course, we learned nothing at all about design, and yet it is a flourishing field at the moment. Nevertheless, one can say that in the institutional system of art distribution, design continues to play – albeit with some exceptions – a marginal role.

**JW:** Assuming the impact on reality as an important criterion, design seems to be meeting it to a larger extent than a gallery exhibition. There remains, of course, the pressure from those providing the funding for a specific project. Likewise institutionally, on the part of state and local authorities or patrons financially supporting their activity. Still, when I think of socially engaged art, design meets these criteria to a larger extent...

**Michał Zawada:** Because of its direct influence on reality.

**MU:** Whereas visual arts suffer from having no agency... As for alternative streams, even in institutional circulation one can find galleries specialising in the marginalised drawing or comic book art. These, admittedly, are situated rather locally; I am thinking of the BWA Galleries in Zamość and Jelenia Góra.

**JW:** Speaking of drawing, it is to a certain extent represented in the mainstream of art distribution. There still is, say, the Think Tank Lab Triennial in Wrocław, which makes valuable effort to introduce drawing to a wider system of art distribution. In this context, it is worth mentioning the *Painters*

*of Illustrations* exhibition, held at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. However it was rather a 'one-off' event – such presentations tend to reaffirm the status of illustration as a separate phenomenon that does not take a regular part in the system of art distribution. The same is true of comic book art. It is regarded as a distinct microcosm, presented in art institutions as a thematic 'bullet-point' of sorts in order to familiarise with the phenomenon a public that is hardly well-versed therein. Nevertheless, comic book art does not belong to the mainstream of art as something permanently established, on par with other genres of it.

**mz:** It is not really a matter of the distinction set by a medium or genre, but rather of the relation between institutional art and the distribution of symbolic capital. We may very well imagine the situation of an artist who possess a certain symbolic capital, active precisely in such marginalised branches of art. Let us take, for instance, Sasnal, as a creator of comic book art. Even though the medium appears to lay outside the central current of the institutional system of visual art distribution, in the hands of a mainstream artist it proves attractive for the artworld. It seems, therefore, that it is not the form of expression that demarcates the border between the well-established and the marginal. I think that we should return to the initial question, namely, whether the centre exists and – if so – what it is like. There certainly is not a single centre, albeit one is postulated by various conspiracy theorists within the artworld. Perhaps it is more akin to a network of gravitational points around which various communities coalesce. They are sure to share certain common traits, qualitative connections; however, they may just as well function entirely regardless of one another. We can consider centres being established in respective countries, regions, and local art centres. The mechanism of gravitation causes larger bodies to attract smaller ones; hence, what emerges at this juncture is a kind of hierarchical space. Smaller subjects revolve around the centre, enriching the ecosystem of the latter, but – as we are well aware – such centres may expand to such an extent that they 'devour' their peripheries. The question remains: what determines such a gravitational pull. Is it money or is it something else? I believe that in the institutional domain of art it is both the money and something less tangible, that is...

**JW:** ... symbolic capital. I think that in the Polish conditions it may even be the dominant force because the money is rather in short supply.

**mz:** At times, symbolic capital coincides with the monetary one.

**Kinga Nowak:** Now, to come back to marginalised art distribution systems, illustrators are indeed welcome in mainstream galleries as exceptions that are supposed to prove the rule.

**JW:** Maciej Bieńczyk is a good example here, as he operates at the intersection of visual arts, illustration, comic book art, and literature. Even though his presence is predominantly felt in the literary market, from time to time he is also featured by artistic institutions. Furthermore, he is – at least in theory – represented by the Raster Gallery. This shows that such instances do occur. There was also the loud *Black and White* exhibition held at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw (MSN), which featured comic book art and animation, as well as – to a degree – illustration, though more as instruments used by artists with established reputation in the institutional mainstream. This is the phenomenon that Michał Zawada mentioned a moment ago. There are some people active in the borderlands, such as Dan Perjovschi, who started his artistic career as a politically engaged newspaper cartoonist. I remember an attempt to introduce Marek Raczkowski into the gallery system – I was very much interested in what that would result in, but it turned out to result in nothing.

**MU:** When it comes to a switch in the opposite direction, I remember Janek Koza. He had his roots in the world of visual arts.

**JW:** He even was – according to a classification by critics from *Raster* – considered a representative of pop-banalism, much in the vein of Grupa Ładnie. He subsequently made a turn towards satirical press illustration and remained faithful to this field. Thus, individual transgressions do occur. Still, the presence of illustrators within the mainstream of art is not all that noticeable. Occasional displays tend to reaffirm the ghetto status of this branch as an aesthetic niche. We ironically refer to this phenomenon as ‘ethnographical exhibitions’. We survey them as unprofessional art.

**MU:** Precisely, ethnography. For instance, the art by artists with Romani background, Małgorzata Mirga-Tas and Krzysztof Gil, broke through to the mainstream via ethnographic museums.

**MZ:** They aspired to be recognised and waited for the institutions to be ready to receive them. Exactly the same mechanism as regards the acknowledgement of marginalised artistic groups and phenomena worked throughout the 19th and the 20th.

**MU:** I would like to broaden the list of examples already presented by that of photography. There are at least two streams of it. Photography is created by photographers but also by visual artists – and the two subsets tend not to intermingle...

**JW:** This is precisely the issue covered by André Rouille in his book *Photography: Between Document and Contemporary Art*, where he precisely

defined the two phenomena as ‘photographers’ art’ and ‘artists’ photography’. A similar principle will apply in the case of comic book art, animation, and film – the mechanism is replicated in numerous areas.

**MZ:** It happens, at times, that an amateur who avails her- or himself of the language of photography – after all, everyone takes photographs – may find an easier access to the institutional system of art than a professional who devoted his entire life to mastering his craft. It all hinges on the process of project conceptualisation.

**MU:** It is only now that newspaper journalists with immense oeuvre, such as Wojciech Plewiński, are being introduced to gallery spaces.

### CAPITALS

**Małgorzata Płazowska:** In what you have been saying, there is a clear distinction between applied art, which is more accessible, and high art. This is a lasting distinction.

**MU:** Pure art is at the centre.

**JW:** Through the notion of ‘applicability’, we may also be referring to a more straight-forward and easier to verify means of expressions, such as, for instance, the set of classic skills and techniques. In the case of the mainstream of institutional art, reaching for a form of expression more accessible to receivers ‘from the outside’ tends to be looked down upon – as an indication that someone was unable to assimilate the arsenal of means used in contemporary art, that she or he did not fully decipher its language. In ‘photographers’ photography’, for instance, we tend to recognise traditional skills and techniques, which a casual member of the audience may find easier to fathom. What transpire here is another aspect of art situated outside the institutional mainstream, one related to its applicability or accessibility.

**MZ:** In this context, photography’s path to emancipation within the discourse of fine arts proves very intriguing. As late as in the 19th century, photography still had to imitate the language of the mainstream medium of painting in order to be able to make its way to the system of art distribution. Likewise film had to imitate theatre and visual arts.

**MU:** I will refer back to what we have already said about the centre, namely, that what we find there is economic capital and prestige, i.e., symbolic capital. I would like to remind you of Wojciech Szafranski’s text we published in the issue no. 3 of *Elementy*. In his take, the two capitals tend

to diverge from one another: the economic capital does not have to correspond to prestige. Such artists as Rafał Olbiński and Jacek Yerka earn millions, but it does not follow that they are recognised within the history of art. They are labelled as the representatives of ‘magical realism’.

**MZ:** As a result, there situations when an artist doing very well for her- or himself financially is completely absent from the institutional system of distribution. It makes one think. The question is whether it is a specifically Polish phenomenon or whether it is a totally universal circumstance, which would mean that there is a mechanism that governs how the artworld operates that ultimately has to produce the said distinction. It is common knowledge that painting is a ‘gallery-based discipline’, it turns out, however, that some of the output within the medium is restricted to the relation studio–viewer, excluding any institutions. Sometimes, besides direct selling from the gallery, there may be an intermediary element, although in the era of Instagram even an auction house with all its prestige and economic resources proves inessential. There is a gallery community that displays such art, but more often than not the latter has the status of an extra.

**KN:** Interestingly, studios do not require any verification and no criticism could change the existing situation. One can say that there is art that can be subject to criticism and art that cannot.

**JW:** The missing criticism as a criterion?

**MZ:** Here, the term ‘critic’ simply indicates a specific customer who decides whether or not to buy a given piece. This is where the crucial verification comes about.

**JW:** As a result, an outside observer may get the impression that this system of art distribution is to a greater extent democratised.

**MZ:** I am convinced that the world of such an alternative system of painting art distribution is less prone to speculations. Prices development is more stable and more predictable; it is far more like the traditional circulation of goods.

**MU:** The market that trades in Olbiński, Yerka and Siudmak has no need for external validation. It does not require to be recognised by what we consider to be the mainstream. It has its own authorities. It has its own galleries. It has been approached by pgs (State Art Gallery), under the previous Director, Zbigniew Buski. It is in no need of our criticism for it

has its own. Piotr Sarzyński appears to be courting that world. That system has its own artists and its own art collectors. If it needs any criticism at all, it is a laudatory one which James Elkins once wrote about as constituting a necessary complement of any artist's portfolio.

**JW:** Yet it is often the case that artists of the 'second circuit', in spite of having well-established financial situation, are envious of the symbolic capital offered by the institutional mainstream...

**MZ:** It raises the question about the reason why artists who are in demand, whose works regularly sell out and are featured in numerous auctions, will never have an exhibition in the Zachęta Gallery. There is a bilateral tension palpable here: one group enjoys financial stability, the other has access to symbolic capital.

**MP:** I wonder whether or not in the West there is such a great divergence between these two worlds. And if there is not, whether this is the result of the audience having a better education. After all, people there are educated in art from a very early age and by that token the two worlds converge – the world of the market and that of leading art institutions.

**JW:** At the same time, it is worth keeping in mind that it is the institutional mainstream that determines the canon which – even if shifting and evolving dynamically, it becomes more inclusive – continues to define what we consider worthy of the name of art. When we speak of the need for education, the following argument very often emerges: were the society better educated, people would know, say, that conceptual art is worth their interest, their money to purchase it, etc. In truth, however, it is in the interest of the 'centre' to make us believe that conceptual art is indeed a valuable enterprise, that the symbolic capital behind it prevails... Hence, thinking of the entire discourse that accompanies the institutional system of art distribution, that is, thinking of historiography, history, and theory of art, criticism – it is worth remembering that it is in the interest of the centre to shape that discourse in such a way that it would correspond to the beliefs holds therein.

**MU:** Creating a narrative of art without any inconsistencies and cracks, a narrative of constant development, progress, and improvement. Even though it is not true.

**JW:** Canon continues to evolve constantly. We have seen how the 20th century vision of art development changed since the famous diagram by Alfred Barr, and what the history of the avant-garde is now. This tale has come to feature phenomena that were previously absent from it, but it

does not change the fact that we still do not have a complete picture of the situation. We may expect it to never be complete, considering that every historical narrative tends to hierarchise reality. Something will always be deemed more noteworthy while something else will drop out of sight.

**MU:** Remember what Piotr Piotrowski said in his final interviews, when he was developing a comprehensive overview of the Central and Eastern European art? He claimed that the centre can be discovered in the periphery. He advocated a network history of art, that is, one revealing the horizontal mesh of connections and collaboration, for instance, between South America and Eastern Europe. It was also important for him to seek the marginal in the centres. Do you think that it can be applied to contemporary situation in the artworld?

**MZ:** Results of such thinking are certainly visible even though it does not reduce the existence of the centre. There are countless events, festivals, biennials outside the geographical centre; however, we continue to revolve around those initial hierarchies.

**MU:** But, returning to what occurs in Poland, we do see the need for prestige. The Polish society hungers for it, it has experienced social advancement and wishes to display its newly acquired status. Such aspiration may be one of the reasons behind the emergence of the market for magical realism and its derivatives. It is also noticeable that the legacy of Polish People's Republic (PRL) has ultimately turned into its own caricature; after all, during the PRL era the idea was to bring the art of modernism to wide masses – for example, through the itinerant exhibitions in the BWA (Office for Art Exhibitions) network, or the Museum of Art in Łódź. What is left of that noble idea? Yet contemporary art, the one that has institutional *imprimatur* of the major institutions of art – Zachęta Gallery, Museum of Modern Art, National Museums – has become completely elitist.

**JW:** This causes a grassroots backlash, encapsulated by the ever returning question: how on Earth it is possible that public institutions, spending public money, display art that nobody wants to see, whereas art that sells well and is present in the lives of Polish men and women remains totally marginalised?

**KN:** The collectors who aspire to be in the prestigious centre want to have their names inscribed in the history of art. I wonder whether or not the substantial amounts of money they invest will pay off, which would mean that the painters of the magical genre would in fact go down in history. Their works are not verified in any manner. Should they survive, and if so, as what?



**JW:** Speaking of the ‘magical genre’ – it is worth noting that, besides this popular phenomenon, the ‘second circuit’ features various aesthetics, such as hyperrealism and pop art, which also transpire into the institutional mainstream. Hence, the problem lies not only in specific stylistics – it is also the matter of the subjects tackled and the selection of artistic strategies.

**KN:** Financial security is greater there. Perhaps it is also easier to operate there, for there is no competition for social prestige and therefore no unpleasant clashes.

**MZ:** The stakes in the mainstream are indeed extremely high. Only those who have acquired symbolic prestige, in fact, are guaranteed any financial stability in the institutional path. As a result, very few benefit therefrom and arguments heat up.

**MU:** And what do you think about frustrated artists who aspire to be recognised within the realm of good non-commercial art, but are not? They are riled up because they believe they are no worse. And oftentimes that is the case.

**JW:** Such a tendency is present in all art distribution systems. There are always attitudes that are marginalised.

**MZ:** In the Polish context, with its strong gravitational pull towards the symbolic centre situated in a single place, such attitudes are left without an outlet, there is no other way to vent them. In more decentralised circles, one can speak of greater pluralism. It is easier to get your foot in the door there, whereas in Poland, if an artist does not gain a foothold in the mainstream, he won’t find it anywhere.

## CENTRES

**MP:** My question is whether we are to consider as the centre Warsaw exclusively, or whether other hubs, such as Kraków and Gdańsk, are strong enough to compete with the capital city?

**MZ:** For at least two decades, we have seen the process of symbolic capital being centralised in Warsaw, which is an unequivocal indication that there is only one such place in Poland.

**JW:** Warsaw has sucked it all up. I still remember a moment, roughly 15 years ago, when the potential of smaller artistic centres was analysed in terms of a real counterbalance for the capital city. But it was merely wishful

thinking, never to be realised. In this context, the history of individual exhibitions of Tomek Kowalski was brought up as a promising example, because following his debut in the Nova Gallery in Kraków he amassed some symbolic capital during a mini-tour of Western Poland in order to soon afterwards – bypassing Warsaw – open a solo exhibition in the Carlier | Gebauer gallery in Berlin.

**MU:** He had a high-profile exhibition in Zielona Góra.

**JW:** Furthermore, a part of the problem seems to be the centralisation of economic capital; after all, almost all leading commercial galleries have relocated to Warsaw or simply disappeared from the market.

**MZ:** When it comes to access to the institutional world of art, there certainly is a powerful tendency to shift oneself towards the centre. Thus, even if an initiative emerges in the periphery, it will need to be approved by the centre. But if we look at the problem through the lens of applicability – that is, for instance – applied social influence, we are more interested in the local. In such cases the approval from the center is of no particular importance.

**MU:** On the one hand, there is the distribution system that requires Warsaw's approval. The 'province' has to be given such a permit, Warsaw has to display its interest, send representatives to check and provide a verdict, something along the lines of: 'Tarnów is good because the exhibitions there are like the ones we have in Warsaw'. It is also the case of Szalona Galeria, when Warsaw-based artists set forth from Warsaw to 'enlighten' the provinces with contemporary modern art. At the same time – as you have pointed out, Michał – there is another circuit, one we could refer to as 'local'. The venues therein manage their audiences, their exhibitions well. The Offices of Art Exhibitions (BWA) in smaller cities, such as Krosno and Zamość, work in the interest of their local communities and do not lose sleep over the distant centre. They hold exhibitions, attract workshop and training participants, promote artists from within their own communities, they keep in touch with other similar hubs. They often hold open-air workshops and sales of art works.

**JW:** These smaller galleries need to be validated by their local community; hence, their repertoire is inevitably more syncretic – even if they do implement something from the centre, they have to take into consideration the artists active locally. Looking through the lists of participants in contemporary art exhibitions held there, we discover names that never made it to the centre. However, the lesser the distance from the centre, the more fixed

the 'attendance list'. There are many mechanisms at play here, described already in the 1990s in critical papers created in within the community of *Raster*. A major role in the 'integrated circuit' of Polish art was played by the BWA galleries, classified in terms of their dependency on Warsaw into 'crunchy and stale BWA (bread) rolls', the 'stale' ones being those that lost contact with the centre, ones where we can no longer find leaflets of Warsaw-based institutions. [laughing]

**MU:** I always found the Museum of Art in Łódź to be a remarkable institution because it has always striven to be its own centre and has a distinct individual (not Warsaw-centred) system of references. Likewise, albeit in another context, the Centre of Contemporary Art in Toruń.

**MZ:** True, but in the case of the Museum of Art there is the power of the institution as such and it has a solid base. The centre provides visibility; therefore, were we to assume that an artist aims for the universality of their message, there can be no doubt that they can be assisted by the centre. Within a local activity, we remain limited to a very specific field of visibility.

**JW:** If an institution's profile is that of local activity, it actually does not need an external *imprimatur*, because its mission is fulfilled through its direct on-site activity.

**MU:** The issue of visibility stirs a great deal of emotions. It is not even about whether or not a given institution is acknowledged by an opinion-forming and visibility-providing periodical of art criticism, but rather about being picked up on by high-circulation non art-oriented media. It is more important to be featured, even in a short paragraph, in *Polityka*, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, or something as glamorous as *Vogue*. Such were the really strong aspirations of institutions from 'the interior'; today, however, they have become aware of the way content is selected by magazines of country-wide circulation. If a journalist of *Wysokie Obcasy* likes an exhibition held in the Kronika Centre of Contemporary Art (CSW), she will write about it, but it is a matter of luck and of a chain of acquaintances that are able to reach her. Warsaw presents the interior as a curiosity. We all know that nationwide media in fact operate as the local media of Warsaw and it is a significant problem.

I would like to ask you about what this centre of ours is oriented towards, though. Are we still as dependent on the West as we were shortly after the systemic transformation? There was a debate, in the 1990s, about whether or not Polish art is dependent on the West and whether or not it should retain its specificity. As usual in semi periphery countries (as some scholars

categorise us), the motifs of native culture clashed with the cosmopolitan ones. What is the situation like today?

**MZ:** I believe that we continue to be dependent on the West. This dependency may have taken on a different form, but persist it does. As long as Polish institutions are oriented towards global institutions, such as documenta, the Venice Biennale, or Manifesta, we are dealing with a dependency.

**MU:** What a momentous event is each and every competition for the Polish Pavilion in Venice! It is discussed as if it were the key event of the Biennial itself, while in fact it is a mere speck in the rich programme of the undertaking.

**MZ:** But it elevates the artist to the global pantheon. From the local perspective, it is tantamount to the highest praise.

**KN:** We have seen some change. It was in the past a rule that an artist must be exported to the West to only later be sold in Poland. Nowadays, some of this capital can be found in Poland and sending artists abroad for them to be approved by the main centre is no longer as necessary. Which means that there are now artists who aim for the Polish audience. Having said that, most artists from the Foksal Gallery Foundation are sent abroad and only later capitalised in Poland. Nevertheless, there is much capital in Poland and art can be capitalised without being brought to the West.

**MU:** Take for example the career of Mirosław Bałka. After his Polish beginnings, he was exported to the West. It was only several years later that he had his triumphant presentation in Poland, in the form of the 1994 *Rampa* exhibition held in the Museum of Art in Łódź.

**JW:** In the case of artists who are at the same time academics, the necessity of an international career is linked with the requirements of the academic 'point-mania' and evaluation criteria. Furthermore, there is the social stereotype according to which the artist's presence abroad is evidence of their prestige. Reading biographical entries of many artists, we tend to discover that the accounts of their oeuvre open with an exhibition in a large foreign centre, even if it was held in a second-rate gallery.

**MU:** At the beginning of its activity, *Raster* referred to its readers as young Polish intelligentsia.

**JW:** The issue of the audience is almost non-existent in the Polish criticism of today. Contemporary art functions above all else as a community and

expert phenomenon, analysed by other creators and critics who vouch for its quality. One can hardly shake the feeling that it is *de facto* a vicious circle, with external spectators being nice but non-essential extras.

### CONNECTIONS

**MU:** I have thought of Stach Szablowski. He is a Warsaw-based critic and, concurrently, a curator. He enjoys visibility as a critic regularly published in *Dwutygodnik*, *Przekrój*, and *Zwierciadło*, a glossy magazine. And yet he does not cling to the centre. He is an exception as such. He does a lot of travelling. He has recently curated the exhibition of Bielsko Autumn. Do you think that he is able to challenge the monopoly of the centre? Admittedly, he comes with his artists, but he also gets to know others on site.

**JW:** It has potential. The greater the number of people who migrate somewhere – whether for reasons economic or other – the better, for information is conveyed better through direct contact, not gossip and guesswork. Incidentally, the category of curiosity about the world proves extremely important here, though it continues to be poorly represented within our community.

**MU:** Curators of the Zachęta Gallery never travel much in Poland. It has always perplexed me.

**JW:** I think that such a ‘tour’ should be a matter of standard, routine.

**MZ:** Annual tour.

**MU:** Another influential critic, Karol Sienkiewicz, seemingly did mention his rural background, but he does not embrace curiosity about the world unless it has been acknowledged by Anda Rottenberg and the Foksal Gallery Foundation. The popular faction of Polish art is guided by the principle: ‘I do not analyse what I see, I write about my free associations’.

**JW:** There are also reviews in the vein of: ‘I did not go and neither should you’. [laughing]

**MU:** I would like to return for a moment to the question posed by Małgorzata: are there any centres to compete against Warsaw? Was it Wrocław, a trend that culminated in its nomination as the European Capital of Culture? Is it Gdańsk with the Nomus?

**MZ:** Periphery centres need to find inner strength to decide: 'Fine, despite everything, it is worth investing in the local'. This is a process of rebuilding on the ashes. Polish cities with population over 100,000 inhabitants, that used to be lively centres, have been swallowed by Warsaw and are now rediscovering their identity.

**MU:** Cities have been strengthened after the accession to the EU. On the other hand, however, we are dealing with a growing centralisation in Poland. Previously enforced by the neoliberal dictate of free market, it is now further reinforced by the authorities, who – as regards culture – strive for as many institutions as possible to be controlled by the Ministry. I think that cities that wanted to become centres of culture were in the end unsuccessful. After being the European Capital of Culture, Wrocław turned out to have a good PR, but then they failed to part ways in a civil manner with Dorota Monkiewicz, who did very well managing Wrocław Contemporary Museum (MWW), and with the long-standing Director of BWA, Marek Puchała. In Gdańsk, their ambitions were also great, but the recent scandal at Nomus (though it is a branch of the National Museum) ruined the image of the city in the eyes of our community. Poznań has missed its chance. They have a great Municipal Gallery, which came under fire from right-wing activists. At the centre of these attacks was the Deputy Director, Zofia Nierodzińska, the author of a completely unique, country-wide, socially sensitive programme. Zofia left.

But I would also like to ask about other art distribution systems, other than the mainstream, that you see. Could we recognise the demoscene as one of these?

**JW:** In and of itself, the demoscene is a great collective bound together by periodic gatherings, known as 'demoparties', that constitute the natural nexus of the subculture. It is anything but insignificant that due to technological circumstances a typical demo is the result of collaboration of several persons – the priority here being not the promotion of an 'inspired' individual, but predominantly of the very piece as an advanced engineering structure. Even though the demoscene is in principle non-commercial in nature, it has obviously developed its own mechanisms of visibility, associated with various forms of competition. What intrigues me in the demoscene is its hardware aspect – oftentimes archaic, which fosters the strategy of 'creative constraints'. Another complication stems from the demo being generated in real time based on the code developed. Of great significance are both the performative and the material aspect of the situation, which result from the fact that demo parties are not held online but as a place-based event. Much like in the case of an art biennial, it is the culmination point that reinforces the intra-communal connections. At

the same time, the demoscene also constitutes a self-contained ecosystem, only to a minimum extent connected with other art distribution systems.

**MU:** Is it that the participants in the demoscene do not care about their visibility, or that the others simply do not want to recognise them?

**JW:** I think that the systemic issue is to be able to recognise all artistic languages simultaneously and at the same time provide deft ‘translations’ from one to another. I have noted a major deficit in the ability to simultaneously think in two different cultural ‘dialects’. It is certainly difficult; it requires time, competence, curiosity, significant mobility... I have the impression that creators in various segments of culture use similar notions but ascribe different meanings thereto and hence cannot get through to one another. What is missing are the liaisons – personal, institutional, of any kind. Observing various circuits of art I recognise the analogies and differences between them – that is why they continue to define one another.

**MU:** Do you think that we need these liaisons and connections at all? I mean, the respective distribution systems are doing very well on their own, they constitute inward, self-contained worlds.

**MZ:** Such coexistence is completely natural and perfectly fine. I believe that trouble starts at the point when one side attempts to interfere with the other; when one side claims that the others are not ‘art’.

**JW:** This also applies to the demoscene, which – because of its non-commercial nature – does not comply with the standards typical of the art market. People contributing to the demoscene do not see the artworld as a point of reference, while any ‘outside’ interest in their works is also rather incidental. I refer here to the activity of Piotr Marecki within the framework of the UBU lab project, and the recent exhibition titled *8 bits of art* which was held in the BWA in Tarnów. Another important aspect that emerges in the context of the demoscene pertains to the technological professionalisation which favours the separation of the respective art systems. It is also true of other phenomena, such as traditional graphic techniques, and authorial animation practice which ‘got stuck’ within the film world and only occasionally appears in the orbit of the artworld.

**MZ:** The exact same thing can be said about painting. Technique-oriented painting is situated in the periphery.

**JW:** Another important issue here is that of distribution, the ways of displaying works. Art institutions provide a limited set of established exhibition conventions, which may prove discouraging for creative communities that operate differently.

**MU:** But do they really need the approval on the part of the centre?

**JW:** They evidently do not, but it is to the detriment of the centre, which is increasingly oriented towards a single course of action. What I mean here is not really a fundamental shift in the perspective – the peripheral and hybrid phenomena we have been talking about could emerge in the discourse on contemporary art, say, as a new context or an interesting backdrop against which to observe the features of the institutional mainstream better.

**MU:** Concluding, I would like to return to outsiders. Is it possible to live in a geographical province and gain visibility in the centre? Two examples come to mind, both of publishing houses: the people behind the Bored Wolves publishing house live in a small village in the Beskid Mountains, while those behind the bigger and better known Czarne publishing house in Low Beskid.

**Michał Bratko:** Come on, Bored Wolves print their books in Kraków, they sell them in New York and Warsaw. This is no periphery... So this is living in a province but operating at the very centre.

**JW:** Of crucial importance is the fact of having an adequate social position – if someone's activity has already been validated by the centre, they can be wherever they like, geographically speaking.

**MZ:** It is all about networking. Failing to complete that stage renders growth in the periphery impossible. Monet had to first come to Paris in order to be able to settle down in Giverny, Gauguin, in order to leave for Tahiti, had to first conquer Paris. Likewise Cézanne and many others.

**KN:** Locally, we also see that people who have gained visibility remove themselves from social life, they do not visit, do not attend, but they do create. They can afford that luxury.



## HYBRIDS

**MZ:** I am interested in the process of a new centre emerging, one always associated with some sort of economic and political dominance. The history of Western art has clearly demonstrated that such was the case there. For the coming decades, the centre will probably be shifting Eastward, to India and China. How long will the cultural hegemony of the West last? The economic dominance slowly transfers to the Eastern powers. After all, Chinese traditions of art are much older than European ones. Still, in the 19th and the 20th century, the country turned to the language developed in the West, from the Socrealist idiom of the Mao era all the way to the language of the galleries in the 1990s. Western galleries started to open their branches in China. And now, while gaining economic dominance, these powers have not yet developed an autonomous cultural language, but they will, I think. Meanwhile, the language of our culture proliferated around the globe and became the *lingua franca*. Everyone uses the model of art developed by the Europeans. It is, therefore, very intriguing to see the developments of the coming decades and whether or not a new language will emerge on the basis of the old one.

**MU:** The new centre lives in the long shadow of its predecessor. The former wants to authenticate itself by taking over the latter's language. For instance, Americans' love for Paris and the contemporary American painting created with the influence from the artists who had emigrated from France during the war.

**MZ:** This shows there can be no centre without economic and political dominance.

**MU:** In the Far East, in Korea and China, there is a performance art community. They hold performance art festivals there. Local artists were able to adapt performance art because it is congruent with their way of being in the world, their traditional training of the body and the mind. However, performative activity interpreted in the cultural codes of the East gains meanings different to the ones in the West.

**JW:** Perhaps being able to discover the similarity between the global language of art and local phenomena could give rise to a sort of a pole reversal? Sometimes, this way – by small steps – a major shift comes about, stemming from the fact that certain elements 'fit together', whether intentionally or not. We can consider it to be a manifestation of a hybrid structure that I refer to as the connective tissue that fills the space between the centres. The process of gradually shifting accents, of seeking analogies

– sometimes imprecise, but revealing the actual truth – may prove more efficient than a radical revolution.

**MZ:** This is a perfectly natural process for one to be seeking footholds, such as similarities that would foster the process of intercultural communication. But complete otherness cannot be assimilated.

**JW:** The principle of seeking ‘fresh blood’ in the artistic mainstream is similar. We need something different, but it has to be somewhat similar.

**MZ:** Not radically different.

**JW:** Obviously, we must be able to associate it with contemporary art. [laughing]

**MZ:** This phenomenon is connected with the very definition of art. No detailed criteria can be determined because art eludes them. Art is unnamable, as a whole realm, therefore, it has a phantasmic core. The criteria and hierarchies institutionally established around that notion are rather intuitive than set in stone – we sense what art is, and hence what the mainstream in art is, but these categories are subject to constant change.

Kraków, 14 November 2022 and 4 January 2023