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## An Affective Art History

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The aim of this text is to present the project of affective history of modern art in Poland from the point of view of affirmative ethics and humanities. The field of my initial research is marked out by works that originated after the outbreak of the Second World War. In the first section of the article, which refers to the history of art's unique position in Poland, I ask the following research questions: what is affect? How can the concept of affect be adapted to studying works of art? Where can affect be placed? Which dimensions of knowledge concerning artistic work could be opened by an affective analysis and interpretation? What does affect bring to art history? In the next section of the article, owing to the limited format of the article I shall offer a few perspectives on post-war art in Poland from the point of view of a selected, specific affect – empathy, through which I would like to examine the history of art in Poland and restore its two critical events/experiences: the year 1968 and the Holocaust.<sup>1</sup> I shall also explore the critical potential of the affective analysis of art.

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1 This text is part of the book which I am working on, *Afekt Strzemińskiego. Moim przyjaciołom Żydom* ["Strzemiński's Affect. To My Friends the Jews"]. My sincere thanks to Professor Ewa Domańska, Dorota Jarecka, Professor Ryszard Nycz and Professor Piotr Piotrowski for their extremely valuable, critical remarks.

### **Ethics and Affirmative Humanities**

In her article *Affirmation, Pain and Empowerment*, Rosi Braidotti notes that in contemporary political and cultural discourse, negative critical categories dominate, meaning that our horizon of the potential future tends to be described by wars, violence and death.<sup>2</sup> This “traumatic realism” (Hal Foster) – concentration on wounds, suffering and pain – has become our schizoid cultural politics. As Braidotti writes, after September 11, 2001 in the United States (and I suspect that her observations could also be transferred to political, social and cultural life in Poland), there are a number of phenomena to which mourning is the response. Unquestionably, collective mourning and melancholy also have a major political and social significance, such as creating social solidarity, loyalty to people who are suffering, and maintaining social memory about critical events and experiences. As Braidotti continues, however, we must take note that universal melancholy and mourning have become such dominant narratives that they function as self-fulfilling prophecies, leaving little room for an alternative approach and different ways of looking at the social and cultural space – as well as, I would add, the historical one. The author proposes creating a new framework for developing ethical relations – an affirmative ethics as one of the productive paths to establishing new forms of resistance. She writes that the ethical relationship does not belong to the moral essence of the subject, but is understood, after Michel Foucault, rather as a practice or technology of the “I.” The concepts that define affirmative ethics are: relations, resilience, change, process, radical immanence, and the concept of ethical stability. Braidotti understands the ethical good as the consolidation of the various forms of becoming a subject, and ethics as active and productive satisfaction of the desire to form supportive relations with others. A subject is perceived here as a process, developed by relations with others and affects, but it is also understood in a post-anthropocentric manner – as that which is human, non-human and post-human.

The starting point for affirmative ethics is pain and suffering. Pain, writes Braidotti, apart from other negative sensations, exposes the heart of subjectivity – affect and affectiveness, i.e. the disposition of influencing others and being open to influence. But the conceptualisation of pain which she is aiming for is one that will permit negativity to be neutralised. This is not so that we can pretend that the pain does not exist, but to transgress the resignation, torpor and passivity that result from profound hurt or loss. According to affirmative ethics, negative affects can transform as they contain a potential that allows them to be surpassed in favour of positivity. Subjects are not treated as

2 Rosi Braidotti, “Affirmation, Pain and Empowerment,” *Asian Journal of Women Studies* 3 (2008), 7-36.

individuals, but as participants in a certain dense network of exchange and relations. Braidotti therefore proposes going beyond the experience of pain, not by denying it, but by forming bonds, the effort of compassion, testifying, empathy, accepting responsibility, and collective formation of the horizons of hope.

The Polish researcher Ewa Domańska invoked Braidotti's concept in proposing the idea of affirmative humanities. The characteristics of this were to be

the peculiar post-secular and post-humanistic context of the project; going beyond postmodernist negativity and concentration of research on catastrophe, emptiness, apocalypse, trauma, mourning, melancholy, and passive victims; a turn from the egocentric human individual towards the community understood as a collective of human and non-human personae; positive reinforcement of the (individual and collective) subject; viewing the subject as an agent (application of the idea of non-anthropocentric, dispersed agency and non-intentional agency), vitalisation of the subject (the potential of mental and physical self-generation, the idea of neo-vitalism); a post-anthropocentric understanding of life as the dynamic force of becoming; use of relational epistemology (interest in the relationship between the human, non-human and post-human) and an emphasis on co-dependence and mutual conditioning.<sup>3</sup>

Domańska stresses, however, that

the proposal of an affirmative humanities is not about creating an infantile, naive and idyllic vision of humanities, which divorces itself from discussions concerning such things as vital socio-political issues, but about going beyond negativity and proposing a different set of research categories.<sup>4</sup>

Inspired by the proposals of both affirmative ethics and affirmative humanities, I would like to propose the concept of an affective history of art. Referring to the above remarks of Braidotti and Domańska, I shall treat as specific case studies the writing of modern art history as well as a certain general theoretical framework of artistic historiography in Poland after 1945.

3 Ewa Domańska, "Humanistyka afirmatywna: władza i płeć po Butler i Foucault," in *Płeć i władza w kontekstach historycznych i współczesnych*, ed. Filip Kubiacyk and Monika Owsianna (Poznań–Gniezno: Gnieźnieńskie Akta Humanistyczne, 2013).

4 Ibid.

## I. Negative Modernity

In Poland, the concept of modernity – and more broadly of post-war art – is based on decidedly negative categories.<sup>5</sup> It is explored in a dialectical relationship with the destructive experience of social realism, which in Polish art history is viewed as the fundamental disgrace, fall, break, non-art, or also, despite everything, the traumatic core of art after 1945. Scholars interpret modernity as being affected by the “October syndrome,”<sup>6</sup> becoming a kind of “mental compensation” for socialist realism, the quintessence of involvement in the mechanisms of power; this concept is based on the figure of a sudden break, invalidation, or amnesia jettisoning the experience of socialist realism; the dividing lines between socialist realism and modernity are blurred. The long departure from socialist realism is made mention of, or its dangerous proximity as well, and the negative similarity between it and modernity. In summary, in its rejection of figuration, realism and the conception of engaged art, modernity is regarded both as the negative legacy of socialist realism and the negative tradition of the present day. All these characteristics mean that works from after 1945 tend to be viewed

5 My main references in thinking about the negative image of modernity are the following publications: Wojciech Włodarczyk, “Nowoczesność i jej granice,” in *Sztuka polska po 1945 r. Materiały sesji Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki, Warszawa listopad 1984* (Warszawa: PWN, 1987), 19–30, and *Socrealizm. Sztuka polska w latach 1950–1954* (Paryż: Libella, 1986); Waldemar Baraniewski, “Wobec socrealizmu,” in *Sztuka polska po 1945 r. Materiały sesji Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki, Warszawa November 1984* (Warszawa: PWN, 1987), 173–188 and “Sztuka i mała stabilizacja,” in *Idee sztuki lat 60. Oraz inne sesje, seminaria i wystawy, Centrum Rzeźby Polskiej, Seminara orońskie*, vol. 2, ed. Jan Stanisław Wojciechowski (Orońsko: CRP, 1994), 33–42; Elżbieta Grabska “‘Puisque réalisme il y a’, czyli o tym, co w sztuce powojennego dziesięciolecia nie mogło się dokonać,” in *Sztuka polska po 1945 r. Materiały sesji Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki, Warszawa listopad 1984* (Warszawa: PWN, 1987), 375–384; Piotr Juszkiewicz, *Od rozkoszy historiozofii do „gry w nic.” Polska krytyka artystyczna czasu Odwilży* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2005); Anna Markowska, *Dwa Przełomy. Sztuka polska po 1955 i 1989 roku* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UMK, 2012). Books that to some extent detach the specific nature of modernity in Poland from socialist realism, seeing a traumatic experience not only in socialist realism, but especially in the Second World War, are: Piotr Piotrowski, *Znaczenia modernizmu* (Poznań: Dom Wydawniczy Rebis, 1999, and Andrzej Turowski, *Budownicowie Świata. Z dziejów radykalnego modernizmu w sztuce polskiej* (Kraków: Universitas, 2000). Those that continue to be an exception in attempting a different perspective of critical experiences in art in Poland include Ewa Toniak, *Olbrzymki. Kobiety i socrealizm* (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2008) and Izabela Kowalczyk, *Podróż do przeszłości: interpretacje najnowszej historii w polskiej sztuce krytycznej* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo SWPS Academica, 2010). Alongside the Second World War, Marcin Lachowski names as a traumatic experience, as well as a formative one for contemporary art, the Holocaust; see Marcin Lachowski, *Nowocześni po katastrofie. Sztuka w Polsce w latach 1945–1960* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2013).

6 “October syndrome” is connected to political events of October 1956 in Poland and the set of cultural processes related to “Thaw.”

as politically neutral, detached from reality, mute (and thus also to an extent deficient), and in this sense autonomous, hermetic, but at the same time conventional, squandering everything that might be seen as interesting in Polish 20th-century art. Modernity in this view becomes the space for a hegemonic game, and in fact itself becomes hegemonic. Considerations of this kind are accompanied by a certain lament over what might have happened in the history of Polish art and yet did not – a lack, if you will. What is not perceived here is the potentiality created by the decisive moments in history whose effects can be played out in spaces that are somewhat different from those expected. Therefore, the task of searching for another modernity/modernism whose experience is contemporary to us (and thus could be of use at the moment, not closed in the blocked space of non-experience, traumatic memory, fear, emptiness or dread) must not involve an inclusive operation – co-opting works that would create a critical idiom towards this negative vision of modernity – or even with regaining the excluded space. Rather, the task ought to involve a change in the perspective with which we look at post-war art in Poland, and assuming a different model of knowledge. Of course, I do not mean rejecting, but creatively using the categories and the works of scholars whose dedication to the Polish art history are indisputable.<sup>7</sup> I would also like to stress that the research of the authors I have mentioned are for me an extremely valuable source of knowledge and inspiration, and that I have the utmost respect for them.

My objective is to find the dimension of potentiality and positive categories within the critical events whose meanings and effects are never determined. I am also interested in finding other events previously not appreciated by the history of art in Poland (as they have not fitted in its paradigmatic framework), which could serve to stratify, transform and enrich the periodisation of art in Poland, as well as the concept of modernity, modernism and the avant-garde. To this end, rather than the template of trauma, I shall call upon a number of theories of affect and phenomena associated with affective experiences, of which I shall examine empathy in depth. I am putting forward the hypothesis that it is possible to construct a history of art in a more affirmative way, where it is affect, as a category, which organises the narrative. I should point out, however, that this endeavour does not mean the erasure

7 I regard as one such attempt to escape the stalemate of negativity Piotr Piotrowski's *Awan-garda w cieniu Jałty* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Rebis, 2005), which analyses art in Poland from the point of view of a dynamic comparative analysis with artistic practices in diverse cultural spaces of Central Europe (searching for the strong subjectivity of this region), and as another *Agorafilia* (2009), including the remarkably effective concept of "love for the public space," used to ascribe and distinguish the meanings of autonomy and involvement before and after 1989.

of negative categories, but rather the exploration and transgression of the models of knowledge and theory based on negativity.

### Outline of the Issues in the Theory of Affect

In psychology today, affect is seen as a “momentary, positive or negative reaction of an organism (vegetative, muscular, experiential) to a change in the environment or in the subject itself.”<sup>8</sup> By affect we understand all short-term emotional states of low intensity, be they pleasant or unpleasant, which do not exceed the threshold of consciousness and are not processed by the subject’s cognitive powers, thus remaining a kind of proto-emotion. An affect is thus an unreflective, automatic, unconscious act, where the differentiation of the subject’s states concern basic judgements: like/dislike, aspire/avoid. It also spreads to the assessment of objects independent of it, affecting the subject’s judgements, as well as his/her relations with other subjects, orientation in the environment, cognitive process and memory.<sup>9</sup>

Many scholars, however, disagree with the separation of affect from emotion. Significant in this context is the discovery in the field of neurobiology made by Joseph LeDoux of the “low road,” a shortcut from the brain to the amygdala which permits an organism to react immediately to a threat. This path is responsible for the affective reaction (e.g. fear) that precedes a conscious perception, thus also proving that emotions too – like affects – can occur unconsciously.<sup>10</sup> Neurobiologists including LeDoux as well as Antonio Damasio argue that emotions are a precognitive system of bodily reactions to stimuli, which, although they occur unconsciously, are responsible for judgement processes, creating a kind of biological layer, or a core of consciousness.<sup>11</sup>

Paul Ekman, Richard J. Davidson, Jaak Panksepp and Nico H. Frijda do not differentiate between affects and emotions, and write about affective states, or even simply about the diversity of affect. Ekman argues that there are fundamental emotions, aroused automatically outside of the consciousness, having developed as a result of evolution owing to their adaptive values,

8 Alina Kolańczyk, “Procesy afektywne i orientacja w otoczeniu,” in *Serce w rozumie. Afektywne podstawy orientacji w otoczeniu* (Gdańsk: Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne, 2004), 16.

9 *Ibid.*, 15–36.

10 Maria Jarymowicz, “Czy emocje mogą zmieścić się w polu świadomości?,” in *Nieuświadomiony afekt*, ed. Rafał Krzysztof Ohme (Gdańsk: Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne, 2007), 19–21.

11 Constantina Papoulias, Felicity Callard, “Biology’s Gift: Interrogating the Turn to Affect,” *Body and Society* vol. 16, 29 (2010): 39–41.

and the emotions he refers to are the family of affective states.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, Rafał Krzysztof Ohme, working on unconscious affects, claims that at the basic level humans can distinguish more affects than only positive or negative ones: e.g. fear, anger, revulsion, joy.<sup>13</sup> Further elements in the controversy are the relationship between cognitive powers and affect, the question of the intentionality and autonomy of affect/affective states, the relationship between affect and socio-cultural constructions, as well as assigning to specific affects universal physiological reactions, e.g. a mimic or vocal signal.<sup>14</sup>

Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth note that the concept of affect entered the humanities lexicon for good in the mid-1990s thanks to the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Brian Massumi. The main foundations of their approach to affect were the research of Silvan Tomkins (in the former case) and the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and the ethics of Baruch Spinoza (in the latter case).<sup>15</sup> As in the biological, neurobiological and psychological sciences, the concept of affect is still lacking a satisfactory definition in the humanities, its meanings continuing to compete with each other and be shaped, criticised and contested. In the growing mountain of literature on the subject, it depends on the definition of affect (adopted from biology, neurobiology or psychology) whether cultural scholars treat affect as an affective state or emotion within the body that engages the cognitive powers and refers to a cultural system, or as pure social and cultural constructs, or as an unconscious intensity rooted in the body and physiology – a kind of genesis of the subject. The common point is the attempt to understand the subject beyond divisions into body and mind, nature and culture, and to ask questions about embodied experience and agency that cannot be reduced to social structures.<sup>16</sup>

In *What is Philosophy?*, Gilles Deleuze understood affect as a process of saturation, going beyond oneself, beyond sensual experiences and impressions, the excess of subjectivity, and at the same time the experience of indistinguishability, in which the division between the person, thing and animal, human and non-human, breaks. In *Proust and Signs*, meanwhile, he considers affect as semiological: as artistic or material signs, impressions forcing us to think

12 See *Natura emocji. Podstawowe zagadnienia*, ed. Paul Ekman and Richard J. Davidson (Gdańsk: Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne, 1999), 13-49.

13 Kolańczyk, *Procesy afektywne*, 20.

14 On the fundamental criticism of affect as used by the humanities see Ruth Leys's famous article "The Turn to Affect: a Critique," *Critical Inquiry* 37 (2011): 434-472.

15 Melissa Gregg, Gregory J. Seigworth "An Inventory of Shimmers," in *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham-London: Duke University Press, 2010), 5.

16 Cf. e.g. Lisa Blackman, Couze Venn, "Affect," *Body and Society* 16 (2010): 7-28.

and at the same time to search for the truth bundled up in signs. The sign encountered – more sensually felt than recognised by the reasoning powers – deals violence to conventional thought and leads to critical reflection. In this way, Deleuze sought to disarm the traditional divides between feeling, thinking and acting; affect, body and reason; art and philosophy.<sup>17</sup> Brian Massumi followed this path in his famous article *The Autonomy of Affect*, in which he interprets affect as intensity, the emotional state of suspension, but far removed from passivity, as it is filled with the potency of events, movement and vibration. Characteristic of affect is the fact that it is fixed inside the body, yet at the same time has the ability to transgress bodies and things. The body viewed in this way becomes both virtual and current: it is a potentiality in which the past joins with the present, as well as a place of vitality, sensual, synaesthetic sensations, interactions with the world opening the body to the unpredictable.<sup>18</sup>

Affect as a political and identity-based problem, rather than just a theoretical one, is particularly evident in the works of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who takes issue with cultural constructivism and the legacy of poststructuralism – the fear of the biological determinants of the body and essentialism.<sup>19</sup> Together with Adam Frank, Sedgwick published a collection of psychological works by the pioneer of psychological research on affect – Silvan Tomkins.<sup>20</sup> According to Tomkins, affect is an innate motivational system that is autonomous, independent of urges, but also connected with the intellect, endowing the human subject with freedom. Tomkins identifies seven pairs of fundamental affects (of low and high frequency), to which a specific mimic expression corresponds – interest-excitement, enjoyment-joy, surprise-startle, distress-anguish, anger-rage, fear-terror, and shame-humiliation – attributing the most important function in the formation of the subject to shame. Sedgwick uses his ideas in her texts, concentrating on the bodily aspect of affects, and the subjective difference and at the same time relationality that they introduce. Writing about shame, she extracts its performative and connecting nature, at the same time pointing to its power of subjective change

17 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) and Ernst van Alphen "Affective Operations of Art and Literature," *Res* 53/54 (2008, Spring/Autumn): 20–31.

18 Brian Massumi, "The Autonomy of Affect," in *Parables for the Virtual. Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham–London: Duke University Press, 2002), 23–45.

19 Leys, *The Turn*, 440.

20 *Shame and Its Sisters. A Silvan Tomkins Reader*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank (Durham–London: Duke University Press, 1995).



(monitoring subjectivity) and the cardinal role it plays in shaping both identity and queer politics.<sup>21</sup>

Cultural studies, anthropology, history and literary studies, especially in the United States, have begun to develop knowledge on the topic of affect in the context of social and political practices, of research on the everyday and the body, as well as animals, things, materiality, race, class, gender, capitalism and nationalism. Notions related to these approaches are trans-subjectivity, the unconscious, feelings, the concept of the body as a process, life, movement, collectivity, relationality, flow, environment, the body as more-than-human, individualisation, becoming, and embodiment.<sup>22</sup> There is no way to discuss here even a fraction of the research conducted and the broad spectrum of issues examined. I would therefore like to focus on just a few questions associated with the most recent applications of the concept of affect in the humanities. In his foreword to the important publication *The Affective Turn*, Michael Hardt uses the ontology of Spinoza to emphasise that the concept of affect detects the links between the disposition of a subject to think, his/her embodied actions and the body's susceptibility to influences, e.g. in the matter of so-called affective work.<sup>23</sup> Patricia Ticineto Clough notes that one is forced by the concept of affect to rephrase questions on the relations between the body and the mind, the dynamism of matter (except the logic of aspiring to *equilibrium*), and issues of causality.<sup>24</sup> The major political significances of affect are highlighted, among others, by Deborah Gould. In her article "Affect and Protest," she stresses that the idea of affectivity demonstrates important aspects of human motivation and behaviour that escapes cognitive and rationalistic attempts at understanding – it confronts us with the complexity and lack of determination of human thoughts and feelings. Affect also clarifies important sources of renewal concerning social aspects and interpersonal bonds, as well as pointing to the possibility of social change. According to Gould, affective states are what intensifies our attention, affiliations, identifications, reinforcing some convictions and weakening others. She goes on to observe that it is the perspective of the affective subject that makes us aware of the

21 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Shame, Theatricality and Queer Performativity. Henry James's *The Art of the Novel*," in *Touching Feeling. Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham–London: Duke University Press, 2003), 35–66.

22 Blackman, Venn, "Affect," 7–28.

23 Michael Hardt, "Foreword: What Affects are Good for," in *The Affective Turn. Theorizing the Social*, ed. Patricia Ticineto Clough and Jean Halley (Durham–London: Duke University Press, 2007), IX–XIII.

24 Patricia Ticineto "Clough. Introduction," in *The Affective Turn*, 1–33.

material effects that power has, but also, and perhaps above all, why it is never overwhelming.<sup>25</sup>

The notion of affect therefore radically alters the conception of the subject and the body, but also that of the social, cultural and political space, opening new perspectives in research on memory, history, culture and art, their function, causative power, and also the potential for change.

### **Affect and Art**

With the experience of the first avant-gardes of the 20th century, an encounter with a work of art ceased to be a question of experiencing beauty or sublimity. Yet at the most important, decisive moments it remained an occurrence of transitory intensity, an affective event. At the same time, though, feelings in the history of art are treated as not particularly serious and useless for research, and therefore seldom reflected upon. Yet the questions of what we feel and why, and whose affects and emotions works of art project on us, belong both to the sphere of intimate questions and to that of important political ones. Affect is diffusive in character, easily “spilling over” onto other subjects, unconsciously influencing our judgements, attention, and ability to remember and forget.<sup>26</sup> One of its fundamental characteristics is the ease of its intersubjective, intergenerational and transhistoric transfer through works, pieces of art and cultural objects, among others. Teresa Brennan notes that the fact of uncontrolled transmission of affect forces us to bid farewell to the concept of individualism. This is because we do not have full certainty of which affects are “ours,” and the easy delimitation between the subject and his/her environment disappears, the barrier of skin ceasing to protect subjects from something “in the air.”<sup>27</sup> However, it is important to emphasise what distinguishes affects from trauma: susceptibility to change in the process of their transmission and circulation, as well as the possibility (when they are subjected to conscious control) of an active influence on them. Thinking in terms of affective theories always assumes relationality, the possibility of transformation, agency and responsibility.

Mieke Bal and Jill Bennett are among the scholars who use affect for the analysis of artistic works. Their extremely inspiring works are to a great extent

25 Deborah Gould, “Affect and Protest,” in *Political Emotions* (Routledge: New York–London, 2010), 18–44.

26 Jarymowicz, *Czy emocje*, 23.

27 Teresa Brennan, “Introduction,” in *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca–London: Cornell University Press, 2004), 1–23.

based on the Deleuzian understanding of affect. Bennett deals with the splice of affect and cognition referring to artistic works on the issue of trauma, as well as highlighting the tension between the notion of affect and representation.<sup>28</sup> Bal, meanwhile, is especially interested in the relationship formed between an artistic work and its beholder, his/her affective reception, affect as a fundamental interaction with art and the resulting political aesthetic of the work.<sup>29</sup>

One of the most useful texts that, as it were, links the mentioned research positions, and facilitates consideration of the history of art using the concept of affect, is Ernst van Alphen's article *Affective Operations of Art and Literature*, in which the author conducts a review of the most important theories of affect and proposes looking at art from the titular point of view of "affective operations."<sup>30</sup> Van Alphen points out that in contemporary interpretations of art the dominant vocabularies have been those with their roots in theories of signification, and above all meaning has been privileged. He also stresses the important fact that the theories of affect give agency to works of art, ensuring that we perceive them outside of an anthropocentric framework – not as passive objects, but as active intermediaries. In doing so, he notes the transmission of affects by cultural objects and the diverse ways in which affects can be received. Affect in art, according to van Alphen, is a new form of contestation – its political influence is controlled by the powerful affective apparatus engaged by literature and art. He follows Deleuze in emphasising the proximity of affect and thought, perceiving impressions as catalysts of critical research. Van Alphen is interested in the ways in which affects are transmitted by art, and how works are active mediators in the world of culture.

I would like, on the basis of the proposals of the aforementioned scholars, to suggest a somewhat different approach and to indicate the fundamental differences between my perspective and that of van Alphen. Like the Dutch scholar, I aim not so much to apply theories of affect, as to consider the way in which the intensity, this life-giving transmission, and the rupture between the human and the non-human world – affect in its numerous conceptualisations – occurs, happens and acts through artistic works (in the broadest possible sense: paintings, sculptures, objects, happenings, performance art, spaces, environments, texts, and ultimately notions, conceptions and ideas). I do not

28 Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision. Affect, Trauma and Contemporary Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005). Among other art historians using the concept of affect, see also Susan Best, "Mild Intoxication and Other Aesthetic Feelings. Psychoanalysis and Art Revisited," *Angelaki*, 10 (2005): 157-170.

29 Mieke Bal, "A gdyby tak? Język afektu," *Teksty Drugie*, 1/2 (2007): 165-188.

30 van Alphen, "Affective Operations," 23-29.

reject the intellectualist-formalistic perspective dominant in research on art, but I would like – by adding affect as one of the dimensions of experience connected to the visual arts – to expand it with an element that has to date been ignored, unjustly I feel. I am therefore interested both in the usefulness and the possibility of applying theories of affect to studying works of art – the “affective operations” of a work of art – and in the question of what new things artistic works can tell us about affect. What aspects of historical experience do theories of affect reveal with reference to contemporary art in Poland?

Ernst van Alphen points to the fact that affect is played out in the relationship between the viewer (with their base of culturally, historically and socially shaped sensitivity) and the artistic work; the formal characteristics of the work act affectively, while the reading of it should display literalness.<sup>31</sup> I would like to expand this idea. In my proposal of the affective history of art, affect is the dynamic relationship subject to continual transformation not of a dyad (as in van Alphen), but a triad:<sup>32</sup> between the subjective position of the artist, the material and textural (as well as, following van Alphen, formal) levels of the work and the beholder, who becomes the place of transmission and retransmission of the affect. In writing about the subjective position of the artist and the viewer I do not mean the artist’s intention, although I see the subjective feelings of the beholder (e.g. fear, boredom, tiredness, rapture) as important for analysis and interpretation: they bring knowledge on the cultural models of binding affects with specific objects. I would simply like to show that in studying affect, we must focus in detail on important political challenges, the cultural, historical and existential stakes at play both “now” and “then,” which steadily frame the work.

In affective history of art, I am interested in the way in which affects are formed (as biological phenomena) in their historical framework, how they are problematised and conceptualised by artists, how and with which material media they are transmitted and changed, and what their ethical grounding is. I am keen to see how an affective reading of a work looks like, when, as van Alphen notes, it requires engagement, and at the same time production of a new language. The significant difference between my proposal of an affective history of art and the application of affect to the study of art made by Bal, Bennett and van Alphen is within the framework of the humanities and affirmative ethics. I am interested in the following questions: in what ways can the affects transmitted by works serve to transgress the negativity perceived

31 *Ibid.*, 26.

32 I owe the idea of moving from a dyad to a triad to Barbara Engelking’s book *Zagłada i pamięć: doświadczenie Holocaustu i jego konsekwencje opisane na podstawie relacji autobiograficznych* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IFIS PAN, 1994), 16.

by Rosi Braidotti and Ewa Domańska (the concept of crisis, agony, emptiness, fracture, oppressive power, exclusion, repression etc.)? How through art bonds and networks of exchange could be established? How can the tactics of influencing the world and processes of opening oneself to the influence of others develop?

However, my proposal of an affective history of art is not a project that assumes unconditional optimism. In fact, I am particularly attached to the conclusions made in Grzegorz Niziołek's impressive book, as yet the only critical attempt to rewrite post-war history of Polish culture using affective categories:

The post-war history of Polish theatre is usually told from the perspective of a symbolic order, as works of symbolic reinterpretations of great texts and collective myths, accorded great importance and permanence. My question is: can these works be studied from the point of view of affects? Can the theatre be recognised as a place of production of these affects, as a place of defence from them and as a place where this defence is broken? My proposal involves an attempt to disclose the fact that another stage exists – not that of the theatre of symbolic reconfigurations, but of affective flows and blockages. The history of the other stage of Polish theatre might be perceptible by studying mistakes and omissions, for instance. Yet I do not treat mistakes and omissions as a historian of the theatre, who explains misunderstandings, corrects facts, and determines the final version of events. These mistakes and omissions in fact themselves belong to the final versions of events, and are already an irremovable part of this history.<sup>33</sup>

Like the author of *Polish Theatre of the Holocaust*, I too would like to recognise the field of the visual arts as a place of production and reproduction of affects (in the case of the affective history of art both negative and positive), the accompanying mechanisms of displacement and the moments at which they break – but also as a place in which resistance emerges against the affective power, an opposition to the dominant cultural models, and in which a leap of the imagination is made. In this sense I feel that, in spite of the obvious differences, Niziołek's ideas do not clash with the affirmative nature of my project: with the search for events and artistic works that touch upon the fractures of history, pain and death, producing spaces of potentiality and life, positivity and bonds, support, reinforcement, care, and life-giving power. Even in the concept of trauma, one may discern a space for constructing positive categories

33 Grzegorz Niziołek, *Polski teatr Zagłady* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2013), 220. My thanks to Katarzyna Bojarska for pointing me in the direction of the above quotation.

such as care, forming relations, testimony, and the coping process. I therefore treat transgression of negativity as throwing off stupor, torpor, compulsive repetition, and pointing to the agency and potency of subjects placed before critical situations – rather than as a rejection of the historical and cultural experiences associated with suffering, or more metaphorically, with states of a split in the I – which, to repeat, are for me the backdrop to the whole project.

## II. Empathy – Attempts at an Affective Interpretation

In 2006, when the *Obieg* journal held a discussion on Piotr Piotrowski's *Awan-garda w cieniu Jałty* [*The Avant-garde in the Shadow of Yalta*], published a year earlier, perhaps all the participants in the meeting (including myself) expressed their surprise at the artistic practices of Hungary, circa 1968. This book contained information on activities the nature of which exceeded my imagination and analytical capabilities at the time. I wondered for a long time over what had such a profound effect on me using the example of the reproduction of Tamás Szentjóby's *Czechoslovak Radio 1968*.

Szentjóby's work was produced in 1969. It is a brick covered with a layer of sulphur on the four narrower sides and placed vertically on one of them, functioning as a multiple. The radio-brick hybrid refers to objects (bricks wrapped in newspapers) that appeared on the streets of Prague as an expression of protest against the invasion of Warsaw Pact forces (20 August 1968) and the military decree forbidding listening to the radio, which continued, unfettered, to transmit information on the developing political situation in Czechoslovakia. The artist interpreted this work as a portable monument contesting every war, and simultaneously expressing his enthusiasm for human invention in situations of brutal oppression.<sup>34</sup> The sulphur that partly covers the brick is used as an ingredient in gunpowder, but also has medicinal purposes, thus making the surface of the object both explosive and therapeutic. Sulphur is a metonym for shooting, violence and fire, but it also brings with it the promise of reparation and healing. The object can be treated as a literal tool of active resistance in the tactics of the powerless when faced with the outbreak of violence. At the same time, *Czechoslovak Radio 1968* is a receiver, although it does not receive electromagnetic waves itself. It works on two levels. The first is that of observers, i.e. us the listeners – those subjected to violence. The second level is that of the sufferers. The radio-brick transmits a message from them to us: a communication of the pain and suffering of the other. Simultaneously, though, this is a message for suffering humanity: somebody

34 Cf. Tamás St. Auby's statement in conversation with Reuben and Maja Fowkes, <http://www.translocal.org/revolutioniloveyou/stauby.html> (accessed October 17, 2013).

is listening to your suffering, somebody is on the other side and is united with you. Admitting pain and listening to this confession is not the end, but the beginning of an event, as Veena Das notes.<sup>35</sup> In this sense, *Czechoslovak Radio 1968* can be seen as a dual receiver: in its mute, paradoxical transmission of pain, but also, through such transmission confirming its reception, it designates the moment of the encounter with the other and the beginning of the human relationship. Yet we cannot ignore the fact that *Czechoslovak Radio 1968* looks like a relic of the past, a kind of “radioactive fossil.”<sup>36</sup> Another’s suffering becomes a point of reference for thinking about our own pain (in this case the silence of Hungarian artists associated with the events of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution), not to remain there, but to transgress the pain in order to establish relationality: the effort of understanding and supporting. Szentjóbý’s work implies questions concerning not so much trauma itself as the viewers’ relationship with it, with the suffering of another. His portable monument does not so much refer to the ways of showing opposition, as itself being a work of resistance – in the endeavour of paying homage to others who are subjected to brutal oppression. It is characterised by a set of affective, corporeal, sensual, memory-related, and also intellectual processes, which Jill Bennett described by citing Nikos Papastergiadis’s description of empathy as a movement “of going closer to be able to see, but also never forgetting where you are coming from”<sup>37</sup> – for me, this is empathy’s paradigmatic work.

Anna Łebkowska, the author of a book on the connections between empathy and literature, notes that there are two opposing viewpoints that dominate in reflection on this affect. The first is that of identification, where it is a significant threat to impute one’s own experiences and cultural position on another, taking for oneself a privileged and moralising position. The second is understanding and feeling for somebody, which involves orienting oneself self-critically towards getting to know the states of the other, seeing something in that person, recognizing “transitions between people,” being aware of mediation, and at the same time acknowledging the ethical responsibility for the other.<sup>38</sup> In view of the kind of empathy adopted here, I reject the former meaning in favour of the latter broader approach, which

35 Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, 48.

36 Anri Sala’s phrase referring to the traumatic dimension of the archive, see Anri Sala. Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez, “Obraz jest pozbawiony podmiotowości nie dlatego, że jest znaleziony,” *Tytuł roboczy Archiwum*, no. 1, 42.

37 Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, 10.

38 Anna Łebkowska, *Empatia. O literackich narracjach przełomu XX i XXI wieku* (Kraków: Universitas, 2008), 20–33.

entails [...] a continual tension between otherness and striving for closeness, [where] what come into play [...] are relations usually based on the paradox of empathising and being alongside, consciously muting one's own expression and at the same time refraining from excessive interfering in the autonomy of others.<sup>39</sup>

Jeremy Rifkin, author of the book *The Empathic Civilization*, uses the accomplishments of contemporary neurobiology (the discovery of mirror neurons) to back up the claim that empathy is a predisposition of human (and not only human) biology. It is connected to the development of the "I," of self-awareness, also of social life and, more broadly, advanced civilisation. Without going into the complicated history of this concept and the often contradictory definitions, I would like to follow Rifkin in making use of Martin L. Hoffman's definition of empathy, which calls it the engagement of mental processes causing the feelings of a given person to be more honed to the situation of others than to one's own. Empathy understood in this way is a kind of response to somebody's suffering or a crisis situation with which a cognitive and affective judgement is linked: the engaged desire to bring help and relief in suffering. Rifkin stresses that empathy is not associated exclusively with pain, but also with positive experiences: one can empathise with somebody's joy and success. Empathy therefore gives a sense of belonging – in pain, but also in joy. It is also a predisposition which makes us aware of the human need for belonging that builds relationships with others. Through empathy we become part of someone's life and share an experience. It seems extremely important that empathy, as seen by Rifkin, is perceived as a biologically affective predisposition that needs to be developed and cultivated by education – as well as, I would add, by cultural practices, including creating, making available and distributing works of art. Rifkin writes of the need to determine a new model for describing humans, to change the way we regard economics, society, politics and history. This new model is *h o m o e m p a t h i c u s* – raised to empathise and feel a responsibility for the suffering and pain of others, a model fulfilled not in the egoistic drive for desire, but in relations with others.<sup>40</sup>

I would like to harmonise the work by Szentjóby, a transmitter of suffering and distributor of compassion – a work of empathy considered by Anna Łebkowska as a "relationship of empathising and being alongside," or

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39 *Ibid.*, 33.

40 Jeremy Rifkin, *The Empathic Civilization. The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis* (Cambridge: J.P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2009), 5-43.



“co-participating in the strong awareness of alienation”<sup>41</sup> – with other voices and cultural spaces. My aim is to consider how empathy with other societies of Central Europe could turn into a question of modernity, modernism and the avant-garde in Poland at that time, as well as how it might become an ethical message for art historians.

### 1968 in Poland from an Empathy Perspective

For me, one such work is Jurry Zieliński's *Hot* from September 1968. *Hot* (oil on canvas, 149 x 199.5 cm), as noted by my student Aryna Astashova, is not “burning,” connoting rather a state than a process. On a smooth blue background, explosive, blood-red forms arrange themselves into the outline of a human face, which is burning and showing no signs of letting up. The red and blue contrast with each other sharply – the lively, growing, intensive forms of the red conflicting with the smooth calm of the background. The painting probably came about a few days after the self-immolation of Ryszard Siwiec at the harvest festival in the 10th-Anniversary Stadium in Warsaw on 8 September 1968.<sup>42</sup> Siwiec's act was a protest against the Warsaw Pact forces' invasion of Czechoslovakia. Information about the event and the picture of the burning body were carefully guarded by the authorities, and apparently had no way of entering social consciousness, although it had taken place in front of around 100,000 spectators. Jurry Zieliński created the picture of a burning body, thus showing solidarity with both the pain and the resistance exhibited by Ryszard Siwiec and the Buddhist monk who on 11 June 1963 had committed an act of self-immolation to protest against the dictatorship in South Vietnam. Malcolm Brown's photograph of this event had gone round the world. Zieliński gave an image of events which he had not seen and which at the same time exceeded all phantasms, violating the horizon of our imagination. It is an oneiric image, but also one that jolts viewers from their slumber. Zieliński's *Hot* does not so much kill as rather symbolically give life, as the space of the fire, the fever becomes the genesis of a new subject. The subject is continually becoming, and at the same time, so to speak, infects with fire, the fever. The experience of pain is recorded by Zieliński, finding a space to be heard,

41 Łebkowska, *Empatia*, 34.

42 This coincidence demands a thorough analysis. Among those to identify the link between Jurry Zieliński's painting and the self-immolation of Ryszard Siwiec is Jolanta Kruczek, *Metaforyczne malarstwo Jerzego Ryszarda Zielińskiego*: „Jurry malariski poeta,” master's dissertation, KUL, Lublin 2009, 107–108, and following her the authors of a calendar, see *Kalendarium życia i twórczości, in Jurry. Powrót artysty. Jerzy Ryszard „Jurry” Zieliński (1943–1980)*, ed. Marta Tarabuła (Kraków: Galeria Zderzak, 2010), 474.

and also a space for the transgression of suffering – in the web of relationality woven around the dramatic existential gestures, while also regarding the political events of violence to which Ryszard Siwiec and the Buddhist monk reacted with self-destruction. This image-account becomes a place of forming bonds with those who suffer, and at the same time is supposed to infect viewers with the fever of empathy. As Jan Michalski writes:

Zieliński's life mission was to defend the community from moral lethargy. [...] According to his wife's testimony he called this a modest vigil. On a painting that goes by the title *Modest Vigil*, he painted his soul in the form of a live bird with a glowing eye.<sup>43</sup>

I should stress that I do not think that *Hot* is a straightforward image of Ryszard Siwiec or a Buddhist monk with whom viewers are to identify, which would assume introducing an ambivalent meaning of empathy as identification. I perceive Zieliński's painting rather as an expression of a "modest vigil," which in this case I interpret as a glowing, hot gift of empathy, leaning towards another, seeing something in him or her that goes beyond our own experience.<sup>44</sup> I therefore understand *Hot* as an image-account, a representation of empathy calling for a response and responsibility.

Such works as Barbara Zbrożyna's *Sarcophagus in Memory of Jan Palach* (c. 1969) and Jarosław Kozłowski's *Presence* (Galeria Pod Moną Lisą, Wrocław, 1968) can, I suspect, be considered in similar terms. They demand from us a detailed analysis at the level of the material aspect of objects as well as the level of their political and social framing.

In their relational nature and references to the suffering of others, these works appear in 1968, which to date has not been a particular reference point for the periodisation of art in Poland, confined to 1944, 1945, 1948, 1949, 1955 and 1956, and then 1980, 1981 and finally 1989. This fragile (and, it seems, rare in the field of the visual arts) phenomenon of empathy at the same time triggers its reverse – indifference, and ethical torpor. The year 1968 in Poland is surrounded by silence in the art history narrative, and also seems empty from the perspective of artistic production. In spite of the dramatic events in politics and society of the time – above all the strident anti-Semitic witch-hunt, the forced emigration of Polish citizens with Jewish roots, and student

43 Jan Michalski, "Jury – partyzant," in *Jury. Powrót artysty*, 62. Michalski also relates *Hot* to the self-immolation of Ryszard Siwiec, as well as mentioning Maciej Bieniasz's series of *Burning* paintings, in which the artist refers to the similar acts of Buddhist monks.

44 Cf. the examination of the concept of "empathy" in the writings of Edith Stein, Anna Lebkowska, *Emocje*, 25, footnote 56.

protests – in the visual arts circa 1968 it was as if nothing was happening. With the few exceptions of individual artists, daily activities on the national art scene went on uninterrupted; at the same time, art in Poland seemed strangely numb and indifferent. Carolyn Dean, writing about the phenomenon of indifference in culture, writes that “most of us won’t disrupt our daily routines for the sake of others near or far without a real or imaginary causal connection to sufferers.”<sup>45</sup>

In spite of this silence, to me 1968 seems decisive in thinking about the periodisation of art in Poland: it was at that time that the worldview of avant-garde art, which assumed the universalism of values and universality of experience, imperceptibly succumbed to destruction. Indifference entirely destroys a community of experience, as well as the myth of universalistic values and of art as a community experience. If by their lack of reaction artists made it clear that they were watching over timeless values, then the period in which they did not react showed these values to be past, empty, and useless. This, I feel, makes the few voices that one can discern in this silence all the more valuable. However, for this we need a change in the theoretical framework. Individual gestures such as self-reflectiveness, (self-) criticism of institutions, analysis of the medium, critique of pictorialism, recalling socialist realism and the disenchantment with realism and figuration seem to me rather specific problems of Polish art. Instead of them, I am inclined to look for relational gestures: empathy and community - looking for links and connections with a true other that can proceed using various media, forms and materials and which change the concept of autonomy of form in the direction of subjective sovereignty, an existential concept of autonomy, perhaps: speaking to others in one’s name and seeking relations with another in order to copy oneself anew.

### **The Art Historian as Homo Empathicus**

Empathy as a gesture of critical courage, response and responsibility recalled and initiated in artistic practice by Szentjóbby, Jurry Zieliński and Władysław Strzemiński (*To My Friends the Jews*, c. 1945) leads to a redefinition of the concept of criticism in the art of the time. From this point of view, critical artistic practice is the kind that forms a sense of empathy and a position of *homo empathicus* among artists in spectators as well as in the wider perspective: it is art that does not feel for itself, but co-creates itself through an empathetic relationship with another. In what way, though, could we relate the question

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45 Carolyn J. Dean, *The Fragility of Empathy after the Holocaust* (Ithaca–London: Cornell University Press, 1999), 5.

of empathy, affect and experience of critical artistic practice mentioned above to writing art history in Poland?

I would like to point to the fact that the history of art in Poland has never considered the Holocaust sufficiently thoroughly to change art history's structures, paradigms, hierarchies of values and periodisations, which from a geopolitical perspective appears to be a particular task for it. I do not mean either a simple operation of adding Jewish artists to the apparatus of art history in Poland, or the absorption of the Holocaust by the *episteme* of the discipline in its local version. Izabela Kowalczyk points emphatically to this "break" in art history in Poland with reference to Jewish identity.<sup>46</sup> What I have in mind is rather the aforementioned change in framework, the radical rewriting of art history in Poland, taking as a starting point (not a culmination point!) the suffering and pain of the other, the Holocaust and Polish society's involvement in it, as well as war and postwar bursts and symptoms of antisemitism. I am thinking of the transgression of identity in art history towards radical otherness, so that, rather than being consolidated, it is exposed to change, ultimately understanding the Shoah as, to quote Zygmunt Bauman,

born and executed in our modern rational society, at the high stage of our civilization and at the peak of human cultural achievement, and for this reason it is a problem of that society, civilization and culture.<sup>47</sup>

Grzegorz Niziołek relates Bauman's conclusions to the post-war history of theatre in Poland in the phenomenal book mentioned above, *Polish Holocaust Theatre*. I would like to repeat Bauman's and Niziołek's proposal to refer to my own discipline. This is not about the history of art relegating the Holocaust to the space of specialist studies, but rather about shifting it from the margins to the centre of thinking and writing about history and art of the last seventy or so years in Poland.<sup>48</sup> And it is from this perspective – the Holocaust treated not as a specific problem, but as the heart of art history in Poland – that I propose searching for the traces of this event (as well as those of 1968) and the experience of Polish-Jewish relations that joins it, in the work both of the

46 Izabela Kowalczyk, "Zwichnięta historia sztuki? – o pominięciach problematyki żydowskiej w badaniach sztuki polskiej po 1945 roku," *Opposite, Rocznik Instytutu Historii Sztuki Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego*, Wrocław 2011, [http://opposite.uni.wroc.pl/opposite\\_nr1/izabela\\_kowalczyk.htm](http://opposite.uni.wroc.pl/opposite_nr1/izabela_kowalczyk.htm) (accessed October 19, 2013).

47 Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), x.

48 Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*. I regard Marcin Lachowski's book *Nowocześni po katastrofie. Sztuka w Polsce w latach 1945-1960* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2013) as the first step in the rewriting of the history of art in Poland in this direction.

artists who remained in Poland and of those who in Polish history and art, forced to leave the country in a literal and symbolic way, “emigrated” in the 1940s, ‘50s and ‘60s (and later). The ways that might lead art historians to such a paradigmatic change include searching for founding events that are radically different from those previously adopted for post-war art history, and with them being open to other experiences, values, categories and judgements.

What would happen if, for example, instead of Tadeusz Kantor’s *The Return of Odysseus* (1944), the *First Exhibitions of Modern Art* (1948) or the exhibitions in the Warsaw Arsenal (1955), we were to take, as an “event”-scale work, an otherwise unknown album from the heart of darkness – the Łódź ghetto circa 1943?

This piece is an 18-page album with an unknown title. It was produced in the Łódź ghetto, as indicated by Agata Pietroń, probably in the autumn or early winter of 1943.<sup>49</sup> The plastic cover was made by Arie Ben Menachem, and the majority of the photographs, integrated as a collage, were taken by Mendel Grosman. The original album was lost, leaving black-and-white photographic copies in its stead. According to Pietroń’s excellent master’s thesis, Arie Ben Menachem had no artistic training, but Mendel Grosman was a photographer who was recognised in the artistic community before the war. Pietroń writes that in the ghetto he worked in the department producing straw shoes, and probably met Mendel Grosman through the latter’s sister, Ruzka Grosman. In 1942 he helped him photograph the victims of the General Curfew of September 1942.<sup>50</sup> The album of interest to me was produced from blue pages manufactured in the ghetto paper-making department. On each sheet a black-and-white photograph or photographs were affixed, accompanied by a caption in Polish or Yiddish, or drawings in watercolours and gouache and patches cut out from coloured paper. Most of the photos used by Ben Menachem were taken for official purposes for the Statistical Office, while some were private and taken in secret (from 1941 there was a ban on photography for private use).<sup>51</sup> Their montage, the contrasting juxtaposition of images, and the use of text that demystifies or reinforces the visual information or poses questions and sets problems completing the space of the elliptical official discourse, allows Ben Menachem to construct an accusation levelled at those in power, as well as taking a position towards the

49 Agata Pietroń, *Fotomontaż jako sposób opisu Zagłady. Analiza albumów fotograficznych z łódzkiego getta*, master’s dissertation written under the supervision of dr hab. Jacek Leociak, University of Warsaw Institute of Polish Culture, April 2007, 54. Thanks to Agata Pietroń for allowing me to read her excellent thesis and for providing valuable information.

50 *Ibid.*, 42-43.

51 My description is based on the catalogue *Getto. Terra incognita. Sztuka walcząca Ariego Ben Menachema i Mendla Grosmana*, eds. Xenia Modrzejewska-Mrozowska and Andrzej Różycki, Marek Szukalak (Łódź: Oficyna Bibliofilów, 2009).

official albums in the ghetto made by ghetto workers for German and ghetto dignitaries.<sup>52</sup> He exposes their crimes and concealments and traces their promises, decisions, choices and their consequences. Yet in this space of dark knowledge marked by suffering, death, destruction, but also self-accusation, hope appears. The first 16 pages are devoted to hunger, death, humiliations, deportations to the extermination camps, uncertainty, loss, despair, and tragic events in the history of the ghetto such as the General Curfew of September 1942. But the two final pages bear the comment “But despite everything...” “We will endure.” The first of the pages depicts in photographs young people dancing, learning, and spending time together. On the second page we see an almost archetypal couple: a woman and man gazing into the distance, beyond the horizon of the representation, pointing to the future. The last two pages, depicting groups and pairs, underline the community, relations, and solidarity of people in the face of suffering. One might say that the album was constructed for the future, for viewers to come. For me, this album from the ghetto as a material object (for whose production the authors could have faced a harsh punishment), and also as a process of creation (involving a network of collaborators bearing an existential risk), constitutes a work (in the verb and the noun sense) of resistance *par excellence*. With it came the belief in the fragility of human life, but also faith in the power of testimony. Ben Menachem and Mendel Grosman represented the experience of pain and suffering, but also their own, extremely subjective sovereignty. They portrayed the phenomena of utter social subordination, but also of the community and collective. The disillusionment that Ben Menachem and Mendel Grosman’s series exhibited in its focus on death, sickness and suffering, led to action, throwing off the structure of passive waiting. Although it depicts the darkest experience of death and loss, in its power and expression it is life-giving, as it calls for resistance, protest, and feeling. The album’s 18 pages are an assemblage of extraordinary constructions of intensity, endeavouring to surpass the state of immobilisation, anticipation and petrification, moving from despair to anger and hope. This is a hope that, as Victor Crapanzano writes, is linked to the future tense – the promise not only of individual salvation and endurance, but also of a broader one, that of society. A hope that becomes a promise, has a therapeutic aspect, and moves away the horizon of death. It calls upon us to join in feeling the injustice and suffering, to salvage the space of intensity and waiting, to establish the space of the future in ourselves.<sup>53</sup>

52 On Ben Menachem’s album and those in the ghetto see Agata Pietrofi’s master’s dissertation *Fotomontaż*.

53 My observations on hope come from Vincent Crapanzano’s article “Reflections on Hope as a Category of Social and Psychological Analysis,” *Cultural Anthropology*, 1 (2003): 3-32.

I would like to make this work a symbolic foundation of affective art history in Poland and the historian perceived as *homo empathicus*. It obliges art history in Poland to form a sense of empathy proposed in historical research by Dominick LaCapra:

the historian puts him- or herself in the other's position without taking the other's place or becoming a substitute or surrogate for the other who is authorized to speak in the other's voice. Empathy involves affective response to the other [my emphasis] [...] It implies what I am terming empathic unsettlement in the secondary witness, including the historian in one of his or her roles or subjective positions. This unsettlement should, I think, have nonformulaic stylistic effects in representation, for example, in placing in jeopardy harmonizing or fetishistic accounts that bring unearned spiritual uplift or meaning [...].<sup>54</sup>

From the point of view of the affective history of art, I would like to propose the historian of art as a *homo empathicus*, who sees the founding event of art history in Poland not in socialist realism and disgrace, war and trauma, but in the Holocaust, the suffering of the other, but also in the hope of the other, that are so strongly enshrined in Arie Ben Menachem and Mendel Grosman's joint, and only, work.<sup>55</sup>

### **Conclusion: What is Affective History of Art?**

Although the effects of critical events are not always traumatising, introducing negativity through such terms as fear, disgrace, rupture, emptiness, non-experience or trauma in art studies can rob subjects of their agency, frequently blurring the boundaries between the victim, the witness and the aggressor and (self-) victimising individuals and entire social groups. This in turn often leads to the experience of the actual victims being obscured and particularly uncomfortable historical facts being repressed, such as that of Polish society's partial responsibility for the Holocaust. Theories of affect not only restore to subjects the power of influencing the world, but also equip them with the possibility of existential transformation and political change. As I mentioned, affect does not occur either in the body or in the mind, but joins the intellect

54 Dominick LaCapra, *History in Transit. Experience, Identity, Critical Theory* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2004), 65.

55 This work does not exist in studies of the history of art in Poland, although it was mentioned during the exhibition *Pole, Jew, Artist. Identity and Avant-garde*, curators: Joanna Ritt and Jarosław Suchan, Łódź Museum of Art, 15 November 2009 – 21 January 2010.

and cognitive powers with the senses, instinct and the biological level of human functioning like a Möbius strip. At the same time, though, affect is the biological core of subjectivity; in an affective experience (thus wrote Deleuze, and I suspect that the representatives of contemporary psychology and neurobiology would not disagree) there is a rupture in the boundary between the human and the non-human – affect is the space in which humans, animals, space and things meet.

The aforementioned artistic works made me aware that hegemony is never quite overwhelming.<sup>56</sup> The mysterious point x at which its effect vanishes concerns consenting and being open to relationality that is reinforcing and life-giving in an existential and social sense. Although in the above analyses I concentrated on empathy, I should stress that the affective art history can of course not be reduced to this, which is just one very specific form of affective art. Whole chapters therefore wait to be written involving such affects, or collections of affects such as guilt and shame, hatred, anger, sadness, anxiety and fear, as well as love, pleasure, affection and longing. In the history of art edited in this way, particular attention must be given to the transitive relationship of the scholar.

Ewa Domańska describes the challenge of putting together a “practical methodology” combining diligently conducted empirical research with the ability to construct a theory. She writes:

This would therefore mean not finding methodological directives to study history from already existing theories [...] but turning towards the description and analysis of the research material with the aim of searching for concepts and building generalisations, which as a consequence leads to the construction of (small- and medium-scope) theories.<sup>57</sup>

This approach makes existing theories the starting point, the framework for the initial assumptions and research questions, but not the ending point.

In writing about the significance of the subject matter of a work in an affective analysis, I would like to use the above proposal of practical methodology to underline the need to construct the affective history of art in a “bottom-up” fashion, as it were, employing detailed analytical methods focused on the surface of the work: its form, but also its texture, material and physical nature, as well as the artistic procedures undergone (e.g. chopping and cutting, or the reverse: joining, fastening, copying and reproducing). In this way, the affective

<sup>56</sup> Gould, *Affect and Protest*.

<sup>57</sup> Ewa Domańska, *Historia egzystencjalna* (Warszawa: PWN, 2012), 171–172.



art history would constitute a challenge not so much for the application of terms garnered from other disciplines, as for using a dense description of the piece and an analysis to produce new research categories that are almost inscribed in the matter of artistic work.

Affective art history is not only concerned with the affects problematised by artistic practices. Above all, it examines the artists, objects, processual works, institutions, beholders and environment (in a material, historical and cultural sense) as a certain assemblage of active intermediaries of affects: points of transmission, reception, and finally transformation of the affects connected with each other by the web of relationality. As Ernst van Alphen writes, affective reading is an act of engagement – the act of exposing the reader to change. I would add that in an affective reading of art works we concentrate on the material and formal location of the affect in the work and attempt at recognising its forms of transmission, its ethical authority, and relations with memory. But what seems particularly interesting is the way in which this affect operates: what works, how and thanks to what, as well as what we as viewers perceive, what we can do with it as active agents, how we can respond to it and what our responsibility is.

Again, though, I would like to stress very strongly that my project is not about rejecting critical events and experiences, but rather about exiting the impasse of using the “traumatic subject” as a research perspective, whose conceptual outline is, too readily applied not so much to the experiences of actual victims as to the observers of trauma. As Grzegorz Niziołek claims in *Polish Theatre of the Holocaust*, “the bystander society dreams of salvation through trauma. But what about resentment, stupidity, lack of imagination? [...] my research on historical theatrical facts falling into a broad time frame between 1946 and 2009 teaches mistrust towards such overused concepts as trauma and mourning.”<sup>58</sup> I would like to bring a little of this mistrust into the history of art in Poland too. The goal of my broader project, of which this article comprises an introduction, is to try to recognise the key moments of a certain dimension (visual arts) of the history of culture in Poland from an ethical perspective that assumes the possibility (but not necessity) of agency and responsibility, especially of those who are exposed to the view of others’ suffering (particularly the subjective position of artist-observer). So I do not want to reject the negative experiences of the cultural field’s past in Poland, only analysing the positive ones. On the contrary, I would describe my objective as undertaking a critical study of the critical moments in art based on the key events and historical experiences, as well as to change the perspective from a traumatic to an affective one. The task this brings with it is to listen

58 Niziołek, *Polski teatr Zagłady*, 35.

carefully to silence and quiet, to pain and death, to indifference, anger and hatred, the challenge of continually opening oneself to guilt and shame, but also the search for the desire for life, relations, care, friendship, and solidarity in and through art. In the history of art conceived and articulated in this affective fashion, I am not interested in moral judgement, but in expanding the space of understanding.

As noted by Braidotti in the article I quoted at the beginning, affirmative ethics does not entail rejection of pain or suffering, but changing the framework in which they are conceived: empathetic co-existence with the other, in a relationship that is a potential place: of movement and change, growth and interaction.<sup>59</sup> I would set similar goals for the affective art history in Poland, for example. I propose leaving behind self-victimisation in order to see the suffering of others, as well as oneself in relation to others. The affective history of art would serve to redefine our own cultural and artistic experience – to recognise ourselves as a subject influencing others and open to the influences of others: human and non-human. It would, as Braidotti puts it, make us see not individuals, but mutually dependent, connected networks of positive and negative flows of reality. Affect in the writing of history can be treated as a “rescue category,”<sup>60</sup> giving us an escape from a situation of an insoluble conflict that makes agreement impossible. The goal of the affective history of art would be to “move the heart” and, connected with this, “shock to thought,” in order for conflict and crisis to be not just described and analysed, but above all transgressed.<sup>61</sup>

*Translation: Benjamin Koschalka*

<sup>59</sup> Braidotti, *Affirmation*.

<sup>60</sup> The rescue category is conceived here in reference to Ewa Domańska's idea of “rescue history.”

<sup>61</sup> “Shock to thought” is a description of affect used by Brian Massumi, cf. *A Shock to Thought. Expression after Deleuze and Guattari*, ed. Brian Massumi (London–New York: Routledge, 2002). I thank Łukasz Mojsak for the concept of “moving the heart.”