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Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź
Ogrodowa 19
www.msl.org.pl

**ATLAS
OF MODERNITY.
THE 20TH AND 21ST CENTURY
ART COLLECTION**

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Kolekcja

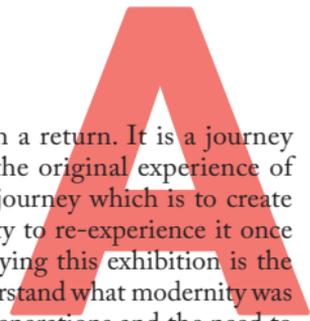


**The Honorary Patronage of
the President of the Republic of Poland
Bronisław Komorowski**

ATLAS OF MODERNITY

Modernity. An age whose origins some associate with the French Revolution and the Enlightenment ideals of reason and progress, while others relate it to the industrial revolution and the development of capitalism. It is also a state of mind: a strong sense of one's own subjectivity and the autonomy of the individual in relation to the community. It is the conviction that nothing is established once and for all and that it's man who moulds his own future and destiny and, consequently, is held responsible for its shape. Are we still living in such modernity? Is our perception of the world and our thinking about the world still modern? Is the era of modernity over and has the era of post-modernism dawned upon us, or is it only now, as some claim, that it has entered its decisive phase? Without anticipating the answers to these questions, one can say with cautious certainty: the world as we know is still to a large degree defined by phenomena, processes, ideas and notions that appeared in modernity. Contemporary culture, models of scientific knowledge, social structures, forms of politics, economic mechanisms, our ideas about ourselves and, finally, our desires and fears were all basically shaped in modernity. Their shape might have changed significantly over time, becoming misshapen and distorted, or even inverted, but its original, modernist matrix can still be recognized. Thus if we want to understand the contemporary world and understand ourselves, we must keep returning to modernity.

The exhibition 'Atlas of Modernity', based on the Muzeum Sztuki collection,



proposes such a return. It is a journey in search of the original experience of modernity, a journey which is to create an opportunity to re-experience it once again. Underlying this exhibition is the desire to understand what modernity was for previous generations and the need to renew contact with what once shaped it. Modern ideals and solutions derived from them have been repeatedly subjected to criticism, accused that instead of a better life and a more just world, they brought about dangers on a scale unprecedented in history. Admittedly: these accusations have not been entirely unfounded. Does it mean, however, that the project of modernity should be completely rejected?

We are deeply convinced that this is not the case. Many of the ideas instrumental to this project are still valid in our opinion. The only thing is to revise them and think them through once again. As one of contemporary thinkers points out: 'To appropriate the modernities of yesterday can be at once a critique of the modernities of today and an act of faith in the modernities – and in the modern men and women – of tomorrow and the day after tomorrow.' The journey into the depth of modernity can become the best way to find the road leading towards a better future.

In today's Poland, the issue of modernity seems to be of particular importance. Over the last twenty years our country has been undergoing a very dynamic modernization. It covers all areas in which the State and the society function: politics, economy, social relations and mores. The question is: are we real subjects of modernization

processes, consciously taking pains to transform ourselves and to change the world? Or are we just objects, mindlessly accepting roles written for us in the scenario of modernization? By encouraging us to rethink the modern heritage the exhibition 'Atlas of Modernity' aims at developing a more conscious and subjective approach to the ongoing changes.

Modernity, in its entire diversity, can be reduced to two imperatives. The first is the imperative of critical reflection on the world, a demand for independence of judgment, a refusal to accept any statements just because they are backed by the authority of tradition, public opinion or a leader. The second one is an imperative of commitment to change the world, an obligation to make the conditions of human existence more bearable. Critical reflection and commitment are equally important, but the most important seems to be their coexistence. The society consisting of individuals who are committed and yet incapable of critical thinking is probably effective when it comes to implementing the tasks assigned to it, however, such a society is ready to pursue both democratic and totalitarian goals with equal effectiveness – if only they are backed by a sufficiently seductive ideology. Only the subjects critical of what is said about the world, of how this world is portrayed are able to stand up to the persuasive power of ideology. Only the subjects thinking independently, those who have managed to escape from the state of intellectual immaturity, are able to take full responsibility for themselves and

the world. In the context of the ongoing modernization processes taking place in Poland, critical thinking is the element of the modern tradition which we certainly should try to save. Also in order to be able to use it for correcting modernity itself – even if this correction was to lead to the refutation of some seemingly fundamentally modernist assumptions.

'Atlas of Modernity' is not a historical exhibition. It offers not so much a narrative of modern history put in chronological order, as a montage of notions about modernity and its traces rooted in the art of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The 'atlas' appearing in the title defines best the structure of the exhibition: it is an unusual collection of 'maps', each describing the topography of a different territory of modernity. We can find among them such territories as: 'revolution', 'emancipation', 'progress', 'city', 'capital', 'machine', 'experiment', but also 'museum', 'tradition' and 'catastrophe'. The maps certainly do not cover all areas of the modern world but it was not the intention. After all, the incompleteness of this collection and the collage-like arrangement of its elements seem to render best a modern view of reality with its fragmentary nature and discontinuity.

It is no coincidence that modernity becomes an object of reflection in Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź. There is no other museum in Poland with equally strong relationship with modern culture. It was here that one of the first museum collections of modern art in the world was created. It was here that the image of artistic modernity was

shaped for decades, establishing the hierarchies which are still valid to this day. But most importantly, it was here that the idea of a museum was linked for the first time with the modern idea of critical thinking. According to the assumptions made by Władysław Strzemiński, one of the initiators of creating the collection of modern art in Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, this institution was to serve, on the one hand, to critically revise the established aesthetic canons, and, on the other – to develop conscious and mature approach to artistic form within the Polish society. Ryszard Stanisławski, longstanding director of Muzeum Sztuki, called it ‘a critical instrument’, believing that the purpose of this institution should be to continuously undermine the dominant judgments about what is important in art. We are also trying to continue this idea. While the mission of the Museum managed by Stanisławski was to present a critical reinterpretation of the history of art, we would rather see the mission of today’s Muzeum Sztuki in triggering critical attitude towards reality – both artistic and non-artistic. We would like ‘Atlas of Modernity’ to become a tool for supporting the development of this capacity.

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MUSEUM

Felt slippers, barrier ropes stretched between stanchions which mustn't be crossed, 'no photography' signs and devout recollection – those were some stereotypical associations brought by the idea of a 'museum' not so long ago.

Traditional museum imposed some discipline on visitors. Not only with the help of special order regulations, but above all – by imposing a certain vision of the world. Museum expositions, organizing historical material according to some presuppositions, suggested how the society should think about the world. They taught history – also the history of art – as a process of inevitable progress, a process occurring due to master achievements of outstanding individuals – geniuses. The cult of the artist as genius, on which the idea of a traditional museum was based, translated into the cult of their artistic output: a unique work of art, an original.

For the purpose of this exhibition, a traditional museum is symbolically evoked by the reconstruction of a fragment of the historical exhibition of Muzeum Sztuki dating back to the 1930s. On the other hand, the museum ideology and, above all, the cult of the original, instrumental to it, is undermined with an installation-forger: the reproduction of the Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0.10 from 1915 (in Petrograd) where Kazimir Malevich presented his Suprematist masterpieces, including *Black Square on a White Ground*. An installation reviving that exhibition was made in the years 1985–2011 by a Serbian artist who, on this occasion, took

the name of Malevich. This play with the idea of the original can also be understood as an attempt to draw attention to the fact that the essence of the avant-garde art (which Malevich was associated with) relied not so much on producing unique works of art as on the efforts to change the way of seeing the world.

It became manifest with the assumptions made for the International Collection of Modern Art of the 'a.r.' group opened in 1931 in Muzeum Sztuki (a part of which is permanently displayed in the Neoplastic Room, designed by Strzemiński and located in ms¹). According to these assumptions, a museum displaying a collection of avant-garde art did not serve to preserve the old order or to worship great artists and their original masterpieces. Instead, the works of art gathered in the museum's collection were to stimulate a modern aesthetic sensitivity and thereby shape the citizen of a modern society.

AUTONOMY

What counts most for modernity is independence: the independence of nations, individuals, sciences or art disciplines. Sovereignty and independence – or autonomy – is a special value of modern art. A society that is focused, every single day, on achieving concrete and measurable objectives, makes an exception for art. Art does not have to be productive – it can come into existence in a space seemingly detached from life. This does not mean, however, that the modern avant-garde turns away from everyday life.

It is the autonomy that provides space for the development of the new forms of thinking independent of politics and economics. It is also the autonomy which allows the artists – such as Katarzyna Kobro and Władysław Strzemiński – to test, in the context of art and with appropriate means, the solutions that could later be used to bring about changes in urban planning, architecture and design of a new social order.

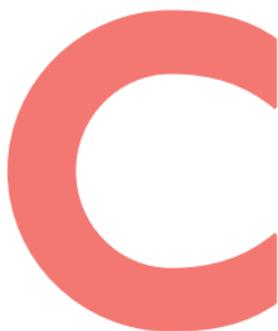


CAPITAL

Everyone cares about money. Each of us weighs how much he earns and how much he spends. He is also interested in other people's earnings – envying fortunes, pitying debts. The flow of capital shapes the majority of relations between people.

Therefore Karl Marx criticized capitalism. Not only did he criticize the desire for profit of the bourgeois industrialists. He also showed the mechanism of exploitation of each worker, both male and female, the mechanism of alienation which reduces people to effective cogs in an assembly line. Modern capitalism is greedily seizing an ever-increasing share of life. Not only work time, but also free time can be reduced to cash. Education and intellect, cultural competences, trained and acquired by each of us outside the workplace, or even our network of friends and acquaintances – can all be used to gain profit.

Modern artists have always closely watched capitalism. They saw it as an opportunity for civilization progress, but protested at the same time against the exploitation of workers. On the one hand, art itself became the subject of market speculation, on the other, however, it tried to offer alternative economic models. For Joseph Beuys, the creativity of those who were knowingly and deliberately changing the world around them for the better, already constituted their capital, but the capital that instead of alienating, empowers the society.



MACHINE

Today we cannot live without machines. Mobile phone's alarms wake us up. Electric toothbrushes and hair dryers help us take care of hygiene. Toasters and microwaves facilitate the preparation of breakfast. Radio, television and the Internet allow us access to the latest news. Both public and private means of transport take us to work... And so throughout the whole day we are surrounded by indispensable machines and trivial gadgets.

Simple automatic machines already existed before the modern era. But it was not until the advent of complex machines that the avant-garde artists were seduced. Their functionality has become the new standard of beauty. The Italian Futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti declared that 'a roaring motor car which seems to run on machine-gun fire, is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace'.

Artists did see, however, the threat of the automation of society. Janusz Maria Brzeski warned: 'A man operating a machine tool or an automatic machine became, a long time ago, an inherent part of that machine'.

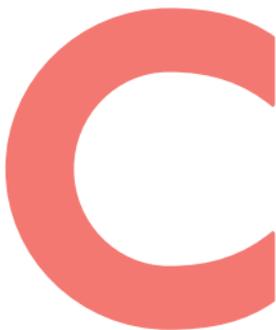


CITY

Before the advent of the modern era, art was hidden in spaces inaccessible to all. Art, paid with aristocracy's money, embellished only the manor houses of the patrons of arts. Art created for the glory of God would not go beyond the abbey's walls.

It was not until the modern era that art – quite literally – was taken to the city streets. Art has become available to all city dwellers, both in the institutions devoted to art, as well as in the visual language of urban advertising. The city has become the main arena of modern life, a place of major civilizational changes for the last two centuries at least. This rapid urban development has become itself a subject of art (as in a photomontage by Kazimierz Podszadecki).

Art made city dwellers aware of the fact that the public space is a common property. Artists frequently implemented prototypes of urban manifestations. For example, Ewa Partum, in 1971, mocked the language of communist prohibitions, piling up absurd signs on the Freedom Square [plac Wolności] in Łódź, with one of them reading: 'It is forbidden to forbid'.



PROGRESS

For millennia humankind has longed for ideal times when heroes walked the earth, and deities interfered every day in the most mundane matters. In the spirit of this longing for the prehistoric era of universal abundance and happiness, each new day could only be worse than the previous one.

It was only the modern era which brought the idea of progress, the opportunities for technological, cultural and moral development to the fore. The belief that it is man himself – without the intervention of deities and heroes who can build a better tomorrow – brought about the nineteenth-century industrial revolution, the steam engine and electricity. The avant-garde art documented the progress of technology (Janusz Maria Brzeski). Art, inspired by technological achievements, used them in new forms of art. In the evolution of these forms, some also wanted to see the inevitability of progress.



EXPERIMENT

The concept of experiment brings images of test tubes, flasks and retorts manipulated by scientists in white lab coats. Such an association is possible thanks to modernity. Before, the nature was only observed. Experimental studies that allow to explore the laws of nature and create technical inventions are an achievement of modernity.

Every scientific experiment is governed by very strict rules. It should be carried out in precisely controlled conditions which must be repeatable. The experiment in art is free from such constraints, relies on the work of imagination beyond all rules imposed from above. But the effects of the artists' activities can be – and sometimes are – used in everyday life. For example, the avant-garde techniques of photomontage and collage have permanently entered the graphic design and advertising, while the experiments related to geometric abstraction have inspired new forms of architecture and industrial design.



PROPAGANDA



Some manipulations by propagandists – such as posters from the communist era or some clumsy modern advertising – may amuse by their artlessness. But all the more visible is the essence of propaganda in them: bending the truth and censoring inconvenient contents. Propaganda reinforces stereotypes, both positive and negative ones, in order to convince the public opinion to the propagandists' arguments.

The majority of information is received through the image. That is why the modern propaganda uses visual materials most willingly. Some modern artists consciously engaged in propaganda activity (Mieczysław Szczuka, Mieczysław Berman, Teresa Żarnower). Some of the techniques used by them, such as photomontage, have become an integral part of the language of propaganda.

Other artists expose the propaganda manipulations, suggesting their aloofness from the imposed world's image (Tamás St. Auby, Derek Boshier, Zbigniew Libera, Mladen Stilinović).

NORMAS AND STANDARDS



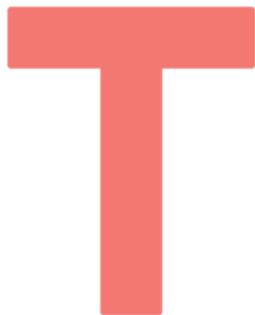
Since childhood, which we spend – according to gender – in pink or blue rompers, different norms and standards define every aspect of our lives. There are norms which define appropriate weight to height ratio, standard morphology and blood pressure results. The standards of the proper Polish language use, education rules, specific social roles determined by gender, sexual orientation, ethnic origin, class divisions, social position – have all been set... Standards and norms are ubiquitous, it is not surprising, therefore, that artists are interested in them. Some artists – like Zbigniew Libera, Jacek Niegoda, Anna Orlikowska – reveal the oppressive nature of norms. Others (Ryszard Winarski, Zbigniew Dłubak) are interested in the study of these most basic standards that organize the reality, or – conversely – constructing standards using artistic means to define non-artistic social relationships (Władysław Strzemiński).

TRADITION

Tradition – expressed in paper cutouts from the region of Łowicz, in great grandma's hand-caligraphed recipes, in family or religious customs – is a kind of museum in itself. Similarly to a museum, tradition is created with ideas which are important to the ancestors of a given community.

Preserving tradition helps the community survive because it creates its identity, which is precisely why avant-garde artists – such as the Polish 'Formist' movement – looked to tradition for inspiration. Tytus Czyżewski or Władysław Skoczylas viewed folk art not only as an inspiration for their own art practice, but also as a source of national art which was to express the aspirations of a new modern Poland after it regained its independence in 1918.

Tradition creates a bond between subsequent generations and builds a sense of community. It also acts as a constraint, making the rational development of societies more difficult and preventing the individual from becoming independent (this is how the avant-garde perceived tradition in general). At the same time tradition fascinates as a world which is becoming all past and is no longer our world due to the progress of civilisation (Zofia Rydet, Władysław Hasior).

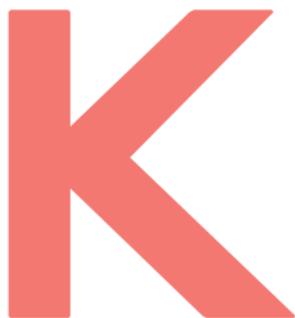


CATASTROPHE

The 20th century started in 1915 in the trenches of the First World War. It was then that chemical weapons causing mass destruction and death were used for the first time. The true tragic meaning of the notion of 'mass destruction' was revealed 25 years later by the Second World War and the Holocaust.

The catastrophe of the 20th century world wars does not only consist in the millions of victims. The trauma of war undermined the faith in the meaning of the 19th century progress – since it led to genocide.

Also artists lost their faith in the future. Marek Szwarc in 1935 creates the sculpture of Hiob debased by suffering. Władysław Strzemiński makes portraits of victims of war. Death can be seen in the photographs of ruins made by Leonard Sempoliński and in the paintings by Andrzej Wróblewski, Jerzy Krawczyk and Jonasz Stern. Although Konrad Smoleński was born almost 40 years after the Second World War his work entitled 'There is no God' is also marked with catastrophe. Showing the image of empty skies, it clearly indicates who is to blame. We are.



THE SELF

Each adult Polish citizen holds an identity card, a document which unequivocally identifies him or herself. In the field of legal regulations there is no room for doubts concerning the 'self' – but contemporary art does not belong to this field.

Especially that the thinkers of the modern era began to look critically at the nature of the Self. For Descartes in the 17th century the essential nature of a subject was its capacity to think. Self was equal to mind. This is how human body was pushed to the background – for many ages. Body in art appeared only as a metaphor of abstract ideas or as an object of erotic fascination of the male gaze. Indeed – an object and not a subject.

It was only the 20th century that elevated the body showing that our 'self' is the whole made of body and spirit. This subject has been explored, in particular, by women artists who by showing corporeality – such as in nudes by Katarzyna Kobro and Alina Szapocznikow – tell an intimate story of female identity and its relation to a very special experience of the body. Mirosław Bałka or Haegue Yang go even further, creating art, in which the body inscribed in the structure of the work enters into a relation with the bodies of spectators. Other artists (Alan Charlton, Jerzy Lewczyński, Alain Jacquet) enter into a dialogue with philosophical concepts of the subject, undermining the well-established idea of the artist's self being the only source of the work's meaning.



EMANCIPATION

The emancipation assumes a struggle for equality. It was only the era of modernity that allowed the voice of those deprived of rights: religious minorities, slaves, women, Jews, workers and Black people... Today a struggle continues to stop discrimination based on sexual orientation, disability or age, and to obtain equal access to education, wage and career.

The struggle for equality is joined by artists. The works by Ewa Partum, Barbara Hammer, Zoran Todorovic, Zbigniew Libera are a voice speaking on behalf of various minorities – women, atheists, Arabs living in the land occupied by Israel. Lastly – on behalf of animals.



REVOLUTION

Revolution, though it always means a rapid change in the course of history, does not have to be connected with violence. This is demonstrated by the events of the bloodless 1989 revolution – initiated with a Solidarity revolt of 1981 – that put an end to the Europe's division between the Communist East and Capitalist West. The post-Cold War order was the final result of another large-scale 20th century revolution – the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 when militant workers who sympathized with communism overthrew the tsar in Russia.

Communist ideas influenced artists, too. In Poland during the 20-year Interwar Period artists from different leftist milieus devoted their art to the ideas which had given birth to the October Revolution. In Warsaw it was Mieczysław Szczuka and Teresa Żarnower, in Cracow – Stanisław Osostowicz and Henryk Wiciński, in Łódź – Karol Hiller, Władysław Strzemiński, Katarzyna Kobro or Stanisław Notarjusz and a milieu of artists of Jewish descent.

After the Second World War when the totalitarian form of Communism discredited the ideas that formed its basis, a revolution began also to signify a pursuit of alternative solutions to dominating political systems. Joseph Beuys believed that artistic work itself may bring about revolutionary changes.



RELATED EVENTS

The Department of Education would like to invite you to the meetings with 'Atlas of Modernity. The 20th and 21st Century Art Collection' as part of a series of workshop:

— 'Familia do kwadratu' [Family squared] – for young children accompanied by their parents, on Saturdays at 13:13

— 'Pół kwadrata małolata' [Half Square of a Kiddy] – for children from the first three grades of primary school, on Saturdays at 11:11

— 'Kwadratowa szkoła' [Square school] – for children from grades from 4th to 6th of primary school, on Wednesdays at 17:17

— 'Otwarta pracownia' [Open Atelier] – for adults, on Fridays at 17:17.

Lectures dedicated to selected themes of the exhibition entitled 'Atlas of Modernity. The 20th and 21st Century Art Collection' will be given on Saturdays, at 11:11.



All the activities take place at ms² – Muzeum Sztuki, Ogrodowa 19.

Information and registration for workshops and tours:
The Department of Education,
phone no 605 060 063.

<http://msl.org.pl/pl/wydarzenia/kategorie/edu-pl/>



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CENTURY ART COLLECTION
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