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THE ISSUE OF AUTHENTICITY IN *GRASS JUST GRASS* BY K. M. BEDNARSKI

1. INTRODUCTION. PROBLEMS. CASE STUDY BEDNARSKI

The subject of this paper is the authenticity of installation art with reference to *Grass just Grass* by K. M. Bednarski. This issue is, in my opinion, crucial for understanding contemporary art and a key concept in conservation theory and practice. I will consider the subject from philosophical and practical point of view, taking into account some aspects important for conservation. It aims at caring for and preserving contemporary art for future generations “in the full richness of their authenticity”.¹ My thesis is that the issues of authenticity of the installation work of art constitute a delicate complexity of many inherent factors. The main are: authenticity of the material and meaning unity of the work of art, authenticity of context, place and space, and authenticity of the viewer’s perception relevant to the artist’s intent.

Grass just grass is a kind of installation connected with emotional experience of the author as well as the viewer. It uses interaction leading to the expression of emotions and associations, with particular role of the place as an inherent element of the work of art. Looking at the work from a distance we can see some kind of window boxes with grass and beautiful small red flowers or a kind of coffin full of soil and grass with four lamps above. Coming closer we realise the grass is made of green coated barbed wire, the peat is wet, the bulbs are producing warmth, dampness and scent of fresh soil, the sound of the word *missenti* (which mean: can you hear me?) is whispering from a distance. The viewer is faced with a simple form made of ordinary materials, immediately affecting his senses and intellect. The artist has evoked many associations – from hollow space, a metaphor of emptiness, to concentration camps. However, in keeping with Umberto Eco’s theory of the open form, he has generally avoided an auto-commentary to the work. He leaves the viewer with different interpretations to choose from and that’s why he entitled it *Grass just grass*. The basic, *sine*

¹ The introduction of the *Venice Charter*, 1964

qua non, condition for all these contents of the message to be accessible is to maintain the object as constituted by the artist, both in the physical and metaphorical sense.

But the work had changed. The change of space was followed by the change of context, opening new possibilities of interpretation. Yet at some point an inappropriate arrangement destroyed the object's idea, needs and the artist's concept. The alteration of meaning was at variance with the artist's intent and consequently it ruined the authenticity of the context, place and space.

The next change was connected with the lack of haptic and sensual elements designed by the artist. The authenticity of the ecosystem of the work as well as the compliance with artist's concept were wrecked, so was the viewer's perception. The artist's attitude to the work has changed and that was connected with possibilities, temporal, historical and personal circumstances. This attitude of the artist who observes the changes of his/her work and submits them for activity of the viewer, community is called in history of art – activism.

Does authenticity depend only on the material part of the work? In this context, I find that the establishing of the issue of authenticity of *Grass just grass* by K. M. Bednarski is highly significant and important. I am going to describe below the complexity of the issues of authenticity in historical and scientific terms.

The notion of authenticity has never been precisely defined. It changes depending on time, place, cultural and traditional connections, the perception of the idea of original and the truth. The etymology of the word “authentic” derives from the Greek *authentikòs* (myself, the same). In Latin it is related to *auctor* (warrant of its truth, authority). Latin *authenticus* means reliable, being in accordance with facts, but also particular and original. In that meaning, it entered the French language in the thirteenth century and English in the fourteenth century. Shakespeare used it to denote the absence of dissimulation or of pretence.²

The historical approach to the issue is based on the ancient tradition on taking care of Apelles artwork in Roman times. In our times, authenticity considered and affirmed in the Charter of Venice, supplemented by the Nara Document on Authenticity (1994) occurred the issue as the essentials qualifying factor concerning values. The main use of the concept of authenticity in relation to the words such as “true” and “original” is inherent in various contexts, belonging to the meaning of the work of art. The current concept of authenticity as a tool for past, present and future preservation, presentation and conservation of installations has to be considered and researched as: the authenticity of the internal unity of the artwork;

² *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., OED2, as quoted in: J.Jokilehto, *Authenticity: A general framework for the concept*, Nara Conference on Authenticity, ed. K.E. Larsen, Nara 1994, p. 18

the authenticity of context, place and space; the authenticity of the creation process; the truth in the case of the viewer's perception; the authenticity as a relevance to the artist's intent; authentic as originated; the truth in the aspect of durability and changes.

2 . ANALYSE THE AUTHENTICITY AS THE TRUTH:

authenticity of the internal unity of the work of art

The work of art is bound up with the form that belongs to the creation process and is made from certain materials in certain historical setting. Matter is the carrier of the work's meaning, an idea "encrypted in morphemes" of the material substance.³ To preserve the authenticity of the work's ecosystem that combines specific formal, material and existential ingredients, all its constituent parts have to be retained. Conservation of the work therefore is a process requiring understanding and appreciation of the idea and significance and it isn't just limited to the material. In the case of *Grass just grass* the authenticity of the work's setting has been upset. Its constituents determining its sensual and haptic value – the scent, dampness and sound – were removed, which made the work internally incoherent.

the authenticity of context

The work of art needs to be perceived in its context, and relevant values defined as a basis for treatment. *Grass just Grass* can include the category of *artist-as-anthropologist*. This notion was used by Joseph Kosuth who described the artist as opposed to the anthropologist. Occupying a special position in society, the artist analyses his/her own culture from the inside. He doesn't respect the existing, functioning artists' views, material, spatial and semantic relations, but he express doubts and challenges (artistic practice observed at least since Duchamp). Bednarski's concept of authenticity connotes culture having to do with an object's character as a true expression of an individual's art as society's values and beliefs. That's why *Grass just Grass* has been construed in so many different ways, from existential to a strictly political sense. The suggestions of traces of existence overgrown with grass were mentioned as part of the artist's intent, as was the experience of human memory or simply the field of poppy flowers. Given the extraordinarily ironic character of Bednarski, it was also interpreted as the artist's joke of the traditional thinking. But at the exhibition in Vilnius, Lithuania, barbed wire was associated with Stalinism and the yoke of the Soviet captivity. In Italy and in Poland it was associated with more general meanings.

place and space

³ J. Makota, *O klasyfikacji sztuk pięknych*, Kraków 1964, pp. 25, 158-164

The arrangement of place and space as one of key elements for the installation work was considered in historical, temporal and environmental contexts. Initially, the artist adapted the concept to the site construction, putting it into an open space, as Robert Smithson said⁴, a long way from - “abstractive universe of art” - separated places like galleries or museums. Bednarski followed this direction by realising his first version in the middle of the forest. The second was on the field full of poppy flowers that inspired him to use the painting colour effect. In the subsequent exposition he used the space of old, ruined house, thus creating a completely new context. He added the sound of the word “*missenti*” recorded on the tape and played back from a different room. This element, as well as the watering of grass, constituting the integral part of the work, triggered many difficulties during next expositions.

The role and influence of the place forced the artist to think of gallery space. He became aware of many different elements of the gallery which acquired a meaning by exposing the work of art. It influenced its sense. As Brian O’Doherty⁵ claimed, the meaning of the work of art resided not in the specific materials or objects but in the meeting with the viewer in a specific place. Using the complexity of relations between gallery space and every element of the work *per se* Bednarski took into account the outdated gallery space. He created it as a presentation structure for the work of art. For example, in the case of a very narrow corridor at the A.R.Gallery in Warsaw the artist arranged the object in one row of twelve boxes so as to make the sensual contact with the work more likely. In the form of a happening Bednarski made people observe a gardener who was taking care of his grass by watering it. That site-specific art, or rather site-oriented art, evoked emotions, associations, intuitive impressions. In such situation, as Joseph Kosuth said, the installation created event context, whose meaning-effect was the result of the meeting of objects used by the artist with the place.⁶ The work appeared to be the expression of the artist’s commitment to space. Misunderstandings that caused damage of authenticity of the unity of the work of art and space that happened in the past were connected with the arrangement in an inappropriate place. The artist objects to presenting the work in a passage or a big hall with several doors that cause the draught. He suggests a claustrophobic space that can evoke the state of concentration. Aggressive floor, walls, works around (for example other artist’s colorful, powerful works) that were the case in the past, destroyed the much-needed mood of contemplation.

⁴ R. Smithson, *Dialectic of Site and Non-Site* (1968), in: *The writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. By N. Holt, New York 1979

⁵ B. O’Doherty, “Inside the White Cube: Ideology of the Galery Space”, Santa Monika: Lapis Press, 1986, p. 14

⁶ J. Kosuth, “On installation”, *Art and Design*, 1993, no. 30, p. 95

3. PHILOSOPHICAL ISSUES

The truth of perception and influence on the viewer

Grass just Grass is associated with the trend of *actualisme* (fr.), whose focus is on the direct dialog between the artist and the viewer or society by means of a work of art. For phenomenologists like Heidegger, Ingarden, as well as for Brandi for that matter, the artistic aspect of a work of art resides in the mind of the person experiencing it. The work of art is potential by nature, as it doesn't exist without realisation during the viewer's perception. In *Grass just grass* this realisation can be possible only by taking together all elements affecting all human senses.

The object smells with warmed, wet peat, the wire pricks, the red fruits or flowers on the green background delude. It exists in a separated space of the gallery, waiting for the discovery of its potential internal wealth and diversity. Potential, because it exists only if perceived by the viewer in the field intuitively drawn by the artist. The viewer is not obligated by demolishing his habits, but by the influence on his senses revealing many possibilities to follow. The unity of all elements of the work appeared to be indispensable for the authentic and complete empathy of the artist and the viewer.

the authenticity of the creation process

According to Cesare Brandi, a work of art is the result of a creative process, where the artist reveals the physical reality of the work on the basis of the form given by the "pure reality" in the artist's mind. Although after creation such a work has an independent existence, its appreciation and therefore also conservation attitudes depend on the recognition of its authentic creation process every time the work is contemplated or analysed. *Grass just grass* is an essentially autobiographical work connected with personal experiences. Depression was the emotional state that made the artist start cutting barbed wire into small pieces. He was working for more than two months without paying any attention to many cuts on his hands. In the middle of that process his friend Bruno Marrini joined him. That act of assistance and help meant a lot for the artist as a kind of special relationship and communication with other human being. In this context it seems that any attempts to reconstruct the work in case of damage of the original one would have destroyed the authenticity of the creation process. Bednarski considered reconstruction possible but recognised it only as kind of reproduction of the idea. It could play with meanings, without personal mythology, with the loss of the authentic "aura", as the result of, as Walter Benjamin said, mechanical reproduction.

truth in the aspect of durability and changes

According to phenomenological aesthetics, the work of art is a being composed of both a physical, material aspect and a broad, elusive aspect of meaning and notion. What is essential, also for the conservation activities, is to recognise that being as a work of art. Heidegger discriminated between works of art and “production” based on the criterion of purpose. In mass production, the material related to a function is “used” as a means for making an object useful, while the purpose of a work of art is the work itself. The structure exists in a constant tension creating the unity of the work of art. This unity has to be grasped by the conservator. The challenge is to preserve the work’s matter not for its own sake, but in symbiosis with a meaning instilled by the artist. In a mass product, the material that is assigned some function may be replaced without modifying the object’s meaning. In a work of art, particularly contemporary one, the situation is more complicated.

The unity of external appearance and internal system in the contemporary work of art is highly dependent on the materials used in the work. Departure from traditional materials and technological good practice resulted in decreased durability of objects. The novelty consisted in a conscious use, as a means of expression, of perishable, disintegrating matter. In *Grass just Grass* we deal with “dirty” peat full of leaves, pieces of bark etc. All that connected with the grass of barbed wire have come to be treated in metaphorical sense. The replacement of these elements is related to the identity of the object like in the famous Plutarch story about the ship of Argonauts in Athens⁷. Bednarski opts for identity by keeping the original form with the loss of ephemeral material. The material (peat) was replaceable because the installation was operated by symbols and relationships, not the particular substance. There is a hierarchy of importance visible in the attitude of artist that should be followed by conservators.

authentic as originated

The issue of authenticity as the truth in time went through ages from the unity with reality, with *mimesis* and respect for perfection as the unity with rules in antiquity, by changing criteria till the present day. In our time the truth means, by the internal consequences of the work of art, the unity with the artist’s intent.

The creative aspect of authenticity could be linked to the definition by Paul Philippot. The authenticity of a work of art in the internal unity of the mental process and of the material

⁷ Plutarch, *Theseus, the rise and the fall of Athens*, Penguin, 1973, in: D. Lowenthal, *Criteria of authenticity, Conference on authenticity in relation to the world heritage convention*, preparatory workshop, Bergen, Norway 1994 s. 41

realisation of the work which he called “authenticity by creation”. There is no doubt for that in the case of Bednarski.

4. IDENTIFYING ISSUES RELEVANT TO THE CONSERVATORS AND BROAD MUSEUM COMMUNITY

The dual nature of the work of art, which consists of representation (image) and cognitive substance (material, form) must be respected in the conservation treatment. This inquiry, as Cesare Brandi said, “is the only way to clarify the authenticity with which the image was transmitted to us, and the state of its material(s)”⁸. Precise research in semantic and technical sense is absolutely required. We have to consider the work of art in several aspects: (1) as to the condition of the materials of which it is made; (2) as to the internal message of the work of art; (3) as to the adequacy of the image manifested in it. The aim is to find the universal and unchangeable essence or structure of the object.

The work of art, as Benedetto Croce said,⁹ is the identity of intuition of feelings and expression. Searching for the character of the artist’s intent is essential for the understanding of the meaning of the work of art and indispensable for decision-making and plans of conservation treatment, whether preventive or active. The authenticity of the artist’s expression is the underlying cause of the work of art, as Tolstoj noticed reflecting on the issue of art. These authentic values must be saved by conservators, curators and other hosts of works of art.

Sometimes the artist changes his/her point of view on the form or character of presentation and preservation of the work (Vincent van Gogh, Franz Kafka). The same difficulties we have to deal with Bednarski’s case due to the relativism of the artist. It happened as a result of the historical or economic obstacles but not his intent. So in this situation we are obliged to come back to his original concept – the grass as the physical object with the ephemeral elements. The importance connected with the viewer’s sensual contact with the work must be achieved by creating proper space.

To achieve maximum authenticity of presentation, one has to reach the effect precisely in line with the artist’s intent and assumptions. It is necessary to take into account all options based on the artist’s suggestions and documentation of previous exhibitions.

⁹ B. Croce, *Estetica come schema dell’espressione e linguistica generale*, 9th editio Laterza, Bari 1950, pp. 1-14, in: P. Philippot, *The phenomenology of artistic creation according to Cesare Brandi*, op. cit. p. 29

5. RESUME: IDENTIFYING NEW PROFESSIONAL TRENDS AND NEEDS IN THIS FIELD

In conclusion I would like to present the thesis¹¹ that the issues of authenticity of the installation work of art constitute the unity of: firstly – the material structure, secondly – the meaning structure of the work connected with the correlation between some elements of the work and the space of exhibition, thirdly – arrangement based on values – scent, sound, light and other ephemeral elements. Alois Riegl defined them as *haptisch-optisch*. They form a unique value instilled in the work of contemporary art.

Conservators' objective is to preserve and secure that authenticity in line with policies worked out through analysis, dialog and discussion among experts. What is essential is to correctly identify a work, its material, authentic message, internal unity, context, space, compliance with the artist's intent, viewer's perception. Based on research I would like to suggest that it will be useful to spark a discussion among the museums' community. It is proposed to organise events, in the form of a forum, workshop or panels in museums and host institutions, to discuss the legacy of installations and re-installations. Interviews with artists, compiling expert documentation, data gathering, and most of all a broad-based discussion among experts and those caring for and preserving works of art have certainly become essential for contemporary conservation.

The source of such knowledge is, besides the analysed work, the artist. Only by considering an individual case are conservators able to research its particular needs, representation and material substance.

The aim of all those activities that we have to retained is the authenticity of the work of contemporary artwork.

¹¹ The assumption was taken according to analyses and research carried out together with Prof. Iwona Szmelter.