

When the Senses Become Theoreticians.  
**Hommage to Bunt**

Opening:  
**18.02.2025**



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**Alma Mater gallery**  
 Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", north wing  
 15 Tor Osvoboditel Blvd

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Uniwersytet Artystyczny  
 im. Magdaleny Abakanowicz  
 w Poznaniu



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# The Tower of Babel and the Avant-Garde ‘Theory’ and Practice of World-Transforming Art

Lidia Gluchowska, Ph.D., Institute of Visual Arts, University of Zielona Góra,  
curator of the exhibition *When the Senses Become Theoreticians: Homage to Bunt*

At the end of World War I, pacifist sentiments were spreading across the already unstable borders of European countries. Using the explosive synergy of word and image – the *conditio sine qua non* of avant-garde publications – artists promoted their protesting *épater le bourgeois*, violating the sphere of national, social and artistic taboos. Under these circumstances, in Poznań, which was inhabited mainly by Poles and Germans, the association of artists and writers Bunt (1918–1922) organised its first exhibition. Its deliberately chosen, bilingual name (meaning ‘rebellion’ in Polish, and ‘motley,’ ‘gaudy,’ and ‘flashy’ in German) reflected the most important political and aesthetic aspects of the international Expressionists’ programme.

They published a poster in the languages of both warring nations, featuring the linocut manifesto *The Tower of Babel*, created by Stanisław Kubicki, the *Spiritus rector* of Bunt. This graphic work was widely perceived as a call for artistic and social revolution and a symbol of radical avant-garde. In fact, however, its message was ambiguous and expressed the complex self-awareness of artists torn between the idea of the rebirth of the Polish state and the internationalist



utopia of a new world, without the boundaries of bureaucracy and offices. The unindividualized silhouettes of people escaping from the collapsing tower look like a multiplication of characters from Edvard Munch’s work *The Scream*.

The motif of a face torn apart by a scream from Munch’s famous woodcut reflecting existential fear and protest against social conventions is also replicated in Kubicki’s programmatic linocut *Bunt* [Rebellion]

from June 1918, showing a rower swimming against the current. It appeared on the cover of a special issue entitled *Polnische Kunst* [Polish Art] of the Berlin periodical *Die Aktion*. The same motif, but depicted from behind, was published earlier, in April, in the Poznan magazine *Zdrój*, prior to the opening of the first Bunt exhibition.

The cross-border transfer of reproductive graphics, art theories and literary works in international periodicals effectively contributed to the popularization of new aesthetics and programmes as tools of socio-political intervention. The transnational network of the avant-garde developed through multilingual magazines circulating on private initiative and distributed at the creators' expense functioned like an unofficial union of non-governmental organizations or independent publications, which contained information alternative to that

written in the nationalist press and often contested the official and separatist policies of the 'new states' in the interwar period. Their similar graphic design reflected the universal corporate design of the transnational and transcontinental community of constructors of a new world. In time, subjective forms of expressionism were replaced by geometric abstraction and rational typography, initiating contemporary visual communication.

The international network of the avant-garde was co-created by such magazines as *Die Aktion* and *Der Sturm* in Berlin, *Devětsil*, *Červen* and *Red* in Prague, *MA* in Hungary, *Der Stijl* in Denmark, *Zenit* and *Tank* in Yugoslavia and *Contimporanul* in Romania. Among the Polish periodicals, the mission of transforming reality was fulfilled primarily by *Zwrotnica*, *Blok: revue internationale d'avant-garde*, *Praesens* and Paris-published



*L'Art Contemporain – Sztuka Współczesna*, created by constructivist engineers of imagination. *Vezni* and *Plamak* were the Bulgarian sister magazines to Poznań-based *Zdrój*.

The graphics published by the avant-garde network, despite their modest size, constituted a condensed but expressive message, easy to transport, send, reproduce and exhibit in ever new, distant places. As a vehicle of its identity and a universal code, it intensified the message of texts also distributed on leaflets and posters, which were usually not translated. Despite this, their message is still timeless and universally understandable.

The current exhibition refers to the idea of portable media. Its form refers to the collage technique tested by the avant-garde and such patterns from the interwar period as Aby Warburg's atlas *Mnemosyne* or *Dada-Enzyklopädie*, in which sensual signs and creative gestures from different contexts give rise to meanings that none of them possesses separately. It is a visual symbol of democracy and coordination of equal voices in the discourse on the condition of the world in the era of post-colonialism, globalization, multiplying military conflicts, political radicalization, extreme demagoguery and environmental disaster. This is not the only point of reference for the curatorial concept. This exhibition also resembles a school wall newspaper, on which children pin photos, articles and letters about events important to them. The idea of co-authorship and multi-voice is essential in it. However, it is more about transforming a detective board used by criminologists to trigger a 'brainstorm' during the reconstruction of the crime process. As the investigation progresses, the documents placed on it are gradually exchanged and supplemented in search of

the 'truth.' This is an associative process co-created by many participants in the investigation. Similarly, artists who prepare works do not know what gesture, sign and text others will convey and what meanings of the common 'statement'/appeal will arise while 'reading' each of them in a horizontal and vertical arrangement, on various diagonal axes and in random arrangements. Each image therefore becomes a kind of quotation in countless compilations of individual 'texts,' which together become a programmatic manifesto on the freedom of speech.

The boards on which the exhibition is displayed are intentionally not glazed. Leaving an open frame is an unusual 'warm gesture' in exhibition practice, a nod towards the visitors. It is a tactile, sensually felt surprising invitation to co-create the content of an artistic manifesto and open up to the reaction and opinion of the near and far 'other' (to refer to the concept of horizontal (history of) art/hierarchical discourse created by Poznań avant-garde researcher Piotr Piotrowski.)

Perhaps careful and courageous 'independent observers' would like to add their own comments? In principle, what will result at different stages of this collective process is as unpredictable as debates in an open society. Perhaps photographing its individual stages will reveal different versions of the 'theory' of contemporary engaged art? Perhaps their documentation will make up an ambiguous palimpsest, assuming different, equally valid versions of reading the still fragmentary 'whole'?

The open frame is an invitation to participate and define one's own position. To be not only a viewer, but always an actor....

Translation: Barbara Komorowska

# When the Senses Become Theoreticians: Homage to Bunt

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In art, a new form of objectivity is created. It is different from that found in nature because it is shaped by a subject who refers to the environment in the context of the established community. This also applies to extreme situations, when the activity of the subject is reduced solely to the act of designating and isolating a field that is outside of them, in their environment. Creative exploration, being an individualized way of ‘experiencing human reality,’ becomes socially significant when it shows alternative ways of perceiving the world, thus co-creating the process of socialization.

Mimesis, which is characteristic of individualized artistic activity, does not involve mechanical reproduction of reality but introduces a difference resulting from the use of an intermediary, such as a medium. The use of repetition in art (iterability), on the other hand, is distinguished by an unconventional, non-systemic approach, which opposes the universal ways in which man perceives and functions that are dominant at a given historical moment. In this approach, creativity is combined with anticipation and opening perspectives for including new forms of social action in the continuous process of shaping rationality.

Revealing the mechanisms of these behaviours, which is an essential element of artistic activities, is thus intertwined with the process of awareness. Referring to Karl Marx and his thought as interpreted by György Lukács, this can be described as transforming ‘the human species-in-itself’ into ‘the human species-for-itself.’ It is speciesness, or the social dimension revealed in everyday life, that allows the creator to transcend particularism and limitations resulting from a narrow view of reality. This is because a richer and deeper perception of the world strengthens individualism, which in turn becomes the foundation for the existence of the human species. Society is created by individuals, who are simultaneously shaped by the surrounding community because they function in a specific environment that influences them. Treated as exceptionalism, individualism is a unique combination of various factors that co-create it but it always remains embedded in the social context. On this basis, creative exploration can focus on showing the complexity of the world and presenting its different faces. At the same time, the creative process includes elements of the human environment that are often ignored because they remain invisible to

the public due to their inconsistency with dominant regularities.

Immanuel Wallerstein refers to these regularities as the 'world system,' which is based on the accumulation of capital, which existed before the formation of the global system and has now gained a dominant position, thus influencing all areas of human activity. This promotes rationality that favours phenomena such as 'positivization' and differentiates human activity into specializations according to a key based on pairs of opposing categories: truth-goodness, nomothetism-idiography or science-philosophy. Consequently, philosophy is perceived as irrelevant from the perspective of exact sciences, leading to the so-called 'naive realism'. The pursuit of 'objective' truth, seemingly independent of other influences (positivization), as a result of the mathematization of science, leads to a phenomenon known as neopositivization.<sup>2</sup> However, this does not mean that theories formulated in the spirit of neopositivization are inaccurate. It should be emphasized, however, that this type of reflection can only recreate specific moments of reality, which itself is still composed of indefinite multiplicities of other components.<sup>3</sup> The independence of science from philosophy in a global system dominated by capitalism allows technical and scientific achievements to be subjected to market goals. This type of division of human activity additionally consolidates

the existing system. Moreover, due to its expansiveness, this process limits the possibility of shaping attitudes based on ethical values. However, referring to Wallerstein's idea, one can state that 'the scholarly analyses that are more correct are more socially useful in that they aid the world to construct a substantively more rational reality.'<sup>4</sup> Consequently, the search for truth and goodness become inextricably linked, even though today they are often perceived as separate and mutually exclusive values. The division into individual specializations<sup>5</sup> gives rise to the concept of double truth. As soon as this problem was noticed, that is, when religion began to lose its dominant position in Western culture, it became necessary to derive every category of Christian inner life no longer from the image of the world breathing with cosmically guaranteed certainty, but only from the new logic of human orientation towards oneself.<sup>6</sup> As György Lukács writes, the separation of religion from science, in which Cardinal Robert Bellarmine, among others, was significantly involved, created the foundations enabling both areas to function independently and influence society, while opening the way for the development of capitalism in Europe.

Unconventional presentation of complex reality, considering all aspects of the human environment, including those that are not subject to scientific certainty, opens up space for perceiving new possibilities,

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1 Positivization, understood as an attitude limited solely to empirical values, refers to the acceptance of existing data without critical analysis of their validity.

2 Referring to György Lukács, the neo-positivist attitude only takes account of measurable, countable data.

3 Cf. G. Lukács, *The Young Hegel: Studies in the Relations between Dialectics and Economics*, Rodney Livingstone (trans.), London: Merlin Press, 1975, p. 211.

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4 Immanuel Wallerstein, *The End of the World as We Know It*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999, p. 217.

5 Here, specialization refers to various areas of human activity, such as religion, art or science.

6 G. Lukács, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 477-488.

anticipating the future and creating critical spaces showing alternative solutions for social behaviours. In this context, art, as a field that remains in close correlation with society, makes it possible to show irrational aspects that escape established rationality. It thus allows discovering the potential of changes that can be introduced within the existing system, while contributing to its transformation. By questioning the prevailing order and accepted rules of conduct, art creates a space in which the mechanisms shaping existing social norms are revealed. Creative denial in this context questions the prevailing state of affairs.

Undermining the rules, generating situations that went beyond the established patterns and creating events of an incompletely defined nature were the distinguishing features of the attitude of avant-garde artists. It was in the late 19th and 20th centuries that the discussion on the role and function of art in relation to society was particularly intense. As part of these considerations, the expressionist artists of the Poznań art group Bunt also adopted a strategy that reflected their involvement in social problems. An example of this is the graphic work entitled *Wieża Babel II* [Babel Tower II] by one of the group's lead-

ers, Stanisław Kubicki, depicting a crowd of people escaping from the titular tower. This work can refer to the contemporary situation in which individual specializations of human activity, separated from each other, create separate languages, leading to chaos and a lack of mutual understanding - symbolically preventing the completion of the building. Another linocut entitled *Wioślarz II* [Rower II] by Kubicki can be interpreted similarly. It depicts a figure sailing a boat against the current. In this context, the work becomes an allegory of breaking away from the established order and polemics with the existing reality.

Artistic research can be integrated with other disciplines, such as science and philosophy, so that it can actively participate in discussions about social reality by using the sensory and emotional potential of art. This approach makes it possible to create a more complete picture of the world and consciously shape the future, which also influences how the past is perceived and interpreted. By enriching the interpretation of the past with new perspectives, art can create space for discovering new possibilities and directions of social development.

Translation: Barbara Komorowska

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