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The group of paintings *Oświęcim/Auschwitz* (1947–1955) by Xawery Dunikowski – the artistic testimony of borderline experience[1]

Grupa obrazów *Oświęcim* (1947–1955) Xawerego Dunikowskiego – artystyczne świadectwo doświadczenia granicznego

Keywords: Xawery Dunikowski, painting, *Oświęcim*, concentration camp, borderline experience, testimony
Słowa kluczowe: Xawery Dunikowski, malarstwo, *Oświęcim*, lagier, doświadczenie graniczne, świadectwo

Abstract

This article presents an analysis of Xawery Dunikowski's post-war paintings, a testimony to his stay in the Auschwitz concentration camp, i.e. the canvases of the cycle *Oświęcim/Auschwitz* (1947–1955). Based on this infrequently discussed kind of art, an attempt has been made to describe the visual representation of borderline experience, which, according to Georges Didi-Huberman, is a "tear-image" or a glimpse of an incomprehensible unprecedented truth, urging to a particularly cruel imaginability or, as Luiza Nader puts it, an expression of "affective memory". At the same time, the considerations contribute to the research discourse on whether or to what extent it is possible to express the experience of a Konzentrationslager (or, more broadly, the Second World War) in visual representation. The complex issues and stylistics of these works are discussed in the light of methodology concerning the trauma of a witness, an affective observer, a surviving victim (Jacek Leociak, Aleida Assmann, Dominick LaCapra) and its evocation in the image (Didi-Huberman, Nader) thus allowing to consider them as a necessary artistic *catharsis* of the author of

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Tchnienie/A Breath of Air. At the same time, it has been pointed out that the painting of Dunikowski, a sculptor, individually reformulated in the artistic medium, non-masterly and in search of their own expression, is a recontextualising confirmation of his status as a modernist artist.

Introduction

Xawery Dunikowski (1875–1964) rarely commented on his stay in Auschwitz. He chose to express his survival of the extermination camp in artistic sublimation.[2] The post-war group of paintings[3] entitled *Oświęcim/Auschwitz* (1947–1955)[4] being reviewed in this paper constitutes a record of the personal trauma of this multi-epoch artist, who marked it with contemporary stylistic conventions. This time he chose not to sculpt but to paint. He aimed to find his own expression in the medium of painting, bypassing traditional artistry. He produced works that were thematically significant, serving as both reflective and cathartic while also being stylistically distinct. Consequently, this paper addresses the boundary experience of a survivor artist of fin de siècle origins and his authorship of a painterly evocation of trauma, which at the same time served as a confirmation of the inexhaustibility of the concept of modern art following the time of the Holocaust, even though it seemed doubtful to other surviving artists to pursue it at the time. Its intention is to elaborate on the stylistic and sensitive subject matter of these hitherto insufficiently described works.[5] This will allow the author to testify to

[2] In psychoanalytic terms: personality defence mechanism involving the expression of repressed unconsciousness (mental conflicts in general) in an acceptable substitute form; here in an artistic medium.

[3] Despite the description of Dunikowski's paintings attesting to his stay in Auschwitz as a cycle (i.a. in the artist's archival records and the literature on the subject), its validity can be questioned, pointing to the lack of the determinants associated with this term, such as a strong articulation of common formal solutions and an ordering compositional consistency. Consequently, the paper uses competing terms, meaningfully eschewing a strictly systematic classification of works, i.e. series, collection, group.

[4] Based on the artist's notes, it is known that the earliest paintings were created as early as 1947: "From 1947 I began to create a sequence of paintings under the title Oświęcim. I keep painting them as the visions come in" (MNW, rkps ref. 6592: 1946–1950). Quotations from archival documents are quoted in their original wording.

[5] The most recent publication on the artist's paintings, including those concerning his stay in Auschwitz, is the catalogue of the exhibition organised in 2021 at the MNW Królikarnia (*Xawery Dunikowski. Painting* 2021). Additionally, a commentary on the artist's Auschwitz paintings is provided by Aleksandra Melbechowska-Luty in a monograph on his work as a whole (Melbechowska-Luty 2012: 236–238). Published in the collective edition of *Xawery Dunikowski and Polish Artists in Auschwitz Concentration Camp 1940–1945: Drawings – Paintings – Sculptures*, the chapter by Aleksandra Kodurowa deals with the circumstances of the artist's arrival in the camp

the assumption that they represented a personal artistic *catharsis* crucial to coming to terms with the memory of the camp and working through the trauma associated with it, as well as to express Dunikowski's identity as a modernist artist in a constitutive, yet reinterpretative way. In order to achieve this goal and to give evidence to the hypothesis, recognised methods of studying a work of art have been used: stylistic analysis and compositional interpretation with elements of iconographic-iconological description as well as the contextual method. Additionally, reference was made to current research concepts (e.g. history, art history, literature, philosophy) on the subject of borderline experience, which defined an important framework for addressing the issues raised.

The art referring to the wartime experience has not been thoroughly examined. Most often, it has been discussed in only a few sentences. Janusz Kębłowski noted the paucity of this art "oscillating between naturalism and post-cubist figuration" (Kębłowski 1987: 205). Piotr Piotrowski highlighted the shortcomings of so-called camp art, suggesting the inadequacy of the conventions of depicting wartime trauma (Piotrowski 2007: 127). Among the more recent positions on wartime art, including labour camp art, is Izabela Kowalczyk's book *Podróż do przeszłości. Interpretacje najnowszej historii w polskiej sztuce krytycznej* [*Journey to the Past. Interpretations of recent history in Polish critical art*], in which the author notes the unlearned memory of past events, the detrimental "domination of avant-garde paradigms" or the romantic approach to portraying the experience of war, which elevates it and treats this part of history as the "materialisation of sacrifice and suffering" (Kowalczyk 2010: 93–95).[6] The most up-to-date publication dealing with the theme of the Holocaust in art is Luiza Nader's monograph *Afekt Strzemińskiego. „Teoria widzenia", rysunki wojenne, „Pamięci przyjaciół* – Żydów*"* [*Strzeminski's Affect. "Theory of Seeing", wartime drawings, "In Memory of Friends – Jews"*]. In describing Władysław Strzemiński's art related to the Shoah in relation to the affectivity of the work-testimony, the researcher used a "catalogue of affective concepts", i.e. affect, neuro-testimony, affective violence, affective memory and affective observer (Nader 2018: 60).

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and the conditions of his stay there, as well as his works dedicated to his stay in Auschwitz (Kodurowa 1985: 11–32). Additionally, the stylistics of these paintings were mentioned by Tadeusz Dobrowolski (Dobrowolski 1964). Mentions of the subject also appeared in periodicals (e.g.: Prokop 1994: 13; Nastulanka 1961: 7; Starzyński 1985: 5; Jarnuszkiewicz 1956: 3).

[6] In addition, Eleonora Jedlińska, among others, has also written about Polish post-war paintings in her publication *Sztuka po Holokauście* (Jedlińska 2001), while the book *Cierpienie i nadzieja. Twórczość plastyczna więźniów obozu oświęcimskiego* deals with camp art, among others (Dałek, Świebocka 1989).

Borderline experience

The *Oświęcim* series painted by Dunikowski touches on the issue of borderline experience. Citing Jan Strzelecki, Jacek Leociak defined it as "existing in the realm of the ultimate experiences of human fate, as if on the borders of the experiences that accrue to humans as species beings" (Strzelecki 1974: 11). It appears when "a person is no longer able to endure, yet has to – and does so" (Leociak 2009: 20). Having experienced the reality of Auschwitz, the artist found himself in the semantic field of this term,[7] i.e. he was put to the test as he faced the horror of the camp reality, which posed both a psychological and physical threat, and he experienced the tragedy of such survival; he substantiated the world of Auschwitz with the force of his subjective participation in it; he left testimony to it in his Auschwitz works. He considered this experience traumatic and extreme.

Krystyna Czerni remarked that: "None of the artists imprisoned in Auschwitz, not even Xawery Dunikowski, created a truly relevant, powerful testimony to this atrocity" (Czerni 1997: 259). This opinion gives rise to a dispute, or discussion over imagery, i.e. whether art is capable of depicting the borderline experience and whether post-Auschwitz art is possible. Referring to the image-accepting attitude advocated, for example, by Georges Didi-Huberman in his book *Images in Spite of All* (Didi-Huberman 2008), it can be argued that art is capable of conveying the borderline experience of being in the Auschwitz concentration camp.[8] The researcher proposed the notion of a 'tear-image' based on "dialectical plasticity", meaning a "double order" reduced to "the visible and the visual, the particular and the general, the similar and the dissimilar, the anthropomorphic and the abstract, the shaped and the formless", or fact and fetish, the literal and the metaphoric, the view and its fragment. This makes it possible to exert "the effect along with its negation", that is, making (the image) visible, even though one has not revealed everything: "[Images – K.T.] are neither pure illusion nor the whole truth, but that very dialectical pulsation that simultaneously moves the

[7] The word "[to] experience" in Polish means, among other things: "«to be put to the test» in the sense of: to be exposed to risk, to be confronted with something threatening, unfamiliar, dangerous, which may constitute both a psychological and a physical danger"; "«to experience», «to witness» in the sense of: to prove something by means of experience, i.e. not by pronouncing a judgment about a state of affairs, but, as it were, by sanctioning it with the power of subjective participation in what is being proved to exist"; "«to declare», «to testify», in the sense of: to give testimony about something" (Nycz 2006: 12–16, after: Leociak 2009: 9).

[8] In his book, Georges Didi-Huberman analysed four photographs taken in January 1944 by Sonderkommando prisoners documenting the Auschwitz extermination. Describing their history and phenomenology, he assumed that they allowed us to imagine the experience of the death camp.

veil and its «tear»" (Didi-Huberman 2008: 102–103). They appear when all words become inadequate, in which case they form "an outlet for a fraction of reality" (Didi-Huberman 2008: 104). Drawing on Didi-Huberman's idea, among others, here is an attempt to describe Dunikowski's work as a testimony to the experience of surviving the extermination camp.

Another noteworthy example is the category of affective remembrance or, in other words, the "active act of remembering" (Nader 2018: 63), employed by Luiza Nader with regard to Władysław Strzemiński's war drawings *In Memory of Friends – Jews* (Nader 2018). She developed the concept of the three forms of memory identified by Aleida Assmann, i.e. communicative memory (individual and created in interaction with the Other), collective memory (the space in which individual memory interacts with social and political life) and cultural memory (long-term and unconstrained by the historical experience of individuals and generations) (Assmann 2009: 158, 164, 171). Nader supplemented this with the affect she distinguished (Nader 2018: 255–257). This specific emotion was defined by Spinoza as exerting influence and being open to influence (Williams 2010: 246). Gilles Deleuze called affect a pre-social intensity embedded in the biological functions of the human body, a pre-thought and transgressive move of the embodied individual beyond the self that results in the crossing of the border between body and mind, the subject and the surroundings (Deleuze, Guattari 2000; Deleuze 2000, in: Nader 2018: 314). The emotional intensity captured in the work of art as a "block of impressions" (Deleuze, Guattari 1999: 10–11) gains autonomy, denoting itself. The visualised affect is a phenomenon that defines and attests to the subjectivity of the traumatised victim, surpassing it in its power. Alongside symbol and trauma (Assmann 2003: 15–30), affective remembering relies on the central stabiliser of memory – affect, referred to as the "memory core" (Nader 2018: 259) and characterised by "corporeal weight" (Nader 2018: 260). The affective embedding of the memory of the source of the trauma retains its distinctiveness, despite the incoherence and fragmentation of the visual representation itself. The always affectively charged memory manifests itself in an emotional artistic record, which is the outcome of working through the overdue and ever-active affective states of the victim and witness. This connection between memory and emotion is also important for other scholars, including Susan Sontag, who has defined memory as a passive and selective relationship with the deceased, and remembering as activated critical thinking, thus working through trauma and, at the same time, bereavement (Sontag 2017: 30, 136).

Dunikowski's works can be viewed in the light of Dominick LaCapra's concept of borderline experience. According to the researcher, these are practices

"that carry a massive, overpowering and unprecedented potential for rape and violence" (Leociak 2009: 16) and lead to the destruction of the values underpinning the human community. In doing so, the author referred to the Freudian mechanism of mourning and melancholia. To succumb to melancholy is to continually act out the trauma in the present and to succumb to its destructive power. Mourning amounts to working through the trauma, leaving it in the realm of the past and returning to life, which gets richer thanks to a new kind of self-knowledge. Melancholia confines the Self in isolation. For Sigmund Freud, it is ambivalent – it forms the basis of mourning, but when it gets excessive, it blocks the process of mourning. It proves necessary for expressing loss; it also becomes part of mourning. Mourning can counteract melancholy, "enable the identification of the Other as the Other" (Leociak 2009: 131); who is remembered and respected, it can lead to the dissolution of narcissistic identification. The mourning person recognises the loss as a loss but is able to let go of it and become interested in life again. Working through problems constitutes "a modified kind of repetition" (Leociak 2009: 134), "a process of moving from the state of victimhood to survivorship, witnessing and causation". LaCapra negated the sublimation (here in the sense of elevation, ennoblement) or sacralisation of borderline experiences and emphasised the radical "de-sublimation brought about by the Holocaust, removing the possibility of salvaging any higher meaning" (Leociak 2009: 134–135).

As far as the latter concept is concerned, it needs to be stated right at the outset that Dunikowski chose mourning to save himself from regressive melancholy. Already during his several months' stay in the camp infirmary, emaciated by his confinement in the bunker of block eleven as punishment for his association with the underground Union of Military Organisations, the artist drew portrait sketches of his sick fellow prisoners (1940–1945). Also referred to as the *Auschwitz Heads* by way of analogy with his authorship of the sculpted *Wawel Heads* (1925–1928) and the *Pantheon of Polish Culture* (1953–1961) (Janczyk 2018: 11–43; Melbechowska-Luty 2012: 255–271; Melbechowska-Luty 2005: 178), provide an empathetic and relatively accurate record of the suffering marking the faces of his companions. Then, moving from identifying oneself with a psychologically framed model to distancing oneself from the condition of the victim ("the recognition of the Other as Other" [Leociak 2009: 131]), the artist focused on leaving a testimony, surviving agency as indicated by LaCapra, which constituted a prelude to mourning. After his release from the camp, he worked through this process in his Auschwitz paintings. He stripped his fellow prisoners of subjectivity, depicting their physiognomies as schematic and anonymous, and did not sacralise the traumatic experience. Dunikowski's works become his "modified type of

repetition" (Leociak 2009: 134). Although LaCapra reflected on the unrepresentability of the borderline experience, he allowed for the possibility of expressing it, taking into account all the various modalities and shades associated with such expression. Admittedly, it is difficult to achieve metaphysical order, but it is possible to break the silence that precludes the evocation of trauma. The paintings of this saved modernist are thus an example of speaking out on the subject of the extermination camp in the artistic representation of negative experience.

The group of paintings *Oświęcim/Auschwitz* (1947–1955)

Auschwitz was liberated from the Nazis on 27 January 1945, when the Red Army entered the camp. Dunikowski was exhausted; his recuperation and hospitalisation lasted almost a year. As early as 1946, he resumed teaching at the Academy of Fine Arts in Cracow. He still remembered the extermination camp, hence the notes in his sketchbooks: "The feelings towards Auschwitz have died down, I don't want to remember…", "I am an alumnus of the University of Auschwitz: prisoner no. 774, the guiding idea of the university was «the enemy killed is silent»" (Kodurowa 1985: 24). He also sketched different camp situations he had witnessed. Little by little, paintings emerged from these sketches to bear witness to his stay in Auschwitz. This was not the first time the artist reached for the paintbrush. The sculptor's passion for painting goes back to his studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Cracow. He painted a lot during his Parisian period. In the interwar period, he focused mainly on realistic portraits, which were shown at one of the exhibitions at the Institute of Art Propaganda. Dunikowski described these early works as "soapy painting", done "in likeness" (Nastulanka 1961: 7). He added: "I wouldn't paint like that anymore today" (Nastulanka 1961: 7). The post-war paintings stand out as being artistically superior, and also "constitute an entirely new quality and play an incomparably more prominent role in the totality of his art" (Starzyński 1985: 5). The works recording the experience of Auschwitz, as well as *Baby z Nieborowa* (1957–1958) or *Człowiek w przestworzu* (1958–1961), are characterised by refined, innovative form, by a predilection for experimentation, reaching for new means of expression and new content (Malina 1956: 8).[9]

Dunikowski made it clear that the group of paintings *Oświęcim* was "a complete statement and protest once and for all" (KP, rkps ref. 745: *Statement…*)

[9] It was not until after World War II that Xawery Dunikowski's paintings were appreciated and treated as a "top-notch artistic phenomenon" (Blum 1948: 8).

regarding the camp. He proposed a one-off work with no continuation, in which he conveyed his recollections and experiences of Auschwitz encapsulated in one place. At the Second International Congress of Intellectuals for Peace (1948), being a victim of the extermination camp terror, he sincerely advocated the fight for peace, confessing: "Having been in the Auschwitz camp for five years, I saw what monstrous crimes people and human beings are able to do when humanity and logic disappear. My fellow inmates, as well as inmates of other camps, representing various nationalities, witnessed the same" (KP, rkps ref. 745: 1950). Additionally, despite his official participation in the communist-controlled artistic life of the post-war Polish People's Republic, Dunikowski vehemently rejected Socialist realism in his Auschwitz paintings. This doctrine and creative method in force in Poland between 1949 and 1955, based on the cultural policy of Stalinism, was something the artist did not value (KP, rkps ref. 745: *Conversation*…). Formal solutions imposed by the socialist canon were nullified in Dunikowski's post-war art, as they conflicted with his nature as a modernist who combined classical, Young Poland and avant-garde conventions with contemporary simplification. The creator would invariably experiment with the visual medium despite being aware of his already established authorial style and was loyal to high-quality, personally reinterpreted art (Tomczak 2020: 54–107). He was also certain that the restrictive pattern of ideologised stylistics could not bear the weight of an attempt to express the borderline experience, a highly individualised affect. Therefore, he firmly discarded the academic correctness of representation devoid of bringing out its peculiarities, the idealisation and schematisation of depiction (Włodarczyk 1981: 284–289), the primacy of the traditional medium of "high" oil painting over drawing or poster-like handling of the colour spot. Moreover, he doubted the idyllic nature of post-war reality or the heroism of the survivor. Likewise, he did not promote a naïve belief in a definitive release from the traumatic past and the wiping out of Nazi crimes. In his Oświęcim paintings, the reverberations of socialist realist motifs (e.g. good prisoner – evil SS man) are universalised, which removes their propaganda value. Heavily reformulated stylistically, they lose their legibility. Formal individualism thus dominates over the suggestion of an ideologised meaning.

The paintings of the Auschwitz series cited below, i.e. *Prisoner* (1950), *Christmas in Auschwitz in 1944* (*Christmas Tree*) (1950), *Road to Freedom* (1955), *Orchestra* (1955), *Grates* (*Episode from Auschwitz*) (1955) or *Dying Amaryllis* (1951), have been analysed to varying degrees in different aspects. There is no room here to discuss all the works from this collection, hence the omission of works with less expressive power that evoke the negative experience of Auschwitz,

i.e. *Phenomena* (1948–1949), *Scream* (*Elements of the Seas*) (1950), *Landscape* (1950), *Jungle I* (1951) and *Jungle II* (1951–1952) and *Birth of Life* (1952–1955). The oil painting *Więźniarka* [*Prisoner*] was made in 1950 (height – 180 cm, width – 86 cm)[10] (image 1) and preceded it with three sketch variants (c. 1950). Against a vague background, he portrayed an emaciated, naked woman covering her womb with her hands. Her neck is elongated, and her face is depicted in a portrait fashion with an emphasis on her psychological characteristics. Dunikowski alluded here thematically to his earlier sculptures: *Maternity* (1904), *Pregnant Women* (1906) and especially the two versions of the statue entitled *Eve* (1906). These works are interconnected by their evocative depiction of femininity and the drama of women's fate, including the pain of human birth and the difficulties of motherhood. In the painting *Prisoner*, this tragedy was extended to include the historical context of the woman's life, namely the period of the Second World War and her stay in a concentration camp.

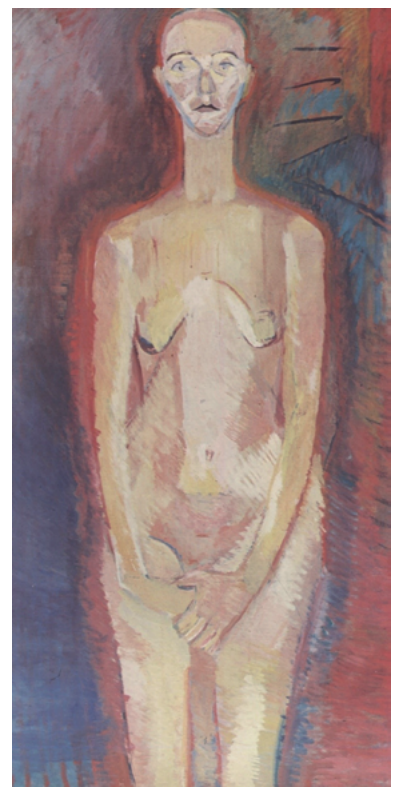

Image 1. *Więźniarka* [*Prisoner*], ca. 1950, oil, canvas, owned by the MNW, repr. from: Kodurowa 1985.

The artist has deprived this work of its erotic subtext. He reproduced the authentic appearance of a female prisoner: her physical exploitation, the stigmatising shaving of her head and the embarrassment inscribed in her nakedness. The figure covering herself from the intrusive gaze of onlookers was looked at by other prisoners, and especially blatantly and unrestrainedly by SS men, practising male voyeurism. This "subordination of the female body to the power of the male gaze equated with sexual possession" (Kowalczyk 2010: 99) appeared in the works of other camp survivors. One example is Władysław Siwek's watercolour *Before Execution*,

[10] Dates of creation and dimensions of Auschwitz paintings from: catalogue cards of the Xawery Dunikowski Museum of Sculpture in Królikarnia and *Xawery Dunikowski. Sculptures, paintings, drawings. Catalogue* (1975). The order in which the works are discussed is dictated by their subject matter, not the chronology of their production.

discussed by Piotr Piotrowski (Piotrowski 2007: 127) and Izabela Kowalczyk (Kowalczyk 2010: 99), who point to the eroticism of the painting and the convention of the female nude. The watercolour depicts naked female prisoners locked in a cell being watched by SS men. It addresses the sexual exploitation of these women through both the ambiguous voyeurism of the SS men and the "special buildings" that were, in fact, the camp's brothels (Kowalczyk 2010: 100). In her book *Holocaust in Photographs* (Struk 2007: 104–106), Janina Struk reports on photographs depicting naked female prisoners before or after their execution as "documents of humiliation" (Kowalczyk 2010: 100) on account of their gender. Dunikowski's painting thus corresponded with other works depicting the borderline experience of women in Auschwitz. Using his personal artistic language, he attempted to capture the individuality of the female prisoner's experience. This is not a typical nude; the portrayed woman is unsure of her charms and does not wish to present them. Nudity is forced, and the onlooker is an unwanted voyeur of the camp version of femininity – degraded and silent.

Painted in 1950, *Boże Narodzenie w Oświęcimiu w r. 1944* (*Choinka*) [*Christmas in Auschwitz in 1944* (*Christmas Tree*)] (height – 200 cm, width – 161 cm) (image 2) refers to an authentic event, i.e. the hanging of five prisoners against the backdrop of a Christmas tree with lights on for an attempted escape, carried out by Obersturmführer Beer. Preceded by black and white sketches (1950), it is a rhythmic figurative vision (Starzyński 1956: 4). The Christmas tree with the grotesquely hung corpses was cropped as the centrepiece of a composition devoid of superfluous detail. The silhouettes were outlined schematically, without highlighting facial features. The suggestive palette conflicts with the content of the painting.

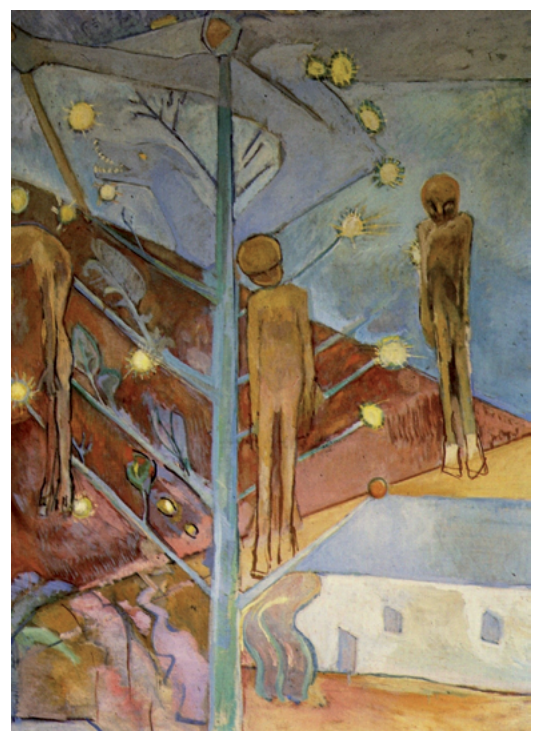

Image 2. *Boże Narodzenie w Oświęcimiu w roku 1944* (*Choinka*) [*Christmas in Auschwitz in 1944* (*Christmas Tree*)], 1950, oil, canvas, owned by the MNW, repr. from: *Nie wieder! – Never again!* 1989.

The artist supplemented the scene with fantastic elements: an image of a phantom with a torch in its hand and a head adorned with a feathered cap (the latter noticeable in the sketch). Described by Aleksandra Kodurowa as "symbols of supernatural forces, demons of evil and conflagration" (Kodurowa 1985: 26), they employ plastic imagery to mark the evoked event that transcended the limits of human perception.

The sketches preceding the painting *Droga do wolności* [*Road to Freedom*] (c. 1955) show Dunikowski's several attempts to draw the corpse of a prisoner caught between barbed wires, with an emphasis on accentuating the features of the tormented face and the inertia of the electrocuted body. The painting itself (image 3) was produced by Dunikowski in 1955 in two variants, which differed mainly in size (height – 96 cm, width – 126 cm; height – 125 cm, width – 163 cm) and in the positioning of the moon (on the right or on the left). It was reproduced in three replicas using the simplest means of expression. It depicts, in close-up, the corpses of two prisoners who attempted to escape, with faces devoid of psychological characteristics: one hanging on wires, the other stiff and contorted. Their appearance is reduced to a simplified and agonisingly deformed figural shape. The symbolic stylistic asceticism of this representation evokes a situation of extreme and hardly expressible human tragedy.

Image 3. *Droga do wolności* [*Road to Freedom*], 1955, oil, canvas, owned by the MNW, repr. from: Kodurowa 1985.

In contrast, the painting *Orkiestra* [*Orchestra*] (height – 147 cm, width – 185 cm) was created in 1955 (sketches already in 1952) (image 4). It is a reminiscence of the camp orchestra, which, positioned at the gate, used to play marches every day during the prisoners' departure for work and their return. "It was a mourning orchestra, at the beat of which the corpses shook their heads when carried out" (Jagoda, Kłodziński, Masłowski 1981: 122). It accompanied the carrying of emaciated or dead bodies on the way and the beating of those who delayed the procession. The painting depicts the macabre and grotesque performance of the camp musicians, with the corpses of their dead comrades lying at their feet, while next to them, the convicts wait to be shot with their hands raised. Intense colours enhance the horror of the scene. Attention is drawn to the concentration of figures and events and the expressive simultaneity in their representation, which is based on the subjective multiplication and layering of compositional plans (squeezing them into the lens of view).

Image 4. *Orkiestra*, [*Orchestra*], 1955, oil, canvas, owned by the MNW, repr. from: *Nie wieder! – Never again!* 1989.

Sketches of *Ruszty* (*Epizod z Oświęcimia*) [*Grates* (*Episode from Auschwitz*)] (1955) consist of black-and-white, strongly generalised compositions obtained from colour patches applied in layers and in various configurations. The painting of the same title from 1955 (height – 180 cm, width – 179 cm) (image 5)

is reduced to an expressive shortcut blurring the representational character of the memoir. It referred to the so-called "grates", an indispensable element of the large open-air incineration pits (5 m wide, 10 m deep, 20 to 50 m long), in which the bodies of the prisoners gassed in the gas chambers were burned. The grates were in the shape of rail tracks built into the ditches, upon which wood was laid and on top of it the corpses poured with oil and set on fire (AGKBZH, ref. 220: 3).[11] Dunikowski's consideration of the diagonally positioned grates stretches from the upper left side of the picture plane to the lower right, introducing a compositional dominant, i.e. a sharp intersection with metaphorical overtones. The artist inserted the silhouettes of the burning prisoners into the distorted arrangement of the planes, while in the lower part of the painting he

Image 5. *Ruszty* (*Epizod z Oświęcimia*) [*Grates* (*Episode from Auschwitz*)], 1955, oil, canvas, owned by the MNW, repr. from: Kodurowa 1985.

[11] To increase the efficiency and benefits of the genocide, grooves were cut in the rails for the collection of fat, and bones mixed with ashes were smashed into dust on a concrete slab (Müller 1980: 169–183). Sometimes lorries would drive up to the burning ditches, from which live prisoners were "dumped" into the fire. One could hear: "indescribable screams of men, women and children being burned alive" (Kodurowa 1985: 27).

composed less coherent figural motifs, including a snake, which may symbolise decay and evil, and the face of a guard, whose figure he subjected to a grotesque and pejoratively characterised defragmentation. He used colour to characterise the victims, distinguishing between the white skeletons of the long dead, the frail blue silhouettes of the dying, and the red figures of those condemned to die by burning. The simplified colour tonality (red, grey and white) is both a symbolic and emotional reduction of colour. It complements the condensed but strip-ordered composition, which evokes the agonising dynamism of the huddled bodies.

Another stylistically distinctive painting from the discussed collection of Auschwitz works, entitled *Umierający Amarylis* [*Dying Amaryllis*], created in 1951 (height – 98 cm, width – 91 cm) and depicts an inert human silhouette attached to the stems of a flower (image 6). The scene is rendered in the convention of Young Poland symbolism. The amaryllis grows all year round and belongs

Image 6. *Umierający Amarylis* [*Dying Amaryllis*], 1951, oil, canvas, owned by the MNW, repr. from: *Nie wieder! – Never again!* 1989.

to perennial plants, so the painting may suggest that eternal life awaits the dying person, regardless of physical death. The appearance of the flower also gives off reminiscences of the Young Poland style, evident in the decorative stylistics, i.e. the elongation of the flatly designed shapes and their refined configuration. The generalised figuration, less painterly and more drawing-like, combines organic lines (rounded elements, suggesting that which is endowed with life – in this case, the victim) and straight lines (geometric elements, approaching non-representation – in this case, associated with the arms of the cross). When expressively reinforced with diagonal directions, it suggests a modernised crucifixion.

The painting has often attracted the attention of critics. Despite Dunikowski's debatable mastery of painting, it was called a masterpiece of modern Polish painting (Starzyński 1973: 15) and "the most beautiful painting of the series" (Kodurowa 1985: 27). Researchers were captivated by the profound meaning expressed in the allusive plastic form: "The delicate, limp, brutally wounded plant is a poetic symbol of the suffering and helplessness of perishing people" (Kodurowa 1985: 27). They saw in it a representation of the "perpetual drama of being and death" (Starzyński 1956: 4) and "a new world of intimate, tender coexistence with nature" (Starzyński 1985: 5). On the one hand, the image evokes the therapeutic visualisation of trauma in a natural setting that soothes the personal tragedy embedded in the universal dimension. It neutralises it by subjecting it to the natural order of birth and death. The law of flowering and withering, to which the animated figure-flower is subjected as it were, nullifies the technicised and man-activated mechanism of death – it restores the survivor's existence to its natural, or human, character. One can see that the artist, drawing on the modernist use of the regenerating relationship between the individual and nature, has minimised the expressively reformulated drastic concrete of the camp realities and emphasised the distancing aesthetic stylisation of the shape. On the other hand, the artist continues to evoke the borderline situation through the use of a symbolic visual representation of human suffering and death, which works with the unsettling, eerie shape of the fainting figure. The passage of time separating Dunikowski from the period of his imprisonment in Auschwitz is particularly evident in this painting in the treatment of memories by means of subtle metaphor and artistic simplification, which, however, do not obliterate the affect.

Style vis-a-vis trauma

When developing the stylistic approach to the paintings in question, Dunikowski focused on the authenticity of the expression of the borderline experience,

with less emphasis on the mastery of execution. He rejected the traditional realistic depiction of events, which would not have worked in the face of the truth about Auschwitz. Instead, he reached for summary, symbolism and the grotesque. The traces of sketchiness left in the rendering of individual elements of the composition are subordinated to the coherence of the representation. These shortcomings, however, may express over-expression in the act of painting or an intentional act, making it clear that the reality of the camp cannot be fully recreated by depicting every detail with complete clarity and realistic precision. The memory of a witness to transgressive events evokes scenes that deviate from realism, but in the sense of deviating from the known objective reality. Dunikowski has thus sublimated nightmarish scenes, mistakenly associated with fantasy and surrealism.

The artist reconfigured various artistic conventions: those of the Young Poland movement (symbolisation and decorative stylisation), the interwar period (avant-garde expressiveness of formal synthesis and generalisation of shape gravitating towards abstraction; only surrealist-like marking of reality) and the postwar period (mutilated figuration devoid of idealisation). He proposed a modernised painting style, i.e. simplifying shape and eliminating chiaroscuro modelling in favour of expressive flatness. On the one hand, this is related to his way of approaching sculpture, which he captured spatially and always sketched flatly on paper and, on the other hand, to facilitate the expression of the intensity of the experience. He recreated camp situations in a symbolic manner (e.g. *Dying Amaryllis*), which refers to the Young Poland symbolism present in his earliest sculptural work, or operated with simplified specifics in the depiction of lifeless bodies (e.g. *Orchestra*). He applied an enhancing dark contour to indicate the figures – the victims. He achieved expression through deformation and contrasting colour combinations. Referring to the painting once observed in Paris and his own understanding of colour (Dobrowolski 1964: 394), he made use of the disturbing disharmony of saturated and pastel colours. Therefore, he relied on a differentiation that disturbs perception. By doing so, he achieved a surprising juxtaposition of separate qualities, resulting in a new incoherent whole that evokes an experienced reality. This grotesque representation is composed mainly of the principle of excess and concentration of various elements covering the entire surface of the canvas, which violates the planarity of space. It emanates a cluster of schematic silhouettes of figures devoid of facial features, disproportionate and dismembered. The resulting *horror vacui* effect intensifies the atmosphere of dread and incomprehensibility of the actual events. Using the stylistics of the grotesque, Dunikowski thereby illustrated the inhuman dimension of everyday life in the extermination camp, consisting of the unequal coexistence of its aspects (including the seriousness and prevalence of death).

Dunikowski took the risk of creating a particular image in this style, i.e. a testimony to a real situation that people are unable to imagine accurately due to the excess of human suffering and cruelty. Aware of the difficulty of believing such a representation to people untouched by the evoked drama, he assumed that his image might be incomprehensible, even unimaginable by the viewer, deemed an expression of madness (Didi-Huberman 2008: 14). Against these odds, he proposed visual representations that functioned as evidence of Auschwitz's existence. He urged us to imagine a particularly cruel reality "despite our own inability to see it as it deserves to be seen, despite our own world, saturated, even overwhelmed, with material for the imagination" (Didi-Huberman 2008: 9).

If Didi-Huberman's concept of the tear-image points to a dialectical understanding of the image, i.e. the coexistence of what is the "veil" and that which constitutes the "tear exception", so, among other things, the oscillation of these different qualities manifests itself in a noticeably incommensurable manner in *Grates*. In this painting, the representation of the survivor's visuality also outweighs the visibility of the nightmare shared by all others. What was viewed by the general public and attributed to the universalising rule makes a significant concession to the individual view, to the profoundly personal affect, initiating an exception for a "fraction of reality" (Didi-Huberman 2008: 104). Still, the preserved dialectic of veil and tear conditions the rupture for the display of personal truth. This is made possible by articulating it in the distinct artistic idiom of the surviving victim elaborated for this purpose. The strongly creative marking of the past thus allows the veil (also understood as a conventional "veil-image fetish" (Didi-Huberman 2008: 104), reinforcing illusion) to be discarded and a gap to be found for an outlet of affect based on real oppression. Thus, *Grates* is a distorted representation of a fragment of the past, diagonally cut composition with blurred figurative shapes that depicts a macabre psychomachy, i.e. a camp struggle between good and evil, life and death, dominated by the unequal relationship between executioner and victim, that makes the morality play topos contemporary. The image stylistically reinterpreted in such a way, defined by the dialectical pulsation of the visible and the visual, conveys the artist's personal drama, a fraction of a traumatised reality. It is also apparent that the artistic recollection of shreds of past tragedy avoids its literal repetition in a historical form in various ways. As opposed to the distinctive expressive explication of the crime in *Grates* painting, this evocation in *Dying Amaryllis* is based on a distant but recognisable sign of weakened referential value, which simultaneously also conditions the veil-tear (the subtle representation of visuality – the unveiling of the drastic truth of a time of debasement), underlining this very dialectic of painting's order.

The paintings described here are typically accompanied by multiple preliminary sketches that make it easier to balance the affective memory of the witness through artistic repetition of the intrusive memory in order to capture it and neutralise its emotional destructiveness. The powerful framing of the scene or the figure itself used in the paintings recalls the notion of memory proposed by Sontag as the past's immobilising recollection of single situations (Sontag 2017: 30, 136), the most acute ones. Dunikowski overcame the compelling passivity of such a relationship with the dead and traumatic events by means of artistic, therapeutically activating remembering. The affective framing of the memory space is thus distortive, illuminating the remembered trace and reconfiguring the iconosphere of recalled cruelty by way of a critical and stylistically alternative reckoning with the past. Dunikowski's affective memory selectively yet intensely exposes the traumatic past that the artist experienced as an affective observer (Nader 2018: 60), i.e. one who watched condemned to a vision that was difficult to endure, perceiving realities with the unbelievable empathetic eye of an accomplice to a subordinate torturer. The power of the gaze of Dunikowski acting as witness-observer-survivor, relying on identification with another victim and situation, triggers the transmission of traumatic knowledge, memory and affects (Nader 2018: 229–231). Emotionally susceptible to the influence of and interaction with an oppressive environment, he made a statement in the images post-facto – his ethical "visual testimony" (Nader 2018: 284) – from the position of the affected onlooker, who experienced a transgressive blurring of what is subjective and external, own and other's, attributed to the victim's body and mind. By evoking the memory of a female prisoner, half-dead bodies burning on grates and being pushed down a burn pit, corpses stretched on wires or the gruesomeness of a camp orchestra – the artist articulates the essence of the personal sensations of looking from victim to victim, among which one can recognise a corporeal relationality with what he experienced in the external space that affected him. Each such exposure marks another point of stabilisation in the chaotic memory of the mutilated survivor (Nader 2018: 238), teasing out the nodal events that seem necessary to shape the flow and equilibrium of remembering, occurring concurrently with cathartic mourning.

Citing Assmann's distinguished forms of memory, the presence of communicative, most individual and periodic memory, which directly relates to the witness-victim, dominates Dunikowski's Auschwitz works. Although it arises from regular interaction with the environment and another person, it pertains to the intimate private sphere (Assmann 2009: 158) and individual biographical experience. Ephemeral, chaotic and episodic, it allows the author of *Tchnienie* to

personally work through the borderline experience (Nader 2018: 256) by way of commemorative practices (Wóycicki 2009). They take the form of images, equally visionary and fragmentary cropped, which, in an artistic shorthand that opens up to an expanded meaningful context, symbolise the individuality of the experienced trauma and mourning. Dunikowski's personal communicative memory distances itself from the collective memory that depended on the official authorities' line of thought at the time. Despite his exposure to the generation's authentic memory of the time of the Holocaust, the artist remained indifferent to the legitimisation of the communist story of Auschwitz in socialist realist painting, which instrumentalised the memories of the victim. He expressed his opposition to this ideologised discourse on Nazi violence by marking affective memory in the distinct style described here, based on Young Poland and avant-garde reminiscences, as well as a contemporary and purifying abridgement that rejected the traditional realism that corresponded to Socialist realism. In this way, the creator affirmed the unadulterated feeling of witnesses about the wartime pogrom, emphasising that it was a turning point that called into question the very essence of humanity, history and culture (Nader 2018: 256–257) and, at its starting point, profoundly traumatised individuals.

Conclusion

After his liberation from the concentration camp, Dunikowski entered the reality of the communist state and penetrated it, creating continuously. His attempt to regain metaphysical peace after the shock he experienced manifested itself in a relentless search for solace, however, in alternative regions of human understanding and experiencing the world other than the communist utopia. This is reflected in the artist's post-war paintings: first, the cathartic group of paintings *Oświęcim*, discussed herein, and then a strictly modernist interest in the unlimited universe, its defining principle and the role of man in it (*Człowiek w przestworzu*) and contemplation of his (victim's) existence through entry into the musical world of the harmony of sounds (the series of paintings *Muzyka* [*Music*], 1958–1961, inspired by the compositions of Aram Khachaturian).[12]

Other artists who experienced an extermination camp, including Alina Szapocznikow (1926–1973), Jozef Szajna (1922–2008) and Jonasz Stern (1904–1988),

[12] Dunikowski's mother was a pianist, so since his childhood the artist's exposure to the world of music significantly enriched his everyday life.

left a permanent trace of negative experience in their post-war art. In her personal and "emotional" contemporary sculpture (Markowska 2012: 189), Szapocznikow, who was imprisoned at Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen and Teresin in the Czech Republic, evoked the experience of the camp from the position of a female subject who was seen as a "delicate and beautiful victim" (Markowska 2012: 189). She invoked the human body being subjected to fragmentation, suggesting torture and annihilation, constituting a reverberation of the camp trauma.[13] She initially resorted to the symbolism of an open hand implicitly of a battered man (Auschwitz monument project, 1958; also an earlier project for the Warsaw Heroes II monument, 1957), expressing the tragedy of thousands of murdered victims. In this simple incomplete form, based on a plastic synecdoche (a fragment replacing the whole), it attested to the complex issues of the Holocaust. In subsequent innovative sculptures, synthesising abstraction and representation, she juxtaposed the personal memory of the camps with the tragedy of the murdered prisoners, for example, by melting into a polyester mass the same photograph of a massacred female prisoner next to a portrait photograph showing the surviving artist (*Great Cancer* I, II and III, 1969; *Souvenir* I, 1971). In a deformed, mostly figurative form, she would consistently record and metaphorise the tormented (dismembered, cut) and mortal human body, referring universally to the suffering human being, whether a victim of the camp (*Exhumed*, 1955), the artist herself dying of cancer (*Cancer* series, 1969–1971), or any individual confronting the inevitable end of life (*Bird*, 1959; *Herbarium*, 1972).

Szajna, who was imprisoned in the concentration camps at Auschwitz, Birkenau and Buchenwald, in his post-war assemblages, environments and paintings, constantly employed the device of the outline of a prisoner's silhouette, into which he inscribed small images of victims in striped uniforms and with shaved heads,[14] which can symbolise the individual exterminated in the mass of other individuals (*Reminiscences*, 1969; *Silhouettes and shadows*, 1973; *Silhouette anthill*, 1988). In these epitaph-like works, he placed value on camp objects (clothing, various fragments of saved items, and prison photographs of victims).[15] He called it a psychogram, while researchers assigned to it the function of a psycho-object

[13] In her original works, Szapocznikow did not directly refer to her stay in Nazi concentration camps, and she kept silent about her experiences there (Markowska 2012: 197). Furthermore, for more on the artist's work, see publications: Jakubowska 2008; Chrzanowska-Pieńkos, Gołubiew 1998.

[14] Most often, these were photographs from Nazi documentation (camp files) glued to the ground in the shape of a human bust.

[15] Szajna commemorated the exterminated whose belongings he came into contact with in the camp, sorting them as a storage clerk.

which, in the more general perspective of catastrophic existentialism, was intended to signify the "human plight" (Wojciechowski 1983: 118).[16] Szajna, as if enslaved by the thing of sacrifice – the most important sign of a slaughtered human being – established it as the most valuable means of artistic expression of the camp experience (*Replica* I, 1971; *Replica* II, 1972 [Kowalczyk 2010: 123–125]). On the other hand, Stern, a ghetto prisoner and escapee from the Bełżec camp, rescued during the execution in Janowiec, evocatively conveyed the syndrome of the Jewish Holocaust survivor in his post-war biological abstraction, also known as matter painting, especially in his paintings-assemblages made of organic remains (including animal bones,[17] fish bones, bird feathers, eel skins) glued to canvas or board (*Silence of Types*, 1965; *Red Board*, 1971; *Killed Forms* II, 1972; *Pink Desert*, 1976; *Persistence*, 1983) (Piątkowska 2002: 27). Aesthetically powerful and decorative, they strike at the same time with the expressiveness of their bright colours and the sharp shapes of the rows of organic remnants, which are arranged in epitaph-like verses as if from Hebrew gravestones (Piątkowska 2002: 29). The objectivity of "structural logic" (Czerwiński 1955) attributed to Stern's post-war art gives way to lyricism (Markowska 2012: 214) and an elegiac rhythm of creation (Piątkowska 2002: 29). Therefore, it is a trace of the constant working through of trauma[18] in everyday activities, i.e. during canoe trips seen as team actions (Markowska 2012: 107), when the artist also acquired material for his mournful assemblages.

Against this significant background, Dunikowski appears as an artist who avoided the inner compulsion to repeat the stylistic expression of the camp trauma in his art. He remained a consistent artist, invariably aware of his artistic vision and open to new formal pursuits. Defining himself as a modernist creator, which had already accompanied the author of *Tchnienie* as early as in the period of Young Poland, helped him to survive the exceptionally acute negative experience of Auschwitz and saved him from the existential void of a survivor. He confirmed this in his Auschwitz works, for which he used the medium of painting, understating its conventional mastery, to express trauma once and to enhance the visual record of harm. He created paintings that were still modern, i.e. formative,

[16] For Szajna's work see also: Bogucki 1983: 337–340.

[17] Stern understood bones as symbols of the "duration of individual existence" (Trzupek 1988: 14), which preserve "memory, knowledge and the longing for life" for the longest time (Świerszcz 1988: 41). See more on the work of art made of them, as if "a biological organism of elemental beauty": Markowska 1998: 96.

[18] See Stern's statement: "It is so heavy that one never gets out of it through words. Nor through art. […] After the war I found escape in painting, I found escape in social activity, I found escape in fishing in order to forget it" (Potocka 1988: 39).

and conditioned their individualised form – reinterpreting old conventions – with a particular burden of content.

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