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CONTEMPORARY ART OR CONTEMPORARY ARTS? REMARKS ON *LE PARADIGME DE L'ART CONTEMPORAIN*BY NATHALIE HEINICH

Abstract: This paper provides several polemic comments regarding the concept of the "paradigm of contemporary art" presented by Nathalie Heinich in her book entitled *Le paradigme de l'art contemporain. Structure d'une révolution artistique.* The paper questions the accuracy of the analogy between changes within artworld that took place in the 20th century and the structure of scientific revolutions discussed by Thomas Kuhn. The author also points to the incompleteness of the proposal of the French sociologist, who neglects artistic activities that occur outside galleries and institutional art circles.

Keywords: contemporary art, modern art, paradigm, revolution in art, artworld

On 11th April 2011, during the *Gosser le frutif* conference held in the auditorium of the Université du Québec in Montreal, one could listen to a speech of Laurent Marissal, which was started by this middle-aged French artist in the following manner: "Cimabue was the teacher of Giotto, Giotto was the teacher of Taddeo Gaddi, Taddeo Gaddi was the teacher of Agnolo Gaddi, Agnolo Gaddi was the teacher of Antonio Veneziano, Antonio Veneziano was the teacher of Gherardo Starnina, Gherardo Starnina was the teacher of Fra Angelico...". Marissal continued the list of consecutive teachers and students who, throughout the centuries, became well-known masters, and several minutes later he pointed to "Jean-Paul Laurens, who was the teacher of Roger Chastel, Roger Chastel was the teacher of Claude Viallat and Ouanes Amor, who

The speech by Laurent Marissal is available at: https://vimeo.com/63369874 [access on: 10 July 2019].

were my teachers." Marissal cannot be considered a conservatist. He works in a variety of media that are far from traditional art. He avoids creating objects and prefers to document interventions taking place in various institutions.

Marissal's approach is exceptionally important, as this ultra-contemporary artist decided to set his short, almost biblical (or non-biblical, because it was factual and documented) genealogy in the chain of artists starting in the 14th century. His enumeration has showed the continuity of interpersonal relations within art community from the Middle Ages until now. He indicated that even though techniques, media, and aesthetic devices had been changing radically throughout centuries - from tempera on wood, through oil on canvas, up to ephemeral activities which are present in common conscience only thanks to documentation or memories - the occidental artistic life has been characterized by an unusual constancy. The continuity of the artistic environment has legitimized shifts in art production and that is why today we refer to paintings of Cimabue, collages of Braque, and installations of Daniel Buren by using the common term of "art" and we consider them as belonging to the same type of human activity. This simple yet brilliant enumeration provided by Marissal is going to be treated as a background for a few criticisms on a concept from the field of the sociology of art proposed several years ago by a French researcher, Nathalie Heinich.³ It seems that the intuition involved into Marissal's speech contradicts the proposals of the sociologist in question. At one point, she claims that a set of phenomena that we refer to nowadays as contemporary art has resulted in developing a new type of artistic activities followed by a new structure of the artworld. Its nature is so different from the art created up to the middle of the 20th century that we should consider it to be a completely new paradigm of art.

For five years, he worked as a guard in the Parisian Gustav Moreau Museum, where he organized interventions in the exhibitory space in secret from his colleagues and the administration. The project was documented in the publication entitled *Pinxit I* (Éditions Incertain Sens, Rennes 2006). Two years after the lecture discussed within the scope of this paper, Marissal aroused controversies at the École Supérieure d'Art de Clermont Métropole, where he made a survey on employment conditions among the workers of the art school he was invited to, its students, but also among the employees of Michelin company that were on strike then. Michelin sponsored the school's operation and the executive director of the corporation was a member of the board of ESACM at that time. As it can be guessed, the results of the survey were not received warmly by the school authorities. (See: L. Cauwet, *La domestication de l'art*, La fabrique éditions, Paris 2017, pp. 62-65).

N. Heinich, Le paradigme de l'art contemporain. Structure d'une révolution artistique, Éditions Gallimard, Paris 2014.

Parallel universes

Heinich refers to a rather intuitive chronology and distinguishes three major stages⁴ in the development of art. The first one is "classical art", characterized by the use of academic canons of figurative representation within the framework of typical genres, such as still life, historical painting, portrait etc. That type of art is proposed to embrace all figurative forms of painting, starting from medieval art, through academism, up to, for instance, Art Nouveau. The second type is defined by Nathalie Heinich as "modern art" – it challenges the rules of representation of the reality and is based on an imperative to express the internal life of an artist. The third type is "contemporary art" which experiments with the ontological status of artwork, its limitations, and the very notion of art.⁵

In order to better depict the specificity of each discussed stages, Heinich refers to statistical examinations that are a part of a doctoral thesis in economy by Bénédicte Martin. They are based on taking advantage of the computer program Alceste⁶ to analyze texts of six art critics: Charles Baudelaire (a type of text referring to classical art), Clement Greenberg (a type of text that is specific for modern art understood as a form of art dominating the first half of the 20th century), and four authors writing about current trends in art, namely - Paul Ardenne, Jean Clair, Thierry de Duve, and Yves Michaud (a type of text referring to contemporary art). The occurrence frequency of certain keywords (below, in italics) shows that in the case of the first type of text, the artist is a conceptualized as being a "craftsman, who creates paintings, looks for beauty, harmony, and composition, for he is all about imitating the reality and nature. He is also a genius, the talent of whom manifests itself through imagination and allows to create *masterpieces*, which are presented at *Salons*. The discussed artist went through the process of education at school under the supervision of a master." According to Martin, all these terms relate to "the category of figurative painting following academic canons."8 The second type of texts describes "paintings or sculptures that are similar to the first type [classical art - Ł. B.] (...) in terms of using traditional materials." Nevertheless, contrary to the first

⁴ Heinich calls them "classes" (see N. Heinich, op. cit., p. 32).

⁵ Ibid, p. 24.

A computer program used to analyze text data or gather text-specific statistics created in 1979 by Max Reintert.

B. Martin, Évaluation de la qualité sur le marché de l'art contemporain. Le cas des jeunes artistes en voie d'insertion, doctoral thesis written under the supervision of François Eymarda-Dyvernaya, Université Paris X, Nanterre 2005, pp. 109-110 (as cited in N. Heinich, op. cit., p. 32). If not stated otherwise, all the quotes were translated by the author of this text.

type, "painters or photographers aim at challenging the existing conventions." The use of such words as modern and expression orients the discourse towards creations that can be easily classified as modern art. The third type of text is "characterized by such terms as production and object, which describe works of artists that are connected with experience and creation (...) Artist's recognition and his status is constructed by art galleries and institutions. (...) While looking for words that are characteristic for that type of texts, one can easily identify such terms as contemporary art, Duchamp or limits." Taking results of this examination for granted, Heinich considers them to be an empirical confirmation of her intuition. The such as the considers them to be an empirical confirmation of her intuition.

The French sociologist assumes that even though the aforementioned stages followed one another historically, the earlier formulas have not disappeared and exist parallelly with one another nowadays. Additionally, their boundaries seem to be frequently fuzzy. For example, the works of Jackson Pollock are considered to be modern art due to their expressionistic nature, but they might also be categorized as contemporary art because they break with "the continuity between the body of the artist and the paint on the canvas."13 Heinich tries to date the emergence and development of the paradigm of contemporary art, stating that it established in the 1950s and early 1960s, when pop-art, New Realism and Viennese Actionism emerged. 14 She focuses also on the activities of Yves Klein and the import of American art into the French art market in the same period, which were strongly rejected by the prominent representatives of the former, modern order. This rejection and the fact that the older generation used assessment criteria that were inacceptable for the new generation, looking for core values somewhere else, are interpreted by Heinich as mutual incompatibility between modern and contemporary art.¹⁵ Reluctance and the lack of understanding of contemporary art among followers of modern art are considered by the sociologist to be one of arguments confirming the emergence of a new paradigm, the precursor and originator of which was Duchamp three decades earlier.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ N. Heinich, op. cit., p. 32.

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid. (It is not the place for questioning the methodology of Bénédicte Martin's research, so - to follow the paternalistic tone of Nathalie Heinich's statement - I will limit myself to a comment that there may be thousands of texts on Africa where no "Africa" word is used. On the other hand, even if the "painters" term is used in a text many a time, it does not mean that the text is about painting as such).

¹³ Ibid., p. 33.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 35.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 46.

While calling the contemporary art type a paradigm, Heinich refers obviously to Thomas Kuhn and shows several parallels between a development of scientific and artistic paradigm. While discussing the structure of scientific revolutions. Kuhn indicates that 1) it takes place within a certain community - separated, individual scientists are not enough to create a paradigm. Additionally, 2) opinions formulated by that community are considered to be controversial by the followers of the dominant paradigm - it is not just a difference of opinion, but rather a set of statements that go far beyond a dominant way of perceiving scientific problems. After some time, 3) these statements are becoming gradually popular, approved and eventually become a new paradigm. Heinich compares this simplistic reconstruction of the scheme proposed by Kuhn to the dynamics of avant-garde movements. She states that they also started among small groups of artists who happen to have a completely different perception of art from their contemporaries. Avant-garde artists created works of art that were used to be rejected by the dominant artistic tendency, but with time, the views of the avant-garde movements became the dominant way of perceiving art.¹⁶ Avant-garde movements functioned in the background of the "normal" art, representatives of which were so against the new approach that they refused to consider it art at all, which in turn resulted in such creations not being presented in art galleries and not reaching the general public. As Heinich stated: "it is always possible to be a «marginal», «naive» creator or a «Sunday painter», but it is always connected with the risk of not being considered as an artist at all and seeing own production excluded by prominent bodies, such as institutions or art dealers. In order to integrate the world of art, one has to be approved by the dominant paradigm, which accepts to absorb new trends". 17 In this sense, paradigm is not only a difference of opinions, but it also imposes some type of artistic production, which in turn affects the way of distributing art, presenting it, opting for or abandoning certain practices, as well as assessment criteria, economic value, status of the artist, role of the viewer, characteristics of art institution, preferences of dealers and collectors, style of writing about art, and many other aspects that completely transform the world of art. Heinich seems to suggest that nowadays there is not just one artworld, but there are three of them. They are parallel, but it can be noticed that two of the worlds have lost their impetus and contemporary art has become dominant.

The Heinich's postulate sounds interesting to say the least. It is obvious that it is easy to see differences in art production from the 16th, 19th, or 20th centuries. By opting for Heinich's view, we should stop perceiving art as Hegel did, namely – as a chain of consecutive *corrections*. We should avoid assessing

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 48.

all given art works by following the same criteria and take a look at various types of art trying to imagine them being different branches of historical process growing from the same trunk. It is *de facto* troublesome to compare them to one another, as they are representatives of different approaches. It is difficult to assess participatory art practices by following the same criteria as the ones used while evaluating impressionist paintings, and it is difficult to compare performance art to Donald Judd's objects. Let us end the unnecessary quarrels and leave both reluctance and contempt behind. A physicist and a chemist do not quarrel with each other – they just perceive the same world from different angles and notice its various aspects.

Such vision of "parallel universes" offers certain promises, but - and it has to be properly stressed - those are not promises that Nathalie Heinich considers to be of interest. She considers the model she has created as if it was a report. She does not search for any political, ethical, economic, or artistic value within her model. She just suggests that nowadays there simultaneously exist three types of art and even though we are used to call all of them "art", they actually function in different networks having their own institutions, reviews, experts, collectors and are separate from one another. The French sociologist, willing to focus on the empirical side of the matter, refrains from describing what the consequences would be if the separate nature of various art worlds was formally recognized on both administrative and legislative level (it might result in, for example, different forms of financing each type of art, different educational system, and many other consequences that are currently difficult to imagine). Even though the analysis of such an administrative and formal secession of various forms of art and the analysis of Heinich's concept from that point of view seems to be tempting, one has to respect the intent of the French scholar and focus on methodological issues only. One should rather focus on whether or not the analogy between a scientific revolution and an artistic one is accurate and the model of "contemporary art" proposed by Heinich is complete. I would like to focus on exactly that.

A misguided analogy?

Discussing the paradigm of contemporary art, Heinich refers to some other concepts that were proposed before her own. She mainly focuses on the proposals by Richard Brown¹⁸ and Remi Clignet.¹⁹ The French sociologist con-

¹⁸ R. H. Brown, A Poetic for Sociology: Toward a Logic of Discovery for the Human Sciences, the University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1977.

¹⁹ [R. Clignet, The Strucutre of Artistic Revolutions, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 1985.

siders both of them to be "unsatisfactory", because – as she sees it – they lack "the understanding of notions used by Thomas Kuhn and issues that are strictly connected with them"²⁰. It is difficult though to say that Heinich provides an in-depth analysis of earlier proposals, because, aside from her paternalistic manner of speaking, she devotes only two pages to discuss those proposals in her book (which is 300 pages in total).

The analogy presented by the author in Le paradigme de l'art contemporain showing similarities between the structure of a scientific and an artistic revolution seems to be accurate at first sight. In both cases, there is a group of people coming up with a completely new set of problems that is "incompatible" with the dominant model and causes confusion, misunderstanding, and controversies. With time, it turns out that this previously rejected way of putting problems becomes dominant. One has to remember, however, that the mechanism of legitimization plays an important role in the discussed process. As a result of a scientific revolution, a triumphant paradigm overshadows the one considered earlier to be the proper one. In the perspective proposed by Kuhn, it is not possible for several opposite scientific paradigms to be reciprocally recognized as scientific. For example, the paradigm which dominates nowadays strictly rejects the scientific character of natural medicine or Aristotelian statements on existence of sublunary sphere (texts on those issues can be considered to be scientific only in historical terms). The dominant paradigm has the exclusivity for truth and excludes all others.

It seems that this is the first weak point of Heinich's analogy: while the Aristotelian physics is not considered to be science in terms of contemporary physics, contemporary art considers to be art both its classical and modern periods. What is more, hypotheses formulated by a quantum physician are not in any way complemented by the "discoveries" of Aristotle (they may be treated as a beginning of a social and historic process which led to the emergence of contemporary science, but they are not considered to be scientific theses in terms of contemporary science). The lack of understanding of the Ionian school does not make it impossible to understand the development of current physics. Yet, if one wants to understand contemporary art, he or she needs to be familiar with prior forms of art in order to identify a set of interweaving comments, allusions, breaches, and - especially - negations, without which contemporary art could not be comprehensible and would be unable to develop. In other words, the analogy used by Heinich works as a description of a historical process a set of "anomalies" that became "normal" with time. However, it is not valid when one wants to create a concept of separate paradigms: a scientific revolu-

²⁰ N. Heinich, op. cit., p. 45.

tion works on the basis of exclusion, whereas an art-related one on the basis of sedimentation.

Such a state of affairs is perfectly depicted by Laurent Marissal's speech quoted at the beginning of this article. Visiting any contemporary art exhibition clearly proves that contemporary art can easily incorporate artworks stemming from the two previous types of art specified by Heinich and they all together may be highly symbiotic. They may appear next to one another, completing and explaining themselves reciprocally. In other words, the symbiosis of the three aforementioned types of art allows to raise some doubts about Heinich's idea of "a paradigm of contemporary art" and ask whether or not differences between these types are so fundamental that one can talk about a completely new paradigm. To prove the validity of that doubt, we may refer to the analogy involving the world of science that is so willingly taken advantage of by the author of Le paradigme.... In contemporary physics, there is a coexistence of Newton's model of physics, theory of relativity, and quantum physics, which base on different assumptions and examine physical objects from different angles. Yet these three approaches still function within the same paradigm that accepts them all as being science. If Heinich considers the scientific analogy to be valid, perhaps she jumps too easily and quickly to conclusions saying that the enumerated three types of art - focusing on dissimilar problems and proposing diverse perspectives - should be considered to be separate paradigms. Even though they are based on different assumptions, we still may consider them to be varied emanations of artistic creation and to be, in terms of education, administration, tourism, etc., a part of one social field divided into small pieces.

All of the above remarks make it possible to ask a question: is the proposal of Nathalie Heinich actually conclusive. There may be an indefinite number of various classifications and types of art, depending on chosen criteria. What do we epistemically gain after accepting that contemporary art is a completely new paradigm? What does it help us understand? What does it add to the current interpretation of historical facts? In the light of the strictly descriptive approach of the French sociologist – it gives us not too much. In the first chapter, Nathalie Heinich announces the appearance of a new art paradigm, but then she goes on to provide the reader with a series of descriptions of contemporary art system which would be equally beneficial heuristically if the concept of the "paradigm of contemporary art" was not used at all. The purely academic willingness to classify and redefine certain phenomena becomes a decoration, behind which there are well-known props.

Incompleteness

One simply cannot forget the ambiguity of the term "contemporary art". A definition of this term is nowhere to be found in Heinich's book, as if its meaning was purely intuitive and fixed.

The French sociologist writes about contemporary art as if it was an empirical description of a well-defined phenomenon - somewhat like a biologist who knows the definition of an ant and simply has to describe yet another species of said insect. Unfortunately, here the analogy used between natural sciences and artworld also turns out to be deceptive. Among art critics and historians, there are many different definitions of contemporary art, and its periodicity is notoriously changing due to the relative meaning of the "contemporary" word. For example, Clair Bishop, in her essay entitled Radical Museology or, What's 'Contemporary' in Museums of Contemporary Art? evokes completely different understandings of this concept. In her opinion, until the end of the 1990s, contemporary art was considered to be the art created after World War II. In the early 2000s, the focus was shifted to artistic activities that have been developing since the 1960s and 1970s. Nowadays those activities are considered as manifestations of the so-called "high modernism", and there is a tendency to understand the contemporary art as practices that took place after 1989.²¹ At the same time, although each periodization has its advantages and disadvantages. all of them perceive the development of art only from the Western perspective²² (sic!).

Since a range of phenomena denoted by the term "contemporary art" changes permanently, it undermines the unity of the paradigm so meticulously described – or, in the light of Claire Bishop's observations – "designed"²³ by Heinich. Furthermore, it is difficult not to resist the impression that this "new" paradigm – set on phenomena quite arbitrarily chosen by Heinich as representative for contemporary art – is not so new. In her book, Heinich describes it using categories that appeared in the 19th century and were in a widespread use, as well as were subjected to problematization during the domination of modern art so far, i.e. a shift from traditional materials towards new practices and media, the importance of discourse describing artistic activities, the impor-

²¹ C. Bishop, Radical Museology or, What's 'Contemporary'in Museums of Contemporary Art?, Koenig Books, London 2013, p. 16.

²² Ibid., p. 16-17.

It is designed, i.e., in the sense that if a phenomenon does not fit into the periodization depicted by Heinich, this does not mean that the periodization is false, but that the works of a given artist overtakes the model. Basing on this principle, many phenomena that appear before World War II and do not fit the Heinich model, can be considered a harbinger of contemporary art that appeared in modernist art, e.g., Duchamp.

tance of the art market, the role of collectors, the development of galleries and art institutions, etc. In other words, Heinich looks at contemporary art with a definitely modernist view and the "new" paradigm eventually differs from the earlier one only in terms of intensifying certain phenomena.

Heinich describes - using a very traditional language in fact - a well-known bourgeois circulation of commercialized artworks, whose authors try to gain visibility, distinguishing themselves from others by playing with conventions. This brief description corresponds both to modern and contemporary art (or, at least, contemporary art as defined by the French sociologist). In her book, we can hardly find any examples of art activities that actually look for the possibility of creating a real "new paradigm". Heinich completely neglects a whole branch of activities which seek opportunities to operate outside institutions and galleries, artists who do not want to treat their activity as a way to generate symbolic and economic capital, who are absolutely distanced from the art market, who tend to blur the boundaries between politics and art activity, who search for such a model of coexistence with other artists that would enable to minimize or avoid the need to compete within the artworld. In other words, we will not find in Heinich's book examples of art that wants to go beyond the "paradigm of visibility" - perhaps the only paradigm that is valid in the occidental art since the late Middle Ages.²⁴ If we really look for a new paradigm, it seems that this kind of activities - stepping beyond well-established formulas of exhibiting, selling, collecting and legitimizing - have a chance to become truly "incompatible" with the paradigm that has been dominating the artworld for a very long time. Remarkable descriptions of such artistic attitudes were given, for instance, by Stephen Wright - who discusses artists escaping from the artworld and working anonymously²⁵ - or by Julia Bryan Wilson - who refers to artists who, by problematizing both the logic of the art world and the labor market, consider their regular, non-artistic work as an artistic activity.²⁶

Hence, the paradigm created by Heinich is not only quite conservative but, above all, it is incomplete. It is not surprising, however, that the French sociologist does not go beyond the "paradigm of visibility", because the legitimization through visibility is imposed by the very notion of a paradigm in the Kuhn's ap-

See Ł. Białkowski, From Artist Gone Underground To Occupational Realism. Remarks On Artistic Strategies Based On Invisibility, "Art Inquiry" 2018, vol. XX, 2018, p. 83-97, https://www.academia.edu/38086296/FROM_ARTIST_GONE_UNDERGROUND_TO_OCCUPATIONAL_REALISM._REMARKS_ON_ARTISTIC_STRATEGIES_BASED_ON_INVISIBILITY [access on: 10th July 2019].

²⁵ S. Wright, Toward a Lexicon of Usership, Museum of Arte Útil Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven 2014.

²⁶ J. Bryan Wilson, *Occupational Realism*, "TDR: The Drama Review", vol. 56, Issue 4, Winter 2012, p.32-48.

proach. The scientific revolution is possible through access to visibility, i.e. opportunities to publish, lecture, attend conferences, be employed at universities, etc. If we reach for the analogy with the Kuhn's idea, the principle of visibility becomes the guiding principle in art as well, where the process of legitimization turns out to be paramount. It will be achieved through the presentation of artist's works in galleries and institutions, purchase of his or her works for collections, discussion of his or her exhibitions in the press, information about records during the auction, etc. This is exactly a model of modern literary field discussed by Pierre Bourdieu (who, by the way, was Heinich's teacher) in his *Rules of Art*, and the search for visibility is in fact essential for its mechanics. If we agree that the same dynamics has characterized the development of modern art, can we really say that the field of contemporary art – described by Heinich as a system of object-based art production, exhibiting, selling and collecting – is something new?

Conclusion

Nevertheless, the intuition that underlies the concept proposed by Nathalie Heinich deserves attention. It illustrates an essential feature of the contemporary art which is exhibited in galleries and within institutional networks - crossing borders itself has become a convention. An artistic activity is still often considered by artists themselves, art critics, and art enthusiasts themselves to be an area of freedom of expression, uncontrollable creative passion, and a kind of oasis in the context of a conventionalized social life, an interstice through which one can escape to a somewhat more authentic world. If there is a possibility to define, easily and smoothly, this "oasis" as just "a paradigm", it should give food for thought. If art curators and critics still describe activities of many today's artists as an experiment, it is worth considering whether - within the sterile, well-recognized borders of the white cube - it has not just become a fake imitation of old endeavors. If an experiment is just a part of "a paradigm", it is time maybe to consider whether it is not just a template that has been developed many years ago and nowadays appears as a seemingly revolted lifestyle, a strange kind of imposter castrated and deprived of any power. This would mean that the paradigm presented by Heinich is a culture of absolute domestication of art, as Laurent Cauwet calls it.²⁷ The question remains whether one can fight with it, or rather leave and wait only for the moment when it will face the same fate as opera or ballet, that is a buffoonery for big money, an estheticized flatterers gathering who watch another Don Giovanni waiting for emotions they know all too well.

²⁷ L. Cauwet, op.cit.

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SZTUKA CZY SZTUKI WSPÓŁCZESNE? UWAGI NA TEMAT KSIĄŻKI *LE PARADIGME DE L'ART CONTEMPORAIN* NATHALIE HEINICH (streszczenie)

Artykuł wskazuje kilka polemicznych uwag w stosunku do koncepcji "paradygmatu sztuki współczesnej" przedstawionej przez Nathalie Heinich w książce *Le paradigme de l'art contemporain*. Structure d'une révolution artistique. Autor tekstu podważa zasadność budowania analogii pomiędzy zmianami zachodzącymi w sztuce XX wieku a zmianą paradygmatu naukowego opisaną przez Thomasa Khuna w *Strukturze rewolucji naukowych*. Autor wskazuje również na niekompletność modelu zaproponowanego przez francuską socjolożkę, która pomija w strukturze "paradygmatu sztuki współczesnej" działania artystyczne funkcjonujące poza obiegiem galeryjnym i instytucjonalnym.

Słowa kluczowe: sztuka współczesna, sztuka nowoczesna, paradygmat, rewolucja, świat sztuki

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