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## **ARTISTIC LABYRINTHS AND THE TOWER OF BABEL. A COMPARATIVE LOOK AT THE EXHIBITIONS: DOCUMENTA 5, LES IMMATÉRIEAUX AND LABYRINTH – AN UNDERGROUND SPACE**

**Abstract:** In this article, I would like to compare three exhibitions: *documenta 5* in Kassel (1972), *Les Immatériaux* at the Centre Pompidou in Paris (1985) and *Labyrinth - An Underground Space* at the Church of the Ascension of Christ in Warsaw (1989). These exhibitions are different in terms of their scale, fame, works presented and venue, and marked by different local contexts. The visions of art that the organisers – Harald Szeemann, Jean-François Lyotard and Janusz Bogucki – wanted to articulate through them seem to me an ideal example of reflecting on the integrity or heterogeneity of contemporary artistic activity. It is clear that the exhibitions discussed here were based on a pattern of wandering with the inherent figure of the tower-labyrinth of Babel. Therefore, the topos of the Tower of Babel, revolving around the theme of unity and dispersion, is quite fundamental to these reflections. Bogucki and Lyotard were to some extent similar in their diagnosis of contemporary art, which they saw in terms of dispersion and a great diversity of styles, motivations and references to reality – just like Szeemann, in fact. While Bogucki was searching for some universal ground of understanding in a situation of "confusion of tongues" in the sphere of spirituality, Szeemann delved into and explored separate artistic worlds operating in the registers of triviality and spirituality. In comparison, Lyotard, like other postmodernists, described dispersion as a condition inherent in the present.

**Keywords:** Harald Szeemann, Jean-François Lyotard, Janusz Bogucki, Individual Mythologies, sacrum of art, postmodernism, Tower of Babel.

In this paper, I would like to attempt to answer the question regarding the integration or dispersion of contemporary art. I am interested in a particular moment in history, just before the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the sense of

the end of an era was increasingly felt, and at the same time there was restless curiosity as to how the following decades would be shaped. My field of analysis will be the specific area of exhibitions. Exhibitions are a medium in which – and this is a hallmark of the new times – the holistic visions of their authors' art can be embodied. The 1980s brought one of the most important presentations of the period, *Les Immatériaux* at the Centre Pompidou in Paris (1985), but also the relatively modest, but well-thought-out and ambitious exhibition *Labyrinth - An Underground Space* at the Church of the Ascension of Christ in Warsaw (1989). These exhibitions are different in terms of their scale, fame, works presented and venue. Nonetheless, the visions of art that the organisers, Jean-François Lyotard and Janusz Bogucki, wanted to articulate through them seem to me an ideal example of reflecting on the integrity or heterogeneity of contemporary artistic activity. They constituted certain attempts to find oneself in a situation of the emergence of a "border's zero line" in the development of art. *Les Immatériaux* manifested, in this context, its author's belief in the "postmodern condition", in the convergent development of media, art, theory and technology after the collapse of the "grand narratives". *Labyrinth - An Underground Space*, on the other hand, can be seen as the realisation of the concept of making a transformation in art itself, understood as a "return to home and temple". However, I would like to extend the scope of the analysis with another example of a significant exhibition. Harald Szeemann, as general secretary of *documenta 5* in Kassel (1972), proposed to investigate the relationship between visual expressions and reality in the formula of "structured chaos" and "individual mythologies". However, it is not only the immense significance of this exhibition for all subsequent exhibition practices that provides the reason for going back to the previous decade. The Kassel exhibition introduces, through Bogucki, the figure of the Tower of Babel and a labyrinth, which will be key metaphors for the reflections undertaken here. Recalling this presentation will broaden the research perspective and help the author take a proper look at the "works" of Lyotard's and Bogucki's exhibition art from the 1980s. I will therefore compare three very different exhibitions, marked by different local contexts and, above all, by specific visions of art.

### **The Labyrinth of Babel**

The topos of the Tower of Babel, revolving around the theme of unity and dispersion, is quite fundamental to these reflections. It is based on a story in the Book of Genesis about the building of a city and tower, confusion of tongues and dispersion of people (Gen 11:1-9). It closes the first part of the book, which connects the origins of the world and man with the history of biblical patriarchs, but, significantly, it also shows the process of people's gradual di-

stancing from God, symbolically started by tasting the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and ending with the very (un)construction of the tower of Babel. The parable of the builders, who wished to erect a city and a tower reaching heaven to "get a name for themselves" and not to disperse over the whole earth, contributed to one of the most important myths shaping our culture. In the most common interpretation, they were punished for their hubris and audacity expressed in their desire to "break through to heaven". The punishment for the sin of exalting oneself (in the literal and metaphorical sense), or even for the ambition to equate oneself with God, was meted out in two acts: there was dispersion caused by the spirit of discord and confusion of tongues. In this way, the unfinished tower became a symbol of the impossibility of agreement and cooperation.<sup>1</sup>

The presence of this myth is particularly noticeable in literature and art,<sup>2</sup> with the most widespread representation of the tower (and one seemingly already firmly rooted in European imagination) being Pieter Bruegel the Elder's painting *The Tower of Babel* (1563, Kunsthistorisches Museum's collection, Vienna). The cloud-reaching building, overwhelming everything around it with its scale, combines the precision of realistic rendering of detail with a fantastic aura, straddling between waking and sleeping. The tower, shaped like a truncated cone, is made up of successively tighter floors with arcades and brick interiors, countless "windows" (openings) of various shapes and sizes, differently and asymmetrically situated. "They are certainly not 'windows to the world' enabling one to see what is outside the building. They are rather 'communication channels' in a world where communication between people is no longer possible. Through each of these openings one speaks differently, and therefore there is also a space of non-understanding. And this, perhaps, in a form more expressive than anywhere else"

<sup>1</sup> The etymology of the word „Babel” is interesting in the context of the „confusion of tongues”. According to the biblical account, this was the name given to the city where „the Lord confused the speech of all the world”. The author derived the name from the Hebrew verb *balal* (to confuse, to mix) and subsequently linked it to Babylon. This was an unjustified connection, as „Babylon” corresponded to the Akkadian *bab-ili* (gate of the gods), which referred directly to the astral religious cults from Mesopotamia. The similar-sounding words *balal* and *bab-ili* thus „confused” the original meanings, which makes „Babel” (Babylon) all the more a symbol of linguistic chaos in the world. At this point, it is also worth clarifying that what is actually meant by using the phrase „the tower of Babel” is „the tower in the city of Babel”. See: M. Jurkowski, *Od Wieży Babel do języka kosmitów*, KAW, Białystok 1986, p. 12; S. Szymik, „*Wieża Babel*” P. Bruegla czytana oczami bibliisty, in: *Biblia kodem kulturowym Europy*, ed. S. Szymik, Wydawnictwo KUL, Lublin 2013, p. 80.

<sup>2</sup> On the *BabelStone Blog*, its author has collected more than 200 different representations of the Tower of Babel, ranging from illustrations of manuscripts, bibles, chronicles, prints, lithographs, engravings to frescoes and paintings by Dutch masters and contemporary artists. They are divided into three groups: medieval, post-medieval and contemporary. <https://www.babelstone.co.uk/Blog/babel.html> (accessed: 23.06.2022).

- Michał Głowiński wrote.<sup>3</sup> In such a compelling vision, the analogy with the figure of the labyrinth almost comes to mind by itself, further emphasising this particular communicative aspect: the impossibility for the person in the middle of it to communicate.

The metaphor of the tower-labyrinth of Babel also inspired Janusz Bogucki (1916-1995), the renowned Polish art historian, critic and curator, when he appeared at *documenta 5* in 1972. His arrival in Kassel left its mark on his subsequent exhibition practice and approach to understanding contemporary art functions. By then, he had already had more than 20 years of experience as an organiser and participant in art life as well as author of books on art history and theory, so he had the right perspective to assess what he saw in Germany. Bogucki combined critical activity with popularisation activities and his perspective, as Piotr Majewski believes, was characterised by excellent orientation in the country's artistic circles and a sense of trends in world art.<sup>4</sup> This is why the Warsaw Contemporary Gallery (1965-1974) which he ran became famous not only for its important individual exhibitions, but also for its model of "didactic" problem-based exhibitions that engaged the viewer's activity. In 1974, however, Bogucki resigned from running this unique institution on the Polish art scene and decided to operate outside the official domain. He was then able to devote himself entirely to developing "a kind of contemporary theology of art", in line with his conviction, which had been crystallising since the 1960s, that "the essence of art is sacred and develops fully in sacred space."<sup>5</sup>

One of the impulses that led to intensifying this type of exploration was precisely the 1972 exhibition organised under the direction of Harald Szeemann. Bogucki considered it one of the most important exhibitions of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to him, *documenta 5* not only presented the situation of art according to artistic views and styles, but also outlined an enormous, even "sociological" panorama of ways of depicting, encompassing different languages and different levels of white man's culture.<sup>6</sup> He was convinced, however, that they functioned side by side, creating their own closed worlds between which there was no understanding - like the mythical tower of Babel. This reflection was particularly important to him and led him to wonder how

<sup>3</sup> M. Głowiński, *Labirynt. Przestrzeń obcości*, in: idem, *Mity przebrane*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1990, pp. 184-185.

<sup>4</sup> *Słownik polskiej krytyki artystycznej XX i XXI wieku*, vol. I *Słownik biograficzny*, eds. R. Kasperowicz, M. Lachowski, P. Majewski, Towarzystwo Naukowe Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, Lublin 2020, p. 21.

<sup>5</sup> *O pobudzeniu faktów artystycznych i przewidywaniu tego, co się zdarzy. Wywiad z Januszem Boguckim*, in: W. Wierzchowska, *Sąd niecenzurowany, czyli 23 wywiady z krytykami sztuki*, Film i Literatura, Łódź 1989, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> J. Bogucki, *Od rozmów ekumenicznych do Labiryntu*, Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej - Zamek Ujazdowski, Warszawa 1991, p. 14, 107.

"these separated channels of imagination and diverging languages of art could be reunited in a whole that was not necessarily homogeneous, interwoven with different threads and attitudes, but relatively coherent."<sup>7</sup> He then returned to the conviction that it was the experience of God and the experience of sacred space, both primary and art-related, that could influence the situation of art's dispersion, of which he saw such a clear manifestation in *documenta 5*.

### Pictorial worlds and obsessions

Looking at Bogucki's developing concepts, it is clear that a certain limiting moment was marked for him by the Kassel exhibition – a proposal that caused a great stir in the world of art and revolutionised the approach to the medium of exhibition. In preparing the fifth edition of *documenta*, Harald Szeemann (1933-2005) completely changed the exhibition format developed in 1955. Initially, it was to take on the formula of a 100-day event (a space of "programmed experiences", interactions, based on a structure of events with different action centres), but later the decision to organise the exhibition around a socially relevant theme prevailed. The very fact of setting a central theme broke with the previous convention of *documenta* and similar large-scale exhibitions usually focused on showing (or juxtaposing) specific trends and styles in art. The exhibition's creators' intentions were to be reflected in its subtitle: *Befragung der Realität: Bildwelten heute (Questioning reality: Pictorial worlds today)*. Ultimately, the exhibition's formula was to guide viewers to better recognise these visual worlds, to understand a reality increasingly dependent on the mediation of (mass)media and increasingly similar to a staged event (spectacle). The exhibition's thematic sections, leading from the "reality of the image" (such as political propaganda and advertising) through the "reality of what is shown" (i.e. social realism and photorealism) to the "sameness, or the lack thereof, between the image and the depicted" (conceptual art), were a response to this. As Szeemann explained, the idea was to trace the trajectory of *mimesis* in the context of the difference between the reality of the image and the reality of the imagined.<sup>8</sup> Art of action was also an important part of the exhibition's

<sup>7</sup> *O pobudzeniu faktów...*, p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> H. Obrist, *Krótko historia kuratorstwa*, transl. M. Nowicka, Korporacja Ha!art, Kraków 2009, p. 96. See: M. Bremer, *Modes of Making Art History. Looking Back at documenta 5 and documenta 6*, "Stedelijk Studies Journal" 2015, no. 5, DOI: 10.54533/StedStud.vol002.art08 (accessed: 27.05.2022); Ch. Rattemeyer, 'Op Losse Schroeven' and 'When Attitudes Become Form' 1969, in: *Exhibiting the New Art: 'Op Losse Schroeven' and 'When Attitudes Become Form' 1969*, eds. Ch. Rattemeyer et al, Afterall Books, London 2010, pp. 12-64; *Documenta 5. Befragung der Realität - Bildwelten heute*, 1 Ringbuchordner Bd. 1: Materialien, exh. cat., eds. H. Szeemann; M. Grüterich, K. von den Velden, J. Gough-Cooper, GmbH, C. Bertelsmann Verlag, Kassel 1972.

programme. As a result, *documenta 5* was distinguished by a great diversity of artistic realisations which, as Max Rosenberg argues, could be put as a spatial and visual journey from the trivial to the spiritual.<sup>9</sup>

Characteristic of the fifth edition of the exhibition were also the "individual mythologies", expressing within themselves all of Szeemann's key "obsessions". Initially, this category (with the working name "mysticism and shamanism"<sup>10</sup>) was intended to play a marginal role, but in the course of the work on the exhibition it grew and took up strategic positions in the exhibition space. Szeemann defined "individual mythology" as the spiritual space in which man places his signs and symbols which represent the world for him.<sup>11</sup> This idea came to him when he was working on an exhibition by the French sculptor Etienne-Martin (Kunsthalle Bern, 1963).<sup>12</sup> He was particularly inspired by the *Demeures*, constructed on site, austere and original sculpture-habitats intended to be visited "in the imagination" by the viewer. These were marked by an autobiographical approach, an in-depth reflection on the loss of his birthplace-home ("an obsessive thing, linked to my own life, no more and no less"). By experimenting with matter (wood, plaster, stone, textiles) and form that eschewed the styles and conventions of his time, Etienne-Martin was developing his solitary pursuit of personal and mythical memory. In this context, Szeemann's intentions are understandable when he explained: "the idea of 'individual mythologies' was intended as a demand for art history to emphasise intentions which can take many forms."<sup>13</sup> The hermetic cosmos of the French sculptor, which seemed to him to be built on an intricate but impenetrable system of signs, was thus becoming a kind of myth unknown to anyone but the artist himself. He explained the internal incoherence of the term itself (as myth is a collective phenomenon) by the fact that the construction of a pictorial reality into coherent and closed representations of one artist's reality becomes precisely a mythology, but an individual one (because it concerns one particular person). He saw this kind of artistic practice as an attempt to express the very private, obsessive world of the

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<sup>9</sup> M. Rosenberg, *Harald Szeemann and the Road Back to the Museum*, "Getty Research Journal" 2019, no. 11, p. 111.

<sup>10</sup> D. Birnbaum, *When Attitude Becomes Form: Daniel Birnbaum on Harald Szeemann*, "Artforum" 2005, vol. 43, no. 10, p. 346.

<sup>11</sup> *Conversation with Paul Thek, Duisburg, 12 December 1973*, in: *Harald Szeemann: Selected Writings*, ed. D. Chon, G. Phillips, P. Rigolo, transl. J. Blower, E. Tucker, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles 2018, p. 234.

<sup>12</sup> M. R. Teixeira, *The Grandfather exhibition. A sort of manifesto*, in: *Harald Szeemann: museum of obsessions*, ed. G. Phillips, P. Kaiser with D. Chon, P. Rigolo, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles 2018, p. 112.

<sup>13</sup> H. Obrist, *Krótko historia...*, p. 97.

artist, to confront his own order with the great disorder of an alienated, post-industrial, media-driven society living in the shadow of the Tower of Babel.<sup>14</sup>

The "individual mythologies" section, personally supervised by Szeemann, featured specific artistic "cosmos", including Etienne-Martin, Christian Boltanski, Joseph Beuys, but many viewers and commentators of the exhibition were very impressed by the evocative work *Ark, Pyramid* (1972) by Paul Thek. The American artist staged the entire space of the large hall with raw panache. The whole work was based on a pattern of wandering, with a moment of "immersion" in the reality created by the artist and a moment of enlightenment (transition).<sup>15</sup> The viewer, following a path made of planks, encountered a real leafy grove with stuffed animals, the workshop of a village carpenter with a skeleton of a fishing boat, a fence and a chest with a grey-haired man with a long beard resting in it (the *Fishman* sculpture, a life-size latex cast of the artist's body), sandy dunes, a wooden platform and a pyramid-shaped building made of wood, covered with newspapers. All this scenic richness, combining elements of art, literature, theatre and religion, created a mysterious mystical atmosphere, which was further emphasised by theatrical lighting and candles in the "sea of sand" ("water to walk on, time"). Here, the artist was appealing to the collective subconscious. Not surprisingly, viewers reacted to this spatial arrangement as if they were in a sacred place, which was in line with the artist's intentions: "art is a liturgy".<sup>16</sup>

### In search of the *sacrum* of art

*Ark, Pyramid* also captivated Janusz Bogucki – he saw it in Kassel several times. This is what he wrote about it: "Thek reports nothing, stigmatises nothing, does not convince us to do anything. Through a mysterious interstice, he leads us into the interior of the «Pyramid», into a space that seems to exist outside of time. This space and the path through it are formed by the most ordinary objects transferred from rural life and landscape".<sup>17</sup> Thus, when

<sup>14</sup> D. Chon, *Harald Szeemann's Museum of Obsessions, between parody and consecration*, in: *Harald Szeemann: museum of...*, p. 95.

<sup>15</sup> D. Jarecka, *Janusz Bogucki, polski Szeemann?*, in: *Odrzucone dziedzictwo. O sztuce polskiej lat 80.*, ed. K. Sienkiewicz, Muzeum Sztuki Nowoczesnej w Warszawie, Warszawa 2011, p. 18, [https://artmuseum.pl/public/upload/files/Odrzucone\\_dziedzictwo.pdf](https://artmuseum.pl/public/upload/files/Odrzucone_dziedzictwo.pdf) (accessed: 25.06.2022). The artist explained that the corridor in the pyramid signified a place of „concentrated energy, a passage through the womb, the Way of the Cross”. It is also used in the sense Jung understood it, as an initiatory journey (rite of passage) – *Conversation with Paul Thek...*, p. 230.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 230.

<sup>17</sup> J. Bogucki, *Pop ezo sacrum*, Pallotinum, Poznań 1990, p. 62.



Bogucki was asked what the *sacrum* he postulated could be in art, he referred to this very installation "because there one enters another world, or even another dimension of existence".<sup>18</sup>

In the 1970s, he was increasingly noticing that artists' interests were moving towards a search for a spiritual life or, in other words, inner orientation. He thus explained: "Taking up this theme this time resulted from certain urgency of history. The circle of avant-garde artists close to me was experiencing a situation of 'the end of art' at the time – not only in our country. There was a growing premonition that this form of its social existence, which the European tradition had associated with the cult of progress, novelty, revolution, the avant-garde as well as with the secular homocentric model of culture, had quite suddenly been exhausted".<sup>19</sup> These thoughts were overlaid with the vision of the Tower of Babel in Kassel, which Bogucki had in his memory all the time. He saw an analogy between contemporary man divided internally as an individual, a society divided according to function and specialisation, and the situation of art divided into its various movements and separated, above all, as a whole, from the totality of spiritual life.<sup>20</sup> In his view, there could only be one answer to this "swarm of mutually alien languages of the imagination": the restoration of art's participation in the totality of spiritual life.

Bogucki was convinced that the devaluation of the contemporary artistic system was a long-term result of the separation of the *sacrum* and the *sacrum* of art. By *sacrum* he meant the awareness of the existence of a "sacred space" which in ancient cultures gave meaning to human phenomena and actions, and revealed the spiritual side of what was physical. "It was the psychic realm of myths and their imagery, i.e., art".<sup>21</sup> He associated the *sacrum* of art, in turn, with "special spiritual qualities of a creative individual". Thanks to these qualities, later associated with inspiration and then with intuition, sensitivity and imagination, the artist was able to perceive a deeper state of things and open up new horizons of vision. In the past, there was no difference between what was sacred to an artist and what was sacred to a human being. A few hundred years of European modernity, Bogucki explained, had undermined this condition and traditional spiritual ties linking people in closed religious and cultural circles, resulting in the creation of a culture that was technical in nature and increasingly global in scope.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup> D. Jarecka, *Janusz Bogucki...*, p. 18; J. Bogucki, *Pop...*, p. 61.

<sup>19</sup> J. Bogucki, *Pop...*, p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> *O pobudzeniu faktów...*, p. 6.

<sup>21</sup> J. Bogucki, *Sacrum i sztuka*, "Śląskie Studia Historyczno-Teologiczne" 1984, no. 17, p. 133.

<sup>22</sup> J. Bogucki, *Pop...*, pp. 19-20. See also: J. Bogucki, *Od rozmów...*, p. 7.



This understanding of the *sacrum* was close to the reflections of Mircea Eliade. In his numerous writings, this world-renowned religious scholar, historian of religious ideas and researcher of traces of the *sacrum* argued that modern humans, like those of past cultures, cannot live without myth, the "mythical story", ritual, symbols, religious beliefs, without all this "sacred reality". It had "fueled" previous civilisations, while today its place is occupied by popular culture. For the researcher, it was important to believe that people are made to form a community, to live a communal experience that goes beyond the "objectified image" of media reality. Hence, he opposed all extreme rationalist ideologies, materialism and scientism, which contributed to the disappearance of the *sacrum* and thus to the impoverishment of man's vital religious dimension.<sup>23</sup>

The transformations described by Bogucki, identical to those explored by Eliade, had, according to the Polish curator, implications for the functioning of contemporary art. It became impossible, in fact, to open up new horizons by breaking up worn-out conventions (because there were simply no more unbroken conventions). Behind this "border zero line", however, it was possible for moral and artistic attitudes to form. He saw three possibilities which he labelled as: "pop", "ezo" and "sacrum". This typology was based on the relationship with the *sacrum* of art.

"Pop" was associated with a drive towards total desacralisation of art – in a civilisation of "hurry and success" there is no room for spirituality, its place being taken by mass culture linked to production, entertainment and information. It was oriented towards creating enticing labyrinths and funfairs of the imagination ("spaces of permanent fascination"). An opposite attitude, stemming from a belief in the inviolability of the *sacrum* of art, was "ezo". Instead of producing novelties, it cultivated unhurried self-reflection and locked itself in its own hermetic circle accessible only to insiders. The third attitude, on the other hand, signified a drive to rediscover the connection between the old *sacrum* and the *sacrum* of art.<sup>24</sup> This was understood by Bogucki as renewal of the inner connection between creativity and spiritual life as a whole. Its essence was to ask fundamental questions about the meaning of the world and man, and its method was the slogan "return to home and temple". The return in this context was a move beyond the contemporary artistic frame that imposed a framework for the functioning of art through presentation spaces set aside for it, disconnected from its natural connection to human spirituality. Bogucki explained: "The home and the temple are the places where this totality of spiritual

<sup>23</sup> Eliade even stated that being religious is part of human nature (*homo religiosus*) and this is what distinguishes humans from other beings. See: "Teologia Polityczna Co Tydzień" 2021, no. 16, title of issue: *Eliade: mity człowieka nowoczesnego (Eliade: Myths of the Modern Man)*, <https://teologiapolityczna.pl/tpct-264> (24.06.2022).

<sup>24</sup> J. Bogucki, *Pop...*, pp. 24-25.

development has matured over the millennia. They are also spaces in which symbolic objects and objects of art settle and dwell. Fusing with architecture, they form living entities similar to organisms – the opposite of artificial sets, such as a collection, an exhibition, or a storage inventory".<sup>25</sup>

In an astonishing way, Bogucki's words found a chance to be materially realised at the dramatic time triggered by the introduction of martial law in Poland (1981-1983), when, in response to the boycott of state exhibition institutions by most artists in the country, the premises of churches began to function as an alternative gallery system. As unexpected as it may have been, it was the political turn of the Solidarity period that provided a stimulus for the emergence of a broad trend of church-based art. Thanks to this, the idea of "return to home and temple", contemplated by Bogucki and his friends from the mid-1970s at rather small meetings, was transformed into public, interdisciplinary artistic ventures with a wider social reach. Today, they are considered to be among the most important contributions to this spectacular convergence of Polish art with the Church.

At the time, Bogucki, in collaboration with Nina Smolarz, organised exhibitions such as *Sign of the Cross* at the Divine Mercy Parish in Warsaw (1983), *Artists to Shipyard Workers* at St. Nicholas Church in Gdańsk (1984), *Apocalypse - Light in the Darkness* at the Holy Cross Church in Warsaw (1984), *Way of Lights - Ecumenical Meetings* at the Divine Mercy Church in Warsaw (1987), and *Labyrinth - An Underground Space* at the Ascension Church in Warsaw (1989). Perhaps the most famous one from this list was the *Sign of the Cross*, but the *Labyrinth - An Underground Space*, however, seems to be Bogucki's most mature encounter with the formula of church art, incorporating all his previous experiences. By doing so, he closed the story initiated by the emergence of Solidarity and imposition of the martial law in 1981, which resulted in the mass entry of artists "into the porch".

### **From the labyrinth to home and temple**

The *Labyrinth - An Underground Space* exhibition was an attempt to show the eternal predicaments that define man's fate.<sup>26</sup> This idea was matched by the layout of zones of visual/photographic imagery symbolically referring to the Book of Genesis. Once set in a specific space, i.e., the basement of a church in Ursynów, the layout consisted of an introductory zone (referring to the creation of the world and the Garden of Eden), a labyrinth of time and space (a network

<sup>25</sup> J. Bogucki, *Od rozmów...*, p. 9

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem, p. 124.

of corridors with the ruins of the Tower of Babel – the place where man ended up after being expelled from Eden), a zone of light and a zone of home (both related to man's spiritual development).<sup>27</sup>

A tour of the exhibition began with the Introductory Zone, a large semi-circular wall occupied on one side by striking visions of cosmic nebulae, explosions and celestial bodies (painting by Kazimierz Jałowczyk), and on the other one by a colourful Garden of Eden filled with animals and guarded by a four-winged Cherubim (Jan Rylke). Between these large-scale paintings, in a deep recess, there was a two-armed sculpture with flickering prisms, symbolising the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (Marek Kijewski). Opposite it there was a narrow opening through which one could enter the labyrinth.

It was a huge, surprising and seemingly unfinished construction by Grzegorz Klamana. His labyrinth covered almost half of the vast space of the underground part of the church, thus becoming the dominant central figure of the whole exhibition. It is around this figure that the original painting sequences and the other zones were built. The formidable structure of the labyrinth gave the impression of being compact, yet in a state of dramatic decay, as it was clumped together from grimy decayed matter. Its framework was made of unhewn timber and covered on the outside with tin "armour". The walls sometimes went on for a long time, sometimes abruptly broke off, creating a chaotic arrangement of corridors. The whole was arranged in an unformed circle, above which hung heavy coffer "sky" (ceiling) of raw concrete. This is where another structure – Jerzy Kalina's *Tower of Babel*, partly burnt down and emerging from the centre of the labyrinth, was embedded.

Significantly, some 700 photographs, selected and hung by Nina Smolarz and her collaborators from several thousand public and private collections and archives made available to them, found their way into the labyrinth (on the inside of the walls). Those relating to birth and the beginning of life are grouped at the entrance to the labyrinth, those in the middle reveal the most varied "signs of life", and those that speak of death are shown at the exit. As Bogucki explained, "the essential point of the selection was neither preconceived thematic and historical assumptions, nor aesthetic preferences, but it was to pick out things that are experienced most intensely, photographs that, more than others, have preserved in themselves the emitting energy of something that once existed: a place, an event, a presence."<sup>28</sup> The location of the photographs in the sacred space reinforced these hidden meanings and gave them a spiritual context.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibidem, pp. 124-126.

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem, p. 141.

There were author zones on both sides of the labyrinth, aimed at creating subjective imagery around the main layout. These include illusionistic landscapes with the figure of a labyrinth by Henryk Waniek, based on the impeccable technique of the realistic painter. From the early 1980s, this artist focused on the symbolism of the sacred place. For him, the hollowed-out or stone-paved labyrinth had strong symbolic significance as a form of sacred space which brought spiritual order to the human world.<sup>29</sup> Nearby, in a spacious hallway, one could also find illustrations by Bogdan Kraśniewski. This artist's work has also long featured the image of a labyrinth through which, in a geometric void, a lone and naked human being wanders in search of something hidden, indefinable and mysterious - in other words, caught between the sacred and profane.<sup>30</sup>

A narrow passage from the labyrinth led to the next two zones. The Light zone was built in contrast to the overwhelming severity and vastness of the labyrinthine "fortress". Alojzy Grit's installation seemed, especially when viewed from a distance, to be a semi-material phenomenon. The artist positioned the slats vertically on the altar platform with mathematical precision, each ending in a mirror placed at the top. The complete structure was arranged in the shape of a pyramid, illuminated by mirror-like glow spreading from its apex.

Adjacent to this luminous space, sacred in expression, was the more earthy Home Zone. Artists from the Lucim Group (Bogdan and Witold Chmielewski, Wiesław Smużny) decorated a simple room in the image of a traditional cottage with a wooden floor, white walls, beams on the ceiling and four differently lit windows. The central place was occupied by a table covered with a napkin embroidered with a large inscription: "rano, wieczór, we dnie, w nocy" (words of the Polish version of the Guardian Angel Prayer), on which rested a loaf of bread. The walls were covered with dates (from 1889 to 1989), the names of the months, days of the week and names of patron saints. The atmosphere of the room was evocative of a quiet everyday life and the passing of time, indicated by changes in the seasons of the day and year, and the inscriptions on the tablecloth and walls. This simple installation reflected the specificity of the group of artists who declared a focus on reinforcing old values as much as on finding new symbols and imagery close to and understandable for the local community (the inhabitants of Lucim village). Immersed in folk culture, which they simultaneously considered to be universal (because it referred to archetypes and basic symbols), they pursued their programme of social art, aiming to create bonds between people through symbolic communication. In

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<sup>29</sup> H. Waniek, *Świątynia w gruzach*, "Ars Regi: czasopismo poświęcone myśli i historii wolnomularstwa" 2010, no. 19, pp. 75-79.

<sup>30</sup> A. Osęka, in: *Bogdan Kraśniewski - Droga*, exh. cat., ed. A. Kroplewska-Gajewska, Muzeum Okręgowe w Toruniu, Toruń 2004, p. 19.

this context, the home zone presented by the artists of the Lucim Group in the basement of the Warsaw church, so far from its primary environment, showed human existence in the "cosmic cycle of the pulse-breath of man and nature, in the rhythm of years, seasons, months, days. (...) In the Lucim year cycle. In the human life cycle."<sup>31</sup>

The cycle of life, understood in broader terms as the eternal order of nature, was also alluded to in an ephemeral and rather inconspicuous work by Teresa Murak, situated at the church's exit. The artist covered the corners of two walls with silt from a nearby river, creating a kind of a mud cavern. In doing so, she wanted to reveal primordial energy and symbolic charge contained in organic impermanent material. In this modest practice, she exposed the properties of a natural ecosystem in which, on a micro-scale, the struggle for existence continues and, as if against the nature of decay and death, new life is established. As Bogucki explained it, the natural order met here with the biblical word about the dust from which we rose and into which we will turn.<sup>32</sup> Murak thus brought other evidence of the eternal clash of these forces into the sacred place where "matters of life and death" are pondered, linking together the dichotomous themes of the beginning and end, and the worlds of nature and culture.<sup>33</sup>

### Revising the myth

In proposing his interdisciplinary project at the Church of the Ascension in Warsaw, Bogucki attempted to respond to the "swarm of mutually foreign languages of imagination". He suggested a kind of a universal common ground represented by spirituality for him. This vision, however, started from the "classical" interpretation of the myth of the Tower of Babel, in which the tower appeared as a monument to man's creative hubris and the origin of the confusion of tongues. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, other interpretations began to emerge, showing a contemporary "fix" to the understanding of the story. For thinkers we now

<sup>31</sup> M. Weyhert-Waluszko, *Grupa Działania i Grupa 111 (1977...)* "Działania lucimskie" - *spóźniona recepcja*, "Dyskurs. Pismo Naukowo-Artystyczne ASP we Wrocławiu" 2016, no. 21, pp. 174-203. See also: a special issue of "Konteksty", following the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Lucim Group - "Konteksty. Polska Sztuka Ludowa" 2019, no. 4 (327), including the texts: Hubert Czachowski, *Fenomen(ologia) Lucima* (pp. 51-55), Wiesław Smużny, *Na marginesie hasel programowych sztuki społecznej po ośmiu latach realizacji prospołecznej postawy artystyczne* (pp. 61-63); Witold Chmielewski, *Trzecia droga* (pp. 71-77).

<sup>32</sup> J. Bogucki, *Od rozmów...*, p. 143.

<sup>33</sup> S. Cichocki, *Punkt widokowy: Teresa Murak. Wybrane prace ziemne*, "Widok. Teorie i praktyki kultury wizualnej" 2014, no. 8, <https://www.pismowidok.org/pl/archiwum/2014/8-powrot-krajobrazu/teresa-murak-wybrane-prace-ziemne> (accessed: 28.06.2022).

refer to as postmodern, such as Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, or Gilles Deleuz, Babel as a metaphor evoked different associations. To understand their intentions better, it is worth focusing for a moment on the category of postmodernism itself. Lyotard (1924-1998), a French philosopher and one of the leading representatives of this formation, did not see it directly as an opposition to modernism, but rather in terms of working on what "the modernist mind, caught up in its own project of reforming the world, could not or would not see."<sup>34</sup> The modern era, heralded as an age of enlightenment (and therefore of the power of reason and methodical doubt), was to lead, through scientific and technological development, to progress, emancipation of the subject and expansion of freedom. Over time, his initial project based on "grand narratives" turned, as Lyotard argued, into its opposite, producing its own illusions, until it was eventually replaced by various "ideologies" already subordinated to particular interests. Nevertheless, although the myths of modernity lost their credibility and justifying function, the reality they invoked continued to develop dynamically on the basis of the "fallen" narratives.<sup>35</sup> Wolfgang Iser remarked: "The modern art took up the Tower project all over again, it tried to impose a single unified language ruling over everything; its dream was to overcome multiplicity. However, the construction failed, the multitude of languages came to the fore again. (...) The dream of unity is hubris, perhaps not towards God, but towards the multiplicity of what is human. The most difficult thing, however, is overcoming the obsession with unity, seeing that the project of healing is morbid. The postmodern art works on a revision and shows great radicality in doing so."<sup>36</sup> Such a reversal of the Tower of Babel topos was due to the fact that postmodernists, renouncing the old Enlightenment arrogance, were anxiously observing the fruits of the unstoppable rush towards modernisation that had been setting the course of change for centuries.<sup>37</sup> The *Les Immatériaux* (1985) exhibition became an expression of this anxiety of the 1980s.

The project of this exhibition was initiated back in 1981 by the Centre de Création Industriel (CCI, one of the separate departments of the Centre Pompidou), under the working title "New Materials and Creation". It was overseen by Thierry Chapat, a design theoretician and curator, who at the time was head

<sup>34</sup> G. Dziamski, *Co po nowoczesności? Dwie perspektywy postmodernizmu*, in: *Postmodernizm. Teksty polskich autorów*, ed. M. A. Potocka, Bunkier Sztuki, Inter Esse, Kraków 2003, p. 22.

<sup>35</sup> Ibidem, pp. 30-31, 33.

<sup>36</sup> W. Iser, *Nasza postmodernistyczna moderna*, transl. R. Kubicki, A. Zeidler-Janiszewska, Oficyna Naukowa, Warszawa 1998, p. 160.

<sup>37</sup> A. Mitek, *Jean-François Lyotarda manifest(acja) immaterialności. W stronę nowej antropologii*, in: *Muzeum Sztuki. Antologia*, ed. M. Popczyk, Universitas, Kraków 2005, p. 240.

of projects, exhibitions and audiovisual production at the CCI. The unit previously worked on exhibitions devoted to new technologies, but this time a much broader perspective was to include not only industrial and cultural production, but also architecture, biology, design and literature. After some time, Philippe Délis, who was chosen as the architect (designer) of the exhibition, joined the project. However, the efforts made by the team were not entirely satisfactory, hence the management of the Centre Pompidou decided to involve an outsider to give the main thrust to all the ideas, materials and thematic fields collected so far. This is how, in 1983, Jean-François Lyotard, one of the world's best-known philosophers, joined the project which was later often referred to as the "Lyotard exhibition".

*Les Immatériaux* was characterised precisely by being the "work" of a philosopher. Philosophical discourse was presented to the general public for the first time not through texts or papers but images and artefacts. This shift from philosophy to the medium of the exhibition had a significant impact on its organisation and design.<sup>38</sup> Right from the outset, Lyotard questioned the three terms used in the exhibition's original title, proposing that "new", "materials" and "creation" be replaced by the expression *immatériaux*.<sup>39</sup> He insisted that the aim of the exhibition was not to show objects but to make the condition of the world tangibly visible in relation to the technical and scientific revolution that began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and is still ongoing. His point seemed to be that materiality in the usual sense no longer exists in an area colonised by high technology.<sup>40</sup> In part, the very structure of the exhibition corresponded to Lyotard's diagnosis of what emerges from the darkness of the "fallen" myths of modernity.<sup>41</sup> He thus invited viewers into a new type of space – "one in which real objects coexist with media reproductions, one which offers the opportunity for actual interaction between technical apparatus and visitors, and which is finally constructed largely by immaterial elements (sound, light and electromagnetic waves)".

<sup>38</sup> N. Heinrich, *Les Immatériaux Revisited: Innovation in Innovations*, "Tate Papers" 2009, no. 12, <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/12/les-immatériaux-revisited-innovation-in-innovations> (accessed: 30.07.2022).

<sup>39</sup> *The Production of Les Immatériaux. Jean-Louis Boissier in conversation with Andreas Broeckmann*, in: *30 Years After Les Immatériaux: Art, Science and Theory*, eds. Y. Hui, A. Broeckmann, meson press, Lüneburg 2015, p. 96.

<sup>40</sup> A. Mitek, *Jean-François...*, p. 200.

<sup>41</sup> Due to the vastness of the subject matter, I will skip here the rich thread of linguistic references (derived from the core *mât*) that Lyotard used to operationalise the idea and structure of the exhibition.



### Language, body, "immaterials" in space-time

Lyotard, Chaput and Délis, who formed the core of the curatorial team and resolved most of the issues among themselves, were assigned the main gallery at the Centre Pompidou, an exclusive space on the fifth and top floor of this extraordinary building located in Beaubourg, in the heart of old Paris. The exhibition as a whole was constructed in such a way that visitors could choose their own path, with five possible options. As they wandered through the exhibition, they passed through separate sound "zones". These were created by placing more than twenty radio transmitters in the gallery space. They emitted zone-specific audio messages in the form of questions, excerpts from literary, philosophical and scientific texts, as well as musical pieces. However, when asked to move around the exhibition with headsets, the audience did not receive any direct explanation of what they were looking at (or rather experiencing) in this way.

The range of the sound "zone" included several "sites" (sections) each, i.e. certain thematic units filled with one or more installations (objects). They formed a great labyrinth of small spaces. The gallery area was divided into a total of sixty "sites". They did not resemble standard neutrally lit "white cubes" and, instead of partitions, they were separated by sheets of metal mesh hanging from the ceiling. They acted as screens and gained more or less transparency through light, evoking different types of perspectives. The arrangement of the hanging screens made it possible to "discreetly" cordon off and separate parts of the space. The lighting was fully controllable; at times, it was set to spotlight the "exhibits" and, at times, the "screens" themselves, leaving some sections plunged into darkness or twilight. Françoise Michel, responsible for the scenography, played the play of colours and shadows with these theatrically created contrasts.<sup>42</sup>

The diversity of objects collected in the various "sites" arranged in the kind of a labyrinth of *Les Immatériaux* was striking. After all, it was filled with "artefacts" from all domains of life, from the latest industrial robots and computers, to holograms, music videos and 3D cinema, music scores, architectural concepts, scientific experiments and actual works of art (sculptures, paintings, photographs, installations). The latter were scattered throughout the main gallery and mixed with other non-art objects. Looking at the selection of artists and works (realisations) carried out by Lyotard and Bernard Blistèn, a curator from the Musée national d'art moderne (MNAM, another department of the Centre Pompidou), however, it is quite clear that the main motivation was to fit

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<sup>42</sup> N. Heinich, *Les Immatériaux...* See also: A. Mitek, *Jean-François...*, p. 247.

them into a narrative logic and to highlight the different dimensions of *Les Immatériaux*. In other words, the works of art here functioned on an equal footing with other objects, they did not have their customary status of uniqueness, and they performed a servile function in relation to the context of the exhibition.

The authors of the exhibition have tried to articulate the main themes of the *immatériaux* (body, language, meaning, matter) in the visual field of art in different ways. It is worth citing a few examples at this point.

Among others, the *Infra-Mince* section was important to the overall concept of the exhibition. It seemed to show very little: documents and sketches by Marcel Duchamp and Yves Klein hidden in a display case, and a monitor with a video work by Thierry Kuntzel. More observant viewers could also see the word "visible" projected from an overhead projector. This was the work entitled *Invisible* (1969) by Giovanni Anselmo, which undermines the sense of sight and presents the artist's characteristic dialectic of opposing "orders". The slide projector was constantly turned on, but it didn't seem to display anything until a viewer walked into its projection beam. The viewer then became a screen on which the previously unseen "visible" word appeared. The visibility and readability of the displayed word was therefore dependent on the presence of the audience. In doing so, Anselmo materialised something that had just been absent from the human experience of the "here and now". The work brought out and manifested, simultaneously in time and space, the action of potential "energies" that the elements arranged by the artist generated in collision with each other. It also referred, in a visible yet corporeal way, to the *Infra-mince* included in the title. In Duchamp's case, the term meant "ultra-thin"; Lyotard and Blističn applied it to operationalise the notion of "immateriality" through its double meaning: "almost nothing" and "in-between".<sup>43</sup>

The semiotic potential inherent in the category of "immaterials" was alluded to in the section *ombre de l'ombre* and the work *One and Three Shadows* (1965) by Joseph Kosuth. It contextualised interpretations of what a shadow could be: through a "real object" (the shadow of an object), its representation (a black and white photograph of that shadow) and its definition (a panel with a textual explanation of the meaning of the word "shadow"). One could also find references to Duchamp and his *Infra-mince*, which signified any difference that can be imagined but which, at the same time, does not exist – like the thickness of a shadow.<sup>44</sup> Of course, the authors of the exhibition were not interested

<sup>43</sup> A. Broeckmann, *The Visual Arts Program of Les Immatériaux*, Curated by Jean-François Lyotard and Bernard Blistène, *Les Immatériaux Research*, Working Paper 2022, no. 8 (draft version), pp. 13-14, [https://les-immatériaux.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Broeckmann\\_Les\\_Immatériaux\\_artworks\\_program\\_v5\\_20220301.pdf](https://les-immatériaux.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Broeckmann_Les_Immatériaux_artworks_program_v5_20220301.pdf) (accessed: 03.07.2022).

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 17.

in the shadow as a physical phenomenon but as a certain metaphor. Lyotard's aim was not only to expose the "immaterial" nature of language in art but, more so, perhaps to show its precarious status and potential for transformation which ephemeral light can also possess.

Analysis of light in terms of both a medium and an art object was addressed in the *lumière dérobée* section. It primarily gathered artworks that used traditional media such as oil paint, pastels and glass. This was the nature of the works of the avant-garde classics (Giacomo Balla, Robert Delaunay Michail Larionov, Kasimir Malevich) and the luminosity of paint (colour) was also alluded to by precursors (Georges Seurat). This "place" also confronted such distant realisations as a reduced reproduction of Simone Martini's triptych *The Annunciation* (1333) and Dan Graham's video installation *Present Continuous Past(s)* (1974). In this layout, the creators of the exhibition combined an attempt to capture the metaphysics of light as seen by a medieval painter with a contemporary play with time and the presence of the body. Graham's composition, built around two mirrored walls, a video camera and a monitor, manipulated the viewer's experience, creating the feeling of being simultaneously present in multiple temporal measures and spaces, as described in the title: real, illusory (reflection), media (the closed circuit of video technology). It established a relationship with the viewer that was not so much aesthetic as intellectual and, what is more, the status of the viewer was portrayed in it as fluid and non-obvious.<sup>45</sup>

Right next to it, in the *peintre sans corps* section, a large-format work by Jacques Monora - *Explosion* (1973) was placed. This work consisted of four panels. Each featured the same "hyper-realistic" painting of an exploding aircraft as it approached landing, except that the first sequence (from the left), with blue spectral glow characteristic of the artist, passed onto the next three, which were devoid of colour and increasingly blurred. This first panel was a painting based on a photograph, while the subsequent panels were covered with a light-sensitive emulsion onto which the previously used photograph was projected.<sup>46</sup> The French painter, known for his obsessive references to death and catastrophe ("violence of the everyday"), depicted a practice shaped under the clear influence of photography and cinema here, dispassionately recording phenomena in a formula of sophisticated realism. Lyotard perceived a kind of

<sup>45</sup> See: U. Frohne, *The Artwork as Temporal Form. Giving Access to the Historicity, Context and Discursiveness of Media Art*, in: *Present Continuous Past(s): Media Art. Strategies of Presentation, Mediation and Dissemination*, eds. U. Frohne, M. Schieren, Jean-François Guiton, Springer, Wien-New York 2005, pp. 22-23, 28-31.

<sup>46</sup> A. Hudek, *From Over- to Sub-Exposure: The Anamnesis of Les Immatériaux*, "Tate Papers" 2009, no. 12, <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/12/from-over-to-sub-exposure-the-anamnesis-of-les-immateriaux> (accessed: 28.06.2022).

"sublimity" characteristic of modernity here. In his opinion, the act of painting's vanishing, occurring from the first to the last sequence of the *Explosion*, showed how painting was forced to abandon the "sublimity of transcendence" in favour of the "sublimity of immanence", a new category of (perhaps dubious) techno-scientific sublimity.<sup>47</sup>

As can be seen from these few examples, the artistic programme of the exhibition focused largely on showing the historical dimension of the emergence of the eponymous "immaterials", for, according to Lyotard, the field of art was best suited to this. As a result, the Centre Pompidou included works by artists representing the established modernity and canon of the modernist avant-garde, as well as conceptual art of the 1960s-70s, due to the key issue of language for *Les Immatériaux*. However, the exhibition as a whole had a distinctly contemporary tone, and this atmosphere, alongside numerous non-art objects and presentations, was created by works of new media art.

One of them, perhaps the one most associated with this Paris exhibition, was the interactive video installation *Le Bus, ou l'exercice de la découverte* (1984-1995) by Jean-Louis Boissier (located in the *visites simulées* section). It attracted attention with a realistic model of a bus (in 1:10 scale) and a handrail with a "stop" button from a real bus placed in front of it. On getting closer, it became apparent that the three windows of the model were three small video screens. Entering this installation placed the viewer, perceptually and mentally, in the position of a passenger. On the screens, the viewer could watch a filmed shifting landscape (housing estates, houses, gardens, a university), and when the viewer pressed the "stop" button (in the traditional gesture of stopping the bus to get off at a stop), the projection would stop, change perspective (to perpendicular to the bus) and switch to a human "landscape" with the sounds of the engine already falling silent. One could now see a series of still, changing images: a path to a house, a room or a garden, and a figure within it. Boissier had prepared more than 100 such sequences-portraits of residents, depicting a person's life, personal belongings, mementos, a family album. The viewer, by manipulating a bus button, could return to the route and then "visit" further places, and enter the intimacy of the next "inhabitants".<sup>48</sup> The work even became a symbol of the entire *Les Immatériaux* exhibition. In the same way, it ena-

<sup>47</sup> Ibidem. See also: F. Pręgowski, *Seans malarstwa. Jacques Monory*, in: *Pomiędzy prawdą a zmyśleniem. U źródeł interpretacji w malarstwie współczesnym*, eds. J. Pręgowski, F. Pręgowski, Zakład Malarstwa na Wydziale Sztuk Pięknych UMK, Stowarzyszenie Przyjaciół Wydziału Sztuk Pięknych UMK, Toruń 2015, pp. 81-96; F. Gallo, *Contemporary Art as "Immatériaux". Yesterday and Today*, in: *30 Years After...*, p. 126.

<sup>48</sup> J-L. Boissier, *The Bus of Les Immatériaux*, in: *30 Years After...*, pp. 109-110. See also: C. Chik, *L'Image paradoxale: Fixité et mouvement*, Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, Villeneuve d'Ascq 2011, pp. 204-205.

bled the viewer-passenger to wander without landmarks, to traverse the same places over and over again, to observe objects of a different nature. In other words, "the eye-camera exceeds the paths possible to the eye in actual displacement. It extends them and complicates them. It shows 'as if we were there' that which is not currently visible. What is then competes with the presence of what is here, now."<sup>49</sup> This perspective evoked a wider context of the functioning of the postmodern world, in which a situation of simultaneity, omnipresence, or tele-observation has become possible thanks to technology.

According to the exhibition's creators, the installation *Mistere I: Hermaphrodite endormi/e* (1982) by the duo Maria Klonaris and Katharina Thomadaki was intended to draw attention to a different, identity-related (and, at the same time, body-related) aspect of this world. It was actually an entire installation environment: a space surrounded by screens, projections in the form of film loops, slides and sound compositions. The whole was built around the Greek myth of the fusion of the son of Hermes and Aphrodite with the nymph Salma-cis. It was 'represented' here through projections of the well-known Hellenistic statue *The Sleeping Hermaphrodite*, depicting a full-length figure with male and female features in a twisted pose on a bed. In this realisation, the artists combined different orders: ancient and museum (the statue is now in the collection of the Louvre) with contemporary critical thought and technologies. Starting from their experiments in "expanded cinema", at the Centre Pompidou they presented the formula of "cinema of the body" – a corporeal experience affecting all the senses, extending the frame of the screen and cinematic image, merging with spatiality and temporality typical of the visual arts. This was an absolute innovation at the time.<sup>50</sup> The issues of identity and its transformation were undoubtedly important to Lyotard as the co-creator of the exhibition. In his analyses of the postmodern condition, he drew attention to the deconstruction of the concept of identity, linked to advances in science and technology (plastic surgery, genetic engineering, robotics; the Internet should also be added to this list today).

<sup>49</sup> *Les Immatériaux. Album et Inventaire*, exh. cat., eds. T. Chaput, J-F. Lyotard, Éditions du Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris 1985, p. 89.

<sup>50</sup> See: Klonaris/Thomadaki *Manifeste. Le Cinéma Corporel*, exh. cat., Jeu de Paume, Paris 2016, [https://jeudepaume.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/PetitJournal\\_KlonarisThomadaki.pdf](https://jeudepaume.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/PetitJournal_KlonarisThomadaki.pdf) (accessed: 29.06.2022); M. Klonaris, K. Thomadaki, *Traversée du corps, traversée des media. Mises au point pour un regard rétrospectif*, in: *Jeune, dure et pure!: une histoire du cinéma d'avant-garde et expérimental en France*, eds. N. Brenez, Ch. Lebrat, Cinémathèque Française / Mazzotta, Paris-Milano 2001, pp. 398-399.

### Summary. State of dispersion

It is clear that the *documenta 5*, *Les Immatériaux and Labyrinth - An Underground Space* exhibitions discussed here were based on the pattern of wandering with the inherent figure of the tower-labyrinth of Babel.

What Szeemann designed for *documenta 5*, seemingly typically of his curatorial identity, was a trajectory conceived as an imaginary journey from the trivial to the spiritual. A consequence of this was the decision to confront very different fields of visual "production", such as advertising, kitsch, political iconography, religious imagery, or "art of the mad" with a large number of *strictly* artistic worlds. In this context, the aforementioned installation by Paul Thek was symbolic, where the viewer followed a marked path through an accumulation of artefacts towards the "pyramid" included in the title, with a moment of transition (enlightenment) arranged there.

Bogucki, who perceived the exhibition in Kassel as a contemporary Tower of Babel, prepared a response to the situation of pictorial "confusion of tongues" by inviting viewers into a labyrinth understood as literally and tangibly as possible. Significantly, however, unlike his earlier church projects, which were subordinated to the structure of the host-church, the labyrinth was inserted into the underworld of the Warsaw temple in an arbitrary manner, on the basis of an external artistic (curatorial) gesture. Bogucki invited the viewer to wander through the pessimistic fallen world of man after his expulsion from paradise, materialised in the form of a chaotic system of corridors made of a grimy decayed matter of unhewn planks and sheet metal. Although it may have given the impression of a road with no exit, the labyrinth ultimately led to the "zone of light" and "zone of home". In this way, the journey through a great river of photographic images, intuitively arranged but not subject to rigid ordering thought, was transformed into a "return to home and temple". The journey thus had a beginning and a positively circular ending.

The figure of a labyrinth was also crucial for Lyotard, who made full use of the spatial and technical possibilities given to him at the Centre Pompidou for its creation. "The unconventional layout of the rooms, lack of sharp contours and boundaries (transparent screens which do not provide solid support), multifaceted non-conclusive narrative (a large number of intersections and an almost free choice of path), extension of the space by a vertical dimension (radio broadcast zones) and, above all, elimination of the primacy of the power of perception, opening up of other channels of sensory perception, recognition of the predominance of time over place" – this is how Alina Mitek characterised the innovations introduced by Lyotard.<sup>51</sup> All this made the viewer wander, or

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<sup>51</sup> A. Mitek, *Jean-François...*, pp. 249-250.



rather "drift" in the semi-darkness from "place" to "place", while new sounds and voices appearing in the headsets informed them of a transition from one "zone" to another. Lyotord was keen to make hearing as important as sight in the perception of the exhibition. At the same time, the headsets isolated each viewer, enclosing them in an intimate space-time, which, with the injunction "silence is required at the exhibition", translated into the impossibility of communicating while exploring *Les Immatériaux*. This situation, also considering the lack of clear points of reference and explanation, as well as the freedom to choose one's own sequence of "places" and "zones", created an effect of disorientation and loneliness.<sup>52</sup> This is what can explain the apparent contradiction of feeling a "dehumanised" universe in the crowded labyrinth of the Centre Pompidou.

The visions of the Babel labyrinth thus presented reflected different visions ("wandering") of art, one of which seems to have tended towards integrity, while the other ones – towards heterogeneity of artistic activity. Bogucki and Lyotard were to some extent similar in their diagnosis of contemporary art, which they saw in terms of dispersion and a great diversity of styles, motivations and references to reality – just like Szeemann, in fact.

In his vision of the post-Babel state, the Polish gallerist found a way out of the labyrinth in the establishment of a spiritual space as a ground for dialogue. Its main feature was to strive to rediscover the connection between the sacrum of art and the primary *sacrum*. For this reason, the *Labyrinth - An Underground Space* exhibition was organised in a place where "the concrete things of life are seen from the perspective of eternity", where this special kind of space was likely to emerge from the need for spiritual coexistence (and not from the accumulation of artistic objects) and where, at the same time, the "silence" of the works contrasted with the "hustle and bustle of the great funfair exhibition" that he saw in Kassel.<sup>53</sup> Viewed in this way, the exhibition became a narrative about the fate of man on two intertwined planes: individual (the story of each person's life) and universal (the history of the human species, from appearance on earth to salvation).<sup>54</sup> At the same time, all this was linked to a fairly clear biblical style: darkness in the underworld (purgatory?) of the lower church, expulsion from Paradise, sin and redemption. In the background, meanwhile,

<sup>52</sup> See: M. Vicet, *Les Immatériaux: a tour of the exhibition with headphones*, "Hybrid: Revue des Arts et Médiations Humaines" 2019, <https://doi.org/10.4000/hybrid.523> (accessed: 19.06.2022); A. Broeckmann, *Sounding Immaterial. Sound and Listening in the Exhibition Les Immatériaux (Paris, 1985)*, *Les Immatériaux Research*, Working Paper 2020, no. 4, pp. 4-6, [http://les-immateriaux.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/LIR-WP4\\_Broeckmann-Sound\\_2020.pdf](http://les-immateriaux.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/LIR-WP4_Broeckmann-Sound_2020.pdf) (accessed: 23.06.2022).

<sup>53</sup> J. Bogucki, *Pop...*, pp. 24-25, 86; J. Bogucki, *Od rozmów...*, p. 86.

<sup>54</sup> D. Jaročka, *Janusz Bogucki...*, p. 18.



the ominous Tower of Babel was constantly visible, a constant point of reference for Bogucki.

In the expected intensification of the moral-artistic attitude defined by him as *sacrum*, he saw a rapprochement between art and religion, "two domains and ways of human intercourse with eternity", formerly fused together and later almost antagonistic. Creativity within the *sacrum* was supposed to arise as an attempt to make spiritual experience and ethical reflection more tangible, helping people to find themselves and, at the same time, to show the realities of their times. Bogucki was aware, however, that a return to the original unity ("which was natural in pre-modern closed sacred cultures") was impossible. He suggested that there would rather persist "a changing interplay of tensions between the three magnetisms": *pop*, *ezo* and *sacrum*. In this vision, a "return to home and temple" seems to be one possible alternative to the "confusion of tongues" that characterises contemporary artistic practices. For him, the relative homogeneity of creativity relating to the *sacrum*, based on the principle of convergence of the worlds of religion and art, meant a formula of co-occurrence ("a relationship that could be described as a conjunction of internal consonance"<sup>55</sup>).

This was actually Bogucki's response to the diagnosis of the state of culture made, among other things, on the basis of the 1972 Kassel experience. It is therefore impossible not to evoke Szeemann's "individual mythologies" again at this point. This is interesting, and also significant, because the same spatial arrangement from documenta 5 *Pyramid, Ark* by Thek was both an example of "individual mythologies" and a "return to home and temple". Szeemann was most interested in "intense intentions", hence he explored and revealed the obsessive energies behind the creation of an artwork, rather than their material or formal dimension. The concept of "individual mythologies" therefore assumed an art history of intense intentions, which can take many forms and whose deciphering, through a search for one's own answers, is already left individually to the viewer. By presenting the "deeply egocentric" worlds of the artists in Kassel, Szeemann thus seemed to side with heterogeneity of artistic practice. Thus protecting each artist's subjective cosmos and intentions, emphasising the importance of "irrationality" and "intensity", Szeemann proposed an "anti-schema" for individuals who do not belong to any schema. But there was no question of any homogeneity here.

While Bogucki was searching for some universal ground of understanding in a situation of "confusion of tongues" in the sphere of spirituality, Szeemann delved into and explored separate artistic worlds operating in the registers of

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<sup>55</sup> J. Bogucki, *Sacrum i...*, pp. 145, 147.

triviality and spirituality. In comparison, Lyotard, like other postmodernists, described dispersion as a condition inherent in the present. This "postmodern spirit of time" can be understood, following Ingeborg Hoesterey, as follows: "it is alien to unity, wholeness, continuity or similarity. On the contrary, it is discontinuity, randomness, fragmentation and multiplicity that have become the domain of the various spheres of spiritual life, and it is the Tower of Babel that is now the seat of the spirit of time."<sup>56</sup> This description corresponds exactly to what *Les Immatériaux* represented – on an ideological, organisational and artistic level. Lyotard considered multiplicity and diversity to be natural, and, above all, creative and cognitively valuable. Accepting the post-Babel state as the desired state of culture thus meant demystifying its longing for unity and similarity. As Burzyska argues, "by modernising the myth of the confusion of tongues and performing its ultimate apologia, he (Lyotard) turned an internally divided, radically heterogeneous speech into a kind of a 'foundation' for thought and knowledge."<sup>57</sup> It can be said that Lyotard imposed a postmodern correction on the myth of the tower-labyrinth of Babel evoked by Bogucki, modernistic in its meaning, which, in fact, led to its reversal. The philosopher thus invited the viewer into the labyrinth, so that, lost inside it, they could feel, tangibly and metaphorically, the immediate future, postmodernity emerging from the darkness at the crossroads of the digital age, which would in a moment become their "everyday life". Thus, the vast heterogeneity of different types of human activity, presented in all its splendour at the Centre Pompidou, corresponded to this. The incoherence of the objects of art, science and technology applied there was programmatic. The works of art there were part of a much larger set of "information" consisting of signs, sounds and technical artefacts. Thus, as it were, they "melted" into the space of this astonishing labyrinth. Therefore, the dispersion of artistic activities occurred on many levels. Lyotard was in favour of radical pluralism and a world composed of many "small narratives" – local empowerments displacing "grand narratives". And this vision of the contemporary world and art, embodied in the "inverted" topos of Babel, seems the most convincing today.

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<sup>56</sup> L. Hoestery, *Intruduction. Postmodernism As Discursive Event*, in: *Zeitgeist in Babel. The Post-Modernist Controversy*, ed. Ingeborg Hoesterey, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1991, p. 42; quoted after: A. Burzyńska, *Postmoderna: między Wieżą Babel a Biblioteką Babel*, in: *Postmodernizm. Teksty...*, p. 55.

<sup>57</sup> A. Burzyńska, *Postmoderna...*, p. 58.

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## **ARTYSTYCZNE LABIRYNTY I WIEŻA BABEL. PORÓWNAWCZE SPOJRZENIE NA WYSTAWY: DOCUMENTA 5, LES IMMATÉRIEAUX, LABIRYNT – PRZESTRZEŃ PODZIEMNA (streszczenie)**

W niniejszym tekście chciałabym porównać ze sobą trzy wystawy: *documenta 5* w Kassel (1972), *Les Immatériaux* w Centre Pompidou w Paryżu (1985), *Labirynt - przestrzeń podziemna* w kościele Wniebowstąpienia Pańskiego w Warszawie (1989). Są to wystawy różne pod względem skali realizacji, rozgłosu, prezentowanych dzieł, miejsca ekspozycji, naznaczone różnym kontekstem lokalnym. Wizje sztuki, które za ich pośrednictwem chcieli wyartykułować organizatorzy – Harald Szeemann, Jean-François Lyotard oraz Janusz Bogucki – jawią mi się jako idealny przykład do podjęcia rozważań nad zagadnieniem integralności lub heterogeniczności współczesnej działalności artystycznej. Widać wyraźnie, iż omawiane tu wystawy opierały się na schemacie wędrówki z nieodłączną figurą wieży-labiryntu Babel. Stąd też topos wieży Babel, krążący wokół tematu jedności i rozproszenia, ma dla niniejszych rozważań dość zasadnicze znaczenie. Bogucki i Lyotard w pewnym sensie byli podobni w diagnozie sztuki współczesnej, którą postrzegali w kategoriach rozproszenia oraz dużej różnorodności stylistyk, motywacji i odniesień do rzeczywistości – tak samo zresztą jak Szeemann. O ile jednak Bogucki szukał w sferze duchowości pewnej uniwersalnej płaszczyzny porozumienia w sytuacji „pomieszania języków”, tak Szeemann zagłębiał się i eksplorował osobne artystyczne światy działając w rejestrach banalności i duchowości. W porównaniu do tego, Lyotard, jak inni postmoderniści, określał rozproszenie jako stan właściwy współczesności.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Harald Szeemann, Jean-François Lyotard, Janusz Bogucki, indywidualne mitologie, sacrum sztuki, postmodernizm, wieża Babel

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