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Author(s): Wiktor Komorowski

Email: wiktor.komorowski@courtauld.ac.uk

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Red Trauma: Aleksander Kobzdej's Informel and the Challenge of Stalinist Past

Wiktor Komorowski

‘Whether justly or not, an artist is aware that for his art he has to pay with his life.’¹

—Aleksander Kobzdej, 1965

These words, which may be taken as Aleksander Kobzdej's (1920-1972) artistic credo, provide us with an image of an artist who was highly aware of the burden of consequence that may accompany artistic work. This sentence expresses fear linked to the belief that history will inevitably verify the artistic deeds of every artist. In a broader perspective, this symptomatic phrase can characterise the sense of insecurity of the generation of Polish artists working after the Khrushchev Thaw (1953-1957).² Artists such as Wojciech Fangor, Włodzimierz Zakrzewski or Aleksander Kobzdej, who first illustrated the slogans of the Stalinist regime after Stalin's death in 1953, found themselves in a reality that stigmatised the victories of Stalinism.³ This turnover in cultural policy prompted an internal artistic struggle, which in many cases was worsened by questions of a personal and moral nature. This article approaches the cultural ambiguity that dominated the artistic scene of the Polish People's Republic in the 1960s.⁴ At that time, the official critique supported by the Ministry of Culture and numerous artists began to challenge their earlier engagement with the policy of Socialist Realism in order to re-create the character of Polish art and to question the notion of artistic responsibility.⁵

The effects of the disenchantment, which took place in the Polish People's Republic from 1953–1957, is visible in the works of Aleksander Kobzdej, particularly in his use of the red hue. This article

¹ Anna Baranowa, ‘Aleksander Kobzdej – malarstwo jako cena życia’, in *Aleksander Kobzdej- zmagania z materią*, ed. by Józef Grabski (Warszawa: IRSA, 2002), pp. 13-23 (p. 13).

² Piotr Piotrowski, ‘Odwilż’, in *Odwilż: sztuka ok. 1956 r.*, ed. by Piotr Piotrowski (Poznań: Muzeum Narodowe w Poznaniu, 1996), pp. 13-15.

³ Katarzyna Kasprzak, ‘Odtwarzanie portretu człowieka po katastrofie. Egzystencjalizm a malarstwo polskie’, in *Odwilż: sztuka ok. 1956 r.*, ed. by Piotr Piotrowski (Poznań: Muzeum Narodowe w Poznaniu, 1996), pp. 67-72.

⁴ Agnieszka Ławniczakowa, ‘Przedmowa’, in *Odwilż: sztuka ok. 1956 r.*, ed. by Piotr Piotrowski (Poznań: Muzeum Narodowe w Poznaniu, 1996), pp. 7-8.

⁵ Zbigniew Florczak, ‘Sprawy sztuki w Polsce’, in *Nowocześni a Socrealizm*, ed. by Marek Świca and Józef Chrobak (Kraków: Fundacja Nowosielskich, Starmach Gallery, 2000), pp. 17-18. Author's note: Socialist Realism was a form of modern realism imposed in Russia by Stalin in 1924. Its main characteristic was optimistic depictions of Soviet life painted in a realist style.

analyses the application of the colour red in his Socialist-Realist paintings and informel works, in order to uncover the psychological link between the colour red and social fear. Kobdziej's contrasting application of red in his Socialist-Realist painting *Podaj cegłę* (*Pass Me a Brick*, 1949 Fig. 1) and his 'matter painting' cycle *Szczeliny* (*Crevices*, 1966-1968 Fig. 2) provides an example that demonstrates the unique character of Polish art of the 1960s as it relates to the Western neo-Avant-Garde.⁶ This article not only analyses the moral dilemmas of artists working immediately after the Stalinist period, but also attempts to offer a sample of research ethics, which may serve as a model for researchers from a range of humanistic disciplines.



Fig. 1
Aleksander Kobdziej, *Podaj cegłę* (*Pass Me a Brick*), 1949, oil on canvas, 133 × 162 cm, © The National Museum in Wrocław, 2018.

⁶ Author's note: Art Informel is a French term, developed by Michel Tapié (1909-1987) to describe approaches to abstract painting in the 1940s and 1950s which had in common an improvisatory methodology, full freedom of expression and highly gestural technique.



Fig. 2

Aleksander Kobzdej, *Szczelina między różowym i czerwonym* (*Crevice between Pink and Red*), 1967, mixed media, canvas, 191 × 139 cm, © The National Museum in Wrocław, 2018.

The first part of this article locates Kobzdej's use of red within two major colour traditions, which were discussed in a polemic over the adaptation of traditions and the possible ways of the emancipation of Polish informel initiated between the theoreticians Julian Przyboś and Mieczysław Porębski. The second part outlines various attempts pursued by other scholars to understand the unique character of Polish informel. This part proposes that the relation between the two modes of red that are found in Kobzdej's works can be used as an argument for the definition of Polish 'matter painting'. In the third part, the argument moves on to discuss Kobzdej's application of the colour red in the context of post-Stalinist social fear, as an element that differentiates his artistic practice from the art of the Western neo-Avant-Garde.

Attempts to define the Polish art scene of the 1960s are often reduced to a discussion of the degree of independence of Polish artists in relation to the artistic concepts that originated in France

during the 1950s.⁷ The discussion over the possible existence and provenance of the post-war Polish National School of Neo-Avant-Garde was crystallised in 1957 in the Polish art paper *Przegląd Kulturalny*.⁸ Julian Przyboś, in his article ‘Abstract Art – How to Exit’, proposed that the constructivist heritage of Malevich, Strzemiński and Stażewski should be revitalised in Polish neo-Avant-Garde attempts.⁹ Polish artists had to refer back to the tradition of the Polish constructivist movements, such as Formism and Unism, in order to re-establish the national character of Polish art lost as a result of war and a repressive Stalinist policy. For Przyboś the return to the sources was the most effective and, in fact, the only way to emancipate the contemporary artistic style from the Western neo-Avant-Garde and to regain the national character of Polish art. His idea was based on the concept of inversion. While Western informel artists were striving to free their art from the tradition of the 1920s, Polish neo-Avant-Garde artists should seek to appropriate and modernise the vernacular tradition of the 1920s.

An opposing idea was presented by Mieczysław Porębski in his article ‘How Not to Exit? (Polemical Remarks)’.¹⁰ Porębski claimed that the Polish neo-Avant-Garde should not look back at the Polish Avant-Garde but should focus its efforts on emulating the French Art informel patterns introduced by Michel Tapié, Jean Dubuffet, Georges Mathieu or Alberto Burri. Porębski’s view was later supported by Tadeusz Kantor, who was among the first to implement modern and international standards in the Polish art scene.¹¹ Piotr Majewski described this exchange of ideas as:

[...] a dispute between the supporters of intellectualism and rationality [Julian Przyboś] and the supporters of emotionalism and up to some degree irrationalism in art [Mieczysław Porębski and Tadeusz Kantor]. A dispute between the intellectual rigour and the right to use imagination, instinct and feelings in the creative process.¹²

⁷ Piotr Krakowski, ‘Rzut oka na owe prądy w malarstwie polskim w latach 1945-1960 (1965)’, in *Sztuka współczesna. Studia i szkice*, ed. by Józef E. Dutkiewicz, vol. 2 (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1966), pp. 327-360 (p. 333).

⁸ Stanisław Ledóchowski, ‘Malarz Optymizmu’, *Aleksander Kobzdej- zmagania z materią*, ed. by Józef Grabski (Warszawa: IRSA, 2002), pp. 84-85.

⁹ Julian Przyboś, ‘Sztuka abstrakcyjna – jak z niej wyjść?’, *Przegląd Kulturalny*, 45 (1957), 5-5 (p. 5). Translated by the author.

¹⁰ Mieczysław Porębski, ‘Jak nie wychodzić? (Uwagi Polemiczne)’, *Przegląd Kulturalny*, 46 (1957), 6-6 (p.6). Orig. title: ‘Jak nie wychodzić? (Uwagi Polemiczne)’. Translated by the author.

¹¹ Tadeusz Kantor, ‘Abstrakcja umarła – niech żyje abstrakcja’, *Plastyka (dodatek do Życia Literackiego)*, 50 (1957), 6-6 (p. 6).

¹² Piotr Majewski, *Malarstwo materii w Polsce jako formuła ‘nowoczesności’* (Lublin: Tow. Naukowe Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego Jana Pawła II, 2006), p. 29.

Despite the fact that the discussion between Przyboś and Porębski had aesthetic foundations and aimed to determine whether the Polish neo-Avant-Garde should follow a national or international artistic tradition, their argument also had a profound political subtext.¹³ The titles of Przyboś's article 'jak wyjść?' ('How to Exit?') and Porębski's response 'jak nie wychodzić?' ('How Not to Exit?') in the late 1950s suggest a search for ways of emancipation not only from the Western neo-Avant-Garde, but also from the soviet cultural circle.

A rather problematic model for the discussion can be found in the works of Polish painter Aleksander Kobzdej.¹⁴ His works created after 1957 can be placed right at the crossroads of the arguments brought forward by Przyboś's and Porębski. Kobzdej's late cycles of paintings, such as *Szczeliny* (*Crevices*, 1966–1968 Fig. 2) or *Hors cadre* (1969–1972), combine Polish Avant-Garde traditions of Formists and Unists with a direct appropriation of the modernising discoveries of the Western neo-Avant-Garde.¹⁵ Hence, his use of red has been interpreted as an example of appropriation of either the Avant-Garde or the neo-Avant-Garde colour pattern. The tradition of the Polish Avant-Garde was acquired by Kobzdej during his academic formation, chiefly due to Kobzdej's two mentors. During the war, he developed his passion for painting under Władysław Lam, who at that time was the head of the department of figural hand drawing at the Lviv Polytechnic. It was Lam who introduced Kobzdej to the nineteenth-century Realist tradition and equipped Kobzdej with a thorough technical education. Lam taught Kobzdej in the tradition of the Polish Colourist movement.¹⁶ The Colourists were Polish painters who in 1923 emigrated from Poland to Paris for seven years to draw inspiration from French masters, mostly Post-Impressionists.¹⁷ Their trademarks were pure and melodic colours, which may be found in Kobzdej's informel compositions. After the war, Kobzdej further developed his skills at Krakow's Academy of Fine Arts under the guidance of Eugeniusz Eibisch, whose fascination with the art of Formists was passed

¹³ Jerzy Tchórzewski, *Teksty* (Warszawa: Akademia Sztuk Pięknych w Warszawie, 1998), pp. 170-171.

¹⁴ Ledóchowski, p. 84.

¹⁵ Dorota Płuciennik, 'Kobzdej's Creative Output', in *Aleksander Kobzdej, 1920-1972: (wystawa w 20-lecie śmierci)*, Warszawa, listopad 1992, *Akademia Sztuk Pięknych w Warszawie, Galeria ZPAP na Mazowieckiej*, ed. by Muzeum Akademii Sztuk Pięknych, (Warszawa: Muzeum Akademii Sztuk Pięknych, 1992). pp.22-24 (p.23); Majewski, p. 109.

¹⁶ Baranowa, 'Aleksander Kobzdej – malarstwo jako cena życia', p. 19.

¹⁷ Marek Bartelik, *Early Polish Modern Art: Unity in Multiplicity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 56.

down to Kobzdej.¹⁸ Formists and Unists were two groups of Polish artists inspired by the constructivist and cubist tradition, who stood in opposition to the painterly tradition of the nineteenth century.¹⁹ The synthetic style of Kobzdej's works is the inheritance of the tutelage of Eibisch, who was strongly influenced by the Polish Avant-Garde of the 1920s.

While the tradition of the Polish Avant-Garde was passed down to Kobzdej during his education, the tradition of the Western neo-Avant-Garde was acquired by the artist during his travels. Kobzdej's artistic position grew significantly during the Socialist Realist period.²⁰ At that time he was involved in preparing works to illustrate the slogans of Socialist Realism. Paintings such as *Podaj cegłę* (*Pass Me a Brick*, 1949 Fig. 1) and *Ceglarki* (*Brick Layers*, 1950 Fig. 3) come from this period. Recognition from the state helped him find a place among artists such as Tadeusz Kantor and Jerzy Nowosielski, who were selected by the government to represent the Polish People's Republic on the international art scene.



Fig. 3
Aleksander Kobzdej, *Ceglarki* (*Bricklayers*), 1950, oil on canvass, 133 x 169 cm, © The National Museum in Warsaw, 2018.

¹⁸ Majewski, p. 109.

¹⁹ Bartelik, pp. 79-80.

²⁰ Józef Grabski, 'Aleksander Kobzdej – Biografia', in *Aleksander Kobzdej- zmagania z materią*, ed. by Grabski Józef (Warszawa: IRSA, 2002), pp. 164-173 (p. 165).

His final departure from the Socialist-Realist iconography became evident in the series of paintings titled *Gęstwiny* (*Thickets*, 1955), but his interest in informel truly gathered momentum after travelling around Western Europe in 1958–1959.²¹ This tour brought a deep sense of revolution to Kobzdej's works. His paintings developed a more transcendental character expressed by a crudely and dramatically moulded painting surface.²² These compositions may be also characterised by their minutely studied colour schemes, which, on the one hand, may be seen as a continuation of the Colourists' tradition and, on the other hand, can be understood as a new inspiration sparked by discoveries of French Art Informel.²³

The peak of his experimentation with different traditions came in the series *Szczeliny* (*Crevices*, 1966-1968 Fig. 2).²⁴ These works combine the properties of flat compositions with those of relief techniques. In *Crevices* the characteristic French Informel texture was achieved by mixing a thick impasto with non-painting materials, such as particles of metal, wood and plastic. These materials seem to emerge from between two bands of painted canvas. The concept of relief composition was further developed in the cycles *Powierzchnia srebrna podparta reliefem* (*Silver Surface Supported by a Relief*, 1967) and *Hors cadre* (1969-1972).²⁵ The informel effect in these works was achieved by draping a mouldable mass on a metal surface attached to a canvas.

During the early stage of his artistic career Kobzdej was highly influenced by the 'art of the fathers'.²⁶ Significantly, after the political relaxation of 1957 his works did not entirely lose their pre-war Avant-Garde character. Rather, they became enhanced by the international ideas brought into his art as a consequence of his travels. His late works, such as *Crevices* or *Hors cadre*, respond therefore equally to Porębski's and Kantor's postulates of modernity, but also to the ideas of the pre-war revival brought forward by Przyboś. Kobzdej's polysemic artistic experience shows how ambiguous and complex the Polish art scene was at the outset of the 1960s. It also testifies to the fact that it was highly problematic

²¹ Płuciennik, pp. 22-23.

²² Aleksander Kobzdej, 'Znalazłem się w Kassel', *Współczesność*, 174, (1964), 1, 6-7 (p. 6).

²³ Wiesława Wierzchowska, 'Aleksander Kobzdej', *Projekt*, 75 (1970), p. 24.

²⁴ Baranowa, 'Aleksander Kobzdej', p. 20.

²⁵ Wojciech Skrodzki, 'Aleksander Kobzdej. Dzieło bez granic', *Literatura*, 38 (1972), 5-5 (p. 5).

²⁶ Mieczysław Porębski, 'Aleksander Kobzdej', *Literatura*, 34 (1972), 5-5 (p. 5).

for Polish informel artists to denounce the pre-war Avant-Garde tradition in which the whole generation of post-war artists had grown up or to reject the temptations of Western modernity.

The problematic discussion between Przyboś and Porębski over the adaptation of traditions and the ways of emancipation began to gain validity in 1957, when Polish artists (for the first time since 1939) finally received enough freedom to self-define their art.²⁷ Piotr Piotrowski points out that independent as well as state-controlled Polish art was developing very quickly at this time.²⁸ The preparation of Ogólnopolska Wystawa Młodej Plastyki ‘Przeciw wojnie — przeciw faszyzmowi’ [Nationwide Exhibition of Young Artists ‘Against War — Against Fascism’] in 1955, as well as the official initiation of Galeria Krzywe Koło in 1956 and the reactivation of the modernist Grupa Krakowska in 1957, serve as examples of this trend. The dynamic process of emancipation was also visible in attempts to export Polish ideas abroad, in a cultural diplomatic effort that may resemble the support Abstract Expressionism artists received from the state authorities of the United States.²⁹ Artists such as Tadeusz Kantor or Jerzy Nowosielski had their art exhibited during international biennales and in the major Western art galleries.³⁰

Aleksander Kobzdej was involved in the process of artistic emancipation taking place abroad. His works were shown at the biennales in Venice (1954) and São Paulo (1959), and several exhibitions of his works were organised in countries such as France, the United States and the United Kingdom.³¹ On these occasions his paintings were discussed by members of the international art community. Pierre Courthion, Peter Selz and Robin Darwin, for instance, came to the conclusion that Kobzdej’s late works represent his struggle for emancipation, but at the same time they attempt to preserve an artistic element that could

²⁷ Bożena Kowalska, *Polska awangarda malarska 1945 - 1970: szanse i mity* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1975), p. 109.

²⁸ Piotrowski, p. 20.

²⁹ Jill Bugajski, ‘Tadeusz Kantor Publics’, in *Divided Dreamworlds?: The Cultural Cold War in East and West*, ed. by Peter Romijn, Giles Scott-Smith, and Joes Segal (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), pp. 58-59.

³⁰ Anna Baranowa, ‘Polski cud’, in *Malarstwo materii 1957-1963. Warszawa-Lublin*, ed. by Anna Baranowa (Krakow: Galeria Zderzak, 2001), p. 3.

³¹ Baranowa, ‘Aleksander Kobzdej’, pp. 17-18.

testify to the unique input of an artist.³² These examples show that foreign critics understood Kobzdej's art as modern in Western terms, yet still peculiarly independent.

In more recent times the dispute initiated by Przyboś and Porębski found a permanent place in academic discourse.³³ The publications on this topic prepared by Piotr Majewski, Jarosław Suchan, Piotr Juskiewicz and Piotr Piotrowski provide profound insight into the process of the emancipation of Polish 'matter' painters from the Western neo-Avant-Garde. Remarkably, they arrive at a similar conclusion.³⁴ For these scholars the process of emancipation of Polish art was extremely difficult to define, as it was usually based on diverse and individual rather than equivocal and collective attempts. For this reason, it is only possible to achieve any effective conclusion when the works of Polish informel are discussed in the context of an artistic pursuit to achieve 'modernity'.³⁵

More than 50 years after Przyboś and Porębski initiated the discussion over the properties of the Polish art scene of the late 1950s, the outcome of their debate still remains open. The lack of satisfactory conclusions has even pushed some scholars to undermine the merit of their dispute. Accordingly, Marta Tarabuła questioned whether there ever was a notion of Polish 'matter painting' in European art.³⁶ This rhetorical question was obviously not an attempt to deny the existence of Polish Art Informel. It was rather a call for further exploration of an artistic compound that could testify to the fact that Polish Avant-Garde was not merely another European 'repetition' of Avant-Garde concepts, in the words of Benjamin H. D. Buchloh.³⁷

³² Pierre Courthion, *Alexandre Kobzdej. Prix de la Biennale de Sao Paulo 1959, Galerie de l'Ancienne- Comédie* (Paris: Galerie de l'Ancienne-Comédie, 1960), pp. 3-4; Peter Selz, *15 Polish Painters* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1961), p. 9; Arts Council of Great Britain, *Six painters from Poland: Tadeusz Makowski, Piotr Potworowski, Eugeniusz Markowski, Tadeusz Brzozowski, Aleksander Kobzdej, Jerzy Tchórzewski. RCA galleries, February 22-March 23, 1968* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1968), p. 2.

³³ Marta Tarabuła, 'Próba czasu', in *Malarstwo materii 1957-1963. Warszawa-Lublin*, ed. by Anna Baranowa (Kraków: Galeria Zderzak, 2001), pp. 7-8 (p. 7).

³⁴ See: Piotr Majewski, *Malarstwo materii w Polsce jako formuła 'nowoczesności'* (Lublin: Tow. Naukowe Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego Jana Pawła II, 2006), p. 29; Jarosław Suchan, 'Polityczna historia apolityczności Grupy Krakowskiej (w zarysie)', *Sztuka w okresie PRL-u. Metody i stan badań. Materiały z seminarium naukowego IHS UJ zorganizowanego w grudniu 1997*, ed. by Tomasz Gryglewicz and Andrzej Szczerski (Kraków: Instytut Historii Sztuki Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 1997); Piotr Juskiewicz, *Od rozkoszy historiozofii do 'gry w nic'. Polska krytyka czasów odwilży* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu im. Adama Mickiewicza, 2006); Piotr Piotrowski ed., *Odwilż: sztuka ok. 1956 r.* (Poznań: Muzeum Narodowe w Poznaniu, 1996).

³⁵ Wojciech Włodarczyk, 'Nowoczesność i jej granice', in *Sztuka polska po 1945 roku.*, ed. by Juliusz Starzyński (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1987), pp. 19-31 (p. 29).

³⁶ Tarabuła, p. 8.

³⁷ Benjamin D. Buchloh, 'The Primary Colors for the Second Time: A Paradigm Repetition of the Neo-Avant-Garde', *October*, 37 (1986), 43-56 (p. 41)

Such a unique artistic compound may be found in the late works of Aleksander Kobzdej, whose art was heavily psychologically affected by the Stalinist regime. The outcomes of the impact of the Stalinist disquietude on the art of Kobzdej is an element that can be used as an argument to distinguish Polish 'matter painting' from the Western neo-Avant-Garde. The position of Polish informel may be seen as unique due to the stigma of red fear born from the Stalinist period, which Western artists did not experience.

The work of Aleksander Kobzdej reflects a difficult, but paradoxically fruitful (in artistic terms), relation between 'matter painting' and Socialist Realism. Kobzdej was affected by the policy of Socialist Realism as much as any other Polish artist.³⁸ First of all, he was extremely successful under the umbrella of the Stalinist regime. His *Podaj cegłę* immediately entered the social conscience, and his figure consequently became permanently associated with the policy of Socialist Realism.³⁹ The phrase 'Kobzdej cegłę' (a play on words, in colloquial Polish, 'Kopsnij cegłę,' meaning 'Pass me a brick', where the word 'kopsnij' bares a phonetic resemblance to the surname of the artist) was permanently registered in the social memory of his contemporaries.⁴⁰ He was stigmatised not only by public critique, but also by his fellow artists. Jerzy Tchórzewski, who was a Polish independent Avant-Garde artist and a friend of Kobzdej, recalls that during his first meeting with Kobzdej he could not believe that an artist who painted *Podaj cegłę* could have a mindset so similar to the members of the rather exclusive Krakow 'family' of Avant-Garde artists. The Krakow Avant-Garde was known for its repugnance towards artists who worked for the state authorities.⁴¹

The red bricks in *Podaj cegłę* (*Pass Me a Brick*, 1949 Fig. 1) or the red floor in *Portret Bronisławy Urbanowicz*, (*Portrait of Bronisława Urbanowicz*, 1950 Fig. 4) represent shades of red, whose meaning was culturally superimposed on Kobzdej, and which brutally clashed with the colour tradition in which he was educated. In 1934 Andrei Zhdanov proclaimed the introduction of Socialist Realism, but on that

³⁸ Kira Gałczyńska, *Jak się te lata mylą...* (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1989), p. 25.

³⁹ Tadeusz Konwicki, 'Mój przyjaciel Olek', *Literatura*, 41, (1972), 3-3 (p. 3).

⁴⁰ Baranowa, 'Aleksander Kobzdej', p. 14.

⁴¹ Tchórzewski, p. 166.

occasion red was not officially defined as the colour of socialism.⁴² In fact, it was not necessary to do so, as red was already deeply rooted in Russian cultural identity, and the process of its appropriation to the needs of socialism could take place naturally.⁴³



Fig. 4
Aleksander Kobzdej, *Portret Bronisławy Urbanowicz*, (Portrait of Bronisława Urbanowicz), 1950, oil on canvas, 112 x 70 cm,
© The National Museum in Warsaw, 2018.

Red very quickly became considered an allegory, not of the Russian nation, but of the Soviet state.⁴⁴ This was a clever strategy on the part of the Soviet regime to use allegory to pass the meaning attached to the colour red, as allegory works predominately as a psychological device.⁴⁵ Upon seeing an

⁴² Andrei Zhdanov, 'From Speech at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers 1934', in *Art in Theory 1900-1990. An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Wiley, 2000), pp. 409-411.

⁴³ Vitaly Komar, 'Red is Beautiful!', in *Socialist Realisms. Soviet Painting 1920-1970*, ed. by Matthew Cullerne Bown, Matteo Lafranconi, and Faina Balakhovskaia (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012), pp. 226-228.

⁴⁴ Wolfgang Holz, 'Allegory and Iconography in Socialist Realist Painting', *Art of the Soviets: Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture in a One-party State, 1917-1992*, ed. by Matthew Cullerne Bown and Brandon Taylor (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), pp. 74-75.

⁴⁵ Stephen Greenblatt, 'Allegory and Representation', in *Selected Papers from the English Institute*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), pp. 7-11 (p. 8).

allegoric element, which was earlier registered in memory, the human mind triggers a chain of associative memories. The use of red as an allegory of the Soviet state was aimed at depositing a chain of associations deep in the social identity of the nation.⁴⁶

In Soviet Russia this process was justified by a profound cultural tradition around the colour red, hence its success.⁴⁷ In the Polish People's Republic, however, the attempt to solidify the colour red in social identity eventually resulted in complete failure. As part of a superimposed tradition associated with the repressions of the Stalinist regime, Soviet red quickly became the most hated colour. The term 'Reds', which Poles used to refer to communists, had a pejorative meaning.⁴⁸ The negative feelings towards red spread out into many areas of every-day life, and any red object could bring to mind a socialist subtext. Red bricks, cars, flowers, shirts, ties or scarfs instantly brought to mind the burden of Stalinism. Right after the Thaw, red became registered in the social conscience as an uncanny object in a Freudian sense — familiar, yet strangely uncomfortable.⁴⁹ After 1957, the use of the colour red in the social post-traumatic memory entered what psychology might call a phase of denial.⁵⁰ The proximity of the unquiet past associated with red made the use of this colour highly uncomfortable. This denial of the colour red was driven by the subconscious fear of the possible repetition of the recent traumatic past.⁵¹

Kobzdej's late works can be seen as an interpretation of traumatic events, which is the next psychological phase of the post-traumatic social memory.⁵² *Ocalony (Rescued, 1958 Fig. 5)* or *Dwie przestrzenie (czerwona) Nr 2 (Two Spaces, 1969 Fig. 6)* can be seen as an attempt to purge the colour red of its association with the socialist brick-red colour. The variety of gradients of red applied can be seen as an attempt to free this colour from the previous associations with Socialist Realism. In a similar way, the crude and aggressively-moulded surfaces of his late red works can be understood in terms of an auto-psychoanalysis. Kobzdej carries a self-referential artistic discourse, which brings to mind the French

⁴⁶ Graeme Gill, *Symbols and Legitimacy in Soviet Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 93.

⁴⁷ Komar, p. 229

⁴⁸ Irena Kamińska-Szmaj, *Agresja językowa w życiu publicznym: leksykon inwektyw politycznych, 1918-2000* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2007), p. 36.

⁴⁹ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. by David McLintock (London: Penguin, 1984), pp. 147-148.

⁵⁰ Alexander Etkind, 'Post-soviet Culture and the Soviet Terror', in *Facing Fear: The History of an Emotion in Global Perspective*, ed. by Michael Laffan and Max Weiss (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp. 183-201 (p. 187).

⁵¹ Etkind, pp. 187-188.

⁵² Janusz Bogucki, *Sztuka Polski Ludowej* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1983), p. 240.

post-war revival of existentialism, which raised the question of the role of an artist in a dystopian reality.⁵³ The colour red, used as an allegory becomes a permanent stigma, which is difficult to erase from the social memory. Despite the change between cultural contexts, colour, contrary to any other element of graphic representation, accumulates meaning over time, so it is rather difficult to fully cleanse a colour from its past meanings registered in social memory.⁵⁴ While it is possible to change the elements of a figurative composition by distorting the volumes or lines in the composition implying a satire or parody, it is impossible to fully distort the allegorically used colour, which permanently enters the subconscious social memory.⁵⁵



Fig. 5

Aleksander Kobzdej, *Ocalony (Rescued)*, 1958, oil on canvas, paper, 190 × 136 cm, © The National Museum in Warsaw, 2018.

⁵³ Katarzyna Kasprzak, 'Odtwarzanie portretu człowieka po katastrofie. Egzystencjalizm a malarstwo polskie', in *Odwilż: sztuka ok. 1956 r.*, ed. by Piotr Piotrowski (Poznań: Muzeum Narodowe w Poznaniu, 1996), pp. 63-65.

⁵⁴ Roy Osborne and Don Pavey, *Colour Engrained in the Mind: Character Profiling that Researches How to Find Excellence in Everyone* (London: Micro Academy, 2010), p. 163.

⁵⁵ Joane Wolfrom, *The Magical Effects of Color* (Concord: Crafts and Hobbies, 1993), pp. 86-87.

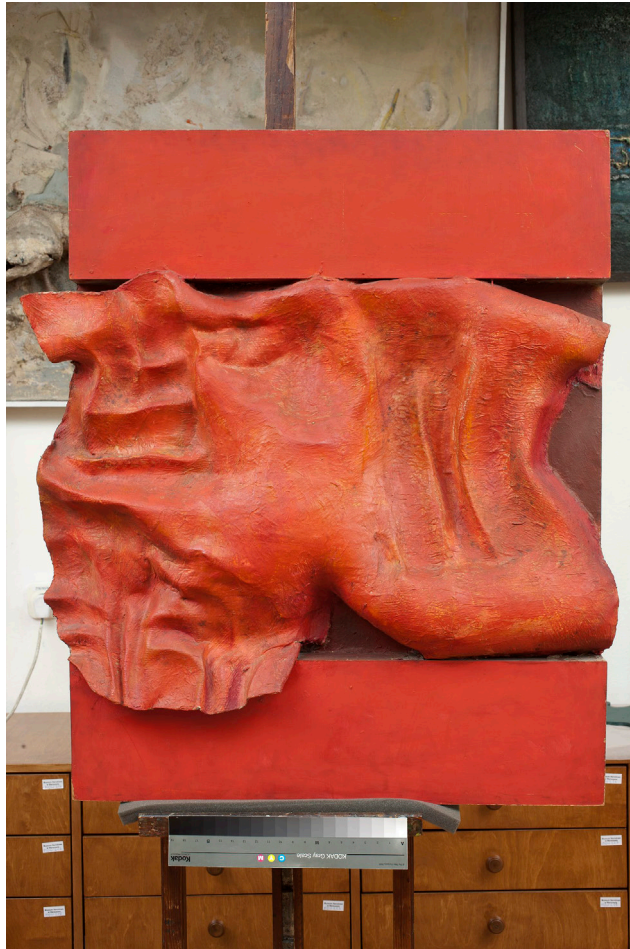


Fig. 6
Aleksander Kobzdej, *Dwie przestrzenie (czerwona) Nr 2 (Two Spaces)*, 1969, relief, mixed media, 100 x 80 cm, © The National Museum in Warsaw, 2018.

Abstraction became for Kobzdej a way to challenge this problem, who was never interested in abstraction per se, but rather in the metaphysic realm that the means of abstraction enabled him to explore. In his conversation with Pierre Courthion, which was registered before the individual exhibition of his paintings at the Paris Galerie de l’Ancienne Comédie in 1960, Kobzdej explained:

I feel the urge to enlarge and to deepen my domain. I am not an “abstractionist”. I am not assembling forms. Painting, to me, is neither a chemical formula nor a rule of a game. I do not calculate. I create my universe, a concrete world which I feel very profoundly. Hence my landscapes, my people, my problems, my difficulties.⁵⁶

Kobzdej must have felt that his art did not fully belong to any of the cultural traditions, not to the Socialist-Realists or to the Western neo-Avant-Garde or even to the Polish Avant-Garde.⁵⁷ For Kobzdej, who in fact was an artistic outcast, the main objective was rather to prove himself as an independent artist who could

⁵⁶ Courthion, pp. 3-4.

⁵⁷ Jerzy Stajuda, *O obrazach i innych takich* (Warszawa: Muzeum Akademii Sztuk Pięknych, 2000), pp. 282-283.

defend his art from Western influence and — most importantly — from the accusations related to the infamous past.⁵⁸ His struggle to come to terms with the past is evident in his transition in the use of red as unveiling an additional level of meaning, which could not be achieved by artists who did not experience the trauma of the Stalinist regime.⁵⁹ Kobzdej's use of red does not merely represent the transcendental qualities of trauma. Rather, it becomes an embodied testimony of this psychological stigma.

In conclusion, the example of Kobzdej's use of the colour red demonstrates a lack of interest in the ethically problematic studies on social trauma caused by the political entanglement of the 1950s. What is symptomatic in the context of registering the trauma in the social memory is the fact that neither the discussion of the 1960s nor the more recent studies on Polish art in the 1960s devoted much attention to thoughtfully investigating the relation between Socialist Realism and Polish 'matter painting'.⁶⁰ The only major work that distantly approaches this topic came to light along with the exhibition *Nowoczesni a Socrealizm*, which took place at the Starmach Gallery in Krakow in 2000.⁶¹ A more developed argument in this matter can be found in Tomasz Gryglewicz's work 'Co zawdziecza sztuka polska PRL-owi?' in which he pointed out that the success of Polish 'matter painting' was based on the fact that Polish artists managed to preserve the pre-war ideas of Polish structuralism and colourism from the trauma of war and Stalinism.⁶² This alleged success became the input of Polish 'matter painting' in the development of European post-war art. Similarly, Jarosław Suchan claimed that the most important achievement of Polish 'matter painting' was its success in the struggle to rebuild the pre-war Avant-Garde tradition tragically broken by the war and Socialist Realism.⁶³

This article has aimed to prove that a valuable component, which can testify to the unique character of Polish 'matter painting', can be found in the capability of artists to challenge the burden

⁵⁸ Porębski, 'Aleksander Kobzdej', p. 5.

⁵⁹ Baranowa, 'Aleksander Kobzdej', p. 21.

⁶⁰ Piotr Juszkiewicz, *Od rozkoszy historiozofii* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu im. Adama Mickiewicza, 2006), p. 13.

⁶¹ *Nowocześni a Socrealizm: styczeń-luty 2000* [exhibition], January – February 2000, Starmach Gallery, Kraków.

⁶² Tomasz Gryglewicz, 'Co zawdziecza sztuka PRL-owi?', in *Sztuka w okresie PRL-u. Metody i stan badań. Materiały z seminarium naukowego IHS UJ zorganizowanego w grudniu 1997*, ed. by Tomasz Gryglewicz and Andrzej Szczerski (Kraków: Instytut Historii Sztuki Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 1997), pp. 5-12 (p. 11).

⁶³ Jarosław Suchan, 'Polityczna apolityczność Grupy Krakowskiej (w zarysie)', in *Sztuka w okresie PRL-u. Metody i stan badań. Materiały z seminarium naukowego IHS UJ zorganizowanego w grudniu 1997*, ed. by Tomasz Gryglewicz and Andrzej Szczerski (Kraków: Instytut Historii Sztuki Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 1997), pp. 159-173 (p. 162).

of the Stalinist past and carry out a self-referential artistic discourse. Aleksander Kobzdej's deliberate transition between two different modes of red shows that the level of independence and modernity of Polish 'matter painting' can also be measured with the ability to reproach and to challenge the trauma of the Stalinist past. From the perspective of research ethics, Kobzdej's transition from Socialist Realism to informel can be seen as an uneasy research case, because it involves stepping into the artist's personal life and judging his moral choices.

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