

## **„ART AS A FINGERPRINT”**

**(Waldemar Siemiński talks to Zdzisław Beksiński)**

**What do you owe to literature in your opinion?**

I haven't read for a long time. Sometimes "DIALOGUE" and that's it .... Reading has somehow finished for me. I had a period of intense reading, I guess it was more or less between 24 and 30 years of age – at that time I was going through a kind of late spiritual maturation, I was turning from an engineer into a painter while still working in the construction industry. I read books like mad, making use of every free moment stolen from the company I worked for or from my family, but later it became more and more

irregular and I plunged in my own creative work, which eventually resulted in my quitting the learned profession, that is architecture ...

I still read a little bit in the years 1963-70. It was a period when I was enchanted by esotericism, in which I'd become interested thanks to Andrzej Urbanowicz, but the books I leafed through were chiefly textbooks, dissertations, essays, finally sutras, instructions and notes of Saints – there wasn't much pure literature. I'd find it difficult to find the trace of books in my own paintings. Both the old and the later ones. Kafka, Dostoyevski, Borges, Thomas Mann, Schulz, Gombrowicz, Witkacy, Robie-Grillet, Ionesco, Kubin, Orwell, Meyrink etc., a crazy confusion of names: great and mediocre ones, visionaries and classics, where should I find a distorted echo of those books in my works? There's one book which I read not long ago, in those years 1968-70. It's *Sibylla and Pilgrim* by Lagerkvist. I read it when I was ill, because I didn't have anything else at hand. I read it with difficulty and strain, but strangely enough, this book grows in my memory to such an extent that today I'd be afraid of a confrontation with the original. The more difficult it was for me to read it, the more beautiful it seems as a memory. In this case, however, I

think I wouldn't have problems pointing to the influence on what I paint. I can't exclude a kind of paramnesia, though.

**You've mentioned that you sometimes read „Dialogue”. I guess it results from the difficulties with the live theatre in Sanok?**

I simply hate the theatre! I hate it! And the more it breaks the barrier separating it from the audience, the more I detest it. It's a deeply rooted reluctance and fear – perhaps these multi-layer reservations are simply rationalised subconscious complexes or even some traumas – I don't know. Of course, a predilection for theatre plays in a form of reading is another story. I probably know more contemporary plays than novels. However, live theatre is first of all a live actor. For me contact with a live actor is as embarrassing as contact with somebody who keeps grabbing my hand, and I hate being grabbed by the hand; it's like contact with somebody who constantly rests on my shoulder, which I hate; like contact with a mate from school years who wants to kiss me and I detest being kissed

by mates from school years!!! I wouldn't like anybody to feel hurt by what I've said. It's some kind of huge disability in myself, and not a fault of the theatre, actors etc.

**Are there any painters – living in our times or in the past – who are particularly close to you? If yes, why do you value them?**

But I'm hardly interested in painting! For years I haven't been to any exhibition, including my own ones. You shouldn't jump to conclusions basing on the very fact that I am a painter myself! The history of art is something I've got a vague idea of: it's like a soup in which something amorphous shines from time to time, one time it's Leonardo, another time Picasso, anyway, don't overrate this identification – I certainly couldn't list and identify more than three paintings by Leonardo and the same number by Picasso – actually, all that leaves me pretty cold. I don't see more than two third-rate paintings a year personally, and a few reproductions. Of course, this statistics can also mean that once in five years I'm at an exhibition and once in a few years I see an album with

reproductions in a dentist's waiting room if the dentist has one instead of something more interesting. Sometimes I like something, but it's the question of sheer coincidence that I've come across it. Anyway, I don't try to remember the names ... What for? Among ten thousand things that I haven't seen and will never see there must be at least a hundred things much more worth remembering. In a word, painting doesn't particularly interest me, I don't look for any opportunities to have an encounter with it, I meet it by chance and in a natural way, like a tree or a cow. If I search for anything, find anything exciting, it's first of all music. Besides, I'm a bit into the film ...

**So you go to the cinema? I didn't know about that.**

No, I hardly ever go to the cinema, and it's been like that for years. Simply my dream, which I have till today, has been to become a film director. Life somehow didn't let me make this dream come true. Hence my interest in the film, or rather a number of my own concepts of the cinema. For me the film is a potential power which, for many reasons,

remains hardly used. From my point of view, of course. Ideally, I'd like to see a film which becomes music, but I don't mean that rubbish with pulsating colours and flowing forms or anything like that. I have in mind a film the dramaturgy of which not only in the chronological but also in the visual sphere would be ruled by the laws resembling those of music architectonics instead of a literary plot. A literary plot in a film isn't anything interesting to me, it's simply irritating. In the best case scenario I can treat it as a necessary evil. OK, I'll use an example to explain what I mean when talking about a music film in terms of construction; well, for example some parts of *Roma* by Fellini, let's say the sequence when a truck with a camera crane and a passenger's car with the director drives into the town – I wanted to applaud when I saw it, or the scene with a night motorcycle rally ... Every moment Fellini becomes pure music, but he also plunges into literature. I think he's afraid of being accused of not having much to say, so he speaks only sometimes ... Every culture TV commentator has so much to say that we should erect monuments and put crowns on the heads of those who have nothing to say ... Never mind, I'm straying from the subject, actually in my case it's not so much about the

film but the music, I listen to music for 10-14 hours a day. Of course, only from tapes, the radio and records, which I have hundreds of. This is a perfect substitute not only for watching paintings, but also reading books.

**It's solely pop music that you listen to, isn't it?**

What makes you think so? Of course, I listen to pop music a lot, but not only that! I don't know anything about music, after all I didn't learn anything when banging on the piano for a few years of my childhood, because my teacher paid attention to me having relaxed wrists rather than to explaining what I was actually doing. I remember it as a nightmare, which finished with the loss of my left hand fingers as a result of an explosion. So I belong to the Howling Dog Club and receive music solely with my guts, as Witkacy would have put it. But I receive a lot of it, I listen to music for long hours, I'm well familiarized with it, as they used to say, though of course I do it unsystematically; besides, I'm always confusing things, so for God's sake, don't interrogate me about the

names, styles, influences ... In general, I like music, which makes me a suitable person for “guts” reception, so I chiefly like the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the very beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, I also like the latest music, but with some reservations: I would say I’m enchanted by its sound, instrumentation, while in most cases, pieces of music as a whole are not expressive enough in my opinion, they aren’t charged with enough emotion – of course, it’s not any criticism on my part, simply I’m not suitable for this kind of perception, I don’t need and I’m not accustomed to it. In the emotional or “guts” reception of music I’m greatly helped by the amplification system in my atelier – for me nothing is ever loud enough, so I’m constantly hunting for an ideal amplifier, which would tear the windows from their frames without distorting the sound at the same time. I had tests, my hearing is not dull, but I have a need to be virtually crushed or torn to pieces by music. It turns out, though, that after a fourteen-hour uninterrupted listening, only music lets me paint all the time, and I can do it standing up without paying the slightest attention to fatigue - it’s a stronger stimulant than coffee! Of course, big areas of music are inaccessible to me, actually almost everything before the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup>



century is too far for me, and too difficult to understand. Beethoven makes me bored and tired, well, perhaps some of the piano and violin sonatas to a lesser extent, but as for symphonies, I can't listen to them although I've tried many times and I nearly know them by heart; it's even worse with the Baroque, though I constantly listen to everything that's available on records, I simply try to get used to it, which I'm doing in my own interest, because someone who listens to music for 10 or more hours a day will always have too little of it. I'd like to get to some new areas for exploitation, some new pastures – I simply treat it like food – but the grass there is inedible, a clear structure and no emotion; it must be hidden somewhere, but I don't have the key and forcing myself to get accustomed to it will not change anything. When I hear Scriabin, my whole organism sort of immediately merges with the sounds filling my atelier – there's no longer music I'm listening to, but the sounds and I become a whole, I feel like I were hypnotized by a fakir's pipe, like a dog reacting to a harmonica ... Whenever I listen to Beethoven's variations on the Devilish, I remain completely cold and critical – I know what it's about, I can follow the idea of the construction, but the whole thing simply bores me and that's it. There's no

possibility for me to become united with the music – there's just the reception of it, nothing more. Of course, among the stuff I like to a greater or lesser extent and even among the things I actually don't like, for example Bach, there are pieces which I listen to more willingly and the ones that I hardly ever listen to. The contradiction in this sentence is only apparent, because in the first place I actually like sad, tragic, solemn, ecstatic, powerful, melancholic, neurasthenic and, finally, even grotesque and persiflage music, but I simply hate cheerful, merry, vigorous, full of humour, funny, folk-dancing music and so on, I can't help it. I guess I don't have to account for my tastes before you, I don't understand them myself, anyway. Besides, I also like rough, rhythmic, stereotypical music; it used to be jazz, now for many years it's been pop and especially stereotypical heavy rock and hard rock groups. Actually, when listening to music, I can switch over from Bruckner to *Hudgie* or *Nazareth* – a transition from Bruckner to Beethoven is much more difficult despite the fact that this trail is better trodden.

**Could you tell me if you consider yourself an avant-garde painter and what you think of avant-garde in general?**

I'm not interested in disputes between avant-garde and traditionalists; moreover, I think that these disputes don't concern me at all. My attitude in this matter is probably similar to that of a gnostic faced with the disputes of the last two centuries of the European philosophy. Let me once more stress that the very fact I paint doesn't necessarily have to result in my interest in aesthetic issues. A man who's fallen into the sea must swim, but it doesn't mean that he immediately becomes interested in the style of swimming, the world swimming and its history. He just swims so as not to get drowned – he won't drown

anyway, it's then simply a reflex, the instinct of self-preservation or another undetermined reason. I started painting, I paint and will probably paint for two reasons. The first one is the cause, while the other one – the purpose. The cause is something impossible to analyse, it's mysterious and lost in the mists of early childhood. I can only vaguely guess what caused my predilection for drawing everything that came to my mind from the earliest childhood. The years I spent getting used to the stereotype and becoming confirmed in it provoked a need for creating, which couldn't be replaced by anything else. As for the purpose of creating, it's a bit hopeless and a bit cynical. Hopeless, because using this one way available to me, I'd like to fight death and remain in the form of paintings; and cynical, because I realize that a work of art is the only sacred cow of the European culture and that being a sacred cow has greater chances than anything else for respect, care and survival.

**What would you consider kitsch in art then? What's your attitude to kitsch?**

The need to describe something as kitsch is completely strange to me. From the position I view artistic work, kitsch doesn't exist. For me the fruits of any artistic work are always more perfect when they define the individual that produced them. They are something I'd compare to fingerprints considered from the point of view of dactyloscopy. If you leave aesthetics behind, there are no longer aesthetically better or worse fingerprints. The only thing that remains is the certificate of identity. Certainly, this doesn't mean that I'd like to spend a yearly holiday on a desert island with anybody who leaves fingerprints behind, sometimes even a five-minute encounter on the tram might be too tiring, but this kind of judgment has a solely social nature. Probably it's the same with the term "kitsch" for aesthetes. What is kitsch for one person isn't perceived as kitsch by another person. What's the value of an epithet which is merely an invective? I realize that the question you asked has its implied meaning: one can guess that from the point of view of commonly held opinions, my paintings might come across as a conscious use of kitsch, and I may be perceived as an enthusiast of the so-called kitsch aesthetics. I can assure you that it's nothing of the kind ...

**This way we have reached the problem of talentless painting – after all it's also the fingerprint you're postulating.**

Yes, of course. That's the fingerprint we're talking about. So what? It's certainly hard to find pure talentless painting, because it never occurs in a completely selfless form. We can only talk about a tendency. Anyway, if there's anything precious in any artistic work, this thing is first of all an element of talentless production. At this point I'll try to somehow specify what the very term means to me personally. Well, it is an uncompromising necessity, even a compulsion to express your own or considered your own spiritual meanings. No matter whether the environment accepts or negates these meanings, whether they are trendy or not, whether you are awarded with medals or put to prison for propagating these meanings. But I've already mentioned it. Perhaps you still

don't understand precisely what I mean, so let me use a negation. There's nothing stranger to me than an artist using his art for the purposes which are not his own purposes, but an order of some patrons, no matter whether these are private persons or the state. Such an attitude does not so much fill me with disgust, but it's simply beyond the comprehension of my body, just like breathing through gills under water. For me this kind of artists are creatures from another dimension. I don't have anything in common with them except some technological relations in the very mechanism of artistic work.

**What do you think of the role of art criticism then?**

I'm not a critic, I don't ask myself such questions. If you believe that God speaks through the mouth of every man, and I do believe in it, then from the mouths of other people, including critics, you can hear your own thoughts that you haven't thought yourself yet. From this perspective, a critic would be an artist's conscience.

**So what circles and painting trends seem the most interesting to you as an observer?**

I guess the cartoon, if you agree to call it a painting trend – I want to agree to all divisions of yours, so from your point of view I might not be speaking to the point. Some time ago I listened to a television discussion of some terrified writers, which among others was devoted to the problem of comic strips and how to fight them. I think you should rather talk about the ways to use them for your purposes! That's the language suitable for the most common perception and the eggheads are already ready to fight it. I don't even remember if they want to fight it from the position of Avant-garde or the position of Holy Trinity Trenches, maybe even *viribus unitis*! Undoubtedly, so far the cartoon hasn't born its Dostoyevsky, but it doesn't mean it's not able to bear one, just like it doesn't mean that *Demons* in a comic strip version is the thing I want! Simply the cartoon is a tool, a tool which in my opinion offers very wide possibilities. Today an obstacle is the painstaking work of a graphic artist, which makes it difficult and in large measure also impossible to improvise, and artistic art without improvisation is hard to imagine. But if



we managed to partially automate or computerise the process of picture making, just like in the case of cartoon films, then the speed of making drawings might be similar or identical with that of writing a book ...

### **Why do you live in a small, remote town and don't move to a bigger city centre?**

You're asking two questions pretending it's just one. And more important is the hidden question, so I'd rather answer this one. What does the word "remote" mean? Remote from the world centre? Haven't I mentioned my discovery that the centre of the globe is in my room? I even stuck a nail in the floor to mark this point. It's Warsaw that's far away from this nail, not Sanok. Apropos of this question, if I dared to accuse Polish culture of anything, it would be that conviction of being far away from something that exists somewhere, from where we should be noticed and praised or accepted as "our people". Such an eternal, deeply rooted complex of a diligent pupil or an obedient son disowned by his parents. Nobody will ever be himself if he keeps turning back to see whether those

from the Centre of the World see him or not. The World Centre is where I'm staying and it's not parochialism, isolationism, xenophobia or the sense of my own uniqueness or authenticity. Gombrowicz wrote about something like that ...

**Gombrowicz said that what a real writer can do is to disclose his own quirks and shame. Do you think this saying makes any sense in painting?**

If we treat art as a fingerprint, then exposing yourself is a step resulting from the adopted assumptions. But it's a heroic attitude and stands hardly any chance of being put to life. Besides, it requires a specific split personality, a division of "you – the observer" and "you – the observed one", that is to say, a kind of neurosis. I'm not sure if it occurs in all people, so talking about it, I run the risk of being misunderstood. Of course, I guess I don't have to dwell on the fact that the so-called scandalizing most frequently does not involve exposing yourself, but putting on an appropriate mask of a self-unmasker ... It wouldn't be difficult for somebody who looked at my paintings more thoroughly to notice

where an enclave of conscious quirk and shame is hidden in me. Perhaps it's one of many, but right now it's this enclave that I want to talk about: I have a deeply rooted predilection for theatricality, for utterly infantile grandiloquence. When I'm supposed to give the first visual association with the word ART, I immediately see a 19<sup>th</sup>-century etching which shows a young man in a picturesquely draped cloak, theatrically posed on a rock. It's either Byron or Puschkin, there's also something that resembles paintings of Napoleon on Elba. I can't have seen any etching of this kind in my life, but it's a compilation of a few paintings I remember, supplemented by my imagination. On the horizon you can see a sailing ship tossed by the raging sea waves. The sky is covered in tumbling clouds, and the clouds are cut by a lightning. There could also be some black birds in the background and a hanged man might be dangling from a branch of a dried up tree. As you can see, I'm devoid of any restraints in the area of the so-called "good taste". Of course, "I – the observed one", because "I – the observer" have plenty of such restraints, too many! They've been made up of my whole upbringing, which made me view the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a complete collapse of art. However, for many, many years I've

had another very deep conviction, which might have been born out of sheer contrariness, namely the conviction that art begins when seven suns light up at the zenith and black clouds cover the rest of the sky, a thunder rends the air, a curtain is torn apart in a temple, bloody rain starts falling down, there are millions of snakes from far and near and the dead rise from their graves. Another welcome element would be a voice from the skies or from beneath the earth and such like. I tried in cold blood to include, sort of integrate for example a telephone or a tennis racket or any other more obvious and precise designation of the present time in this scenery – it didn't work out. So I thought it was about archetypes. I could swallow a cloud, the sun, thunderstorms and the ocean, but what should I do with a coffin, a sailing ship, a cloak and a noose? These aren't archetypes, but simply staffage from the dustbin of culture in the years of education. "I – the observer" can perfectly well spoil the appetite of "me – the observed one" for my own vision. Own in inverted commas or even double inverted commas ... Because firstly, even an archetype is not something that I own, while staffage taken over from the second or third hand ...well, there's no point talking about it. But how could I explain not just the

predilection, but simply the irresistible need of “me – the observer” to constantly dig in this area of the dustbin full of snakes, skulls and crossbones, poisonous weed and dead witches instead of the area with blooming flowers and playing children? The question is rhetorical, because “I – the observer” am ready to immediately give you a rational explanation. And so on and so forth. That duality, ambivalence, predilection and at the same time shame and the lack of certainty whether the others react to that Macbethian soup of witches as strongly as me have made me maintain a permanent detachment from everything that’s related to the phenomenon of my own expression outside. On the one hand, I dream of expressing myself frankly, without concealing anything, in the old Russian style, tearing a shirt on my chest and bowing down; on the other hand, it’s like in dreams, just in case I’d rather stay aside and manipulate a mannequin that would do all that instead of me, but in an “artificial” way, so that I could always weasel out: it’s not me, it’s a puppet, you can see that I’m using it, but for quite different purposes than you think – don’t identify it with me, please. I guess it sticks out a mile in absolutely every painting. And this is where that Child of Gombrowicz is buried ...

**You are well-known as a technically perfect painter. Do you get an impression that you're constantly improving your technique?**

Am I well-known for it? Just yesterday I had such a question in an interview for the radio. Well, I guess yes ... But this is an excellent topic for deliberations about the blindness of P.T. art recipients to technical matters. I'm no match for a whole pack of second-rate painters from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. I have huge technical obstacles in painting – painting is just tough sledding for me: so I would eagerly agree with all those who say I paint simply badly if only they first defined what they consider good painting. Because what others consider good painting I very often perceive as bad painting, even worse than my own. You can't separate the issue of achievements or the lack of achievements from the issue of purpose I set for myself, which I'm not going to let anyone question. As for the goal I've set for myself, I strive to make a painting which is a colour photograph of a vision.

The development of technique in my case would be merely coming closer to the ideal of taking colour photographs of the dreams.

**But what do you understand by the word „vision”? Is it simply a conscious idea or a subconscious impulse?**

For me a vision I have at the beginning of painting or drawing, which you could also name an idea for want of anything better is a quasi-image of something existing in a quasi-reality, which in a hardly determined way in terms of a great number of details appears instantly in my mind as a closed whole. All years of recording these ideas caused that the vision is sort of a ready drawing or oil painting, sometimes I even know that it must be painted smooth or coarse, so at first sight it's already a processed and nearly utilitarian vision. The only thing I have to do is just paint. Unfortunately, only some things can be seen clearly, they are sometimes visually incomplete like “a fearful movement” or “a pride-filled gesture”. Usually you can see more, but still in some places

there's either nothing or something hard to define, which I failed to record in my memory when having a vision, something that lasts for a very short time, a second at the most. So the problem with "taking photographs" of that does exist after all. Should I leave the empty spaces black like Caravaggio or should I fill them with a colourful mist, like in Turner's paintings, or should I simply add some invented details which don't destroy the atmosphere and the expression of the original vision? Here's a space for those skulls, coffins, snakes and witches, which lie in wait to penetrate into each free fragment of the painting on a *horror vacui* basis. And additionally, I'm ashamed of them, so before I let them penetrate, I need to put them in question marks, apply lipstick, distort. Unfortunately, I don't have a way to deal with that and my paintings, those in the Turner style or the more pedantic and overloaded ones, are a continual, disgusted attempt the ultimate consequence of which so far has always been a collapse. Incidentally, I'd like to add that reading symbolic contents from my paintings in a popular historic-aesthetic understanding of symbolism is like shooting to cars. I don't think my vision would change if the queen was replaced by a cow and the forest by a flock of birds. Identity is



contained not in the meaning of objects, but in the atmosphere or rather the expression which I'd like to convey. Whether I convey it is another story.