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## RETHINKING POLISH ASSEMBLAGES OF THE 1960S: THE (RE)TURN TO THINGS

### INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the presence of objects in Polish assemblages from the perspective of the concept of “turning to things” which appeared at the end of the 1990s in Anglo-American humanities<sup>1</sup>. It highlights, along with other perspectives, the active role of manmade objects as creators of social life (Domańska, “O zwrocie ku rzeczom” 10)<sup>2</sup>. Toolmaking has existed in human culture from the very beginning and the products of both craftsmen and artists have shaped human identity just as surely as human beings have used their bare hands and tools to shape the raw materials around them. Being an element of material culture, both the skills to produce inanimate objects and the objects themselves have been passed down from generation to generation. Material culture, being composed of things, changes, evolves and becomes more and more complex. The birth of first modern and then postmodern society also influenced material culture. This particularly applies to the active participation of material objects in the establishment of the community, to something one may call the “life” of objects. They “live” – in

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<sup>1</sup> On this problem see i.e.: BROWN; GOSDEN, MARSHALL; APPADURAI.

<sup>2</sup> For more about the problem of things and their agency in contemporary archaeology, see: DOMAŃSKA, “Problem rzeczy”.

a social sense – when they influence, enable or prevent something, or when they are just a part of everyday activities, interactions (Krajewski 49). People used to think that the fact that things are human-made automatically means that things remain under human control. However, an object with a specific form and function has a life of its own in the sense that it has an influence over its next incarnation (Csikszentmihalyi 21).

In *The cultural biography of objects* Gosden and Marshall indicate some reasons why people changed their attitude to objects. They realized that objects are integral to human activity and create much more than just a “stage setting”. “The central idea is that, as people and objects gather time, movement and change, they are constantly transformed, and these transformations of person and object are tied up with each other” (169). One of the questions addressed by Igor Kopytoff in his essay *The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process*, is how the usefulness of things changes with their age and what happens when they become completely useless? The author claims that biographies of things can make salient what in another case would remain obscure, and reveal subtle meanings. According to cultural biography, biographies of things may be: economic, technical or social – they “may or may not be culturally informed. What would make a biography cultural is not what it deals with, but how and from what perspective” (67-68). In the case of assemblages, we will discuss the stage that follows the “ordinary” existence of objects that assemblages are created from. Their hopeless, and apparent uselessness often means a new beginning, new life and, by extension, new biography.

An assemblage (fr.: arrangement/linking together), closely related to Cubist collages and Duchamp’s readymades, is a three-dimensional art form created by combining different, rather non-artistic materials<sup>3</sup>. We shall stick to this simple definition of an “assemblage”, although clear classification of particular works of art created by specific artists is by no means a straightforward task. Karolina Rajna reviewed publications devoted to Polish postwar art, searching for the term assemblage and its usage context (“Asamblaż z lat sześćdziesiątych”). The author noticed a common lack of consistency, when the different works of various artists were considered. *Nota bene*, such a wide variety of classification methods dominate Polish art history studies which are already considered to be classics<sup>4</sup>, as well as quite recent treatises<sup>5</sup>. Similar “chaos” has also been observed by Rajna in the

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<sup>3</sup> For the historical background and wide overview see Seitz, already canon in this subject matter catalogue accompanying the exhibition in MoMA in 1961.

<sup>4</sup> F. ex.: WOJCIECHOWSKI; KĘPIŃSKA; KOWALSKA.

<sup>5</sup> F. ex.: MAJEWSKI; SZCZYGIEL-GAJEWSKA; MOSKALEWICZ, “Na krawędzi obrazu”.

way in which these works are catalogued in museum collections (“Asamblaż z lat sześćdziesiątych” 93-94). To avoid delving into greater detail concerning various types of nuances, in order to identify an assemblage, for the needs of this paper, one is only required to accept the condition of the assemblage being created as a combination of ordinary, everyday things. Let this suffice for the moment.

From the very beginning, dating back to collages from the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, one might consider the act of creation as an activity of recycling and repurposing. Most often this was realized by using something that was broken or deprived of its current use, simply rubbish. The cubism of Picasso and Braque altered and extended the perception of the world around us. The first stage of the movement analyzed objects, before breaking them up and reassembled them in an almost abstracted form. Synthetic cubism, especially collages, reintegrated objects using signs and other fragments of reality. Picasso’s photographic composition with a guitar player and violin (1913) pioneered the arrival of collage into three-dimensional space. It consisted of a human shape outlined on cardboard, with a real guitar hung on the surface, “supported” by cardboard hands. The composition was completed by a real table with a bottle, newspaper and a smoking pipe.

Dada and surrealist artists used ordinary objects from different, often very different worlds. By combining them, they created a new, surprising reality. After World War II, artists followed a similar course and rediscovered these “art” objects. In Poland, this only happened in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 1950s, when, after Stalin’s death a thaw occurred in politics, as well as in art. However, the postwar concept was different to French Dadaists who mostly denied the world around them. In turn, assemblage creators from the 1960s rather followed Berlin artists who were critical of modernism and contemporary German society, concentrating on making comments based on current reality using contemporary “props”<sup>6</sup>.

Hence, in the late 1950s and 1960s, the frequently banal materials used retained their physical and functional identity in the hands of painters and sculptors. This development expanded the range of artistic possibilities available by ending the domination of traditional art media – such as paint – associated with the modernist paradigm. The artworks produced were also capable of building a bridge between art and life. In fact, worn-out objects became a specific type of “memorial”; commemorating something that used to be merely functional before the artist’s intervention, and the artwork thus contained an element of passing. On the other hand, in this manner they have started a new stage of existence and begun to live

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<sup>6</sup> It is also visible in post-World War II artistic movements such as Tashism, Arte Povera, and Neo-Dadaism which directly impacted the assemblage creation.

their own independent artistic life. Such activity of combining things also occurs as *signum temporis*, it is strictly connected with the invention of new materials in human surroundings (f. ex. synthetic fiber and plastics).

Works by Polish artists: Erna Rosenstein, Tadeusz Kantor, Alina Szapocznikow and Włodzimierz Borowski differ quite fundamentally, but all of them reveal their authors' interest in the material symptoms of modernity<sup>7</sup>. However, the status of the objects selected might have changed in a way which was independent from the intention of the artist. Such suspicions encourage the decoding of their individual biographies – biographies of things of course, sometimes creating surprising connotations and a new reality. Assuming the independence of particular creations, the order in which they are discussed does not seem to be especially important; moreover, doing so would detract from the legitimacy of this independence.

#### ERNA ROSENSTEIN: COMMEMORATION OF THE OBJECT

Erna Rosenstein belonged to the pre-war Kraków Group of artists, which she naturally joined after its reactivation in 1957. This female painter and poet is associated with surrealist poetics. The artists saw the Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme in Paris in 1938, as well as she was the active member of post-war Kraków Group<sup>8</sup>. She combined elements from different worlds and orders. This aspect is particularly significant in relation to the specific assemblages created by her. They touch deeply on the subject category of memory. Some of them have become memorials that have a powerful association with her parents. The situation of her Jewish family was extremely difficult after the outbreak of World War II. Rosenstein's parents were murdered while attempting to escape to a place of refuge where they planned to remain for the summer of 1942. The artist herself came close to death on several occasions, but as fate would have it, she finally became one of the survivors of the Holocaust. The memory of her parents also survived, especially in the artist's drawings, for her entire life after that traumatic war period when she had to deny her national identity and repress most of her prewar memories<sup>9</sup>. The memory of her parents also accompanied the assemblages

<sup>7</sup> The author of this study is well aware that this subjective choice of artists and works of art might seem risky, however, representative to the subject matter.

<sup>8</sup> Influenced, among others, by Jean Fautrier or Jean Dubuffet.

<sup>9</sup> While being questioned by the police after her parents had been murdered, she pretended to suffer from amnesia in order to conceal her Jewish identity. See: JARECKA, PIWOWARSKA 297-298. The authors notice that works of Rosenstein exemplify not only memory but – paradoxically – forgetting, too.

in a metaphorical way. Considering this information, the exact dates of creation of her works seem not to matter, in fact, the artist never bothered to sign many of them. I would agree with Dorota Jarecka who noticed that the obvious act of doubling, repeating the motif and arranging objects in pairs might be a veiled portrait of Erna's parents (309). Such associations are evoked, for example, by the untitled and undated assemblage with two small transparent plastic Tic tac boxes and yellow contoured, vertical shapes painted on them (Fig. 1). There is something unsettling and intriguing at the same time in this very simple, homely form. However, it is absolutely enough to discover the subtle poetics of the composition. A similar rule seems to be present in *Rocznica* (*Anniversary*, 1993), made from glue packaging, which once contained two small tubes (Fig. 2). Except for the existing double form again, there is also a visible lack of something, unfulfilled emptiness in both works. The artist uses empty shapes just to commemorate those who passed away and materially would never come back. They are constantly present however, in the author's mind and heart. She has created "memorials", the idea of which has also appeared in the painter's poems and notes, but Rosenstein's memorials are indefinable. Vertical forms associated with columns, obelisks and stelae in the artist's interpretation don't comply with a traditionally perceived monument. Their small scale, the false impermanence of re-used things – pieces of junk, seems to contradict the impression created by the image of the monument image and its substance. Revived objects, deprived of primary meaning, suggest new stories which may be decoded in the context of Rosenstein's private mourning after her experience of the Holocaust. The personal trauma of war atrocities shared by many artists has resulted in the creation of individual artistic idioms which are confronted by a complex political situation<sup>10</sup>.

A perusal of the construction of the work reveals Rosenstein's ability to combine different techniques. Superimposition<sup>11</sup>, the process of attaching one piece to another, characterizes the artist's creative process. In the assemblage *Narodziny Wenus i dym* (*Birth of Venus and Smoke*, 1966), the artist used a rectangular piece of cardboard on the surface of which she first stuck fine groats and subsequently thin, mostly disc-shaped, shiny metal plates (Fig. 3). The dirty and rough texture

<sup>10</sup> The topic of how Polish artists managed to come to terms with their tragic war experience and to tame their memories is referred to in a book by Lachowski. Although Lachowski's thesis doesn't refer to Rosenstein's works, the author presents a complex and synthetic view of Polish art after World War II scarred by traumatic experience which led to the search for new forms of expression.

<sup>11</sup> "Superimposition" is a title of one of the artist's collages from 1965. "Superimposition" is also a title of the third exhibition (25 March – 25 May 2014, Królikarnia, Warsaw) from the series organized by Dorota Jarecka and Barbara Piwowarska, over the past couple of years.

is probably a reference to the second part of the title. Only twinkling crumbs survived after the destructive fire, like splinters of memory, unwanted but perpetuated. It directly evokes the idea of birth after burning, the voice of a survivor, although it could also be a reference to the most distressing aspects of the artist's experience and suggest her own rebirth, a second life that she received with her parents' death. The same line of reasoning may be applied to the tiny waste items that her assemblages are made from: their alternative incarnation is only possible after they became useless, unnecessary.

Erna Rosenstein used a lot of different objects in her creations; however, there is no visible fascination with new materials. Rather, the memory of objects which do not bring about the usual connotations anymore are central to the artworks. They may evoke associations with surrealist objects, thus creating a new reality, a new narrative and finally, new poetics. Some of them – like the “Birth of Venus” – approximate the fine line between painting and sculpture, and fit into the matter painting formula.

#### WŁODZIMIERZ BOROWSKI: THE ORGANIC EXISTENCE OF THE EMBLEMS OF MODERNITY

Włodzimierz Borowski, a co-founder of the Lublin group *Zamek (Castle)* in the 1950s during his art history studies at Catholic University of Lublin, quickly abandoned traditional painting, and switched his focus to the texture values of matter painting<sup>12</sup>. In 1958, he made his first assemblages – *Artons: Arton A* (Fig. 4) and *Arton B*, and in 1961-1963 the next group of *Artons*. Usually, these compositions have been interpreted by scholars and critics from the perspective of Borowski's total artistic strategy as an attempt to discredit traditionally understood works of art by using completely non-artistic materials (Kowalska 195). Others tend to view them as a criticism of painting understood as a two-dimensional surface of canvas (Olszewski 153-160). Magdalena Moskalewicz in turn, paid attention to the physical appearance of the assemblages<sup>13</sup>. She analyzed three different aspects of *Artons*: the avant-garde tradition of readymades by Marcel Duchamp, the category of time and engineering (“Przygoda z czasem i techniką”). My attempt to read Borowski's assemblages considering the fourth aspect – “turning to things” – should benefit from all of the above-mentioned aspects. The artist refers to the tra-

<sup>12</sup> See i.e. NADER; POLIT.

<sup>13</sup> She attempted to read out – respecting their visuality – *Artons A* and *B*: MOSKALEWICZ, “Przygoda z czasem i techniką”, as well as *Artons* from 1961-1963: MOSKALEWICZ, „Plastikowe Artony”.

dition of dadaist ready-made objects, using two bicycle rims as frames, filled with fiber board with different objects stuck to the surface: on the side facing outwards, there were, among others, fragments of an elastic hose, pieces of plastic and many small bulbs. On the other side, there were some electronic devices: a small engine and a special panel to program the pulsating rhythm of lights when plugged in. This special light show additionally enriches the visual values of the round *Artons*. A fair attempt to reconstruct the artist's initial intention seems to be pointless, as well as very difficult. As long as we believe in the agency of the objects, we may easily give up looking for the roots of the work and let the objects speak independently of the creative contribution of the artists. Therefore, the objects used by the artist create the language of the artwork and determines both the sense of the work and its artistic context. The initial *Artons*, as well as those from the 1960s may be interpreted as organic forms, similar to the *Niciowce (Threadoids)* which came later. Some of them even emitted a real smell. References to nature are not limited to the visual layer of these compositions, the appearances of which may resemble organic structures. As with the creations of nature with their unpredictable activity and existence, the specific character of plastic, the main substance in Borowski's assemblages, determines the rate of degradation, which means gradual but unavoidable change.

Considering the question of independent life of objects in the work of art the problem of their preservation and reconstruction of these that have been damaged, appears. Borowski himself opposed the restoration of his compositions, as he was against historicizing his work. To describe the subject, one may refer to the example of *Arton X*. The then owner of the assemblage, The National Museum of Wrocław, asked the artist to reconstruct it and posted the work to its author. Borowski never sent it back and the remains of the composition were never found until the artist's death in his house in Brwinów (Moskalewicz, "Utknąć w muzeum"). Preservation means an attempt to stop the natural process of aging. Borowski's assemblages represent the situation of objects which have already been taken out of their natural contexts and then put together, to some extent "rescued" by the artist. This new beginning was supposed to be the start of some natural existence. According to Borowski's expectations, this type of a "rescue mission" was a single action. For this reason, the idea of preservation went against the creator's intention. Borowski himself thought about *Artons* as organic/life structures. He said: "I didn't do anything to get them destroyed, maybe it is good I do nothing to preserve them. They are so organic. Let them die."<sup>14</sup> *Arton X* was supposed to

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<sup>14</sup> Cited as: MOSKALEWICZ, "Utknąć w muzeum".

be reconstructed according to the proprietor's will, however this went against the artist's intention. This case refers to the paradoxical double "life after life" of *Artons* and the objects from which they were created. Finally, *Arton X* was restored for an exhibition held in 2010.

#### TADEUSZ KANTOR: 'POOR' OBJECTS AS CREATIVE ACTORS

When talking about objects and their status in the art world, one may not ignore the activity of Tadeusz Kantor, a "total" artist – as he used to describe himself<sup>15</sup>. He was fascinated with theatre for his entire life, and in retrospect it seems to have been the most important domain of his artistic activity. It was in the theatre where he first experimented and pushed the boundaries most bravely. The beginnings of his theatre research within Independent Theatre date back to 1943. His painting was also connected with theatrical experience, although this Cracovian artist was undoubtedly primarily a painter and was thought of as such<sup>16</sup>. But "turning" to things... As early as in 1944, Kantor already started using some definitely non-stage objects – rags, wrecks, simply junk. As Alicja Kępińska wrote: "[they] don't create a narrative "stage design", nor "costume", but they express "ready-made reality" in which actors become involved. [...] Creator [...] introduced into the field of art a concrete thing, which is not a description of reality but is a reality itself" (14). The situation of the objects in Kantor's theatre is to some extent the opposite to those filling in Borowski's assemblages. The latter also used non-artistic, forgotten objects, junk and waste, however not only do they obtain new biographies in his works, but also, they become something/someone else in a newly created arrangement. In Kantor's theatre, the object "of the lowest rank" as described by the artist: "the simplest, with signs of wear, worn-out by using it for a longer time, at the door of the garbage dump. By itself: vitally useless, without hope to fulfil its vital function. Without practical value. Old junk! Just: poor! Evoking compassion" ("Pisma" 415), becomes a fully fledged actor. It is not only a stage decoration but it maintains its uniformity in general. Next to the human – the actor, who in turn is treated by Kantor – the director (Kantor didn't like this designation) merely instrumentally, objects play at least equivalent roles.

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<sup>15</sup> The status of "poor objects" in Kantor's art, the objects he tried to save in order to reveal their true status as objects, in the context of social research on "things", has been also noted by DOMAŃSKA, "Humanistyka nie-antropocentryczna" 19-20.

<sup>16</sup> Kantor graduated from the Kraków Academy of Fine Arts in 1939. He studied in the studio of Władysław Jaroński and Karol Frycz. For more about the work of Tadeusz Kantor, see i.e.: FAZAN et al.



Although – for obvious reasons – Kantor couldn't have had even the slightest idea about the Actor-Network-Theory described by Bruno Latour in his *Reassembling the Social*, the theory might be discerned in Kantor's theatre from today's perspective. Latour and some other scholars of the social theory field consider objects to be a part of social networks. The actor-network theory tries to explain how material-semiotic networks unite and form a coherent whole. Everything lies inside the network of relationships in which there is no difference in the ability to act between humans and non-humans.

In Kantor's theatre, the agency of all parties, both humans and non-humans, is realized within the specific net of the play which he's directing. The life "of the lowest rank" object, preserved from total destruction, is extended and its biography becomes new by obtaining another function and field of activity, although it must be pointed out that the object saves its previous identity. The artist really cared about his objects – props. He tried to preserve and even reconstruct the damaged ones, especially those from plays not performed any more – in sharp contrast to Borowski. Again, it was a turning point for the biography of these objects – according to the artist's intention, they became autonomic works of art, exhibited and collected in museums.

Another "path" of life was planned by the artist for a group of objects which he used in order to create his famous *Multipart* action: in a set of assemblages, the artist fixed umbrellas – his favourite article in his "*poor room of imagination*". The cycle consisted of 40 identical, numbered white paintings with white, crumpled umbrellas stuck to the surface, entitled *Parapluie – emballages*<sup>17</sup>. The frame for the *Multipart* project (the name coming from the fusion of *multiplication* and *participation*) was provided by two exhibitions in the Foksal Gallery in Warsaw: the first one took place on 21 February 1970 (Fig. 5). Every person from the audience could buy the presented work at a low price and – according to the artist's intention and conditions set out in a special written agreement between the seller and the buyer – could feel absolutely free to do whatever they wanted to with their property: "write insults, commendations, compliments, condolences, the worst words [...], erase, cross out, draw [...], make holes, burn [...], sell, buy back, use it to speculate, steal it" ("Metamorfozy" 508-509). The owners were only obliged to lend their assemblages for the second exhibition, precisely a year later, on 20 Feb-

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<sup>17</sup> Using the terms assemblages and emballages might be somewhat confusing considering Kantor's works. The idea of emballage revealed the artist's concept of hiding something important and intimate, in order to rescue it from oblivion and death. A simple act of wrapping, opened a new chapter in the history of Polish art. Structurally, emballage is a type of assemblage, made from objects (umbrellas, envelopes, suitcases etc.) but expanded by a certain idea.

ruary 1971 (Fig. 6). It was entitled *Ostatni etap Multipartu Tadeusza Kantora* (eng. *The last stage of Tadeusz Kantor's Multipart*), and presented 25 works – some of them had been destroyed or sold, some purchasers failed to respond to the organizers' request. In the aforementioned activity, objects also played the main "roles"; this time however, they were not so precisely planned by the artist. First of all, *Parapluie – emballages* were made according to Kantor's instructions, but not himself personally. Such a decision of the artist is usually interpreted as an act of questioning the idea of the work of art, traditionally appreciated for its uniqueness resulting from the artist's personal creativity. What is more, through the multiplication of these works Kantor denied their uniqueness twice. However, the ambiguous concept of *Multipart* contributed to the final paradoxical result: each of the 40 works – identical in the beginning – became unique. The ravages of time, foreseen and expected by the author, as well as Kantor's encouragement to owners to brand each composition, gave birth to forty single biographies, connected with the identities of their purchasers. Thus, 40 new stories about umbrella assemblages had been created. Some of them as extraordinary as a history of the composition brought by a group of the then students of the Faculty of Architecture, Warsaw University of Technology, carried as a banner during an official parade of 1 May 1970, then after the second *Multipart* exhibition in 1971 buried ceremoniously close to the Foksal Gallery, and finally twice exhumed after 40 years in 2012 and 2015. Again, the question of preservation appears. We don't really know what Kantor would decide to do about his work – belonging as it does to another person. Although Kantor himself reconstructed some of the objects-actors used, the *Multipart* emballage was probably supposed to "live" its life subsequently, devoted to hidden degradation. Similarly to *Arton X* by Borowski, the intentions of the museum institutions are usually at odds with the author's idea and the question of the object's destiny is often connected with a difficult compromise<sup>18</sup>.

#### ALINA SZAPOCZNIKOW: BODY AS AN OBJECT

Assemblages by the female sculptor Alina Szapocznikow may be considered as a very personal example. In the context of objects and assemblage as a type of art, a few problems appear. The first issue is related to the description of technique. Works by Szapocznikow are most often described as sculptures (f. ex. Myt-

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<sup>18</sup> Karolina Rajna the act of reconstruction interpreted as a quotation from the original work. She referred to the above-mentioned Kantor's emballage, *Arton X* by Borowski and *Niobe* by Władysław Hasior. See: RAJNA, "Asamblaż jako cytat" 72-79.

kowska), less frequently as assemblages (Kitowska-Lysiak, "Pamięć ciała" 110). Using the latter term is by all means adequate, considering that the artist used to put together several objects – according to the definition of an assemblage – in this case multiplied casts of fragments of the artist's body<sup>19</sup>. The whole output of Alina Szapocznikow refers to a female body, it is an attempt to "remember" her own fragile body<sup>20</sup>, expressively described by Małgorzata Kitowska-Lysiak as relics and tokens of remembrance, always fragments ("Pamięć ciała"). Specific *partes pro toto* in the artist's *oeuvre* are represented for example in: *Bukiet II (Bouquet II, 1966)*, *Portret wielokrotny (Multiplied portrait, 1967)*, or *Ventres (Bellies, 1968)*, which naturally may be interpreted as Szapocznikow's self-portraits.

The problems of objects, in turn, refer directly to the collected objects – pieces of casts of the artist's own body. Their presence is widely open to interpretation – this was indicated by Agata Jakubowska, the author of a written polemic biography of Szapocznikow entitled – *nomen omen – Portret wielokrotny (Multiplied portrait)*, but also by other scholars<sup>21</sup>.

In 1966-1967, two cycles *Lamp-Bouches (Illuminated Lips)* and *Bustes étincelants (Illuminated Breasts)* were created. The casts of the lips and breasts are the main motifs here, the fundamental attributes of femininity. By installing the forms on sticks and using illumination, Szapocznikow created objects one may describe as "utilitarian" and decorative-like. They contain elements of self-mockery and present a literal reification of the human body at the same time. The multiplication of the objects – using different parts of the body, f. ex. *Lamp-Bouche II (Illuminated Lips II)* – evokes associations with mass production, based on shape standardization, depriving the objects of individuality and uniqueness.

A contrary trend appears in Szapocznikow's unusual works. On the one hand, one may observe a kind of delicate commemoration of the human body; on the other however, repeated compositions show its degradation. The sculpting material is also important and symptomatic. At that time, Szapocznikow experimented with new materials, like polyester. Pierre Restany who appreciated her works, focused

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<sup>19</sup> However controversial the interpretation of the works by Szapocznikow might seem, repeating the fragments of the artist's body as assemblages – Kitowska-Lysiak called them "tautological" assemblages (see: "Alina Szapocznikow"), she did use, for example, pieces of underwear or photographs in the others, i.e. *Wielki Nowotwór II* (eng. *Great Tumour II, 1969*), *Pamiątka I* (eng. *Souvenir I, 1971*).

<sup>20</sup> Alina Szapocznikow, who, similar to Erna Rosenstein was a Holocaust survivor, died of breast cancer in 1973 at the age of 47.

<sup>21</sup> See: JAKUBOWSKA, "Portret wielokrotny"; JAKUBOWSKA, "Alina Szapocznikow"; FILIPOVIC, MYTKOWSKA.

very much on her interest in the surrounding modernity of the 1960s. He also noticed the fact that its real elements were used, she was not just making copies (33). That is why he compared them to works from the circle of French Nouveau Réalisme artists (Butler 33-34). Unlike them however, for example, César who made his famous cast of a monstrous thumb or the fountain in Poissy using a night club dancer as a model, Szapocznikow's acting is extremely personal and impossible to separate from her private corporeality (Jakubowska, "Portret wielokrotny" 178-180). The "machine aesthetic" is given a new quality in the elegant series of lamps in which "lips teeter on tentacles of electricity, blossoming like flowers on gold-coloured stalks and perched as if to kiss or exhale" (Butler 34).

### CONCLUSION

The review of the status of objects in the presented assemblages reveals a variety of meanings and the biographies of arranged objects. They may express personal experiences and refer, directly or indirectly, to artists own biographies (Rosenstein, Szapocznikow). In Rosenstein's compositions, everyday small objects often commemorate her parents who perished in dramatic circumstances. Their presence helps the artist cope with her traumatic past, as well as evoking a willingness to look for new artistic forms of expression after the bitter experience of World War II. Alina Szapocznikow, in turn, in her polyester works, reveals intimate areas of the human body – her own body. Casts of lips and breasts become relics, more durable than the original fragile body. They have achieved a durable existence, much longer than the prematurely passed away artist was able to experience herself. In this aspect the objects give her new life.

Putting useless rubbish on the pedestal of art by Rosenstein, Kantor and Borowski reveal the enchantment of everyday reality, their new existence allow to keep moments left in the hands of oblivion. Kantor's "objects of the lowest rank", as well as plastic "bric-à-brac" by Borowski and Rosenstein are worn out and damaged ordinary things (e.g. Kantor's umbrellas) or plastic waste, a specific emblem of modernity and the new materials available (Borowski's and Rosenstein's plastic objects). Similarly to the circle of the Nouveau Réalisme the artists gave them new biographies. Kantor, however, allowed his poor objects to retain their original identities. Borowski, in turn, used waste to form another original "creature".

Objects always have something to say, not only about themselves, but mainly about us and the surrounding reality. Katarzyna Szkaradnik noticed a performative potential of this language: it is not just the human who makes sense of passive things, but it is the thing which enables this sense to come out ("Z powrotem

do rzeczy”). Do objects in art works “strike back”, as Latour mentioned (“When Things Strike Back”), against artistic intentions and the interpretation of spectators? To some degree they probably do. However, the second life they live in the works of art is given to them by the artist. It was the artist who decided to use certain objects with a definite intention. His attitude towards assemblages may be compared to the act of collecting the objects that were used to construct them. The artist – collector is an agent in this narrative. Mieke Bal noticed that between the object and the collector stands the question of motivation which is the “motor” of the narrative<sup>22</sup>. The arrangement of an assemblage determines the narrative and specific status of things. On the other hand, one may observe how far they sometimes go beyond the creator’s thought process and how free they are to manifest their individuality.

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<sup>22</sup> BAL 273. Collecting perspective is another interesting aspect worth analysing, however, this topic exceeds the scope of this paper.

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1. Erna Rosenstein, *Bez tytułu*, (eng. *Untitled*), undated, assemblage, 20 x 20 cm; courtesy of Adam Sandauer and the Foksal Gallery Foundation.
2. Erna Rosenstein, *Rocznica* (eng. *Anniversary*), 1993, assemblage, 23,3 x 13,5 cm; courtesy of Adam Sandauer and the Foksal Gallery Foundation.
3. Erna Rosenstein, *Narodziny Wenus i dym* (eng. *Birth of Venus and Smoke*) 1966, assemblage, 33 x 43 cm; courtesy of Adam Sandauer and the Foksal Gallery Foundation.
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5. *Multipart*, the action of Tadeusz Kantor in Foksal Gallery, 21 February 1970; phot. by Jacek Maria Stokłosa; courtesy of the Author.
6. *Ostatni etap Multipartu Tadeusza Kantora* (eng. *The last stage of Tadeusz Kantor's Multipart*), opening of an exhibition in Foksal Gallery, 20 February 1971; phot. by J.M.Stokłosa; courtesy of the Author.

RETHINKING POLISH ASSEMBLAGES OF THE 1960S:  
THE (RE)TURN TO THINGS

## S u m m a r y

The article aims to analyse the status of the object in the neo-avantgarde practice of selected Polish artists in 1960s assemblages, from the perspective of the 'material turn', initiated by poststructuralism's crisis of representation in the social sciences and humanities. Trespassing on the intellectual ground associated with traditional painting, which was conceived as a flat two-dimensional surface, led the artists to introducing objects from real life into their art, this gave the artwork containing objects new life and 'personality'. The paper focuses on the works by four prominent modernist Polish artists: Erna Rosenstein, Włodzimierz Borowski, Tadeusz Kantor and Alina Szapocznikow. Taking into account the differences between their artistic attitudes and personal experiences, one may observe a common interest in the materiality of the world that resulted in a variety of object interpretations (Rosenstein, Borowski, Kantor) as well as the reification the body (Szapocznikow). Reference to Latour's Actor-Network-Theory also creates a new perspective for research on the objects in works of art (Kantor).

**Key words:** Polish assemblages, material turn, objects in art, Polish art of the 1960s.



PRZEMYŚLEĆ NA NOWO POLSKIE ASAMBLAŻE Z LAT 60. XX WIEKU:  
POWRÓT DO RZECZY

## Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest analiza statusu obiektu w praktykach neoawangardowych wybranych polskich artystów w latach 60. XX wieku, z perspektywy „zwrotu materialnego”, zainicjowanego przez kryzys reprezentacji postrukturalizmu w naukach społecznych i humanistycznych. Chęć wyjścia poza tradycyjne dzieło malarskie, pojmowane w kategoriach płaskiej, dwuwymiarowej powierzchni, sprawiła, że artyści zaczęli wprowadzać do sztuki przedmioty z prawdziwego życia, dzięki czemu dzieło zyskiwało nowe życie i „osobowość”. Artykuł koncentruje się na pracach czterech wybitnych polskich artystów neoawangardowych: Erny Rosensteina, Włodzimierza Borowskiego, Tadeusza Kantora i Aliny Szapocznikow. Biorąc pod uwagę różnice między ich postawami artystycznymi i osobistymi doświadczeniami, można zaobserwować wspólne zainteresowanie materialnością świata, które zaowocowało różnorodnymi interpretacjami przedmiotów (Rosenstein, Borowski, Kantor), a także reifikacją ciała (Szapocznikow). Odniesienie do teorii aktora-sieci Latoura tworzy także nową perspektywę dla badań nad rolą obiektów w dziełach sztuki (Kantor).

**Słowa kluczowe:** polskie asamblaże, zwrot materialny, przedmioty w sztuce, polska sztuka lat 60. XX wieku.



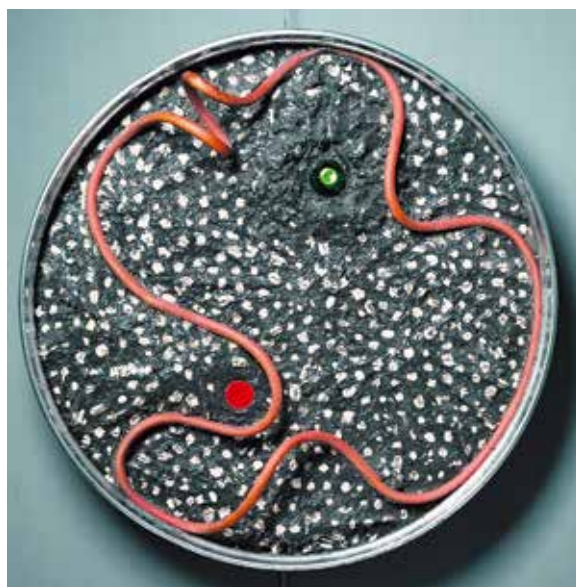
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