

ANNA KAWALEC

INTEGRAL AESTHETICS. PROJECT

INTRODUCTION TO A *TIMELESS CONTROVERSY*
*OVER CONTEMPORARY ART**

When on 14 July 2019—a Sunday afternoon—I approached the buildings of Pueblo Cochiti New Mexico and through car windows I heard the sounds of a voice coming out of the soil, engulfing the space and striving upwards. The voice was so strong and penetrating that an idea crossed my mind that the organizers of the Corn Dance of the Cochiti Pueblo used a special kind of amplifiers, special—because the voice did not sound as the ones familiar from music performances, but rather as completely unmodified and raw. I had to leave the car about three kilometers from the central pueblo square, where the ritual of the “Blessing of the Fields & Corn” took place. As I headed for this place, I felt unable to breathe after a while and my body became weak: the drought lasting several weeks and the impending storm in this steppe terrain caused the guests to change their sensory sensitivity and awareness.

Passing quite numerous participants of the ceremony between the buildings, my attention was focused entirely on feeling the rhythm of the soil on which I was treading, the rhythm that penetrated me from my toes, through

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* The project is funded by the Minister of Science and Higher Education within the program under the name ‘Regional Initiative of Excellence’ in 2019-2022, project number: 028/RID/2018/19, the amount of funding: 11 742 500 PLN.

my hips, torso, hands, shoulders, neck and head to move upwards. It harmonized with the ever-growing voice, sometimes it seemed it was solo, sometimes it was polyphonic, but was so harmonious that it seemed to be one sound coming from one larynx, lungs, heart, spine, or feet. With this feeling, forgetting the weakness of my body and the privation of air, I reached my destination. The visual impression was a shock for me: hundreds of dancers moved in one rhythm, played one melody, all dressed in a similar traditional way, characteristic for each dance, after which another large group of dancers went out to the next session. So the rhythm of the soil and air was continuous, it showed the heartbeat.¹ The air was overwhelming, the rumbling of the Earth and singing prayers, reminiscent of the history of the tribe, and singing thanksgiving permeated the atmosphere and all the guests-participants.

Everyone was invited to participate in the ceremony, the majority—even if did not enter the dancers' list—danced around the choreographic circles of the celebrants. Among them were extremely focused, prayerful guests, pulling out the dust of ground corn (a spiritual food) from tiny bags and blowing it—in sign of gratitude to the Earth for the gift of food to animals and people; all the people. My interlocutor, a guest from Laguna Pueblo, when asked what for he prayed so deeply, answered that he thanked the Creator for the gifts of harvest, the air, the burning sun, the dry land, for the precious gift of rain, the community that **IS** at this moment, at this place, and for his ancestors and successors. He asked that the participants of the ritual and all the people on the Earth never lose harmony, that is health. Jarvis Poncho² did not pray for his own goods, for his relatives or for his tribe—he prayed for all the people on the Earth, and in this prayer, when he was holding a bag of corn, he resembled a monk contemplating the splendor of the gift of the world.

While tactile, auditory, visual and olfactory sensations (although I smelled only the soil) overwhelmed my body and consciousness, people around me smiled, also at me, greeted each other, offered me a meal and rest. It is Cochiti's custom that a guest is welcome and always gifted. And I considered myself a stranger—one representing the cultural community, which for nearly four centuries destroyed, murdered the Natives' tribes, stealing their land and introduced—to express it with an aesthetic word—ugliness.

¹ The heartbeat of communities and individuals, the rhythm of music creates harmony with the rhythm of the heart of the Earth (the interpretation heard in a conversation with the organizer of the ritual July 14, 2019).

² Author interview, Cochiti Pueblo, July 14, 2019.

Ugliness is there — as Jarvis explained to me — where other people, traditions and everything that the Creator has given us are not respected, because His gift is beautiful. I heard similar ethical categorizations of beauty and ugliness from the lips of other Native Americans: beauty is around us, trees, river, sky, while ugliness is evil created by humans (as Jalen Kopepassah from Taos Pueblo told me in another conversation³). Beauty is in simple things, in rocks, when you put your head on a pillow, ugliness is when a human indulges her “ego”; ambition, when she wants more and more (in an interview with Edwin Leon from Laguna Pueblo⁴). Beauty and ugliness — as in the times of Greek antiquity — are inseparable from the moral attitude.⁵

The modern, and especially contemporary, separation of art and aesthetic values from the moral dimension of human action — their emancipation⁶ — violated the original integrity of acting humans: they formed and furnished a very high cultural status upon artistic and aesthetic categories. From then on, like the theater, which emancipated itself from its roots, art and aesthetics were seeking the rationale of their existence. They brazenly trespassed the grounds of religion, even though these practices had been already rejected by Grotowski, together with the form of theater-ritual,⁷ as well as beauty itself with its aspirations to replace holiness. And the emancipated art demands a unique status for itself, independent of the responsibility that transforms a human into a person both as a subject and as a relation.⁸ This exceptionally high status of art has been almost tacitly accepted by the Western community. The consequences can be observed in the general attitudes of “the cult of art,” “the cult of artist” (see GELL 1992), but also in the social and political consequences of the Western culture.

Today Native Art reminds the Western world of its origins, when art did not exist for itself and artists did not create “works of art” for the sake of aesthetic values (see BEN 2013). By contrast, in an Aristotelian vein, art was virtuous action. It required effort and responsibility in the hardships of becoming a human person. When the work of art — as a product that put an extra burden on its creator of being responsible for anyone who would come

³ Author interview, Taos Pueblo, 7 July 2019.

⁴ Author interview, Laguna Pueblo, 5 July 2019.

⁵ Further recent ethnographic examples can be found in *Anthropology and Beauty. From Aesthetics to Creativity*.

⁶ Initially in theory, and then entered the practices of the Western cultural world.

⁷ Grotowski discredited this form of theatrical explorations as “the history of certain illusions, dreams, temptations to find a myth in theater, to find a ritual.” GROTOWSKI 1990, 61.

⁸ See WOJTYLA 1979, and Barbara Tryka’s article in this issue.

into contact with it was in that sense a task,⁹ not a sterile and demoralizing entertainment, for which today often people are willing to pay absurdly high prices on the art market...

The current issue of *Roczniki Kulturoznawcze* (*Annals of Cultural Studies*, entitled *A Timeless Controversy Over Contemporary Art*, concerns the **integrated approach of aesthetics of an intercultural character**.¹⁰ It is an approach that respects the wealth of practices, experiences, theories and beliefs of the world community. It does not stop, however, at the ethnographic data or on assumptions of contemporary aesthetics, and brings the anthropological conclusions closer to the metaphysical ones. This **Integral Aesthetics**¹¹ does not remove moral values from the field of art, on the contrary — it **integrates artistic—and aesthetic values with moral ones** — it integrates, because it is one horizon of human activity. We are interested in questions — those asked and those not verbalized directly in the articles — “Why?” and “What for?” The proposed “aesthetics” assumes the integrality of art and beauty with moral values,¹² but indirectly also with political ones.¹³

If we take the risk to adopt such an aesthetics, then art and aesthetic values would not only gain purposefulness and meaningfulness (which would be restored), but would actually play a serious role in human life. This means that aesthetics would not have to constantly fight for its existence; a continuous struggle with the recurrent crisis of its own existence — as art, as secularized and looking for its metaphysical foundations.¹⁴ Also the

⁹ See an interesting version of the concept of art as an intellectual challenge in GELL 1996, 15–38.

¹⁰ The first steps in formulating intercultural aesthetics in Polish aesthetic literature were taken by Krystyna Wilkoszewska — see especially *Estetyka transkulturowa*.

¹¹ The expression integral aesthetics is used by Shelli Renee Joye in the context of Kant’s sublime. See JOYE 2018. Kindle Edition.

¹² On the other hand, this indissolubility is confirmed by the performative aspect of art, which is common today and dominant in artistic theory and practice, and thus art having the nature of action (Richard Schechner), because a basic question should be asked to artists and performance theorists: How can we use it? action (carried out in any area) to isolate moral values, and then — bearing in mind the fundamental goal, which is the good of man and the entire community of the world, exterminate the moral plane?

¹³ Moral and political values are common ground not only from the sources of the Mediterranean culture — this relationship is the axis in the articles presented here, including Hirsch, Sassower, Begay, Meyer-Fraatz, and Tryka.

¹⁴ It was a particular problem for Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz and the founder of *The Theater and Its Double* Antonin Artaud, who risked his life to discover the mystery of the world in Sierra Tarahumara. This mystery is presented to us by one of the authors of this issue — Juan Chindoy in his article, and in detail in CHINDOY 2020. In 1936 Antonin Artaud, the French visionary of art, embarked on a journey to Sierra Tarahumara to learn the metaphysics of life

“higher shelf” kinds of beauty and values, such as tragedy, pathos or other metaphysical values / qualities, which are eliminated today,¹⁵ would not have to be replaced today with aesthetic values associated with modern people, such as luxury, cute, violence, retro, stardom or filigree. Beauty would have a moral ground inseparable from the agency of the subject. Beauty would be functional, not on the planes of design, aesthetic physical values of shape, color or size, but on the grounds of moral perfection, deeply motivated by the nature of the human person and the very fact of her existence.

Is the version of Integral Aesthetics offered here, referring to Aristotle (Greek tradition) and tribal practices, and also to some extent to Kant, an outdated one? Is it a “conservative” formula? Often art history has recognized (especially the case of theater) that what is valuable is what has passed and returned back, what has worked in the past... As underscored by Jalen: if the old methods have proven through so many centuries, if through them has survived my community and our tradition—that means that they are good for us. Who could guarantee—Jalen asked me—that the “new,” the technical innovations, convenience (electricity, sewerage...) will be better for our community, and that they will not destroy our spirit? Indeed, the stories of many colonized or neo-colonized communities, including some indigenous US communities, confirm the doubts of the young Taos woman.

The subsequent history of the communities of the colonized and the colonizers and the consequences of “ugliness” in the sense expressed by Edwin Leon as a lack of respect for other people, traditions, other communities and the gifts of the Creator, in the current issue is discussed by Raphael Sassower and Les Begay. Two different perspectives—two traditions in the United States. Sassower develops three symptomatic and postcolonial views of examples of contemporary controversies related to the art world in the United States that are particularly complex. Among the many questions found in Sassower’s paper is the following: “Would the removal of statues and monuments to the Confederacy have the power to rewrite American history and erase ongoing racism in America?” This is a valid, unresolved question, but does not assume Edwin Leon’s meaning of “beauty,” i.e. the respect for humans and traditions. It seems that attempts other than the revolutionary violence in the United States are, unfortunately, not taken seriously, not to mention comprehensively.

directly from a shaman. This deadly pursuit was left unanswered. The reader of Juan Chindoy’s book is fortunate to encounter it without undertaking the risk. In contrast to the Author’s claim, the answer applies universally, not only to the Sibundoy tribes.

¹⁵ See especially WITKIEWICZ 1974, also INGARDEN 1985, 1975, and 1957–1970).

The history of Navajo in the lens of art and comedy was described from the other perspective, namely from the one of Native Americans who are eradicated, by a representative of the Diné community (True People / Navajo), Les Begay (Begay's text is a response to an article devoted to the genesis and distinguishing features of comedy and a specific contemporary Western form of stand-up comedy, KAWALEC 2020). While Begay appreciated native humor as "a sense of pride among Native people" "whereby indigenous community" has survived and still here thriving in the 21st century "he pointed to the devastating impact of popular entertainment culture of the Western tradition on Native Americans. The activities of this community, as mentioned by Begay, are based on the functional and religious forms of "sand painting." This form of artistic display, fashionable in the West today, has its origins in the deep layers of the Diné tradition. In order to properly understand the area of human activity, known in the West as art, it is worth referring to their still living meaning in tribal communities. First of all, art is not a sublime and isolated field of activity for Natives. What we call art in the Western world, "Native people first made for utility."¹⁶ Moreover, "the word 'art' is not found in our language [...] We make pieces of life to see, touch, and feel. Shall we call it 'art'? I hope not. It may lose its soul."¹⁷ Sassower and Begay statements are two sides of the same phenomenon, allowing the reader to look "from the inside", on the life juices "aesthetics," flowing in the bloodstream of many communities on the North American continent.

The present issue does not answer all the questions of aesthetics, does not formulate some basic ones, such as "Do three ancient values: truth, goodness, beauty, constitute a theory or are they real? Is the perennial human question about nature as a work of art valid? In order to formulate this last question, it is necessary to impose the boundaries of the notion of art—this is the role of the aesthetics. But to answer the question of whether a tree, clouds, stones are products of the creative process, one should seriously accept assumptions that are outside of popular scientific discourse and follow the paths of communities whose beliefs sometimes are revealed to us by anthropologists or ... oneself try to create, in order to ask the question: How was it made?"¹⁸. Objects

¹⁶ Edmund J. LADD and Zuni PUEBLO in *Here, Now, and Always — Voices of the First Peoples of the Southwest* (catalog from Exhibition in Museum of Indian Arts and Culture, Museum Hill, Santa Fe 2001, p. 62).

¹⁷ Michael LACAPA, "Apache/Hopi/Tewa," in *Here, Now, and Always*, 62.

¹⁸ Alfred Gell formulated the question: How did this thing get to be here? And wrote: „Art, as a separate kind of technical activity, only carries further, through a kind involution, the enchantment which is immanent in all kinds of technical activity” (GELL 1992, 40–66. Reprint 2006, 164).

of nature can be defined as works of art, if we assume that they have their creator which has special gifts. However, this is not a response of an aesthetician formed from the Enlightenment in Western culture.

In the present issue of *Annals of Culture Studies*, apart from the above-mentioned double-voices, there are also suggestions of several different contemporary aesthetic theories. Each proposal is confronted with the broad perspective offered by intercultural research, especially anthropology. Finally, the volume also contains analyzes and original interpretations of exemplary, also colliding—contraposed as a duet—contemporary works of Western art. Among the presented theories, the closest to the American duet of Sassower and Begay is the aesthetics of engagement, formulated by Arnold Berleant, who set himself the task of a synchronous approach to art, “away from tradition, away from textual study, away from the search for first principles, and toward creative practices. and the experiential values they promote.” The opening paper of the current issue authored by the well known (also in Poland) representative of the broad mainstream of pragmatic aesthetics is an updated statement the philosopher published in 1970 as *Aesthetics and the Contemporary Arts*. The author introduces into the text the latest forms of art that have been born in the last fifty years, interpreting them in the context of his own original theory. This theory is known as “an aesthetics of engagement” and includes these features and determinants of new forms of art, in which “The audience joins with the artist as an originative force in achieving the final art work.” Berleant claims that “We can see this as art returning to its origins as a communal process.” The philosopher’s observation harmonizes with the ideas of pragmatism, and with the anthropological concept of community as a “dividuum,”¹⁹ harmonizes with the ambitions of forming a theory based on the original experience of the “rhythm of life” (see DEWEY 2005; WILKOSZEWSKA 2003). I would, however, ask the Professor a question that might initiate new considerations: What is the reason why art returns to its sources as “a communal process”? Is the reason for this perhaps the unbearable situation of extreme individualism of the Western society? A deep need for a relationship? Search for authentic relationships at any cost?

As a voice that broadens the intercultural and anthropological perspective, I propose the article by Eric Hirsch—author of *Ancestral Presence: Cosmology and Historical Experience in the Papuan Highlands* (=HIRSCH 2021)—who tells the reader he intends to “discuss how I am using the

¹⁹ On the original anthropological concept of society and the individual see especially LIPUMA 2000, but also GELL 1998, and KAWALEC2016.

notion of aesthetics in this Melanesian context.” And it is a perspective that takes “aesthetics” as a concept encompassing tribal practices. Hirsch undertakes an ethnographic description of the Fuyuge community in the Papuan highlands of Papua New Guinea, to “examine Fuyuge ideas of aesthetics and how these are related to a cosmological figure (*tidibe*). The cosmological figure is not only the source of Fuyuge aesthetic perceptions but also their ideas of history—the origin of things and how things change.” The author examines these ideas through a focus on the Fuyuge ritual known as *gab*. The aesthetics in Hirsch’s proposal is the dynamics by which persons achieve a particular visible form. “What is perceived should appear correct, should assume the appropriate aesthetic form [...] this is evidence of effectiveness and capability by those revealing such relations to others.” Hirsch proposes a functional and living aesthetics, the main role of which is to preserve the right forms of expression, passed down from generation to generation, expressed on the “skin” and intended to be “read” based on Fuyuge cosmology: “Everything in the world and how it is perceived—its aesthetic—derives from one source, from Fuyuge lands formed by *tidibe*.” The description of the ritual, a result of the author’s ethnographic research, with his beautiful photographs, reveals the characteristic non-Western concept of the *dividuum* community and the ritual of an interesting dialogue between Fuyuge social groups as an attempt to sustain their conventions and their perceptions as being at the world’s centre.

Another pair of articles, by Edyta Kuzian and Juan Chindoy Chindoy, represents two sides of the approach to dance. Kuzian refers to the formalistic ideas of Clement Greenberg. The author, without any terminological bias, using specific examples of conceptions of dance, examines the development trajectory of contemporary dance in order to justify the position of “pure art” of dance.²⁰ Chindoy, the author of *A Decolonial Philosophy of Indigenous Colombia* and a member of the Colombian Kamëntšá community, represents an opposite position. The one presented in his article has been slightly modified since publication of his monograph (from pragmatism to environmental aesthetics). It reveals ideas older and deeper than the increasingly popular version of pragmatic aesthetics. Chindoy refers to his personal experience, the history of the community of Sibundoy Valley, particularly those that affect the deepest layers of human communities. *Dividuum* society, Kamëntšá people, carefully reads each form of expression of the po-

²⁰ An interesting critique of “pure” art of dance, from the perspective of anthropological logic, took GELL 1979, 18–31. See too KAWALEC 2017.

wers of nature, because nature is the objective reality that determines human life. According to Chindoy, “all meaningful native aesthetic experiences are enactments of the core belief about the relations of harmony that humans seek to establish in the universe.” The philosopher’s broad contexts of research and interpretation transgress not only the boundaries of meaning and object of the research culture in the West; Chindoy formulates a new version of the aesthetics of the environment at the borderline of pragmatism and anthropological research. Although dance for Kamëntšá constitutes a part of the religious experience—the philosopher narrows the field of his considerations to the influence of dance on the communal and individual spirit: dance “makes us aware of the possibility of transcending the present without denying it or escaping from it.” Although, the author, analyzes the art (dance) in the context of nature, evil, ugliness and beauty, and adopts an satisfactory attitude – he stops from answering the question about the creator of the experienced world, of human beings and nature. In his final considerations, he sticks to an aesthetic position.

The next two papers present philosophical positions. Luty’s article is an elaboration of the evolutionary approach to art and aesthetic (EAAA), based on Darwinian theories and Denis Dutton. Luty updates this conception and defines art as “no longer merely objects or actions, but also forms of human behavior (that might have an adaptive value).” He lists the most important determinants of the theory, hypotheses and merits. He poses the question, to which it is difficult to find a concluding answer: “Would humans have reached with the same degree of civilization, social and moral development if he had not told stories, created imaginary worlds, participated in collective artistic and ritualistic activities, embellished their bodies and his surroundings, and not drawn cognitive and, above all, emotional satisfaction from all these behaviours?” Luty’s article collects the main ideas of evolutionary aesthetics, developed in his latest monograph *Art as Adaptation: Universalism in evolutionary aesthetics*. The article by Raffaella Giovagnoli “Rituals: Philosophical Perspectives and Normative Aspects” though it does not present anthropological research, is interested in the subject of the ritual, which places it at the interface between the pair of positions in the current issue. The philosopher advances the claim that “ritual” is an inherently philosophical category and demonstrates its constitutive role for social ontology.²¹ The author discusses how different philosophical traditions may be interpreted for their insights on ritual as a social habit. She concludes that the ritual by “creating social

²¹ A more extensive study of these issues in *The Logic of Social Practices* 2020.

spaces” leads to emergent forms of collective intentionality and imposition of a status function on objects or persons in the relevant context.

The next pair of articles are analyses and original interpretations of exemplary, but also very different contemporary Western artworks. Barbara Tryka describes, analyzes and interprets the performance *IMMACULATE* by Casey Jenkins. This is done in the context of the ethical dimension of art, the moral determinants of artistic action (performance art), by entering the field of human sexuality, and proposing to solve the problem of sexuality, reproduction and art in the context of integral understanding of human beings. This can occur when freedom harmonizes with love and responsibility for every human activity, including the artistic one. As the author admits: “The article is based on the assumption that art is not autonomous. Thus, the author shows appreciation to the moral dimension of artist’s freedom and responsibility for taken actions supporting view that value of art is not dominant over the human.” Topicality of the subject is deepened by Tryka’s analysis concerning the problem of authenticity and play—the key categories of contemporary performative art and her arguments for the merits of subordination of the artistic values to the moral dimension of the creator. Her analyzes are based on the reception of the social media community to the Australian performer’s media documented performance, launched to establish contact with the spectators. The article is a critical analysis of a popular form of contemporary art. The other example of a contemporary work of art represented in the current issue is the performance detailed by Andrea Meyer-Fraatz concerning Saint Francis of Assisi and directed by the Croatian author Rena Medvešek. The performance is an interesting, rare example of modern art exerting a significant impact on the audiences’ attitudes. The author of the article specifically discusses the contexts, interpreting the characteristics of the holy hero, the patron saint of the poor and the reformer of the Church in the context of contemporary history, politicc, and the moral and religious contexts in Croatia. Let two features of the theater announce the article: “This, in my opinion (says director/actor), is just theater; not that Certain people watch Certain other people do something, but That we are together for a while,” “after the performance they felt differently than before watching the performance, “*Brother Magarac* are performances which really leave something noble in the soul of man,” and notice that this is not the case of a shocking masochistic, violent or pornographic spectacle, but we are concerned with a poor spectacle concerning a poor saint.

The above pair of articles constitute a potential panorama of conceptions of aesthetics initially set out as an integral aesthetics, based on ethnographic data, aesthetic and ethical theories with the ambition of formulating fundamental, timeless questions for humanity and individuals within the scope of socio-cultural, and in particular philosophical, anthropology.

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Summary

In the article, I propose a conception of aesthetics that undermines the dogmatic idea of a pure discipline exempt from moral evaluation. This project is motivated by cross-cultural research. The second part overviews the articles published in this issue which are organized along their interculturalism.

Key words: aesthetics; integrity; moral evaluation; interculturalism.

ESTETYKA INTEGRALNA. PROJEKT
WPROWADZENIE DO *TIMELESS CONTROVERSY*
OVER CONTEMPORARY ART

Streszczenie

W artykule proponuję koncepcję estetyki przełamującej dogmatyczną ideę dyscypliny czystej, która nie unika wartościowania moralnego. Projekt ten motywowany jest badaniami międzykulturowymi. Część druga tekstu poświęcona jest przeglądowi publikowanych w numerze artykułów, uporządkowanych według klucza międzykulturowości.

Słowa kluczowe: estetyka; integralność; wartościowanie moralne; międzykulturowość.