

ANNA KAWALEC

DIALOGUE ABOUT ART:  
INTRODUCTION TO “WHAT IS ART?  
HORIZONS OF THE CREATOR AND RECIPIENT”

The contents of the current issue of *Roczniki Kulturoznawcze* [Annals of Cultural Studies] represent the initial stage of work on the project of integral aesthetics, which was outlined in this journal in issue 4/2021. This project is characterized by two main determinants: an integrated approach to aesthetics of an intercultural character, and the integration of artistic and aesthetic values with moral values.<sup>1</sup> The initial stage of this project is designed as an intercultural and cross-social groups overview of viewpoints concerning “art,” which is particularly focused on the clash between creators and recipients of art. This overview is carried out as a forum for the voices of individuals from a wide range of social and cultural backgrounds because the editors wanted to capture the essence of the ongoing confrontation of both social positions, as authenticated by the experiences of the person.

This current issue is an attempt to open this discussion to a wider, integrated forum of anthropology, which is conceived not so much as another theoretical proposition (cultural, social, and philosophical) but rather as human attitude (representing mutual respect) of the artist and their sensitivity to the recipient and other persons, as well as of the recipient and their sensitivity to a person with special artistic needs. Therefore, the content of this issue is the result of gathering (as is typical in this type of work) of material that for various reasons is selective. However, I believe that this task should begin with the project of elaboration of integrated aesthetics in the conditions of contemporary misunderstandings and

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Kawalec, „Integral Aesthetics. Project: Introduction to a timeless controversy over contemporary art,” *Roczniki Kulturoznawcze* [Annals of Cultural Studies] 22, no. 1 (2021): 10.

conflicts, which result in the emergence of hermetic and even hostile social environments.

This issue resembles a “tumble of connections and contradictions that constitute contemporary Indigenous identities, opening a dialogue between artists, audiences, and the interconnected mesh-works woven between all our relations.”<sup>2</sup> The gathering of complementary, but also often opposing, positions on art is tantamount to adopting the attitude of listening to and understanding the determinants of the position of another person, and perhaps supplementing one’s own understanding of art and the human being. This is the practical purpose of the flexible form of this issue that was adopted by the editors as a forum of live voices that are not interfered with by the editors. Consequently, the authors were asked (in the first place) to submit an authentic voice, supported by biographical accents, and their own research and creative experience.

The project of integral aesthetics, like many research projects in line with Western traditions, begins with the arrangement of the research field. In this case, this arrangement is based not so much on the standard “state of research” as a starting point but on the collection of specific, quite diversified “material” (which is treated as empirical material). Additionally, we propose an initial, introductory form of work on short “naive” thought experiments. The following list gives some of the proposed exercises that we encourage a patient and insightful reader to follow:

1. Slowly look around you, then try to recall other places that you have visited recently and in the past, where specific human creations and products caught your attention. Focus your attention on particularly remembered places and artifacts. Take your time. Move very slowly on this journey from one place to another. Do not overlook the circumstances of your stay. Before departing from one, remember what you thought, what you felt when you were in front of this artifact at that particular place and time. Contrast that memory with the present feeling, with your present thoughts and experiences. Do not impose upon yourself the past judgments and feelings. Watch and let yourself feel. Think and answer, are the past and the present the same? What makes them overlap or not?

2. Also: If you have spent your last remembered vacation in the European or Western world, especially in a big city, then you presumably have often come

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<sup>2</sup> John G. Hampton (organizing the exhibition), “In Dialogue.” Exhibition in Art Museum in Toronto. September 6 – October 7, 2017, accessed August 30, 2022, <https://artmuseum.utoronto.ca/exhibition/in-dialogue/>.

across some “works of art.” Now close your eyes. Recall the same view: many, several, or just one particular piece of art that caught your attention. Watch them carefully in the place and circumstances of your past experience. Take your time to specify space, time, and accompanying feelings. Then, remove from this comprehensive image that remembered unique work. Remove from each subsequent image of the place and circumstances the relevant artistic work that you have remembered. Travel in your imagination through the remembered places where you experienced these peculiar works, but this time without them. Look again at the places and tame them. Slowly look around at each of them again. Combine these landscapes.

3. Are you able to remove the artworks that you have learned from secondary sources (studies, reports, or the Internet) from your feelings and experiences? Try this step persistently.

#### A WORLD WITHOUT ART

These suggestions are selected, incomplete, and obviously subject to different assumptions. The basic assumption is, for example, that “art” is understood as an “exclusive” (socially and culturally exposed) work, which is classified as a work of art. After the twentieth century, many would disagree with this assumption. Closely related (but not identical to the previous one) is the assumption that “art” is understood as a product or an action of an artist, an individual with exceptional abilities in the field of creating artistic qualities which evoke a specific type of reception in the form of experiencing aesthetic values. Today, in the twenty-first century many people will disagree—and not only representatives of avant-garde groups of aesthetic researchers but also among the weakly interested non-professionals. The latter are determined to receive various artistic forms, which are imposed in almost every space of life, especially urban, and almost universally in the Western culture. There are many more listed and similar unjustified assumptions contained in the proposed exercises, especially if we broaden the perspective to embrace non-Western or post-colonial views.

The suggested experiments are only a proposal to pause, to “contemplate” what we, today, call “art,” which is essentially entangled in cultures and traditions but which can reveal what is invisible in humans. These exercises serve to start anew, to take the first step on a land that is not owned by artists or non-artists but is inhabited by all human beings who are creative agents. The exercises are intended to discover—through the integrated being (and not only cultural identity)

of a person—the best area to come across. These experiments, as well as the content of the current issue, are meant to bring us (of course through culture and tradition) to a person in their specific environment, to their actions and experiences (perhaps also sources and purpose). I think that this type of research approach gives a real chance not so much for forming another theoretical system but for *μετάνοια* [*metánoia*] (but not in the sense of a revolution) of human attitudes—for mutual respect in dialogue, an attitude of lively listening in the social nexus, an atmosphere of openness and kindness also in the artistic nexus.

In the context of the nexus, in the context of integral aesthetics, one cannot ignore the intercultural perspective (Alfred Gell formulated anthropology of art as an intercultural and timeless theory). It will be represented in the voices of this issue. However, at this point I will take into account, at least an outline of, the perspective of non-Western and post-colonial worlds on art.

Critics of Alfred Gell's theory of anthropology of art were right, pointing out that the British researcher did not write about art, that his theory applied to all creations that affect another person or community.<sup>3</sup> In this perspective, just as the Maori warrior canoes or the Turkish Bayraktars have an impact on their opponents, in the same way so do bandages or bread baked in Syria, or the causative mines of Pol Pot that were analyzed by Gell (who was an anthropologist who implemented the positivist project of science but did not take up the problem of the moral perspective).<sup>4</sup> I think that it is worth looking at “art” through the optics of human action, its causes, benefits, values, and purpose. It is worth going back to the moment when “art” was not a cultural “specialization,” an exclusive part of the social, even economic, environment. It is worth going back to the world in which the idea of art was born, to the origins, to the traditions of some societies of the world preserved today.

The statements of the Indigenous peoples of North America quoted in the issue 1/2021 of *Roczniki Kulturoznawcze* [Annals of Cultural Studies] express an understanding of art that fundamentally contrasts with that of the Western traditions. Let us recall two of them: “Native people first made for utility” (Ladd 2001, 62). 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

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<sup>3</sup> Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Ross Bowden, “A Critique of Alfred Gell on «Art and Agency».” *Oceania* 74, no 4 (2004): 309–324; Howard Morphy, “Art as a Mode of Action: Some Problems with Gell’s «Art and Agency»,” *Journal of Material Culture* 14, no. 1 (2019): 5–2.

<sup>4</sup> Alfred Gell, „The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology,” in *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics*, edited by Jeremy Coote and Anthony Shelton (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 40–66.

soul” (Lacapa 2001, 62). The utilitarian perspective corresponds to the ancient understanding of art as τέχνη [*technē*], it was expressed in works demonstrating the political and religious power of Greece. Perceptions of the world without “art,” of a living, holistic, and dynamic world which nonetheless realizes the goal of the existence of an individual that is inseparable from their good, the good of their community and even of all mankind (cf. the way of praying during the Cochiti ceremony and in a conversation with a representative of Dine in July 2022 in Santa Fe, who while pointing the various persons seen in the city, uttered prayers for them and in their name... It is a dividual person) to this day characterizes unique Indigenous communities.

Unfortunately, many of the Aboriginal communities lost what constituted their Indigeness, identity, and uniqueness, mainly because of the reduction of the range of relations that formed the identity of an individual, their environment and constituted the common values of the community. It is hard to resist the impression that such changes have already taken place and are still taking place in front of our eyes—and their reversal will no longer be possible. I eagerly absorbed my friend’s story and the written accounts of the representatives of the Indigenous South American community describing the Betšknaté ceremony among Kamëntšá, a Colombian community on the border region of Putumayo. The stories evoked the fundamental symbols of the culture of this people. The basic principle of interpretation in my friend’s study was to measure existence in terms of the past and present—the continuity that was clear in view of the rule of justice, and respect for the ancestors and traditions of the people.<sup>5</sup> The richness of the stories of the Indigenous people of the Sibundoy Valley is present today in various artifacts of the community (e.g., sculptures, the board house, the Shanayoy (the healing center), belts and ceremonial jewelry, and gallery) but most importantly in the famous “dancing of forgiveness.”

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<sup>5</sup> Juan Alejandro Chindoy Chindoy, *A Decolonial Philosophy of Indigenous Colombia. Time, Beauty, and Spirit in Kamëntšá Culture* (London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2020).



Belts, sculptures from Sibundoy. Photos by the author  
Shanayoy – Taita Juan Bautista Agreda,

<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=458489009199813&set=a.348916146823767>

The history of this celebration evokes the best moments of human history, it marks the ways of the harmonious existence of the community, as well as forgiveness and reconciliation with the colonizers and their successors. This was the purpose of the concelebrated mass that opened the ceremony in the Catholic Cathedral of St. Alphonsus de Ligouri in Sibundoy at the square which commemorates people killed by the invaders in the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries.



Betšknaté Celebration, July 28, 2022. Photos by the author

It was attended by representatives of tribal authorities and members of the community, sometimes entire families, wearing ceremonial costumes, with instruments and accompanied by animals. There were also many guests, spectators, and photographers. However, there was much more space in the cathedral than the participants of the rite. After the end of the mass, to the accompaniment of tribal drums and wind instruments, participants left in a certain order dancing. In the square in front of the cathedral, an almost hour-long dance ceremony took place, with the use of masks (with mainly historical and healing functions), bringing together the tribe's management and groups of dancing audience.

Two hours after the ceremony started, the atmosphere began to change. More and more often you could meet drunken eaters, and also older children. Most of those moving through the Sibundoy center to the rhythm and to the music of both more and less skilled instrumentalists looked for places to get more of the cause for exhilaration, men, women, couples, and children. Those who could not afford to buy alcohol or wanted to use additional alcoholic beverages lined up in a long line leading to the house of the community board to get the traditional chicha (bitter-sour corn beer). Before deep night fell, few were standing on their feet, the square and the town were deserted, Betšknaté was practically over. The ceremony of reconciliation had little in common with the long tradition of the rite and the great idea of reconciliation—neither between the community members themselves, nor between the Natives and representatives of the Catholic post-colonial tradition.



Betšknaté – Forgiveness Ceremony – A mosaic of traditions.  
Painting on the wall of the community board house. Photo by the author



The ceremony was not attended by many, including inhabitants of Sibundoy, Indigenous Kamëntšá, and especially the elders. They decided to stay at home. However, many non-Indigenous people and guests, including documentary filmmakers, journalists and tourists attended. What was intrinsic element of the Kamëntšá community has ceased to constitute it, the past during Betšknaté (February 28, 2022) manifested itself in the hidden meanings of the myths of masks, the form of a trance dance supported by the sounds of drums, and winds, and alcohol. It was difficult to see any particular gestures or choreography that were intended to reveal a deliberate reconciliation between people or traditions. Even the ceremonial dance in the dense atmosphere of the feasts in the walls of the community board house did not express any particular relationship of closeness (apart from the physical one, which was due to the lack of space). Perhaps this was the reason why many of the community elders did not attend the ceremony.

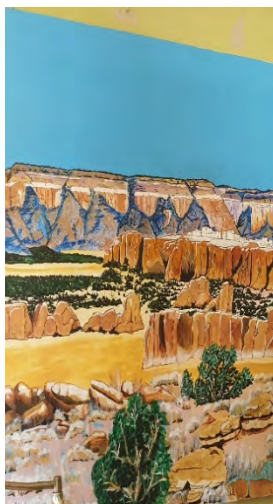
The present broke ties with the past, the attitude of respectful for elders, for history and their beliefs remained the tradition and the idea of the older, and was merely a lip service for the younger. It also remained, in a slightly modified form compared to the traditional one, in the art practiced by a few entrepreneurial community members and their guests. This art by the elders of the community is considered as follows: if it does not continue the tradition (e.g., making instruments, clothing, or ornaments), then it merely serves commercial purposes and functions outside of the community (an elder from the Sibundoy community, author interview, Sibundoy, 27 February 2022).

For the representatives of Kamëntšá, everyone is an artist. A young girl (a young girl from Sibundoy, author interview, 9 March 2022) told me that for her it was her mother who was the first artist because she gave birth to her. Her mother also makes ceremonial belts and other items that incorporate myths, community symbols and thereby perpetuates the bond between generations and traditions. However, this girl also adopts an attitude of rebellion and disobedience toward her parents, toward their beliefs and demands, and (as the young) tracks down the falsehood of the community, but without asking questions about history, beliefs, and myths. I heard the complaints of the older generation many times in July this year also around the Plaza of Santa Fe expressed by the Indigenous people of North America. These were complaints about the lack of interest of their descendants in the history of the community and their indifference to tradition (July 2022). The situation among the Indigenous people of Navajo or Pueblo Laguna after the COVID pandemic has increased the isolation between generations, led to closing of pueblos and reserves, and exposed many tribespeople to pain, fear, and exclusion. Some returned to the Governor's Palace, selling traditional, original jewelry, but to this day fear and pain can be seen in their eyes, voices, and gestures.



Some Indigenous returned to the Governor's Palace. Santa Fe, NM, USA, July 2022.  
Photos by the author

Three years ago, Leon from Laguna Pueblo, a painting fireman, explained to me that he was painting pictures because he needed to share, to convey a landscape that is not available to others (author interview, Laguna Pueblo, 5 July 2019).



Thankfully to Leon. Photos by the author

However, neither he nor a young girl's mother from Sibundoy consider themselves as artists. For Leon of Laguna Pueblo, as well as for a senior member of the community of Kamëntšá, the concept of justice is more fundamental to understand humans and actions. My senior interlocutor from Sibundoy community identified it with kindness and rationality, he said: "A rational person, a good personality is one who does not drink, does not fight, who respects the elders and the rights, and the one whose words and deeds are coherent" (February 27, How incongruous this is an ideal to what happened at the reconciliation ceremony!). The Western tradition of understanding truth should then be amended with: "consonance of thoughts, words and deeds."<sup>6</sup> Truth thus understood and acted in the Western world, as in many places of the world today, is almost gone because—as expressed in a letter to Czesław Miłosz by Thomas Merton: "a new huge community of managers," people "with three or four eyes and iron fangs"<sup>7</sup> prefer profit and domination over the values of person, justice, and respect for the other person and the environment. These managers operate not only in the field of economics but treat it as a tool to control others, which undermines human rights and justice—a justice that is not separate from human action, including art.

With this current issue of *Annals*, we hope to commence a dialogue on art, its sources, epiphany, and purpose, seeking a common ground for the conversation between people, cultures, and values (returning to the time preceding the conventional forms, heading with respect toward a formula of art that would be acceptable both to native communities and to other societies). We have provided the authors with a fair opportunity to express themselves—not so much in the manner of Greek tragedies,<sup>8</sup> which equally distributed the number of verses in the dialogue between ancient heroes, but by allowing each author to choose the form, length, style, content of the voice, and the position of a tragic or comic person or choir.

As we stated earlier, this issue resembles a "tumble of connections and contradictions that constitute contemporary Indigenous [and other] identities, opening a dialogue between artists, their audiences, and the interconnected mesh-works woven between all our relations."<sup>9</sup> The structure and form of this issue may resemble the diversity of people, ideas and forms—twenty-eight authors from fifteen countries. The authors represent both positions towards art: they are artists and audiences from various social groups, professionals, students and enthusiasts

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate*, q. 1, a. 1, c.

<sup>7</sup> *Striving Towards Being: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz*, ed. Robert Faggen (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1996), Merton's letter, 21 May 1959.

<sup>8</sup> Jaqueline de Romilly, *La tragédie grecque* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> Hampton, "In Dialogue."

or critics and persons who are not particularly interested in art. The forms of the authors' texts are very different: we can find a strict form of a scientific article, essay, report, photo report, reflection, painterly contemplation. However, they all have a specific task in common: a personal answer to the question "What is art?". Many authors took the view of the recipient or creator, but many also spoke from both positions. Thus, the editor adopted a different principle of the issue structure than the forced and artificially divided positions of the authors—she decided to present the positions of the authors in alphabetical order. At the same time, the authors' bios will be placed at the end of the issue in the style they have chosen, which will authenticate their position (according to the principle: that the best understanding of art is those who at least tried to perform<sup>10</sup>). The editor asks the reader to accept with understanding the not very creative structure of the issue, but—according to editor—it is fair. Each text is an essential thread in the material of humanity, revealing the uniqueness of the person and her ideas about art. All voices, on the other hand, create a forum for dialogue about art and humans.

We hope that this dialogue will lead not so much to a vicious circle of concepts, understandings, and interpretations, but to attempts to unravel these threads and arrange them as a proposal for conceptualization, and above all, attempts to practice art in life. We also hope that it will result in the arrangement of proposals for choices and actions, so that the concept of art will mean a living process of shaping justice by every human-creator, because "often having an unambiguous label equals closing the mouth."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Gell, „The Technology.”

<sup>11</sup> *Striving Towards Being*, Th. Merton, Letter to Cz. Miłosz, 21 V 1959.

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