

I Piotr Piotrowski **(14 June 1952 – 3 May 2015)**

On 15 May 2015, the ashes of Piotr Piotrowski were laid to rest at the Miłostowo Cemetery in Poznań. He died from complications of leukaemia, for which he had been undergoing treatment for the previous ten years. Piotr Piotrowski was born on 14 June 1952 in Poznań. Without a doubt, he was one of the more vibrant personalities in contemporary Polish art history. He could be described as a romantic researcher with left-wing views and the soul of a curious child.

As an intellectual, Professor Piotrowski was deeply involved in on-going art life. He shaped it as a critic, organizer of exhibitions and participant of debates. He conducted research on modern and contemporary art. His activity was marked with a civic ethos and concern about current social and political affairs. Friendly and kind, he was also stubborn and always faithful to his professed values.

Always on the move, always ready to face challenges – at least since his high school times. It is difficult to accurately describe him with such short hindsight, so the following farewell word to Professor Piotr Piotrowski will be almost statistical in nature. The deceased was an outstanding art historian, an authority in academic circles in Poland and abroad, and author of a vast number of publications: around fifteen books, over a hundred articles, more than sixty press texts, to say nothing of interviews. His research was focused on Central Europe, yet it is worth remembering that he actually defined, even created Central European art for his contemporaries. This holds equally true for its description and topography as well as for introducing its key works to academic circulation.

Having completed high school in Środa Wielkopolska in 1971, Piotr Piotrowski started studying art history at the Adam Mickiewicz University (AMU) in Poznań. Here, five years later, he defended his Master's thesis entitled *The Social Reception of S.I. Witkiewicz Portrait Company* and – right after his studies – began work at the Institute of Cultural Studies, which back then still formed part of the Faculty of History. Piotrowski was not too fond of the academic method implemented at the Institute under the management of Prof. Jerzy Kmita and, two years later, was expelled from AMU for failing to attend academic faculty meetings held by the famous philosopher and methodologist.

During the following two years, Piotr Piotrowski worked on and off, mainly preparing documentation for the regional conservator of historical monuments. He also tried his hand as a museologist, briefly working as an assistant at the Regional Museum in Wolsztyn. This was a period of limbo, of transition in his career, as Piotr Piotrowski had a clearly defined idea for life, which included neither the Poznań school of methodology nor employment at a regional museum. He was probably aware that his career depended on finding a friendly university environment. University gave him the possibility of open academic debate. He also needed contacts with art galleries, as it made him sensitive to problems that occupied artists. When, thanks to the efforts of Professor Konstanty Kalinowski, he was employed as senior assistant

at AMU's Institute of Art History, he apparently found his space, as he remained there until the end. He was prepared for the post and did not start work from scratch, as throughout the turbulent period of looking for his place in life, he had been writing his doctoral thesis. He defended it in 1982, with the aforementioned Professor Kalinowski as his supervisor. The thesis concerned the theory of art formulated by Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz. Professor Kalinowski was Piotr Piotrowski's guide, but his chosen masters in the first period of his academic endeavours, as he had emphasized many times, were Jarosław Kozłowski and Andrzej Turowski. These names require no explanation today. Thanks to Kozłowski, Piotrowski came into contact with problems related to exhibiting contemporary art; thanks to Turowski, he gained access to methodological debates on art that represented an alternative to proposals endorsed in Poland. It is not without significance that, while still a student, Piotrowski became associated with the "Akumulatory 2" gallery, which was managed, among others, by Kozłowski and played an important role in Polish artistic life.

He obtained his habilitation in 1993 for a dissertation entitled *The Artist between Revolution and Reaction. A Study on the Ethical History of Russian Avant-Garde Art*. Consequently, he could become an associate professor at the AMU, which happened in 1995. The shift in his research between the PhD and habilitation – abandoning Witkacy in favour of the problems troubling the Russian avant-garde in times of crisis – was a meaningful one. Having experienced revolutionary days in Petersburg, Witkacy was terrified of the Soviet ideology. An avid admirer of Witkacy in his youth, Piotr Piotrowski recognized its significance for Europe, which had remained under the Soviet influence. He delved into revolutionary communist ideologies and became an unquestionable authority in that respect – research institutes from the whole world either turned to him or awarded him research grants.

Thus, Piotr Piotrowski was a visiting professor at Bard College, Center for Curatorial Studies, Annandale-on-Hudson in New York (2001), the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (2003), the Humboldt University of Berlin (2011–12), as well as the University of Warsaw (2011, 2012–13). Even if we add that he was a member of the Association of Art Historians (UK) and College Art Association (USA), as well as a fellow or scholarship holder of over 20 prestigious academic and research centres, including the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts in Washington (1989/1990), Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton (2000), Collegium Budapest (2005–06), Clark Art Institute in Williamstown (2009) and the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles (2015) – he interrupted this stay and returned to Poland, sick – we are not going to arrive at the full picture. In addition, Professor Piotrowski was a permanent fellow of the Graduate School for East and South East European Studies, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, München/Regensburg Universität. One should also specify that between 2009 and 2010, he headed the European Network for Avant-Garde and Modernism Studies (EAM).

For reasons of order, allow me to add that he received a professorial nomination in 2000 and became a full professor at the AMU over five years later. Piotr Piotrowski was very dutiful, which is why he never shirked a challenge. Between 1996 and 1999, he served as Deputy Director for Academic Affairs and after that, for many years, he was the director of the Institute of Art History and head of the Department of Modern Art History (until 2008).

The importance of his position in the academic and museum world is testified by his membership in numerous museum boards, advisory and editorial committees. He was also an expert at numerous international exhibitions and co-author of catalogues. It would not be an overstatement to say that his ideas attracted other researchers. He infected them with his enthusiasm and independent thinking. Consequently, he was readily invited – often as a keynote speaker – to numerous academic conferences in Poland and abroad. It is hardly

surprising that professor Piotrowski exerted a great influence on his students and exuded a welcoming aura. In total, he supervised 13 doctoral theses. The majority of their authors went on to become important figures in Polish and foreign history of contemporary art. His educational activity was both far-reaching and generous – let me just mention that thanks to him, academic trips for students and doctoral students were organized to China and Mexico, including meetings at local universities.

The importance of Piotr Piotrowski's pioneer research on art of the communist bloc as seen from a common perspective cannot be overstated today. The launch of innovative and revealing research on art in post-communist countries, with impressive evidence in the form of *In the Shadow of Yalta* and *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe*, published in Polish and English, remains his one major achievement.

*In the Shadow of Yalta. Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989*¹ is a unique publication, first in the world to offer a comprehensive outlook on art of the Eastern Bloc as a stand-alone subject. Without this book, it would not be possible to imagine present studies on Central Europe after 1945. On the other hand, in *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe* (first edition in Polish: Poznań, 2010, then in English: London, 2012), Piotrowski analyses the public space as a positive factor in contemporary art. The latter publication heralds the research he conducted throughout the last years. The most recent direction of Professor Piotrowski's deliberations were the problems of museology and the relationship between art and globalization. The first articles on this subject were published before his death.

Piotr Piotrowski was always looking for a challenge. The adventure that began in "Akumulatory 2" had its sequels. In early 1990s, the then director of the National Museum in Poznań, Professor Kalinowski, invited Piotrowski to manage the modern art department at the institution – in 1992 he became the curator of the Gallery of Contemporary Art, where he worked for five years. The exhibition entitled *The odNOWA Gallery, 1964–1969* was prepared already in 1993. However, it was Piotrowski's 1996 exhibition *Thaw* that represents an important turning point in terms of Polish exhibitions of socialist art. The following year, he invited his master, Jarosław Kozłowski, to a solo exhibition entitled *Jarosław Kozłowski. Spaces of Time*. The exhibition *Zofia Kulik. From Siberia to Cyberia* (1999) curated by Piotrowski took place already after he left the museum. On account of censorial interventions in the shape of the exhibition on the part of NMP's director, the relationship between Piotrowski and his former thesis supervisor significantly cooled.

The last museum challenge – so recent it would seem – was accepting the post of director of the National Museum in Warsaw, one of the most important museums in Poland. He headed the institution between 2009 and 2010. Rather than being responsible for the museum's management and administration, Piotrowski strived to create an original institution that would reflect his ideas on the tasks of art. The more time passes from his sudden departure from the NMW, the more voices recall the times of his turbulent leadership with sympathy. It is through work at this museum, or rather attempts at reforming it, that the idea for the book *Muzeum krytyczne* [A critical museum] was born (Polish edition: Poznań, 2011, then Serbian: Belgrade, 2013).² The fundamental idea consisted in changing the museum's paradigm – Piotrowski strived to transfer the idea of critical art onto the institution of a museum. This stemmed from

¹ Polish edition: Poznań, 2005, with its subsequent English (London, 2011) and Croatian editions – *Avangarda u sjeni Jalte. Umjetnost Srednjoistočne Europe u razdoblju 1945–1989* (Zagreb, 2011). Italian and French ones are underway.

² *Kritički Muzej* (Belgrad, 2013).

his conviction that there could exist museums without great art, yet not without ideas, since their proper task lay in involvement in broadly understood social activity. Museums are social institutions, and as such, they form part of political actions. It is difficult to assess his influence on matters related to exhibiting works of art. However, one may not resist the impression that the concept of a museum institution he proposed is another incarnation of Piotrowski's heterogeneous fascinations with debates of the Russian avant-garde and ideologists of Socialist Realism on the tasks faced by the artist. In that respect, Piotrowski's proposals should be seen as a continuation of the concept of Alexey Alexandrovich Fedorov-Davydov (1900–69), formulated in the late 1920s, who propagated the importance of museums without masterpieces and emphasized the dominant role of the message conveyed by exhibition concepts (see Maria Kokkori, "Exhibiting Malevich under Stalin," in *Utopian Reality: Reconstructing Culture in Revolutionary Russia and beyond*, Christina Lodder, Maria Kokkori and Maria Mileeva, eds, Leiden, 2013). Certain ideas need the right time to become established. The notion propagated by Piotr Piotrowski arouses interest and debates; at least this is the impression one may get from statements included in the publication edited by Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius and Piotr Piotrowski – *From Museum Critique to the Critical Museum* (London, 2015). The book he did not live to see was published in July.

For Piotr Piotrowski, it was obvious that the museum, like science, should not be neutral, but creative and socially – that is, politically – involved. Therefore, change and confrontation characterized both his academic and institutional activity. The appearance of Piotr Piotrowski at the National Museum in Warsaw caused considerable commotion and infringed on previous rituals. However, it also provoked multifaceted museological reflection on the tasks of the museum and – consequently – the formulation and delineation of variant perspectives on the perception of a museum as an institution. The diagnoses formulated as a result of this process and the directions of initiated reforms were not assessed unanimously. It may seem that the brief period of Piotrowski's management of the NMW caused more far-reaching changes than it could initially seem. On 18 June 2015, at a meeting of the National Museum of Warsaw's Board of Trustees, professor Jack Lohman asked for a moment of silence to commemorate the deceased former director of the institution with the following words: "What is happening now, the Museum's accomplishments, are partially caused by changes implemented under Piotrowski's management. This was a very difficult time, full of unrest and necessary decisions that laid the foundations for the present situation."

Translated by Aleksandra Szkudłapska