

Antoni Szoska

The Private Zone of Silence

I remember the day when I met Ryszard Otręba in a corridor of the Cracovian Academy of Fine Arts and, while talking with him, I learned that he had just returned from a short stay in... Puerto Rico and that, on the way, he had stopped in... the Hilton Hotel in New York – unfortunately, for a couple of hours only before catching another flight from the Kennedy Airport. His travel, as it turned out, had been connected with his participation in the jury of the International Print Biennial in San Juan, Puerto Rico. All this would not be extraordinary in itself, were it not for the fact that this actual "worldliness" of the artist very decidedly contrasts with his humble and not very perspicuous, albeit generally smiling, personage of a teacher (since 1961) in the Cracow Academy of Fine Arts. Well-known and appreciated in several countries as a graphic artist and designer, Otręba has, in fact, remained a private person. On the cover of one of his catalogues Otręba published a photograph showing himself in his own flat and studio, accompanied by inserted portraits of his wife and two sons. I suppose that this intimate attitude towards reality finds, in a sense, a reflection in Otręba's oeuvre, which allows us to come into a private contact with the author himself.

The number of the artist's achievements is quite considerable. He has, undoubtedly, been successful, though not in such a spectacular way as Kantor or Penderecki, who have already become entries in the world encyclopedia of art. The entry "Ryszard Otręba" can also be found there, but one has to know how to find it and assess rightly. Otręba begins his career as "number one". It all started with the diploma with distinction at the Faculty of Interior Architecture of the Academy of Fine Arts in Cracow (where he additionally attended graphics classes). Later he participated in the 1st Polish Print Biennial in Cracow (1960). From then on the list of the artist's exhibitions grew in size with every passing year. Since 1964 Otręba has more and more frequently put his works on display abroad: from Prague, through Havana, New York, Sydney, to Tokyo. A similar situation obtains in what concerns his awards and works present in collections of museums and galleries around the world.

His studies at the Interior Architecture, coupled with active practising of artistic graphics, cannot have remained without influence on his further creativity. Thus Otręba has been practising drawing

and artistic print besides typically design-oriented disciplines such as: visual communication, poster, museum displays and industrial design. These experiences, which – in a sense – originated in Otręba's studies, have resulted in a sophisticated graphic oeuvre, approaching the constructivistic geometrical abstraction.

During our conversation in the artist's flat (studio), his wife remarks, quite casually, that he works absolutely concentrated, which allows him to dissociate himself totally from the surrounding domestic life. And although a certain degree of concentration is typical of every artist, in Otręba's case it becomes of a very special importance. As a side-note one can add that, in general, the creation in the field of graphics demands from an artist a greater discipline (hence also concentration) than easel painting. While using the term "artistic disarray" we usually mean the latter. The artistic reason which intensifies Otręba's focussing on his work is his wish to totally control the creative process. This he does both in what concerns his material and in the way of its elaboration. Otręba does not utilize ready materials such as board, linoleum or copperplate. What he practices are plaster-prints. He casts a plasterplate by himself, hardens it and covers with black Chinese ink. On thus prepared surface there arises a drawing made with a graver applied several times (which produces characteristic effects). At this point Otręba draws our attention to the fact that whiteness of the drawing executed in plaster against the background of black ink allows him, already at this preliminary stage, to control the composition. Now, after putting on some printing ink, he proceeds to making plaster-prints on paper. This, in turn, he achieves through rubbing in the paint with a printing-block. As we can see, this process absorbs the author completely. It is not only a purely technical endeavour, for in reference to Otręba's prints, it finds its total reflection in the picture, a trace of the graver, a trace of the artist's hand and his visual meditation.

At this point one can quote a great poet and constructor of the picture, Vassilij Kandinsky, who said that the picture surface ("PS") is a living creature and that "(...) behind what is visible and tangible is hidden that which is invisible and elusive". If we look at the picture in this manner, in Kandinsky's opinion we shall be able to feel "the inner pulsation" of its living essence.