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Affective Avant-gardism

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Creative works must clearly communicate the author's emotional states but also be able to "infect" the audiences with them; intellectualized or formally complicated creations, or those which indicate the author's detachment are manifestations of degraded and dishonest art (Leo Tolstoy). Art should be an escape from personality, a skilled depersonalization and an infiltration of extra-aesthetic experiences (T.S. Eliot). Avant-garde art is an expression of emotional reticence and reluctance (Tadeusz Peiper). New art is an experiment, a technique, a practice aimed at disturbing the aesthetic and perceptive habits of the audiences (Viktor Shklovsky). Sincerity of the author is legitimate only when it is constructed (Karol Irzykowski). Modern art breaks away from realism which induces simple psycho-physiological reactions (Ortega y Gasset). The avant-garde is rationalist, formal, and founded on the primacy of science and the idea of progress (Clement Greenberg). "The artistic adage of the directness of feelings resembles a person with their heart on a plate – it seems thus either banal, or childish. Especially as the said directness is frequently accompanied by the triviality of feelings" (Julian Przyboś). Art is not about creating things but about detachment from

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things (Greenberg). Avant-garde consists of conceptualism and formal innovation (Luigi Pareyson). Abstract art cannot be arbitrary or accidental, it must redirect attention from the subject of experiences to the means of its own craft (Greenberg). Avant-garde cannot be constantly innovative – it is a continuous repetition (Umberto Eco). Modern art privileges all that is anti-natural, anti-mimetic and anti-real (Rosalind Krauss). Modern art is ocular-centric (Martin Jay), male-centered and oppressive (Nancy K. Miller), holistic and dualist (Jean-François Lyotard). The avant-garde is repression (Krauss).

This is what an argumentative, postulative-receptive development of the assumptions behind the modernist aesthetic would look like if we were to abbreviate it to an almost absurd length of a single paragraph.¹ Or, more precisely, this is what the development of its avant-garde, intellectualized, “high” variety (to use the outdated typology) could be said to look like – juxtaposed with the popular, “rear-guard” artistic developments.² Even considering the gradual evolution of its critical attitudes, one notices easily the extreme dualism of these reflections on the modernist artistic tendencies, as well as the intellectually dubious, declarative essentialism of these and similar diagnoses. Importantly, due to their nature, assertions of this kind fail to capture the complex specificity of several, first-rate artistic productions – meanwhile, reflecting on them raises several questions only seemingly “unrelated” to the phenomena of modernism. Can the avant-garde be viewed only through categories of depersonalization, detachment, reticence, and rationalization? Why does the gulf between the modern current of intellectual art and the figurative mode seem so vast? Are there really no intermediary forms connecting these polar opposites? What was the contemporary status of affect, emotion, impression, and empathy, and where do the obvious (maybe just too obvious) answers come from? Perhaps there existed a current in the arts which eludes the above aesthetic distinctions? And if it does, what is its nature?

Following for a while the declarative stylistics of the binary diagnoses presented earlier, I will start by proposing at least one answer, namely: modernism may, for certain reasons, be viewed both as rationalistic and affective; meanwhile, the avant-garde is the artist’s state of mind

1 Referring to “avant-garde” and “modernism” in this article, I am following Astradur Eysteinnsson’s distinction which assumes (speaking generally) that modernism is a broader term that includes avant-garde – a subordinate term which can be characterized by a tendency to experimentation and discovery. See Astradur Eysteinnsson, “Awangarda jako/czy modernizm?” in *Odkrywanie modernizmu. Przekłady i komentarze*, ed. Ryszard Nycz, trans. Dorota Wojda (Kraków: Universitas, 2004), 195-199.

2 Clement Greenberg, *Obrona modernizmu. Wybór esejów*, trans. Grzegorz Dziamski and Maria Śpik-Dziamska (Kraków: Universitas, 2006), 8-18.

(and body) – and as such it is as rational as it is emotional; finally, I believe it is possible to distinguish a different, “alternative” kind of modernity, a certain avant-garde of the avant-garde whose specificity relies on problematizing the tensions between the intellectual, the somatic and the emotional. In the following parts of my argument I am going to elaborate on those initial propositions, reconsider the legitimacy of making a connection between the well-established and well-discussed modernist artistic phenomena and the recently popular category of affect and – last but not least – propose a model of reading and analysis of those artistic realizations, further referred to as “affective criticism.”

Modernism as a Spatial Agon

The degree of impact of modernist art was determined largely by the tensions (rarely explicitly verbalized) between emotions and rationality. Naturally, earlier artistic tendencies also depended on the oscillation between these two spheres, but (as I will try to prove in the present essay) the specificity of modernism resulted directly from its innovative methods of transposing affects into the substance of art.

The history of the relations between the intellectual and emotional spheres, defined as mutual opposites, may be presented in the form of a sinusoid. The sinusoid would illustrate (in a greatly simplified manner) the movement from the primacy of reason dominant throughout the Enlightenment, through the Romantic privileging of expression identified with an eruption of authentic feelings, toward the Positivist restoration of rationality, and finally – at the turn of the twentieth century – the returning focus on the author’s spirituality and his or her individualized expression of the most affective contents, accompanied by the postulate of authenticity, directness of expression and the sincerity of emotions represented. However, Wilhelm Worringer’s famous 1907 *Abstraction and Empathy* posits art history to be shaped not by subsequent artistic tendencies but by simultaneous, competing currents. These include, on the one hand, a tendency for naturalization (in the case of the artist’s affirmative attitude to the surrounding reality and a belief in the possibility of successful artistic representation) and on the other hand, a tendency for stylization (when the artist, searching for a rational order of expression, experiences an anxiety toward the surrounding realities and toward the artistic medium itself). From this perspective, simultaneous yet radically different currents (differing not only in the complexity of formal expression, but also based on different existential and aesthetic worldviews) determine the parallel tracks of modernity’s development, including its entire system of internal fissures. Consequently, the specificity of modernism would

involve a continuous aesthetic oscillation between these models: on the one hand, the realistic or empathetic model utilizing the representative rhetoric of emotion, experience, and authenticity, which was perhaps realized to the greatest extent in the popular variety of so-called high art; and on the other hand, the opposing intellectualist model accompanied by the abstract, cubist, formalist, and other modes which, as a principle, rejected all non-rational and non-intellectual elements and refused to assign any aesthetic significance to what is realistic and recognizable.³

Searching for the "Third Mode"

In the brilliant conclusion to his reflection on the epiphanic character of the modernist attempt to "express the inexpressible," Ryszard Nycz "risked" a certain intriguing "hypothesis":

the third mode (which so far has found its fullest realization in the marginal or "liminal" modern and postmodern art) aims to gather evidence – symptoms, impressions, signals, accounts – for the positive existence of the shapeless factuality (monstrous or merely constituting background) sensed largely through an ambiguous resistance: as much to the subject's actions (by the force of its inertia) as to the subject's powers of representation (through the plasticity of its substance). It seems that the modernists refused to assign a positivist ontological status to what was formless and protean not only out of fear but quite deliberately. They sentenced it, after all, to both a negative and dependent (i.e. partial and only "formal") existence: that of a necessary but always negated part of the binary opposition only in relation to which the perceptible, comprehensible and representable forms of existence became truly positive and valuable. Consequently, one could conclude that the value of the works of the third mode would lie in documenting that significant fortuitousness of being... If modernist aestheticism located [reality – AD] in the ultimately hidden order, internalized and embodied in the (auto) revelatory form of art, then for that postmodern art, reality would constitute first and foremost that which modernism refused to attribute to existence: the essence-less matter of the real; the shapeless, the insignificant, the meaningless, and elusive.⁴

3 Arnold Berleant, *Prze-myśleć estetykę. Niepokorne eseje o sztuce*, trans. Maria Korusiewicz and Tomasz Markiewka (Kraków: Universitas, 2007), 76.

4 Ryszard Nycz, *Literatura jako trop rzeczywistości* (Kraków: Universitas, 2001), 48-49.

For some reason, Nycz's argument begins to resemble the object of description. In other words, there is a repetition of a gesture resulting from the modernists' "fear" and "deliberation"; the category discussed in the conclusion is once again sentenced to a fleeting, "partial" and "only formal" presence. The sense of factuality and significance of the "third mode's" existence does not resound fully in Nycz's argument, abandoned (or temporarily suspended hopefully) in favor of other analyses. However, while the argument remains unfinished, a lot has been said. The rather enigmatic quality of "shapeless factuality," of that which is "formless and protean," "shapeless, insignificant, meaningless and elusive" refers precisely to what I believe to be the affective dimension discussed in this paper: the irrational, emotional-sensational amalgam of human (in this case, writerly) experience. At the risk of simplification, it seems that Nycz's thesis (or intuition) asserts the following: despite their various declarations, the modernists had feelings and used them repeatedly as a reservoir of possible formal-thematic inspirations, even though they were reluctant to admit it. They did not want to admit it, or rather (as also suggested by Nycz) rejected, sublimated, or repressed that which repeatedly returned in the act of writing as "negative epiphanies."

Its meandering nature, or perhaps its subtle, localized (maybe intentional) inconsistency is another interesting aspect of Nycz's reflection. The so-called "third mode" registering evidence for the existence of insistent reality, different from the main intellectual stream of modernism, is first situated within: 1. "the marginal or «liminal» modern and postmodern art," and then more declaratively within; 2. "that postmodern art." The possibility of a synchronous coexistence of different modern streams – the ones defined so far, that is, the intellectual and realist ones, as well as the "third mode" proposed by Nycz, constituting perhaps the "lining" of the avant-garde (proposed in 1) – is now replaced by the postulate of a diachronic succession of interesting regularities (proposed in 2) where the "modernist" period is followed by post-modernity from which there emerges (like a posthumous child) the late "third" child of modernism. Ultimately, Nycz seems to lean toward refusing modernity its marginal or liminal tendencies, attributing them instead to the postmodern order. I would like to conduct a "defense of modernity" in the rest of the article and postulate so as not to cede too quickly to postmodernity that which I consider to be thoroughly modernist.

Nycz's typologizing gesture is very thought-provoking: obviously, the realization and the need to recognize the existence of some kind of "third mode" are a consequence of postmodernism's theoretical achievement, critical approach, and suspicions about several modernist phenomena, about redefining notions, reevaluating categories, and changing focus. It also holds suspicions about changing sensibility, awareness and priorities (not only the scholarly

ones). Consequently, postmodernity can be seen as forging tools appropriate for conducting interpretations of modernist phenomena (both the marginal and mainstream ones). Such interpretations also fit the formula of “discovering modernity” and “becoming aware of the shift in perspective, a shift resulting from the phenomena and trends described as postmodern.”⁵

A similar “revindicating” principle of reasoning allows me to propose a model of “affective criticism” – one inspired (to various degrees) by the modern, postmodern, and the post-postmodern methodologies and reading methods including deconstruction, feminist criticism, reception research, the so called “affective” and “affirmative” turns, and other methods. Setting aside for now the old argument about the status of meaning extracted from or read into the interpreted work, the most productive approach here seems to incorporate both the modern and postmodern tools useful in an “affective” analysis of the “third mode” which manifested itself (not only in the background) and realized itself (not only partially) in modernity. In this context, I believe Nycz’s intuitions, expressed *en passant*, to be highly inspiring as they have so far found no precedence in the humanities on avant-gardism. What he describes as modernism’s “margin” will become the center of the following analysis while the “lining” of the avant-garde will be treated, at least for the time being, as its outer shell, in order to reveal the “twofold” character of avant-garde postulates and works.

Double-winged Modernity

In his detailed study of T.S. Eliot’s “Tradition and Individual Talent,” Michał Paweł Markowski recapitulates the poet’s argumentation in the following words:

emotions are meaningful only when they are represented, in other words, made objective by the mind and the work of art. Emotions which evade presentation, which create the lining, the substratum of our existence, must be eradicated not only from the sphere of art but also from life as it is. This is the founding gesture of the modern sensibility whose one wing – let us call it the male, cool and anxious one – includes T.S. Eliot. The other wing – female, fervent and bold – is represented by Virginia Woolf. But the tale of the other wing must be left for another occasion.⁶

5 Ryszard Nycz, “Słowo wstępne,” in *Odkrywanie modernizmu*, 6-7.

6 Michał Paweł Markowski, „Literatura i uczucia. T.S. Eliot i wrażliwość nowoczesna,” in *Dzieła, języki, tradycje*, ed. Włodzimierz Bolecki and Ryszard Nycz (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 2006), 240.

Also in this case (although following a different principle) the nature of argumentation begins to resemble the object of description: the sharpness of Eliot's distinctions is reflected by Markowski's essay, as evidenced by his binary, double-winged typology of the modernist phenomena. There is no space here for the intermediary forms, hybrids, and phenomena escaping clear systematization. There is no space for the doubt which may result from the conducted (and somewhat controversial) division into the male and female streams in art. One could also wonder about the absence of other tendencies, for instance, the strong, modern currents of realist or popular art. However, Markowski's interpretation is interesting for at least three reasons: firstly, he argues "fervently" and methodically for the priorities of Eliot's manifesto which in fact do not include tradition, canon, and the individual talent, but precisely the crucial intellectual work performed on the writerly emotional states. Secondly, Markowski distinguishes within modernity two avant-garde currents, both artistically valuable, and positions them opposite of that which is *affective*. Finally, and importantly, Markowski is "bold" in stating directly that emotions remain emotions even in Eliot who persistently seeks to escape them (and advises others to do the same).

The Avant-garde "Conspiracy Against Chaos"⁷

This is how Thomas Stearns Eliot justifies the need for creative depersonalization:

Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.⁸

Understanding Eliot's "depersonalized" theory of poetry (requiring the artist to "catalyze" personal emotions, treated as a creative material, "combine" them into new compounds and rework them into new literary values) is crucial for an understanding of the modernist sensibility. New art is not to

7 Karol Irzykowski, *Czyn i słowo oraz Fryderyk Hebbel jako poeta konieczności, Lemiesz i spada przed sądem publicznym. Prolegomena do charakterologii* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1980), 475-476.

8 Thomas Stearns Eliot, "Tradition and Individual Talent," in *The Sacred Wood. Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1921; New York: Bartleby.com, 2000), accessed May 18, 2017, <http://www.bartleby.com/200/sw4.html/>.

be devoid of individual or emotional content. Quite on the contrary, the question of the work's affective qualities is central to Eliot's reflection. Unlike his predecessors who limited themselves to "poetic meditations" on the subject of emotions, the modern poet should intensify work on emotions in order to transform the sensory-affective experiences into categories of the mind and find the most adequate "verbal equivalent for states of mind and feeling."⁹ Consequently, the creative process is not an escape from emotion, but is founded on a directly affective-emotional amalgam: "what you start from is nothing so definite as an emotion, in any ordinary sense, it is still more certainly not an idea."¹⁰ What is crucial then is the act of mediation between the spheres of "feeling" and "understanding," between the emotion and the idea. But the cited passage from "Tradition and Individual Talent" speaks directly about an "escape" from emotion and personality. What kind of escape does the author have in mind?

It is hard to resist the impression of a strong resentment resounding through Eliot's reflection, noticeable especially in the following statement: "But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things." This remark seems to allude to an undefined unity of "those who have personality and emotions," perhaps also those who have made traumatic experiences or feel more than they actually reveal, and for some reason try to distance themselves from those experiences, precisely through the mediation of art.

Dispersed hints of such an "escapist" dimension of artistic activity can be found also in the essays, diaries and criticism by [Polish] avant-garde artists, for instance Adam Wazyk:

The hyperbolic voracity of the futurists had obvious causes. The time of war overlapped with their days of youth, the onset of their puberty. They starved. The days of futurism were hungry too. Hunger was the basic category of social classification. People were divided into the satiate ones and the others. "But I am forever hungry" Wat wrote, in an act of solidarity with those others. Stern ostensibly absolved from guilt all who were threatened by hunger, prostitutes, and thieves. The fear of hunger, the only theme resulting from experience, became

9 Thomas Stearns Eliot, review of *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century: Donne to Butler*, ed. Herbert J. C. Grierson (Oxford: Clarendon Press) first published in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 20 (1921), accessed May 17, 2017, http://www.uwyo.edu/numimage/eliot_metaphysical_poets.htm/.

10 Thomas Stearns Eliot, "The Three Voices of Poetry," in *On Poetry and Poets* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), 107.

a decalogue of the stomach in the later long poem, *Europa*. It was in the times of futurism that Jasiński wrote *Pieśń o głodzie* [*The Song of Hunger*] ... The trauma of hunger did not always involve everyone, but a certain oral hypersensitivity and a passion to devour everything characterized them all.¹¹

One could criticize Ważyk for the anecdotal character of his account, for dallying with the readers by jesting about the premises of past artistic endeavors and for ultimately trivializing the value of contemporary art. But the playful tone is only a ruse, and his reminiscence an act of courageous disclosure rather than of thoughtlessness or bad faith. Ważyk not so much mocks his older colleagues as reveals the motivations for forming the avant-garde (including his own). He verbalizes a pattern which seemingly did not conform to the avant-garde tactic, explaining formal choices with the “decalogue of the stomach,” sharpness of expression with basic physiological needs, and innovation with intensity and severity of experiencing the war, undermining the myth of “impersonality” and “autonomy” of modern art. Importantly, Ważyk’s frankness with regard to the causes of the psychosomatic trauma is not restricted to simply registering the basic deficits of the period. Also his language reveals a conviction in an affective undercurrent in futurist work: the poet talks about “experience,” “hypersensitivity,” “passion” and “fear” which determined creative work and which he attributes to the most original modern artists, including Witkacy:

Witkacy’s prophetism, as any emotional prophetism, did not come from the ability to prophesize but from fear, from the shock caused by the experienced events. The sensitivity of young age was traumatized.¹²

The shock results mainly from the extreme experiences of the war period,¹³ which according to Ważyk, changed the fate of the interwar (as well as post-war) art. But he goes beyond obvious statements on the consequences of experienced trauma, exhaustion of contemporary art, inability to forget, or the ethical and aesthetic crisis. First and foremost, Ważyk’s language exposes

11 Adam Ważyk, *Dziwna historia awangardy* [*Unusual History of the Avant-garde*] (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1976), 46.

12 Ważyk, *Dziwna*, 44.

13 Of course, the experience of war was just one of the causes which included also the dynamics and scale of global modernization, growing medical knowledge, the impact of the twentieth-century scientific achievements, technological-civilizational progress and the great influence of (mostly Freudian) psychoanalytic theory.

(as do several other commentators of the period¹⁴) a shift in the way of experiencing emotions:

The fact that the same sensitization manifested simultaneously in several poets supports the proposal that we are dealing with a historical moment: a jump from the centrifugal principle to the centripetal principle, one sweeping over all centers of absorption, over all senses.¹⁵

The Romantic and neo-Romantic “centrifugal” release of emotions (and the belief that the creative process is an eruption of authentic, explicable and expressible feelings) gave way to the “centripetal” method based on the “accumulation” and intellectual “reworking” of affective-sensory experiences. The change was dictated, firstly, by the shock of new experiences, secondly, by the need for expression, and finally, by the conviction that there is a discrepancy between contemporary forms of expression and those experiences. As such, artistic inquiries of the avant-gardists were also (auto)therapeutic: it is no coincidence that in his discussion of “techniques” Viktor Shklovsky notes that art should return to man – not just to the audience, but also to the artists themselves – the capacity to sense the world.¹⁶ Jan Brzękowski states directly that “poets who lived through the war and came to know all its horrors... could not continue writing poetry of their predecessors who existed in more ordinary conditions.”¹⁷ Ważyk spoke of the specificity of the formation of “people mentally beset, wounded by history, gifted – if one may call it a gift – with a traumatic sensibility.”¹⁸

14 An interesting commentary on those changes can be found in the writing by Umberto Eco: “Our universe is in full crisis. The order of words no longer corresponds to the order of things: whereas the former still insists on following a traditional system, the latter seems to be mostly characterized by disorder and discontinuity, or so science tells us. Our feelings and emotions have been frozen into stereotypical expressions that have nothing to do with our reality... Though it is commonly believed that avant-garde artists are out of touch with the human community in which they live, and that traditional art remains in close contact with it, the opposite is true. In fact, only avant-garde artists are capable of establishing a meaningful relationship with the world in which they live.” Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989) 141-142.

15 Ważyk, *Dziwna*, 47.

16 Wiktor Szklowski (V. Shklovsky), “Wskrzeszenie słowa,” in *Rosyjska szkoła stylistyki. Wybór tekstów*, ed. Maria Renata Mayenowa and Zygmunt Saloni (Warszawa: PWN, 1970), 61.

17 Jan Brzękowski, *Szkie literackie i artystyczne 1925-1970*, ed. Andrzej Waśkiewicz (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1978), 61.

18 Ważyk, *Dziwna*, 101.

The creative act became here, to quote from Nycz, an act of “exorcising chaos” which revealed itself when the image of a stable reality had disintegrated.¹⁹ Of emotional-mental chaos in particular, one might add:

The dualism of body and soul was under attack or abolished, the metaphysical ambitions restricted or abandoned, moralism disappeared while moral criteria moved to the sphere of social relations. Sensitization to the values of life pervaded the complementary spirit of youthful enthusiasm and despair caused by life being not what it should be. Just after the war, poets of various formations shared in the civilizational anxiety spawning visions of European or global destruction, colorful, ingenious and unreasonable... All of that distinguished the new Polish poetry from the older one... including [among others – A.D.] the Skamander group.²⁰

Once again avant-gardism reveals itself, to use Greenberg’s formulation, not as a program or style but as an attitude²¹ or, as Brzękowski puts it, “not as much a literary direction but as a spiritual condition.”²² A condition which did not fit the old framework of experience and feeling, a condition which at the same time could not be “contained,” which “ruptured” the formulas of traditional art. Consequently, Przyboś notes, modern art overcame the boundaries which aesthetic repeatedly imposed on the human emotion.²³ This is why – analogically to Adorno’s thesis that the avant-garde work is the only possible expression given the contemporary state of the world – avant-garde was the only possible way to not so much present feelings or repress them (as Krauss would argue²⁴), but to construct emotions and become aware of the importance of affect precisely through creation. The creative act is viewed here as a simultaneous process of sensory experience, registering and conceptualizing or mediating between the orders of the body, consciousness, affect and the artistic artifact (which are usually separated in discourse).²⁵

19 Nycz, *Literatura jako trop*, 48.

20 Ważyk, *Dziwna*, 31-32.

21 Greenberg, *Obrona*, 57.

22 Brzękowski, *Szkice*, 29.

23 Julian Przyboś, *Linia i gwar*, vol. 1 (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1959), 75.

24 Rosalind Krauss, *Oryginalność awangardy i inne mity modernistyczne*, trans. Monika Szuba (Gdańsk: słowo/obraz/terytoria, 2011), 17-30.

25 Compare also the Deleuze-based concept of art co-responding with the receiver and the aesthetic experience seen as a constant mediation between the work, the environment

Consequently, the new art, rather than registering some pre-existent emotions, “creates” and reveals them in a concrete form, removing the Romantic dualism of feeling and word/image,²⁶ establishing new emotional connections.²⁷ Thus, artistic practice does not just produce art, but also a lesson in experience, something Brzękowski paid special attention to:

New poets and writers are incomprehensible. Or rather – they are hard to comprehend. Indeed... one of the causes lies in the reading audience. Each novelty shocks, intrigues, blurs judgment. This is accompanied by another attribute: it is difficult. Difficult not because of some inherent reasons but rather because we must create new categories of feelings and responses in order to evaluate it. This is also why novelty requires mental work – it is tiring... I hope that my remarks may contribute to understanding the goals and methods of the New Art, that the reading audience will look differently at the modern artists and try to feel them.²⁸

Beliefs such as this one are not very different from Irzykowski’s notion of “incomprehensibility” which assumes that each valuable work must contain an element of incomprehensibility and pose “difficulties either in one’s mind, when the matter concerns accepting new ideas, or in one’s heart, when we are talking about a new way of feeling things.”²⁹ The challenges that avant-garde posed to perception and interpretation were probably responsible for the claims of its “incomprehensibility,” “intellectualism,” “impersonality” and a certain “emotionlessness.” One should add to this list the sensation of “novelty” which Greenberg described as a feeling of surprise experienced by the audience encountering an avant-garde work which refuses to fit the system of internal expectations and habits.³⁰ This effect was probably responsible for the sense of aesthetic inaccessibility evoked by the new art. Meanwhile, contradicting the stereotypical assumptions of avant-garde’s elitism, one may find hope in Brzękowski’s wishful argument that the audiences can make the effort not even to understand but to “feel” the modern artistic

and the impression of the receiver, Elizabeth Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

26 Przyboś, *Linia i gwar*, 74.

27 Irzykowski, *Czyn i słowo*, 412.

28 Brzękowski, *Szkice literackie*, 71.

29 Irzykowski, *Czyn i słowo*, 477.

30 Greenberg, *Obrona modernizmu*, 128.

activity. What is meant here is more than the simple mechanism of empathic identification adequate for the popular art (which Brzękowski positions at the opposite end³¹) we are rather talking about experimental testing and perhaps shaping of a formative aesthetic sensibility:

They [the new artists – A.D.] play the role of an experimental laboratory and a scientific workshop. Once new values are discovered, they become popularized and applied (the utilitarian moment) by hundreds of mediocre artists in cheap imagery, advertising, interior design, clothing etc. ... Pure, abstract, innovative art is like mathematics or logic: it teaches to think according to the artistic principles of creating and solving one's own tasks. It makes artists aware of themselves.³²

Discrepant orders of the “modern,” “creative” and the popular, “derivative,” unoriginal art which Brzękowski describes elsewhere as “applied” and “utilitarian,” correspond to the two already distinguished modes: the intellectual and the realist. But the traditionally defined “abstractness” begins to acquire a new meaning: it is meant to result in new principles and tools aimed at understanding, “becoming aware” and conceptualizing the surrounding reality. This is why, Umberto Eco suggests, avant-garde art resembles a scientific revolution – every work of modern art creates new laws, imposes a new paradigm, a new way of looking at the world.³³ As he did in Eliot, the artist fulfills the role of a “catalyst,” transforming impressions physically, sensorially, affectively and intellectually into the tissue of art. The scientific–experimental metaphor does not appear here without a reason.

Artists function in this system as an “experimental laboratory and a scientific workshop” which corresponds with the avant-garde rhetoric of progress, inventiveness, and science reflected emblematically in Pound's postulate to “make it new.” Nycz's “imperative of inventiveness which is of key importance to modernism; the imperative to create/discover the new”³⁴ is more than a linguistic construct: certain analogies between science and modern art reach much further, as Greenberg points out when he speaks of modern art belonging to the same specific cultural tendency

31 Compare also Berleant's claim that every type of art is at least to some extent emphatic since art involves several senses, A. Berleant, *Prze-mysleć estetykę*, 101-106.

32 Brzękowski, *Szkice literackie i artystyczne*, 74.

33 Umberto Eco, “Innowacja i powtórzenie: pomiędzy modernistyczną i postmodernistyczną estetyką,” trans. to Polish by T. Rutkowska, in *Przekazy i opinie* 1-2 (1990): 13.

34 Nycz, “Słowo wstępne,” in *Odkrywanie modernizmu*, 17.

as modern science.³⁵ In the traditional, positivist perspective the disparity of the two disciplines excludes any convergences and mutual inspirations, as is exemplified in Michał Sobeski's conservative argument making a clear distinction between the aesthetic and scientific principle:

Art is about a proper recreation of mental experiences, one's own and others'. Science, on the other hand, elucidates those experiences by discovering their mutual relationships and dependencies, in other words, by proving their underlying principles.³⁶

In the modern configuration, art breaks the commandment of "proper" recreation and usurps the tasks of science, which itself is a part of a broader modernist concept of creating an objective theory and a disciplined, autonomous art whose language, as Peiper hoped, would "originate in the scientific movements of the last decades."³⁷

The scientist longings of the avant-gardists took various forms. What lied at their core was the same imperative of creative formal innovativeness, confirming Astradur Eysteinnsson's observation that the avant-garde (distinguished from the broader phenomenon of modernism) denoted in fact contemporary experimental activity.³⁸ In the plastic arts, innovativeness manifested mainly through increasing abstractness, deformation, ambiguity and untypical presentations of artistic artifacts. In literature, it extended from the level of the individual word through the manipulation of increasingly complex syntactic structures³⁹ to the author's self-declared attitude to the work and a form of (auto) presentation. Seen from this perspective, the most outstanding techniques of the first half of the twentieth century found in the writings of Joyce, Mann, Canetti, and Woolf – and in Poland, in Schulz, Choromański, or Gombrowicz – such as internal monologue, stream of consciousness, self-reflexivity, psychologism, deformations of perspective, or certain figurations of affects can be described as tools which complicate the simplicity of the message. They erase the human factor on the one hand, but

35 Greenberg, *Obrona modernizmu*, 53.

36 Michał Sobeski, *Wybór pism estetycznych*, ed. Sław Krzemień-Ojak (Kraków: Universitas, 2010), 96.

37 Peiper's remarks from 1935 quoted in Ważyk, *Dziwna historia*, 97.

38 Eysteinnsson, "Awangarda jako/czy modernizm?," 65.

39 Compare Brzękowski: „The new experimental wave in Poland focused on the word itself in an attempt to first break it down and then create new combinations from the resulting segments, or to explore their potential.” Brzękowski, *Szkice literackie*, 133.

on the other, continue to express the personal or affective content in a new, “deformed” or “strange” form. For the sake of the argument presented in this essay, I am going to propose an affective critique of a few artistic realizations, which should allow me to distinguish typical organizational methods of the choromaniacs [from the name of M. Choromański – A.W.] and of Giacometti’s sculpture, among others.

Grotesque Creations of the Avant-garde

The ambivalence of the avant-garde artists to the emotional expression, on the level of rhetoric, revealed itself, on the one hand, in the calls for emotional reticence (*vide* Peiper’s metaphor of reluctant emotion) or restraint (“Poets – restrain your emotions!” – Jalu Kurek⁴⁰) but on the other hand, in a conviction of the utopian character of the affective “break” and the desire to shape a new sensibility in the audience, “to renew the freshness and sharpness of cognitive and emotional reactions,”⁴¹ turning art into a factory of feelings which “animate, invigorate or cleanse” and allow art to “nobly compete with the factory of ventilators, medicine and soaps.”⁴² The discrepancies of their theoretical postulates were reflected in the artistic practice which for some reason became unanimously viewed as an actual expression of avant-garde “restraint.” It may indeed seem restrained, especially when seen from the perspective of the declarations, commentaries and manifestos of the avant-gardists themselves.

But the issue is far from simple and in order to notice the affective potential of avant-gardism it is enough to abandon the traditional understanding of the relations between affect and literature/art (for instance, viewing them as a vassalization of literature by emotion – “poetry as a language of feelings”) requiring an appropriate “thematic” reading. Consequently, one can distinguish for instance the following property – literature of the choromaniacs unkindly described by Ignacy Fik as a manifestation of disrespect for the “historical achievement of the human psyche: the creative and active consciousness put in the service of unconscious tremors, outbursts and impulses related via

⁴⁰ See also Jalu Kurek’s other aesthetic postulates “Abandon the personal and individual lyric. Poetry is a function, a service, a social craft and you can smuggle in it only inasmuch of the so-called individuality as an average tailor does when he sews new clothing. You must create the world, not recreate your own heart. Who cares about that?” Quoted in Artur Hutnikiewicz *Od czystej formy do literatury faktu* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo TNT, 1967), 227.

⁴¹ Tadeusz Pawłowski, *Wybór pism estetycznych*, ed. Grzegorz Sztabiński (Kraków: Universitas, 2010), 282.

⁴² Tadeusz Peiper, “Także inaczej,” *Zwrotnica* 7 (1926): 198.

accidental appearance in mental time.”⁴³ In other words, such literature “sniffed” and “probed the ulcers, shameful spots, and dirty nooks;”⁴⁴ penetrated “mental exoticness;”⁴⁵ while multiplying “clinical specimens” and “physiological–metaphysical creations.”⁴⁶ Fik’s interpretative perceptiveness and surprising astuteness reveal what was later frequently marginalized or misunderstood about these works: an obsessive fixation on the emotional which took the most extreme forms and seemed to directly stimulate formal innovativeness.

Clinical Literature

This can be seen in the work of Michał Choromański himself, for instance in his flagship *Zazdrość i medycyna* [*Envy and Medicine*], a novel whose title speaks for itself and which reveals in full force the longings and dilemmas of the avant-garde formation. In this case the method involves a clinical analysis of a single affect: envy. Affect is treated as a living organism subjected to a series of trials and experiments. The formal technique involves an experimental act of vivisection – the narrative is in fact reduced to revealing subsequent steps of a scientific, medical study. The analytical method of the affective state is simultaneous to the presentations of bodily vivisections illustrated by detailed descriptions of surgical procedures. However, a clinical separation of the private, homely space and the hospital one becomes impossible; the protagonists perform constant exchanges and shifts, “infecting” the antiseptic conditions. As in Latour’s reflection on Pasteur’s workplace, the boundaries of the laboratory are not impermeable and the dichotomy of the inside and the outside is abolished. In fact, Latour claims that “the very difference between the *inside* and the *outside*, and the difference of scale between *micro* and *macro* levels, is precisely what laboratories are built to destabilize or undo,”⁴⁷ in order to make phenomena visible, observable and known.⁴⁸ An identical process takes place in Choromański’s

43 Ignacy Fik, *Wybór pism krytycznych*, ed. Andrzej Chruszczyński (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1961), 130.

44 *Ibid.*, 127.

45 *Ibid.*, 126.

46 *Ibid.*, 127.

47 Bruno Latour, “Give Me a Laboratory and I will Raise the World,” in *Science Observed: Perspectives on the Social Study of Science*, ed. Karin Knorr-Cetina and Michael Mulkay (London: Sage, 1983) 143.

48 *Ibid.*, 168.

textual laboratory. The writer turns a small space of the Zakopane resort, somewhat isolated (for instance, geographically) into an experimental space where the irrational and rational clash against each other. To reveal all details of the mechanism he is interested in, Choromański “ignores” the “complexity” – or the “amalgam character” – of the feeling sphere (the macroscale) and selects one affect (the microscale) which he then “materializes” to perform a series of operations. The author conceptualizes what is seemingly “inexpressible,” but does it very factually and “coldly,” in a “disciplined,” “restrained” manner. The result resembles the analogous revealing of Pasteur’s microbes which Latour names “invisible actors” who, in the process of analysis, “show their moves and development in pictures so clear that... the invisible becomes visible and the ‘thing’ becomes a written trace they can read at will as if it were a text.”⁴⁹ Choromański experimentally textualizes an emotion and dissects it, revealing its mechanisms and by doing so, realizes a primary postulate – his art fulfills the role of logic of “making the artist aware of himself.”

Creation as a “Mental Cardiac Death”

Gombrowicz’s early stories constitute a very interesting case. Putting it simply (and ignoring, for now, the multitude of alternative interpretations), almost each of his stories can be read as an intriguing study of affective states: from the thorough revulsion of *The Memoirs of Stefan Czarniecki* through the shame of *Lawyer Kraykowski’s Dancer* to the timidity and fear in *On the Kitchen Steps*. However, *A Premeditated Crime* seems particularly interesting in the context of the argument presented in this article, a text I would not hesitate to describe as a programmatic, self-reflective manifesto commenting on the clash of contemporary artistic tendencies and revealing Gombrowicz’s attempts to create his own writerly strategy.

It is by no accident that the space of the “closely sealed” household resembles a “theatrical stage.” The plot is founded on the process of dialogue between opposites. If Gombrowicz’s “artificial protagonists” are to be treated as different sides of an aesthetic argument, we shall discover that the isolated house is not a metaphor for the theatre, but the (macroscopic) social sphere or the writer’s (microscopic) individual struggle with artistic convention. It is hard to resist the impression that the characters playing parts in the aesthetic debate directly present their programs. The widow represents the order of realist–empathetic art:

⁴⁹ Ibid., 163.

“In the night,” she said dazedly, “Last night... I got up this morning... I went in... I called – Ignas, Ignas – but there was no response; he was lying there... I fainted... I fainted... And from that moment my hands have not stopped trembling – see for yourself!”⁵⁰

She stood fanatically, silent, with staring eyes, like Niobe, her gaze fixed on her memories, crumpled, disheveled; and a tiny droplet appeared at the tip of her nose and dangled there, and dangled... like the sword of Damocles – and the candles smoked. (Gombrowicz, 44)

In this short passage, Gombrowicz presents an entire array of trespasses of Romantic and neo-Romantic literature: its sentimentality and nostalgia (“her gaze fixed on her memories”), the imperative to empathize (“see for yourself”), literalness and exhibitionism (I got up this morning... I went in... I called... I fainted”), circumlocution and exaltation (“Ignas, Ignas... I fainted... I fainted.”), irritating mood building techniques (“and the candles smoked”), lack of formal discipline (“crumpled, disheveled”), finally – over-individualization and primitivism (“and a tiny droplet appeared at the tip of her nose and dangled there, and dangled”). In turn, the spirit of modern art is revealed in the figuration of the son, reacting sharply to his mother’s affectation:

“What’s the point, Mama?” ... No one is... No one will be... it makes no difference. It’s embarrassing!” he burst out violently and suddenly turned his back and walked away. “Antoś!” his mother called in fright [...]. “A blow, an awful blow... The children said nothing. They’re proud, difficult, reserved, they won’t just allow anyone into their hearts, but rather prefer to worry on their own... Antoś is tough, stubborn, he won’t even let his hands twitch.” (43)

The protagonist who “restrains” his feelings, embarrassed by the mother’s emotionality, represents the new, avant-garde generation of artists who view art as “a function, a service, a craft.”⁵¹ He fervently fights to eradicate all manifestations of the old order and subjects himself to the discipline of the form, carefully selecting his words and distancing himself from the pain: “Apparently this morning you visited my father or rather,

⁵⁰ Witold Gombrowicz, “A Premeditated Crime,” in *Bacacay*, trans. Bill Johnston (New York: Archipelago Books, 2006), 41.

⁵¹ Jalu Kurek quoted in Hutnikiewicz, *Od czystej formy*, 227.

pardon me, his body" (57). He would rather remain silent than to admit strong affect.

"Did you love your father very much?" I asked... The question clearly took him by surprise. No, he was not prepared for it; he bowed his head, looked to the side, swallowed and muttered with inexpressible constraint, almost with repugnance: "I suppose." (57)

Interestingly, in his portrayal of modern artistic tendencies, Gombrowicz reveals also their (and also his own) formal techniques:

That was.... it was irony... You understand?... The opposite... on purpose" – "Being ironic about your father's death?" ... "Surely there's nothing embarrassing about one's father's death" ... Or perhaps you're embarrassed because you loved him? He stammered with difficulty with abhorrence with despair: "Very well. If you absolutely ... then yes, so be it... I loved him." And throwing something on the table, he cried: "Here! This is his hair!" (69)

The mention of irony, expressions such as "opposite," "on purpose," and the symbolic strand of hair are synonymous to the avant-gardists' rich repertoire of means to create distance: from embarrassment, the grotesque, to masking, deformation, and ellipsis. What is interesting in the story is also the status of the intruder, the investigator who could be seen as the protagonist's *porte-parole*. On the one hand, he clearly distances himself from all emphatic displays (such as the "odor of family affection") and the principles of the old art, tradition, and canon:

They make people pay homage to them – kiss their hands! They demand sentiments from me! Sentiments! They demand to be humored! And I, let's say, I hate that. And let's say, I hate it when they have me tremble to make me kiss their hands, when they compel me to mumble prayers, to kneel, to produce false, sentimental noises – and above all I hate tears, sighs, and droplets at the tips of their noses; whereas I like cleanliness and order. (45-46)

Thus, the investigator-artist surely appears closer to the modern concept of art represented by the son: "I had a wish to confess to... big brother my mistake and the trouble I had caused. It seemed to me that he would understand... and surely he wouldn't refuse me" (74). But on the other hand, Gombrowicz's protagonist remains undoubtedly separate, distant, vigilant,

and suspicious; he constantly oscillates between two models: the realist one, where death is seen as a natural and biological act, and the intellectual one, where it is the consequence of a crime constituting a certain “interference” or “construct.” As a result, in the process of the investigation, several spectacular discoveries are made, for instance that of “the terrible duality” of each and every feeling (72) – a duality which is probably a testimony to the complex “rational–emotional” nature of all affect. The investigator also becomes convinced of the risk involved or perhaps the utopian character of the declared, avant-garde restraint: “Here again I lowered my voice and whispered in his ear: «You loved him... but why was there so much shame, so much scorn in that love? ... Why do you conceal it like a criminal concealing a crime? You don’t answer? You don’t know? Perhaps I will know for you»” (70). With these words Gombrowicz makes an aesthetic declaration: aware of the limitations and traps of the two clashing tendencies, he proposes a new path of investigation, approaching the model which could be for now referred to as the “third mode.” It would focus on problematizing the tensions between the rational and the affective, the intellectual and the realist, which is precisely what constitutes the “content” of the story. Here, the corpse of the father becomes a metaphor of the work of art, whose status depends on creative (and interpretative) profiling. As we know, Gombrowicz ultimately chooses the “third option” – the deceased do not “die” of natural causes, nor is he a victim of mental “cardiac death.” But the work can no longer be taken to be a faithful representation of experiences and emotions, and by Gombrowicz’s choice, it is also not meant to become the language of discipline and form, which are nothing more than a trick, “a vicious circle” clearly returning art to the recently cursed reality.⁵² Hence the solution: the body and the work fall victim to a conscious “premeditated crime” problematizing the status of the criminal/investigator/artist and the artifact itself – a crime “squared,” performed in plain sight and requiring premeditation. Gombrowicz’s verdict is clear: the avant-garde work which fails to conceptualize its status and function means nothing, it is an escape “a sign of the timidity of feelings which retreat and contract at the cold touch of a stranger” (60); consequently it fails to reveal the artistic gesture, leaves “not the slightest marks of asphyxiation on [the] body” (60). The work of the investigator, the artist of the “third mode,” requires clear authorial signature, a trace of the artist’s touch, a “clear imprint of all ten fingers” on the “dead man’s neck” (75).

52 Stanisław Machniewicz, *Wybór pism estetycznych*, ed. Sław Krzemień-Ojak (Kraków: Universitas, 2012), 84.

A Machine for the Production of Meanings

In the attempt to describe precisely the specificity of art's "third mode," one should consider also non-literary examples (which largely confirm the validity of the proposed investigations), for instance, the works created by the group connected to the French journal *Documents*: the conceptualizations of Georges Bataille, Eli Lotar, Man Ray, Max Ernst, and Hans Bellmer which disturb, hypnotize, and seduce perhaps with their ambiguity precisely as a result of the tension between the affective and the conceptual.

Several sculptures by Alberto Giacometti can also be considered as model examples of the artistic mode discussed in this essay, among them *Suspended Ball*, an intriguing installation from 1930 (which started among the Surrealists the trend of producing sexually charged works). Giacometti's erotic machine, consisting of a movable, suspended ball made of stone and plowed from below by a long, moon-shaped wedge, placed within a metal, cage-like frame provoked mixed reactions, and not without a reason. Critics compared them to "strong but undefined sexual emotions related to unconscious desires,"⁵³ adding that "the emotions did not arouse satisfaction of any kind" but rather "an irritating anxiety."⁵⁴ Rosalind Krauss locates the work's source of power in the connection it makes between the supposedly opposite orders – love and violence, as well as between the sexes – while employing simple modest means. But the force of impact of *Suspended Ball* could have several other, quite diverse explanations.⁵⁵

Giacometti's "machine for the production of meanings" may be read as a consequence of the artist's ethnographic fascination with primitivism, for instance, figures alluding to an ancient Mexican game where a stone wedge functioned as a ball. Hitting with it selected body parts (especially knees and buttocks) was meant to symbolize a combination of cruelty and vitality. In another related interpretation, *Suspended Ball* in form may have been inspired by Bataille's *History of the Eye*, and particularly by the ambiguous status of the eyeball (also connected to other spherical objects such as the sun, the egg, etc.).

53 Maurice Nadeau, *Histoire du surréalisme* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1945), 176 (quoted in Krauss, *Oryginalność awangardy*, 63-64).

54 Krauss, *Oryginalność awangardy*, 63-64.

55 Giacometti's sculpture reveals itself, in fact, as a classical open work as defined by Umberto Eco, one which encourages the audience's active participation because "the form itself is so constructed as to appear ambiguous and to assume different shapes depending on the angle from which it is viewed" (and this certainly means more than just the physical angle of observation), Eco, *The Open Work*, 85.

Considering the elements the sculpture consists of, its composition suggests that the elements' potential mobility, the audience's perception and verdict tend to frame them firstly as a figuration of the constant, perhaps inevitable interaction of bodies and sexes: the furrowed ball may symbolize femininity and the wedge could stand for the "plowing" male activity. In this way, the sculpture materializes the sexual potentiality of action and physical integration. The swaying movement and the "grinding" of the two elements also point to another interpretative possibility, suggesting, for instance, a play of meanings between that which is static (the wedge), but not passive as it carves the other element, and the ball which is mobile, but lacking actual agency, as it is subjected to the process of "carving." Critics also saw in it an act of primordial violence resembling the famous slicing of the eyeball with a razor in Buñuel's *An Andalusian Dog*. Finally, Giacometti's installation can be read also as an expression of castration anxiety, of the fear of dominance and appropriation in general.

However, Giacometti's sculpture becomes as ambiguous as the eroticism of Bataille's eye is transgressive. If the eye is to symbolize the gaze-centric order, usually identified in the modern tradition with the rational, male element, then the ball itself could be read as a hollistic, "round phallicness" opposed to the moon-shaped wedge.⁵⁶ The sculpture, moreover, can be viewed from yet a different angle (one that for several reasons is more attractive): we could read the signifying ambiguity of *Suspended Ball* and the "dissolution of difference" between femininity and masculinity – passivity and activity – as an intended gesture suggesting the need of going beyond the binary divisions and negating both sexual and erotic dualism.

Additionally, the blurring of boundaries and the dissolution of divisions could be an attempt at leaving behind the traditional distinction of the intellectual/spiritual and the physical spheres, as well as the rational and instinctual ones. The metal frame where the ball and the wedge are placed would then become a kind of cage, a designed, separated space, an artistic laboratory revealing actual relations of supposedly radically different potentialities. The "design" does not necessarily imply the "artificiality" of the presented mechanism, but rather reveals the need to find an appropriate scale allowing to show clearly the nature of the affective-somatic and intellectual processes. Similar interpretative intuitions can be found in the somewhat enigmatic remarks by Michel Leiris, awed by the innovativeness, intensity, and the ability to "express emotional ambivalence" found in Giacometti's sculpture:

56 For more on the tradition of relating the lunar metaphors to femininity see, for instance, Kazimiera Szczuka, "Przędki, tkaczki, pająki," *Biuletyn OŚKI* 3(8), (1990): 46-51.

Among the works of art one finds few objects (paintings or sculptures) capable of at least meeting the basic requirements of that true fetishism, in other words, love... revealing itself under a hard shell, enclosing it within the range of a tangible thing, placed like a piece of furniture, in this vast, strange house known as space... There are moments which could be referred to as moments of crisis and only those matter in life. Moments when suddenly that which is external begins to meet the demands signaled by our interior, moments when the outside world opens itself to allow a connection with our hearts... I like Giacometti's sculpture because everything he does seems to preserve a crisis of this kind in stone, and it is marked with the intensity of a sudden incident, immediately captured and frozen... and yet nothing in the sculpture is dead, on the contrary, everything can be worshipped like in true fetishes...⁵⁷

The sculpture becomes a "piece of furniture," that is, a material artifact serving as a handy (and otherwise inexpressible) figuration of a certain affect. However, Giacometti's work is also a "protective armor," which could be understood not only as a "shield" for something, but also an anatomical metaphor. It is a hard cover for defensive and representative purposes, but first and foremost (as in the case of insects) an "exoskeleton" – an indispensable and basic construction element. As such, the "shell" is located neither on the outside, nor on the inside, thus annulling the binary distinction between the external and the internal. The sculpture, similarly, is not a "container for meanings," a representation of some previously experienced state transcribed into a work of art. Giacometti's work is itself this affective state, becoming its own fetish or embodiment, which Leiris believes should be "worshipped," or perceived as the act of perception activates the affective–signifying potential. The "emotional ambivalence" experienced in a confrontation with the sculpture is precisely a recreation (though one following a new set of rules) of a specific fusion, a mediation between the artist and the external world which happens in "moments of crisis."

This equally physical, instinctual, and mental opportunity for actions and experience thus becomes the actual object of interest here because, firstly, the movement it suggests takes place on several levels of the artist's integration with the environment, when "that which is external begins to meet the demands signaled by our interior" and, secondly, the opportunities to act, and their very potentiality, could be posited as the founding principle of the concept of *Suspended Ball* where the movement smoothly turns into rest, activity into passivity, aggression into submission, masculinity into femininity,

57 Michel Leiris, „Alberto Giacometti,“ trans. M. Kędzierski, *Konteksty* 3-4 (2007): 163.

and so forth; and where it is difficult to distinguish between the supposedly opposite orders. Finally, a confrontation with Giacometti's work could be revealed as essential, one where the sculpture "emanates" with meanings, activating its affective agency and the model viewer (in this case Leiris) is "drawn into a vast dark vortex, those uncanny trance-inducing moments"⁵⁸ and later, on the basis of his aesthetic experience, perceives the sculpture as a reservoir of meanings, including his own emotions and affects: "those beautiful objects which I can see and touch are the nucleus of my many memories."⁵⁹

Analyzing the mechanisms of *Suspended Ball* from this angle and considering the wealth of its readings and the force of its impact, one may risk yet another interpretative trope: namely that the sculpture implies and problematizes the work of drives, desires, and affects, blocked and rationalized, and yet evading the domination of the mind. In this reading, Giacometti's cage would be no longer an agonal space where the masculine and the feminine clash, but a metaphor of the human psychosomatic order where the mind, the unconscious, and the body continuously converse.

On the Originality of the Avant-garde Feeling

The aim of artistic works eluding the known aesthetic categories of modernism would be to embody or figure or materialize the artistic impasse resulting from the difficulty of choice between two paradigms of presentation. At the same time, those realizations would move beyond the dualist reasoning and the split between the spiritual and material dimensions. In such cases, the avant-garde artists would draw inspiration precisely from the tensions between the various orders. A direct stimulus to initiate the creative processes would come from the sphere located at the point of contact between the traditionally understood spheres of reason and physicality, spirituality and materiality. What I have in mind here is precisely the sphere of affect which I believe to be of key importance in order to understand the more general regularity which is the source of avant-garde's actual originality.

Consequently, the proposed "alternative" artistic model would be inspired by the techniques of intellectual art, but at the same time it would express and problematize issues resisting rationalization, presented and described so far through the categories of suppression, repression, division, and breakdown. Speaking generally, the engine of such artistic investigations would be fueled not so much by the fissure between soul and matter, mind and body,

58 *Ibid.*, 163.

59 *Ibid.*, 163.

or *sacrum* and *profanum*, but rather by the intuition of a kinship and osmosis between these orders. We are no longer talking about the ideal of mirroring reality or expressing authentic emotions (as in the more traditional paradigms of understanding art), but about repeated attempts to conceptualize the complexity and ambiguity of the experiential–affective sphere – both in the existential dimension, experienced by the individual trying to determine their attitude to their chaotic, unpredictable, and encompassing reality, and in the aesthetic one, that is, the affect of the artist toward the created work which may precisely be a fear of being fortunate enough to find artistic solutions. This is why the specificity of this modernist mode would rely on an anxious ambivalence – an uneasiness created by the object of presentation, which somehow “demands” a description, and by the responsibility of making formal choices. Consequently, in the third mode of experience, emotion and affect become the proper object of the avant-garde play with audience sensibility, conventions, canons, and perception models, but also (as stimuli for creative processes) with the invention of the artists themselves. The affective amalgam would thus function as a special “invisible object,”⁶⁰ responsible for the initiation of the artistic gesture, but also subjected to a necessary processing that ultimately complicates an unequivocal decoding.

Translation: Anna Warso

⁶⁰ I am alluding here to Giacometti’s intriguing 1934 sculpture, *Invisible Object*.