

THE IMAGE OF ART BETWEEN IDEOLOGY AND MODERNITY. ELBLĄG BIENNALES OF SPATIAL FORMS IN 1960'S POLAND

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ABSTRACT

In 1965 Gerard Kwiatkowski and Marian Bogusz organized the first of the Spatial Forms Biennales in Elbląg – a city based in the so-called “Recovered Territories”. Selected artists, supported by ZAMECH mechanical plant and with the permission of the communist authorities, created several dozen huge metal sculptures known as “Spatial Forms”. This was the biggest experiment combining art and industry in Poland or even in Europe.

The aim of the article is to juxtapose the role of this phenomenon, namely how the creators of the Biennales found a balance between artistic freedom and political limitations, these limitations were forced upon the artists in a way that might prompt one to recall, Foucault's manner of “discipline” (Foucault, 1973). The author of the article also touches upon the question of the contemporary view of the Elbląg Biennale from the perspective of the avant-garde myth of social and collective participation in artistic creation.

KEYWORDS

Spatial Forms | Metal Sculpture | Art and Ideology | Elbląg Biennale | Polish Art in the 1960's

After the end of the Second World War, Poland along with many other countries of Central and Eastern Europe found themselves within the Soviet sphere of political influence, according to the Yalta Conference agreement, which soon resulted in the Cold War division of the continent (Wettig, 2008). The communist regime not only enforced Soviet economic models, i.e. a centrally planned economy, but it also interfered with other areas of life such as architecture and art.

However, during the immediate postwar years Polish artists and critics made efforts to continue to develop their cultural activities. In 1948 Tadeusz Kantor (artist) and Mieczysław Porębski (art critic) organized I Wystawa Sztuki Nowoczesnej (the 1st Modern Art Exhibition) in Kraków, presenting a wide range of Polish contemporary art, including painting as well as photography and spatial objects. Although the artists declared their interest in combining modern art with “progressive”, official ideology, the communist authorities soon decided to close the exhibition. In 1949 socialist realism became the obligatory and official trend in art for the Eastern Bloc. Artistic circles in Poland very quickly realized that there was no room for modern, abstract works any more. However, the exhibition was of great importance for Polish art.

After the breakthrough of October 1956, when the Stalinist period ended, II Wystawa Sztuki Nowoczesnej (the 2nd Modern Art Exhibition) was held in 1957 in Warsaw Zachęta – taking its number from the one held in 1948. Its participants rejected socialist realism. This was possible due to the changes in the politics of Poland – introduced in 1956 by Władysław Gomułka, the new leader of the PZPR (Polish United Workers Party) – which began Polish October – also known as the Polish thaw (Kemp-Welch, 2006: 1261-1284). The new authorities were still communists, however, so in their search for legitimacy they decided to support – at a moderate level of course – the ideas of modernism, which was a total negation of “socialist” doctrine. For the authorities it was convenient to appear liberal, *ipso facto* “modern”. They were aware of the fact that the repressions conducted during the Stalinist period were not as efficient as a method of

“soft” control could be (Piotrowski, 2011: 40-45). The modernist interest of artists in artistic problems only – such as the autonomy of painting in particular – seemed to be politically neutral to the ruling authorities, that is, safe and useful. In this way the communist government had given the artists an illusion of freedom, allowing formal experiments and excepting non-objective works of art, however, they still exerted full control over the “disobedient” artists. In practice, the authorities could easily intimidate artists suspected of improper political involvement (Piotrowski, 2010)¹. This reserved approval for modernism was part of an intentional game between the authorities and artists who aspired to be modern and use the abstract language of art. They were supposed to feel free within the framework of politically neutral experiments, without any interference in their creative process, but at the same time respect the unwritten “rules”. On the other hand, after the end of the period of socialist realism with its strictly pro-Soviet political propaganda which was an arrangement imposed on artists by force, the artists themselves avoided being involved in propaganda art as well as its narrative aspects (Baraniewski, 1994: 34).

In Poland, in the second half of the 1950’s and early 1960’s, there was a characteristic development of the myth of “coming back” to the Europe ideal, giving Polish artistic circles the illusory comfort of being European. On that basis, some specific concepts were created, like the “Polish poster school” or the “Polish film school”, which gathered together the leading group of artists representing the country in international events (Baraniewski 1994: 37).

In that period, especially during the 1960’s, one may observe a variety of forms of artistic activity under national patronage. Funded symposiums, workshops and plein-air sprang up, creating an atmosphere of initiative and professionalism. Such initiatives were only possible due to generous national financial support. They were quite often organized on the so-called “Recovered Territories” (Polish: “Ziemie Odzyskane”) that became part of Poland after the Second World War². They were treated as an element of official communist propaganda, defining postwar

¹ Piotrowski also indicates ambivalent interpretations of relation between artistic freedom and politics, as a demonstration against communist forms of oppression – especially abroad. Eva Cockroft, for example, persuaded an obvious connection between cultural cold war politics and the success of Abstract Expressionism in the USA, examining the policy of The Museum of Modern Art (MOMA); see Cockroft 1985.

² This term was used by Polish People’s Republic and referred to the former Free City of Gdańsk as well as some pre-war German lands, incorporated into Poland after the Second World War. At the same time Poland lost a far greater area in the East (Eastern Borderlands) that had been annexed by the Soviet Union.

Poland as the heir to the medieval times of Piast's realm³. Among events of quite mediocre significance there were some outstanding undertakings like I Sympozjum Artystów Plastyków i Naukowców (the 1st Symposium of Visual Artists and Scientists) in Puławy in August 1966. As the result of the artistic activities, which took place during the Symposium many spatial sculptures or installations were created, as well as events, which had a similar nature to performances or happenings, organized in close cooperation with labourers engaged in Zakłady Azotowe (a nitrogen plant) in Puławy. This particular location – a great new investment, one of the symbols of the industrial revolution in Poland at that time – inspired the subtitle of a Symposium: "Art in a changing world" (Leśniewska, 2006; Leśniewska 2015, 153-213).

Just one year before the Meeting of Artists and Scientists in Puławy, in 1965 (22nd July – 22nd August), the artist Gerard Kwiatkowski (1930-2015) – also known as Jürgen Blum – organized the 1st of the Spatial Forms Biennales in Elbląg⁴. Selected invited artists, supported by ZAMECH Mechanical Works, created several dozen huge metal objects known as "Spatial Forms". Kwiatkowski together with Warsaw artist Marian Bogusz (1920-1980) as ideological leaders of the Biennale, strongly accentuated the duties of the new artists connected with the evolution of the visual form. The function of a work of art in the context of reality had changed, in their opinion. Introducing the idea of Biennale Bogusz wrote:

"Participants of the Biennale (...) spatially organize a selected area and arrange metal forms there. This is not about placing a traditional sculpture in an open space, but about organizing a certain zone with projected as well as the existing components (greenery, architecture). (...) This meeting of real-scale architecture, greenery, the surrounding area and specific materials makes an important contribution to the review of many artistic ideas created in the conditions of the atelier" (Bogusz 1965: 10)⁵.

Kwiatkowski, himself employed in Zamech as a visual artist, saw the relationship between art and reality even more clearly. The artists – participants of the Biennale – were supposed to choose a certain place within the area defined by the organizers in the city of Elbląg, then design and finally make a spatial form (Kwiatkowski, 1965: 5-6). The "laboratory" idea of art and the right of artists to experiment freely – strongly accentuated during the prewar period by Polish avant-garde artist Władysław Strzemiński (1893-1952) – had been reassessed: metal sculptures which were meant to be placed in a social surrounding, intruding into the city space. The artist was supposed to leave his atelier and supported by engineers, technicians and labourers co-create a spatial form. In this way, the ideas of the 1st Biennale appear to be an innovative experiment, considering the modern form of artistic patronage by a mechanical plant as well as the incorporation of the works of art into ordinary life (Bogusz, 1965: 10). Kwiatkowski wrote about the bright future filled with cities – paintings and about the whole world resembling huge work of art (Kwiatkowski 1965: 6). In this way, he touched upon the two opposing problems of prewar artistic ideas of the 1920's: the modernist autonomy of the work of art and the constructivist concept of the artist-engineer. The spatial forms in Elbląg were indeed independent sculptural structures, however, attention to the appropriate treatment of specific material – metal in this case – referred directly to constructivism⁶. Some other guidelines of the organizers also accentuated the tradition of a productivist utopia, the practical and socially useful role of art connected with industrial production and the close cooperation of groups of artists and labourers (Lachowski 2006: 51-52). Piotr Juszkiewicz, in turn, noted a specific re-interpretation of the constructivist tradition in Biennale's program, and emphasized that the event was an interesting example of its postwar interpretation. In particular, the call to change the world into an aesthetic composition, a gigantic art gallery, seems to be close to the ideas presented by Julian Przyboś – a poet and co-founder

3 The word "Recovered" was interpreted according to the fact that these territories belonged to the Polish state in different periods over the centuries, especially under the Piast dynasty (established by Duke Mieszko I, it ended with the death of king Casimir III, called the Great). The problematic nature of this concept in the contemporary discourse was outlined by: (Jasiński, 2006: 15-25).

4 They were regularly held in Elbląg in 1965-1973, sponsored by ZAMECH Mechanical Works.

5 „Uczestnicy Biennale (...) przestrzennie organizują wybrany teren komponując na nim formy z metalu. Nie chodzi o ustawienie tradycyjnie pojętej rzeźby w plenerze, a o zagospodarowanie wybranej powierzchni elementami zaprojektowanymi i już istniejącymi (zieleni, architektura). ... To spotkanie się z rzeczywistym wymiarem architektury, zieleni, terenu oraz rodzajem materiału jest ważnym przyczynkiem do rewizji wielu założeń artystycznych powstałych w warunkach pracowni (transl. from Polish to English by the Author).

6 Constructivist ideas see: (Lodder, 1985). More reading about the tension between prewar avant-garde and modernism and its consequences for the postwar modernism dialectics: (Piotrowski 2011: 117-146).

of the Polish prewar avant-garde – in his essays written in the 2nd half of the 1950's (Juszkiewicz, 2013: 147).

Let us consider the outcome of the 1st Elbląg Biennale, based on some selected examples. The artists, according to Biennale's policy, had scrap materials at their disposal – industrial waste provided by Zamech. Most of the forms created presented a simple shape, often based on the repetitive units of circles or triangles. There were quite a few artists one might consider as neo-constructivists among about fifty participants of this event, like: Marian Bogusz – the Biennale ideologist we already mentioned, Zbigniew Gostomski, Adam Marczyński, or Henryk Stażewski. It is symptomatic of the event that these artists were primarily painters, but were eager to cross the limits of the painting genre towards three-dimensional forms. In Elbląg they had a great opportunity to take up this challenge. One may observe that in some cases the concept of certain metal objects were preceded by two-dimensional compositions.

Henryk Stażewski (1894-1988), a doyen of Polish avant-garde artists, was a co-founder of Polish

Constructivism. His paintings represented geometric abstraction in the 1920s and early 30s, after the figurative period evolved into reliefs around 1960. He used geometric shapes creating optical effects with the colour white dominating (Fig. 1a). In this background Stażewski's spatial form in Elbląg seems to be a continuation of his previous interests as a painter. Plates with an asteroidal shape curve upward. It is supposed to be viewed from the front from Słowiański Square. The view of St. Nicholas cathedral appearing at the background of the form brings the whole experience together. A picture taken by Eustachy Kossakowski – one of many pictures by this renowned Polish photographer taken during Biennale⁷ – captures the probable intention of the artist (Fig. 1b). The church's tower becomes a natural extension of the metal structure. The grid of vertical tracery and cornices of the architectural object correspond with the geometrical shapes of the spatial form. The boom of the crane just placing the object, as photographed by Kossakowski, seems to be a part of the whole composition, hanging over Stażewski's work as an openwork tented roof over the church's façade (Juszkiewicz, 2013: 154).

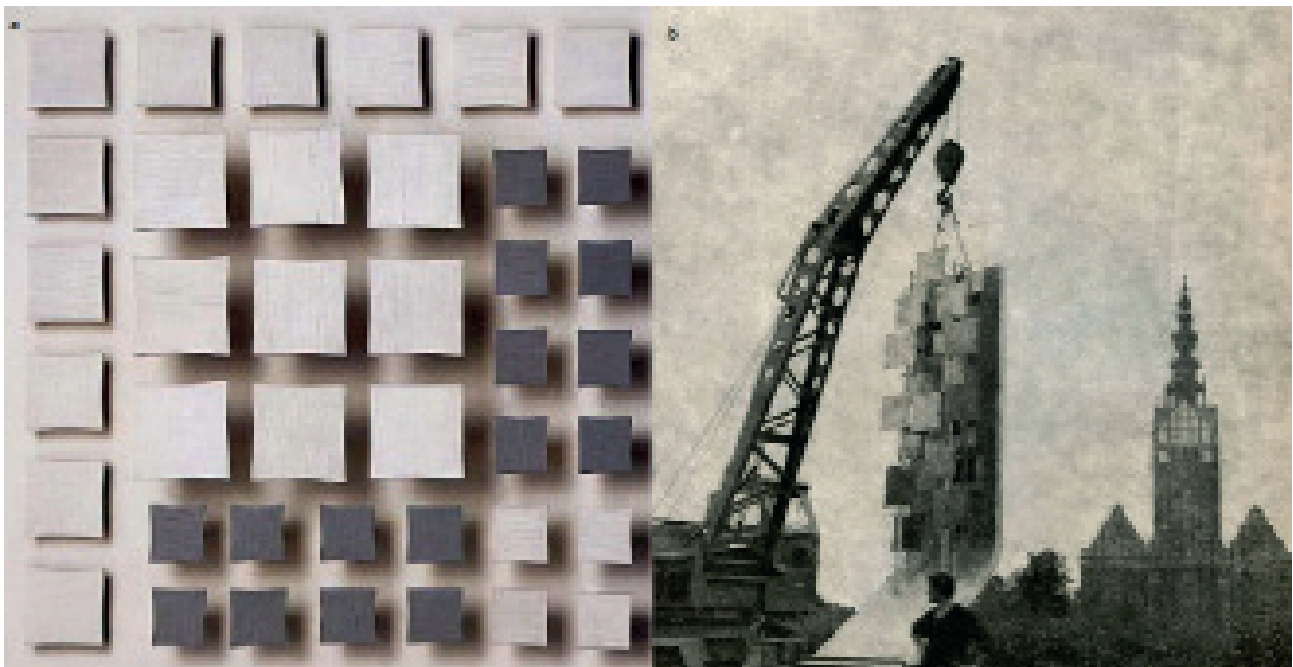


Fig. 01. Henryk Stażewski: a. *Białe i szary relief nr 20* [White and gray relief no 20], 1964, mixed media, private collection, source: <http://artyzm.com/obraz.php?id=1858>; b. *Placing Stażewski's Spatial form in Elbląg* (coop. with E. Kopyrk et al.), 1965, 450 cm (height), sheet metal, photo by Eustachy Kossakowski, after: *I. biennale form przestrzennych, elbląg 23.VII-22.VIII.1965*, [ex. cat.], ed. Marian Bogusz, © Anka Ptaszowska

⁷ Piotr Juszkiewicz draws attention to the contextualization and monumentalization of the Elbląg forms in many of the pictures taken by Kossakowski (Juszkiewicz, 2013: 171). Architectural context captured by the photographer seems to be quite natural, considering many modern buildings in the city, still under construction after the World War II. However, the use of the distant ground and a worm's-eye view in an attractive way combines both elements – form and architecture – contrasting or comparing them.

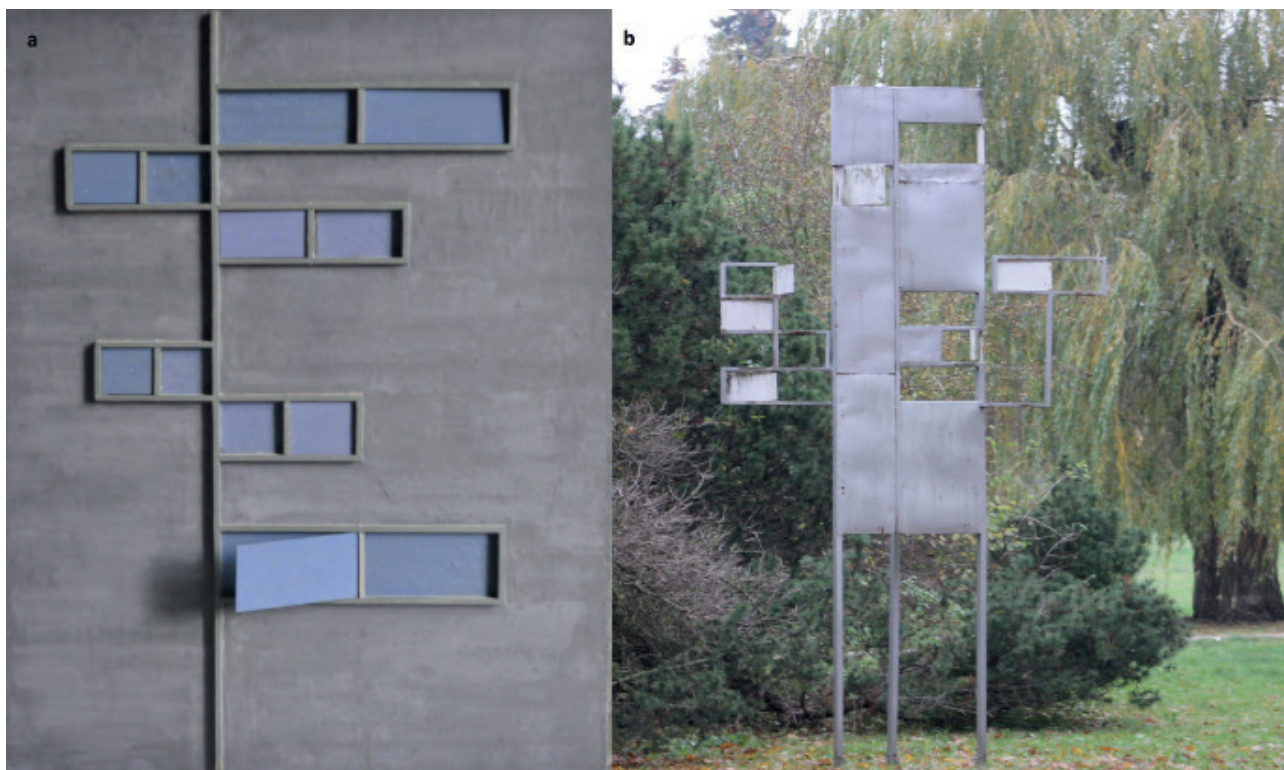


Fig. 02. Adam Marczyński: a. *Relief fioletowy UZ11B* [Violet relief UZ11B], 1965, 61 x 45 cm, mixed media, private collection, photo by E. Błotnicka-Mazur, © Piotr Marczyński; b. *Spatial form in Elbląg* (coop. with M. Klaus, J. Rakowski), 1965, 800 cm (height), iron, contemporary view, photo by A. Dzierżyc-Horniak

Adam Marczyński (1908-1985), a member of the Kraków Group of Artists, experimented as a painter in the same time period with semi-spatial compositions based on movable geometric panels (Fig. 2a). It was a cycle of variable kinetic abstractions, a combination of wooden cases with movable flaps that opened and closed. The giant object he created in Elbląg – almost 8 meters high – was also kinetic, but it went beyond the rectangular frame (Fig. 2b). The artist fixed numerous flaps to the object's rectangular holes in a way that enabled the wind to change their arrangement within the panels, opening or closing these small "windows" to the landscape behind. Similarly, in his pictures the viewer had the possibility of arranging movable elements to create a new unique composition each time.

In the 1960s Marian Bogusz became involved in matter painting and specialized in exposing the texture of his compositions. His exploration of the concepts connected with real space led him to create double-layer paintings with vertical cuts on the outer layer of the canvas revealing the surface underneath (Kowalska, 2007: 86-87). He called one of his cycles *Fugues*, to emphasize the connection of their rhythm and harmony with music (Fig. 3a). These semi-spatial compositions combined canvas and sheets of metal.

The elongated forms were organized in a particular rhythm. Such a dynamic musical rhythm is readable in the form created by Bogusz in Elbląg, with its vertical elements of different sizes and the specific density of their arrangement (Fig. 3b).

The metal form created by Lech Kunka (1920-1978), a painter from Łódź, is one of the favourites of the inhabitants of Elbląg, from its shape associated with European bison. Its structure resembles a honeycomb made from a combination of pipes of a similar cross-section (Fig. 4a). The object lies within the creative development line of Kunka's painting, in which he portrayed round shapes at that time (Fig. 4b). In the 1960s the artist exploited the texture values and tension between multiple small spots on the picture's surface.

Next to Kazimierz Jagiellończyk square there is an intriguing object by Zbigniew Gostomski (1932-2017) who also transferred the visual issues that he was solving in his painting. His *Optical object XIII* (1963) creates the illusion of a metal form. The surface of the painting is organized into two zones of grey colour of graduating intensity (Fig. 5a). This produces the optical effect of coming closer or moving away from presented forms, suggesting a three-



Fig. 03. Marian Bogusz: a. *Fuga na blachę i ultramarynę* [Fugue on the sheet metal and ultramarine], 1965, 73 x 100 cm, mixed media, private collection, source: <https://onebid.pl/pl/auction/139/lot/501/marian-bogusz-1920-1980-fuga-na-blache-i-ultramaryne-1965>; b. *Spatial form in Elbląg* (coop. with Z. Czarnecki et al.), 1965, 420 cm, 320 cm, 180 cm (height), iron, contemporary view, photo by K. Mazur



Fig. 04. Lech Kunka: a. *Spatial form in Elbląg* (coop. with H. Borowicz), 1965, 220 x 350 x 100 cm, welded pipes, contemporary view, photo by K. Mazur; b. *Kompozycja* [Composition], 95 x 54 cm, mixed media, private collection, https://artinfo.pl/wyniki-aukcji/168-aukcja-dziel-sztuki?dzieło=36_kompozycja_lech_kunka&page=1

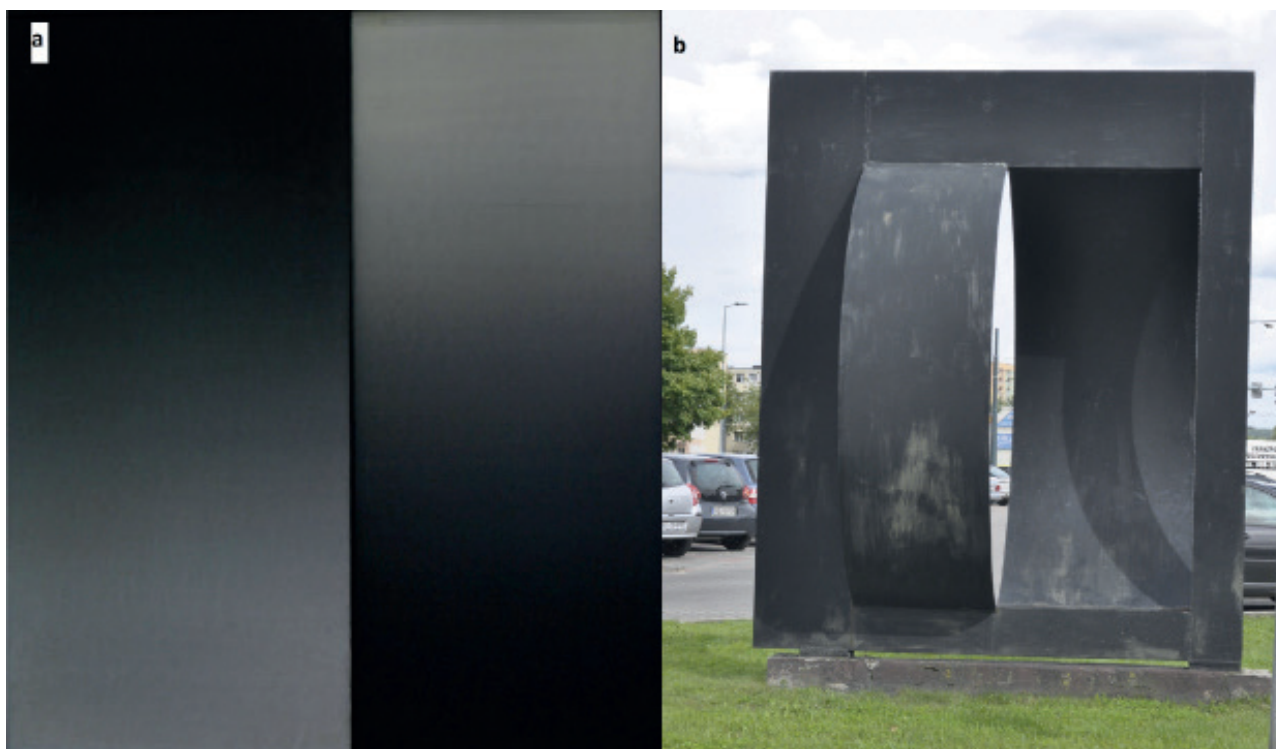


Fig. 05. Zbigniew Gostomski: a. *Przedmiot optyczny XIII* [Optical object XIII], 1963, 100 x 85 cm, tempera on fibreboard, Museum Ziemi Lubuskiej in Zielona Góra, source: <http://mzl.zgora.pl/zbiory/infokioski/dzial-sztuki-wspolczesnej/zbigniew-gostomski/#>; b. *Spatial form in Elbląg* (coop. with Z. Czarnecki et al.), 1965, 400 cm (height), sheet metal bended, contemporary view, photo by K. Mazur

dimensional perception. Gostomski's spatial form in Elbląg is a simple but well-considered composition made from two sheets of parallel curved metal (Fig. 5b). They generate a tension, hidden within the thick frame when it is viewed from the front. It is only clear in the three-dimensional space.

The spatial forms were created by painters – however, there were other artists created additional objects. Remarkable creations were also presented by sculptors, who had worked with metal before, like *Witacz* (*Welcomer*) by Jerzy Jarnuszkiewicz (1919-2005) or the tallest form made during the 1st Biennale by Julian Boss-Gostłowski (1926-2012). Both compositions reveal an aspiration for closing their shapes within a specific frame – similar to the abovementioned work by Zbigniew Gostomski. They accentuate the symmetry of straight and curved lines. *Witacz* by Jarnuszkiewicz is made from steel strips, fixed in lines at sharp angles to each other (Fig. 6a). They are cut in such a way as to create a horizontal oval shape, balanced by vertical elements of construction. Such an arrangement produces the effect of the dematerialization of the material used. The open-work construction is effective in light and dark conditions due to the steel “jalousie”. A predatory as well as an aesthetic appearance

characterizes Julian's Boss-Gostłowski's composition (Fig. 6b). With its sharp longitudinal elements rising above the centre of a quatrefoil composed of triangle metal plates, it resembles a gigantic floral form.

Among the participants of the Biennale there were other notable artists like Magdalena Abakanowicz (1930-2017) who is known around the world for her original sculptural forms made from textiles, which she called *Abakans*. The artist took up the challenge to work with metal for the first time in Elbląg, forming a vertical arbor-like work (Fig. 7a). Another female artist, Magdalena Więcek (1924-2008), who along with Abakanowicz graduated from the Sculpture Faculty of the Warsaw Fine Arts Academy, initially worked with rough reinforced concrete. Biennale was the first opportunity for the artist to reveal the potential of metal structures. Her dynamic construction rotates around a triangle skeleton (Fig. 7b).

In communist Poland such an artistic initiative would never have come into existence without the permission of the authorities and their material support. By 1973 five editions of the Biennale had taken place and, as a result, nearly fifty forms were created. The broad support from ZAMECH and the personal engagement

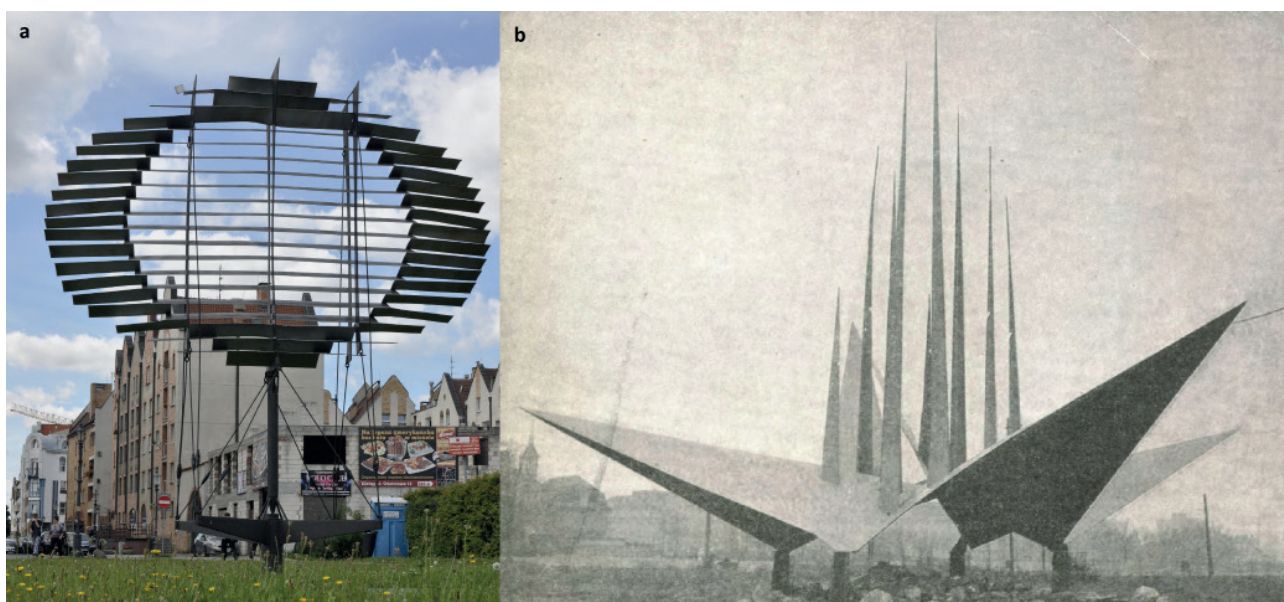


Fig. 06. a. Jerzy Jarnuszkiewicz, spatial form in Elbląg *Witacz* [Welcomer] (coop. with M. Cierniewski et al.), 1965, 800 cm (height), sheet metal and wire, contemporary view, photo by K. Mazur; b. Julian Boss-Gostawski, spatial form in Elbląg (coop. with M. Karpowicz, J. Grdeń), 1965, 1250 cm (height), metal and stone, after: *I. biennale form przestrzennych, elbląg 23.VII-22.VIII.1965*, [ex. cat.], ed. Marian Bogusz

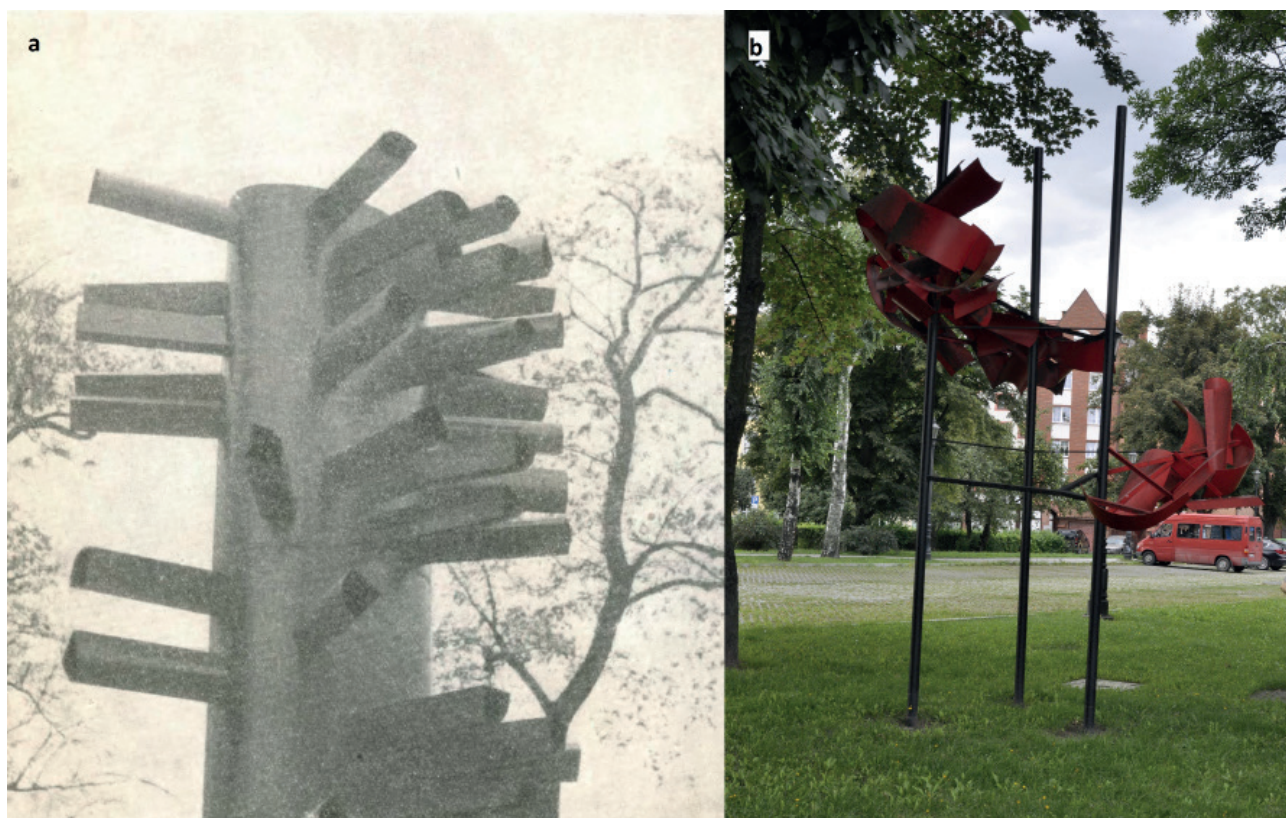


Fig. 07. a. Magdalena Abakanowicz, spatial form in Elbląg (coop. with J. Podwalny, J. Sznajder), 1965, 400 cm (height), metal, after: *I. biennale form przestrzennych, elbląg 23.VII-22.VIII.1965*, [ex. cat.], ed. Marian Bogusz; b. Magdalena Więcek, spatial form in Elbląg (coop. with Z. Czarnecki et al.), 1965, 650 cm (height), sheet metal, photo by K. Mazur

of its workers played an extraordinary role. The participation of non-artists was a unique act: both for the engineers and the workers, who, together with the artists made decisions regarding the constructional issues of the spatial forms produced.

All of these non-utilitarian, abstract objects situated in the urban space attracted crowds of intrigued citizens from the very beginning. Gerard Kwiatkowski expressed his hope for the active involvement of the citizens of Elbląg when he said: "We would like the spatial forms placed in various locations in the city to make a bond with people, (...) to initiate the process of reflection. This is our understanding of the objective and sense of modern art – the impact that it has on people on a daily basis within the city space and at work"⁸. These postulates, however, remained in the sphere of utopian ideals. The spatial forms, which initially attracted huge interest from the public, soon ceased to cause a sensation, becoming "a mirage that briefly created a festive atmosphere. Thereafter, the footprints of the artists were covered with dust and rust and nobody paid attention to them" (Kowalski, 1994: 108-109)⁹.

The ideas and works expressed by the Biennale reveal a variety of aspects of this phenomenon, including its artistic values. The particular balance between artistic freedom – although limited to abstract forms of works, designed by the artists and supported by the

team of workers from ZAMECH – and the political limitations of the time, were strictly connected with the obvious factor of control by the communist authorities. However, Polish art theoreticians Hanna Ptaszkowska and Wiesław Borowski took a critical view of the Biennale as an artistic event. Ptaszkowska noted that the claimed "space organization" was in fact a false declaration and the result was rather closer to "occasional decoration" (Ptaszkowska, 1965: 14-15). Similarly Borowski criticized the "unilateral, utilitarian idea of space only" (Borowski 1965).

From the contemporary perspective, the 1st Biennale of Spatial Forms in Elbląg appears to be exceptional, from the point of view of the artistic results of the efforts of fifty sculptors and painters¹⁰. The following meetings in Elbląg were not of such great importance as the one from 1965. The 50th anniversary of the 1965 Biennale was celebrated by artists, art critics and scholars (Dzieweczyńska, 2015). Also, the presence of the spatial objects still fascinates the inhabitants as well as visitors to Elbląg. Although the critics of the Biennale accentuated the disorder in the arrangement of the forms within the urban space as well as the lack of intuition for their proper scale, the event was still the biggest experiment combining art and industry in Poland, or even in Europe, of the decade, which resulted in the realization of so many art works within the city space.

8 „chcemy, aby formy ustawione w różnych punktach miasta obcowwały z człowiekiem, (...) pobudzały do myślenia. Tak rozumiemy cel i sens sztuki nowoczesnej: w jej codziennym działaniu na człowieka w mieście i w pracy"; (Kwiatkowski, 1965: 6); (transl. from Polish to English by the Author).

9 More about participatory aspects of Elbląg Biennale see: (Błotnicka-Mazur, 2018).

10 Further reading about the Biennale: (Denisiuk, 2006).

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