

Summary

ANNA MARKOWSKA / *Junk Art and the Politics of Trash*

A guest of the international conference “Trickster Strategies in the Artists’ and Curatorial Practice”, which took place at the Art History Institute at the University of Wrocław on 26–27 October 2011, was, among others, a reputable art historian and curator Dr. Gillian Whiteley (Loughborough University School of the Arts). She delivered a paper “Political Pranksters, Provocateurs and Pan-It: Re-Connecting Countercultural Practices”. Whereas within the collection of the institute library we have had for not long time now her recent book entitled *Junk Art and the Politics of Trash* (London – New York 2011). Before the post-conference materials are printed, it is worth reaching out for this interesting and important volume that combines the perspective of her personal experience and erudition.

What will be the reflection of a Polish reader on Whiteley’s book?

Certainly a total lack of reference to World War 2 will come as a surprise; absence of feeling that millions of our fathers and grandfathers not much more than half a century ago were treated as junk. As this was a perspective on which grounds many works of art were created, also from the area Gillian Whiteley tells about – French New Realists. The omitted places however, create a refreshing for a Pole perspective that neutralise besetment in the past. The author’s considerations to „The Art of Assemblage” exhibition (1961) will undoubtedly induce the Polish reader to pose a question – that in any case will not be answered in the book – about the participation of Polish artists, Teresa Rudowicz and Marian Warzecha, who managed to cross the Iron Curtain and, according to oral tradition, took part in the New York show. It is worth also to pose a question about ‘Polish junk’, *i.e.* which works of art after the war made use of the aesthetics of assemblage, consciously disputing with the establishment Modernism and injecting – in apparently autonomous art of the PRL [the People Republic of Poland] – a spirit of anarchy? The answer is quite difficult as Poles used to treat those poor fractions and crumbs – following Romantic and Catholic customs – as traces that would undergo transsubstantiation thanks to an artist’s genius. And Whiteley’s narration does not include search for religious substitutions. In Poland poor, low-ranged objects are the domain of: Tadeusz Kantor, Piotr Potworowski (he included old pieces of jute bags in his canvases), Władysław Hasiór with his half country, provincial assemblages and Janek Simon, who deals with electronic garbage brought away by the Europeans to Africa. But are we ready to write about Polish junk without pathos and martyrology? A dubious distinction between rubbish and treasure, waste and miracle, in Whiteley’s tale refers rather to child’s sensibility, to maintain which the whole book actually appeals – though not *expressis verbis*.