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The History of the Witkacy Collection in Słupsk¹

This text is an endeavour to report on the 45-year presence of the Witkacy Collection in Słupsk. This presence is shrouded in a series of events, which developed into a coherent whole and is indeed intertwined with the history of the town. This has taken place with such strength that at present Witkacy is associated with Słupsk in the same way that he is associated with Kraków, Warsaw and Zakopane. Słupsk, a city which he never visited, has now become his second home and, most importantly, an important research centre devoted to his work.

It is also important to highlight that this text is written from the standpoint of an individual whose relationship with Witkacy is somewhat perfunctory. As an assistant to the curator of the collection there is little involvement in substantive work; however, there is involvement in the popularization of the collection as well as educational and administrative work. Hence, much of what is presented here, based upon observations from a distance so to speak, provides the opportunity to evaluate and to summarize many activities.

¹ This article was originally presented in summary form at Witkacy 2010 in Washington D.C. and has been revised and translated by Kevin Anthony Hayes.

The bringing of the first 110 works of art, which belonged to the collection of Birula-Białynicki, to Słupsk in 1965 was an attempt to build a Polish identity in the "New Poland." Following the Second World War, one of the aims of political propaganda was the popularization of culture in the territories which returned to the 'motherland.' It was a time when numerous initiatives were implemented in Słupsk in order to instill a new tradition in the territories which had been subject to Prussian or German influence for a number of years. This tradition was, of course, not foreign to people who lived in these territories after 1945.

In a short period of time, the collection of work by Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz became the primary exhibition at the Słupsk museum. Interest in it eclipsed other collections – those of contemporary and ancient art as well as ethnographic and archival collections. Because of its popularity, the Słupsk Museum is often mistakenly called the Witkacy Museum in Słupsk.

Since 1982, the Słupsk Museum has a permanent exhibition of Witkiewicz's work. It is so far the only monographic exhibition of the artist. The present exhibition, which was established in 1988, has at any one time more than 125 works of art on display, which is more than in all of the other Witkacy collections in Polish museums combined. Annually, some of the works on display are replaced with others. This is mainly due to the requirements of conservation and the need to vary the exhibition.

The presence of the collection in the city was more successful than expected. Above all, the proximity of Ustka – the local resort - meant that the exhibition is seen by a decidedly wider audience than just those living in Słupsk or in nearby towns and villages. The audience now includes people from all over Poland as well as tourists from other countries. This also led to the artist attracting broad interest outside the museum. The subject of Witkacy has been taken up by other institutions – the cultural centres as well as two leading theatres in Słupsk. For several years, the Słupsk City Council features the Witkacy collection in its promotional strategy. Therefore, the Witkacy Collection's functions can be divided into three areas: it is an exhibition which popularizes the activities of the museum, it supports the cultural and educational activities of other institutions, and it plays a role in promotional activities of the City of Słupsk.

The Museum's Activities

Witkacy's presence in Słupsk has meant that in addition to basic operations, such as organizing, compilation, and display, the museum has had to manage with considerable public interest which the collection attracted. Guided

tours and access to the collection have adopted a special form, the aim of which is to prepare the audience for the proper reception of the artworks. According to the curators, Witkacy's artworks, which are highly complex, can be received only through an appropriate lens and by comprehending the thoughts that guided the artist. At the very outset the Museum rejected an unreflective approach and to the present day every effort is made to educate the visitors. This teaches both the young as well as adults how to appreciate art. For many years, the work at the Museum has been substantive and not based on contemporary approaches to advertising and profit-making which is consistent with the law governing museums.

Within the framework of the educational activities, museum classes and lectures are organised and conducted at the exhibition. Such meetings are taken up mainly by schools from Słupsk and across Poland. Meetings are also organized for other groups – the University of the Third Age, the Society of Friends of the Central Pomeranian Museum in Słupsk, and the Polish Tourist Country-Lovers' Society. Every few months meetings open to the public are also organized. On such occasions, lectures are frequently enriched by a slide show, presenting works from other collections.

Substantive tasks are also realised through publication and ongoing development of the collection. The fundamental publication is the museum's catalogue of collections. The first of these, authored by Anna Krzyżanowska-Hajdukiewicz, was published in 1987. The next one, prepared by Beata Zgodzińska-Wojciechowska and Anna Żakiewicz, was released in 1996. Up to the present this catalogue covers a majority of the collection, and any new acquisitions are accounted for in additional publications. For example, The Leszczyński Bequest, comprising 14 portraits and archival documents, are discussed in the 17th issue of the newsletter "Słupia," which is published by the Society of Friends of the Museum. Additional information was also published through the album released by Parma Press in 2006 as well as the publication concerning the Portrait Painting Company issued by the Słupsk City Council in 2010.

Important elements of the popularization of the collections are the dozens of agreements for reproduction which the Museum issues annually. Currently, almost all publications on the artist, especially Polish, but also foreign, are illustrated with works from our collection. Thanks to the collection of portraits of important people from inter-war Poland, the Słupsk artworks are used as illustrations in books, biographies, scientific publications and journals, among others.

The Museum also organizes exhibitions of Witkacy's work in Poland and abroad. It is open to co-operation with other museums and cultural institu-

tions. The following is a summary of events between 1965 and 2009. There were more than 40 temporary exhibitions displaying Witkacy's artworks exclusively from the Museum's collection, including 28 outside Słupsk. Witkacy's artworks were also shown in more than 70 different temporary exhibitions. The Słupsk collection has been shown mainly in Poland, but also in Germany, Holland, Italy, France, Bulgaria and England. In general, considering the 45 year presence of the Witkacy Collection in Słupsk, these numbers are not particularly high, but due to the requirements of conservation, touring the work is limited. Most of the works in Słupsk are delicate pastels.

The Museum is also a patron of numerous cultural undertakings. It supports artists pursuing projects based on the work of Witkacy. It also collaborates with theatrical projects as well as offers patronage of cultural undertakings.

An example would include co-operation with the artist Piotr Szwabe, who proposed the painting of murals inspired by Witkacy's art in Słupsk. This artist had been already famed for several similar projects – including a monumental portrait of Lech Wałęsa in Gdańsk. Although the idea was well received by the curators, and the Director Mr. Jaroszewicz supported him, the Słupsk City Council rejected the proposal.

In earlier years the most significant co-operation took place with Waldemar Świerzy, one of Poland's most renowned poster artists. Because of his individual style and high profile, in 1985 the museum commissioned him to undertake a poster project: *Paintings and Drawings from the Collections of the Museum of Central Pomerania in Słupsk: On the 100th anniversary of the artist's birth*. A further example of such activity was the joint venture with Ewa Olszewska-Borys, a Polish sculptor known for her numerous projects of medals and coins. In the same year (1985) through a commission from the Słupsk museum, she designed a commemorative medal bearing the image of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz. In 1995, the Słupsk artist Mieczysław Łażny designed a commemorative envelope.

One of the few situations in which the museum refused to co-operate was the most recent film by Jacek Koprowicz, *The Hoax*. The film, which tells the story about the alleged life of Witkacy after World War II, aroused too much controversy and portrayed the artist in a bad light. Therefore, the museum refused to support the authors and did not consent to the creation of copies of the artworks from its collections. Nevertheless, these artworks ended up being used in the film.

Nonetheless, the museum's most important activity are the international conferences devoted to the life and creative work of Witkacy, which take place every five years. They are typically academic and serve to generate

a deeper understanding of the artist. Those who participate are both known Witkacologists and those who are taking their first steps in this field. Presented themes encompass the current state of research on Witkacy's work. For many years, the audiences have included people from Słupsk and those coming from afar. The first session took place in 1994, and the fourth, most recent, in 2009. Every conference leaves us with materials comprising all the papers which were presented during the conference. Throughout the long history of the conferences, only a few of the papers presented were not published. At the time of writing the present article, the papers from the fourth conference are being edited by Professor Janusz Degler. Previous editors have included Janusz Degler (conference 1994, published 1996), Anna Żakiewicz (conference 1999, published 2000) and Józef Tarnowski (conference 2004, published 2006). It is worth noting that last year's session and three temporary exhibitions, including an exhibition of the entire Słupsk Collection, have been acknowledged by the judges of the 'Pomeranian Arts Award' and Beata Zgodzińska received a nomination in the category of "creations" for organizing the session, for serving as an exhibition curator, and for authoring two catalogues.

Recently, the museum has striven to prepare an assortment of souvenirs and items, which are designed to promote the collection and the museum. Visitors to the museum frequently pointed out that following a visit it was not possible to buy a souvenir or a simple object associated with the collection. For many years, the museum reacted to this kind of criticism by investing in both large and small publications. The first idea to meet the demands of tourists was to publish postcards, which happened successively in 1994, 2002 and 2005. Reproductions of artworks also appeared in the 1996 calendar. While preparing these items great care is always taken to frame each image precisely in order to retain the important elements of the composition and its notations. Even promotional items should fully adhere to the principles of professionally prepared reproduction. For the past two years, the Museum offers T-shirts adorned with the work of Witkacy and linen bags bearing his photograph.

The Activities of Other Institutions

Thanks to the popularization and educational activities of the museum, Witkacy has become the leading figure of the cultural life of the town. One of the fields to take full advantage of his legacy is the theatre. The Słupsk

Theatre Centre Rondo is famous for a number of dramas and performances which have been produced since 1973 and are based on compilations of texts drawn from famous plays. This has been the case with both small-cast plays as well as monodramas. Among the first of these were: *Juvenilia*, *New Deliverance*, *Cocaine Séance*, *Dinner with Beelzebub*, *The Water Hen or Damn*, *PULPWITKAC*, *Bite* (based on themes from *The Mother*), *'Das Küchendrama'*, *Speed – Witkac Dangerous*, *Rage Theatre*, *DissONaNce*, *The Madman and the Nun*. Among the monodramas that deserve attention are: *Kalamarapaksa* (performed by Caryl Swift), *Leon* (based on *The Mother*) with Krzysztof Protasewicz, *Hygiene* (derived from *Narcotics* and *Unwashed Souls*) played by Daniel Kalinowski. The latter was also presented in the museum on several occasions.

The Rondo Theatre also organizes celebrations to commemorate the anniversaries of the birth and death of the artist. In February, *Quirky Nights* takes place, during which performances and concerts dedicated to the memory of the artist are presented. However, their main aim is to bring together the enthusiasts of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz. In contrast, a festival aimed at the young, *Witkacy under Thatched Roofs*, takes place in September. During the festival, secondary schools present wide-ranging creative projects inspired by the artist. Up till now, they have presented small and quasi-theatrical dramas, as well as attempts at photography, painting, music and dance. Annually, there are more than a dozen presentations which are judged by a panel of artists, actors, and Witkacy scholars.

The Dramatic Theatre in Słupsk also had Witkacy's works in its repertoire. The first performance was *Jan Maciej Karol Hellcat* in 1969. Further realizations included: *Lecture on Witkacy* in the program *New Deliverance of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz*, *The Madman and the Nun*, and *Beast of the Theatre of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz* in 1989. The Dramatic Theatre in Słupsk ceased to exist following an official decision taken in the 1990s. The New Theatre in Słupsk, established in 2004, inherited the repertoire. The inaugural play was a production of *The Crazy Locomotive*, directed by Jan Peszek. Coincidentally, in 2005 the museum purchased the typed manuscript of this play from the Leszczyński Collection. In 2009, on the 70th anniversary of the artist's death, the theatre took the name, *The Witkacy New Theatre*. This new assignation of patronage was accompanied by the premiere of *Witkacy – It is 20 to X* (i.e. *Witkacy – it is Twenty to Ten*), directed by Andrzej Maria Marczewski. This theatrical realisation was combined with a series of lectures concerning the literary, dramatic and theatrical work of Witkacy prepared by the director for secondary schools. An important event accompanying the implementation of the performance was a trip to the Great Lakes in Ukraine,

which was attended by representatives of the theater and museum. The expedition was accompanied by a TV crew which produced a documentary film about the place of Witkacy's passing. The film was directed by Maria Mrozińska.

Two books which were published in 2009 summarized the theatrical activity in Słupsk: *23 Theatrical Incidents* by Wioleta Komar and *Theatrical Traditions of Słupsk 1945–2008* by Anna Sobiecka. The first book concerns the history of monodrama on the boards of the Theatre Centre Rondo; the other is about the history of theatre in Słupsk after 1945. Importantly, both books discuss how the figure of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz has functioned in the theatrical culture of Słupsk.

It is worth mentioning that for the past two years an art competition called 'Witkacy and I' has taken place. This project was devised by Wioletta Miś, a teacher, and is organised in collaboration with the Słupsk Museum, the Teacher's Advisory Centre, and secondary schools. Its purpose is to promote Witkacy's plastic arts among the youth. The first instalment of this competition included art works, and in 2010 photography was added. Despite its short history, the contest is very popular; in fact, the organizers are now planning to expand it across the voivodship.

Promotional Activities of the Town Council

As a result of Witkiewicz's omnipresence in the culture of Słupsk, the interest in the artist became a means of attracting more tourists to the town. Widespread publicity and information sharing have become important elements of the realisation of this goal. Reproductions of artworks appear on posters promoting the city at the international expos, as well as on leaflets and advertising materials.

Information about the museum, and in particular about the Witkacy Collection, is also available on the town's website. For several years, the main entrances to the town have been marked with welcome signs advertising the art collection of the Słupsk Museum.

In addition, the City Council funds the production of souvenirs which are distributed free of charge or used as prizes in contests. Among these is a calendar containing 12 large-format reproductions, produced in 2008. There is also a silk scarf imprinted with the Portrait of Irmina Bajer-Nowowiejska. However, the most important initiative was the 2010 edition of the book *Witkacy in Słupsk: The Portrait Company of S. I. Witkiewicz* by Beata Zgo-

dzińska. The publication was prepared on the occasion of the 700th anniversary of the city. In principle, it is not intended for sale; instead, it is distributed free of charge.

In 2008 another form of promotion entailed the issuing of a special commemorative coin – a ducat with the nominal face value based on a currency inspired by the river Słupia on which the city of Słupsk sits. The obverse face of the coin carries an image of Witkacy. In principle, the coin served to advance the idea of the twin towns of Słupsk–Ustka, but it was also used to display the connection with culture.

The City Council also supports the expansion of the collection. The most spectacular example of this was the co-financed purchase of 14 portraits and archival items which belonged to Jan Leszczyński. This was done jointly with the Ministry of Culture in Warsaw and the Office of the Marshal in Gdańsk in 2005.

Conclusion

Work on the popularization of Witkacy is extraordinarily difficult. This is not an easy artist to embrace, so the ‘struggle’ for an audience can take place only through publishing and education. Currently, the consumption of culture, set for a quick profit coupled with minimal intellectual effort, does not coincide with the concept of cultural institutions, especially museums. In order to maintain an adequate status, the museum avoids participating in activities related to advertising and promotion. For many of today’s observers, this is completely incomprehensible – especially in the context of potential profits. Hence, the accusation, which frequently appears in the local media, that the Museum does not appropriately use the vibrant potential of the collection. However, for the Słupsk museum, the most satisfying achievements include the following; instilling in the city’s inhabitants a sense of awareness of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz’s art collection and serving all those who already know Witkacy and want to explore him in greater depth.

Abstract

This account describes the activity of the Museum in functional terms and reports on the 45-year presence in Słupsk of the Witkacy collection. The presence of Witkacy’s work in Słupsk was instigated by an initial acquisition of 110 works which were brought to Słupsk in 1965. This was part of a post-war endeavour aimed at countering the influence of Ger-

manic traditions then present in the region. In a short space of time the collection of works by Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz became the primary museum collection of Słupsk, eclipsing all other collections including. The museum now works with the City Council in a three-fold way: through exhibition, educational outreach, and as part of broader promotional activity of the City of Słupsk. However, perhaps the Museum's most important measure of success is the international scholastic conferences dedicated to the life and work of Witkiewicz.

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