



Intervention purchasing of art

Andrzej SADOWSKI,
President of the Adam Smith Research Centre
interview by Paulina TENDERA

3 October 2018, the Adam Smith Research Centre

P.T. We are discussing Polish art, but also art created all over the world. Art in Poland, with a certain delay, reflects everything that happens in other parts of the world – let us assume that for now. It became very popular in the eighties and nineties to speak about freedom in art, to assume that art must be free. In the context of art, the meaning of this concept (which I often refer to while working with students), is very different from the one we use in economic analysis. Freedom in art means neither the artist nor art itself may be subjected to censorship. The artist has the right to any form of expression. Further, it means that if a state or government refuses to provide funds for the maintenance of any kind of art, for any reason (religious, philosophical, economic or legal), it is an assault on art, an attempt on limiting its “freedom of speech.” Moreover, nowadays, the audience is commonly being ousted from the so-called “world of art”, even though until now it has had an important, critical voice in this world. This elimination is achieved by constant repetition of slogans by art critics, like Anda Rottenberg, who claim that it is the artist who decides what art is.

As a consequence, the world of art generates its own concept of freedom which contradicts the idea of economic freedom.

So the question is: should the state, to any extent at all, support artistic activity in the country?

A.S. Yes, but only in one case, namely in the case of preserving historical artistic resources.

P.T. In other words, we do not buy anything new and limit the role of the state to archiving.

A.S. In a normal, wealthy society, art is an object of consumption, as all other goods. In this way, there is no problem at all when we look at the impressive selection of contemporary art in private hands. It shows that it is dominated by private collections rather than public ones. We can see those large selections actually being created, and indeed, in Poland we also have several important, major collections of works of art. In fact, last year saw the record-breaking sale of the painting by Andrzej Wróblewski for one and a half million zlotys to a Wrocław-based entrepreneur (co-owner of the Kruk company) for his collection. These are all market-effective actions. On the other hand, if the government attempts to interfere in the areas that have so far been a field of individual activity, through its own efforts to purchase art, it partially nationalises that market. As a consequence, it leads to a situation where artists become an element of the state apparatus. Then the current rulers decide what is art and what is not, directing the taxpayers' money towards those activities which are somehow useful for those currently in power.

We had the period of socialist realism when the ruling party ordered only ideologically correct paintings, such as the icon of that period, *Podaj cegłę* ("Pass a Brick"). This painting actually defends itself quite well, but it was painted according to an imposed convention and to the authorities' specification.

If we are talking about freedom in art, it is the freedom of creation, which is associated with the lack of political dependence. If I speak of freedom, I cannot overlook the fact that if I try to hide under the wings of the political apparatus, then that apparatus will decide what is bought from me and on what terms. Whoever has the money decides. The private market is so diverse that no one government could. Instead, given the dispersed group of audiences with different tastes and aesthetic-political views, who are active in this market to such an extent that any artist can find a buyer. Except, that first the painting has to be created, so that later a buyer could be found in the art market.



The involvement of the government, on the other hand, has led to a situation where it is creating demand by artificially controlling the flow of orders to those artists who are currently convenient, and who are willing to cooperate and accept the order.

P.T. Are there no exceptions to this rule? For example the *Lady with an Ermine*?

A.S. But that was a work once painted for private purposes. It has been nationalised as a result of various political revolutions, but let's look at other collections in this class of artworks that are made available to the public, but remain in private hands.

P.T. In other words, the government should not have bought this painting from the Czartoryski family?

A.S. With the mechanisms of today's taxes and very harmful laws on foundations, the government has created a situation where the founders (i.e. the family) could not otherwise maintain and run this valuable collection. Thus, de facto, in these conditions, as they are now in Poland, selling the collection was a way to enable its further functioning.

P.T. Please correct me if I am wrong, but during the previous governmental term, programmes to subsidise private institutions, such as theatres, were open. The theatres of Tomasz Karolak or Krystyna Janda participated in these funds (Solska 2017). What I understood from the media coverage, is that the government had changed and these funds were then cut off. Could the activity of previous authorities be understood as an attempt to "privatise" the realm of art? That is: "start your theatres, we'll subsidise you, and maybe somehow you will fend for yourself", so it's supposed to become a fully private theatre one day? Or should we rather approach it in line with alleged intentions of the government, that many theatres would not survive without public subsidies?

A.S. There were probably six hundred theatres in Warsaw before the war.

P.T. Private ones?



A.S. Yes, indeed. Based on that, we realise the misery of this system, in which the government selected another area in which it decided that state interference would have a beneficial effect.

But since the government interferes in a certain area, it also dictates conditions not only formal but, as you can see, it also imposes a repertoire, and in addition, an artist who intends to receive such funds must take into account the aesthetic preferences of those who pay the money.

There's no government money that is not addictive. It is as addictive as drugs, and the question arises: what happens when the authorities change? Because this isn't a level playing field. Of course in some countries the attitude is more neutral. We see this kind of distribution almost everywhere. But let us remember that we are speaking of freedom here, and we are aware that it is supposed to be both creative and economic at the same time.

Everybody has the right to risk their own money, show a play and earn a profit or go bankrupt. It is not the case that theatres cannot function in such a large agglomeration as Warsaw. Of course, there is another issue, namely that of the increasingly obstructive regulations regarding employment, the setting of minimum hourly wages, the type of legal agreements that can be entered into, all of which lead to the common, noticeable consequences of the adoption of an anti-national policy of high taxation of labour – that is, this scarce commodity, which is now treated with excise taxes. Excise duty, as applied on cigarettes and petrol in terms of the amount of that tax, not its name. After all, taxation on a permanent job is over 60% of what an employee receives. And that continues till today. For example, whenever protests are sparked in Poland, it regards both the miners and those who would like to take their proverbial “jobs” away. The system is antisocially constructed, because in today's democracy (and in fact it is a social democracy) there is no guarantee of livelihood, not everyone has the right to a pension (as in New Zealand, no matter where and how they work, everyone acquires the right to a minimum pension). Thus the artists' aspiration to extend subsidies, because this gives access to medical services and access to a pension. At the same time, the costs of running a business, the cost of work (including artistic work), of any economic activity, are so high from the very beginning that part of it still remains within the so called grey economy.

P.T. There is such a tendency, or perhaps a common conviction concerning the positions, that artists employed by the Academies are successful in



Poland. Many people graduate every year from the academies of fine arts, especially those who graduate from the so-called pure art: sculpture, painting, and installations. Today, the academy also introduces more market-friendly and professionally oriented courses: design, and materials sciences. It is to overcome the resistance to artists entering the labour market. I have the impression that many people graduating from courses of “pure” art cannot cope in the labour market because they have an inner conviction, which has support in culture, that art is something different from an ordinary profession, an ordinary occupation. That people do not understand what they do. So there has to be someone who can protect them from everyday issues...

A.S. Right, it’s probably about creating a category of special-needs people.

P.T. Yes, but wasn’t it always like that?

A.S. And yes... let’s wait for the information that artists, like farmers, demand an intervention buyout of paintings. After all, it can be treated as a rule that a painter, just like a farmer, has the right to an intervention buyout of paintings.

P.T. Would you apply the same principles of free market and economics to the religious sphere as well? The demand to maintain religious communities with their own means without state interference?

A.S. If the state gives money, it has the right to interfere. Everybody who gives money has the right to interfere. That’s the rule.

P.T. I am asking, because there are certain opinions – historically corroborated – that the realm of art is close to that of religion. It is removed from the everyday life, it is special in some way...

A.S. Well, it can’t be a one-sided advantage without control and supervision... Either you want to be a creator in the true sense of the word, or you want to be a de facto clerk executing art. These are completely different categories of function in the market. You cannot take advantage of subsidies and also present yourself as an independent, free creator who is guided only by



art and not by what is particularly visible today – it is, after all, the authorities that decide the direction of art and to be or not to be a famous artist.

P.T. More than a year ago, I discussed the premiere of a play called *Klątwa* (*The Curse*) with my students – that was the time when many people spoke and commented about it. In addition, there were protests, fisticuffs in front of the theatre, and some social groups expressed their disapproval of the fact that the play showed oral sex with the Pope. I told my students that those people were right, since they have the right to decide what is staged in the theatre if they pay taxes to subsidise art. But such an approach does not win wider support in society, my views could be interpreted as closed dialogue, closed to what I don't like in art, they could be seen as Catholic beliefs. Whereas, I keep repeating that one cannot oust the audience from the world of art. Who is right? Apart from the fact that no one should be forced to pay for the art they do not look at.

A.S. It's like another fact occurring in local governments. They should not carry out any economic activity, whereas in Poland they do it extensively, owning cinemas, theatres, galleries and what else... And to question what is shown there depends on the those currently in power, hence they may allow plays that offend religious feelings of some of their audience. The consequence of staging such a play should be that the possible majority of those voters who feel offended will decide to remove those in power in the next elections.

We have a similar situation now with the film *Kler* (*Clergy*). Some local governments decided that the content of this film offended the religious feelings of their voters and simply did not make this film available in their cinemas for distribution. Since cinemas belong to politicians, they can make these decisions. It is, of course, a decision aimed at the electoral effect. If politicians did not own theatres, cinemas and many other institutions, demonstrations would be understandable, as is happening all over the world. For example, in the United States, *The Last Temptation of Christ* was shown in private cinemas, but that was a private demonstration in front of a private cinema, the film was made with private money, someone took the financial risk, because of course, sometimes protests were effective and customers withdrew from distributing the film. But it all took place in the civic space, where the freedom to create art, to finance and to consume, as well as the



freedom to distribute, dictated the outcome. So we have a world where the element of freedom is fundamental. Here in Poland we have a world devoid of economic rationale, there is far-reaching interference of public institutions, hence politicians, not citizens, decide what is to be shown at a given time and place.

P.T. Sometimes when talking to artists and representatives of the world of art, perhaps not in its entirety – those who sell art, run art galleries, you notice a certain ‘circumstance’. They believe that the art market in Poland is particular...

A.S. Every industry considers itself particular!

P.T. <laughter>

A.S. I don’t know a single representative of any industry that would say they operate in a completely ordinary industry. Everybody thinks they work in a particular one.

P.T. That actually closes the discussion on the matter. But let me at least refer to it. They think that we, the recipients of art in Poland, after communism, did not learn to buy art, that we are lagging behind.

A.S. It’s not at all the case. This can be seen, for example, in the number of painting reproductions sold in large chain stores, which have a great number of them – inexpensive, but nevertheless reproductions. Popularising art is also an expansion of the art market. If we look at the art market in the Middle Ages in the Netherlands, it turns out that suddenly they were manufacturing art, which is rarely remembered.

P.T. Many, many years before the Munich kitsch.

A.S. Suddenly, the Dutch peasantry, which was then greatly enriched, began to purchase these items. How were these painting factories established and operated? The principle was that some people painted the background, others painted the architecture, the third painted the greenery, the fourth



people, and so in the end, mass-produced paintings, sculptures, and furniture was made. The same applied to medallions. There was also a market focusing on certain art, because of course there were outstanding painters and sculptors of that period, but copies of what they did were an object of admiration, expressed in big money paid for these items. These works were multiplied by factories for the average peasant.

First and foremost, it should be remembered that at the root of such a development lies an increase in the wealth of society. It always leads to people wanting to live beautifully and aesthetically, the human need for aesthetics has been known since the first rock paintings appeared on the walls. They inspire and fascinate not only archaeologists but also art historians.

P.T. But if we were to add something to that, you said that Poles buy paintings in retail chains, say in Ikea. They are happy to decorate their walls, and sometimes these are really great things. But we have to see the difference – such an action is devoid of economic risk, which is something usually associated with purchasing art. After all, a picture of this kind costs anywhere between 20 and 200 zlotys.

A.S. But these are the ones who buy for 20 zlotys, while in the galleries there are other customers: a person who buys a flat, comes to the gallery and asks for a painting in a given size. These are paintings that cost from a couple to tens of thousands of zlotys.

P.T. And are there enough of such buyers to be able to seriously consider something like an art market?

A.S. Yes, there are.

P.T. So the belief that galleries in Poland do not really work is strongly exaggerated?

A.S. It is, even if my perspective is narrowed down to only Warsaw. New galleries emerge here on a regular basis, selling not only the art produced today and not only living artists, but also classics. I have been to several painting auctions myself and these paintings were sold for half a million zloty each, and let us remember that the paintings bought in this way are



not only collectibles but also a type of investment. An investment in art with which the value of money can be transferred in time.

P.T. Here we have the investment tools. Many things can be predicted. If we go to a Desa's auction and see Wyspianski's or Mehoffer's drawing, we can be almost certain that the value of these works will increase with time, they will become more valuable. But no gallery will easily take a painting by an unknown art student, precisely because it is guided by the free market profit principle. There is a very high risk involved when it comes to buying such works for investment purposes.

A.S. That is why such works are bought not for investment but for consumption. They are priced in such a way that we can afford the original painting rather than having to settle for a reproduction. We will buy an original painting by an unknown artist, but pleasing enough for us to want to hang it in our living room. And then we can tell our guests that it is an original painting, and that we bought a painting by a living artist. It is a pleasure with the hope that in some time this painting may also become valuable.

Besides, the prices paid for art is exceptionally arbitrary. There is no other point of reference for such prices other than that an unknown artist from this academy, a student of that professor, has priced it in the market for this particular amount.

P.T. The last question concerns a completely different topic: a general reflection on what period of history we are living now. I am talking precisely about art. I think that before WWI and II, government commissions were a more honourable matter for the artists, it brought them some honour. Artists enjoyed public recognition, they built the prestige of this profession, I am thinking for example of Jan Matejko. There was no shame in addressing Polish affairs and patriotism. Today in Warsaw, I was passing by a monument dedicated to the victims of the Smolensk crash (*Pomnik Ofiar Tragedii Smoleńskiej 2010* by Jerzy Kalina). I don't want to say if it's ugly or beautiful, I just want to say that it was not memorable. It is small, mediocre. We don't build monumentally for generations, we lack the momentum that Vienna can be proud of, we don't erect great monuments and sculptures in the streets and squares.



A.S. It is, however, a question of public space, which is in the hands of local governments. If we look at Spanish cities, apart from the heritage that is already there, there are many contemporary art objects, and the best example is of course Barcelona. The city has invested in art objects to demonstrate its modern side, this is how Barcelona promotes itself. It is an investment in positioning Barcelona as a multi-element art venue, both in the form of established institutions exhibiting art with taxpayers' money, but also through the abundance of galleries in the streets of Barcelona.

P.T. Barcelona? How can you compare it to Poland?

A.S. It is not like that. Let me give an example: in Bilbao there used to be a very high unemployment rate. Dominated by an outdated, declining industry. It was simply in a state of crisis. People were deliberating what could distinguish them, what could drag them out of this depression. Finally, they decided to invite the Guggenheim Museum to their city. And what about the St. Sebastian Film Festival? It started in a provincial town...

They put all the money they had to complete these projects, and to break through as a unique place thanks to them, not only nationally, but on the international level. As a result, other forms of activity, like tourism and commerce, followed their successful investment in art. So we have a good example of revitalisation through art, both socially and economically.

I went to Pittsburgh and they had a similar situation. There used to be heavy industry and ship-building. After WWII, arms orders fell by half, after the end of the Korean War by another half, and after the Vietnam War once again. And the city simply started to die out. The heavy industry was no longer there so they decided to move into biotechnology – back then it was still a completely abstract idea. It proved to be a great success, on the Silicon Valley scale, it was not only in the States that there was such a 'valley', there were many of them. Pittsburgh became a centre for biotechnology, for advanced sciences.

Here we are talking about science, but art can certainly be a distinguishing element used to construct public spaces. I also remember an example in New York, where the railway line, which had been closed for several dozen years, was under consideration. I myself saw the project of it, and when the design contest was announced, more than seven hundred applications were submitted. The winner was a city park crated on a railway line and on bridges,



running between houses and above ground buildings. Here, apart from revitalisation, we can also observe how life was brought back to this area...

P.T. I also asked my question from the perspective of yesterday's debate, in which you took part [i.e. the Catholic Social Doctrine Festival 2018 (Festiwal Katolickiej Nauki Społecznej 2018)]. There was a debate on the decline of state authority, the dissolution of social bonds...

A.S. How could a state that interferes in every area of life not be ridiculous? It's the proverbial 'trading of parsley'. This is how the communist government in Poland was described, as an institution regulating and supervising parsley trade!

P.T. The previous question was supposed to be the last, but now I really have the final one: do you buy art?

A.S. Yes, I do.

P.T. What kind of art do you buy?

A.S. I am happy to buy graphics, I own graphics from the turn of the 16th and 17th century. It is much cheaper in Europe than in Poland, and it pleases the eye. I also have artists in my family, and I have the privilege of receiving contemporary art more often as a gift.

Bibliography

Solska, Joanna. 2017. "Prywatne sceny teatralne szukają pieniędzy." *Polityka*. December 17, 2017. <https://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/rynek/1731128,1,prywatne-sceny-teatralne-szukaja-pieniedzy.read>. Accessed [10.05.2020].

