

Paradoxes of Contemporaneity in Museums of Art: The Temporal Limits

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The question about the limits of contemporaneity in museums is, in fact, a question about the nature of the museum institution itself and its changing social role.¹ Historically, the museum initially functioned as a treasury – a repository of the most valuable artworks and treasures. Since the Renaissance, it stored collections of both natural specimens and artefacts collected for their peculiar features, and access was limited to invited guests. Only later, at the end of the eighteenth century, was the museum transformed into an institution that the public had access to. Initially, viewing was only possible on selected days of the month (sometimes requiring application for a ticket prior to the visit), while at present museums are often open seven days a week with prolonged (sometimes until late at night) visiting hours. The most popular museums receive massive admittance. In the course of its two-hundred-and-fifty-year-long history, the public museum has changed almost completely regarding its architectural form, function, and relationship with its audience. What is more, it is still changing – museums of the second decade of the twenty-first century are significantly different from the ones at the end of the twentieth century.

An attempt to answer the question of when contemporaneity becomes heritage proves a difficult task in any field. It seems that the easiest answer is formal in nature – it is when a given place or object is posited within the institutional framework and is placed on a list that guarantees its protection,

¹ I discussed the phenomenon of contemporary art museums in my book: *Czas muzeów w Europie Środkowej: Muzea i centra sztuki współczesnej (1989–2014)*, Kraków 2014, pp. 21–57. This chapter is based on my book and expands the issue of the limits of contemporaneity in museums.

be it the UNESCO World Heritage List or any other international or local list, or a museum inventory. Hence it means that an object placed in a museum becomes a part of cultural heritage. The aim of the article is to refer a discussion on the nature of the museum of contemporary art – where the notions of “museum” and “contemporaneity” are sometimes conceived as contradictory – especially in Central Europe where the coming of the new millennium marked the beginning of a museum boom. I argue that contemporary purposes fulfilled by museums of contemporary art justify using the name.

The Beginnings of Contemporary Art in Museums

Gregory Ashworth, Brian Graham, and John Tunbridge claim that heritage is focused on the present – it is being created, shaped, and managed by the present and in response to the present needs. It is a part of the past that we choose in the present moment for contemporary – economic, cultural, political, and social – purposes that we decide to pass on to future generations who, nevertheless, will make their own decision about what to do with this heritage. In their opinion, heritage consists of a wide and diversified array of past events, personalities, folk memory, mythology, literary associations, physical relics of the past, as well as a place that they can be symbolically associated with.² Yet, how, without any necessary temporal distance, can one choose from contemporaneity what is really important? What will be significant for future generations? What will work as a testimony of the time when the work was made, or the testimony of the genius of its maker? This task is not always easy, and the choices are often incorrect.

A temporal perspective, a grace period of sorts, was adopted by the Louvre at the beginning of its work. On 10 August 1793, on the first anniversary of the abolishment of the monarchy in France, the Musée Central des Arts opened its doors. The exhibition included objects that revolutionaries took over in 1789 from the church and the monarchy, as well as works from the royal academies. Over the course of time, the Louvre was also a place of storage for all artworks that Napoleon confiscated from all around Europe.³ Until 1848, the Louvre’s *Salon Carré* organised temporary

2 Gregory Ashworth, Brian Graham and John E. Tunbridge, *Pluralising Pasts: Heritage, Identity and Place in Multicultural Societies*, London 2007, pp. 3, 35, 40.

3 Jeffrey Abt, “The Origins of the Public Museum,” in: *A Companion to Museum Studies*, ed. Sharon Macdonald, Chichester 2011, pp. 127–128.

exhibitions of contemporary art, yet works of living artists had no access to the museum collection. This common practice was sanctioned in a document from 1863 stating that an object could be included in the Louvre's collection no sooner than ten years after its author's death.⁴ In 1801, the Senate founded a museum of old masters – the Musée de la Chambre des Pairs (The Senate Museum) – in the Luxembourg Palace with a collection complementary to that of the Louvre. The Treaty of Vienna in 1815 worked as a driving force for changes towards contemporary art, as it ordered France to return artworks stolen during the Napoleonic wars.⁵ Because most of them were stored in the Louvre, its collections had to be restituted. The Louvre Museum had a special symbolic meaning for the nation, so as not to allow its rooms to stay empty most of the collection of the Luxembourg Palace that had not been affected by foreign reclaims was relocated to the Louvre.⁶ Now empty, the Luxembourg Palace found a solution in exhibiting contemporary art from the collection of Louis XVIII, as well as artworks loaned from private collectors and institutions. This way, in 1818, the world's first Musée des Artistes Vivants (Museum of Living Artists)⁷ was opened, although it needs to be noted that only French artists were included. It was meant as a “transitional” museum, without a permanent, unchangeable collection. It worked as a waiting room from where after ten years an artwork could be transferred to the Louvre. Krzysztof Pomian emphasises the conservative nature of such a museum, filled with works purchased at Salons. Artists who sought a Salon exhibition and an award, which implied the possibility of having one's work in the museum collection, “had to succumb to the exigencies of competition judges among whom were already acclaimed artists, in the peak of their careers, that is, old and shaped decades earlier and so penetrated with the tastes of the passing generations which was the only taste they considered natural.” Hence, in the second half of the nineteenth

4 Jesús Pedro Lorente, *Cathedrals of Urban Modernity: The First Museums of Contemporary Art, 1800–1930*, Farnham 1998, p. 52.

5 The inflow of artworks was so great that in 1801 the government decided to create fifteen more public museums in various departments to house them. Museums were founded, among others, in Bordeaux and Marseille (1804), Lyon (1806), Rouen and Caen (1809). (J. Abt, “The Origins of the Public Museum,” op. cit., pp. 128–129.)

6 J. P. Lorente, *Cathedrals*, op. cit., p. 54.

7 *Ibidem*, p. 55.

century the museum of contemporary painting was an “out-dated set of works contemporary only in the sense of their date of execution.”⁸

How long does contemporaneity last? At which point does it begin? How does it move? Does it make sense to set its dates arbitrarily, and is it possible to be contemporary without them? The problem of maintaining a contemporary character of the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York was a continuous bone of contention between its director and the advisory board. Referring to this museum, Gertrude Stein supposedly said that “You can be a museum, or you can be modern, but you can’t be both.”⁹ Despite the initial idea to dispose of older works in favour of more contemporary pieces, in practice the time that a work stayed in the collection was repeatedly prolonged, leading ultimately to the emergence of a historical collection. For the first two years of its existence, the museum, founded in 1929, had not built a collection, organising only temporary exhibitions. Throughout the following years, the collection, powered by donations and acquisitions, was meant as a temporary structure modelled on the Luxembourg Museum (the strategy for the collection, as well as the exhibition programme were managed by the legendary director Alfred H. Barr) and in the following years it was supposed to be transferred to the historical museum – the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This way MoMA was to focus on truly contemporary works. Central to Barr’s work was the concept of modern art. Richard Meyer who traces the concept of contemporary art in his academic and museum practice comments:

The term “modern,” often capitalized to underscore its status as a historical style (following “Renaissance” and “Baroque”), signified for Barr the most innovative art and culture of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. “Contemporary,” which he rarely capitalized, conveyed a condition of currency or coexistence regardless of artistic form, content, or sensibility.¹⁰

8 Krzysztof Pomian, “Muzeum wobec sztuki swego czasu,” in: *Fermentum Massae Mundi*, eds. Nawojka Cieślińska and Piotr Rudziński, Warsaw 1990, p. 375.

9 John B. Hightower, “Foreword,” in: *Four Americans in Paris: The Collections of Gertrude Stein and Her Family*, ed. Irene Gordon, New York 1970, p. 8.

10 Richard Meyer, *What Was Contemporary Art?*, Cambridge (Massachusetts) and London 2013, p. 38.

He was reluctant to define modern art as with the passage of time its character changes, and so the museum was about to react to those changes. In 1931 he wrote: "At the present time the Museum is concerned primarily with the work of those early 20th Century artists who seem progressive and alive, together with the work of the past, especially the 19th Century, which is related to the present either by direct ancestry or analogy."¹¹ Hence, the period of time after which the works were supposed to lose their modern character and gain a historic aspect was not strictly defined – ten, twenty, thirty, and fifty years were mentioned, while in a drawing from 1933, where Barr compares the development of the museum collection to a torpedo, there were artworks from even a hundred years before included.¹² Despite the declared necessity to follow the newest trends in art, Barr did not intend to give up the historic collection. In 1947, three New York museums – the MoMA, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Whitney Museum of American Art – signed a trilateral agreement which set the boundary date between the collections of the MoMA and the two other museums as the year 1910. The Metropolitan Museum of Art was obliged to purchase works that MoMA defined as classics.¹³

Another apt example of the struggle with the concept of contemporaneity of collections is provided by the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York. It was founded in 1977 as an institution without a permanent museum location. As Lisa Phillips, its second director, recalls: "part of the institution's charm was its flexibility, scrappiness, and refusal to look anything like museum."¹⁴ In 1978, the museum inaugurated its semi-permanent collection based on the continuous rotation of collected works. A rule was introduced that from each big exhibition organised by the museum at least one work would be included in the collection and kept there for at least ten years, but no longer than twenty years to make

11 *Definition of Modern Art for E. D. Jewell of Times: With Notes From A. H. Barr*, 21 January 1931, http://www.moma.org/learn/resources/press_archives/1930s/1931 (accessed: 29 April 2015).

12 J. P. Lorente, *Cathedrals*, op. cit., pp. 222–230; J. P. Lorente, *The Museums of Contemporary Art*, op. cit., p. 152.

13 The trilateral agreement was dissolved the following year, yet the Whitney Museum of American Art and MoMA continued to co-operate. (J. P. Lorente, *The Museums of Contemporary Art*, op. cit., pp. 186–187).

14 Lisa Phillips, "Past, Present, Future," in: *Shift. SANAA and the New Museum*, eds. Joseph Grima and Karen Wong, Baden 2008, p. 5.

place for new works. Works acquired in a different way – by means of acquisition or donation – were to be not older than ten years and were to leave the collection in the course of the next ten years.¹⁵

Aspects of Contemporaneity on the Example of Polish Museums and Collections

Emphasising contemporaneity is of special significance for countries of Central and Eastern Europe that have undergone political transformation. Erecting museums dedicated to contemporary art means constructing a previously inexistent agora where not only art, but also social problems, politics, and economy are discussed as well. In Poland, there are three museums of this sort: the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, the MOCAK Museum of Contemporary Art in Krakow, and Wrocław Contemporary Museum;¹⁶ there is one in Hungary: the Ludwig Museum of Contemporary Art in Budapest; in the Czech Republic there is a branch of the National Gallery in Prague which works as a museum of modern and contemporary art – the Veletržní Palace. Yet, apart from museums, the beginning of the twenty-first century has been marked by a real institutional boom in contemporary arts. Not only museums but also centres of contemporary art have been built – institutions that often build art collections, but do not present them in the form of permanent exhibitions. They are rather laboratories, commenting on contemporaneity without historical burden, keeping flexible, reacting immediately to emerging problems, and steadily posing new questions. A number of museums have also employed this concept of functioning.

Identifying museums' definitions of contemporaneity is possible by means of analysing how the given institutions approach collecting. In Poland, the most heated debate about temporal limits concerned the biggest art museum project of the post-communist period – namely the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. The founding of the institution came together with a three-year-long discussion on the name of the museum, for it determined the nature of the collection, as well as the exhibition programme. The first

15 Brian Goldfarb et al., *Temporarily Possessed: The Semi-Permanent Collection*, exh. cat., New York 1995.

16 I do not refer in the text to the Museum of Art in Łódź – one of the oldest museums of modern art in the world, established in the 1930s. My intention is to show how newly founded institutions deal with defining their identity.



Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, temporary location opened in 2012.

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to voice his opinion on this matter was Krzysztof Pomian, who, in an article published in *Gazeta Wyborcza* daily, suggested that the name “museum of contemporary art” would entail showing Polish visual culture considered as our contemporaneity, while “museum of modern art” would mean a museum of avant-garde art. Taking into account the limits of contemporaneity, he proposed four possible dates: dates of artistic significance – 1918 (the break of symbolism with the turn of the centuries and the arrival of avant-garde on the art scene), the mid-1960s (the breakthrough in global art, the emergence of new materials and techniques), as well as strictly political dates – 1945 and 1989. Additionally, he opted for 1918 as the date defining the beginning of the museum collection.¹⁷

Drafted in 2005, the document of the preliminary idea for the museum’s programme suggested the working name: “The Warsaw Museum of Modern Art.” The document contained a suggestion that the museum would present the achievement and changes within Polish art of the twentieth and twenty-first century in an international context, and the collection was to produce an image of artistic changes typical for

17 Krzysztof Pomian, “Kolekcja wszystkich gustów,” in: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 19–20 March 2005, p. 26.

the turn of the twentieth century within the area of transformation of the uniting Europe, and reveal the most valuable phenomena of Polish art in this context.¹⁸ Additionally, Maria Poprzęcka, a member of the programme council, explained the idea in the following way:

Certainly, we do not want to create a collection of Polish art of the twentieth century. Such collections already exist. They are not on display, either for the lack of space or lack of will. Out of 700 museums in Poland, 22 collect contemporary art. These collections exist, and works can be taken on long-term loans if museums are not willing to display them. On the other hand, if we planned to build a collection of the twentieth-century art, then firstly we would not have enough money for it, and secondly such a collection would be doomed to be of secondary quality. Good works have already been bought. We could only buy secondary works, leftovers.¹⁹

A similar opinion was voiced by Piotr Rypson at the conference *New Museum of Contemporary or Modern Art? Places, Programmes, Tasks* organised in 2005 by the ICOM Polish National Committee and the Polish Section of the AICA. In his paper, he stated that the new institution should work as a Museum of Contemporary Art. There is no possibility to create a good collection of art from the first half of the twentieth century, either Polish or global, so: “we should seek a chance to form an exceptional, interesting collection most of all by focusing on contemporaneity,”²⁰ especially since “choosing contemporaneity as the basic field of interest of the museum does not prevent the curators from reaching to the past.”²¹ In *Obieg*, Bożena Stokłosa rightly suggested that 1989 does not apply to the category of “modern art” and is directly linked with the category of “contemporary art.”²² She stated that the most apt (though not necessarily expressing the nature

18 *Wstępna koncepcja warszawskiego Muzeum Sztuki Nowoczesnej*, Warsaw 2005, pp. 5, 9.

19 “Duchowe spoiwo współczesnych Europejczyków. Prof. Maria Poprzęcka opowiada o projekcie Muzeum Sztuki Nowoczesnej w Warszawie,” in: *Sekcja 12* (2005), www.sekcja.org/miesiecznik.php?id_artykulu=100 (accessed: 29 October 2006).

20 Piotr Rypson, “Jakie muzeum sztuki w Warszawie?,” in: *Nowe muzeum sztuki współczesnej czy nowoczesnej?*, ed. Dorota Folga-Januszewska, Warsaw 2005, p. 18.

21 *Ibidem*, p. 19.

22 Grzegorz Borkowski and Bożena Stokłosa, “Jakie muzeum,” in: *Obieg.pl* (2006), <http://www.obieg.pl/wydarzenie/4471> (accessed: 29 April 2015).

of the museum to the full) would be the name: The Warsaw Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art. Finally she proposed the name The Warsaw Museum of the Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century Art as the most appropriate. In a commentary to this article, Grzegorz Borkowski suggested a name postulated in 1966 by Jerzy Ludwiński, namely the Museum of Current Art. Yet, none of the postulates was accepted and the museum name, apart from the geographic part, was kept in the preliminary form.

The museum of contemporary art – as it is often emphasised by museologists – is of a peculiar nature. It is supposed to rework contemporary topics. It animates social debates on important, immediate problems. It is to offer a platform for encounters of various interest groups, to work as a venue for the exchange of ideas, as well as convening debates and taking positions. A museum of contemporary art is not just a space for displaying artworks made by contemporary artists, art movements and approaches, but it is also supposed to take part in everyday life, contemporary political, economic, social, and worldview-related issues (not only in the field of art, but also in other disciplines). As Hans Belting maintains, museums of contemporary art are not meant to present art history, but to show the world in the mirror of contemporary art.²³ A museum becomes a barometer of social moods, an agora where discussions take place and questions are posed, as well as simply a place to spend leisure time and seek enjoyment. The place itself often literally takes the form of an agora – it includes designer seats, and activity encouraging facilities. An artistic environment is created, which gains meaning only when it comes with an event taking place in it. Thus, a museum begins to play an important social role – it is an extension of a café or a square in an urban space. The combination with contemporaneity and its problems is an immanent feature of the museum of contemporary art, yet it does not necessarily stem from the nature of art museums of preceding periods.

In Poland, the discussion on this issue was initiated by Piotr Piotrowski, a historian of contemporary art interested most of all in art of Eastern Europe, who was, in 2009, appointed the director of the National Museum in Warsaw. The universal survey museum, whose tradition dates back to 1862, owns a cross-sectional collection of Polish, European and Ancient Egyptian

23 Hans Belting, "Contemporary Art as Global Art: A Critical Estimate," in: *The Global Art World. Audiences, Markets, and Museums*, eds. Hans Belting and Andrea Buddensieg, Ostfildern 2009, p. 48.

art, beginning from ancient art from Egypt and Cyprus, specimens of Nubian Christian art and culture from Faras, up to Polish contemporary art. For decades, the museum has struggled with problems with space – for both exhibitions and storages. Due to these constraints, the collection of the twentieth-century art was presented in a rotating manner – embracing subsequent decades, which made it impossible to see the collection in its entirety. The situation posed a problem inasmuch as none of Warsaw’s exhibition institutions offered this possibility.²⁴ Changes that Piotrowski began to introduce into the museum were related to both the programme as well as the organisation of the institution. In both cases they met with an unfavourable reception from the employees, and lack of support from the Board of Trustees. Finally, Piotrowski was forced to resign after a year-and-a-half-long battle over the new shape of the museum and – the board of directors’ lack of acceptance of his “Strategy for the programme of activities and development,” which was based on his concept of the critical museum.

In his book *Muzeum krytyczne* (Critical Museum), Piotrowski defined the critical museum as a “forum involved in a public debate on the museum, taking up important and often controversial problems relevant for a given community and pertaining to both history and the present. The critical museum is an institution working for democracy based on arguments, as well as a self-critical institution, revising its own tradition, challenging its own authority, and its own art historical canon.”²⁵ The critical mission of the museum was seen by the theorists of its new philosophy on three levels: its activity in public space, its self-critical potential, and the change of the geography of its interests. As Piotrowski writes: “we put stress on the active role of the museum in consistently raising the awareness of the complexity of the contemporary world, in recognising the role of memory and past in the construction of a civic, transnational (cosmopolitan), and internally diversified society.”²⁶ The first manifestation of the new concept in the museum programme was an exhibition called *Ars Homo Erotica*. Its goal was to present

24 The Centre for Contemporary Art at Ujazdowski Castle acted for years as a substitute for the non-existent museum of contemporary art in Warsaw, and also presenting its collecting on a rotating basis. The Museum of Modern Art only began to assemble its collection after it was opened in 2008 at a temporary location.

25 Piotr Piotrowski, *Muzeum krytyczne*, Poznań 2011, p. 9.

26 *Ibidem*, p. 72.

the homoerotic tradition that had previously been excluded from art history, and which is related to present problems regarding the rights of sexual minorities in Poland – its core was provided by works from all epochs, found in museum storage and addressing the issue. Taking a stance in the debate on the condition of Polish democracy, the exhibition was warmly received by the public and, predictably, violently opposed by conservative circles. In the course of the exhibition EuroPride was organised on the streets of Warsaw – the first parade of gay and lesbian circles in post-communist Europe. Piotrowski emphasised the need to participate in the debate that the event had stirred:

in the subject of the place of sexual minorities in history, culture, and social life. [...] Its input in this discussion, along the lines of the mission of the critical museum, consisted in making visible what once had been eliminated as a result of complex historical processes. The point was to disclose homoerotic visuality, homoerotic art, its subjects, iconography and aesthetics present for centuries in European culture, as well as to show the links between this art, historical tradition and contemporary art.²⁷

Adversaries of implementing this idea at the National Museum maintained that it could be introduced in museums of contemporary art, yet not in museums that collect representative art of the nation that should be politically and ideologically neutral. In my view, it stems from the lack of understanding of this concept and the idealist (or rather conservative) assumption that a museum institution can work outside of politics and ideology. In his book, Piotrowski asked a rhetorical question: will the “‘universal survey museum’ make use of critical theory and reform it into critical practice? It doesn’t mean that it should change into a museum of contemporary art (MoCA); the question is rather whether it can use this experience and take challenges brought about by contemporaneity.”²⁸ The history of the museum showed that neither the museum, nor the authorities governing it are ready for it.

“If the collection – the collection of contemporary art – always follows its contemporaneity, its nature will change. Yet, most of all, it is not just

27 Ibidem, p. 84.

28 Ibidem, p. 44.

a set of objects, but also a conversation and an exchange of reflections about them” – Joanna Mytkowska wrote in the catalogue of the exhibition *In the Heart of the Country: The Collection of the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw (2013–2014)*, the biggest presentation of the museum collection since it was opened. For certain, new contemporary acquisitions will animate the discussion on contemporaneity. They will also refer to history, meaning to historical works, in order to present the continuous nature of certain issues. Even art of the most distant periods can be enlivened by means of contemporary additions – this was the basis of *Interventions* at the National Museum in Warsaw, and it is also used in sectional thematic exhibitions. However, what is important is the question of the shape of contemporary museums of contemporary art when the contemporaneity of their beginnings is long gone. For even if the acquisitions are made incessantly, the historical part will always dominate, and proportionally the collection will be less and less contemporary. MoMA in New York, Musée National d'Art Moderne at the Centre Pompidou, Tate Modern, Moderna Museet in Stockholm are all museums showing art history from the beginning of the twentieth century (and even a bit earlier) up to the present. Yet, what will the adjective “modern” mean in the next two hundred and fifty years? After all, as far as their character is concerned, they will simply be museums of art or museums of art of a certain period. However, the name of the museum rarely contains the period it covers.

The MOCAK in Krakow has the most broadly defined sphere of interest among Polish museums of contemporary art. According to its programme, the museum is supposed to create an international collection that will present the historical continuity of art. The starting point is Polish art and the search for phenomena that influenced its changes. According to the idea presented in 2010:

The classics of contemporaneity, namely Polish art after 1945, will be signalled with the works presenting the genesis of artistic reflections emerging at the end of the 1960s (the beginning of Conceptualism that we consider alive and important up to this day). The movements of the 1970s and 1980s that have an unquestionable significance also for the art emerging today will be carefully noted and enriched with publications. The 1990s and the 2000s will be gradually supplemented to create relatively complete collections based on the most important names and most representative works. Together with the collection of Polish art, an international collection will be created – in this case, the dialogue

with history will not reach this far, yet it will be important to reach back to Conceptualism and Fluxus. Despite its smaller ambitions, the international collection will be equally important for the museum.²⁹

An important element defining the identity of the third museum of new art in Poland – Wrocław Contemporary Museum – is its name. According to its programme, it is to emphasise the contemporary nature of requirements and challenges that the museum is to face, at the same time detaching itself from the debates around the notions of “contemporary art” and “modern art.”³⁰ Its mission is broadly understood work on contemporaneity, building relations linking together in one process the visual arts scene and the public, the artistic reality and the conditions that enable their understanding.³¹ The makers of the programme are aware that it is impossible to create from scratch a representative collection of Polish art since the 1960s, hence the necessity to use existing collections to build context and show the continuous development of art. The temporal and thematic scope of art presented at the Contemporary Museum embraces, on the one hand, progressive art movements since the beginning of the 1960s, and on the other, contemporary art including works commissioned by the Museum. The programme emphasises that the 1960s (the period in Poland when there were initiated processes the consequences of which are still noticeable in all aspects of contemporary art) as a boundary date was accepted as a tentative proposition initiating the work of the museum which can be revised later on.³²

A special role in the discussion on contemporary art and its collections was played by the Ministry of Culture’s programme “Sings of the Time,” started in 2004. It was short-lived, yet it initiated a national debate on the need to collect new art, and resulted in building collections, as well as venues for their display. The programme was meant to realise six major goals: 1) creating a national collection of contemporary art based on regional

29 Maria Anna Potocka’s presentation in a discussion panel organised by MOCAK under the title *What Is a Museum Programme?*, which took place on 28 April 2010 in the Centre for Advanced Studies in the Humanities at the Jagiellonian University.

30 Piotr Krajewski and Dorota Monkiewicz, *mww Muzeum Współczesne Wrocław. Koncepcja programowa*, Wrocław 2007, p. 5.

31 Ibidem, p. 6.

32 Ibidem, pp. 8–9.



Wrocław Contemporary Museum temporary location opened in 2012.

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collections, 2) promoting Polish contemporary art, 3) reviving the tradition of patronage for arts, 4) engaging various social groups in the work for culture and arts, 5) using art as a tool for initiating social dialogue and an element of developing civic society, and 6) the developing the art market in Poland. The core of the programme was the plan to build regional art collections – one in each province – by specially appointed civic organisations. In the course of 2004 and 2005, in almost every provincial capital, these organisations initiated the acquisition process. The first artwork for each collection was donated by the Minister of Culture, which was often interpreted as a hint as to the direction of the acquisitions and the character of the future collection. The politics of acquisitions was defined individually by organisations themselves, yet usually the year 1989 – which marked the starting moment of the political, economic, and worldview-related transformation of Central/Eastern Europe – was considered the temporal limit and the major point of reference. According to the declaration by Agata Zbylut, the president of the association in Szczecin, “the collection is to be a regional collection, that is the works collected in it are meant to fully trace the changes in arts after 1989 and, thus, to serve the region as a kind of manual of Polish art history gathered in Western Pomerania.”³³

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33 Katarzyna Jagodzińska, “Zachęcenie do kolekcjonowania,” in: *Art&Business* 3 (2010), p. 23.

When Contemporaneity Becomes Heritage

In Poland, museums of contemporary art have become an element of constructing modern society, sites for learning about contemporary art, shaping visual sensibility, forming a habit of making use of contemporary visual culture, and maintaining an interdisciplinary discussion on contemporary problems, conflicts, and challenges. With the advent of a new century, after the systemic transition in other spheres of life, the state recognised the significance of contemporary art and the need to provide it with appropriate institutional and infrastructural support. A museum of contemporary art is a marker of a modern state. “Warsaw is the only European capital without a museum of modern art. Since the erection of the National Museum in Warsaw in 1938, no separate museum building has been constructed with the function of storing and displaying art despite repeatedly, since 1945, voiced postulates of art circles to create art museums also in such important centres as Silesia or Łódź” – this is the beginning of a document entitled *The Preliminary Idea for the Warsaw Museum of Modern Art*³⁴ passed by the Museum Programme Council in 2005. The largely propagandist nature of the introductory part of the document required some generalisations – in 2005, Warsaw was not the only European capital without a museum of modern (or contemporary) art, Bratislava did not have one either, and the Manggha Centre of Japanese Art and Technology in Krakow, which opened in 1994 (and has been a museum since 2007), is the first museum building erected for the purpose of displaying art after 1938.

New museums in Poland, all dealing with new art and each of them employing a different term in its name: “modern” in Warsaw, “contemporary” in Krakow and “contemporary” in Wrocław however without a word “museum” – had to struggle with defining their identity referring to the discussion on the nature of the role of a museum and museum collections. Contemporaneity itself is not clearly defined. Its beginnings – which stem from the very nature of the notion – are fluid. However, even at the same time, when new institutions and their collections were born in Poland, they were defined differently – depending on local needs and ambitions. The limits of contemporaneity in institutional art collections are usually set in the year 1989. It is a strictly political date, defining the identity of a collection regardless of its particular features, referring

34 *Wstępna koncepcja Warszawskiego Muzeum Sztuki Nowoczesnej*, Warsaw 2005, p. 3.

both to the past that preceded it, as well as the period of transformation that followed. Going back to the question posed at the beginning of this text: When does contemporaneity (referring to contemporary art) become heritage? It seems that the choice of a work for the collection is a gesture that can be defined as “creating” heritage. Although according to the definition already referred to, heritage “is a part of the past that we choose in the present moment for contemporary purposes,” and it should belong to the past, the very notion of the past is equally unclear – it does not have to mean the distant past, but one much closer to us. Of course, the future may have a different opinion on present choices and choose a different set of works for its heritage. The very notion of “museum” and all that it entails has been undergoing changes ever since the beginning of the public museum, however, the end of the twentieth century brought substantial dynamics in the matter. There are museums without collections, museums without a permanent venue, and virtual museums. From time to time, here and there, ephemeral, pop-up museums, emerge. Although they escape the ICOM definition of a museum and state definitions, they still work as ones in the social imagination. These museums are created by people and their collections – personal collections of objects that were selected from their surroundings. It is their heritage that, in the context of a special museum (existing only for a while), becomes a part of the community.

A museum of new art in Poland has started to act as a kind of a community centre that animates the discussion about the contemporary (not necessarily artistic) world. It acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits,³⁵ but most importantly gathers the public around its programme and encourages them to cross the boundaries of disciplines, the limits of space and constraints of linear thinking. In many cases the difference between a museum of contemporary art and a centre of contemporary art is blurred. Museums often deal with ephemeral objects or just concepts, whose status as a work of art, due to its ordinariness, is sometimes questioned by the audiences that are unskilled in the reception of contemporary art. However, this is still the heritage – heritage of the present. And again, according to the definition of heritage – it is up to the generations to come as to whether today’s heritage will be regarded as such in the future.

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35 Following the ICOM definition of a museum from 2007.