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“Fear of Knowledge”

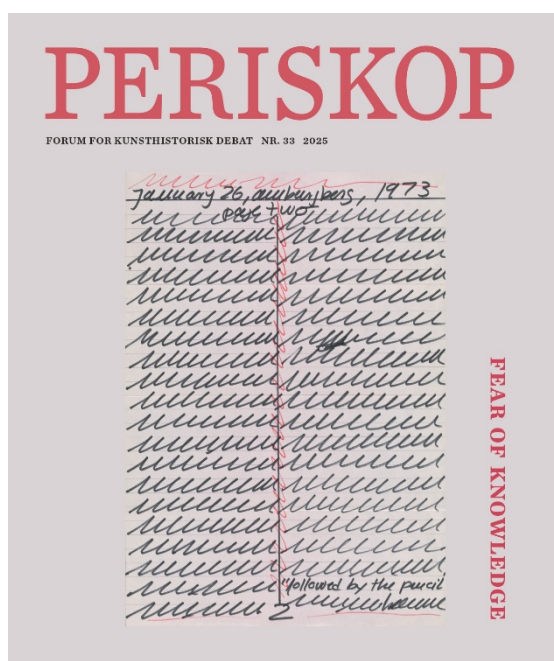
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Leszek Brogowski

Works in Spite of Myself

My proposal consists of presenting four images accompanied by short texts. The photos are taken as time goes by, as my life unfolds. When I take them, or when I first look at them, I realize that they all hint at works that, for one reason or another, have caught my attention: a characteristic shape or a specific setting of a painting, a detail, an anecdote or a title of an artwork, and so on. In these almost random photographs, I try to identify afterwards a specific visual knowledge – that of the history of art, that of the symbols of my culture or education – which is imprinted on the resulting images. This knowledge imposes itself on the image in spite of myself, spontaneously and without intention, and then I am able to talk about it: I recognize what I already know; a way of seeing things with the eyes of art. Actually, one always sees the world in terms of the images they have in their head, images that they often saw or that made

an impression on them. Photography is a more or less accidental reenactment of the knowledge we all have of the history of images: we've seen a lot of such examples, between Oscar Rejlander, Cindy Sherman and Jeff Wall. Here I use photography to identify a kind of sensitive knowledge specific to art. In front of my photos, everyone can do an exercise by bringing into play their own experiential knowledge linked to the meaning they give to their perceptions. Whether they share my visual understanding or not, oppose their own to mine, seek to construct new ones or switch from one image of culture to another, in all these cases they are activating knowledge, latent though it may be, that inhabits and constitutes the viewer. These are experiences, as much aesthetic as cognitive, that bring into play the knowledge that lies dormant in each one of us, because no gaze is innocent, whether it was formed in art school, comic strips or video games.

The texts that accompany these photographs do not serve to reveal my associations, to explain the meaning(s) I assign to them or to instruct the viewer. They are not intended to guide their perception, but – generally speaking – to frame a field of experience where sensitive knowledge comes to light. These are positions I take. My desperate conviction is that a large part of the history of philosophy has worked in a direction that pits art against knowledge, spontaneity against information, and ends up considering intuition and intellect to be irreconcilable. The continental influence of Henri Bergson's writings – whether well understood or misunderstood – contributed greatly to this by establishing the superiority of intuition over intellect in art, forgetting that in German philosophy, intuition is a sensitive and holistic knowledge that occurs in the immediate. At the limit of this conception,

drugs help to bring out an archaic authenticity, in which even psychoanalysis still wants to see the model of creation. In 1932, Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, who was also the author of a number of controlled essays under the effect of narcotics, attacked Bergson, who, in his view, was guilty of an inexcusable contempt for the intellect, and concluded that we must “go beyond this kind of ‘justification’ of ‘white delirium.’ [...] It is better to abstain from a few scribbles of a certain kind than to lose what is most essential in today's man, namely a properly functioning intellect.” My very first essay (1978), inspired by Witkacy's youthful readings, was entitled, precisely, “Intuition on an intellectual pasture.” The texts that accompany the photos therefore point to various aspects of the philosophy of art that worked to scare off knowledge in art.



Marcel Duchamp played a particularly incisive role in overcoming the appreciative conception of art, notably through his recurrent critique of interiority as the founding reference of art. "Taste presupposes an authoritarian spectator who imposes what he likes or dislikes, and translates into 'beautiful' and 'ugly' what he feels to be pleasant and unpleasant," he asserted, while constantly complaining that his readymades were often the object of aesthetic appreciation, whereas "the choice of ready-mades is always based on visual indifference at the same time as the total absence of good or bad taste." Duchamp's proposed cure for images consisted in proscribing not only aesthetic judgment in art, but also the social practice

of judgment! "The word 'belief' is a mistake too. It's like the word 'judgment.' These are appalling facts on which the Earth is based." "The idea of judgment should disappear," he declared. In the world prefigured by such a practice of art, aesthetic fanaticism would never have taken place. To reject the judgment of taste in art and marketing is to touch the foundations of the Western world.

Leszek Brogowski, *1. Le genre et les sanitaires*, 2008/2024



Sticking to common sense banality, Bertrand Russell asserts that those with a rich intellectual culture are incapable of seeing as perceptively as those without, and that, consequently, the latter are better suited to visualization as an operation of consciousness. It's an old prejudice of art academies that it's bad for the painter to read and think too much, a prejudice that grounds the idea of art as an "archaic" expression. It's interesting to discover on this occasion that Russell was well acquainted with the work of Francis Galton, inventor of eugenics, and that his opinion on this subject is merely a validation of one of Galton's theses, set out in *Inquiries into Human Faculty and its Development* in 1883. "I see no reason," wrote Russell

in 1919, "to reject the conclusion, first suggested by Galton's investigations, that the habit of abstract investigation makes cultivated people generally inferior to the average in the power of visual imagination, and far more preoccupied exclusively with words." The question is what place images have in language games. Questioning the relationship between seeing, reading and saying means asking whether we see the same things when we change languages.

Leszek Brogowski, 2. *Élevage d'éclaboussures*
(*poussière à l'envers*), 2021/2024



In *Lessons on Aesthetics*, Wittgenstein asserts that a tiny modification, imperceptible in any form, is immediately perceptible when it takes place in the face, as it significantly alters its expression. “I draw a meaningless curve [a doodle. – S.] and then another later, which looks quite similar; you won’t notice the difference. But if I draw this singular thing I call a face, and later another that’s slightly different, you’ll immediately see that there’s a difference.” Later, in the same series of interviews, he says the same thing

about a painting: “Change the painting by the slightest amount, and you won’t want to look at it again.” Once you’ve familiarized yourself with a work of art, you’re sensitive to the slightest change in its form. Arthur Schopenhauer, too, was interested in that “less than nothing” – *das Unbedeutendeste* – which, in a landscape or architecture, gains beauty from a ray of light. Wittgenstein also compares letters to the face – “The familiar face of a word” – but then he changed the problem, whereas one who was interested in the way we read by following letters with our eyes could have analyzed the difference between printed letters and handwriting. In the face, the most insignificant changes the expression; in a handwritten text, the most insignificant can determine the very possibility of reading it. Handwritten letters are as singular and complex in their use of the standardized forms of

the alphabet as family resemblances are in their use of faces. Paleographers know just as well as visual recognition engineers how difficult it is to decipher handwriting (OCR: Optical Character Recognition). We need a philosophy of the insignificant to complement the theories of signification.

Leszek Brogowski, *3. Pharmacie*, 2024.
Readymade naturel, 2023/2024 (phot. Frédérique Guérin)



“Representation is not the work of the gaze alone,” writes Levinas, “but of language. But to distinguish between the gaze and language, that is to say, between the gaze and the reception of the face that language presupposes, we need to take a closer look at the privilege of vision,” a privilege that the philosophy of art has always accorded to the visual. Without language, there is no face. To remark, as Levinas does, that the eye is that place where we see nothing, but from which the Other looks at me, is, admittedly, more surprising in its radicality than the image of the mouth, an orifice with multiple functions (eating,

speaking, kissing, making faces, etc.), but it is nonetheless from there that the Other speaks to me. So the face is irreducible to the visual, even when the latter is reduced to a tiny black dot: the meaning of the facial expression is inseparable from the narrative in which it is involved, from the words spoken by and around its wearer, from the actions in which it participates, and so on. The tradition of portraiture needs to be revolutionized.

Leszek Brogowski, 4. *Un tas de bois, descendant*, 2015/2024