

Krzysztof Jurecki

Axis mundi: roadside chapel-shrines and crosses

Wayside chapel-shrines, especially crosses, have been a recognizable sign of Christianity since the Middle Ages. These were built and are for votive, ritual or thanksgiving purposes. The objects also served as borders marks. Particularly many crosses were built in the 17th and 18th centuries in Upper Silesia region, during religious persecution and numerous wars. Also the Eastern Małopolska (Lesser Poland), or geographically – Podkarpacie (Subcarpathia), has its spiritual wealth in the form of objects of this kind, still being a place of lively religious activities. This small cult architecture, with a characteristic form have also become the meeting place for local communities, building their relationships with nature. It is worth to recall in this place the famous painting by Nicolas Poussin *Et in Arcadia Ego*, which assumes a hypothetical connection between culture and nature, expressed in the language of classicism in the 17th century Baroque period. The image shows, in the opinion of the interpreters of this outstanding work, the inevitability of death, even in the land of happiness.

The sacrality of the world continues?

The essence of the spiritual world has always been sacred and associated with the idea of divinity. The sacrality has been intrinsically connected with magic, religion and worship (rites) since the prehistoric times. In the 20th century this attitude was clearly shaken. This happened more in urban communities, which have undergone modernisation, now also symbolized by the human crowd, what was mentioned, e.g. by Walter Benjamin and other writers. But the landscape, as a form of nature, usually does not change much and lasts for centuries. Only the people change. Krzysztof Ligęza, however, wants to show the passage of time, including the views surrounding the chapel-shrines. He also disagrees with the ahistorical attitude of Eliade himself, who did not see the process of historical change.

The chapel-shrines and crosses from Krzysztof Ligęza images determine, what is an important discovery of these photographs, the "axis mundi" – spiritual fireplaces that existed from the beginning of civilisations, in its various geographical and mental spaces, as Mircea Eliade wrote. In this intention Zofia Rydet had been photographing houses, looking like temples filled with objects of religious worship, in her famous mega-series, *The Sociological Record 1978-1990*. There is a story behind each chapel. As Eliade wrote, in reference to the concept of Rudolf Otto, the sacred: "[...] At the same time attracts a man and arouses fear in him. The gods are both good and frightening."¹ This issue is partially depicted in the Ligęzas' sound recording, not devoid of humorous accents, a story on the spirit of a horse that appeared nearby Jezioro Rożnowskie (Lake). Since the shrine was built there, the ghost has never been seen anymore.

Is the sacred possible to be photographed? Some of its visible aspects can be shown, e.g. peoples relationship or attempts to communicate with God. Some artistic projects in this area were

1 M. Eliade, *Sacrum, mit, historia* (fragments of chosen Eliade's books), Warsaw 1993, p. 212.

successful, for example: Mariusz Wieczorkowski, Stanisław Woś, Andrzej Różycki, Zbigniew Treppa, and Janusz Leśniak. Now Krzysztof Ligęza opens the new possibilities for this type of photography, directing it to the landscape area, in which there is a hidden a question on spirituality of a man – child, adult, as well as a person facing death.

The sacrality of the world will last as long as we speak of a man, in the sense of a religious being, as described by religious studies scholars, including Mircea Eliade. However, according to some philosophers and art theoreticians, such a religious attitude is no longer valid (Jacques Derrida) or disappears in connection with the creation of the so-called artificial intelligence and an intermediate form between the old man and the new android. It is worth noting that according to Krzysztof Ligęza, the sacral nature of the world is independent of man. Cosmos means in Greek order and harmony. But in my opinion this is not so obvious, because order for some means chaos for other, e.g. Buddhists.

Family and community are one

The photographer points out a very important aspect regarding traditional ties: family, but also the local community. Tradition is shown as the source of their empowerment. Currently there are some attempts (also as a part of the European Union's social policy) made to displace a traditional family and to promote new, artificial creations related to LGBT movement, such as homosexual marriages as well as transgression of the traditional gender category. But the family, if it is to be one, can not change its indisputable rules that determine its stability and morality based on Christianity. There is also hope in Ligęza's photographs. Hope for the continuity of the traditional community and its basic principles set by the "axis mundi" of the cardinal principles of Christian ethics. If they disappear, the world modernised to the limits may sink into technological utopia and destruction, following the Nietzschean principle of "beyond good and evil" which so strongly influenced the modernism of the early twentieth century and is now popular in the next phase liberated from previous utopian postmodern obligations.

Is Poland in this area a positive enclave or a relic of the past? A symbolic and romantic picture with a very positive message emerges from the photographs of Krzysztof Ligęza. Of course, mainly for believers. To what extent does this bond, built largely on the basis of invariable religious rituals, is authentic and strong? The time will tell.

What time, what place is it in this photograph?

On glance it seems that each image operates and, as a consequence, preserves the instantaneous time, recording and describing (Edgar Morin) the reality. But how much is it connected with the imaginary of the photographer about eternal nature and the manifestations of the reality of the sacred? Landscape plays a key role in the series. It presents places of worship, people and animals. The artist photographs both small towns and urban landscapes, showing religious life in urbanized places, sometimes using the so-called "bird's-eye view", which is a slightly different, wider point of view, and still rarely used on a larger scale. Sometimes the people are frozen in prayer and

concentration, while others are in motion, which introduces an element of dynamism and visual contrast. An important role is also played by animals shown here, including flying birds. These are not artificial actions or the use of sensation, but the manifestation of a specific vision of the world. The role of the spiritual community is emphasized by light, also in the form of a rainbow, which is here a good, divine sign of the covenant. Landscapes are complemented by the portraits of psychological kind, depicting the local residents. However it is within the limits of reality. Too pompous art, despite its artistic character, like some of the paintings from the nineteenth century, is something distant and somewhat irrelevant to the latest artistic practice.

In the photographs of Ligęza we see the imaging accentuated by a sophisticated use of colour. The artist uses a rare type of a painter's sensitivity. It turns out that in the era of another digital revolution the colour can be successfully used, incorporating the experience of Caspar David Friedrich or Ivan Ajwazowski into artistic capabilities. But the influence of these painters should be treated in a general and non-literal way.

Photographic document with pictorial qualities

As a result, we are looking at a documentary photography with painting qualities, showing the reality and traceability of places and people. Such a photographic attitude reminds the interwar work of Jan Bułhak included in the album *Pomorze (Pomerania)* from the series *Poland in the photographic images of Jan Bułhak* and of course the aforementioned Zofia Rydet. At this point, I would like to mention that the series seems to me the most important continuation of Rydet's achievements. It is not easy to add new problems here, but Krzysztof Ligęza managed to do this, because he showed new possibilities of imaging in this type of photography. It is worth noting that the author also made 3D panoramas as part of the series. These were already presented at the large collective exhibition *Negotiation of identity. Between real and virtual in the photography from the 21st century* (2018). The 3D views show the world in a macro and micro scale, with the possibility of virtual reaching the sky and listening the authentic prayers with sound recordings. Building a multimedia project based on related artistic techniques testifies the artistic awareness and maturity of the author.

Krzysztof Jurecki (b. 1960)

Critic, curator and art historian. PhD in the humanities. The Dean of Arts Department in University of Humanities and Economics and lecturer of Film School in Łódź. Since 1997 member of AICA and from 2002 honorary member of ZPAF (Association of Polish Artist Photographers). Between 1998-2005 the head of department of Photography and Visual Arts in Museum of Arts in Łódź. He organised many exhibitions in Poland (e.g. Joseph Beuys, Jan Saudek, Erwin Olaf).

He is interested mostly in avant-garde art and post-modern theory. Also interested in a different kind of photography in relation to the art (painting or video-art) or own photographic tradition, e.g. documentary photography, staged photography, digital image. Since 2002 he has been a main juror of international competition "Cyberphoto" (Częstochowa) and since 2011 international Biennial of Arts in Piotrków Trybunalski.

Author of several books on history: *Polish Photography of the 1980s* (1989); *A word on Photography* (written together with K. Makowski - 2003); *Searching for the meaning of photography. Conversations on art* (2008); *Time of photography* (2009).

He is also the author of encyclopedic articles on the history of photography for *The Great Encyclopaedia of PWN* (30th volume), many artistic biographies for the Adam Mickiewicz Institute portal – Culture.pl, including a text on history of Polish photography until 1990. Also the author of a significant text *Polish Photography 1939-1969*, published in *European History of Photography 1969-1969*, (edited by V. Macek, Central European House of Photography, Bratislava 2014).

Author of many articles published in following art magazines: „Arteon”, „Artluk”, „Aspirations”, „Art & Business”, „Format” (from 1990 to the present), „Photography” (1987-1989), „Krytyka Literacka”, „Circulation”, „Obscura”, „Project”, „Student”, „Exit”, „Kwartalnik Fotografia”.

In 1992-1993 he taught art philosophy and lead a diploma seminar at the College of Photography in Warsaw. He was a lecturer at the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk (1997-2010) and the Academy of Fine Arts in Poznań (1994-1996) also the Academy of Fine Arts in Łódź, where he was lecturing the history of graphics and seminar (1994-2005). From 2005 to 2018 he was a lecturer at WSSiP in Łódź.

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