

Beauty is always strange
Charles Baudelaire

A construction model

More and more intense is my search for new forms of beauty.

A few years ago doctors from Florence described a new psychosomatic disorder – Stendhal Syndrome. They named it after the 19th century French author Henri Stendhal, who wrote about nervous breakdown he experienced due to intense contact with renaissance masterpieces collected in Florence. The symptoms ranged from hallucinations to fainting and were connected with disruption of the spatial imagination. The psychosomatic syndrome was incited by excess of aesthetic stimuli. The recommended therapy was sensory deprivation, indoor rest, reduction of visual stimulation and “giving up” art. Recently, several recurring symptoms of the disorder have been recognized in today’s tourists.

Hence my question: how much beauty can we handle, what dose is still safe for our organisms and culture?

Bogna Burska 2003, “Droga” (“The Road”)

Sometimes the excess of snowy whiteness may turn people blind. Sometimes the sight of blood may make people faint. It is not only works of art that are capable of triggering distressing symptoms. Perception of natural phenomena of blood or snow may turn out not less hazardous. What happens if the summed up effect of artwork, snow and blood is intensified? The nine photographs present different images of bloodstained snow, where the white and the red are fragmented by stripes of shadow. Cold, injury, darkness – the potential associations couldn’t be less pleasant. A man or an animal shedding blood on the snow. And yet the images emit light, at the same time diminishing their potential threat. The sharp, blinding edge of whiteness – it lasts only for a moment. We lose consciousness – only for a moment. The photographs are minute, homoeopathic doses of vaccine; they prepare us for the moment to come so that it never really comes. The photographs also testify to the drama which was witnessed by this anonymous place. A drama which, although never clearly understood, will always remain printed in our memory by this aesthetic narration in nine acts – every time at a different angle, with different chiaroscuro, different hues. Artistic testimony situated somewhere between abstraction, landscape and police evidence.

We know that art and aesthetic experience are not tantamount to experiencing beauty. Despite its renaissance tradition, the history of art is not restricted to history of beauty. A rebellion against the terror of beauty has been present in the arts for ages. It has not only been contemporary art that is to a large extent dominated by the movement. The “radiation” of beauty may pose a danger not only to our bodies but also to art itself. This is why so many artists have given up beauty, decreased its doses or treated themselves and us with ugliness, starkness, anxiety, disgust. From romantic abuse of classical beauty to ascetic puritanism of conceptual art and anti-form – contemporary aesthetic history is turbulent and full of controversy. Beauty has often aroused hatred and attracted criticism for performing service to the monarchy, the state, the church or the capital. Highly valued by the audience, it has been a symbol of enslavement for many artists. Stendhal Syndrome can be experienced in the area of physiological perception but also intellect – beauty may cause disgust through watching as well as thinking. Baroque superfluity leads to vertigo. But beauty has not lost even a tiny fragment of its power.

Bogna Burska 2004, "Książka" ("Book")

What is beauty created by an artist as compared to the beauty of nature, of human body – nothing. The beauty of arts is elitist and exclusive, the beauty of the sky belongs to everyone, the beauty of blood is dread for everyone. Reading from the book of the sky and blood is archetypical. What happens if the beauty and depth of the sky, blood and work of art is intensified. Lying on the back and looking up to the sky we lose the sense of self, our identity dissolves. We become immersed in the boundlessness of space, shape and colour. The vaults of baroque churches are nothing compared to this heavenly spectacle. Losing blood, we begin to see differently, the outlines become blurred, we are filled with elation as we lose consciousness. Faced with the dread and ecstasy of our own blood, the iconography of all martyrs fades to nothing. Blood and the sky make us go beyond the limits of ourselves, towards the edges of the body and the space.

Twenty-four pages of the book contain colourful pictures. One half are photographs of the sky, the other half – close-ups of blood-red stains on snow. Postcard-style clouds, sun showing through, the blue sky were contrasted with the almost organic red of wounds bleeding through snowy white bandages. The opening of the sky and the opening of the body, the spectacle of the nature and the spectacle of the blood. In the book we follow the traces, the signs of what used to be crucial for survival and the human fate. Today they are stimulating and mysterious visual art.

For centuries people have tried to explain the nature and the need for beauty. Beauty is neither uniform nor universal, wears many masks, undergoes numerous transformations. According to a dictionary definition, beauty is a quality in people and objects which evokes immense pleasure or deep satisfaction. How could it ever pass away if it's linked with spiritual and sensual bliss we humans cannot give up. Sigmund Freud had no doubts as to the libidinal nature of beauty – he compared it to foreplay. Beauty is full of promises, it gives the foretaste of fulfillment and that constitutes its power. And however aware we are of this being only a disguise, we cannot defend ourselves. Who is able to break a satisfying foreplay?

Bogna Burska 2003, "Odwilż" ("Thaw")

When the thaw comes, it reveals dirt and tracks hidden under the snow. Twenty-five colour photographs show red, bloody effusions on white snow. Different close-ups, immersion in the colour, humidity and texture of the stain. Photographic realism evolves into abstraction, evidence is transformed into a metaphor, an exhibit becomes decoration. Some of the close-ups are dominated by white, others emanate red. Red-white thaw, a purely aesthetic experience, national symbols, individual tragedy, a wound and colour. All and nothing, total opening, emptiness and explosion of sense. Hallucinations of form and meaning. When the thaw comes, it sometimes reveals hidden bloodstains. When the embellishing top layer of reality is removed, a wound appears.

Primacy of the form

How can beauty exist today? At the end of the 20th century, after the experiments of the avant-garde and modernism, after the ascetism of the conceptual art, after the age of barren art and the commercialization of aesthetics when beauty and kitsch have been made equal, contemporary art is facing a triumphal comeback of beauty. As any works of art which wouldn't provide visual pleasure were consistently rejected by the audience, artists finally surrendered and nowadays modern art is once more returning to aesthetic effects. Fully aware of the dangers and benefits connected with beauty, the artists started to manipulate it, using it as their tool for communication and expression. Within this revival of visual pleasure a tendency has been observed to use perfect aesthetic decoration to signal meanings and experiences which are painful, difficult, tragic, irritating, driven away. The characteristic feature of this movement is that traumatic content is minimized and presented in a clear and decorative form. The visual frame, its formalism and cultural connotations have an anaesthetic effect. They grade the pain but first of all they provide visual pleasure. The role of beauty is to convey messages which have nothing in common with aesthetic effect or even contradict it. If beauty can exist in the 21st century art it cannot possibly be naive. Bogna Burska is the main representative of this analytic and aesthetic movement in Polish art.

In her series of photographs *Vazante*, *Marmur i woda* (*Marble and Water*), *Książka* (*Book*), *Deszcz* (*Rain*), *Odwilż* (*The Thaw*), *Droga* (*The Road*) form is of crucial importance. First of all, a single work of art consists of several photographs which are arranged into geometrical grid. A rectangle made of smaller rectangles. The composition edges on mathematical perfection, it has a hint of obsession, just as obsessive is our addiction to beauty and its influence. On the one hand, the structures seem to have been inspired by the tradition of composition based on abstract geometrical forms in painting as well as modernist design – represented by Malewicz, Mondrian, Van Doesburg and Stażewski in Poland. In the case of the red and white color combination even the color range remains as minimalist as in early modernist works. On the other hand, Burska's works are influenced by the use of photography in conceptual art and its analytic perception of the visual medium. The conceptualists' employed a scientific approach to film and photography, examined any characteristic features of these picture-recording systems. This was a prevalent trend in the Polish art of the 70ties. Conceptualists drew abundantly from documentary or scientific photography as they explored areas not normally considered art domain. Similar inspiration can be noticed in Bogna Burska's photographs, which, on a certain level, reveal scientific or utilitarian character. Some of them show close relation to botanical, meteorological and medical photography – as in the case of views of the sky and flowers in *Życie jest piękne* (*Life is Beautiful*), blood and wounds in *Tatuaż* (*Tattoo*), *Ornamenty* (*Ornaments*), *Algorytm* (*Algorithm*), *Historia jednej miłości* (*A Love Story*), *Detale* (*Details*). The associations are strengthened by their clarity, coldness, rigid structural organization, repetitiveness and appearances of objectivism. It seems that these ordered compositions of photographs might be approached from the point of view of Immanuel Kant's aesthetics of Enlightenment, according to which beauty of an object and of experience should be objective and based on disinterested examination. The receivers are neutral and separated from the aesthetic object. Their objectivism enables them to experience the beauty of the work. The geometrical order of Bogna Burska's works widens the distance so that this kind of neutral perception being a pure optic experience is almost forced upon the viewers. Such neutral perception ends where poetry and decoration start to emanate from the artist's photographs. It is the moment when conceptual examination of a medium is transformed into a study of beauty. Not only is Bogna Burska's art supposed to study beauty but also provide it.

The artist's compositions consisting of sets of photographs exert a powerful impact due to their geometrical linear composition and colour scheme. Colour combinations are of crucial importance – the arrangement of red stains on the snow, the contrast of the light blue sky and different shades of white reflected by the snow and the clouds, the nuances of light. The mosaic of hues and gleaming make Burska's photographs seem lyrical painting abstractions. Before the tragic significance of the wound hidden behind the glimmering cover creeps into our consciousness, our perception has already taken us inside a visual lullaby. Not until the visual input is intellectually processed are painful associations awoken. Only then do we start to realize what may be concealed under the decoration. It turns out that the artist sends us pretty postcards which in fact are notification about a tragedy. This reflects the old truth that appearances can be deceptive and looks are nothing but illusion. Discovering this fact for oneself may come as a shock, though. We enter existential symbolism having been captured by the form which seems to conform to classical definitions of beauty.

The philosophy of beauty

Bogna Burska's art encourages reflection over the complex history of fundamental concepts and forms of beauty and this is why it may be regarded as a study of beauty in the age of lost aesthetic innocence.

Plato's metaphysical and objective concept of beauty forms the foundation of western aesthetics. The Greek philosopher didn't relate beauty to art, which is only its secondary reflection, but with the world of high concepts and beauty is linked to Being, light, goodness and truth. Such a wonderful combination is hard to encounter in art. Plato is the author of the belief that beauty is the result of proportional, symmetrical and harmonious relation of the parts and the whole. These assumptions were later supported by Aristotle who related them directly to the work of art adding such objective formal qualities as order and integrity. According to Aristotle, a work of art is an intensified reflection of the reality (*mimesis*) and should be examined from the point of view of formal perfection. Thus the ideal form of a work of art consists in its perfect composition and connection to nature. This became the under-

lying principle of art history and, strangely enough, has remained the frame of reference up to this day. Bogna Burska's photographs study nature in the literal sense, they are views of the sky, the Earth, the body and its interior in the photographs of wounds. Finally, they are conventional sleepy waterscapes as in the case of *Vazante*. They are dominated by horizontal layout and empty space associated with comfort and solace... until suddenly we notice the blurred red colour.

On the shadows, stones and lagoons dripping with water we can see a subtle streak of blood. *Vazante* in Portuguese means "low tide, draining". This series of photographs resemble visual elegies recording moments brimming with beauty, anxiety and pain. Their poetic nature is compensation for the loss of this unique moment. The paused visual narration blocks out the nightmare which might be hidden behind the bloody streams.

According to the 17th century classical understanding of beauty, nature must be subordinate to the mind just as in Bogna Burska's works it is intellectually transformed, framed, multiplied, adomed by means of art. The sky is much more aesthetic and regular than in the so called reality, disgusting blood stains on the snow are turned into pictures to be hung on the wall all in an act of idealizing *mimesis*. The composition consists of symmetrically arranged sets of similar photographs. The concept behind the work is based on multiple enclosures where each part shows the same relation to the whole and the whole is just like a multiplied part. It follows the rule of unity in multiplicity, uniformisation of the module. A single photograph contains the essence of the whole work and the entire composition is a part subdivided into parts. Combinations of various views of the sky, flowers, snow, blood and wound are as if printed with one matrix. Single images resemble each other, according to the concept that the more similar different fragments of the body, the more beautiful the body. Removing one of the fragments would destroy the precise composition of the work. The same distance is kept between single photographs, they are arranged in rhythmical and regular sets. Such role of rhythm, distance and numerical relations was emphasized in treatise on musical beauty by St. Augustine, who stressed the divine nature of beauty. In the 18th century, these metaphysical classical and objective Christian attitudes towards beauty were explained by Denise Diderot in *The Encyclopaedia* in his scientific, Enlightenment way as justified by mathematics and physics. This takes us back to the science of visual perception examining and taming phenomena through recording them. Here we can see a relation to Bogna Burska's conceptual understanding of photography. In her art, the domination of line and proportion is as obvious as in an antic sculpture, a gothic cathedral, renaissance perspective, academic or modernist concepts.

The beginning of the 18th century marks a turning point in the approach to beauty which was related to a new kind of sensitivity based on emotions and senses. Beauty begins to be subjective, the emphasis is shifted from the object of beauty to its individual perception, its effect on feelings, passion and human imagination. A new field of knowledge is born – aesthetics – whose aim is to examine the psychology of beauty. The scope of beauty and aesthetic experience is slowly expanded and accounts for ugliness, anxiety or even dread. That is the beginning of the Romantic and contemporary acceptance of disharmony, irrationality and pain. Apart from the idea of beauty, Edmund Burke develops the concept of sublimity which is of essential importance to modern art. Beauty is reduced to pretty and pleasing sensations and objects, whereas the sublime is capable of opening the existential abyss. Beauty is restricted, the sublime exceeds any limits, comes into relation with pain, fright, astonishment, alienation. The sublime appears in the aesthetic together with dread and intensity of existence and feelings. Beauty only stimulates the senses while sublimity torments them. It is between the beautiful and the sublime that Bogna Burska's photographs are situated. In Friedrich Nietzsche's terminology they join the Apollonian with the Dionysian.

Contrary to expectations, the sublime in the artist's works is not created by the romantic views of the sky or water, as nature is tamed, presented as pleasantly pretty and beautiful. We are seized by the sublime through blood, as we feel shocked by the medical-artistic photographs of wounds (surgeries, amputations, frostbite) taken at wards of Polish hospitals. Today, the injuries give us a foretaste of the sublime, just like the ocean or the mountains used to in the age of Romanticism. They fill us with pain and dread of the subconscious and the suppressed, make us afraid of physical fragmentation and crossing the limits. Any landscape, even the most majestic, has become too codified and too tame. The 2002 series *Algorytm (Algorithm)* and *Życie jest piękne (Life Is Beautiful)* explode with colours. They balance between the beautiful and the sublime, between pleasure and shock. Wonderfully kitschy photographs of colourful flowers were contrasted with naturalistic views of wounds and injured

body being operated on. A combination of visual bliss and dread, the soothing and the shocking was created from contradicting visions of nature and human body. Floral and intestinal beauty. We feel irresistibly drawn towards it and at the same time we avert our eyes. This is the genius of beauty which is no longer innocent.

The aesthetics of the sublime is connected with the birth of 18th century trend in literature and art known as Gothicism, which gives priority to the feelings of dread and horror. Gothicism emphasized the pleasure of fright and shock, the beauty of ugliness and horror, up to now it has explored the dark recesses of the unconscious and crime. that is why we consider Gothicism a decorative artistic mode as well as an active trend in politics, architecture and psychoanalysis. It reveals strong psychological foundations of aesthetics. Gothic horror stories show another aspect of beauty which pervades Bogna Burska's works. Her evident obsession with blood (violence, illness, wounds) teasing us gently in her photographs explode with great power in her paintings, installations and video films. Red liquids and paint in her works are an obvious suggestion of blood. The artist with uses her hands to leave red stains on white walls of galleries (Galeria Szara, Cieszyn 2003; CSW, Warsaw 2001) which look like blood of a struggling, bleeding victim. In the underground of Fort Legionów (The Legions Fort) in Warsaw, she made the dirty walls of the dungeon seem soaked with blood, thus setting a scene for a horror film. In her latest installation *Deszcz (Rain)* 'red rain' is dribbling on the windows of the gallery. The inside and the outside are visible through 'blood'. Is it the Stanley Kubrick's river of blood from *Shining* transformed into a rain of blood, or is it experimental looking through bloody tears? Another work is an inscenisation of an empty child's bedroom full of alarming traces with... a bloodstained bed (Galeria Biała, Lublin, 2002). The installation and video film *Arachne* displays another ghastly interior – in a luxurious ladies boudoir in pastel colours an enormous spider treads over the jewellery and the velvet fabric spread on the bed (Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, Berlin, 2003). The work appears to be a declaration of the philosophy of beauty full of dangerous traps under the cover of seduction.

To reach her Gothic ecstasy, Bogna Burska covers the stained glass windows of churches in Pogorzelica and Frankfurt an der Oder with red stains. In this manifestation of red expressionism the artist returns to the main motifs of Gothicism, namely sacral architecture, crypts, castles, bloodshed and mystery. The mystery which began with Christ's blood. It is also a realization of dreadful beauty and fascination with the frightening and the wonderful. Bogna Burska's art is a beauty laboratory where horror seems indispensable, as it restores the metaphysical and psychological depth of beauty.

Eroticism

What would remain if beauty were deprived of its erotic aspect? After all it has libidinal sources. According to the authors' sexual orientation it was reflected in female (Edmund Burke) or male body (Johann Winckelmann). The traditional belief prevails, however, that women are beautiful and men are handsome. In the domain of beauty, the supremacy of the eye and the genitals is stronger than anywhere else.

Deszcz w Paryżu (Rain in Paris), a video by Bogna Burska, consists of fragments of cult romantic and erotic movies set in Paris: *Queen Margot*, *Marquise*, *Dangerous Liaisons*, *Frantic*, *Henry and June*, *Quills*, *Paint Neuf*, *Le vent de la nuit*. This combination is dominated by the divas of French cinematography and symbols of beauty – Isabell Adjani, Sophie Marceau, Catherine Deneuve. Who wouldn't like to be these women or with these women? The artist chose fragments showing violent confrontation between a man and a woman when blood appears. The intertwining fragments of various films are centered on the character of the women who experience a peculiar state of sensual madness, devotion or despair. *Rain in Paris* gives a remarkable, subversive insight into the aesthetical myth of French existential eroticism. Allegedly only the French are able to talk, write, show and think sexuality and the best scenery to do that is Paris. A certain element of poetry and existentiality visible in the work makes us unable to resist its aesthetics, especially bearing in mind Polish perception of culture which is devoid of deep and emancipated eroticism. The artist surrenders to this painful beauty and shares it with the viewers. The horror of blood and drama disappears in this romantic study of neurotic heterosexual love where only beauty remains. We can sense the spirit of *The Last Tango in Paris* by Bernardo Bertolucci, even if it's absent among Bogna Burska's *found footage* of quotations.

Therapeutical anesthetization

Contrary to Plato, the 19th century realists Gustave Flaubert and Emil Zola claimed that only when beauty was abandoned might we arrive at truth in art. Beauty was a kind of disguise for the brutality of life. Nowadays, we often witness moral doubt over potentially beautiful photographs or films showing human tragedy. The popularity of World Press Photo exhibitions makes us face such dilemma. But if representational the world is essential, if we live in a visual culture which requires representation, anesthetization seems to be a method of humanization of the document. Devoid of even the tiniest particle of beauty, a recording of human suffering would be totally unacceptable. Naturalism additionally humiliates the people portrayed and hurts their pride. Mournfully, beauty makes them eternal.

Beauty is a lie, a mask hiding the dirty façade of life. And yet, would life be possible without this aesthetic protective screen deforming the reality? Even more so if beauty has some hidden connection to pain, tragedy, death, loneliness, neglect. We bring flowers to hospitals, to funerals, we put them on graves. Music accompanies the most difficult moments of our lives. Experiencing beauty is a psychological mechanism of defense against trauma as it humanizes and elevates our suffering and loneliness, brings it out of anonymity, saves from the routine of everyday life. It preserves our body from fleshiness and our desire from bestiality. Beauty is an illusion which is absolutely essential for the survival of humanity of our existence. We must be aware of the so-called surface of beauty and its traps but our unconscious should be allowed to draw from its positive healing and spiritual potential. It is as if we rediscovered Plato's soothing idealist classicism after the difficult truths of naturalism and avant-garde.

It is the framework of such therapeutical philosophy of beauty through which I perceive Bogna Burska's art. The artist combines blood with the sky, horrible wounds with flowers. Moments which normally follow one another are shown simultaneously. Trauma comes first, followed by our attempt to process, suppress, hide or heal it. The substance of life is sewn together by means of forms. The wound fills our mind completely and before we are able to see the flowers we must recover from the shock, forget and see hope. There's a relationship between this natural flow of life and our aesthetic experiences ranging from ugliness to beauty. The artist offers two contradictory existential and perceptual sensations at the same time. This makes her works alarming and aesthetic, painful and pleasing. These are two distant moments of the therapeutical process combined and transformed into a visual experience.

As far as the eternal need for beauty is concerned, artists are faced with a serious dilemma. How can beauty and its meaning be recovered for art in the age when it has been used and taken over by modern mass media and exploited by films, advertisements, television, magazines and the Internet. Andy Warhol and other pop art artists developed a method which is still adopted today, namely they introduced popular aesthetics into art, thus reversing the process of appropriation of ideas. This strategy seems more and more worn out, though. It muddies the unique character of art. We are conscious of the necessity to discover a new kind of beauty – different from the beautiful images dominating the perfect pop culture. Beauty which would be aware of its tradition and completely innocent at the same time. A new child of a new millennium. The stake is high, as we strive towards the aim pursued by every artistic period – to purify the visual sensation, to find a new vision of the world.

Bogna Burska is one of the artists who search for new kinds of beauty and get lost in its old labyrinths.

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