

1. A peculiar fluid

Blut ist ein ganz besonderer Saft (blood is a very peculiar fluid) says Mephistopheles in Goethe's *Faust*. Indeed, blood attracts us and makes us avert our eyes, it fills us with fear and tenderness. What a symbolic potential it has! After all, blood is a symbol of sacrifice, martyrdom and redemption as well as war, murder, sustenance to the dead¹. In the bloody continuum death intertwines with life, crime with sacrifice and redemption with betrayal. Not only may the sight of blood arouse fear but it also gives rise to tender associations with fertility and healthy, well functioning machinery of the human body. Blood as a fluid is at the same time sacred and taboo, the divine essence of a living organism and the cursed secretion of the opened cavities of human body. The blood of Christ and menstrual blood, the blood of scapegoat and umbilical blood – how many possibilities, dramas and mysteries!

Bogna Burska has a predilection of using organic fluids, which keep undergoing physical changes: coagulating, evaporating, and melting. These include blood (usually substituted by red paint) sometimes water, snow, vapor (clouds). The artist constructs her world out of those simple elements paying particular attention to compositional discipline, so as to keep their clarity and enormous interpretational potential. This is why her works are given simple titles which don't distract viewer's attention by luring them into a labyrinth of introvert hallucinations and impulses. Her lexicon basically consists of key words: road, book, tattoo, rain, thaw, ornament, and so on.

Bogna Burska's *Algorithm* (2002) is a set of 12 colour photographs. A healing stump of a human extremity was contrasted with images of a peony in bloom. An algorithm of aesthetic exclusion was created. The more serious the injury and shorter the distance to the operating theatre, the more intense the 'blooming' of the human body. Whereas the seductive beauty of the flower becomes doubly suspicious – the subsequent stages of the flower's growth were presented in a reversed order, from full bloom to a green bud. As we are getting painfully aware of the presence of the red flower, its colour fades, bringing the viewer's eye closer to death. The flower doesn't fold inside but heals up in the scar. Natural, unsophisticated beauty smuggled in Burska's works, which is present in nearly all organic processes (crying, healing of a wound, giving birth etc.) is shown in its simplicity and brutality.

This strategy of minimalist visual sincerity was consistently applied in her work *Odwilż* (*Thaw*, 2003). The image is quite explicit: melting snow reveals the ugliness of some slimy, coagulating substance. In this case, the viewers' potential disgust is justified – the artist used human blood². The fluid spilled over the snow creates organic structures, bores shallow tunnels, and clots. On the one hand, the artist deprives human blood of its magical, ritual power using it so to say in spite of the Biblical curse (*Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man* Genesis 9,6). On the other hand, she elevates it. Burska does this with a substance imprinted on the human mind as bad omen, infamous *sacrament of nations dying from slavery and famine*. As long as blood is flowing in human arteries, it remains a symbol of life, but once it has been 'freed' from the body, (finding the exit with the help of a murderer's treacherous knife, a razor blade in the hand of a suicide or a wartime bullet) it is immediately transformed into an elixir of death, a cursed secretion of the human body. Hence the anxiety provoked by using human blood and anything else which used to be a part of human organism. A few years ago, the Mexican artist Teresa Margolles addressed the problem of using 'human material' in art. In her work *Entierro* (*Burial*, 1999) she used the embalmed corpse of a baby in a minimalist cube-shaped sculpture. This radical work came into being at the mother's request, as she wanted to immortalize her child's body, like in an ancient Egyptian ritual. She didn't want the corpse to be utilized in the hospital, so she sacrificed it on the 'altar of art'. Similarly, Bogna Burska seems to use blood to perform a ritual, which at the same time elevates the symbol and soothes our fears. Moreover, the contrast of white and red evokes other Biblical associations – the ban of combining blood with milk. God warns Noe *But flesh with the life thereof, [which is] the*

blood thereof, shall ye not eat (Genesis 9,4) and *Whatsoever soul it be that eateth any manner of blood, even that soul shall be cut off from his people* (Lev. 7,27). Blood is a peculiar fluid! These semantic juxtapositions might be continued ad infinitum.

2. The curse of the place

In spite of appearances, Bogna Burska's art does not bear direct relationship to reality. Her works are sometimes analyzed in the framework of critical discourse and their Polish historical and social context. However, this art is centered on the power of images and traps of perception and memory rather than on individual tragedies and national fears. The connections between Burska's art and psychoanalytical approach to the issue of architectural 'memory' seem especially intriguing.

Bogna Burska's installation presented in the year 2002 in Biała gallery reveals the scenographical lavishness of her art as well as her talent to narrate grim, painful stories. In the gallery, which was staged as a living space, she placed a children's bed. The bed linen was stained with blood. The viewer's breath quickens, alarming images are generated. A familiar *interieur* becomes subject to manipulation. An image of a typical bedroom turns into a horrifying three-dimensional photography of a crime scene. This is how diabolically powerful models of reality are created and demons are awoken without resorting to any complex techniques. The artist doesn't have to use real blood nor the odour of a dead body to attract the viewer's attention. Burska's method may be compared to the activity of the American police officer and researcher Frances Glessner Lee. In the 1930s she developed a project of building strange, miniature houses. The models were reconstructions of scenes of crimes committed in Chicago at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries – the city was witness to many unsolved mysteries at the time. The miniature houses were designed to help detectives solve those mysteries, and that is why they were constructed with astounding precision. There is sugar spilled on the floor, there are butt-ends in ashtray and scattered toys on shelves. Frances Glessner Lee called this technique *The Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Death*¹. The conventional concept of a little girl's 'home-making' was transformed into a macabre death theatre. The power which enables us to recall past events by means of their substitutes (Burska's stains of red paint as well as Glessner Lee's dolls symbolizing dead bodies) lies in architectural memory. It's not without a reason that psychoanalysis is devoting more and more attention to the almost psychoactive function of space. Space is perceived as one of the clues in a crime mystery. According to Anthony Wilder², *...Space had to be examined in the greatest detail in order for it to be ruled out. If analysis reveals the hidden sources of anxiety neurosis, it is nevertheless the apartment, the window, the street, the space itself that is identified as the instigator of the initial attacks. Whether or not these spaces are symbolic of something else, or the anxiety is thence transformed into an anxiety around anxiety itself, this space remains attached to the first fear, and the anxiety was, if not caused by, certainly figured through private and public space and its uncertain boundaries.*

Thus space was present enough at the outset for it to be a prime suspect, and as we know from Sherlock Holmes, Freud's model in this regard, to exonerate the obvious suspect demands subtle detective work.

Evidence of crime and horrible mysteries from the past can be traced in Burska's other works, too. A bleeding victim might have crawled along a white corridor (*untitled*, 2001), an enormous spider moves in an empty boudoir (*Arachne*, 2003), blood stains cover the walls of a long forgotten fort (*untitled*, 2001). Widely discussed among psychologists as well as historians, architectural memory became a real curse of the 20th century. The painful memory of walls, old furniture, cellars resemble a scar which never completely heals. Time and time again the wound is renewed and starts bleeding again. This problem is also reflected in Burska's activity connected with sacral architecture. In her two projects developed in churches in Pogorzela (2002) and Frankfurt an der Oder (2004), the artist alluded to the best Christian tradition of artistic representation of passion and suffering. Stained glass windows covered with patches of red paint became an abstract story of martyrdom, sin and redemption. The bleeding temples were also a reminder of the dark chapters of the history of Christianity. They were a painful architectural stigma.

3. The conflict of eye and heart

Bogna Burska's photographs seem to have a smell and temperature of their own. The viewer experiences the unpleasant sensation of plunging his or her hand in some sticky, irritating substance. With a surgeon's skill she adds subsequent elements, which seem familiar and yet are full of visual traps. The pain is neutralized by hypnotic ornamentalization (*Ornamenty 1-3 – Ornaments 1-3*, 2002); the photographs' brutal frankness is hidden behind a mask of intriguing juxtapositions and mimesis. (*Życie jest piękne – Life is Beautiful*, 2002), the sterile worlds are scenes of visually dazzling tragedies (*Droga – Road*, 2003). The game has commenced. We should observe without betraying any signs of fascination. We should analyze carefully and without haste. And once we have been drawn into this peculiar game, we start to discover manifestation of beauty in the least probable places. At times we may be horrified and embarrassed, for example when we realize how indisputably beautiful some terror acts appear. There are persistent, ruthless images which may tyrannize our minds. They poison, torment and weaken it.

Consequently, Bogna Burska's art is also a story about suppressing certain events, deceiving our own brains which feeds on bliss and needs more and more powerful stimuli. Echoes of images, images registered out of the corner of the eye, projected on the wall behind us – this is a neurosis of our times. We have problems with concentration, we feed our senses with waste, repetitions, we always hunger for new images. And we become accomplices.

Not once did Burska address the issue of visual representation of violence in the media, for example in her installation *Salon telewizyjny* (*TV Room*, The Zachęta National Gallery, 2004) or photographic composition *Deszcz* (*The Rain*, 2003). The artist alludes to digital blood splashed over flickering TV screens, inaccessible, transmitted (what a miracle!) by cable and aërials. This omnipresent blood arrests our eyes, covers the world with a soft fleshy-pink veil. Without moralizing, Bogna Burska focuses our attention on the ethically ambiguous role of the viewer taking part in the widely accessible spectacles of violence. Ann Jagiello wrote about the *TV Room*: *A simple trick helps, just for a moment, to create a situation where the viewer is no longer sure of his position. He becomes the projection 'screen' and doesn't know which side he is taking – is he the victim, the executioner or only a witness? Shots increase the sense of threat and chaos. A perplexed viewer finds himself in the middle of events. Neither is he ready to participate, nor is he willing to be a passive projection space.*

Burska's *Deszcz* (*Rain*, 2003) is characterized by equally dramatic intensity. A few dozens of photographs show rain on a windowpane and blood on a BBC TV screen. This juxtaposition gives rise to associations with dew, which through centuries was believed to be of divine origin and symbolize life-giving blessing. 'Bloody dew', however, is a prophecy of slaughter, herald of murder. Who is the addressee of this apocalyptic prediction? The viewer? The 'director' of the show?

It's hard to feel at ease when we are alone with these images. The eye is forced to look. Tormented by compassion, disgust and fascination, we get more and more involved in the painful and delightful ritual of seeing and closing our eyes, noticing and deceiving ourselves. This is a demand of our inquiring mind. We behave like small children, who look and cringe and cover their eyes with their hands. This is mutual observation, estimating our strength and looking for weak points – a game between excluding eyes and excluded images. Between love and hate. As William Shakespeare put it in one of his sonnets⁵:

*Mine eye and heart are at mortal war,
How to divide the conquest of thy sight;
Mine eye my heart thy picture's sight would bar,
My heart mine eye the freedom of that right.*

¹ Afer Władysław Kopaliński, *Słownik mitów i symboli*, Warsaw 2001

² Bogna Burska used human blood for the first time at the *Cultural Territories* exhibition (in cooperation with Małgorzata Lisiewicz) in Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst in Leipzig in 2003

³ See: Corinne May Botz. *The Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Death*, New York 2004

⁴ Anthony Wilder *Psychoanalysis of Space* in: *Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered. Spatial Emotion in Contemporary Art & Architecture*, Zürich / Gdańsk 2003

⁵ Sonnet 46, in: *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, Wordsworth 1998