

## Do Androids Dream of Egg Tempera?

How are paintings similar to humans?

We say that each artwork, in the end, is always a self-portrait of the artist, her or his child, and its DNA contains genes and features inherited from the author.<sup>1</sup>

Paintings by Marek Sobczyk – complex, intriguing and provoking many questions, encourage us to search for explanations. Who should we ask to explain? The painter? The paintings themselves? Ourselves – the person viewing the works? Reality?

To say that Marek Sobczyk's paintings are, in a – non-literal – way similar to Marek Sobczyk, does not give us the answers we want. Expressing oneself is not a priority for this particular painter. The exhibitionistic act of granting the audience access to his own internal world has never been the cornerstone of his practice.

When searching for explanations concerning Sobczyk's paintings, it feels more useful to think about how paintings can resemble humans – understood in a general sense – as self-aware, biological machines able to ask questions and think philosophically. Indeed, we are speaking of an artist who declares the "independence of artistic means" and calls for respect towards their "human and civil rights".

Shortly before the pandemic, the painter presented an exhibition in the City Gallery in Wrocław, entitled: "Marek Sobczyk: 2015–2019 [Longer Life for Every Picture] [Android]". In his footnotes written for that show, he recalled the cyberpunk classic: "Blade Runner" by Ridley Scott. The movie, based on a novel by Philip K. Dick, presented a dystopian future, in which humanity has already created other beings with not only artificial intelligence, but also self-awareness. In view of this achievement, the human kind had to choose: should these beings be treated as object or as persons, with all the pertinent "human and civil rights"? We know human nature; both Dick's readers and Scott's viewers were not very surprised to learn that humans refused to grant such rights to their creations. This refusal caused many dramatic events and moral issues that can be seen in "Blade Runner".

However, let us leave the protagonists of "Blade Runner" to those who choose to revisit that story, and let's focus on the figure of Android evoked by Marek Sobczyk.

A work of art can resemble a human being in the same sense as an android can resemble humans. It is a machine built (painted) by a human, in order to do a certain job – a machine that will think and make associations in front of our eyes.

In this context, Sobczyk's demands to grant rights to artistic means acquire additional power, especially considering that the words of the artists resonate with the discourse of the spirit of time.

What does the spirit of time tell us? In October 2017, during the Future Investment Initiative Forum in Saudi Arabia, a cybernetic company from Hong Kong, Hanson Robotics, presented a humanoid android named Sophie. The presentation awakened such emotions that the authorities of that Middle Eastern monarchy decided to grant citizenship to the machine. The entire procedure caused a lot of controversy, because it turned out that Sophie had more civil rights than biological women in Saudi Arabia.

When making reference to that controversy, we are not very far away from Sobczyk's practice, because as a person engaging with contemporary issues through painting, he deals with the topic of emancipation, among others. It is a heated issue, perhaps the most important one, considering that we are living in times when we even discuss the rights and emancipation of non-human beings (animals and even rivers or machines); without any clear situation concerning the

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<sup>1</sup> If we assume that the person of the artist is the mother/father of the painting, we must also ask: who is the second parent? Is it Art? Reality? The female or male viewer? The subconscious of the female/male artist? The joint subconscious? Superior beings?

future of the emancipation and rights of women, as well as certain minorities and even all the citizens as a whole.

Therefore, why not – as Sobczyk suggests – extend the debate to the emancipation of associations – their liberation from the orders they used to be part of, such as texts, paintings, discourses?

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Sobczyk as a painter undertakes many simultaneous operations: looking, thinking, speaking (writing), remembering (recalling and quoting). He is a designer of painting machines and, at the same time, a researcher. What is the subject of his research? Is it painting? Reality? They are not mutually exclusive; it is also worth noting that Sobczyk, author of many cycles and projects involving paintings and discourse, since 1979 (when he was still a student) has been carrying out a specific artistic meta-project, which he calls "Brain research in Poland". He never announced that the project has ended, which we should bear in mind when viewing his paintings.

The basic elements used by Sobczyk-creator are the following: painting with egg tempera, quoting, making references and montage.

Mateusz Falkowski, when writing about Sobczyk, noticed that his choice of egg tempera was made for the sake of colours and against the "aura of illusion" appearing between the painting and the viewer in case of oil paint. "Matt intensification of colours, not necessarily ascetic, a reduction of the transcendence surrounding the work of art (another dimension) to a single, atheist plane." – says the philosopher about the consequences of this choice. The creation of illusion – of paintings-windows – is precisely why modern painters gave up tempera for oil. Paintings by Sobczyk are never projections or illusions; in this context, the choice of the painter can be understood as standing on the side of realism, and speaking more precisely: a real presence of motifs on a surface.

Quotations, in turn, are a procedure that consists in inviting reality to the painting's plane. What kind of "reality" is it? What are the resources used by the painter? For example, the painting "Çatalhöyük\*– Kobieta rōdzi ęzaszkę byka [Skoczkinę] / Çatalhöyük\*– Wōman Giving Birth tō a Būll Skūll [Female Jumper]" from the cycle "Year of sculpture". Among many references made by Sobczyk in this artwork, the most remote in time is the one from the title – an archaeological site located in Anatolia. Çatalhöyük was a Neolithic settlement with a population of 10,000, the first social organism that we could call a city; it was home to more inhabitants than the city of Cracow in Middle Ages. A cradle of civilization? In the same painting, the painter quotes another civilizational finding that he had encountered a moment before. It was a quotation from the Internet, a fragment of text that he decided to include in his painting, describing one of the uncountable stories about people who used miraculous tricks to become rich overnight, progressing from earning the minimum wage to the level of private jets and gorging heaps of caviar. Are these news from the Internet folklore fake news? Electronic fairy tales? Sobczyk treats them rather as myths; he collects stories of this kind in his folder labelled "Millionaires", and introduces fragments of those stories into his paintings.

Meanwhile, between the Neolithic foundations of civilization built in Çatalhöyük and stories from the Internet telling the tale of the miraculous U-turns of destiny, Sobczyk's painting features the body of Mariya Aleksandrovna Lasitskene (b. 1993), a Russian high jump champion. The athlete is depicted at the moment of flying over the bar, for a moment – (nomen est omen) fraught with meaning – her position resembles that of a woman giving birth. The body is painted with thick paint, whose colour looks like clay; is it the same clay Çatalhöyük was built of?

Asking this question is possible thanks to montage – one of the most crucial and fundamental procedures of modern art – a technique that permitted such peculiar events as a meeting of an umbrella with a writing machine on an autopsy table. Sobczyk's montage

interventions also lead to unexpected and surprising situations, but the painter is not a surrealist, he does not dream, he does not invite us to join him in daydreaming, and he wants to achieve more than just puzzling the audience; this is not his ultimate goal. Sobczyk makes montages of shows and texts, juxtaposes still frames, connects different planes – of discourse, space, and – obviously – time, while the chronological perspective of his operations spans from the beginnings of the history of culture to current continuation of that history, manifesting itself, for instance, in the form of fairy tales from the Internet about digital spells changing precarious-Cinderellas into absurdly wealthy hyper-consumers. This is how – to use another example – Brownie the Baby Giraffe can meet Nike of Samothrace in the same painting, accompanied by a quotation from a gossip website and the huge word "Ideology". The above non-human person became famous in 2002, during the second Intifada. Brownie was a resident (prisoner?) at the Qalqiliyah Zoo in Palestinian territory. The noise of Israeli-Palestinian explosions scared the male giraffe so much that he panicked, started running away, and killed himself by hitting his head against the fence of his paddock. Five years later, the world (of art) recalled the fate of that victim of the Middle Eastern conflict, when the Austrian artist, Peter Friedl, put Brownie's stuffed body on display as an artistic installation at Kassel's documenta.<sup>2</sup>

A painting built in such a way can be perceived as a construct, a machine assembled by the painter from the components he had at hand: and nowadays, the entire world is at our fingertips, especially for savants like Sobczyk, who know where to look, and are not afraid to search both the sublime registers of reality, like Austrian critical art, and the "low" registers, like pop culture or urban legends spreading over the Internet. The machine is put into motion by the female viewer/ male viewer, when they look at Sobczyk's paintings, the montage elements he assembled together (portraits, texts, planes, discourses) click and turn together like gears of mutual interaction and association. The fuel firing this painting-machine is a mixture of the viewer's gaze and the thought activated by looking. Footnotes serve as the "lubricant", without them the "apparatus" could become stuck and stop doing its discursive job. Is it justified to refer to this machine as an android? This kind of creation – although it is just a rectangular canvas covered with tempera – resembles a human being, because it is a carrier and reproducer of myths, it connects the past with the present, art with reality, and speaks in public. We could also refer to those paintings as monsters; perhaps there is something monstrous in the very concept of creating androids – we know it from tales about Golem, Frankenstein, Pinocchio, Terminator, and also "Blade Runner", and other uncountable stories containing a warning: humans are prohibited from creating beings in our image and likeness, under the threat of creating monsters. Etymologically, the monster (potwór) is a creature, something left "after the act of creation", a being created "after the actual act of creation". The painter, who wants to meet reality on the plane of his canvas, has to create heterogenous monster-creature-paintings; there is no other way – of course, if we do not count the emergency exits of escapism and formalism. However, the artist does not want to use them, he is not thinking about evacuation; the contemporaneity is monstrous, emancipated from the "initial act of creation", just like the contemporary paintings by Marek Sobczyk created on its basis.

Stach Szabłowski

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<sup>2</sup> Marek Sobczyk, *Cudowna przemiana Martwej Żyrafy – Idee\* w Ideologię [Nike z Samotraki] / A Miraculous Transformation of a Dead Giraffe – from Idea\* to Ideology [Nike from Samothrace]*, 2019, 180x230 cm, egg tempera on canvas