

Relief and the Realm of Geometric Abstraction. The Art of Andrzej Nowacki and Its Sources

Abstract:

This dissertation is the first extensive study to present and analyze the oeuvre of Andrzej Nowacki (b. 1953), Polish artist and one of the foremost representatives of geometric abstraction in contemporary European art. It has not been conceived as a comprehensive monograph; instead, it showcases Nowacki's work in the light of a broad range of issues, encompassing both the origins and history of 20th-century geometric abstraction and relief, as well as the various currents and their programmatic premises. Furthermore, it also reflects on the essence of this art form relative to the individual approach of the artist himself.

The dissertation is structured into five main chapters with numerous subchapters. Occasionally disregarding the chronological order, the disquisition sets out with factual or analytical theme to arrive at an in-depth and multifaceted insight into the work of Andrzej Nowacki. Against the backdrop of biography, I outline the four decades of the artist's creative career, discussing the most important stages of his development as an artist in detail. I analyze the extent to which the achievements of European representatives – Polish and Russian in particular – of non-objective art provided inspiration for Nowacki as he formulated his own, original artistic notions and elaborated the concept of relief as a painting medium. Dedicated to biography, the first chapter discusses Nowacki's major career stages, travels, exhibitions and encounters. The second chapter focuses on the emergence of relief as a medium in geometric abstraction, its painterly origins, significance and development, with references to the work of the leading artists in this current, European and Polish alike. I demonstrate where Andrzej Nowacki's relief situates itself within this tradition, which I interpret to be a certain conceptual and visual continuum. The subsequent chapter is concerned with the first period in Nowacki's oeuvre, which begins with the discovery of his own form of expression that stemmed from profound understanding and active interpretation of the works by Henryk Stażewski. The fourth chapter explores Nowacki's linear reliefs, which were the yield of new formal solutions. To assess the visual impact of these works, I examine them drawing on e.g.

the rules of optics and the theory of perception. However, while I highlight the aspects that may constitute a link between the artist's works and op-art, primary attention is drawn to the significant differences that preclude an unequivocal identification of his oeuvre with that current. The final chapter aims to analyze Nowacki's paintings in terms of their intrinsic affinity with icon painting. This issue is discussed in the light of the history and conceptions of the Russian avant-garde, whose contributions prompted the reception of the icon as an impulse towards abstraction. In addition to the images included in the individual chapters, a catalogue of Nowacki's paintings and reliefs from 1983–2021, comprising over 700 reproductions with detailed descriptions, is provided in the dissertation as an appendix.

With the analysis of Nowacki's oeuvre as a starting point, the dissertation sheds more light on and explores several aspects in the development of Polish geometric abstraction in recent decades, considers its origins and tradition to show its characteristic traits and originality in the European context. Reflection on the relief as a means of painterly expression reveals how concepts of the image fluctuated in twentieth-century art. In the domain of theoretical inquiry, the dissertation addresses non-objective painting and its ideological premises.