

Andrzej Wróblewski. Recto / Verso



ANDRZEJ WRÓBLEWSKI
Sala de espera I, La cola continúa (Waiting room I, The queue continues), 1956
Óleo sobre lienzo (Oil on canvas)
140 x 200 cm
Muzeum Narodowe, Varsovia

- DATES:** November 17, 2015 – February 28, 2016
- PLACE:** Palacio de Velázquez (Parque del Retiro)
- ORGANIZATION:** Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía and Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw
- COLLABORATION:** Culture.pl www.culture.pl
Andrzej Wróblewski Foundation. www.andrzejwroblewski.pl
With the support of the Polish Cultural Institute, Madrid
- CURATORSHIP** Éric de Chassey and Marta Dziewańska
- COORDINATION:** Carolina Bustamante and Patricia Molins
- RELATED ACTIVITIES:** Encounter Andrzej Wróblewski. Éric de Chassey and Marta Dziewańska
November 18, 2015 - 7:00 p.m. / Sabatini Building, Auditorium
- EXHIBITION TOUR:** Muzeum Sztuki Nowoczesnej w Warszawie (Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw) (February 12 - May 17, 2015)

The Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía presents the exhibition *Andrzej Wróblewski: Recto / Verso*, focused on Andrzej Wróblewski (1927-1957), one of the most important Polish artists of the 20th century. This will be the largest Wróblewski retrospective outside of Poland.

Wróblewski was a creator of formal experiments on the border of abstraction and figuration, an artist manifesting an unusually suggestive vision of war and human degradation, based on deep political commitments. His rich, diverse body of work was created over a very brief period (less than ten years), during a distinctly turbulent era.

The exhibition *Andrzej Wróblewski: Recto / Verso* concentrates on two phases in his work: its very beginning, when the artist was trying to come up with his own painterly language (1948–1949) and its very end when, after a period of faith in Stalinist socialist realism and voluntary submission to its mandatory guidelines, he attempted to redefine himself, as if starting from scratch again (1956-1957). These two phases are connected in Wróblewski's art, both in subject and form, by a unique and highly personalized approach to modernity and the avant-garde. His numerous double-sided paintings and works on paper created in these periods are the material sign of his being torn between political engagement and artistic experiment.

The narrative of the exhibition is based on Wróblewski's double-sided works, which are usually exhibited one side at a time, with that choice of side decided upon by the paintings' owners and curators. The artist's use of both sides of these canvases or the paper works was not an accident or coincidence, or purely the result of an economic situation. Double-sidedness was a sort of program for Wróblewski and a fitting symbol for all his work: he made the two sides complete one another and question and complicate the other. This type of dual coexistence, of what are most often extremely different statements both formally and content-wise, is also a pointed way of addressing viewers, who have to literally take sides, while at the same time accepting the existence of both images as two complex problems and two solutions. It is also an expression of the conviction that an artist is an active participant in reality, with the goal of his or her art being the proposal of temporary solutions. The exhibition's additional selection of works on paper and single-sided canvases show the same key motifs being expanded and enriched by Wróblewski at a given juncture in his work. The multilayered divisions, so materially present in Andrzej Wróblewski's art, embody the philosophical questions and artistic answers that arose after the Second World War; while his lack of compromise in facing irreconcilable contradictions and ideological demands makes his work particularly relevant in our contemporary situation.

Executions

The show opens with some examples from the *Executions* series, which alludes to the traumas of the Second World War. Created by Wróblewski in 1948 and 1949, many of these works have two sides. One side shows an execution based on photographs of German firing squads shooting Polish civilians, while the other displays an abstract image lacking the negativity of these depictions of murder.

It should be explained that Wróblewski completely renounced abstraction in 1949, going on to paint figurative images on the back of every abstract composition he had not yet reused. This figurative iconography was unprecedented in the history of art, and so expresses a desire to start from scratch pictorially, even in figuration. While the paintings may be mutually contradictory, the two sides echo each other.

A case in point is *Executed Man. Execution with Member of the Gestapo and Biological Abstraction*. The color scheme on both sides is dominated by blues (a color that denotes

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death in Wróblewski's work), grays and blacks, while the rupture of the figure and the



ANDRZEJ WRÓBLEWSKI
Ejecución contra un muro (*Execution against a Wall*), 1949
Óleo sobre lienzo (Oil on canvas)
119 x 85 cm
Muzeum Wojska Polskiego, Varsovia

unnatural division of the contour in the execution could be seen as the result of a process of abstraction. At the same time, Wróblewski associates death with abstraction in the same way as the Nazis dehumanized their enemies through abstraction – that is, through the administrative language of the death camps and concentration camps, where the names of those condemned to death or hard labor were replaced with abstract numbers.

Other pieces in the series that are shown in this part of the exhibition are *Execution against a Wall / Sky*, where Wróblewski adopts a style that fits more easily within the reigning precepts of new socialist realism, and three other works that are not two-sided: *Execution of Hostages*, *Execution with Child* and *Execution in Poznan*.

The last of these is the only one of the *Executions* that was exhibited during the artist's lifetime. It was shown in 1949 along with *Train Station 45*, *Train Station in the Recovered Territories*, on the back

of which is *Emotional Content of the Revolution*, displayed in the same section of this exhibition. The uncompromising style of these paintings earned Wróblewski a fairly hostile reception, and he was labeled a 'neo-barbarian'. This prompted him to issue a public self-critique and show greater submission to socialist realism. *Execution in Poznan* was even slashed by an enraged viewer.

In this regard, one of the curators, Éric de Chasse, points out in the exhibition catalogue that "when Wróblewski's paintings of 1949 tackle unequivocal, explicitly political or even propagandistic themes, they are generally not two-sided. The exception is *Train Station 45*, *Train Station in the Recovered Territories*, perhaps because its subject is not without ambiguity. Who is arriving, and from what part of the country? Where are they going? What political sector do they represent? For several years, this was the artist's last two-sided painting, and one of the last that did not fit into the program of socialist realism."

Next, other two-sided paintings from 1949 are shown in another of the central areas of the Palacio de Velázquez. One of them exceptionally presents two figurative images: *The Liquidation of the Ghetto* and *Blue Driver*. The first is one of the few Polish works of that time to address the event in question, while at the same time it probably represents a step forward on Wróblewski's part towards the confirmation of the Marxist program that motivated him so strongly. The second work, dating from before 1948, is a personal interpretation of the socialist image of the worker leading humanity towards a better future. In time, the older side came to be preferred over the more recent one, and Wróblewski himself returned in 1956-57 to the same tram driver motif.

Seen in the same section of the exhibition, besides a series of portraits and other pictures of drivers, is *Painting on the Horrors of War*, a realistic and metaphorical picture that responds to the contrasting impulse of “remembering the war and imperialism” through “images as disagreeable as the stink of corpses”. Here too is one of the first examples of a two-sided work, though this one contains two paintings and three images dating probably from 1948. These are *Portrait of a Young Man*, *Geometric Abstraction* and *Geometric Abstraction in Gray*, where the image of a man in a gray suit cut in half is transformed into the back of two separate geometric abstractions. These two abstract pieces, and others from the same period, show the influence of the work of Piet Mondrian on Wróblewski.

Waiting rooms

On view in the third central area of the Palacio de Velázquez is a series of works devised by Wróblewski with the aim of showing gradual dehumanization and the disappearance of human features through various lines of people (forming a queue, seated, their backs turned to each other, without forming a community of any kind), portraits of seated figures whose eyes are often half-closed (idle, bored, absent), and figures busy with everyday tasks that are both an instrument and a means for depriving them of their identity, as in *Mother and Daughter, the Washing*. Although these paintings are much later than the *Executions* series, they share with them the themes of dispersal and dismemberment. The body, like the world, is fragmented, deformed and incapacitated, previously in the context of the horrors of war, and in this new phase in that of the horrors of ideology.

Throughout his life, Wróblewski saw intimacy as the site from which to approach collective problems. His family scenes of 1948-1949 (mother and son, loving couples) examine the omnipresence of death after the war, both in Poland in general but also in his own life. This is symbolized by the use of the color blue, which is assigned indistinctly to a woman, a child or a man. With the advent of the period known as the ‘thaw’ of 1956-1957, which followed the Stalinist period and the death of the intransigent Polish leader Boleslaw Bierut, Wróblewski returned to these themes, combining an acutely caustic representation of everyday situations with formal inventions, and multiplying his experiments in various formats including paintings on canvas and works on paper.

Painted on the back of a *Nude* in which he tries to adhere to the discipline of a supposed ‘realism’ imposed by external criteria, *Mother and Daughter, the Washing* is one of Wróblewski’s most complex works. In this interior scene, two women, one young and the



ANDRZEJ WRÓBLEWSKI
Madre e Hija, La Colada (Mother and Daughter, Laundry), 1956
Óleo sobre lienzo (Oil on canvas)
150 x 120 cm
Muzeum Narodowe, Varsovia

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other older, are deprived of their faces by a brutal cut and a formal experiment that recalls geometric abstraction, while uncomfortable spatial relations are created in a way that suggests strong psychological tensions. Here the artist was reflecting on the contradictions of the 'thaw' in Polish politics and culture, and on his own conflicting sensations when confronted with domestic life.

Socialist realism, works on paper and videos

One room in the exhibition is devoted precisely to the theme of politics, and more particularly to socialist realism. Between the end of 1949 and the year 1955, at the height of Stalinism, Wróblewski interrupted the creation of works in which he tried to construct a new personal and creative language. Convinced that the artist should be involved in the creation of a new world, Wróblewski applied for admission to the Polish Unified Workers' Party and adopted socialist realism as it had been defined by the Conference of Plastic Artists organized in February 1949 by the Polish Ministry of Culture. However, his works of that period did not meet with full acceptance from the authorities.

Mournful Nights, for instance, is a markedly anti-heroic representation of the reactions provoked by the death of Stalin, showing the complexity of Wróblewski's stance towards his political commitment. In the manner of a reportage, this modest work, with no pretensions to being taken as a conclusive statement, shows the yawning abyss between the nation and the Party.

In the other adjoining areas of the exhibition, viewers can see how the artist investigated the coexistence of geometric abstraction and realism in parallel series of works on paper mounted on similar panels, like those which would soon end up sharing the same surface. While the option between figuration and abstraction was a mutually exclusive ethical choice for almost any artist active in the late forties, both *Abstraction-Man* (1948-1949) and *Segments of Young Man* (1956-1957) mix the two components together without any apparent kind of hierarchy.

Other sections of the show display the artist's painted and photographed self-portraits of 1949, 1954 and 1957, where Wróblewski is seen to cut off the figure artificially with the frame, play with reflections or contaminate the image with inexplicable areas of color. All are strategies with which he tries to show that any representation is capable of apprehending a coherent whole. Also included in the exhibition are the new subjects – tombstones, lacerated men, men of stone, and the shadows of Hiroshima – that he invented in the last year of his life, when he entered a period of profound renewal.



ANDRZEJ WRÓBLEWSKI
Hombre-Abstracción (Abstraction-Man), s.f. (n.d.)
Gouache sobre papel (Gouache on paper)
42 x 29,5 cm
Colección Starak (Starak Collection), Varsovia

The show is moreover completed with personal documentation belonging to the artist, such as family photographs or Communist Party reports, and with two videos made by Andrzej Wajda and Konrad Nalęcki, who kept up a close friendship with Wróblewski and took part in the 'self-educating group', a grassroots student initiative founded in 1948 with the aim of combating conservatism in the Krakow Academy of Fine Arts. Andrzej Wajda (1926) has often claimed that it was seeing Wróblewski's *Executions* in 1949

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that encouraged him to abandon painting and devote himself to film-making. He has used motifs from his friend's pictures in several of his films, as can be seen in this excerpt from *Everything for Sale* (1969). He recently made a film on the painter Konrad Nałęcki (1919-1991), whose *Opening and Closing of the Eyes* (1957), a filmed essay on the work of Wróblewski, was shot immediately after the artist's death. The text consists of fragments of poems by Tadeusz Różewicz, another of Andrzej Wróblewski's friends from Krakow.

The artist

Andrzej Wróblewski was born on 15 June 1927 in Vilnius, he was the son of Bronisław Wróblewski, Professor of Law and the president of Stanisław Batory University for many years, and Krystyna Wróblewska neé Hirschberg, a graphic artist mentored by Ludomir Śleńdziński and Jerzy Hoppen.

In 1945, as a part of postwar repatriations, Wróblewski leaves Vilnius with his mother and older brother Jerzy and arrives in Kraków after a few months. In Kraków he begins his studies at two departments simultaneously: the history of art at the Jagiellonian University and painting at the Academy of Fine Arts. He studies under Professors Zygmunt Radnicki, Zbigniew Pronaszko, Hanna Rudzka-Cybisowa and Jerzy Fedkowicz.

At first Wróblewski paints mainly still lifes in the Kapist (Colorist) style. Soon, however, he begins to criticize the Academy's didactic program. In his article published in the journal *Wiś* he describes the Kapist doctrine as "formalistic" and "decadent" and the working methods of the academy's pedagogues as "asocial."

His response to these issues and his attempt to fulfill his own postulates take the form of the Self-Educational Group that he organizes in 1948 with his friends from the Academy, bringing together members of the newly established Union of Polish Academic Youth. Membership fluctuates, with those involved including Andrzej Wajda, Witold Damasiewicz, Konrad Nałęcki, Andrzej Strumiłło and Przemysław Brykalski. The group employs collective methods of work inspired by works of the revolutionary Mexican artists who practiced the idea of art "for the masses" with a strong ideological overtone and involved in political changes, which were so close to Wróblewski's heart, among other sources.

Around 1948, Wróblewski starts to create paintings that employ simplified geometric form in which he clearly refers both to the surrealist paintings of Paul Klee and the tradition of Constructivism. In deliberations on absolute painting ("On the Spiritual in Art") from that period, the artist highlights the connections between the language of geometrical abstraction and social revolution. At that time, he grows closer to the Young Artists Group around Mieczysław Porębski and Tadeusz Kantor who, in their manifesto, proclaimed that "abstractionism in painting shows the infallible path toward the new, intensified realism." By the end of 1948, he takes part in the "1st Exhibition of Modern Art" organized by the group that was supposed to manifest avant-garde tendencies in Polish art. He exhibits the paintings *Emotional Content of the Revolution*, *Sunken City*, *Painting about the Horrors of War, Earth* and two abstract spatial models.

In his commentary for the exhibition, Wróblewski declares: "We want to paint a picture that would help distinguish good from evil." Formulated for the first time in his program of "direct realism" is the voice of a newly initiated discussion, under the not so obvious postwar influences of the Soviet Union, about the so-called new realism.

"Traditional realism was intermediary because of the separation of the form and content of

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the painting. The possibility for a direct realism becomes apparent. It constitutes one of the foundations of modern art.” Wróblewski and Kantor quickly go their separate ways, with Wróblewski severing his relationship with the “moderns” while the exhibit was still ongoing. His faith in the revolutionary power of abstraction gives way to the conviction that art, in order to work, has to be “communicative, legible, themed and aiming for a wide social reception.”

The end of 1948 marks a turning point in Wróblewski’s work—a transition from the abstract toward figuration. In paintings completed over the next year, belonging to the *Executions* series, the artist creates one of the most original formulas for figurative painting in postwar art. It consisted of a far-reaching deformation of the human figure, a purposeful primitivization, as well as vivid color symbolism. Mexican murals and graphics, along with Marc Chagall, whom Wróblewski anoints as the example of the “modern primitive” and whose paintings he saw during his 1947 stay in Amsterdam, are his inspiration.

He undertakes themes of war, death, the loss of loved ones and relationships between the living and the dead in a similar fashion in the paintings *Walk of the Lovers*, *Mother with Dead Child* and *Wedding Photograph (Married Couple with a Bouquet)*. Around this time, he creates works referring to the postwar reality, such as *Train Station in the Recovered Territories* and *Waiting Room – the Poor and the Rich*, *Shopkeeper* and *Two Married Women*, depicting “social contrasts.” Film becomes an important inspiration for the artist at this time—in particular the Italian current of neo-realism—both as regards social issues and the way in which they were depicted, and compositional solutions employed by artists.

Paintings and statements by Wróblewski from 1949 show another radical transition from the avant-garde, in its assumptions of “direct realism,” to the concept of “photographic painting” that was much closer to the requirements of socialist realism.

Wróblewski, together with other members of the Self-Educational Group, takes part in the interschool “Presentations of the Academies of Fine Arts” in Poznań in October of 1949, where he presents two paintings, *Train Station in the Recovered Territories* and his *Execution (Poznań Execution)*. Entering the Poznań exhibition is supposed to be the final rehearsal before the next year’s antiwar exhibition prepared by the group. Their work, however, is met with harsh criticism, mostly because of the perceived clumsiness of execution and its “anti-aestheticism,” with the young artists earning the pejorative title “neo-barbarians.”

Wróblewski, as the main ideologue of the group, publishes a self-criticism a few months later in the *Przegląd Artystyczny* magazine, which cements his introduction to socialist realism. After 1950 he paints very little—mostly portraits, still lifes and academic nudes. Attempting to follow unclear socialist-realist doctrine, he paints various incompetent paintings such as *Youth Rally in West Berlin* and *Bloody Sunday 1905*. On the margins of his official work, he produces numerous drawings of mountains, as well as sketches documenting family life.

In 1955 Wróblewski takes part in the “Exhibition of Young Art” at the Arsenal in Warsaw, where artists of the younger generation manifest their opposition to socialist realism’s teaching methods. He presents *Mothers*, a painting in which he remains faithful to the poetics of realism and figuration, but his work is not awarded and remains unacknowledged by critics. During the cultural and political “thaw” period, Wróblewski creates oil paintings such as *Waiting Room I (The Queue Continues)*, *Laundry (Mother and Daughter)* and *Waiting Room II (Chairing I)*. However, he expresses himself mostly through

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gouaches and watercolors. These are works of a much more intimate character that concentrated on his personal experience, undertaking the theme of the disintegrated body. They are dominated by representations of man—objectified and also “organic,” or “botanical.” After a period of creative impasse, a weeks-long trip to Yugoslavia in 1956 with the young art critic Barbara Majewska serves as an important creative inspiration. Tombstones he admires in the Ethnography Museum in Belgrade will inspire a series of drawings, gouaches and a painting, Tombstone of a Womaniser. After his return to Poland he creates a series of 84 monotypes that include a wide variety of his iconography from that period: fish, horses, ships, chauffeurs, cities, heads and skulls, tombstones and shadows of Hiroshima.

On the 23 March 1957, Andrzej Wróblewski dies alone while on a hiking trip in the Tatra Mountains of southern Poland.

Catalogue

The exhibition is also accompanied by “Andrzej Wróblewski. Recto/Verso” – a publication edited by the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia including essays by Éric de Chassey, Marta Dziewańska, Rachel Haidu, Tom McDonough, Ulrich Loock and artist’s writings.

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