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Cryptograms and the Other Worlds

When I undertook attempts at interpreting Ela Wozniowska's oeuvre, and in particular "the world" of cryptograms she has been building for years now, the world of which a few specimens we present at this exhibition (there are over 800 of them), I was confronted with a question about the earliest, most primordial images created by a human hand. I realized that the answer does not send us back to the Mesolithic or Neolithic epoch; the answer is within our reach, here and there. We can see it on the walls of our flats, in the drawers of our wardrobes, i.e. everywhere where the most original manifestations of our children's works are kept. For psychologists who deal with these works it is a well-known fact that after the initial stage of chaotic and messy lines a child starts drawing "head-and-leg figures" – the simplest representations of man consisting of his head and legs only. It is followed by a face and its emotions: a line going up means a smile, while a line going down denotes sadness. Later other elements of the perceived world are added – trees, sun and houses. In kindergartens and during first years at school much effort is put into fighting with the "smiling" sun as the sun does not smile.

Cryptograms, as approached by Ela Wozniowska's, constitute a phenomenon difficult to interpret for us, civilized people. Let us start from what they are not. They are not symbols – they do not refer to other phenomena (I do not use the word 'concept' consciously) than to the one they are images of. They are not ideographs – representing concepts in the sense ideographs were endowed with when, for example, the Chinese script was evolving. I believe they are not a special kind of an elementary type of script. In this sense all linguistic interpretations are false for they do not serve communication between people. Are they signs perhaps? In a sense they are, although intuitively we are put off by restricting the contents of cryptograms. What are they then? Let me refer to these "head-and-legs creatures". Obviously they are an expression of children's original creative expression, but also are much richer as being an image, essentially preverbal, of various world phenomena. I use the term phenomenon because it seems that in this expressive-emotional base the contours of things, people, and phenomena of nature get obliterated; it is the world with no further distinctions. The "smiling" sun is not only a sun, but maybe also an image of a day, warmth, notion of kindness, safety etc. It induces serious doubts whether an interpretation of the Neolithic cryptograms referring to the original sphere of magic or specific symbolism (for example the rites of wavy lines referring to the notion of water) is absolutely true. It could be the case, or perhaps these are examples of this original creative expression which having been reduced to elementary forms talks about the world, but does not present it (it is difficult to recognise the images of animals in Lascaux or Alta Mira as cryptograms). In a sense (simplifying the whole issue) the essence of cryptograms consists in energy flowing from revealing an act of creative expression of a subject recognizing the world. However, there is still something else. Nowadays, in the world of informatics and complicated electronics almost everybody has encountered in his/her mobile phone or computer a relative of cryptograms – an emoticon called smile, in a certain way introducing an echo of the energy of emotional message into the cold world of electronic communication.

As a matter of fact, behind their simple forms, sometimes apparently referring to phenomena in an unambiguous way, Ela Woźniowska's cryptograms mask a huge effort in reaching this original form and, on the other hand, disciplined consequence in building the world of art through it, a statement about the foundations of our existence. These are the regions once penetrated by Paul Klee in a completely different form, but with a similar disposition of sensitivity and creative intuition.

However, after 25 000 years of the history of art is it possible to get this originality of perception? Or, on the other hand, in the world of cold and flat computer icons, almost constantly breaking into our minds, is it possible to find their old expressive energy in a form of cryptograms? I think that the awareness or perhaps premonition of these dilemmas explain an exceptional role of Ela Woźniowska's cryptograms, their textural structure achieved with her Benedictine patience and precision of traditional painting methods, founded on a belief that purely technical effort, from a painterly perspective, will take them beyond the sphere of the images representing the world of easy clicks. The creed of belief in

painting and its means is evident in the reference to pure, although created traditionally that is through a palette colours which add energy and lead their discourse of individual cryptograms assembled together.

All of them, even though in various dimensions, are created on the plane of a square, assembled into smaller or bigger groups, although they aim at the horizontal, the direction of a child looking at the world.

Ela Woźniewska has been building her own separate world through hundreds of cryptograms for years. Her world refers to reality, but it also becomes a point of reference along with its development.

For with respect to the horizontal world of cryptograms the high column covered with relief signs of the first Slavonic alphabet transposes us into a different sphere of meanings, another part of thinking about man, human cognition and history. For with its all bright innocence of original experience and expression a word and script raises up, even at a price of losing the univocal nature of colours and effort to keep your head up.

However, there is still another side of man to which refers another group of works presented at this exhibition, underlined by fear and anxiety. In these works we do not encounter joyful, radiant purity of colours any more. If it is true, and it is probably the case, that the collective imagination most people is built primarily through icons, i.e. images which almost immediately become the property of us all, extremely powerfully affecting our image of the world in which we live constituting the foundations of our experience, one has to admit that our 21st century did not start in the most agreeable way. Ignoring all political, sociological and mental consequences, September 11th brought the world three pictures which became its icons – an airplane breaking into the skyscraper in the centre of the metropolis, a picture of people jumping from the burning building and of those buildings falling down in the clouds of smoke.

The two latter ones along with the emotional message they carried, provided an impulse to one of the presented cycles. Whereas, it is worth emphasizing, they are not pictures of September 11th, but the world and mankind, its moral and spiritual state that followed the event.

In an extremely austere and, at the same time, clear form Ela Woźniewska succeeded in expressing the essence of anxiety our times are founded on. The form becomes clearer when we juxtapose these paintings with the world of cryptograms. That precisely constructed world with its colours, warmth and sensitivity becomes a reflection sliding into the dark. Convoluted, as if burnt patterns with holes left by cut out forms of cryptograms, make us think instantly that the dying people are not only physical individuals sliding into the dark, but also individual worlds of imagination, feelings, potential which are about to perish. Perhaps it is not about individuals, perhaps behind this sliding down into the dark there is hidden something more, something evoking our anxiety everywhere today?