

artystka zanurzona w procesach artist immersed in processes

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W kwietniu 1924 roku James Joyce opublikował na łamach „Transatlantic Review” — miesięcznika literackiego redagowanego przez Forda Madoxa Forda w Paryżu, a wydawanego w Londynie — pierwszy fragment swojego dzieła, który ukazał się pod znamienym tytułem *From Work in Progress*¹. Fraza ta została wcześniej zastosowana do utworów Ernesta Hemingway’a i Tristana Tzary, wydrukowanych na łamach tego samego pisma. Piętnaście lat później czytelnicy otrzymali do rąk książkę pod tytułem *Finnegans Wake* (*Tren Finneganów*), a termin „work in progress” — roboczy tytuł ostatniej powieści wybitnego irlandzkiego pisarza, który został zmieniony dopiero w momencie decyzji o wydrukowaniu skończonego utworu — stał się jednym z najważniejszych synonimów modernistycznej praktyki artystycznej.

„Dzieło w procesie” zostało zawłaszczone przez wszystkie media sztuki, ze szczególnym naciskiem na te jej formy, które, zakorzenione w gestach i eksperymentach Marcela Duchampa, rozwinęły się po obu stronach Atlantyku w drugiej połowie XX wieku determinując kształt współczesnych działań artystycznych. Zawłaszczony termin, określający specyfikę praktyki twórczej bazującej na nieustannym przekształcaniu i przetwarzaniu pierwotnej koncepcji, w której kolejne etapy pozbawione są piętna ostateczności i nie przybierają skończonej formy, wydaje się najlepiej określać istotę procesu graficznego.

Grafika jako medium ma charakter procesualny. Polega przede wszystkim na nieustannej pracy z technologią, przekształcaniu matrycy, odejmowaniu i doda-

In April 1924, the “Transatlantic Review” — a literary monthly edited by Ford Madox Ford in Paris, but published in London — published the first part of James Joyce’s masterpiece, introduced to the readers under the telling title *From Work in Progress*. This phrase had been used before as title of works by Ernest Hemingway and Tristan Tzara, published in the same magazine. Fifteen years later the readers received Joyce’s book under the title *Finnegans Wake*, while the term “work in progress” — a working title of the last novel written by the acclaimed Irish author, removed only when the decision was made to publish the finished masterpiece — became one of the major catchphrases for modernist artistic practice.

“Work in progress” was then appropriated by all artistic media, with particular currency among these forms which, rooted in the gestures and experiments of Marcel Duchamp and developed on both sides of the Atlantic in the second half of the 20th century, determined the shape of contemporary artistic practice. This appropriated term, which defines specific art practices based on continuous reworking and reshaping of the initial concept, where consecutive stages are devoid of the burden of finality and do not take a finished form, seems the most apt definition of the printmaking process.

Printmaking as a medium is of processual nature. Its essence lies in the continuous work with technology, changes made to the matrix, subtracting and adding elements, and transforming forms to which a printmaker — who works on the basis of the matrix — can come

remnants of old writings. They are not clear enough to allow a direct reading of an earlier text, but they present a clear reminder of its existence¹. Over time, palimpsest made its come back as an autonomous artistic method, to achieve its present status as one of the most popular creative practices.

Next to collage, palimpsest is an important composition model employed by Deborah Cornell. In contrast to collage, where various elements are casually juxtaposed or overlapping, partly covering the elements contained by lower levels, palimpsest is a result of layering of a number of semi-transparent or transparent strata of images and texts, which together form a whole that thematises its layered nature. Whereas collage is a typical modernist composition model, with its emphasis on complete or partial substitution of one element with another, palimpsest manifests more links with the postmodernist practice, with its hybrid structure of interconnected elements. They reveal themselves to us simultaneously, inviting us to perceive the world not as a sequential linearity, but as hyper textual layers, synchrony of co-existing elements, indeed, as a chaos through which we try to navigate to read the meanings inscribed on various levels.

Deborah Cornell's use of the structure of palimpsest is a natural consequence of her focus on the issue of flows between nature and culture, as well as within each of these spheres separately. The form of palimpsest allows the artist to show numerous parallel information channels, through which we receive the knowledge required to build the image of reality. At the same time,

fragmentariness, as an immanent feature of palimpsest, whereby some parts of information remain unreadable or distorted by other overlying strata, constitutes one of the most characteristic features of present patterns of human perception.

An example of the artist's use of this practice is her installation *The Sleep of Reason*². It contains computer prints made with litho-ink on Plexiglas plates, inserted between two transparent veils. The viewer perceives each of the images through the text printed on the external layer, which determines the reading of meanings inherent in the work. One of them contains a meaningful excerpt from the writings of William Butler Yates: **All changed, changed utterly: A terrible beauty is born.** Through the presence of this quotation, the three images placed underneath are imbued with almost sinister meaning. An X-ray image of a hand — a cultural symbol of creation — becomes juxtaposed with processed images of living organisms and fragmented parts of their bodies. Other works from this series contain further quotations, including the famous motto of IBM: **Think**, combined with forms that evoke cell division process, or, in another print, an excerpt from a "New York Times" article from March 1995 which cautiously informed about the breakthrough in genetics with the discovery of master control gene PAX6, responsible for the creation of one of the most complex organs, namely, the human eye. The quotation ends with a poetic phrase, which suggests that: **the equivalent gene in human embryos may direct the creation of the paired windows to the soul.**

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Prints included in the installation *The Sleep of Reason*³ surround a boat-shaped object filled with forms resembling fossils, casts of the artist's hands, or reptiles created by her imagination. As a whole, the piece works as a warning against the hubris of human endeavour, which can blind us and lead us to uncontrolled experiments with indefinite results, such as the one envisioned in Steven Spielberg's series of catastrophic films, *Jurassic Park*, whose first part hit the cinemas in 1993. At the same time, we can read it as an expression of awe in the face of possibilities of creation or fascination with the power of nature and still undiscovered mysteries at work within its mechanisms.

Two prints in this installation feature the image of compass. In medieval iconography, this technical drawing instrument was an important attribute of God as the Creator of the World. One of the most famous images of this type, signed as *Dieu créateur du monde*, comes from the Bible moralisée, made in Paris between 1215 and 1230, and at present stored at the Austrian National Library in Vienna under the name Codex Vindobonensis 2554. Particularly interesting in this illuminated page is the image "drawn" by God, resembling organic forms. Perhaps it is how the medieval artist imagined the cell. Employing the image of a compass and juxtaposing it with images of chromosomes or the X-ray image of the chest, the artist makes another reference to cultural flows, offering an update of the iconography present in Western culture for almost eight hundred years.

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Palimpsestic composition is also present in the series titled *Biogems*⁴. The term used by Cornell is a portmanteau — a cluster of words which combines the biological with the symbol of what culture considered priceless. The first layer is made by images of hands covered with patterns referring to mehendi — the tradition of decorating the bride's hands and feet with henna drawings, an important element of the Hindu wedding ceremony made to ensure the couple's future happiness. In subsequent prints these images are covered with fragmented chromosomes, geothermal maps, and pictures and diagrams of DNA strands. Yet again, biology is combined with culture to create an inseparable whole. This is a metaphor of contemporary world, where increasingly precise methods of visualisation of natural phenomena are combined with deeply rooted superstitions and beliefs based on enchanting reality.

Cornell employs a palimpsestic composition also in a series of *Scripts*⁵, juxtaposing texts taken from *Beowulf* and *Gilgamesh* with images known from her earlier works: the X-ray image of hands, images of chromosomes, and a variety of diagrams.

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back after many years to pick up previously abandoned experiment and work on it with new strength and in new circumstances.

In artistic printmaking, for at least two recent decades, we have observed a migration of forms and compositional solutions between various graphic techniques and other media employed by given artist. This stems from new possibilities offered by digital tools whose potential is employed by printmakers to transform earlier motifs and use new forms to continue with the experiments they began years earlier with classic print media. At the same time, they continually try to reshape and expand the methods of image making with the use of classic techniques, now joined by new tools whose frameworks allow non-standard solutions.

The above-defined tendency is powerfully manifested in the practice of Deborah Cornell, an artist who for almost fifty years has been an active representative of American printmaking.

flow as a symbolic form

"Impurity of media" is a characteristic feature of works that Cornell has made since the 1980s. Among them, it is difficult to find works made with the use of only one graphic technique or one medium. Woodcuts are combined into collages, drawing is mixed with monotype and relief printing, some parts are covered with oil paint,

while paper gives way to Hydrocal plaster (a mixture of plaster and Portland cement) and Plexiglas plates. Despite this diversity of materials and tools used by the artist, the viewer of Cornell's works made over a course of almost forty years is confronted with a particularly unified aesthetic vision.

The source of this unity is the artist's longterm interest in the complexity of natural phenomena and cultural processes. Notably, these two spheres of influence, with their immediate impact on human life and development, remain — according to Cornell — in an incessant mutual relation, best defined by the notion of flow.

Tectonic Afterimage, Tracer Over the Edge, Copernicus, Arrhythmia, Diatoms, Chromosomes, Viruses, Bacilli, Stains (Water, Oils, Blood), Acqua Alta, Species Boundaries, Biogems, Games of Chance, Binary System or Particle Acceleration are merely some of the titles of series made by Cornell. Together, they form a kind of artistic treatise, with each work as a chapter where the artist reflects on various cultural processes, both local and global in scope.

In her reflections, Cornell often draws on texts by other poets, writers, philosophers, and scientists, making them integral parts of her compositions. An unquestioned patron of her artistic approach is Leonardo da Vinci — artist, philosopher, researcher of natural phenomena, who dismissed the boundaries between mathematical and natural sciences and visual arts and regarded the symbiosis of these two spheres of human activity as a necessary condition of knowledge. Artistic

approach is a source of freedom that allows one to escape carefully systematised scientific procedures. This, in turn, welcomes the perception of the obscure, opening to various possibilities of interpretation of phenomena and creating new ways of representing reality, alternative to the scientific procedures but imbued with the potential of uncovering the visual nature of natural phenomena.

On the visual level, Cornell's works are built up of images of DNA strands, single chromosomes, processed microscopic images of bacteria and viruses, aquatic vortexes, diagrams of atmospheric events, or views of constellations of stars. These nature-derived imagery is combined with images of domino blocs, playing cards, fragments of poetry and prose printed on the image, as well as images of hands that are of particular significance to the artist, since they constitute, e.g. in *The Sleep of Reason*², the metaphor of human volition and evolved form.

Standardised, abstract symbols that serve as representations of natural phenomena, images of forms too big or too small to be seen by the human eye but preserved by micro- and macro-photography, and diagrams that describe natural processes are all freely combined, creating a unified composition with man-made patterns and symbols, which preserve rituals and customs. Thanks to this collage, found both on the level of employed techniques, as well as in the compositional layer of particular works, this compilation of images achieves powerful coherence. It becomes a metaphor of flow. It highlights the dependance of symbolic systems developed with-

in particular culture on the observed forms of natural phenomena which, transformed into abstract systems designed by man, work as foundations of visual patterns that help capture the laws and mechanisms operating within natural environment. An image rooted in natural forms, subject to processes of abstraction, becomes a cultural symbol. An example of this process can be found in the system of "stars" — completely conventional forms — that is present on the right-hand side of the Australian flag, symbolising the Southern Cross and constituting an emotional stimulus for identification for Australians, as well as citizens of Papua New Guinea, New Zealand, Samoa, and Brazil, who also placed it on their national banners.

palimpsest as a composition model

The notion of palimpsest (literal Greek meaning "again scraped") has its origins in the history of writing and it was initially linked with the effect stemming from the repeated use of parchment on which manuscripts were written. The high cost of this animal-based material forced scribes to remove earlier, outdated texts and cover the reused parchment page with new words. Since despite the production of removal devices of certain precision it was still impossible to fully eliminate an older text, numerous present books still carry the

for the scientist, the virtual reality is a way to gain control, for the artist, it's a way to share it²

The difference in the approach to one of the most spectacular tools of digital image generation seems particularly relevant in an analysis of Deborah Cornell's work. Continuously confronting the legacy of contemporary science, the artist seeks to offer the viewer a simultaneous pleasure of immersing into the amazing world of images, of reaching their depth, as well as, in some projects, also of taking control of generated shapes.

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In 2001, the Computer Graphics Laboratory, University of Boston³ showcased a project titled *Spirited Ruins*. It featured a collaborative work by Deborah and Richard Cornell, titled *Línea Australis*. The viewer entered the space through an opening resembling an entrance to a grotto to immediately become immersed in an amazing world generated by digital instruments. The initial idea came when Richard Cornell was commissioned to create a musical piece for the *Spirited Ruins* project. Searching for inspirations, he reached for a reproduction of one of Deborah's pictures. After it was scanned, it served as a foundation of a virtual visual environment which enveloped the viewer. Images drawn from the rock carvings of Australian Aborigines achieved a spatial development. Schematic human figures and shapes of simple

boats filled the space. Stepping inside it, the viewer soon realised that his every movement changed the pattern of images and type of sound filling the space. Through the use of technology, each viewer could move to create his own audio-visual composition.

Experiences generated by this experiment inspired Deborah Cornell to create works whose immersive potential was revealed by the combination of printed graphic images, video projection, and composed sound piece.

*Reflecting Place*⁴ installation, awarded in 2015 the Grand Prix at the International Print Triennial in Krakow, was a result of the artist's previous experiences. One of the walls of the room built specially for the installation was covered with a graphic mural piece made of digital prints. A video image was then projected on this screen, while the whole was completed with a musical piece by Richard Cornell. The installation's main theme was the issue of migration, with a starting point in the observation of annual bird migration. The artist found in this cyclical element of nature a potential for telling a story about forced migration — a cultural experience that in our time is shared by an increasing number of people. The issue of migration suggests obvious links with the artist's earlier interest in the mechanics of cultural flows. This way, yet again, Deborah Cornell has proven that natural phenomena find their reflection in culture. The viewer, immersed in audio-visual space, was offered a way to give in to the power of sound and images to experience the work in a new, truly 21st-century way.

1 Termin ten można przetłumaczyć jako *Fragmenty z Dzieła w procesie*.

2 Por. Keith Houston, *Książka. Najpotężniejszy przedmiot naszych czasów zbudany od deski do deski*, przekł. Paweł Lipszyc, Wydawnictwo Karakter, Kraków 2017, s. 119. Wcześniej teksty zeskrobane z pergaminu są dziś możliwe do odczytania dzięki zastosowaniu lamp ultrafioletowych.

3 Zdanie to pochodzi ze śródtytułu zastosowanego przez Milesę Ungera w tekście zatytułowanym *In a Virtual Sculpture Park, the Art Talks Back* dotyczącym twórczości Deborah Cornell opublikowanym w numerze „The New York Times” z 28. stycznia 2001 roku [s. 41-42].

4 Computer Graphics Laboratory, University of Boston. Projekt został stworzony we współpracy z artystami i programistami związanymi z Uniwersytetem.

1 Cf. Keith Houston, *The Book: A Cover-to-Cover Exploration of the Most Powerful Object of Our Time*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York 2016 [online]. Earlier texts scraped off from parchment can now be read under ultraviolet lamps.

2 This phrase comes from the subtitle used by Miles Unger in a text in a *Virtual Sculpture Park, the Art Talks Back*, where he discusses the work of Deborah Cornell. The essay was published in “The New York Times” on 28 January 2001 [pp. 41-42].

3 Computer Graphics Laboratory, University of Boston. The project was created in collaboration with artists and programmers working at the University.