

Prof. Dr. Žygimantas Augustinas

The Sculpture Department in Vilnius Faculty of Vilnius Academy of Art

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REVIEW

KINGA BARTNIAK,

KOMODYFIKACJA WOLNOŚCI/COMMODIFICATION OF LIBERTY

Doctoral thesis in the field of art, in the discipline of visual arts and conservation of works of art at
the Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Art and Design in Wrocław, Doctoral School

Kinga Bartniak was attending my classes at Vilnius Academy of Art in 2017, and I still remember her ironic video artwork – a toothpaste advertisement where she referenced the attractive lies of business visuals. I am very happy to be invited to review this doctoral work.

My review of the doctoral work of Kinga Bartniak is based on the English part of the doctoral thesis and videos I have gotten from the Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Art and Design in Wrocław. I have not seen the video works and objects installed but I hope my imagination will not distort them.

At first glance, the subject of Kinga's doctoral thesis looked very much connected to the rich tradition of criticism against the capitalistic way of life. Going deeper into the text and her artworks, things get more interesting. Someone could find that it is not a critique at all. Texts reveal the tricks of business, and mild irony with subtle humor takes over the didactics.

The theoretical part of the work starts with a nice utopian vision of the garden as a model for the economy. Utopias are very popular among artists, I am just surprised that Donna Haraway is not mentioned here. On the other hand, I am glad that Kinga chooses to read the Philadelphia Declaration instead of various philosophical rethinking of how economics or society must be arranged. She studies facts and strategies businesses use to soften the brutal exploitation of people. The art-washing, greenhouse, happiness industry... all of them are revealed and used for creating her artworks. It is fun to read, and to feel the delicate

irony around: *"Romanticising an artist's work is like planting lots of flowers, forgetting that their colorful blooms are reproductive organs and were not created for human pleasure."*¹

The allegory of the garden where everything goes 'naturally' is very attractive but I think it is very unhuman at the same point. I guess plants are fighting for their survival with no morality: they are not polite or friendly and brutally try to take what they need. However, there is a long list of philosophers who thought that nature is a good example of how society should be arranged. Since art is a human thing, I have a question for Kinga:

If we reject the commodification of creativity and go natural, do we still need art? Most likely the creativity would be used for survival purposes and everybody would be fighting with everybody, probably no one would have mercy for a lazy individual – an artist. I doubt that we would have time for such a 'useless thing' as art.

Nobody knows nor can imagine a life without greedy people who commodify everything but we can still enjoy artworks and discuss ideas. It looks as if Kinga would like to help people but in a very ironic way. She makes candies (*Balming*) to *"help for the organism of the working person, stressed by underperformance and unable to rest without the use of pharmacology"*² but from the beginning, it is clear that it will not help. When Kinga is dealing with plants (*Nabujać*), she tries to help them too. She rocks plants to classical music, but again not hiding that plants probably do not like it. Perhaps I miss a little more drama in the construction of the artwork. For example, the installation by artist, poet, and chef Precious Okoyomon *"To See the Earth Before the End of the World"* made for the Venice Biennale 2022 shows us the beauty of wild nature while at the same time telling us the story of an invasive, aggressive character of the plant Kudzu (a vine native to Asia).

Could you explain how the artworks '*Balming*' and '*Nabujać*' are constructed? What is your opinion about creating drama in artwork, using the tension between two different subjects?

Another work by Kinga - *Szybowanie* - reminds me of the video artwork by Christian Boltanski *"Animitas"* 2014. In this work, Christian Boltanski films a field of little Japanese bells on the tops of long metal rods in Chile. These bells were arranged by the artist in a constellation of good luck – the star formation on the night Cristian Boltanski was born. I see a drama here between the beauty of belief and the hopelessness of people (the artist asked the local people to build an installation). Kinga makes *Szybowanie* like a somewhat funny object, and it is difficult to imagine that the object could be perceived as a meditation tool.

¹ Kinga Bartniak, *Komodyfikacja wolności*, Doctoral thesis in the field of art, in the discipline of visual arts and conservation of works of art at the Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Art and Design in Wrocław, Doctoral School, 2022, p. 94

² Ibid. p. 109

It is not that I do not like irony or funny things, I adore them, but people's beliefs can be very sensitive.

What do you think about strange beliefs people have (believing in magic objects or magic rituals)? Are they just remains of premodern life? Should they be banned then? Or can they be useful nowadays?

I am very fascinated by another work of Kinga's - *Po-głowie*. It is a very nice piece where irony, capitalism, gold, nervous tapping, and minimalist aesthetics talk about the absurdity of the image of richness with no didactics at all. *Chciałobybyć* – performance with a luxury fabric pajama with an embroidered sentence „I wish I were an artist” in the French language -shows the full power of irony too. Here Kinga exaggerates the absurdist illusions of society and does it with love, with no negative connotations. Artwork *Charakteryzować*, where Kinga creates Karl Marx's handwriting font for a sewing machine, is a perfect conceptual artwork. Multi-layered irony reveals the drama of human beings seeking pure ideas while commodifying everything, making idols, and denying them. The description of this artwork is fully ironic too: *“This manner of writing reveals the writer's emotions, the sweep, and heaviness of the strokes or their lightness and delicacy.”*³ It is superb. Like Barbara Kruger who reveals how power dynamics play out in messaging, Kinga shows us how the image and connotations related to it lose value when they meet critical thinking.

To be honest, I am not into computer games, so it is not easy for me to say something about Kinga's works *Legumina* and *Good Human*. The *Legumina* game is in Polish, and it looks good but I do not know how to play it. The concept of a Good Human looks very attractive too, especially the question: *‘How does a good human steal?’*⁴

I am happy Kinga uses humor and does not play straightforwardly as Jenny Holzer does in her “The Inflammatory Essays” 1978-82 criticizing the abusive logic of power. Kinga avoids confrontation with capitalism. She uses the same language but reverses it into absurdist objects which are attractive and provoking.

Finally, I would like to review didactic and organizational achievements quickly (according to the rules I can not leave them untouched). Looking at the list of didactic, organizational, and popularising activities, Kinga Bartniak appears very active: she has had a lot of teaching and organizing experience. It is difficult to judge the popularisation activity because I live outside Poland, so I checked only one in English – “Cloud Conversations, Anne Murray (US), lecture on work and leisure” which looked decent but could be a little more engaging. The exhibitions and residencies seem to be mostly based in local venues, yet that is understandable due to the pandemic. There are also a few international exhibitions: one in

³ Ibid. p. 117

⁴ Ibid. p. 120

Thailand, and another one (together with Ivan Juarez) is in the Republic of Korea, both have a nice presentation online. I think that is a great beginning for an international career.

Based on the reading and analysis of the concept and the realization of her dissertation, and taking into consideration the creative output, I recommend an academic Ph.D. title in the field of art, in the discipline of fine arts and art conservation to be granted to Kinga Bartniak. Keeping in mind the elegance of the research, I would suggest adding 'with a distinction' to the diploma.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Ž. Augustinas', with a stylized, flowing script.

Žygimantas Augustinas