



Krystyna Jachniewicz, *Self-portrait*, 1981, oil on canvas, photo: Zachęta archive, CC BY-NC-ND 3.0

Living Storages: Self-Portrait

12 February–5 April 2021

Zachęta — National Gallery of Art
pl. Małachowskiego 3, 00-916 Warsaw
zacheta.art.pl

artists:

Andrzej Dudek-Dürer, Eugeniusz Get-Stankiewicz, Krystyna Jachniewicz, Grzegorz Marszałek, Janusz Przybylski, Alina Szapocznikow, Andrzej Tryzno, Monika Zawadzki, Mira Żelechower-Aleksiu

curator: Michał Jachuła

collaboration: Maria Świerżewska

There is a large group of works identified as self-portraits in Zachęta's collection, as well as works directing our attention to such a meaning. The former is evidenced by the titles and the similarity of the images to their authors. The self-portrait nature of the latter group is indicated by factors related to issues of identity, interests and artistic practices of the artists, reflected in their paintings, sculptures or works on paper.

The theme of the self-portrait has a long tradition in art, and its carrying power means that it is taken up by all generations of visual artists. Self-portraits are an expression of the artists' subjective perception of reality in the relation of 'me and society'; therefore, their meaning goes far beyond the gesture of presenting oneself to the world. In their own images, artists also record their internal states of spirit, mind and body, comparable more broadly with the human condition. That is why self-portraits can also be

considered in a universal sense — they are a type of mirror in which viewers can find their own experiences.

The impulse to take on a self-portrait as an internal 'commission' is the consequence of being with oneself all the time, from cradle to the grave. Taking up one's own self as an artistic subject results both from the 'comfort' of the availability of the subject of the painting and from the effort of 'struggling with oneself', not only in time, but also in space. Representing one's self is just as complicated as immortalising someone else. Before it can be shown to the world, the self-portrait must satisfy both the portraitist and the portrayed — the artist. In such works, there is certainly no room for compromise, as shown by both ancient and contemporary art — artists as the authors and protagonists of their own art are very important to themselves, which is why they accept this challenge with full awareness.

The selection of works at the current show includes graphics by Andrzej Dudek-Dürer, Eugeniusz Get-Stankiewicz and Grzegorz Marszałek, paintings by Krystyna Jachniewicz, Janusz Przybylski, Andrzej Tryzno and Mira Żelechower-Aleksiu, as well as sculptures by Alina Szapocznikow and Monika Zawadzki. They come from different moments of the creation of the Zachęta collection and represent a broad spectrum of artistic attitudes, showing the diversity of the collection resulting from the transformations in Polish art from the 1960s to the present day, as well as the history of the institution which has been consistently building its own collection. The show organised in the Mały Salon is part of the *Living Storages* series, which is related to the revitalisation of Zachęta's art storages and the transfer of the collection to a temporary space in the exhibition rooms. The series provided an opportunity to present excerpts of the collection in successive shows.

Works at the exhibition

Andrzej Dudek-Dürer

M.T.A... 2, 1983, serigraphy on paper

Meta... Performance 1471-? ver g, 1984/1985, serigraphy on newspaper

Towards the end of the 1960s, Andrzej Dudek-Dürer began a life-performance, which has lasted to this day, combining themes of life and art, in which an inseparable element is identification with the figure of Albrecht Dürer, from whom the Wrocław-based artist has adopted his pseudonym. Apart from spiritual and artistic affinity, they also share a strong physiognomic similarity. Dudek-Dürer and the master from Nuremberg are also linked by reaching for the self-portrait, worked in various ways, as well as mastery of skills in using graphic techniques. The Wrocław artist's works on paper take up the theme of incarnation and contain motifs drawn from Dürer's art, and the subject himself, travelling in space and time, appears in them as a multiplied figure or only a fragment of it — such as an eye. Works created using graphic techniques are a record of his conceptual and performative interests.

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Eugeniusz Get-Stankiewicz, Untitled, 1977, serigraphy on paper

Eugeniusz Get-Stankiewicz used the self-portrait in his graphic works very frequently. The artist's image appears throughout all periods of his work, in various versions — as a face, a bust, or the entire figure, as a carrier of various types of content. The entire *oeuvre* by Get-Stankiewicz has a very personal dimension, regardless of whether a given work is considered as applied graphics (posters, illustrations) or whether they were created as a personal, 'internal commission'. His famous self-portraits, coloured with irony and humour, referenced the legacy of culture and art, as well as the author's contemporaneous socio-political reality; therefore, they are often read as engaged and critically commenting on the reality. Art historians consider Get-Stankiewicz to be a representative of the early post-modernist tendencies in Polish art and one of the creators of the new figuration. The presented work shows a scaled-up fingerprint of the artist. Although there is no image of a face here, it is a type of self-portrait in the form of the corporeal signature of a fingerprint.

Krystyna Jachniewicz, Self-portrait, 1981, oil on canvas

Painted a few months before the declaration of martial law in Poland, Krystyna Jachniewicz's painting is so far the only self-portrait in her *oeuvre*. Using the example of animals — the main characters of her art — the artist looks for analogies with humans. She wrote about the work:

In the 1981 self-portrait, though, my face became the only actor. I found something almost frightening in my face, which for other

people is supposedly the epitome of peace, and this is what I wanted to bring to light. The times were turbulent, we lived in a kind of trance then, certain we were part of something wonderful, momentous. The difficulties of everyday life faded into the background. We felt that Poland was great and important, we were proud of Solidarity and everything that was happening. But apart from euphoria, I felt anxiety and a kind of powerlessness. I pushed them away, ignored them, but they went deep down. I painted the self-portrait in a few intense sessions, very quickly for me, as if in a trance, with a mirror in one hand and a brush in the other. I 'spat it out' in some strange, incomprehensible urge. I think everything that was happening back then had to affect the work of every artist. Some became decisively involved in their art, others, like me, perhaps uncertain of their role, left it to the realm of the subconscious?

Grzegorz Marszałek

Transplantation, 1976, offset print on paper

ransplantation 2, 1976, offset print on paper

Grzegorz Marszałek's works reference the face transplant — one of the most difficult medical procedures. The works were created after his return from Paris, where the artist, as a holder of a French government scholarship, studied at the *École nationale supérieure des Arts Décoratifs*. In one of them, a glove is the tissue of the new face of a man who underwent a transplant, and the effect resembles a dog's head. In the second work, the transplant led to the modelling of a man's face from two different halves. Both these hybrid depictions of the body, combining elements of various orders, take up the problem of identity, of how people perceive themselves and how they want to be perceived by others. The theme of the self-portrait here refers in a universal way to the imagining and representation of oneself by others, the creation of new images and thus the departure from the old identity, 'fixed' by time and memory. 'There is no escape from the mug, other than into another mug', Witold Gombrowicz wrote in *Ferdydurke*. This quotation, in reference to Marszałek's *Transplantations* illustrates the mechanism of acquiring a new 'self'.

Janusz Przybylski, Cord — Self-portrait, 1973, oil on canvas

The work is an example of the new figuration in Polish painting. In the 1960s, after graduating from the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, Przybylski was reluctant to adopt the academic way of painting and was looking for his own artistic language. At the time, he was interested in expressive abstraction and matter painting, but ultimately his search focused on figurative painting. The artist depicted people in dramatic situation, full of emotions and psychological tension. Characters with simplified, deformed silhouettes play specific roles here — either chosen by the characters themselves or forced on them by external factors. Przybylski's painting draws on the achievements of hyperrealism and is most often metaphorical, while his entire *oeuvre* confirms the artist's socio-political engagement. Przybylski's self-portrait shows a figure bound with cord as a symbol of enslavement, humiliation and violation of human integrity.

Alina Szapocznikow, *Headless Torso*, 1968, polyester, polyurethane

This extremely veristic work is part of sculpture series, in which the artist increasingly combined autobiographical motifs with an interest in new materials. On the one hand, the bust is an image of a young woman, disturbing by virtue of being headless, and on the other, it evokes peace and beauty — the perfect cast is set against a dark, polyurethane background that softly wraps around it like a pillow. In this work, as in many others from this period, Szapocznikow created self-portraits in the form of fragments of her own body. She did not yet show the torment of her illness, but rather captured an image of its beauty.

Andrzej Tryzno, *Self-portrait in the Bin*, 1980, oil on canvas

The theme of the portrait dominates Andrzej Tryzno's paintings. Beginning in the 1970s, numerous self-portraits can be found in his *oeuvre*, as evidenced by the titles of individual paintings and the physiognomic similarity of the images to their author. Both in portraits and self-portraits, Tryzno's attention is focused on models painted against neutral backgrounds, with marked space constructed using light and shadow. In the 1970s and 80s, the characteristic image of the bearded artist smoking a cigarette appears. The colour range of the works is usually muted, as if the painter focused all his attention on the psychology of the portrayed figures. Tryzno's paintings from this period have a lot in common with the photographic method of depiction, characteristic of hyperrealism. In addition to the details rendered in this convention, there are also contrasts and shortened perspectives, as if registered through the eye of the camera. The Zachęta collection includes several paintings by the artist, including *Self-portrait in the Bin* [1980]. The man's gaze is directed towards the viewers, his arm rests on the wall of a rubbish bin. The entire depiction has a dark, existential dimension. The context in which the painting was created is key to its interpretation — the turbulent year 1980, an important moment in Poland's struggle for human rights and dignity.

Monika Zawadzki, *Self-portrait 1, 2 (Diptych)*, 2014, epoxy resin, acrylic paint

The two-element sculptural self-portrait of Monika Zawadzki is composed of fully-realised elements of the hand: a thumb and a fingertip cut off from it. As a result of their scale, the sculpture has a monumental, almost statuesque character. The thumb, in combination with the fingertip — 'a small sliver of a sphere', as Zawadzki calls it — belongs to a larger series of works devoted to 'the awareness of one's own flesh'. In the series, the sculptor analysed the identity of the body understood as a mass, flesh or pulp, in open and closed systems, in relation to maintaining the integrity of the organism or separating its fragments. In *Self-portrait 1, 2 (Diptych)*, Zawadzki raises multiple questions: do fragments of a body represent existence and in what way? After dismemberment, do they still retain the identity of their owner-author or do they become

emancipated? Why does one's own dismembered body become an inspiration and matter for creating art and what feelings does this artistic process generate? And finally — what role does pain play in everything?

Mira Żelechower-Aleksiu, *Self-portrait*, 1976, oil on canvas

Mira Żelechower-Aleksiu's painting is an example of the artist interest on the subject of portraiture. The painter, counted among representatives of new figuration and magical realism, has been portraying people and herself in various conventions since the late 1960s. Through references to stylistic devices such as metaphor, grotesque or allegory, she creates multidimensional images of people, full of lyricism and mystery. The women and men seem alienated and focused, absorbed in reflection on important life issues. In the 1976 *Self-portrait*, the artist depicted herself while painting. In the foreground, in the corner of the painting, we see the surface of white canvas, and just behind it, the author's face and a hand holding a brush close to the face. The enigmatic depiction can be understood in two ways: the artist 'creates herself', or, on the contrary, she strives to make herself disappear. Mira Żelechower-Aleksiu's later works are strongly connected with the memory of Holocaust victims.