

ART OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND  
& THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND IN 20<sup>TH</sup>–21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURIES AND POLISH–BRITISH  
& IRISH ART RELATIONS

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Małgorzata Geroni / and Jerzy Malinowski & Jan Wiktor Sienkiewicz

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# INTRODUCTION

## ON THE BOOK

A conference *Art of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland & the Republic of Ireland in 20<sup>th</sup>–21<sup>st</sup> Centuries and Polish–British & Irish Art Relations* (Toruń, October 9–11, 2013) was the first scientific event of this kind in Poland.<sup>1</sup>

So far, the research on British art in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – in comparison to the research on modern French, German, Russian, Italian and American art – has been taken up only sporadically. The greatest number of Polish publications have concerned post-war British art, while there is almost no publication devoted to inter-war art. The conference is attended by almost all Polish historians and art critics, who – usually on the margins of their interests – have taken up these issues. No research on Irish art has been conducted so far. Thus, the studies on modern Irish art seem to be an important novelty.

The widest range of previous interests has concerned the art of Polish emigration circle since World War II. Like Polish artistic colonies in Rome in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in Munich in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in Paris since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Polish emigration colony in London with numerous organizations, galleries and magazines has drawn attention as an important element of Polish art and Polish artistic tradition.

Particular attention should be paid to a group of studies devoted to works by Jewish artists or artists of Jewish origin from Poland.

It is important to emphasize the participation of university circles of English philology and British cultural studies in establishing the conference agenda. It is the first time in Poland when these circles and art historians have started mutual contacts.

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<sup>1</sup> So far only one Polish–British symposium was organized: *Rebels, Martyrs and the Others: Rethinking Polish Modernism*, by Birkbeck College, University of London in partnership with Tate Britain, the Adam Mickiewicz Institute and the Institute of Art History, Jagiellonian University, London, 11–13 June 2009. Its organizers were Dr. Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius and Prof. Andrzej Szczerski. It was connected with the exhibition *Symbolism in Poland and Britain* in Tate Britain in relation to the Polish Year.

The volume is divided into *Introduction* and 6 sections: (1) *Polish-British Art Relations before 1945*, (2) *Contemporary British Art*, (3) *Polish Émigré Art in Great Britain after 1945*, (4) *Contemporary Polish-British Art Relations*, (5) *Irish Art*, (6) *British Art and the World*.

Thus, a certain image of British art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is outlined, as seen from afar. The volume presents research on British and Irish art conducted mainly by Polish scholars. The book is structured chronologically, with focus on selected issues. Subsequent parts present phenomena of British art, sometimes followed by the account of Polish reactions.

The *Introduction* features a text devoted to British artistic tradition expressed in the references to the landscape, as well as an article presenting the rules of documentation of contemporary British art.

Part 1 – *Polish-British Art Relations before 1945* gives a picture of so far rarely studied phenomena, which, however, before World War I contributed to the creation of a varied Polish-British mosaic. It consisted of Poles' stays in London, the activities of young Jewish artists from Poland and Eastern Europe or having family ties with this region (the so called Whitechapel Boys), as well as artists of different origin yet associated with Poles, such as Henri Gaudier-Brzeska.

The British and the Poles met many times in England, and above all in France, which pushed the writer Wyndham Lewis to create a stereotype of a Polish artist. Due to the dominance of the Parisian milieu, the interwar period was not conducive to contacts. Polish artists started to come to the UK only in the late 30s, in anticipation of war. Closer political ties during this period led to a large exhibition of British art in the National Museum in Warsaw in 1939, for the first time bringing the “insular” artistic tradition to the Polish audience. An interesting yet unknown episode is the artistic activity of British prisoners of war in a German camp in Torun during World War II.

Part 2 – *Contemporary British Art* includes articles about prominent British artists whose art attracted attention in Poland, such as Lucian Freud, Ronald B. Kitaj, David Hockney, Richard Long or Cornelia Parker. The interpretations of their work are set in various methodologies:

- perception and presentation of the human body matter in the works of Freud;
- melancholic, “diasporic” painting of “newcomers”, co-creating The School of London, apart from Ron Kitaj – Lucian Freud, Leon Kossoff and Frank Auerbach;
- historical-artistic experiments of David Hockney proposing a hypothesis that already in the 15<sup>th</sup> century (i.e. 200 years earlier than generally assumed) painters, by using lenses, obtained an impression of realism and depth illusion;

- critical contexts of the discussion of the British land art and the relationship between the discourses of modernity and Englishness, case study: Richard Long;
- interpretation of the art of the duo Gilbert & George in the context of other artistic couples, in search for the origins of their persistence in rites of passage, which are the subject of their post-conceptual photography from the early 70s that allowed not only to create a new common identity of the two artists, but also to overcome narcissism and create “art for everybody”;
- finally, the theme of disaster and destruction in the work of Cornelia Parker.

The outline of topics is complemented by the characteristics of the group Stuckists, issues of contemporary glass art, as well as the text about the architectural office Future Systems which used the digital technology in design, led by Czech Jan Kaplicky and Amanda Levete, established in London in 1979.

Part 3 – *Polish Émigré Art in Great Britain* refers to the period during World War II when several artists came to the UK, including the ones serving in the Polish army in France in 1940 and then in the army of General Władysław Anders. During that time, extensive contacts in the field of visual arts and architecture developed between the Polish creators and British and Irish artists. Big waves of migration of Poles in Great Britain and Ireland contributed to various forms of cooperation and mutual permeating of artistic experience gained from the schools of art by painters, sculptors, graphic artists and architects from Poland with the tradition of British schools.

The origins of the Polish artist colony date back to the late 30s, when Henryk Gottlieb and Franciszek and Stefan Themerson came to England. The Polish milieu was developing artistic groups. Polish magazines published in London featured reviews and publications on Polish and English art. The material is a substantial input in building individual profiles of Polish painters in London (e.g. Piotr Potworowski). Sometimes the opinions of Polish artists and at the same time critics (such as Marek Żuławski and Stanislaw Frenkiel) managed to shed different light on contemporary British art.

Part 4 – *Contemporary Polish-British Art Relations* includes examples of various contacts and Polish inspirations by the British art from the 50s to the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, among others, in architecture and sculpture, observing also potential impacts assuming opposite direction (Jerzy Beres). An interesting event was the visit of Henry Moore in Poland in 1958, associated with the first international Contest for the Monument of Remembrance for Victims of Auschwitz-Birkenau Camp, of which the British artist became a chairman. Articles about the sojourn of British photographer Craigie Horsfield in Krakow in the 70s and the present London activities of painter Antoni Malinowski, operating with color and light in the space show different aspects of the artistic presence of an Englishman in Poland and a Pole in England.

This part of the volume is completed with the text dedicated to the reception of Polish art in Great Britain in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Part 5 – *Irish Art* contains texts about the art of Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland which is almost unknown in Poland. The articles included in the volume reveal an interesting perspective, from the building of the national tradition (Irishness) in contemporary art, through various aspects of performance art and action art referring in the 80s to the socio-political situation in Northern Ireland which showed certain similarities to the situation in Poland under martial law (hence the cooperation between Polish and Irish artists), to the presentation of contemporary art scene in Northern Ireland, centered around Flax Art Studios in Belfast.

Closing the volume, Part 6 – *British Art and the World* is devoted to the colonial aspects of British art: the role of English painters in the development of modern art of South Africa, a British colony, and the work of Yinka Shonibare, an artist of Nigerian origin, born in London, who critically interprets colonial themes, especially Victorian ones, in his installations.

The book is the first study of Polish-British and Polish-Irish artistic ties in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century. The articles emphasize not only outstanding achievements of British, Irish and Polish artists, but also show seemingly marginal and distant phenomena, without which, however, the portrait of the artistic communities and their achievements discussed in the publication would not be comprehensive. The effects of the British-Polish artistic relations, including the output of Polish artists in the UK, should find a permanent place in the history of European contemporary art.