

33 meters of sacrum.

The analysis of discourses surrounding the statue of Christ the King of the Universe in Świebodzin

In this paper address the phenomenon of the monument of Jesus Christ, the King of the Universe, which was built, located and consecrated in Świebodzin. The very size of this monument – in contrast with its rather peripheral location – was enough to elicit lots of response from both the Polish and foreign media. Frequently, highly emotional opinions could be found on community portals on the Internet as well as the official websites of Catholic Church allowing for visitor's input. In an attempt to capture the dynamics of this discourse, I shall employ the anthropological theory of art by Alfred Gell. The subjects of the analysis shall be statements by the monument's designer, its originator as well as the various opinions listed in the parish guestbook and on the monument's Facebook profile.

Alfred Gell was a British social anthropologist, a student of such famous academic figures as Firth and Leach, lecturer at the London School of Economics, a researcher best known for his work and studies devoted to the issues of art, language, symbols, time and ritual. In his book *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* – published after his death, an intellectual and scholarly testament, as it were – in which he proposed his own, original theory of art¹.

Gell was highly opposed to his contemporary anthropological theories of art. This opposition stemmed from his reservations towards anthropology which deals with „non-Western aesthetic systems”. Such a perspective – which was believed to be both necessary and intellectually noble – he believed to be quite erroneous. First of all, it implied the Western perspective and understanding is to be imposed on the subject matter being studied, the result is that all means of theoretical discourse created and distributed by art historians, museologists, estheticians, art merchants etc., were subject to such hegemony. Second of all, the older theory inevitably became involved in colonialism and musealism, both on the level of methods and practices (for example, of artifact acquisition). Thirdly, Gell did not agree with its wrong idea of exclusiveness, which lead to the situation in which all art created in the

¹ A. Gell, *Art And Agency. An Anthropological Theory*, Oxford 1998.

West was effectively excluded from the area of interest. The researcher claims that it is high time to abandon essentializing the aesthetics and move on to study the social environment surrounding art and its function. Anthropologists should focus, first and foremost, on the social context of creation, circulation and reception of art. For this reason, the definitions and theoretical systems are less important than the processes of the creation and circulation of meaning. Eventually, based on these premises, he concedes that employing aesthetics as the universal parameter of description and interpretation goes contrary to the aims of anthropological studies of art.

As a result, Gell decided to forego defining the “piece of art” in the strictly aesthetic framework, in the context of formal or artistic values, in favor of understanding it in the strictly performative sense, as the network of social actions. In his understanding, a work of art is essentially a practical action influencing thoughts and actions of others, embodying an established set of social „agencies”. The ‘anthropological theory of art’ – Gell concludes – is a theory of social relations that obtain in the neighborhood of works of art”².

The key term which he uses in his theory is the „agent”, the one who takes action. In this case, it can be the work of art, the medium to express human intentions, it could be Michelangelo’s sculpture „David”, but also a building, car, painting and many other inanimate, nonhuman items. The term is clearly relation-oriented: „Cars are not a human being, but they act as agents, and suffer as patients ‘in the (casual) vicinity’ of human beings, such as their owners, vandals, and so on”³.

In order to correctly decipher the interrelations of the social framework in which the work of art exists and ‘operates’, Gell lists four factors which create a „canonic” social relation. These are, in order: (1) the „index” (most often an artifact) is the basis for interpretation, I will assume that it is the artistic factor of the network of relations; (2) the „artist”, the intentional creator – a person or a divine entity – of the „index”; (3) the „recipient” of the work of art, compelled to act by the „index”; (4) the „prototype”, which constitutes the actual source of the „index”, usually visual (may be difficult to identify, for example, in the context of abstract art), which influences the interpretative context of the work of art.

The statue of Christ as the King of the Universe in Świebodzin constitutes, in my opinion, the Gellian „index” (the artistic factor). It has officially become the part of the visual

² A. Gell, *Art And Agency*, op. cit., p. 26.

³ Ibid.

and ideological landscape during the mass on November 21, 2010, although all construction and placement works were concluded 2 weeks prior.

Statue characteristics:

- total height of the monument is 52 meters, including: 16 meters of artificial mound made of soil, rocks and debris; the figure of Christ is 33 meters high; the gilded crown resting on the figure's temples is 3 meters high and 3.5 m in diameter.
- Christ's head is 4.5 meters high and weighs 15 tons. Each hand is 6 meters long, and the distance between the tips of the fingers of its outstretched arms is 24 meters.
- the monument frame is made of steel, foundations and pillars are made of reinforced concrete. Figure exterior covering was created utilizing the ferrocement technology.
- total estimated weight of the monument is over 440 tons.
- the monument alludes to the Christ the Redeemer (Cristo Redentor) on Mount Corcovado in Rio de Janeiro. Unveiled in 1931, the monument and the mound is 38 meters high (the head is 3.5 meters high and weights 35 tons, the distance between the tips of the fingers of its outstretched arms is 23 meters).
- on the pedestal, a place for a field altar is to be prepared, the Stations of the Cross and a small waterfall. Parking lot, sanitation and catering facilities are also planned, as well as a park for recreation and pilgrims.

Monument construction was finished on November 6, 2011 at 15.57: the head and arms were installed on the body and the monument thus giving the monument its final shape. November 21, 2011, 16.00: the mass to consecrate the Monument of Jesus Christ, King of the Universe was held, conducted by cardinal Henryk Gulbinowicz, the sermon was given by the metropolitan of the Szczeciński-Kamieńska diocese, archbishop Andrzej Dzięga. Bishop Stefan Regmunt consecrated the monument.

Monument construction chronology:

- November 27, 1987: The bishop of Gorzów Józef Michalik during his visit instructed father Sylwester Zawadzki, Holy Mother Queen of Poland parish priest (assigned at an earlier time from the St. Michael the Archangel parish) to build a chapel or a church on Łużyckie Estate in Świebodzin;
- April 16, 1994: during a field mass, diocese bishop Adam Dyczkowski consecrated and placed the cornerstone of the new Divine Mercy church. The cornerstone used was taken from St. Peter's Basilica in Rome;

- December 20 1998: bishop Paweł Socha consecrated the newly built church. It was the 40th anniversary of priest Zawadzki's Holy Orders. The temple, designed by professor Marian Fikus from Poznań, was constructed in the basilica style with Baroque and Gothic elements. About 300 people were employed in the temple's construction, assisted by donations from many workplaces and individuals. "The building blocks of this church were not only rock, steel, brick and concrete, it was built primarily out of faith", says the parish priest⁴;
- August 25, 1999: ordinary of the Zielonogórska-Gorzowska diocese signs a decree to form the new Divine Mercy parish in Świebodzin. Father Zawadzki becomes the parish priest. The Divine Mercy parish in Świebodzin is one of the three Roman Catholic parishes in Świebodzin, the youngest of the existing parishes;
- November 26, 2000: during the inauguration, diocese bishop Adam Dyczkowski entrusted the city and commune of Świebodzin under the protection of Jesus Christ the King. Hence, the idea to commemorate this event in form of a monument was born;
- 2001: father Zawadzki begins the endeavor to build a monument similar in size to the Christ the Redeemer statue in Rio de Janeiro in Świebodzin.
- May 21, 2005: earthworks began on the mound on which the monument was to be placed. A year later, the 13 meter frame of the monument of Jesus was placed there;
- September 29, 2006: Świebodzin city council passes an act to establish Christ the King as the patron of Świebodzin city and commune. The chairman (by the council's appointment) along with the mayor, began talks with the Zielonogórska-Gorzowska diocese bishop. The patronage was denied, however, due to objections by the Vatican Congregation of the Divine Worship and the Discipline of Sacraments. However, the issue of monument construction remained open;
- 2008: first elements of the bottom part of the monument were set up;
- November 22, 2008: Zielonogórska-Gorzowska diocese bishop Stefan Regmunt consecrated the Divine Mercy church in Świebodzin, and bestowed the rank of sanctuary upon it;
- 2009: assembly of further elements of the monument's body;
- 2010: completion of monument's arms and head;
- 6 November 2011, 15.57: arms and head are placed on the body and, giving the monument its final shape;
- 21 November 2011, 16.00: the mass to consecrate the Monument of Jesus Christ, King of the Universe was held, conducted by cardinal Henryk Gulbinowicz, the sermon was given by

⁴ W. Zdanowicz, *Ksiądz Budowniczy* [The builder-priest], www.poznajmy-prawde.blog.onet.pl, 01.03.2011.

the metropolitan of the Szczeciński-Kamieńska diocese, archbishop Andrzej Dzięga. Bishop Stefan Regmunt consecrated the monument.

The monument was erected in Świebodzin. It is a city in Lubuskie Province, with 22 thousand inhabitants. Historically, the city was part of the Lower Silesia region. It is also an important junction for railways and motorways, as national roads number 2 (from Świecko, border crossing to Germany, to Terespol, border crossing to Belarus) and number 3 (from Świnoujście, north of Poland, to Jakuszyce, border crossing to Czech Republic) intersect. Świebodzin is also located halfway from Poznań to Berlin. The monument is well visible from the S3 national road (and is supposedly visible from Zielona Góra, 40 kilometers away).

The next element – right after the index – of the anthropological theory of art proposed by Gell is the artist. The monument of Christ the King of the Universe was designed by Mirosław Kazimierz Patecki. Graduate of the College of Fine Arts in Toruń (specializing in sculpture), retired at present day, he lives in a self-restored palace in Przybyszowo village in Leszczyński district. Owner of the stucco works company, he often designed stucco for churches, gilt and polychromes (St. Apostles, Peter and Paul Cathedral in Legnica), city fountains (Żagań, Sława Śląska), he is also the author of the sculpture of the legendary cat who leads inebriated people to their homes in Bytom Odrzański⁵. He designed the monument on father Zawadzki's commission, which was to allude to the famous Rio de Janeiro monument from the very beginning. Based on the photographs, he prepared a clay prototype, 1 meter high, and a plaster casting afterwards. Originally, the figure was to be made out of copper metal plates. Since the monument in Brazil depicts Christ as the Redeemer, and that in Świebodzin depicts Christ as the King, its hands were raised in a gesture of world's ruler. However, the client aimed for a much larger scale, at first it was 15 m, then 20, 30, and finally 33. „We parted ways with father Zawadzki a year and a half ago – explains Patecki – I was not present when the monument was being finished and assembled. I did not agree to this type of finishing and materials which were used”⁶. Patecki claims that the final, 33 meters high figure is disproportional, the head is too small, hands are too short and the robe is too long. Copper metal plates were replaced with reinforced concrete. Moreover, he is offended by the

⁵ Ł. Kaźmierczak, Świebodzin – rzeźbiarz z dworu [*Sculptor of the manor*], „Gazeta Regionalna”, www.gazetylokalne.pl, 10.03.2011.

⁶ Niech się schowa Rio de Janeiro [*Rio de Janeiro doesn't hold the candle*], www.polskatimes.pl, 10.03.2011.

stereotypical depiction. „I am to be remembered for all time as the designer of this monument, and yet I do not identify with it at all”, Patecki declares ⁷.

In this specific case, the figure of artist-designer was overshadowed by father Sylwester Zawadzki. He was the originator of the monument, the *spiritus movens* behind its construction, height and final shape, its location, and for making it meaningful. Born in 1932, he moved to Świebodzin in 1970, first as a curate in the St. Michael the Archangel parish⁸. In the following years, he earned the nickname of the ”builder-priest”, by initiating and completing construction works of the church and rectory in Radnica, conducting various refurbishment works, constructing the parish house in Świebodzin, laying the procession road. In 1987 he began to take action to construct a new Divine Mercy church in Świebodzin. The new church was consecrated 11 years afterwards. Father Zawadzki made the decision to erect the monument in 2001. 10 years later, it was finished.

Father Zawadzki has a specific vision as to the meaning of the monument. It stands almost halfway between Berlin and Poznań, on the junction of important national roads, with thousands of people driving by every day. For these people, the monument is to become a reminder, that there are things beyond their present destination⁹. The dimensions of the monument are not accidental as well: the height, 33 meters, alludes to Jesus Christ’s 33 years of age, the 3 meter crown alludes to the 3 years when Christ was teaching. According to the parts of the project which are not yet realized, visitors will reach the monument foundation via a winding road which circles the mound five times, as a symbol of the five continents. It is noteworthy that father Zawadzki was awarded the post of the prelate as well as the curator of the newly opened sanctuary for his outstanding merit for the Catholic Church, and the city of Świebodzin granted him the title of “Honorary Citizen of the Świebodzin Commune” in 2006.

The final element of the social relations framework, which I would like to address in this speech, is the recipient, whom the work of art compels to take an action. Even a passing glance at the comments surrounding the construction of the monument reveals a variety, or rather, a contrast in opinions. Balanced commentary is a rather infrequent sight. The general discourse of the recipients is in fact centered around the two diametrically opposite attitudes: on the one hand we have the sympathizers, admirers of the monument, of the whole undertaking and father Zawadzki himself, and on the other one we have opponents of the

⁷ *Chrystus spod Tesco [The Christ next to the Tesco]*, „Panorama Leszczyńska”, 23.11.2010.

⁸ *Who is who w Polsce [Who is who in Poland]*, 7th issue, 2008, p. 4600.

⁹ Ł. Kaźmierczak, *Chrystus na skrzyżowaniu [Christ at the crossroads]*, „Przewodnik Katolicki”, 2007, no. 47.

monument, the very idea of its construction, and, implicitly, a certain variation of Catholic Faith.

I would like to illustrate that dichotomy using entries from the internet Guestbook of the Sanctuary of the Divine Mercy in Świebodzin¹⁰. The entries cited are from the time frame between April 2010 and March 2011.

Krysia and Stasiu, Świebodzin 11.04.2010:

”We would like to send our respects to father curator Sylwester Zawadzki, may the Holy Mother assist him in his task to built the monument of Jesus Christ the King”.

ZiM, Świebodzin, 04.25.2010:

”Venerable prelate, may God and the Holy Mother watch over you so that you may fulfill the task which Lord himself has bestowed upon you. If there were more such ardent and charismatic priests in the world, it would be that much easier for us to reach the Heavenly Gates. We give you our thanks for the Sanctuary, the monument of Christ the King, and, first and foremost, for that you are here with us. Both I and my spouse are very proud and it is indeed an honor to be part of this parish. Godspeed”.

Lech, Szczecin, 11.10.2011:

”A beautiful sanctuary God’s grace be upon you and I eagerly await the monument to be finished I am just passing through Świebodzin and Jesus will forever be the signpost both on my way and in my life God bless you”.

¹⁰ Cf: <http://ksiegi.emix.net.pl>

JK, Świebodzin 3.10.2010:

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”Our monument of Christ the King is astonishing. I bow my head for the prelate-originator, and the de facto constructor of the monument. It is great joy and happiness for all the inhabitants of Świebodzin The father is a Great Man and may God bless him”

Józef Cyprian Rudziński, Warszawa, 18.11. 2010:

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“Jesus Christ, King of the Universe
in my Świebodzin.

In Świebodzin on the day of King Jesus Christ.
We all gather for the consecration of his monument.
The Sanctuary of his Mercy still so fresh,
And yet the world already feels its effect.
Such is the fruit borne of devotion to the King of All
Of the faithful in Świebodzin ten years ago.
Jesus Christ, King of the Universe, King of Kings
Received from his people a monument of monuments”.

Hubert, Warsaw, 21.11.2011:

”I saw the consecration ceremony of the Statue of Jesus Christ the King in Świebodzin on TV today – God bless you for this great endeavor and the beautiful statue and he Sanctuary. May this be a testimony of faith of Poles, presently, and for the days to come!”

Krystyna Wesseli-Łączak, Świebodzin, 03.03.2011:

”I would like to dedicate the following poem to prelate Sylwester Zawadzki, may the Merciful Christ give him his graces for each and every day of his life.

Christ the King

On the hill of green, at the city gates
Stands our beloved guardian, Christ-King, our Lord

His arms outstretched, in this marvelous gesture
He whispers silently – I watch over this city
When you feel down, or when you feel afraid
Go and kneel before Christ, go and embrace God
And in your happy days run to greet Christ the Lord
Thank him for all he has given thee
For there are disasters wars and hurricanes out there
While by his will your city rests at ease
He guards us from misfortune - Christ, King, our Lord
Embraces us with his love and gives us peace
So if there is God in your heart,
look skywards on this day
May your heart carry you to the green hill
Bow before your King, beat your breast in shame
For only He is the Lord and King and can help you now
May the birds sing for him and the fields rustle
We shall joint them in singing his praise
For he gives his love to people, forests and houses
May our beloved Christ reign over us forevermore!”

The opposing view to the one seen on the official Guestbook can be seen on the Facebook profile called „Monument of Christ the King in Rio de Świebodzineiro” (9 949 ‘likes’ as of 17.03.2011). The very imagery of the profile is striking, it is filled with ironic images of the monument: irony, pastiche, grotesque, subversion.

Lukasz Vwebsa, 7.11.2010:

”The German have their garden dwarfs, we will have our giants! I think we could make ‘ some miniatures, say 4 meters high, one for every garden out there”.

Radosław Stęplewski, 19.11.2011:

”it’s time for the sambadrome!”.

Krzysztof Kupracz, 17.11.2010:

"Now tell me, what is this Christ here for? That's it! Nobody knows, so you needn't worry if anybody ever asks that question. You know what this Christ does? He addresses the vital needs of our entire society. This Christ is up to scale with our ability. You know what we use this Christ for? We use it to open the eyes of the doubters".

Administrator, 24.11.2010:

"It is said that Hollywood already has the screenplay for "Godzilla versus the Christ of Świebodzin". Unfortunately, no Godzillas wanted any part of it".

Paweł Chudziński, 24.11.2010:

"The Jesus of Świebodzin is the perfect monument to the faith of Catholics in Poland - head hard as concrete, empty within".

Joanna Kudryńska-Antonik, 4.12.2010:

"How great must be the provincial inferiority complex of these people so that they must treat it in such a monumental (sic!) way? :) Pity Gombrowicz isn't alive to see it!".

Kamil Kominek, 04.12.2010:

"the 33m totem with one hand pointing at the Tesco, and the other at the sunbeds".

In an attempt to interpret the meaning behind the monument, the decision of its founder and the attitudes of the recipients, I feel it is interesting to further investigate two issues. First issue touches upon the location in which the monument was built and placed. In the hundred years before World War II the city was historically a part of Prussia, as part of the Brandenburg administrative region (in 1939, the number of inhabitants was over 10 thousand). On January 31, 1945 Red Army regiments march into the city. In March, same year, new settlers arrive, called repatriated at that time. They came mostly from Vilnius, Novgorod, Polesie, Lvov, Tarnopol and Stanisławowo provinces. The nationality of the populace changed dramatically. Immigrants employed many different strategies to make themselves at home in the new lands and to transplant the familiar cultural models onto the new territory. Jan Kurowicki – a philosopher raised in Świebodzin, where he arrived from the eastern borders as a young child, able to speak only a Polish-Belarusian pidgin – claims that it is only natural for the visionary priest to come about in his city. "His idea was part of the

cultural aura already present here from many years: he promised new roots and fulfillment”¹¹. The feeling of taking roots in the Lubusz Land, which for many repatriates was merely an ersatz of the ”real” Poland, was in deficit. When in the 70’s a beltway was constructed around the city, its peripheral location became even more evident. Hence, the idea to construct the monument may be treated as a revitalization project to create a new universal value for both the city and its inhabitants. The universal quality is further reinforced by the open allusion to another famous monument. ”What is important for the provincial mentality – Kurowicki says – gains in value when compared to things which already exist in a metropolis, or is one of the kind”¹².

This idea is important for the second interpretation, that is record-breaking. Each entry discussing the monument in Świebodzin in greater detail mentions that it is the largest, counting the pedestal, statue of Christ in the world. How do we interpret this? Leszek Kołakowski used to ponder the drive for record-breaking, he called it the ”noble ambition”¹³. It doesn’t matter whether we discuss sprinters who beat the world record by fractions of a second, or a mathematical theorem which takes the longest to be proven, the underlying issue is fundamentally similar: the need to cross barriers. The need to go beyond what was believed to be the human limit, to expand its range. Such is their essential function, in a nutshell, not practical application or profitability, for the books. ”There may be – the philosopher suggest – a metaphysical root in all this passion for records, this interest in the extremes: the need to go beyond what it, sometimes it is expressed in a peculiar way, other times it is grotesque or downright absurd – as all the things that are human, good or bad, the hope for infinity”¹⁴. It is evident that in any such case the record-breaking ambition is only fulfilled by attention by the world, that it will attract many millions of recipients. World record in the size of sacrum, set in a provincial town, in a former rape field, created an outstanding circumstance for this very situation.

¹¹ J. Kurowicki, *Chrystus Król: witajcie w telenoweli [Christ the King: welcome to the soap opera]*, „Le Monde Diplomatique”, December 2010, no. 12, p. 23.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ L. Kołakowski, O rekordach, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, July 15-16 2000, p. 17.

¹⁴ Ibid.