

Who am I? What am I? Would it be enough to say, “I am an artist” a producer of images, born in Poland and based in the United States? Raised in a rural neighborhood in a working class family, studied art in Poland, and shaped by religious, specific morals and behavior?

Indeed, it would be sufficient for formal records, for statistics, for one volume of a reference book.

But I am here, standing in front of you, students, motivated by what has for centuries been so called “art”, with your open eyes and brains directed to the coming age, with your rebellion, hunger and curiosity for all that you don’t know. You are here, looking to this guy who is like everyone existentially reflecting on his generation and the stormy time of finding his own socio-political, cultural, historical and artistic identity.

At 26 years of age, I came from Central Europe, from the Old Continent and a country that only ten years ago after a long time of oppression and colonization returned to political and economic normality. Spiritually, as well as educationally, I, myself, my homeland, my friends, and my family, are part of a Greater Family of Man. We are the heirs of the European civilization of Judeo-Christianity, the guardians of humanism and tolerance with its high values such as: dignity, courage, and determination in defending the ideals we believe to be invaluable. However, we should not ignore the darker side of our history such as the Spanish Inquisition.

Our historical involvement in recent years has clarified the need to overcome hatred, intolerance and racism. Millions of Europeans paid the highest price for this lesson; their lives. I am very thankful that Danuta Mendryk, a prisoner of the Majdanek concentration camp, is here to share her experience with us.

When I first conceived the idea for this project I was struggling to find a reason to create this *Light Cross*. First I began to think about the symbolic light torch used in the Olympics to celebrate the positive aspects of competition. At the same time I could not ignore the darker side of 20th century history, for instance; Hiroshima, Nagasaki, or the concentration camps in the United States for Japanese-Americans during World War II, and also the victims of the natural disaster in Kobe City.

Polish history is full of the heroic deeds of fellow man and groups during the German occupation, when individuals’ priorities were tested and they had to choose between life and death. Polish Franciscan Father Kolbe was an inmate of the Auschwitz concentration camp where he voluntarily offered his life in exchange for the life of another inmate who was sentenced to death. It was only during my last visit to Japan when I learned that Father Kolbe had gone to Japan

before World War II in a charity mission to help orphans and handicapped people. I was excited to learn about his connection to Japan from the book “Chopin – Poland – Japan: 80 Anniversary of Polish and Japanese Relations”, which was published and given to me by Mr. Kitagawa.

Another heroic act was performed by a Japanese diplomat, Mr. Sugihary Chiune, who saved the lives of over 6,000 Polish and Lithuanian Jews during World War II by giving them visas to find refuge in other countries. By law he was not authorized to do this, giving testimony to a higher moral code.

These two men, crossing geographical borders with their ethical mission to help their fellow man, were not born heroes but two ordinary human beings, involved in the world drama, who achieved the highest degree of humanism when faced with ultimate choices. Their stories are examples of heroism not on the battlefield but in the sphere of a higher ethical code. Could they penetrate the conscience of today’s generation?

On a personal note, the stories of these two men created a friendship between the Japanese artist Utsumi and myself, and it is Utsumi’s generosity that has made it possible for me to speak here today.

By geographical, let’s say “geo-political” circumstances, we are situated at the crossroad of a variety of cultural traditions, schools of thought and religious backgrounds, sometimes contradicting each other. I believe that the objectives imposed on me from being situated in the center of Europe, between the East and the West, between Russia, Germany, and traditionally exposed to the French model of life or the Italian Renaissance ideal, are much stronger influences on my choices and priorities than British Colonial domination.

I have lived in the United States for 30 years, navigating my journey, my professional and personal life and psyche on a totally different ground, I had to learn and assimilate the rules of materialistic society and the challenge of its free economy. I had to recognize their code of ethics - social and cultural behavior, not only in order to survive but to be successful by social standards. Some people say that I am a successful man, I am not sure but let them say it. While living in the United States I have been able to broaden my spectrum and look critically at my past and the present to see the differences in both. This led me to question the American economical and political influence in the international arena. Who possesses the power and who makes the decisions?

Look at the map – Europe is a relatively small continent, although it gave birth to modern civilization. In the United States the American West and Mid-West is open and boundless inviting man to explore the space. I was forced to shape myself anew while experiencing space, distances, the variety of local ethnic cultures and subcultures, and the abundance of languages and dialects. For

instance, the Native Americans used to have more than 360 dialects! It's important that we recognize this loss, a loss to all of us.

On the other hand, the history of America taught us a good lesson regarding the immigration phenomenon. America offered the common man a prospective of the "American Dream", which means that the common man could build a new fatherland elsewhere, his "Little Japan", "Little Poland", "Little China" and so on. This was possible because American society had been formed by transmigration and because the immigrants brought their talents, skills, and most importantly the great desire to open doors for their future generations.

My generation feels the pressure of the newest technologies and newest global visions much stronger than yours does. We must find our place and our identity within the rapidly changing world. At the same time being aware of the demands of the present age and in tune with the origins which had given it life, I do not want to lose the values that I have inherited because they are a part of my past, my origin and tradition.

Now-a-days uniformity and globalization evoke not only enthusiasm, energy, and expectation, but also fear, disturbance and instability. We are witnesses in some parts of the globe to economic growth, a fast development of the existential standard. We are also aware of a great threat of decline, a degradation or disappearance of small communities and single individuality, which were so typical in different parts of the world during previous times.

The diversity of professions derived from craftsmanship, the disappearance of genuine talents, the variety of languages even regional dialects, the flavor of differences in cuisine and fashion, the touch of provincial genuineness, the marginal and peripheral uniqueness, and the charm of suburbia are the top phenomena of our time. Are we facing a new interactive, cross regional, cross cultural, cross conscience, technologically unified world?

What is my position (yours and yours) at the dawn of a crucial digital revolution, with a vision of another step forward to the mystery of nature by genetic engineering?

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I am grateful that the curator of the Triennial, Mr. Kitagawa has given me the opportunity to participate and experience the diversity in this special international event.

Regarding my contribution, *Light Cross for Echigo - Tsumari*, I am responding with a cross, a symbol that has infinite meaning. I am convinced that the primordial functions of art had been to focus attention, heighten awareness and bring man back to the core of humanity.

The point of departure of my reflection on the notion of "light" is its origins as described in Genesis, according to the Holy Bible. God said, "Let there be light", and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness.

In all religions and mythologies light came first. It is the condition of life and the most natural source of energy. Man's necessity to adapt to the physical reality brought him to discover then conquer fire: the first living and movable light in space and time. Fire marks the very beginning of civilization.

From the early stages of civilization, Man developed rites and ceremonies to relate to what he can not understand or control. Fire/light soon acquired symbolic meaning and became an inherent part of many of these rites.

In my project *Light Cross for Echigo - Tsumari* I am bringing to life thousands of candles in the form of a cross – a cross which is an integral part of my flesh and spine, brought to my body through my mother's breast, and with time becoming more than the religious sign of Christianity. It functions as a symbol of brotherhood, and here we are going to celebrate its universal meaning. I believe the significance of the cross in my life is larger and deeper; it embraces human reconciliation and ethical cooperation in case of a total menace. Under the couple of that cross, you are invited to share in the celebration of man who realizes the sublime nature of mankind. The distinction between eastern and western culture is disappearing as we recognize the whole ecosystem, the interconnectedness of its parts, and the dependency of those parts on each other. We have to revise and change our attitude towards nature, to be in tune and not to abuse it.

The inner, spiritual need for ritual and ceremonies is what drives the civilized, urbanized, educated, computerized, globalized, uniformed, ultramodern "postmodern" Man of today to look for the abandoned vestiges or spontaneous behavior in every corner of the world.

All humankind will become *spiritual immigrants* with a profound opportunity to create change. Artists too are exploring the changing concept of time and the Echigo - Tsumari Art Necklace will be a commonplace for them and the public to celebrate.

The Echigo - Tsumari Project will be an opportunity for artists, viewers and the residents of the region to share in their appreciation of the environment and engage in a collaboration. It will be a new interactive solution for preservation. The ever-changing language of nature is intended to be used as a means of expressions, complimented by elements of architecture, art, and installation.

Obviously, art does not have the means to solve social or political problems. It cannot relieve the suffering of the poor, it cannot free the defeated and subdued, it cannot clean the polluted earth. But art is the highest expression of freedom, a freedom that does not subdue other people. Thanks to this unique quality, art can express a definite and unconditioned protest against violence and lies; it can brighten the darkest corners of the human soul and sympathize with those who are refused the right to dignity. This is what art can do.

In the closing of my reflection I would like to read a poem written almost 90 years ago by a visionary artist, Kazimir Malevich, he expressed the same concerns that we have in contemporary times.

THE EARTH'S MOUTH AND THE ARTIST

Earth mind consciousness linked in the chain of things created
But poet and artist were tricked by the fervor of earth
The earth showed them simple things
But they sought a hidden mystery in them.
They sought something that need not have been sought.
The more they sought the more they split into millions
Of tentacles of earth – into mind and language.
The thread of mind and word and sound cleaved
To things to form a huge network, a spidery web
In which consciousness became entangled.
Many painters and even more poets resounding
Desperate wails, indignant moans sobs before the mouth
Of the mystery of earth.

Kazimir Malevich, 1911-1913

Transcript of a lecture by Tadeusz Myslowski
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