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Abstract Art, Cold War and 15 Polish Painters

In 1961 in New York took place an unprecedented event. In the biggest and most important American museum of modern art: MoMA, Peter Selz opened the show of 15 artists from the other side of the iron curtain. This exhibition presented abstract works of young Polish painters. Show not only confirmed the international position of few of them (Wojciech Fangor, Jan Lebenstein, Tadeusz Kantor, Aleksander Kobzdej already exhibited in Venice, Paris, New York and Sao Paulo with success), but it has also allowed unknown Polish artists to conquer the American art market. In the epic story of "15 Polish Painters" mix not only artistic threads, but also Cold War politics, CIA, Rockefeller's patronage and aluminium industry...

Even if "15 Polish Painters" are considered as one of the most important events in art life of this time in Polish art history you cannot find any analysis of this event. All documents related to "15 Polish Painters" show are in MoMA Archives in New York and in American Art Archives in Washington. Those documents are unknown to Polish scholars.

Last summer I did a research on "15 Polish Painters" in New York and Washington archives and I would like to present its results in Berlin

First of all I would like to tell about the origin of the show. The most important is for me political dimension of "15 Polish Painters". I would like to show the importance of Porter McCray (MoMA travelling exhibition curator) activities after vice-president Richard Nixon's visit in Moscow in 1958. Secondly, I would like to show how the cooperation between private museum in New York and communist Poland was possible on the institutional level. Thirdly, I'm interested in the choice made by exhibition curator – Peter Selz, so called "Mr Modern Art", one of the most important figures of art life in '60s. Selz visited Poland for the first time in 1959, he met with several important art historians, critics, curators and he visited several artists in their studios in Warsaw and Cracow. During this pilgrimage he made a choice of artworks that he would like to present in New York – most of them were abstract (informal, art brut, peinture de la matiere, etc.). In the

last part of my presentation I would like to ask why in 1958 it was so important for Americans to show Polish abstract art in New York. Why they choose Polish artists instead of f.e. abstract artist from Czechoslovakia?

To sum up: in Berlin I would like to present unknown materials on one of the most important artistic exchange between the USA and Poland during the Cold War era. I hope that my speech can throw a new light on American cultural politics of this period. After American exhibitions in Paris, Moscow, Vienna and Belgrad in the late '50s, Polish exhibition in New York – nowadays forgotten - seems to be one of the most important event of this time. I hope that knowledge about its political importance could help scholars to understand similar initiatives between USA and Yugoslavia, Austria, DDR or USSR.

Methodology that I would like to apply is close to new historicism (Stephen Greenblatt) and Marxist approach of Serge Guilbaut, author of *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*.