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American Dream – Art, Freedom, Experiment and Educational Utopia in Action

The American dream. It would seem that in today's multipolar, chaotic world there is not much left of it and few who still believe in it. However, throughout the twentieth century the myth of American freedom was an important element, not only in the Cold War landscape, but above all in the lives of many people. Among them were scientists, political and economic refugees – such as Albert Einstein, Stanisław Ulam, and later the Polish Nobel Peace Prize winner Józef Rotblat – as well as artists who were given the necessary opportunity by America to work freely. Marcel Duchamp, along with artists from Poland such as Wojciech Fangor and Krzysztof Wodiczko, found their freedom in the United States.

Eighteen years ago, as an energetic and self-confident Fulbright scholar, I appeared on the Florida Atlantic University campus in Boca Raton near Miami. I was greeted there by my cordial colleague Robert Arnold, who had spent the previous year at the Academy of Fine Arts in Poznań as a visiting lecturer. It was thanks to his activities and initiative that our meeting came to fruition. Although 2000 was not my first visit in the United States, the scale and breadth of what, as a European visitor accustomed to other dimensions, would encounter was breathtaking. Florida's most beautiful coastline – palm-fringed, with a highway on the ocean shore – and the sunny campus are a landscape that seems to come from out of a movie. No wonder, after all, apart from one, not very beautiful species of palm tree, almost everything we encounter in Florida is the work of man, a decoration that will evaporate with his announced imminent disappearance. In 2000, however, environmental disaster was not the subject of headlines, and we were more than

a year away from the fateful attack on New York's twin towers.

My experience of working at an American university was an adventure that has largely formed me as an artist and, above all, a lecturer. It was first of all very interesting meeting with? students who seemed to be much more independent, hungry for knowledge, and looking for answers to their questions than the students I knew from Poland. While Polish students at the beginning of the 21st century still seemed a little confused and frightened, their American colleagues seemed to me even aggressive in asking questions and a little disrespectful in their conviction that sharing their feelings and thoughts with the group was always interesting. One thing was clear: they were committed, passionate, and aware of their rights. Many of them already had a precise idea of what they would be doing in the future. At the end of the semester, students filled in anonymous questionnaires evaluating our cooperation. I read many constructive and inspiring remarks in them. Similar surveys in Poland are still treated as an unnecessary bureaucratic formality or an opportunity to take out one's frustration or malice. Students in Poland do not take surveys seriously because they do not believe that they are full members of the academic community and that their voice will be taken seriously. Once, on a train, I listened to some young people sitting in my compartment as a girl explained the differences between studying in Poland and in the United States to her boyfriend. She said with great emotional certainty that Polish students have it too easy, because studies are free and do not require much effort to apply and be accepted, so they do not represent great value for young people. In the U.S., she said, you have to pay for your studies, and the students are aware of the cost and value of your time at university. Free education is a great achievement for civilization and an important political right developed on the European continent. This acquisition should not and cannot be destroyed for very many reasons. However, the words of my co-passenger sounded like an important observation: that studies are an important investment in life, and that Polish students too often make their choices without careful thought. It seems that American students are, to a greater extent than their Polish colleagues, practitioners of freedom of choice and debate, they feel more deeply rooted

in social structures and have a greater sense that the academic space belongs to them.

Ten years after the collapse of the system of real socialism in Poland (and unfortunately to a large extent still to this day), Polish universities do not prepare students to take part in discussion. Initially, the heritage of excessive collectivism could have been blamed for this state of affairs, later this deplorable state of affairs was overlaid with the backlash of traditionalism, the strengthening of patriarchal and hierarchical structures of power, as well as the misunderstood mythology of the individualistic-competitive model of social and artistic life. The academic context in which I worked was of great interest to me. Artistic education in Poland is based on a system of academies whose main objective is to educate artists and designers. In a few cases they also educate teachers, critics and curators. This means that the dominant model of action is "doing, not talking", "working, not theory." In my opinion, such a firm position of practicing art on the side of production, as opposed to unproductive reflection, is a significant cause of isolation and a certain disregard expressed towards artistic academics by representatives of the humanities and sciences. The cultivation of art as a result of the research process has only in recent years begun to find its place in the structure of artistic education. However, this positive trend, which has alarmed the more traditional staff of the academy, to their great relief, will be stopped by the new law on higher education, which will effectively combat all attempts at interdisciplinary activities. Meanwhile, as Krzysztof Wodiczko, who is a lecturer at Harvard University, told me, there is a clear emphasis on combining practice with a serious theoretical basis in the face of artistic education in America [Wodiczko 450].

In the United States, a significant difference from the model of an independent art academy in the European style is the location of the art faculty within the university structure on an equal footing with science and humanities faculties. I got the impression that it helps to break the isolation of fine arts from other academic disciplines, not only because we could buy the same divine espresso from an old Cuban in the university courtyard and use the same fantastic library. Students of other faculties had to take one course at the faculty of art in their course plan, while students

of the faculty of art attended classes at other faculties. This principle of openness was very close to my heart, because, thanks to the reforms of the Rector Jarosław Kozłowski in 1981, and unique in Poland, similar principles prevailed at the Poznań Academy of Fine Arts. However, it seems that the transfer of this freedom of choice across the disciplines of knowledge and practice to the field of science and art has had even more significant consequences. This allowed both sides to face the difficult and fascinating challenge of working with people whose thinking and actions were guided by completely different logic and these experiences were certainly very interesting for both sides. During my time in the US, of all my American students, I think I remember guests from other faculties the most, who asked different questions and had different difficulties and problems with implementing projects. Also for me, my stay at Florida Atlantic University was an opportunity to expand the area of my educational practices and conduct lectures on the history of Eastern and Central European culture at the Faculty of Journalism, and thus far away from the art field I have tamed. One of the most important cultural elements of this part of Europe was the Bauhaus school, whose creators and educators also influenced art schools in the United States. It was there, fleeing the Second World War and the oppression of totalitarianism, that many important representatives of this school found themselves, including Walter Gropius and Josef Albers. Their paths in America followed different routes, but both created important centers of art education based on the principle of combining different art disciplines and free experimentation within a community of artists, designers and intellectuals. Walter Gropius became the Dean of the Architecture Department at Harvard University when he arrived in the United States. Albers found himself in the American countryside, at a small art school called Black Mountain College (BMC), which, according to Juan Manuel Bonet, was a more open and spontaneous Bauhaus. In January 1939, Gropius and Marcel Breuer, also associated with the Bauhaus school, received an order to design a new building complex on the BMC campus at Lake Eden. This was the first order commission the architects had received in the United States and would have been as iconic as the Bauhaus building in Dessau had it been completed. Gropius visited BMC

as a visiting lecturer and sat on the Advisory Board for ten years. His daughter Beate studied at BMC between 1943 and 1946. The famous architect encouraged all his students at Harvard to make a similar decision.

In 1933, when Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany, John Andrew Rice, an educator and innovator inspired by Socrates' dialogues, founded Black Mountain College in south-western Carolina, a university that would last 23 years and become legendary not only among art schools. The principles underpinning the functioning of the school were derived from the educational system of British universities, such as Oxford, and were based on the foundation of the management of the university by educators with the participation of students, who themselves formed the curriculum of their education and freely chose the educators with whom they wish to consult their work. The most important matters of the university were to be discussed by a general meeting of lecturers and students, during which everyone, regardless of their position, could take the floor. Decisions were made not by vote, but by consensus. The University did not issue grades, and students took an exam only when they felt prepared for it. Students individually chose the activities they wanted to participate in and learned to take responsibility for choosing their own educational pathway.

BMC was one of the smallest universities to ever exist, enabling students to attend all the courses offered, and forcing them to become involved in this small community. Rice emphasized the importance of the group's influence on the individual, the importance of common thinking and cooperative intelligence, in which the individual's effort was subordinated to the group's effort and generated intellectual and political consequences. The life of the community was the essence of Rice's vision. He believed that in order to achieve fullness, each individual must be aware of one's relationship with others [Katz 19]. At BMC, the students and their teachers worked physically on the farm and on the construction of buildings. Students and teachers washed dishes together in the university canteen and shovelled coal together in the basement [Emanuel 10]. The life of the university was not limited to tutorials and lectures; the boundaries between education, entertainment and physical effort were blurred. Emile Bojesen writes that although BMC

was never fully democratic, it was a means to educate for democracy [1]. Democracy was not a means, but a goal. The pillar of educational thought at the college was the relationship between aesthetics, ethics and democracy. It was a concept built on uncompetitive, non-personally profitable relationships between students. According to Rice, art was a tool for educating the democratic citizen, and was also a metaphor for subjective civic involvement in the external world and social life. It is thanks to art that man finds his place in the world, as well as his position in relations with others. Rice wrote in his autobiography: "At the center of the program, we said, will be art. A democratic man, we said, must be an artist. The cohesion, we said, of the democratic man, was the cohesion of the artist, the cohesion of the relations... the artist, we said, does not compete. He only competes with himself. His struggles take place inwardly, not against his companions, but against his own ignorance and clumsiness..." [Bojesen 2] The Black Mountain Program always focused on two goals: building a community where people shared common aspirations and responsibilities, and creating a climate where the highest quality art could be created. [Duberman 253]

Louis Adamic, who visited the college in 1936, was convinced that the methods used in BMC would trigger the beginning of a great social change, an antidote to the individualism that destroyed American society. Through the eyes of his imagination, he saw three hundred BMC-inspired educational institutions scattered around the country, which would be established over the following fifteen years. He did not realize that the existence of even one such university is a utopian task that is almost impossible to achieve in the long run.

In a leaflet published in 1952 (probably written by Charles Olson) we read that BMC's hereticism is based on two simple and classic assumptions. First of all, it is the students, not the curricula, that are the focus of the university, because it is for them that the college exists. Secondly, the ability of university staff members who are ready to work with students, perceived as the center, is measured by their skills and knowledge. Their pedagogical skills and mastery in their discipline justify their work with students. It was obvious to the university that a lecturer had to be active in the field of art, that they could not be a passive link in the

transmission of knowledge, that they had to be productive, creative and inspire people gathered around them. A good teacher must develop together with his or her students, he or she must be able to learn rather than teach, and he or she must have a strong sense of justice. The flyer says: "Teachers in places like these where education is taken seriously must remember that they are the central concern, that free education is about allowing students to see how we educate ourselves." [Katz 202]

It is worth mentioning that there were two students per teacher. Black Mountain College also recognised that ideas are manifested primarily in things and deeds. An important concept implemented in BMC was the conviction that it is not the things themselves that are important, but the relations between them. The university realized its curriculum by emphasizing the importance of processability, paying more attention to the methodology than to the content of theory. While emphasizing the importance of the workshop and knowledge of the facts of science, one should not forget about their limitations. Art must help regain the communication skills lost by our societies, it must teach us how to move, listen, and touch without fear, it must make us sensitive to our surroundings, especially people. The key to the BMC's educational concept was to emphasize the importance of experimentation in art. Students were encouraged to freely search, take artistic risks, and experience the associated risks of failure. The BMC did not apply the commonly used rules of formal assessment. Each student at the beginning of his or her studies chose their advisor, with whom they agreed on a program best suited to their needs. The studies were divided into two phases: junior and senior division. It was up to each student to decide when to take a test in order to progress to a higher level [Duberman 36].

In the first months of its existence, the BMC had already started to look for people who could take responsibility for the most important elements of the curriculum of the university. On the advice of Philip Johnson, head of the architecture department of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Josef Albers, who had been associated with the Bauhaus school from its beginnings in 1923 in Weimar and also taught there when it was transferred to Dessau, was chosen by Philip Johnson. On November 24, 1933, a ship with

the symbolic name SS Europa arrived in New York, on which Josef and Anni Albers were accompanied by other educators from Dessau, such as Wassily Kandinsky and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. At Bauhaus, Albers had been responsible for the initial teaching, which introduced students to working with basic materials such as clay, glass, fabric, wood, metal, and stone. The work with such materials was used to introduce aesthetic issues, such as the issues of studies of nature, geometric compositions, color theory, space and design.

The Albers couple spent sixteen years at BMC and had a major influence on the artistic program of the university, which became a symbol of personal freedom, freedom of choice, freedom of teaching methods, artistic experimentation, and diversity.

Anni Albers played no less of a role at Black Mountain College than Josef. She founded a weaving workshop at the university and her pedagogical work coincided with the most fruitful period of her artistic career, magnified by an individual exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1949. When Josef Albers first appeared at Black Mountain College, he was not yet able to communicate well in English. However, when asked by a student what goals he set himself in teaching, Albers had an answer prepared: "To open eyes! Open your eyes!" This statement became the motto of his studio. The role of the teacher was to make the student see more clearly. For Albers it was important to make his pupils aware of the rules of perception, to be able to communicate precisely and to separate the psychological reaction to color from its rational perception. But opening your eyes was not only about studying color. Albers was deeply convinced that in education it was more important to develop critical thinking skills, creative abilities, and social adaptability than just acquiring knowledge and skills. Education should be based on philosophy and ethics [Katz 20-52]. Richard C. Emanuel wrote that Josef and his wife Anni Albers did not teach art, they taught life, and art was their tool.

The phenomenon of Black Mountain College was that the university did not limit itself to learning one style or one concept of art. In the history of the school many trends and artistic disciplines appeared. Apart from the Albers, Gropius, and Alexander Schawinsky, who were connected with the Bauhaus, there

were also such abstract artists as Robert Motherwell, Franz Kline, and Willem and Elaine de Kooning. At BMC, the classes were led by the legendary visionary, architect, poet and philosopher Richard Buckminster Fuller, who developed a rational and feasible concept to provide every inhabitant of the Earth with a high-quality place to live. The college also became an important place for experimental music and dance. John Cage and Merce Cunningham, among others, were invited to the summer sessions. The Black Mountain Review magazine was also in circulation, publishing prose, poetry, translations, and art criticism. It is the diversity of many attitudes and views on art in comparison with the energy and faith of lecturers and the openness to different fields of artistic and scientific activity that has made BMC legendary as an unsurpassed, utopian model of connecting the artists' colony with the school. All this does not mean that life in such a community went on without conflicts and tensions, that students were not disappointed or discouraged, that there were no fractional fights between individuals. Psychologist John Wallen, who taught courses in psychology in Black Mountain and who demythologized the utopian assumptions of the university in practice, asked questions about whether there was a conflict of interest between the development of creative individuality and community building. Can artists bear the burden of responsibility associated with the duties of living together? Is it possible to function fully in a community and to create art at the same time? How are the concepts of closeness and loneliness defined in such a small community? Does sincerity temper aggression or does it only suppress it? Why live in a commune whose reasons for its existence, i.e. escape from manipulation, industrialization and materialism, are above all negative? What kind of people cherish the positive impulses of sharing and contact with others? [Duberman 238]? Wallen also believed that the traumatized refugees from Europe, who dominated the university, could talk a lot about democracy and to some extent practice its forms, but in fact they could not feel it [Emanuel 242].

One may ask a question as to whether the repetition of a similar experiment is possible anywhere today. The simplest suggestion seems to be that if there was a wealthy and intelligent sponsor, a similar university could be created. This recipe, however, is seemingly

the only solution to the problem. The essence of BMC's success was its independence, which entailed constant financial difficulties and ultimately led to the termination of its activity. A necessary condition for the functioning of such a university is its self-governance, and not yielding to external influences and the whims of even the most favorable sponsors. Another necessary condition is the appearance at the university of active pedagogical artists who will represent different views and who will be united by a serious attitude towards education and art. In an ideal world it would be a unique collection of artists, poets, architects, intellectuals, musicians, filmmakers, and inventors of all kinds. They should be people with different cultural backgrounds, including refugees from countries at war or persecuted by dictatorships, for whom the university would become a safe haven to start a new life. Unfortunately, the creation of such a place in Poland today would be ruled out as, according to the current authorities, it would threaten national security. Students should also come from different countries if possible, representing different cultures, social backgrounds, and interests. All unconventional candidates, regardless of their economic status, should have access to universities. An open question is whether a better place for such a university would be an isolated seaside or forest location, or a city centre pulsing with events. The center of such a school should be a large dining room, in which everyone would meet at the same time for a common meal prepared together. To make this possible, the university cannot be large. In this small community, most university decisions would be made jointly at meetings where students and lecturers would discuss all matters until unanimity is reached. The program of such a university would be to mould the citizens of artists to democracy, which would then be able to creatively change and renew both art and politics.

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ABSTRACT

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American Dream – Art, Freedom, Experiment and Educational Utopia in Action

This text discusses the pedagogical and artistic experiences of the author during his stay at Florida Atlantic University as part of the Fulbright Program. It is an attempt to compare dominating trends in the art education system in Poland and the USA. The reference point for the comparison are the achievements of Black Mountain College, which today remains an unparalleled model of education, not only in the field of art but also ideas of a university open to the challenges of democracy.

Keywords: art, education, democracy, Black Mountain College

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