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SELF PORTRAIT WITH A MASK

“Every *work of art* is the child of *its time*, and, in many cases, the mother of our emotions.”
Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*

The two years 2020 and 2021 were marked by the COVID-19 pandemic – a lengthy period of time in which everyone felt in danger of losing one’s health or life. As a result, many people were experiencing negative emotion, becoming subject to psychological stress: feeling anxious, fearful, frustrated, upset, depressed. In such situations, finding motivations to overcome these feelings is crucial and positive, as it helps people to overcome inactivity and achieve goals. During the phase of stress mobilization, one often experiences elevated efficiency of intellectual and cognitive processes: the ability to make associations and conceive unique ideas is enhanced, as well as one’s sensitivity to stimuli; which results in people accessing a greater range of their potential abilities (Frączek, Kofta, „Frustracja i stres psychologiczny”/ “Frustration and Psychological Stress”).

What I am about to present is an attempt to address the question of the influence which the COVID-19 pandemic, as a socially challenging experience, may have had on the spontaneity and

authenticity of creative imagination possessed by people studying architecture. Obligatory isolation, social distancing and other restraining regulations, dangers stemming from the infectious qualities of the disease, finally the huge number of gravely ill and deceased victims – those circumstance served as a trigger to ask architecture students at the Gdańsk University of Technology to create a piece on the topic *Self Portrait with a Mask* as part of their sculpture course.

It was assumed that the abovementioned circumstance would become a strong context for students’ creative activity. The assignment aimed at each student creating a composition, involving their own bust, that would creatively illustrate the author’s emotional state- sensations, thoughts and feelings experienced at the time of pandemic; along with an additional element – a short description of certain emotions that motivated the author to work. With the information at the back of their heads that the virus is spreading, and inspired by the government regulation that made everyone wear face masks, but at the same time not being literal when it came to the form, each student was obliged to create two black-and-white photographs. The first one – the basis – was to document the person’s appearance, the second one was to present the created piece - *Self*

Portrait with a Mask. Students were free to choose the technique.

Here we present photographic documentation of individual pieces created by students in 2020 and at the beginning of 2021 within the framework of their sculpture course. The course, for obvious safety reasons, was online. This manner of conducting courses by tutors of the Visual Arts Department was compulsory during the spring term of 2019/2020 as well as the winter term of 2020/2021 – during the first and the second wave of the pandemic – so that all students were able to continue their education in an isolated environment, outside the walls of the university. Therefore the presented material may also be analyzed and used to assess the productivity of the abovementioned course having gone online.

Facing the specific convention of the classes, due to the unprecedented situation, academic tutors ensured total creative freedom for their students, and remained engaged in the process by providing regular online consultations. Thus, all authors were supported by their tutors' remarks and guidance offered in a manner that would not interfere with the authentic creative thought or individual expression of each student completing the task, but would gently stimulate imagination. The positive climate of partnership and unforced dialogue enticed everyone's full focus on the task's aim; what is more, it strengthened their faith in the uniqueness of artistic expression. In this situation, an academic tutor has inevitably become the first viewer of numerous a works of art, with a mission to discretely supervise their authors so that the final piece would emerge. And so, we can see the extremely diverse set of artistic forms – unique and individual, stemming from the extraordinary explosion of creative potential. These are mostly unconventional works presenting inorganic visual forms and structural compositions created as an answer to this specific task.

Due to the particular circumstance, the location of realization and, which was often the case, due to the ephemeral character of the pieces, they were photographically documented and submitted via e-mail to be assessed at the end of the term. The next stage, and naturally the final part of the artistic and didactic process, was their permanent exhibition in the representative area at one of the historical

buildings of the Gdańsk University of Technology. This exhibition will include two large-sized photographic boards that would showcase all pieces from the spring term of 2019/2020 and the winter term of 2020/2021. Therefore, it is clear that despite the difficult conditions a monumental set of pieces marking their time was created within this specific course of study, a document of struggle, of everyone's fight with the pandemic which had caused global crisis. This document also illustrates the adaptive response which has ensured our survival (Selye, *The Stress of Life*). Our students, future architects, experienced this response in the form of creative activity, revealing unlimited creative potential and imagination when realizing an artistic task. Employing psychoanalytic theory, developed by Sigmund Freud and those who followed (Freud, *Ego and Defense Mechanisms*), one can associate this positive effect with the students' readiness to sublimate their difficult emotions, thoughts and feelings into artistic activity. Sublimation as a psychological skill performed on a bigger, social scale can certainly be life-saving during such a challenging time.

In summary, based on the results of the abovementioned artistic assignment, one can assume that during the extremely trying times of the pandemic the Internet enables us to contact each other and undertake actions; whereas artistic work – remaining a *katharsis* – is a marvelous antidote that in many cases may minimize further development of stress mechanisms.

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Self-portrait with a Mask
The second wave of Covid-19 pandemic
Term III 2020/2021









