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Review of the PhD dissertation and artistic achievements of Natalia Wiernik, MFA, prepared in connection with the commencement of a doctoral degree conferral procedure in the field of visual arts in the discipline of fine arts, accepted by the Faculty of Graphic Arts of the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków

#### I. Personal data.

Natalia Wiernik was born in Kraków in 1989. In the years 2008-2013, she studied at the Faculty of Graphic Arts of the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow. She was granted her diploma from Assoc. Prof. Agata Pankiewicz's Photography Studio I in 2013. In the same year, she took up third-cycle studies at the Interfaculty Doctoral Studies Centre at the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow, where she was admitted to a PHD programme.

#### II. Teaching and organisational activity.

Within the frame of the Interfaculty Doctoral Studies, Natalia Wiernik was involved in teaching activities and, many times, in organisational and curatorial duties in connection with exhibitions held by Photography Studio I. While organising workshops and exhibitions, delivering lectures and participating in seminars, she closely collaborated with numerous cultural institutions, e.g. Bunkier Sztuki Gallery in Kraków, International Cultural Centre (MCK) in Kraków, Museum of History of Photography (MHF) in Kraków, Małopolska Garden of Arts (MOS) and Historical Museum of the City of Kraków (MHK). The complete list of venues together with a detailed description of her activities can be found in the documentation submitted by her.

#### III. Assessment of the artistic achievements.

The artistic achievements of Natalia Wiernik are impressive. In the years 2011-2017, she took part in over twenty exhibitions, including seven individual ones. Her works have been displayed both in the country and abroad, inter alia in California, Cologne, Munich, Los Angeles, London, Houston, New York, Düsseldorf, Zurich and Paris. Natalia Wiernik has won nineteen awards and distinctions, and, which is significant, a vast majority of them have been won abroad, like a distinction in the Top 75 of the international design competition (Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, Rijks Award 2017), the Grand Prix in the international photographic competition Celest Prize 2015 (Visible White in Florence), the Grand Prix in the 2014 PDN Photo Annual (New York, USA), the first prize in the Portrait category and the Honourable Mention in the Family category in the Px3 2015 Competition (Paris Photo France), the Grand Prix in the international competition World Photography Awards (London) in the Student Focus category. The complete impressive list of her exhibitions, awards, publications, scholarships and grants can be found in the submitted documentation. This list leaves no doubt as to the significance of her artistic accomplishments.

She first drew my attention as an artist thanks to her amazing diploma cycle, entitled "The Protagonists". Considering her artistic achievements, I will dwell on this particular cycle for a while as it contains characteristic motifs and concepts, which are, in my opinion, still present in her creative activity with regard to some aspects. This spectacular debut was really astonishing because of its perfection and formal originality and virtually hypnotised with visual gorgeousness. Nevertheless, which I think is the most important, the aim of these visual fireworks was not only to stun with technical virtuosity. The visual gorgeousness of these works was organically bound to the idea underlying them. Making use of basic physiology related to the perceptual capabilities of the human eye, Natalia Wiernik hid, amidst a dense visual structure, what is difficult (most difficult) to discern in the reality experienced by us, namely another human being with his/her ordinariness, his/her "banal" normality. This kind of ordinariness is the sphere which is most carefully protected by everybody. Unveiling it makes us vulnerable to being hurt, and therefore camouflage becomes a routine, frequently instinctive, everyday practice. The works of Natalia Wiernik reveal this mechanism in a surprisingly simple way. When we finally get through the visual cover, obsessively replete with ornaments, we reach an ordinary portrait, the real image of the portrayed individual, and at the very moment we have managed to do this, the significance of this cover virtually disappears. It is a perfect visualisation of interpersonal relationships; when we really get to know someone,

all social niceties with their convolutions fade away. Natalia Wiernik showed it in such an explicit and, at the same time, simple way that it is truly astonishing that nobody had come across this idea before. Certainly, the topic had been taken up in visual arts before, but it would be difficult to point out to obvious and straightforward analogies. Most probably, what really matters here is the fact of that the author made use of adequate, currently valid, state-of-the-art (in the technological sense) means of artistic expression. In this context, what confirms her creative maturity is that she is able to look above the pure fascination with technological novelties. The perfectly controlled medium is for Natalia Wiernik just a means to achieve the end, and not an end in itself.

The characteristic features, which are incessantly visible in older and newer realisations of Natalia Wiernik, are, in my view, in a formal sense, technical perfection and considerable visual saturation. It can be said that Natalia Wiernik creates images which are high calorie. It can be also said that her images are baroque in character, but I would broaden the common understanding of the notion of baroque with regard to Natalia Wiernik's artistic stance. I would broaden it to include also the conceptual layer of her works. Baroque refers to spectacular visual effects, excess and plethora, but also to the awareness of transitoriness, which is the reverse of the sense of satiety. *Memento mori* is like a shadow inseparably linked to the glamour of wealth. The brighter this lustre is, the darker the shade of this shadow will be - all of us know this rule from Baroque paintings.

#### IV. Assessment of the PhD dissertation.

I was rather surprised by the PhD dissertation of Natalia Wiernik. Nevertheless, in the submitted documentation and a face-to-face conversation, the doctoral student presented a comprehensive and highly convincing explanation of her assumptions and motivations. I have to admit that she impressed me by her courage and uncompromising attitude no less than by the substantive and technical thoroughness of the proposed PhD dissertation. Obviously, she could have stuck to the formerly set course, which was ambitious enough. Instead, in the course of her curatorial-artistic activities, she decided to only partly make use of her characteristic visual language and exploit it only, so to say, instrumentally to achieve the assumed goals, precisely where (and only there!) she thought it would be appropriate. The entire cycle of her curatorial-artistic activities *Well-being* is a complicated and multithreading narrative. We can notice the already mentioned baroque at numerous levels. The cycle includes non-intrusive and originally formulated vanitative themes (*Wystawa/Display*), illusion and a play with visuality in the cycle *Salty Bread (Słony chleb)*, which is also present in the cycle *Re-Collections (Re-kolekcje)*, being in itself, which is significant, a dialogue with Baroque painting. The cycle *Re-Collections* is the most visually spectacular of all the presented realisations; what we see in it is the Natalia Wiernik who is the provider of high-calorie images, who once spread a visual camouflage net over the intimate banality of the portrayed people and who now decides to blend the banality of contemporary bibelots with the noble surface of Baroque paintings. And she does it so immaculately that her works become visual puzzles, which, when we manage to solve them, provide us with a reward, i.e. the opportunity to see anew objects which in the course of our everyday lives have become virtually lucent.

The prevailing theme in Natalia Wiernik's activities is reflecting over excess, plethora, accumulation of both cultural and material goods. It looks as if she was constantly asking the question: *OK, we've got everything we need, so what shall we do about it?* So formulated a question can refer directly to consumption as such, and to cultural heritage as well. This heritage, as we know well enough, can be both a blessing and a curse for an artist. The object which Natalia Wiernik, intentionally or unintentionally, picked up as the one which embodies all these dilemmas is the saltcellar. A banal object which becomes the subject of particular attention, a kind of strongly biased cult, when perceived in the context of a specific collection, a peculiar museum, i.e. the Salt Mine Museum in Wieliczka. The original, and even absurd, idea of Natalia Wiernik's was implemented by her with impressive, iron consistency. It resulted in a multi-layered realisation, including stop-motion animations, which consisted of her activities involving the collection of saltcellars, an exhibition of these animations in the mine and a performance accompanying this exhibition, which was a quote of the back-stage reality of a museum institution.

The activities planned in such a way required her to undertake collaboration with a peculiar administrative and organisational structure of a museum (each museum), which brought about unavoidable reflections upon a museum as an institutionalised form of accumulation of cultural property, i.e. a form of institutionalised excess. The meanders of these thoughts sometimes assumed surprising forms. For example,

making one of the chambers suitable for the purposes of the exhibition required , the so-called, hammering off. Salt icicles had to be hammered off the walls by mountaineers. And so it happened. The ripped off crystals kept falling to the floor for many days as if the chamber itself had been transformed into a gigantic saltcellar with the only exception that the salt did not get outside but fell to the ground. The situation became a metaphor of the museum as an institution, where exhibits are stored, preserved, restored and protected against everything external. An interesting coincidence is the fact that salt was one of the first preservatives, widely used to protect goods (mostly food) against decay.

It would be possible to follow the meanders of the reflections contained in Natalia Wiernik's PhD dissertation for a much longer time, yet the constraints of the format of a review of a PhD thesis do not allow for that.

In summary, I would like to emphasize the following virtues of Natalia Wiernik's PhD dissertation:

- Originality, innovative character and adequacy of the applied means of expression, oscillating on the border of curatorial and artistic practices.
- Maturity of her reflections upon cultural heritage as juxtaposed with challenges posed by the contemporary world.
- High efficiency, so rare among artists, of implementing logistically and organisationally complex undertakings with a special stress on collaboration with museum institutions, which are conservative by nature.
- Social significance of the dissertation, connected with a critical and comprehensive reflection on a museum perceived as an institution gathering, describing and making accessible collections of cultural artefacts.

#### IV. Conclusion

Considering the substantial artistic accomplishments and the original input into the art of preparing PhD dissertations presented by Natalia Wiernik, I strongly support the application, submitted by the Faculty Board of the Faculty of Graphic Arts at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków, for conferring a doctoral degree in the field of visual arts in the discipline of fine arts upon her.