

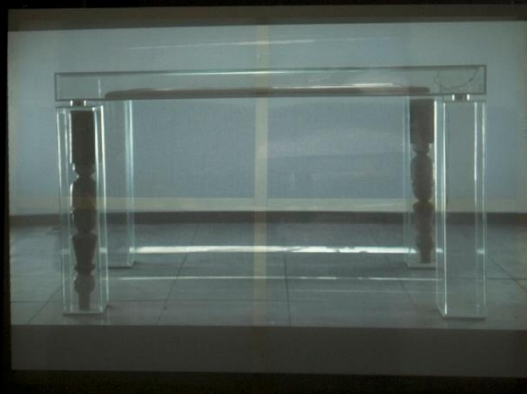
Agnieszka Lasota  
...And this room will be empty  
*/ ...A ten pokój będzie pusty*  
2011

Zona Sztuki Aktualnej, Łódź  
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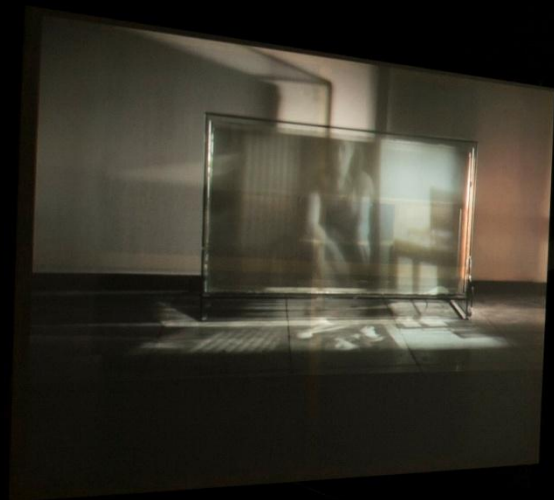
Text/ tekst  
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One of the best-known of Buddhist texts is the *Heart Sūtra*. Also known as the *Essence of Wisdom Sūtra*, it forms part of the *Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras*. It has been said of this very brief collection of writings that it “ (...) is much shorter than the other *Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras* but it contains explicitly or implicitly the entire meaning of the longer Sūtras”. At the same time, it is the most widely-known Buddhist text in the world and has enjoyed popularity for more than one-and-a-half thousand years in countries following the *Mahābhājana* tradition of Buddhism . And it is in the *Heart Sūtra* that a famous expression is found; to wit, “Form is empty. Emptiness is form”.

The tradition of the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* enumerates sixteen different types of emptiness. At the same time, none of them whatsoever should be interpreted as a state close to nihility. However, this preamble is not intended to demonstrate that the concept of *Emptiness* is, in certain of its aspects, central to the philosophy of the East and, in particular, of Buddhism. That would, at bottom, be a colloquialism; it is something known to everyone who has ever had even a superficial encounter with that tradition. Yet, since the opportunity has arisen, it is worth endeavouring to shed some light on the verse of the *Heart Sūtra* quoted above.

This teaching, known as the Doctrine of Emptiness, makes it possible to see that physical objects, such as chairs, tables and even people, do not exist in the way we assume them to. Acting in accord with the Doctrine, one perceives the impermanency of things without denying them their reality. In essence, it is impossible to discern differences between the nature of individual objects, for they are all fundamentally ‘empty’. At the same time, the differences between them should be only be sought in the way in which we perceive them, as occurs, for instance, when two different chairs are observed. Becoming aware of the fact of ‘emptiness’ does away with the fear and desire which things elicit in us and brings about the elimination of spiritual ignorance. It is not, however, identical to the painful act of renouncing them. If one perceives that all things are inwardly empty, then one also sees that they all possess but one and the same fundament, one and the same nature. It is believed that the state of mind which renders possible this very insight into the essence of things would resemble the ability to constantly receive the world with a consciousness of its molecular structure; what we then see are objects in their form, without denying them reality, but we also perceive their physical structure, the atoms and molecules from which they are constructed. Seeing this state, the state of the emptiness of objects, in their form, is therefore a fullness, for it is then, when we experience this fact, that we are able to use things, but they will never use us.



In Western civilisation, however, *Emptiness*, in the sense of a state of things, has never had a good press. As a simple confirmation of that point of view, one might, for instance, call upon an oft-repeated maxim formulated by the French physician and humanist, François' Rabelais, "*Natura abhorret a vacuo*" ("Nature abhors a vacuum"). In this case, Nature has a role which is constant, which exists above and beyond Emptiness, dominating it and deciding as to its being and not being. If we listen intently and attentively to Rabelais' words, what emerges from them is a Nature which always comports itself fittingly, in which regard it rightly eliminates Emptiness, replacing it with the desired Fullness. Emptiness is a state unwanted and unworthy of contemplation. It emerges hand in hand with loss, which is why, in contemporary psychology, it is linked with a state of mourning, sorrow and loneliness and even with melancholia and depression.

Such perceptions of the state of Emptiness have been preserved in our consciousness, pervading mass culture. At this point, there is a film that might well be called to mind as an example. *The NeverEnding Story*, tells the tale of a fantasy world, Fantasia, a world being threatened by an encroaching force called The Nothing and also spoken of as the Great Nothing. Though it would be difficult to imagine what such a thing might look like, nonetheless, all creatures flee from It, great and small, for this terrifying, mysterious, imminent Something spares no one. Its approach is bound up with the loss of memory; when the last human forgets Fantasia, then The Nothing will come. Yet, if anyone at all remembers, then Fantasia will endure.

The battle between Good and Evil fought out in the film is a battle for the constancy of memory. It may, indeed, be in this unexpected place that we acquire a key to understanding the differences between what might be called, with vast simplification, the 'Eastern' and 'Western' understanding of Emptiness. Western societies have focussed first and foremost on leaving their footprint behind them for future generations. Their actions, in a wide sense, have been grounded in the notion that their memory should not be lost together with death and passing, since oblivion means emptiness, which is to say, nothing. Dread of this is accompanied by the fear and, as a consequence, the abjuration of Emptiness, the perception of it as something evil and, in that respect, temporary. All of which compels people to leave traces behind them, traces which will ward off the emergence of Emptiness, in other words, of oblivion and loss. As a counterpoint, this is probably a good moment to cite a famous saying coined by Jiddu Krishnamurti, a saying which, contrary to widespread interpretation, has nothing in common with humility and asceticism; " [...] when the eagle leaves its footprints, there is misery in the world" .

Jiddu Krishnamurti, *The Only Revolution*, California, Part 2; <http://www.jiddu-krishnamurti.net/en> on 17th August 2011.

A question arises... so, what on earth has all that just been about? Well, in an era of unceasing pressure to produce things, a place for Emptiness is all the more absent in the contemporary everyday. Reality is jam-packed with objects. One set of things is the reason for the next set to appear. The process of producing seems to be a process without end. Yet Agnieszka Lasota's work disrupts that process and generates Emptiness. Her ...*this room will be empty* exhibition consists purely of video films devoted to her previous designs, including *Furniture with Memory*, *Wreath Lamp* and *Sunflower (The Dowry)*, with each work being given its own, separate projection. ...*this room will be empty* functions within the specific context which is the Łódź Design International Design Festival, the largest event of its kind in Poland.

While this context does not condition the exhibition, it does, without a doubt, considerably enhance its eloquence. The festival is organised around objects and, indeed, devoted to them. Meanwhile, ...*this room will be empty* not only presents no objects, but also, quite simply, eliminates their presence. The traces of their physicality are there only in the form of digital photographs. And suddenly, tables, lamps and mirrors turn out to be the same. We **see** their dissimilarity, manifest in diverse shapes and various functions. Yet, in fact, when we look mindfully, what we perceive with each new image is that what we are seeing is always the same. The same fundament. Does this not echo the Buddhist Doctrine of Emptiness? By means of this treatment, Lasota breaks free from what would be the trap of simply replacing objects with other objects and, instead, for instance, substitutes video projections for *Furniture with Memory*. Nonetheless, in reducing a diversity of things to a common denominator, she performs a radical unmasking of the nature of objects, to refer back once again to the quotation from the *Heart Sūtra* given at the beginning of this piece. ...*this room will be empty* can thus be considered on several planes, as well as being perceived as a radical gesture renouncing the production of new things, which, after all, is what a work of art is, in essence.

Yet again, Agnieszka Lasota pinpoints the senseless and unthinking duplication of things, objects with which our everyday is glutted, their presence fatiguing and, in point of fact, needless. In her designs, she has more than once made reference to the curious and over-elevated status of the object in a contemporary society which is grounded solely in consumption, as well as pointing up the social ills which bring a surfeit and excess of things in their wake. This time, rather than proffer new objects via an exhibition, she deconstructs those which already exist. In offering the public substitute objects in the form of video images, she gives us a hint, speaking of the essence of things. At the same time, she releases us from the compulsion of consumption, inviting us to partake of the difficult celebration of the ephemeral state of *Absence*.

Cooperation/*współpraca*  
Stanisław Syrewicz (sound/*dźwięk*)  
Julian Kernbach (video)

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Photo/*zdjęcia*  
Jerzy Gregorski

**ART**<sub>on</sub>