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ISOLATION VERSUS THE OPENING PARADOX. SPACE IN HUMAN LIFE AND VARIOUS ASPECTS OF ITS CLOSURE

Art research paper

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Abstract

A safe comfort zone is the basis for a sense of security and stability. It provides people with optimal conditions for development, ensuring them freedom of choice, removing barriers to personal success or development. This statement is self-evident and is almost treated as dogma. At the same time, however, it is worth paying attention to the phenomenon of paradox that appears when the lack of challenges reduces the motivation to self-fulfillment. Natural ambition is stimulated by the gradual achievement of new thresholds. Isolation, a disturbance of the mental and physical comfort zone during a pandemic, triggered two different reactions. The first consists in passive resignation and vegetative expectation of change coming from the outside, while the second is in taking active action aimed at facing the situation, taking up the challenge it brings.

Keywords

art, visual art, space, isolation, Janusz Przybylski, Edward Hopper, Krzysztof Ślachciak

Space in the context of human life

Space is phenomenon which is obvious, on the one hand, and extremely important, on the other hand. However, while the impact of managing this space on man attracts great, and just, interest because of real and clear effects on the functioning of ourselves, the very fact of its existence no longer raises much reflection. This truism, as something obvious and indisputable, usually remains on the margins of research and reflection.

The pandemic reality, which has a huge impact on all aspects of our lives, has at the same time aroused interest in issues that have hitherto been overlooked. The world, previously relatively predictable and, it would seem, known, suddenly turned out to be a place completely different and exposed us to new problems. They were also followed by new questions. The very concept of space has become interesting, gaining further meanings and references.

Space in the context of human functioning can be seen in an external sense, as a set of conditions and physical realities of its existence, but also in an internal sense, as a certain self-defined sense, a sense of consciousness of a certain, own, zone in which we enter into relations with ourselves and with the outside world. Last year, together with the CoViD restrictions, raised the issue of closure to the surface of our collective everyday life, while at the same time inextricably binding it to the space in question in both aspects. The need to change the routine that had been known so far, to give up many habits, mobility and, above all, direct social contacts on the earlier scale, has influenced the perception of this small personal world in which we have come to function. Its borders have not only have become tighter and restrictive but, more importantly from our point of view, more felt. What we had not even fully realized so far has initially become a shocking and, in the next stage, extremely demanding reality, often forcing us to take certain actions or adopt a certain position.

Four aspects of lockdown

In the context of the above thoughts, it is possible to distinguish not only two basic views on the space itself, internal and external, but also, above all, different aspects of the idea of its closure. It is worth taking a closer look at them, both against the background of current events and works of art coming from more distant moments in history.

Institutional isolation is the most obvious and pervasive today. This happened many times in history, as it is now, in connection with plagues, but never on such a large scale in territorial terms and not for such a long period. It is not surprising, therefore, that the current isolation has become a catalyst for change and for reflection on ourselves, our environment, local and global problems.

Much more universal and timeless are other forms of closure, for the purposes of this analysis assigned to four different phenomena and behaviors. The first two aspects refer to the concept of inner, spiritual space, that is, the cut-off from the outside world, its stimuli and correlation. On the one hand, it is a voluntary closure, arising from one's own need, positive or negative – from the desire to focus on, calm down or find oneself, or from fear, or from a sense of inadaptation. On the other hand, there is the age-old problem of self-containment, which is somewhat imposed from the outside and involuntary. The repeatedly raised so-called “loneliness in the crowd” is the result of a lack of understanding, isolation from the rest of the community. In this case, the closure occurs somewhat from outside, by leaving a person to their own fate.

The issue of physical closure, consisting in real isolation in an enclosed space – house, prison, hospital room – can be considered differently. Its existence is not the result of spiritual needs or relations with the world but has its origins usually in institutional decisions, random events, unfortunate or punishable events. It is a physical cut-off, imposed more or less arbitrarily. Its impact on man, however, is huge, albeit diverse. Two more views on the closure can be extracted on this plane.

In the history of art we meet works that relate to all the above aspects but those that refer to spiritual isolation will definitely dominate. To illustrate this division, examples of current works and phenomena will be discussed.

Self-closure

An extremely accurate view of the first of these aspects, resulting from the dilemmas and fears of men, is the graphic of Janusz Przybylski, “So many birds to catch”, from 1969. It is an etching in the colors of white, black and red, showing three figures in the symbolic indefinite interior, to which light flows down through the low and wide hole placed high under the ceiling. The lower edge of the window is uneven, jagged, as if unstable, not entirely material. On the visible fragment of the sky soar birds of restless shapes. On the floor, half-kneeling, sits the man. He looks on the wall with absent sight, his arms tied up or tightly interlinked are invisible. Only the protruding elbow is seen against the background of the wall on which the shadow falls – unusual, corresponding to the sitting man, but showing not his body but the bird figure, standing on emaciated human legs, with limply hanging wings. Only one eye shines among the pale red. The other two figures are small, occupied by their own affairs, sunk in their world. Both contain an element of understatement, pure, unfilled white. One of them, facing the whole scene, supports the block, as if an incompletely polished rock, and seems fully reconciled, even satisfied, with his fate. The second, leaning low above the ground, presses to the ground the bird's silhouette with a long beak and a dead gaze, a shape similar to that visible in the form of the shadow.



Figure 1. Janusz Przybylski, Tyle ptaków do złapania, 1969, etching, <https://zacheta.art.pl/pl/kolekcja/katalog/przybylski-janusz-tyle-ptakow-do-zlapania-2> [accessed on: 30.05.2021]

Crucial is the light coming from the outside: red, disturbing, but also reviving the silent emptiness of the cell. It brings out the essence of who we are and what gives real meaning to existence. However, nothing is obvious or easy. Self-realization is a challenge that requires strength and courage, sometimes giving up safety and comfort. The cramped basement space is a tempting asylum, it promises calm – dead, voiceless, but finally demanding nothing more. The main character's fight for himself is still ongoing, he is still in part in the light spot, although the light no longer reaches his face. It flows down the buttocks, forming a small puddle at the feet. It is significant that the shady birdy echo of his soul remains in a cage formed by the cube of light. His companions have long forgotten about his shining, there is barely a glare on the tops of their heads. The bird lying on the ground and the rock lump are now their small reality. Close, interim, safe. The deceptive comfort of stabilization kills in them the desire to counteract, they fall into semi-lethargy, vegetative continuance, solidified in anticipation of, and hope for, an impulse or a change that will occur on its own, without their participation. So many birds to catch and so little strength to reach out for them.

Exclusion

In contrast to the peculiar freedom of choice of this spiritual isolation, an undefined coercion characterizes the isolation imposed on, and equally difficult to combat by, man, experienced from the rest of the society. It involves the feeling that the whole world is closing in on itself, like in an anti-cage,

and only the individual has been thrown out of the bracket. It surrounds the person from all sides, can even be touched, but its pulse is indiscernible. The Man is alone, invisible, left behind. The story of such isolation resonates in works of many artists and in the hearts of most of us – at least once in the lifetime, though temporarily.

Edward Hopper is a master of these stories¹. In his paintings we see a reflection of ordinary scenes from our lives – these are simple, everyday stories. The realism of depictions, the excellent plasticity and the game of light enliven them extremely suggestively. On his canvases come to life cafes, bars, cinema halls, gas stations. But each of these spaces at the same time emanates a void in which it is so easy to get lost. The strength of these depictions lies in their authenticity. Their fullest being is felt not in the image but in the matter between the canvas and us². We see ourselves in them, we are overwhelmed by sadness or grief but, at the same time, we realize again and again that in this loneliness, paradoxically, we are not alone. This is not reassuring, does not bring comfort, but it is easier for us to understand that this is the principle of the world in which we live. Each of us, though in part, remains alone. A part of us will always remain alien, incomprehensible, considered from the sight of others and often of ourselves.

You can't escape such closure in your own loneliness. It is discernible not only in seclusion but especially among other people. It is significant that Hopper in his works so rarely shows scenes from outside the city. A kind of metropolitan imperative of pace and participation in a heterogeneous unsociable community reinforces the feeling of detachment from the original unity of man with the environment³. Then you can most often feel your own otherness and inadaptation hidden behind the absent gaze and polite indifference. A young attractive woman sitting at a café table in the "Automat" (1927) is located in one of the most crowded and anonymous types of restaurants. In this scene, however, there is no one but her. Seemingly focused on her cup, she looks at it mindlessly, suspended in a vacuum, semi-conscious, as emphasized by her gloves, of which she put on only one. In a huge window, infinite rows of lights reflect, suggesting space. It is filled with the same silence as the sounds of buzzing appliances in an abandoned kitchen – we hear them but, in fact, they only strengthen the feeling of separation from actual manifestations of life. The woman seems calm and tense at the same time, embarrassed, as if she felt that this is not a place intended for her. As if she were at a party to which she was not invited.

1 J. Stasiak-Harabin, *Samotność w wielkim mieście. Edward Hopper*, „Niezła Sztuka”, <https://niezlasztuka.net/o-sztuce/samotnosc-w-wielkim-miescie-edward-hopper/> [accessed on: 15.03.2021]; see also, *O mistrzu malarzkiej izolacji, czyli dziś wszyscy jesteśmy jak z obrazów Edwarda Hoppera*, „Minerva”, <https://www.laminerva.pl/2020/03/hopper-mistrz-malarzkiej-izolacji.html> [accessed on: 15.03.2021].

2 Cf. F. Lipiński, *Widzące obrazy. Motyw postaci w twórczości Edwarda Hoppera*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Adama Mickiewicza, Poznań 2007, s. 151–191, https://repozytorium.amu.edu.pl/bitstream/10593/11114/1/04_Filip_Lipi%C5%84ski_Widz%C4%85ce_obrazy_151-194.pdf [accessed on: 26.03.2021].

3 T. Slater, *Fear of the city 1882–1967: Edward Hopper and the discourse of anti-urbanism*, „Social & Cultural Geography”, Vol. 3, 2002, No. 2, p. 140–143, <https://www.geos.ed.ac.uk/~tslater/assets/Hopper.pdf> [accessed on: 27.03.2021].



Figure 2. E. Hopper, Automat, 1927, <https://www.anodine.org/pl/zapiski/sztuka/sztuki-wizualne/malarstwo/edward-hopper-2/> [accessed on:20.05.2021]

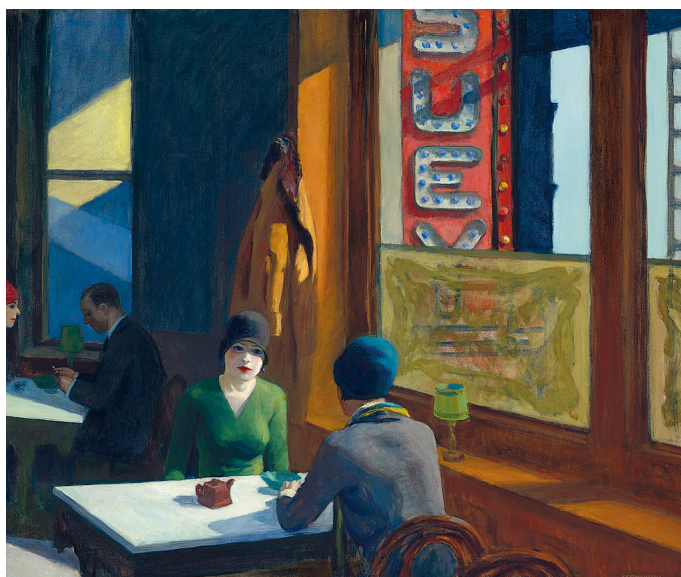


Figure 3. E. Hopper, Chop Suey, 1929, https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward_Hopper#/media/Plik:Edward_hopper_chop_suey.jpg [accessed on:20.05.2021]

She is not always alone. In the Chop Suey café (1929) she is accompanied by another young woman and behind her back at the table there are another couple. In fact, this does not change anything; on the contrary. Her loneliness is now even more intense, more like a blow. Her pale, heavily made-up face catches our eyes irresistibly, even mesmerizingly. It distracts our attention from the rest of the interior as if it were the only point in the vastness. Maybe the red lipstick is supposed to give corporeality to the woman who feels almost absent? The companion says something to her but she doesn't seem to hear. Words fly away as if they were bouncing against a glass wall. The light of sun, falling from behind the half-painted windows, strokes her on the face gently, warmly and affectionately. Nevertheless, the woman does not feel either warmth or this silent consolation. Among the light, the tables and, above all, the people she has fallen deep into herself, held her breath, focused on the pain enclosed in her.

Jonathan Jones wrote at the beginning of the pandemic: "We choose modern loneliness because we want to be free. But now the art of Hopper poses a tough question: when the freedoms of modern life are removed, what's left but loneliness?"⁴. But do we really choose this solitary freedom ourselves, in the name of self-reliance and independence? Is it not that we are confronted with an accomplished fact? It seems that the actual choice is largely imposed on us, leaving only an illusion of influencing our relationship with the world. With excess stimuli and too rapid pace, we do not have time to take root and fully feel and accept who we are.

Hopper's paintings are filled with a huge melancholic immobility. The gesture has cooled down, time has stopped for a blink of the eye. In a moment everything will move forward but, for this short moment, we stop pretending. Social haste, polite smiles and conversations come to a break to allow those emotions, which are so easy to push away, to surface for a while. His works, contrary to appearances, are saturated with the emotions, trembling from internal tension. The silence in them is almost tangible, burdensome, as if in anticipation. The question of the purpose of waiting is fascinating. Do the characters, and we with them, hope that something will ever change? Or would we like to be able to accept this void, come to terms with it, and get rid of illusions at the price of inner peace?

Destructive isolation

The other two aspects of the closure are closely related to its physicality and most strongly relate to the specific situation of the last year. Outdoor space, non-domestic, has become something special – appreciated, almost luxurious, but also a source of elusive threat. Last summer (2020), the National

4 J. Jones, „*We are all Edward Hopper paintings now*”: *is he the artist of the coronavirus age?*, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/mar/27/we-are-all-edward-hopper-paintings-now-artist-coronavirus-age> [accessed on: 30.03.2021].

Museum in Poznań held an exhibition of posters by Michel Quarez⁵. His works, devoted to the vast majority of outdoor events and social relations, are strongly linked – especially those on the first of the subjects – to the relevant group of people of Saint-Denis near Paris. Crucial in them is the reference to the community and its functioning. In posters informing about local events, the space shown in them units, invites people to be together. At the same time, it is relatively confined (to the city, district or a defined area) and accessible, but also tame. The colors, forms and cheerful folk symbolism contained in the projects create a friendly, open and integrating world. Its essence is the formation of bonds. This world encourages contact with one's own surroundings, with people but also with places. The places define people and contribute ingredients for building one's own identity.

The dozen or so months of restrictions have changed our perceptions. Querez's "celebrating" posters have also been affected by an unusual phenomenon. In the face of the current situation, they suddenly seem both alien, anachronistic and almost exclusive in their subject matter. We watch them with nostalgia, longing and affection as if they came from another world. The last aspects of the closure relate to the difficulty in accepting this condition. The public reaction to the first introduction of the restrictions, as well as changes in their perception in this context, are significant. In parallel, two attitudes develop, sometimes at different times, interfusing or exchanging each other. The first reaction comes from the destructive effect of isolation. The overwhelming by the imposed conditions can put out the enthusiasm for action, daily joy. It is an aspect of closure that physically cuts ties with the outside world, creating a barrier that is hard to overcome. The second attitude, on the other hand, involves the opposite. The closure within one's own circle, often within the four walls, has changed not only the perception of the outdoor space but also the home space. It has forced a confrontation with the image of oneself. Paradoxically, however, this coercion has in many cases proved to be a constructive impulse, stimulating search and alternative activities.

Isolation, associated with an imprisonment, illness or other life-affecting factors, is a demanding stimulus. It resonated in the art of the times of totalitarianism and in works of rejected or disabled artists: Egon Schiele, Frida Kahlo, Edward Munch, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Ludwig Heckel, Agnes Martin, Tehching Hsieh, Gülsün Karamustafa, Yayoi Kusama and many others.

The beginning of the fight against the pandemic was almost immediately reflected in art. There were numerous projects and Web sites or portals devoted to art created during isolation and showing its impact on the author and on the recipient. The British Tate museum has responded by collecting and showing inspirations from isolation over centuries⁶. The "Document Journal" has launched the "Art from Isolation" series, presenting works of contemporary artists, in response to the current situ-

5 *Michel Querez. Plakaty*, exhibition in National Museum in Poznań, 7.06.–30.08.2020, https://mnp.art.pl/wydarzenia_i_wystawy/michel-quarez-plakaty/ [accessed on: 20.03.2021].

6 *Making art in isolation*, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/talking-point/making-art-isolation> [accessed on: 15.03.2021].

ation⁷, magazines have begun publishing lists of artistic events accessible online⁸, and museums and galleries around the world have opened their virtual doors. Caroline Campbell, the director of the National Gallery in London, compared the institutions' activities to those during World War II, pointing them out as an inspiration⁹. The issue of art and society during the pandemic was also addressed by scientists from different fields¹⁰.

Works showing loneliness, loss and emptiness are an obvious and very personal artistic response. Rashid Johnson illustrates the drama and instability of this period. In a series of works, the "Anxious Red Drawings", showing the rhythmic restless pulsation of red spots¹¹. In his drawings, the individuality of individual emotions is combined with the ubiquity of the phenomenon of confusion and disorientation.

Xenophobia, intolerance and, above all, indifference comes from works of Matsuyama Miyabi who watched the beginnings of the epidemic in China. Her "Wandering Ghosts" series is filled with ethereal female characters with empty eyes and spectral bodies¹². Despite their weirdness and deadness, we equate with them. In the world saturated with resentment towards others, alienation and distrust, we are just like them. Half-alive, lost in the reality of being re-discovered but disappointing and fearful. The author observes the surroundings with us, mentally coming out of the body as a "wandering spirit". She looks from a distance at space which has unexpectedly become too tight to accommodate all the human diversity.

In her short cartoon-like comments, Emily Bernstein tells about the burn-out and the lack of motivation in the face of being isolated from the daily circle of friends and colleagues. The tenants of her cartoon houses, closed in their apartments, try to establish a substitute for the relationship based on residual one-sided ties. She herself struggles with discouragement, anger, loss, care and boredom.

7 L. Blum, *Art from Isolation: 11 Illustrators visualize our new dystopian reality*, „Document Journal”, 4.05.2020, <https://www.documentjournal.com/2020/05/art-from-isolation-11-illustrators-visualize-our-new-dystopian-reality/> [accessed on: 30.03.2021]; cf. L. Buck, *Coronavirus lockdown creativity continues with Grayson Perry's art club and the isolation art school*, „The Art Newspaper”, 17.04.2020, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/blog/coronavirus-lockdown-creativity-continues-with-grayson-perry-s-art-club-and-the-isolation-art-school> [accessed on: 5.04.2021].

8 *Art of isolation*, „Chrom-Art Magazine”, <https://www.chromart.org/the-art-of-isolation/> [accessed on: 15.03.2021].

9 M. Johnson, *The art of isolation: we speak to the artists and galleries finding ways to bring great works into our homes*, „Tempus Magazine”, 12.06.2020, <https://tempusmagazine.co.uk/news/the-art-of-isolation-we-speak-to-the-artists-and-galleries-finding-ways-to-bring-great-works-into-our-homes> [accessed on: 3.04.2021].

10 E. Marandet, H. Barratt, A. Fotopoulou, *Sztuka w izolacji – artystyczne odpowiedzi na Covid-19*, „The Polyphony”, <https://thepolyphony.org/2020/06/16/art-in-isolation-artistic-responses-to-covid-19/> [accessed on: 20.03.2021].

11 <https://www.vip-hauserwirth.com/online-exhibitions/rashid-johnson-untitled-anxious-red-drawings/> [accessed on: 5.03.2021].

12 J. Mayal Khanna, *How the global art world is responding to the COVID-19 lockdown*, „Architectural Digest”, 11.04.2020, <https://www.architecturaldigest.in/content/how-the-global-art-world-is-responding-to-the-covid-19-pandemic/> [accessed on: 7.03.2021]; Cf. artworks on: <https://matsuyamamiyabi.tumblr.com/post/183470901883/%E5%AD%A4%E9%AD%82the-wandering-ghost-2-follow-me-on-instagram> [accessed on: 7.03.2021].

The challenges posed by the world around and by her own expectations overwhelm her strength¹³. She admits with surprise: “I never knew an introvert could have these kinds of feelings!”¹⁴.

Very accurate in his observations is Krzysztof Ślachciak whose works, the “Separate Worlds. The Community in the New World.” series, show a man locked in a bubble of his own isolation but wishing to stay in touch with others at the same time. He presents works that combine photography and graphics. He pays attention to the specific one-way relationship, the ostensible nature and selectivity of his own image presented to the world. “Looking straight into the eyes has gained a new strength and meaning. After all, during a video call you can look at the monitor or at the camera, but never [at the both] at the same time,” noted the author. “These are words worth stopping at”¹⁵. By interacting via the Internet, often the only channel that connects us and our interlocutors, we create our image much more consciously than it would be the case in a direct relationship. Moreover, we are also reached by a highly processed image. The need to get out of the actual closure prompts the use of illusory opening, unfortunately its authenticity is questionable, or at least incomplete. The presented actions and emotions are reduced to sections of reality, difficult to verify in the face of the inability to transfer this to the sphere of physical presence.

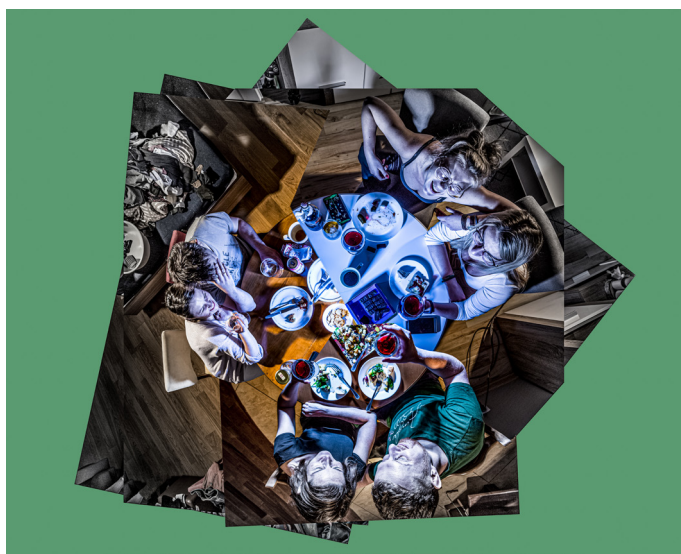


Figure 4. K. Ślachciak, *Światy odseparowane*, 2020, photo courtesy of the artist

13 E. Bernstein, *Mario. To ja*, <https://www.emilycbernstein.com/comics#/mario/> [accessed on: 7.04.2021].

14 L. Blum, *Art from Isolation*, *op. cit*

15 K. Ślachciak, *Światy odseparowane. Wspólnota w Nowym świecie*, https://impurephotography.eu/world-s-separated?fbclid=IwAR1InTHz_UWCLZ26L19MzmUyvC7ULm-zlOsi0fjMWHwK-B8eLA35_JV2Q5E [accessed on: 5.04.2021].

Stimulating isolation

Recent observations of the media and the art market clearly show the strong mobilization of many social groups which used to be disorganized. Social media are pulsing with grassroots initiatives, support groups and activities designed to enable, inspire and connect through art. For example, on April 7, 2021, the “Culture in Quarantine” group had over 96.6 thousand members on Facebook and 46.7 thousand posts with the #artinisolation hash tag on Instagram (compared to 16 thousand 10 months earlier, on May 6, 2020)¹⁶. The issue of isolation is still topical, although with each month and with successive “waves” of the pandemic, social attitudes, diverse from the beginning, anyway, change.

These reactions point to the last, fourth aspect of the closure, which is, apparently paradoxically, linked to the process of opening up. Any, even forced, cut-off from the previous rhythm of life forces you to confront yourself. This alone is extremely valuable, especially when it affects the elevation of self-awareness. Left to our own devices to a degree hitherto unknown, we have a chance to redefine our personal myths. The drama of the situation motivates us to find alternative solutions with regard to our own daily lives and expectations. Already at the beginning of the pandemic isolation there were voices highlighting the potential inherent in the isolation. Without detracting from the trauma of seclusion and its consequences, Olga Tokarczuk, in a column published in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (on April 1, 2020), spoke aloud the thought that comes out of the described artistic explorations and activities. The dizzying pace of life and the demands placed on man do not allow people to reflect on the proper meaning of their own existence, character or direction of decisions. The new state of inhibition made us realize that “our hectic mobility threatens the world” and raised the same question that we rarely had the courage to ask ourselves: “what are we actually looking for?”¹⁷. In the numerous summaries of 2020 posted on social media platforms it is surprisingly often repeated that, despite adversity and abnormality, it was a good year in the context of reflecting on ourselves and reevaluating our own lives.

Initial thoughts have undoubtedly evolved with the prolonged time of the suspension. Fatigue, frustration, concern for survival, in the context of both the disease and the economic standing, introduced new hues and voices. Whether the next year will end with similar self-reflective summaries is hard to predict. It seems more likely that, after at least a partial euphoria of returning to ourselves, further destabilization will become increasingly difficult with the gradual exhaustion of our abilities to live through the crisis and in the face of obstacles in create a lasting reality under new but still indeterminate conditions.

16 E. Marandet, H. Barratt, A. Fotopoulou, *Sztuka w izolacji, op. cit.*

17 O. Tokarczuk, *Nadejść nowe czasy*, „The Fad”, <https://thefad.pl/aktualnosci/nowe-czasy/?fbclid=IwAR2hg-znUEYdifDE-FVwFXE1vnyO4E5cPtO3MdhkOIVMIjoDVIfhPNah2Eww> [accessed on: 2.04.2021].

Space, endlessness and closure are concepts the connotations of which with human existence are numerous and diverse. The four aspects of the closure discussed above can certainly be translated into other situations, new planes and a multitude of instances. However, it seems that this very basic division between the physicality and metaphysicality, and the destructive and constructive influence, of the closure is an interesting foundation for further considerations. The inner space is shown in the works discussed through externality; what remains in the soul and mind gets an embodiment. Although we have seen this ploy in art since its onset, in this case the translation of physical space into this intangible one is particularly relevant and significant. Under the global isolation, the two begin to interfuse and combine in an inseparable way, affecting the whole of our perception of ourselves, the world and its individual elements, as well as changing their interaction with the advancing tightening of the pandemic regime.

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