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THE TRUTH OF AVANT-GARDE OR THE ILLUSION OF UTOPIA?

PRAWDA AWANGARDY, CZY ILUZJA UTOPII?

Abstract

Referring to Roman Ingarden's opinion expressed in *Studies of Aesthetics*, according to which the work is dependent on the material from which it is built, it can be stated that digital data, being the basic element creating the virtual reality around us, are also the basic building blocks of architecture, and more broadly, of space. The world constructed in this way is in many ways illusory, utopian. In this context, it is worth referring to Zaha Hadid's statement that "Every time needs its utopia(s). A society that does no longer reflect its development is uncanny, a monstrosity." As a consequence of following the path of utopia, we face the issue of freedom of the creative act. And it is the avant-garde, as Umberto Eco points out in his *Postscript to The Name of the Rose*, that manifests an unlimited dedication to the unhindered emanation of the individual spirit. Freedom, in fact, can be understood as "freedom from" lack of coercion, restrictions and "freedom to" make dreams come true.

Keywords: aesthetics, utopia, avant-garde, virtuality, art

Streszczenie

Odwołując się do wyrażonej w *Studiach z Estetyki* opinii Romana Ingardena, zgodnie z którą dzieło jest zależne od materiału, z którego jest zbudowane, można stwierdzić, iż dane cyfrowe, będąc podstawowym elementem tworzącym otaczającą nas rzeczywistość wirtualną, są również podstawowym budulcem architektury i – szerzej – przestrzeni. Tak konstruowany świat jest pod wieloma względami iluzoryczny, utopijny. W tym kontekście warto sięgnąć do stwierdzenia Zahy Hadid, że „Każda epoka potrzebuje własnych utopii. Społeczeństwo, które nie poddaje się refleksji nad własnym rozwojem, staje się dziwaczne, potworne.” W konsekwencji podążania ścieżką utopii mierzymy się z zagadnieniem wolności aktu twórczego. I to awangarda, jak zauważa Umberto Eco w swych *Dopiskach na marginesie*, manifestuje nieograniczone przywiązanie do nieskrępowanej niczym swobodnej emanacji ducha indywidualnego. Wolność bowiem może być rozumiana jako „wolność od” braku przymusu, ograniczeń, a także „wolność do” realizacji marzeń.

Słowa kluczowe: estetyka, utopia, awangarda, wirtualność, sztuka

INTRODUCTION

The 1990s marked the beginning of a wave of systemic and political changes of historical importance. These years witnessed incredible technological development, both at the macro and micro levels. "We still live in modernity, but exactly as much as we realize what is post-modern"¹ – this paradoxical formula, developed by Wolfgang Welsch, illustrates the dilemmas

¹ W. Welsch, *Wstęp* [in:] ibidem, *Nasza postmodernistyczna moderna*, Oficyna Naukowa, Warszawa 1998.

of the culture of the time, which in its pluralism turned towards both technology and reflection on the world, with a critical approach to its own achievements and visions of modern society so far. Thirty years ago, a model of new digital architecture also developed, referred to as cyber avant-garde or digital avant-garde. Although it did not proclaim openly *death of architecture*, however, its experiments pointed to the depletion of the creative potential of architecture in the sense that has been formed in Western culture since at least the Renaissance.

The avant-garde architecture of the turn of the 20th and 21st century, deeply rooted in the then emerging cyber-culture and electronic media art, was born out of a combination of two trends. The first was the process of improving electronic technologies, creating a new dimension of communication and creating visions of worlds with unprecedented precision, which was accompanied by progress in research on artificial intelligence. The second was the evolution of artistic forms and doctrines, giving more and more space to the recipient's activity, so that the recipient eventually became a co-creator / interactor of the work. Avant-garde architects, as well as some critics, believed that the city of the 21st century should be *a testing ground* for everything new not only in art but also in advertising, leisure, education, business, research and production. The architecture of such a city must be *intelligent* but also *publicly accessible*, and at the same *interactive* with its users.² And although the experiments created by the avant-garde architects were deeply rooted in virtual reality, they often challenged the new digital world. At the same time, it emphasized that it was "For what we seem to have inherited is not the warped utopia depicted in countless visions of a singular and tyrannical technology (...), but a rich and diverse heterotopia which has opened the possibility of countless channels of local dialect competing directly with the channels of power".³

The *Latent Utopias* exhibition organized in Graz in 2003 by Zaha Hadid and Patrik Schumacher was a kind of summary of these searches and experiments. The leading motto of the exhibition was the thesis that "Every time needs its utopia(s). A society that does no longer reflect its development is uncanny, a monstrosity." Projects of many architects presented, including FOA, MVRDV, UN Studio, Reiser + Umemoto, Ocean, Serve, COOP Himmelb(l)au, as well as Greg Lynn, NOX (Lars Spuybroek), dECOi (Mark Goulthorpe), have become evidence of how elements of avant-garde theory and practice from the last decade of the twentieth century penetrate into broad architecture, as well as how faint is the border between utopians and avant-garde architects, or architects-innovators. It is now seen that this desire for virtuality and hopes placed in it often led to the construction of reality which is in many ways illusory or utopian. Also, in the new "coronavirus" context, one can read Mark Wigley's statement from those years quite literally: "Physical office space has become an addition to the computer system. (...) The design office has moved to the machine. It has become virtual itself".⁴

STEP 1. VIRTUALITY

The very concept of *virtuality* has several connotations. In philosophical terms, what exists potentially and not as an act is virtual, e.g. a tree is virtually present in the seed. This concept of

² R. Ascott, *The Architecture of Cyberception*, Architectural Design, 1995, 65(11–12) profile 118.

³ M. Goulthorpe, *Hyposurface: From Autoplastic to Alloplastic Space*, II Generative Art 1999 International Conference, <http://www.generativeart.com/on/cic/99/2999.htm> (access: 20.09.2020).

⁴ M. Wigley, *Architektura protez: uwagi do prehistorii świata wirtualnego* [in:] A. Budak (ed.), *Co to jest architektura?*, Bunkier Sztuki, Kraków 2002, ed. 1, p. 200.

virtuality has been with us since the time of Plato, since the idea and its representation (today's simulacrum) has coexisted in the state of virtuality.⁵ It is still interesting that, in the colloquial sense, the term *virtuality* often means unreality. The very concept of *virtuality* appeared for the first time in 1938, when the French playwright Antonin Artaud included this term in the text *The Theater and its Double*.⁶ However, the year 1968 when Ivan Sutherland in cooperation with NASA and the US Department of Defense created a prototype of a new weaponry component in the form of a system of screens – glasses put on the head, is commonly regarded as the starting point of the contemporary technological aspect of virtuality.

But why is it worth considering the issue of virtuality in architecture today, since it would seem that almost everything has been said in the last three decades? Soon 30 years will pass – and thus one generation – from the publication of the book edited by Michael Benedict *Cyberspace: First Steps* (1991) which paved the way for the next several years to discuss the architecture of the new electronic media era. At that time, of course, no one could see what form our modern world would take, and the visions fostered by culture were often utopian and hopeful for a better tomorrow. Then Paul Virilio read virtual reality as a kind of new gnosis, a kind of escape from matter and the impurity of life. It was anticipated then that architecture “is going to be emerging, dynamical virtual landscapes that is interactively tied to the physical phenomena. So in that sense it is not reactive but it is proactive and that we are all implicating in that unfolding of building the virtual”.⁷

Looking more broadly, the virtuality of architecture does not only mean a technological aspect, but it is primarily associated with its philosophical dimension, meaning possibility, potentiality – and thus the phenomenon always present in art. Agreeing with Roman Ingarden's opinion expressed in his *Studies of Aesthetics* (1958), according to which a work of art is dependent on the material from which it is built,⁸ one can say that digital data, being the EN element creating the virtual reality around us, are also the basic building blocks of architecture. An architecture theoretician Aaron Betsky goes even further, pointing out in his book *Architecture Must Burn* (2000) that architecture, like cars, computers, interfaces, clothes and all virtual images of space, becomes a part of ourselves, thus the building becomes more and more a casting of our body, its extension and its end.⁹ The voice of avant-garde architects themselves repeated such statements, who noticed that since “The essence of the virtual world is the flow of data, the art of the virtual world is the art of data processing”.¹⁰

As the creator of the concept of *dromology*, philosophy of speed, Paul Virilio, *virtuality* was supposed to become *acceleration* for architecture, and architecture itself was supposed to start living simultaneously in two worlds: real and virtual. Such architecture was to explore the border between real and virtual, which could be found in an example of *Space Station Module* designed by Kas Oosterhuis for the European Space Agency (Ill. 1) or emotional architecture

⁵ E. Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside. Essays on Virtual and Real Space*, MIT Press, Cambridge 2001, pp. 75–90.

⁶ Artaud said that theater creates virtual reality – *la réalité virtuelle* – in which characters, objects and images gain “the phantasmagoric power of the visionary inner dramas of alchemy”.

⁷ Materials from the symposium with L. Spuybroek, following: http://synworld.t0.or.at/level3/symposium_neu/discussion.htm

⁸ R. Ingarden, *Studia z estetyki*, vol. 2, PWN, Warszawa 1958, p. 123.

⁹ A. Betsky, E. Adigard, *Architecture Must Burn*, Thames & Hudson, London, 2000, ed.1, chapter 3.6.

¹⁰ An online interview with M. Novak, entitled *Morphing Media with Marcos Novak*, following: <http://www.geocities.com/micnit/sums/cyber23.rtf>

of *d-Tower* created by Lars Spuybroek (Ill. 2) as well as make the user subject to immersion into the VR world, as in the case of the experimental *Haptic Horizon* by Stephen Perella (Ill. 3) or *Data Driven Form* by Marcos Novak (Ill. 4). The construction of such architecture depends not only on the individual creative act – present in architecture “since forever” – but also on the specific properties of the material, in this case the immateriality of the data.

STEP 2. AVANT-GARDE

Although in the original sense the term of *avant-garde* was developed by the Prussian general and military theoretician Karl von Clausewitz and presented in his work *On War* (1832–1834) as it is commonly known the shift and extension of the strictly military term to other areas of social and public life took place at the end of the 18th century – during the French Revolution. It was then that it became permanently popular in the political and ideological language of the 19th century France. The metaphor of art as an *avant-garde*, however, has been associated with Saint Simon, who first applied it in his text *L'artiste, la savant et l'industriel* from 1825. Claude Henri de Rouvroy de Saint-Simon noted that art can only be performed as an *avant-garde* in critical periods, when a new social vision must be fought for.¹¹ At the same time, the ideas of introducing a new order based on aesthetic harmony were becoming more and more established, accompanied by utopism associated with anarchist tendencies. And so, for example, the term of *avant-garde* was a pretext for the title of an anarchist journal under this title, published under the editorship of Mikhail Bakunin in Switzerland in 1878.¹²

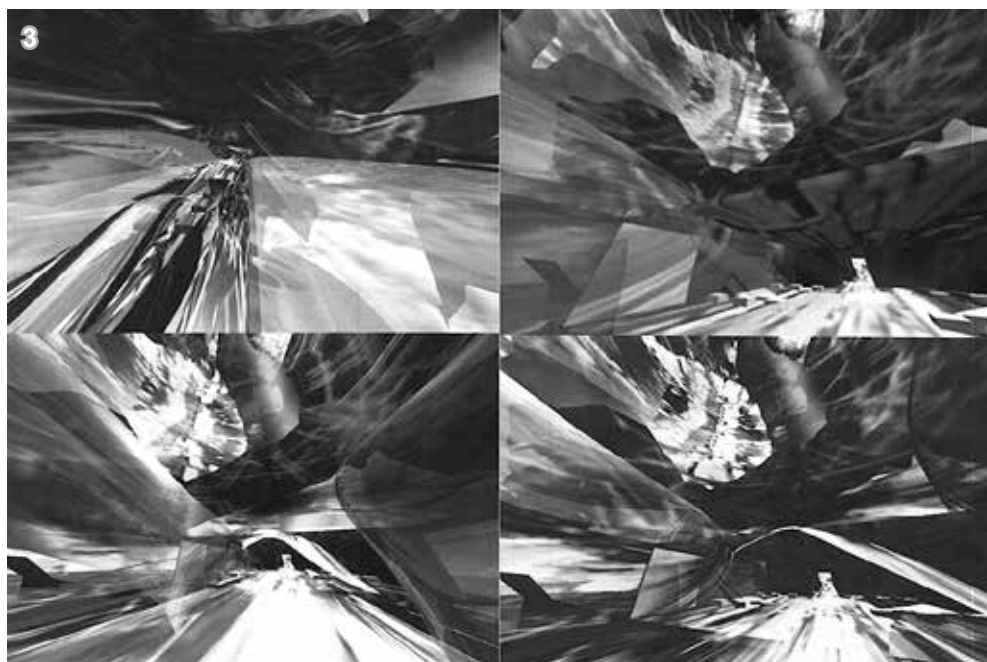
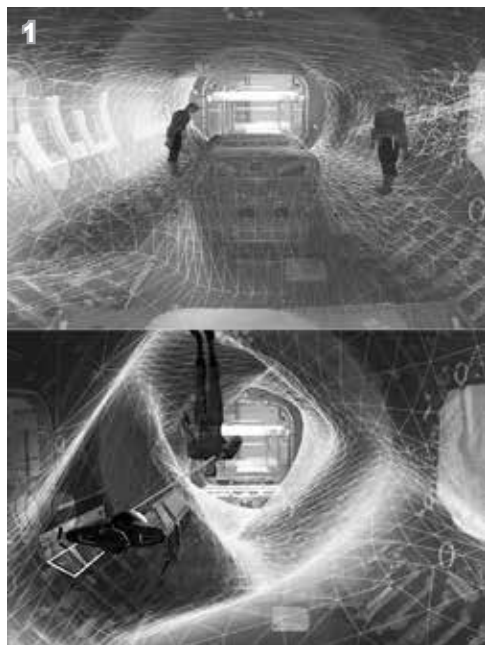
The precursors of *avant-garde* thinking about art among philosophers could be Henri Bergson, Artur Schopenhauer, or even Friedrich Nietzsche, who in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* creates a vision of a man striving to constantly expand the boundaries of his own self, rejecting old norms and authorities in favor of new thinking, a new system of values. Bergson, on the other hand, proposes intuition, owing to which we are able to feel and understand more, and above all we can reach to the unlimited layers of the human soul. Schopenhauer, in turn, directing his attention to the thought of the Far East, indicates the existence of other ways of perceiving reality than before. This was accompanied by the first conscious reference to *the idea of space* (1893), formulated independently by two German aestheticians Hildebrand and Schmarsow. Then it was space, not matter, that was considered the basic “building material” for architecture.

In terms of *avant-garde* architecture, like all art, was never a reflection of what was, but expressed what was just to come – it revealed unconscious goals and unspecified social aspirations. In aesthetics *Novatio*¹³ (1985) Jean François Lyotard argues that the only area of unfettered creation, refuting existing rules and calling new ones is imagination, and the only artist's task is to experiment and explore the artistic possibilities of the language. Therefore, the artistic *avant-garde* enters the areas occupied by other areas of human activity from the very beginning, e.g. science, technology, philosophy, thus expanding the boundaries and scope of art. The results and products of *avant-garde* artists are seen differently due to the

¹¹ G. Dziamski, *Awangarda w perspektywie postmodernizmu*, Wydawnictwo Fundacji Humaniora, Poznań, 1996, p. 8.

¹² A. Książek, *Sztuka przeciw Sztuce*, AKME, Warszawa, 2000, p. 16.

¹³ T. Pękala, *Awangarda i Ariergarda: filozofia sztuki nowoczesnej*, UMCS, Lublin 2000, p. 90.



- III. 1. Kas Oosterhuis: *Space Station Module* (source: <http://www.onl.eu>, access: 5.05.2012)
- III. 2. Lars Spuybroek, *d-Tower* (source: photo by Radosław Achramowicz)
- III. 3. Stephen Perella, *Haptic Horizon* (source: Peter Zellner: *Hybrid Space: New Forms in Digital Architecture*, Gardners Books 2000)

conflicting and diverse responses to the extremely complex forms that avant-garde activities take. This regularity was noticed and expressed in 1925 by the Spanish writer and philosopher José Ortega y Gasset: “a characteristic feature of new art, if viewed from a” sociological point of view, “is that it divides the audience into two groups: those who understand it and those who do not understand it”¹⁴.

It is widely accepted that the main features of the avant-garde, including the latest – architectural, are the pursuit of novelty and constant experimenting with material and means of expression, and consequently the manifestation of freedom of the creative act and the accompanying state of permanent crossing of borders. The transition from constructed to simulated architecture, so distinctive for the culture of the information society, is analogous to the evolution that took place in the interwar period. Aesthetic concepts created then, developed, i.a. in the works of Duchamp, El Lisicki or Moholy-Nagy (Ill. 5), were of fundamental importance for the emergence of new concepts of space and movement, function and form, crucial for the 90s avant-garde. Modeling on the changes that are taking place in science and technology, it wants to make the same changes in culture and society. Thus, a certain property of all avant-garde is confirmed, which consists in the fact that changes caused by avant-garde actions are not limited only to modification of the system of values prevailing in a given field, in this case in architecture, but also – as history shows – contribute to prevailing changes canons and conventions in the whole culture and often entail – in the long term – modernization of the social structure. The avant-garde often refers to a utopian set of beliefs, but it is different from utopia by creating innovative models of reality or discovering new aesthetic canons.

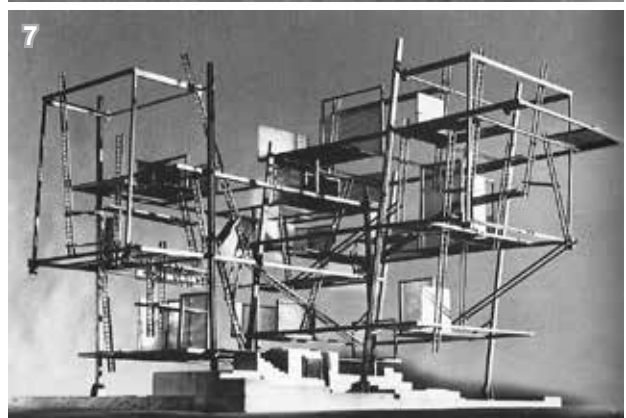
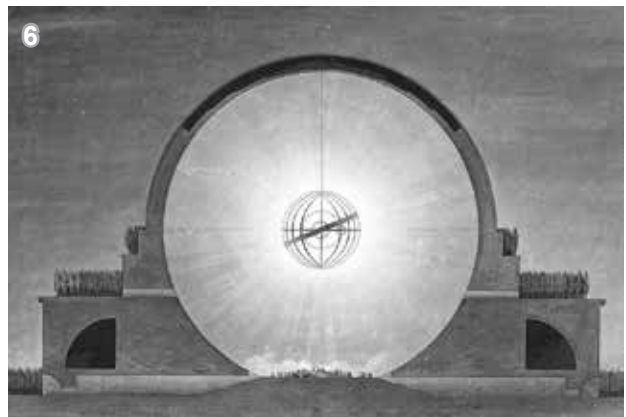
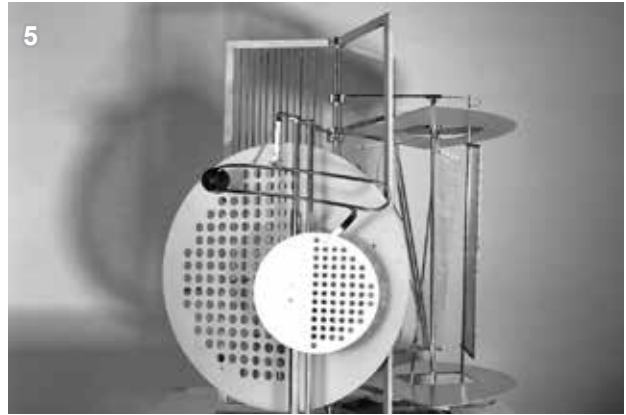
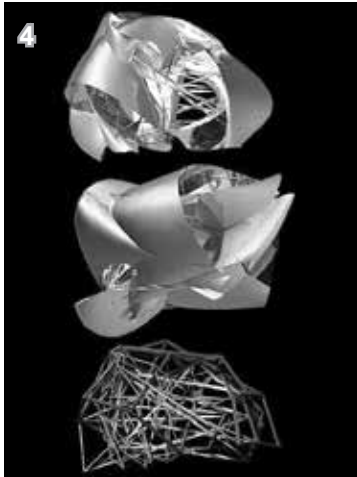
STEP 3. UTOPIANISM

To remind, utopia (from the Greek *ou* – “no”, *topos* – “place”, meaning “a place that does not exist”), derived from Thomas More’s book *A Truly Golden Handbook* (1516), originally showed the image of a perfectly organized society. Over time, the concept of utopia has expanded, encompassing concepts for the reconstruction of societies that do not take into account realities and indicate the means and ways of their implementation, and include all impossible projections of the future and unrealistic fantasies. To this day, like the concept of avant-garde, it has a broader and narrower meaning. In colloquial language, as Jerzy Szacki writes, the word *utopia* means “(...) a product of fantasy, a project that cannot be made real. To be a Utopian is (...) not to take any account of reality and the so-called real possibilities”¹⁵. At the same time he indicates that such an interpretation of *utopia* is not useful for scientific analysis of the phenomenon. It is not possible to arbitrarily determine which ideas and projects can be made real and which cannot.

Qualifying something as *utopia* in the context of architecture depends mainly on technological conditions, because in many cases it is not only about the fact that the project is unrealistic, but about the fact that it cannot be made real today, although it will be possible tomorrow or the day after. On the one hand, the topic of architectural utopias was the framework for the life of an ideal community, mostly in the future, and on the

¹⁴ J. Ortega y Gasset, *Dehumanizacja sztuki i inne eseje*, Czytelnik, Warszawa, 1980, pp. 280–281.

¹⁵ J. Szacki, *Spotkania z utopią*, Wydawnictwo Sic!, Warszawa 2000, p. 16.



- III. 4. Marcos Novak, *Data Driven Form* (source: Peter Zellner: *Hybrid Space: New Forms in Digital Architecture*, Gardners Books 2000)
- III. 5. Laslo Moholy-Nagy: *Light-Space Modulator* (source: <https://www.bauhaus.de/>, access: 5.05.2012)
- III. 6. Étienne-Louis Boullée, *Cenotaph* (source: <https://pl.wikipedia.org>, entry: Étienne-Louis Boullée, access: 20.06.2020)
- III. 7. Situacionists International, *New Babylon* (source: <https://wsimag.com/vitrine-bermondsey-square/artworks/43324>, access: 20.06.2020)

other – technologically unrealistic or perfect architectural objects. Examples of utopian projects can be found as early as the 18th century in the engravings of Giambattista Piranesi (1720–1778) and in the architecture of Étienne-Louis Boullée (1728–1799) such as unfinished *Cenotaph* – Newton’s tomb in the shape of a giant ball (Ill. 6). Also the later dream of “the concentration of all the forces of the people in the building – a symbol of the so-called utopia, showing a better future, the cosmic nature of architecture,”¹⁶ as Bruno Taut wrote in 1918, will continue to be a recurring theme in the first decades of the 20th century. Again, the utopian thought appeared in the 1960s, including in projects of the Superstudio Group or Situationists, such as *New Babylon* (Ill. 7), and then in the digital age, which summarizes, i.a. the aforementioned exhibition of *Latent Utopias*. All utopias, including architectural ones, postulate the abolition of intermediary systems in social communication, and thus refer to the famous topos of Western culture – the topos of Tower of Babel, concerning the desire for understanding in a diverse world.

Today, this desire is based on faith in the Internet and digital tools, also those adopted in the so-called intelligent homes, they often take the form of dystopia, examples of which are provided in the current year. For example, in June this year, the American technology concern IBM, then Amazon, Google announced that they were withdrawing from facial recognition technology, thus taking away the US police license for this tool because it can be used for mass surveillance and ethnic profiling. In the world connected in a virtual whole, on the one hand, the possibility of broad access to information, services and entertainment has developed, on the other, the possibility of falsifying reality on a scale previously unknown (Eng. *Deepfake*). Utopianism is not so much an agreed matter as it is interpreted differently. But despite the differences in the interpretation of the term, the constitutive feature of every utopia is its transcendence towards historical realities. Utopia assumes an attitude of opposition to reality, resulting in a break in the continuity of the existing order, and a proposal for a new alternative order. So in the search for alternatives and in the destruction of order, utopia is close to the avant-garde. In art, and therefore in architecture, the so-called “the utopian moment is this reflex of rebellion against absolute given reality, without which artistic creativity loses its meaning and cannot sufficiently justify the fact of its own existence.”¹⁷

Today we already know that the “information society” does not represent an unequivocal progress in the Enlightenment sense compared to the previous formation. This was noticed by the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo (1989), who diagnosed that three decades ago “the media society is far from being a more enlightened, better educated, and more self-aware society. On the contrary, it is more complex, even chaotic”.¹⁸ It can be assumed that what constitutes an architectural utopia is not so much a specific architectural object as the way of thinking that manifests itself through this object. As a consequence of following the path of utopia, we face the issue of freedom of the creative act. And it is the avant-garde, as Umberto Eco points out in his *Postscript to The Name of the Rose* manifests an unrestricted devotion to the unhindered emanation of the individual spirit, expressed through the freedom of the creative act.

¹⁶ P. Trzeciak, *Historia, psychika, architektura*, PIW, Warszawa 1988, p. 172.

¹⁷ T. Turowski, *Wielka utopia awangardy. Artystyczne i społeczne utopie w sztuce rosyjskiej 1910–1930*, PWN, Warszawa 1990, p. 184, following: T. Perlini, *Utopia i perspektywa w koncepcji estetycznej György Lukácsa*, Studia Estetyczne, 1968, vol. 5, p. 290.

¹⁸ A. and M. Mattelard, *Teorie komunikacji. Krótkie wprowadzenie*, PWN, Kraków 2001, p. 136.

STEP 4. FREEDOM

Freedom is one of the basic anthropological and ontological categories that are of fundamental importance in philosophy, psychology, politics, law, etc. Interpretation of the concept of *freedom* can be multiple, depending on the accepted metaphysical, philosophical, political or ethical concepts. Freedom can be understood as “freedom from” the lack of coercion, limitations as well as “freedom to” i.e. positive possibility of fulfilling selected intentions.

The ideas of *freedom* are found in the programs of the Avant-garde at the beginning of the 20th century mainly due to the fascination with the anarchism of nineteenth-century symbolists. Striving for the freedom of the creative act, on the one hand, involves the individualization of e.g. workshop and design tools. On the other hand, depriving the architect of their connections with the accepted convention, determined e.g. by Euclidean geometry and dynamics, as numerous examples provide the work and theory of Greg Lynn focused on modeling the so-called *blobs*¹⁹ (Ill. 8). Freedom is one of the basic distinguishing features of the architectural avant-garde of the last decade of the twentieth century, which focuses on issues related to virtual reality, the Internet, immersion, tele-presence and many other phenomena associated with the development of electronic media. Also, the discovery of freedom in the sphere of privacy, freedom in disposing of their own body becomes a reason for various experiments for avant-garde architects. Practically all of its representatives develop their own research and design methods, often linking them to original architectural theories, such as *Hypersurface Theory*²⁰, *transArchitectures*²¹ and a way of showing expressiveness based on dynamics, immateriality, interactivity etc. Each of the avant-garde architects perceived the need for social discourse in their own way: for Stephen Perella it was a contestation of the home and household dominated by digital media as in *Moebius House Study* (Ill. 9), for Lars Spuybroek it was an attempt to signal the need to build local communities, and for Kas Oosterhuis the global ones, as in *transPORTs2001* (Ill. 10). Alternative visions of architecture, models and views were associated with the search for that period, which were a proposal of a fresh look at the canons and norms currently in force in architecture. Experiments related to the dynamics of architectural forms, conducted by Greg Lynn (*Korean Presbyterian Church*, *Port Authority Gateway*) led to the development of an alternative, undetermined design method. Decoi group projects (*Aegis*, *The Wobbly Wall*) can be considered both as a modern interactive facade, but also as an idea for an alternative breathing wall system, while the sound installations by Marcos Novak and his *Archimusic* was a contribution to building architectural acoustic space for disabled recipients. This pluralism of phenomena shows us the ideological sense of avant-garde universalism, based on the multitude of artistic manifestations, on the unrestricted freedom and freedom of the creative act.

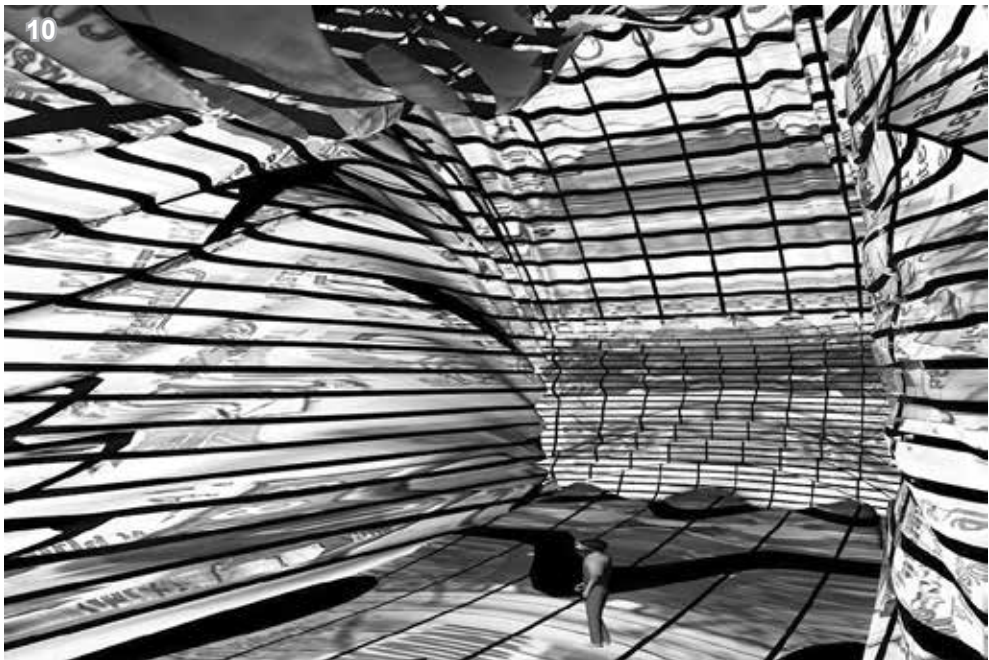
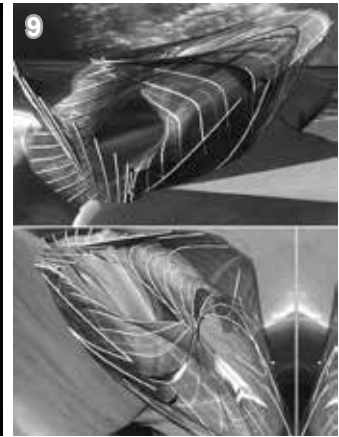
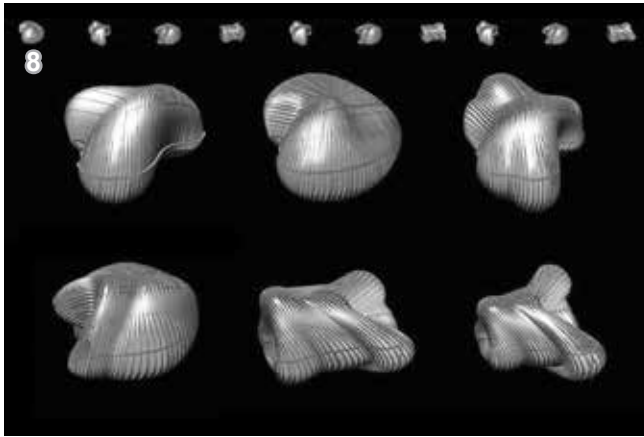
RECAPITULATION

When we think of *avant-garde*, many different images are projected. It's good to go back to the sources to keep the analysis clean. In this case, we again recall the opinion of

¹⁹ G. Lynn, *Animate Form*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York 1999.

²⁰ M. Goulthorpe, *Hypersurface Architecture II*, Architectural Design, 1999, 69(9–10), pp. 60–65.

²¹ M. Novak, *Trans-architecture*, 1994, <http://www.fen-om.com/theory/theory12.pdf> (access: 10.04.2019).



- III. 8. Greg Lynn, *Blob modeling* (source: <http://glform.com/>, access: 5.05.2012)
- III. 9. Stephen Perella: *Moebius House Study* (source: Peter Zellner: *Hybrid Space: New Forms in Digital Architecture*, Gardners Books 2000)
- III. 10. Kas Oosterhuis, *transPORTs2001* (source: <http://www.onl.eu>, access: 5.05.2012)

Saint-Simon, who almost 200 years ago noticed that art can be performed in the role of avant-garde only in critical periods, when it is necessary to fight for the implementation of a new vision. Do we have such an era today? It seems that it is possible to answer this question positively, but in the end, each of the creators should answer this question for themselves. As traversing the topic of utopia, for some the critical times have already come, for others they may not come until tomorrow or the day after tomorrow. Referring to Plato, it seems, however, that the principle of changeability is the most persistent principle of the cosmos, so neither architecture nor art are an exception. Since the idea of transforming our world has been developed, it is virtually present, waiting for a favourable moment of its actualisation, since, as Octavio Paz put it, “artistic changes have, in themselves, neither value nor meaning; what has value and means something is the idea of change”..²²

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