

# “To reach within oneself as soon as possible”.

A conversation with Grzegorz Wróblewski, an asemic artist

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**A conversation about asemic writing, a genre still relatively unknown in Poland, should start with an attempt at defining the phenomenon. What is your understanding of asemic writing as a genre?**

Asemic writing is a very popular and diverse field of visual arts, including photography, film (sounds), more traditional forms, works made with ink, acrylics, oil paints, pastels, and so on. I've been experimenting with asemic writing for several decades now. When I was very young I became very interested in the Voynich Manuscript. My first paintings, which used to be more figurative, started featuring dashes, symbols... I think this is my way of seeing the world. A kind of perceiving externality and, at the same time, an attempt at reflecting my thoughts in the so-called theory of everything. A struggle to define the physical and mental space around me. Each work is a challenge, a voyage into the unknown.

**You repeatedly emphasize the importance of calligraphy in the creation and study of asemic writing, highlighting its Asian variant. Yours is not the sole voice on this issue, because many theorists or artists of the genre also link the foundations of the art of asemic writing with calligraphic writing. How strongly has calligraphy influenced your asemic line?**

In one of my essays on asemic writing I wrote the following: "Someone who wanted to take an interest in the subject would have to take up calligraphy immediately. Study its history. Wang Xizhi - the East! But not only that. They would quickly come across specific traces in modern, Western art (Tashism, etc.), they would come across, for example, an artist like Cy Twombly"<sup>1</sup>. Of course, the writing of the East (China, Japan, etc.) was fundamental to me. I made trips to Japan (Tokyo/Kioto/Osaka) to get a closer look at it. I've always been impressed with the ink and the technique of record used there. However, I was concerned with something else; not so much with calligraphic beauty as with deviations from classical rules. Mistakes and slip-ups, deformities, rather than standard technical solutions. For centuries calligraphy stood still - everything was regular, just like word-processed texts of today. Very rarely did classical calligraphy go beyond the information level. Ancient texts were copied in manners which lacked technical originality. That's why classical calligraphy may seem "beautiful" to us nowadays. Meanwhile, we have now reached an era where calligraphic experiments have started mutating, combining with asemic writing, pictograms, etc. Perhaps the fact that calligraphy has become a hybrid discipline is some kind of clue to its salvation and development.

**Among the works included in the anthology of asemic works, created by the founding fathers of the genre: Tim Gaze and Jim Leftwich (*An Anthology of Asemic Handwriting*<sup>2</sup>), one can find a number of aesthetically consistent works. They resemble systematic records created with ink and pen, black or blue being the dominant colours. They are markedly different from your asemics, not only in terms of the manner of record or the type of line, but also in the color used, the degree to which traditional writing has been referenced or in the use of figurative forms. How do you view your work against this background? Where do you see yourself in the pantheon of asemic artists – this difference is, after all, juxtaposed with productivity, accolades and numerous publications.**

In 2022, my book of asemic writing *Shanty Town* was published in the US by Post-Asemic Press. I only used waterproof black ink of varying thickness in that publication. And it was not a purely calligraphic thing either; it also featured, for instance, pictographic and geometric elements. The book contains a note by Tim Gaze, who thus discusses my methodology: "*Shanty Town* is an unusual work, full of compositions unlike anything else I've seen. The pages appear to have been made in 2 stages, drawn annotations over handwritten or hand-drawn ideas underneath. The first stage ranges from well-behaved written lines as in a letter, to jerky scribbled fragmentary jottings, to sketchy doodles, young ideas captured at high speed. The second stage uses shapes such as rectangles, circles and lines, which appear to be organizing or explaining the first stage they partly cover. Although rectangles and rectangular frames are widely used, these works are at the loosest end of rectilinearity. Wróblewski uses visual rhetoric in a poetic way".

<sup>1</sup> Grzegorz Wróblewski, *Miejsca styku [Places of contact]* (Warszawa: Convivo, 2018), 38.

<sup>2</sup> See *An Anthology of Asemic Handwriting*, ed. by Tim Gaze, Michael Jacobson (New York: Punctum Books, 2013).

In 2022, in Warsaw, I published the book *Polowanie* [*Hunting*]<sup>3</sup>. I will refer to it as “visual poetry”. It consists of photos taken with a cellphone camera. One of the parts of this book includes substrates I prepared specifically for the purposes of the publication, and these combine acrylic and ink surfaces, superimposed on one another. I took these photos both in specific daylight and in artificial lighting. Identical motifs will never be repeated (because of the type and intensity of light). They will remain only in *Polowanie*. So here we are dealing with a different technique still, distinct from traditional acrylics or asemic writing made with inks.

**You often mention a sense of loneliness, otherness, which is manifested in your prose texts and poetry. You seem to focus on that which is marginalized - both by literature and the literary world - as well as on topics rejected by society, as we can learn from reading *Shanty Town*. Do you feel like the odd man out in your own group?**

I don't really belong to any writers' or art group. Many years ago I was a member of the Copenhagen group TOTEM, but this is old history. We used to present art/literature, often in alternative, post-industrial venues. As for my “otherness” among asemic writers, it is expressed by my using a different line, combining it with symbols, some kind of return to times very distant from civilization. I've already mentioned the East or people like Cy Twombly. Among my inspirations were also cave inscriptions/signs, something not entirely explained, an echo of our human past. But the main difference, as far as this great “family” of asemic writing artists is concerned, is certainly my line, calligraphy, and method of recording. I have been working on these for several decades and I think it has become recognizable; I have achieved my own style, different from other artists' projections.

Similarly, in poetry or prose/ essays I am an outlier. In poetry I have moved away from the so-called Mediterranean pseudo-metaphysical poetry. My poems lack fancy metaphors; they are certainly not contemporary poems, encased in ornaments or other lyrical fillers. If anything, they are closer to some variation of Objectivist poetry or minimalism. Polish literary criticism has typically struggled with this. I operate in the literary/artistic underground. Yet another issue is that of geography. For the last forty years I've lived in Copenhagen. I've never decided to create in Dutch, but I wrote my latest book of poetry – *Tatami in Kyoto*<sup>4</sup> – in English.

**In your asemic works you rely on figurative forms - this is quite different from the practices of other artists working in this genre. Apart from inscribing asemic text in circles or rectangles, you include in it shapes that resemble, e.g., human heads. This seems to be poignant in the context of concrete and situational titles of your works. Do you use asemic writing as a form of documenting a particular moment?**

The majority of my asemics are cycles/series, which include *Short Poem*, *Asemic note*, *Kumite*, *Asemic objects*. Some of my works, though rarely, are unrelated to these cycles. For example, there are no figurative traces in *Short Poem*. Figurativeness is almost non-existent in the remaining cycles too, except for profiles of human faces or geometric forms. Rather, I think that

<sup>3</sup> See Grzegorz Wróblewski, *Polowanie*, afterword by Dawid Kujawa (Warszawa: Convivo, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> See Grzegorz Wróblewski, *Tatami in Kyoto* (London: Literary Waves Publishing, 2024).

for a great majority of my asemic works they are a record of moments. Or rather, sequences I had been pondering, but waited for the right time to execute them. This applies both to "purely" calligraphic works, as well as those where the symbol dominates – as a complement or a filler in specific sequences of asemic writing.

**The rejection of the word as a unit of expression carries endless potential. Asemic writing seems to offer a respite from constant transmission and acquisition of information. It appears to be the answer to incessant overstimulation. The broken communication here offers a kind of relief. Do you acknowledge the therapeutic potential of this genre?**

This is an interesting point because, as I've already mentioned, I make different asemic cycles, so the ways/possibilities of interpreting them may also be different. They can also serve a meditative function, as objects that are not entirely interpretable. Some of these works are regular, so to speak, "calmed down", while others are very expressive, dense. So a lot here depends on the psychological/aesthetic predisposition of the viewer. They can be meditative or disturbing, causing a more violent reaction. Interestingly, we are circling back to the issue of the isolation of my asemic writings - they appear in very different geographical locations, for example, in the US, Italy, and Australia. In Poland, too. Often editors combine them compositionally with my "regular" poetry.

**Although you constantly publish in Poland, one gets the impression that your work, especially its asemic part, is not received without problems by Polish critics. You consider the state of Polish criticism and academia not only in this interview but also in your essays. What is your take on the research community in Poland today? And, in the context of current socio-political changes in Poland, do you think there is a hope for a more open and innovative approach in Polish literary and academic circles towards non-obvious works which exceed traditional norms?**

Before I turn to asemic writing, let me mention *Nowa Kolonia* [*The New Cologne*<sup>5</sup>] - I wrote the book in Copenhagen in 2002, and in 2003 its Danish translation was published. The publishers here wrote about it, among other things: "*Nowa Kolonia* (Den Ny Koloni) is the latest book by Grzegorz Wróblewski, a Polish writer living in Denmark. It can be described as an experimental novel in the form of a dialogue. Wróblewski is undoubtedly an heir to the dark, existential work of Beckett and Kafka. Yet the book is unlike anything we may have encountered so far." Niels Henrik Svarre Nielsen, the late influential Danish writer and critic, pointed out something peculiar: "If Beckett, Ionesco or Karen Blixen had not written in the major European languages and debuted here in Denmark, probably no one would have noticed. Their books, without a "proper" discussion, which mainly consisted of genre classification, and establishing their traditional and generational context, would have remained "closed books." A current example of such a book may be Gregory Wroblewski's *Nowa Kolonia*. The book represents a hitherto unprecedented phenomenon." It was published in Poland as late as 2007. I called it a treatise on identity. Polish publishers were baffled, no one wanted to print it. In fact, it was not really a subject of discussions in the country. One of the few pronouncements about it was Henryk

<sup>5</sup> See Grzegorz Wróblewski, *Nowa Kolonia*, afterword by Paweł Stangret (Szczecin: Wydawnictwo Forma, 2007).

Bereza's text in "Pogranicza" ["Borderlands"]<sup>6</sup>. It also had a great theatrical potential, since it was written in dialogue form. Paradoxically, the book was first published in a Danish translation, which made its way to libraries, but I had to wait so long for the original (Polish) version...

And here comes a segue to my activities with asemic registers. If I painted in the style of, for example, Duda-Gracz, Maśluszczak or Beksiński, my work would be known to a wider audience and exhibited in contemporary art museums. My works have been shown in Poland in various interesting places, including the Museum of Literature in Warsaw, BWA in Katowice, Günter Grass Gallery in Gdansk, etc. So there was some visual activity there. Of course, a lot has changed in Poland, but tradition has remained tradition, so I have decided that any "struggle" is pointless. Sometimes my asemic writing works do appear in Polish magazines, both printed and online. This is probably because the editors try to prove that their publication is original or progressive, etc.

It is hard for me to talk about Polish academic community in the context of my literary or artistic activities. That community has rarely commented on my works and my books/exhibitions have generally been ignored. There are probably several reasons for this. I left Poland permanently in 1985 and have lived in Copenhagen for almost forty years (with streaks in New York, London, etc.). So, I have become someone foreign and exotic. In addition, asemics, which I have been working on for years may, in its calligraphic variety, be too hermetic, too different for most audiences. Too mysterious or cave-like. The critics/academia are not equipped for this, they do not have the appropriate research tools, foundations. I don't know if current political changes will make any difference here. Importantly, my work has always been interdisciplinary. Visual arts, collaboration with musicians, poetry, drama, essays. So, it wasn't easy to grasp all of it, to see the entirety, the idea and connections. Poetry experts had no idea what to do with my asemics or mixed media compositions, and visual art experts were non-responsive to literary creations. The result was the proverbial black hole. Isolation. Of course, there have also been interesting reviews, for example by Anna Kałuża; there are also interesting impressions-afterwords in some of my books, for example by Dawid Kujawa, but these are exceptions. Surely, nowadays internet connectivity does away with boundaries; many progressive magazines are published online and offer unlimited access. This is always a huge opportunity for innovative research ideas to emerge. And one must believe that this is exactly what will happen.

**What, then, is the significance of the category of space for your work? Asemic writing seems to be a genre that could not exist without it - asemic records are in constant interaction with it, influencing each other. You live outside Poland, you publish in various places around the world, and draw inspiration from different spaces - how do these experiences influence your writing and perception of the world? Are they as central to your creativity as they are to your everyday life?**

This is an interesting issue, bordering on psychology or anthropology. The study of the possibility for a separate consciousness-self-soul, the existence of something beyond the neural connections, and our bioreceptors. This is a question about the possibility of the existence of some-

<sup>6</sup> Henryk Bereza, „Potencjalność”, *Pogranicza* 6 (2007): 85–87.

thing non-proteinous within us. A search for oneself. I will try to explain this on the example of a number of my asemic writing works. In the case of traditional activities (it doesn't matter whether we mean abstract, avant-garde solutions or figurative, more formally traditional ones) one selects an appropriate technique, surface, paints (acrylics, oils, pastels, watercolors, inks, etc.); there is a so-called idea, a plan of action. Even if it is the technique of automatic creation (action painting), a collage, or a sketch. The idea/vision/feeling/uncertainty is transferred either quickly or in a prolonged action to paper, canvas, wood, etc. It always happens in a time-sensitive episodes of sorts. Our brain, brushstrokes (or any other way of applying material), revisions, corrections or deliberately unfinished motifs. It takes seconds, minutes, hours or years. The original idea undergoes bigger or smaller changes. There is a "falsification" of the idea. In asemic writing I tried to reach within myself as quickly as possible. To grasp the effect of pure thought. A human wave. To shorten the time in which a particular record is created in a manner of speaking, to x-ray consciousness, if such phenomenon exists at all. This is particularly visible in the series of works entitled *Short Poem*, but also in my other asemic series.

Of course, the surrounding space must affect the expression, the proportions of the symbols, their intensity or subtlety, the disappearance of density. This is the mystery of life, that famous existentialism of ours. Although I've been involved in art/literature for several decades, I'm still in the experimental phase, in search for myself. Externality is always essential. The human (or non-human) beings surrounding us, their radiation, the way they communicate. Colours, type of food, physical and mental condition. Islanders communicate differently from those living on the mainland. Earth's temperature, topography. Nature and urban solutions. The noise and melody of the world. The sun, the moon, the stars, the fog. The register in art and literature is dependent on all of these. The influence of externality on our interiors. We don't know how they are shaped, but we study these relationships all the time. We dream of some common code. My asemic writing, mixed media works, and poetry are an attempt to find the mystery of human existence. To confirm the absurdity or some sense of life unfamiliar to me. The diversity of space, learning about other cultures, varieties of art, and literature can be extremely helpful in this search process, or can confirm the assumption that we are not a very special variety of a destructive mammal, creatures lost somewhere in the back alley of the Milky Way. We are something random and unnecessary, and religious schools, the dream of the soul and its immortality are a mere misunderstanding and hallucination. I was helped a lot by visits to places like Kyoto. I am close to some of the Eastern schools of thought. To its calligraphy and aesthetics in general. But I remain in the research phase; I don't know what my next work of asemic writing will look like.

**Asemic creativity could become a bridge for people who have difficulty expressing their emotions verbally, allowing them to communicate with the outside world. For you, on the other hand, it is a form of deepening contact with your own self. Does this mean that in the seemingly chaotic asemic forms you find a certain rhythm that not only soothes emotions, but also allows you to express them more deeply?**

These are psychological situations. Our genre is both simplicity and great mystery. I was fortunate to leave Poland at a young age. I was able to see the visual works of people like Alechinsky and Jorn in Denmark. I found them very relatable. I met great Danish artists. They quickly enrolled me in their various activities. As I mentioned, I participated in the enterprises of the

art group TOTEM, which included Viktor Hall, Flemming Gebauer, Torben Dalhoff, among others - most of them have already passed away. My activities, poetic/visual effects were natural, developmental for them; something that would never have been possible in Poland at the time. Here, a different cultural space proved to be, in a sense, my deliverance. But it also had its consequences. I was suddenly someone from nowhere, a free and independent citizen of planet Earth. I don't like pomposity, but I felt like an entirely uprooted individual.

My asemic works were created on a regular basis, for example as paintings on canvases, but mostly "in action", on scraps of paper, in notebooks, and so on. It always seemed to me that they were not quite asemic in nature. After years, I developed my line, my own manner of record. Sometimes it was ascetic, often pictographic. I knew what I wanted to say specifically and who my audiences were. Let me point out that I am not a huge fan or a supporter of asemic writing. Most of the artists in this movement (type?) use writing/symbols as a mere ornament and I have nothing to do with that. You can easily spot it, all those round letters, additions. Like they serve the purpose of loosening surreal "flaming giraffes" by adding a few childish letters or other incomprehensible triangles/squares.

Yet again, psychological stories, the search for the so-called self, artifacts, anthropology. Our perception of self and externality. The distant past and reality. Biology. Zen. Individual obsessions, convictions. A personal history of each human individual in turn. My asemic writing has been published for years in many parts of the world, including Polish magazines. It would be good if hundreds of these asemic objects were better described and, above all, shown at some major exhibition. This is a big challenge, however. You would need specialists on the very format of such an exhibit, bookbinders, researchers, mentors, and curators. I work on the fringes of the periphery. For some, these are meditative, soothing registers. Quite a few followers of figurative art do not accept it at all. So, we are dealing with multiple receptions. With the understanding and nature of concentration or expressive intellectual "pacing". It is some kind of a niche in the ocean of art and human thinking. I never meant to imply anything. Just like in objectivist poetry. These are my signals to my sisters and brothers on our lonely Earth. I was interested in Andrzej Bursa, and a little less, or maybe not at all, in Herbert. It is necessary to search, to try to survive. At least for a few seasons. For how many years is a person active? Fifty? Eighty? Ninety? If counted in "seasons," dozens at best. So, I've managed to survive here for a while and record my earthly sojourn through the asemic signal, among other things.

**As a visual artist and writer who explores a variety of literary forms and genres, do you see among them any one in which you feel most at home? What are the challenges and limitations of expressing yourself in so many fields? Your art seems very coherent, but perhaps this is just a matter of our perception. What do you make of this coherence in the context of your diverse oeuvre?**

I think this is a good recognition. I was not able to explain everything through visual arts, or through so-called regular records. Among other things, I published two books of sketches/essays – *Miejsca styku* [*Places of Contact*]<sup>7</sup>, and, more recently, *Spartakus* [*Spartacus*]. Maybe

<sup>7</sup> See Wróblewski, *Miejsca styku*.

they have some explanatory power. It was also important for me to work with a whole range of artists from all over the globe. This was also greatly stimulating and inspirational. I think this is definitely the entirety of my research life on Earth. I wanted the literary and visual elements to complement each other. I haven't created a so-called theory of everything, I've always tried to get to the mystery of the matter and perhaps something beyond it. To that end I needed a formal extension. That is why this is broken up, so to speak, into formally diverse statements, actions. One needs to study my training ground more carefully, and it may suddenly turn out to be a consistent and coherent projection.

translated by Justyna Rogos-Hebda

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# KEYWORDS

**ABSTRACT:**

A conversation about asemic writing with the leading Polish artist of this genre, Grzegorz Wróblewski. Wróblewski discusses his inspirations and motivations that led him to choose asemic writing as his form of expression. The artist, who has developed his own recognizable style, muses on the genre's reception, its growing international popularity and the problem of discussing and researching this underdeveloped genre in Poland. He does so against the background of his own experiences with publication and reception. His thoughts on asemic writing and art in general allow for a better understanding of the work of this multidisciplinary artist.

*a s e m i c   w r i t i n g*

AVANT-GARDE

**NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:**

Grzegorz Wróblewski (born 1962) - Polish multidisciplinary émigré artist (from Copenhagen). He creates both poetry (volumes such as *Ra* [2023], *Cukinie* [Zucchini] [2021], *Kosmonauci* [Cosmonauts] [2015]), and prose (e.g., *Copenhagen* [2000], *Gender* [2013]), including essays (e.g., *Miejsca styku* [2018], *Spartakus* [2024]), dramas (e.g., *Lodówka* [The Fridge] [2010], *Przesilenie* [Solstice] [2001]). He is also an active painter and musician. He has been creating asemic writing for years, and is one of the leading founders of this genre. He has published in Poland, the United States, Germany, the Czech Republic, Nepal, Norway, the United Kingdom, and India.