JAN SAWKA: THE PLACE OF MEMORY (THE MEMORY OF PLACE)

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Table of Contents

Jan Sawka:
Biography

Jan Sawka (pronounced Yan SAF-ka) was a contemporary artist of Polish origin and global reach, who lived and worked in the Hudson Valley from 1985 until his death in 2012. Accomplished in multiple disciplines, he was a painter, printmaker, graphic artist, set designer and architect.

Jan Sawka was born in Zabrze (pronounced Zab-je), Poland on December 10, 1946. He was the son of an architect father and linguist mother. His childhood was overshadowed by his father's Stalin-era imprisonment and the political persecution of his family. As part of an individual-studies program, Sawka completed two concurrent Master degrees: one in Painting and Printmaking from the Wrocław Fine Arts Academy and the second in Architectural Engineering from the Institute of Technology in Wrocław. His program was overseen by Professor Stanisław Dawski in print-making and Professor Józef Hałas in painting at the Fine Arts Academy and by Professor Jerzy Rospendowski in architecture at the Polytechnic.

While still a student, he became a well-known figure in the world of Polish counter-culture, and his activities intensified following his graduation. He was active as a set-designer and graphic artist for avant-garde theaters (Kalambur, Teatr STU) and cabarets. He created sets and designed posters for Jazz Nad Odrą (Jazz on the Oder River). He was among the key organizers of artistic events at festivals, creating well-known happenings which were of a politically satirical and absurdist nature at FAMA, the annual student art festival. He illustrated books, including samizdats (underground publications) of the most outstanding contemporary Polish poets of his time, including Edward Stachura, Leszek Aleksander Moczulski, Ryszard Krynicki, Stanislaw Baranczak, Adam Zagajewski and others who comprised the Polish "New Wave" of poetry. He is considered to be the only non-writing member of this movement. He also exhibited his paintings and fine-art prints, as well as curated exhibitions. In addition to all these activities, by his late 20s Sawka had become a star of the Polish Poster School.

In 1975, Jan Sawka was instrumental in organizing an exhibition of paintings, prints, and posters called "The Four" at the Poster Museum in Wilanów (Warsaw). The show was a Trojan Horse—a plan masterminded by Sawka and the museum's then-director, Janina Fijałkowska ,to show the politically controversial fine art of J.J. Aleksiun, Jerzy Czerniawski, Jan Sawka, and S. Stankiewicz, known for their art-poster work as the "Wrocław Four." Because the four artists were well known for their posters, and the censors had already vetted any posters as part of the printing process, the show was considered to be "safe" by the regime.

Opposite page: Jan Sawka in his High Falls studio, 1990. (Artworks from left: *Face 1* and *Face 2*, 1990). Photo by Krys Krawczyk.

Hanna, Jan, and Hanna Maria Sawka, 1985. Photo by Krys Krawczyk.

This was an error, because all of the artists also worked in other media and genres of art, and they included works of an explosive character in the show. The exhibition was an instantaneous hit, not only with Poles, but also with guests visiting from abroad, creating consternation and problems for the regime, which could not definitively shut it down without extreme embarrassment. This show would soon lead to Sawka's exile.

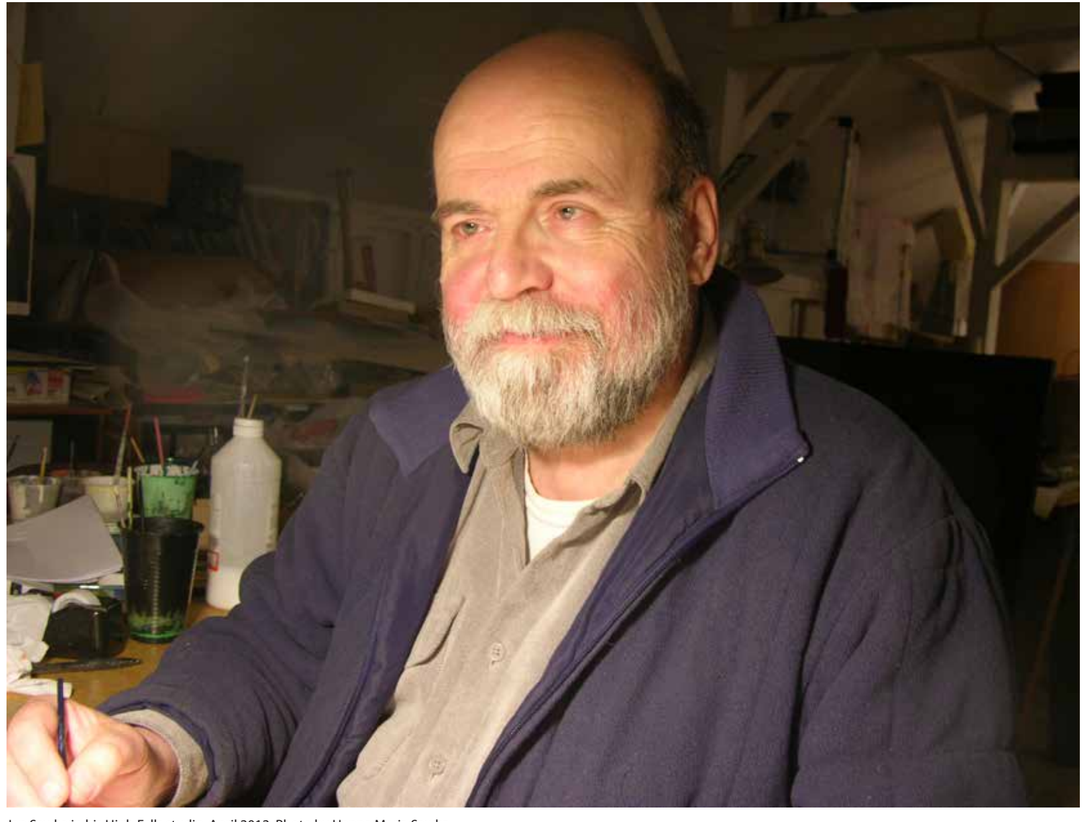
Later in 1975, Sawka, still in his twenties, participated in the International Festival of Painting at Cagnes-Sur-Mer, France, where he won the "Oscar de la Peinture" and the award of the President of the Republic of France for "Innovation in the Art of Painting." The winning paintings were From My Head and I See My Great Theater, in which he combined engraving/intaglio printmaking techniques with traditional painting. For From My Head, Sawka created 216 prints from an engraving of a head. He painted each print uniquely to represent different moments in a narrative progression. He assembled the hand-painted prints into a single composition, which, when viewed from a distance, has its own aesthetic composition as an abstract work. When viewed at close range, the painting shows a narrative of a person's thoughts and dreams, together with the events of their life. Sawka used this approach in many artworks throughout his career, working across disciplines, with the goal of creating an aesthetic that experience held true when the work was viewed at both close proximity and from a distance.

In 1976, Sawka was expelled from Poland for his artistic and oppositionist activities. He, his wife Hanna "Hanka", and their recently born child, Hanna Maria, emigrated to France, thanks to an invitation from the Centre Georges Pompidou, to become one of the first artists-in-residence at the newly opened center. That same year, Sawka represented France and the Pompidou Center with an exhibition of his work in the United States at the Aspen Art and Design Conference that was being held in honor of the Bicentennial of the United States. While living in France, his career continued to develop rapidly. This drew the attention of the communist regime in Poland, where the hope had been that his career would fizzle out. The Embassy of the Polish People's Republic of Poland (i.e, the communist regime in Poland) refused to renew the Sawka family's passports, which had been issued for one-way only travel. The Sawka family had had only three days left on their French residency cards.

At this point, in late November of 1977, Jan Sawka and his family emigrated to the United States, entering the country under a special program of the State Department that was inaugurated during World War II to rescue people outstanding in their fields who were under threat of Nazi oppression. In the United States he would continue to develop his career, forging his unique place in American culture.

Initially, Sawka made a living by creating political commentary illustrations for the Op-Ed page of the New York Times. He embarked on an active gallery career predominantly in New York and Los Angeles, but with occasional shows in other cities in the United States and abroad. At this same time, he worked as a set designer with off-Broadway theaters, including the Samuel Beckett Theater, Harold Clurman Theater, and Jean Cocteau Repertory. In 1982, he participated in the "Let Poland Be Poland" campaign, the American response to the establishment of martial law, continuing his support for political freedom in his country of origin. The AFL-CIO and both political parties sold his "Solidarity" poster in the millions, raising money to support the labor union that would eventually bring down communism. In 1983, he became Artist-in-Residence at the Pratt Manhattan Graphics Center, where he created his critically acclaimed fine print folio, A Book of Fiction.

In 1985, commercial gallery success allowed the Sawka family to buy a home with a structure for a studio in High Falls, a hamlet in Ulster County, New York. In 1987, on his wedding anniversary, Jan Sawka's mother-in-law



Jan Sawka in his High Falls studio, April 2012. Photo by Hanna Maria Sawka.

was brutally murdered in an apparent political assassination. The Sawka family was devastated not only by the death of Hanna Sawka's mother, but also by the impossibility of returning to Poland for the funeral.

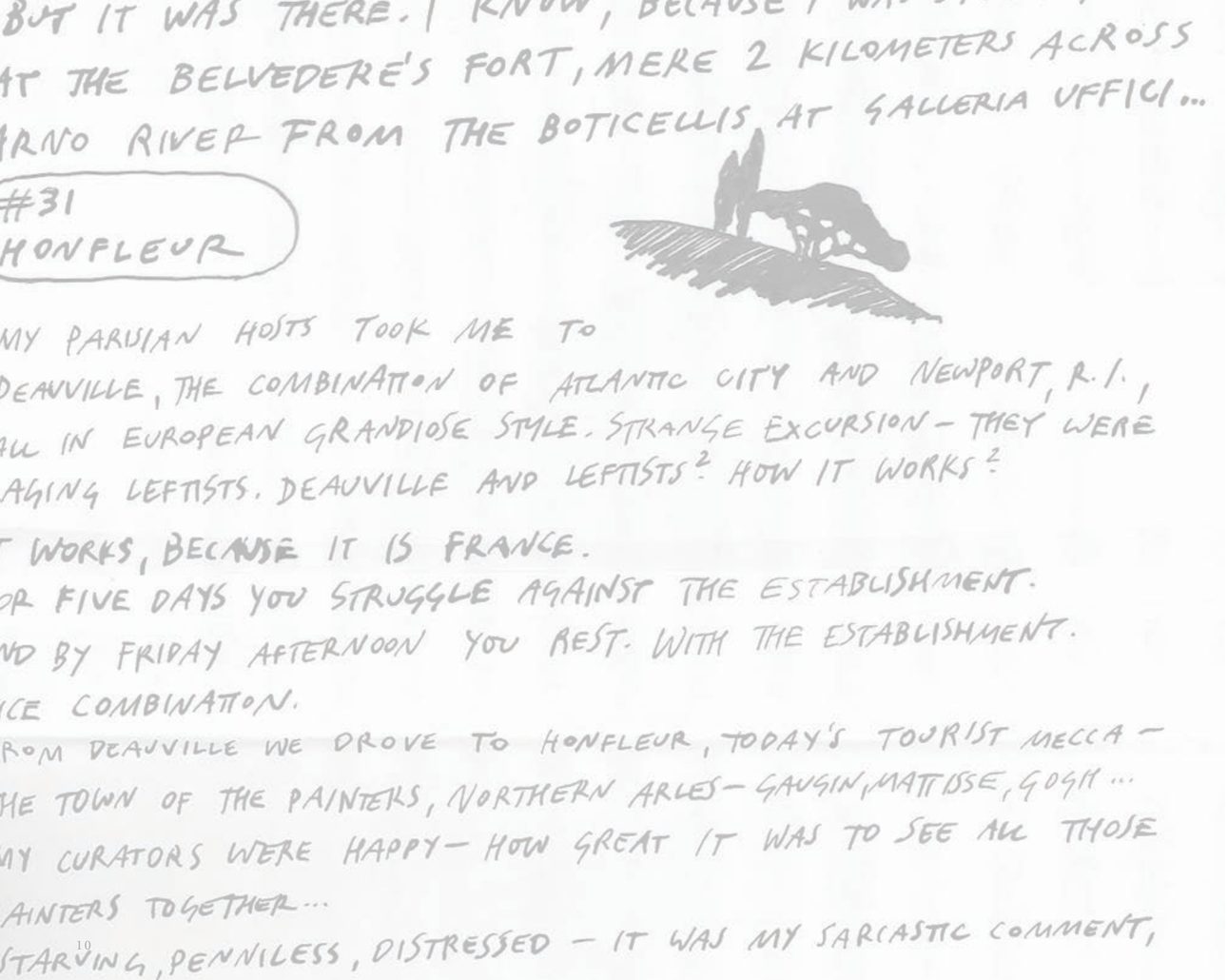
1989 was a very significant year for Jan Sawka and his family. First, they experienced the joy of witnessing from afar the fall of the communist regime in Poland. Also in this year, Neil Trager, director of the College Art Gallery at SUNY New Paltz, curated Sawka's mid-career retrospective. This was a bellwether show that supported the College's first ever gala fundraiser and helped pave the way to the establishment of a museum on the campus. This show toured to four other museums in the United States. Finally, in 1989 Sawka designed a monumental art installation that served as the stadium stage set for the Grateful Dead's 25th Anniversary tour.

The first Minister of Culture of Jan Sawka's newly-freed home country, Duke Marek Rostworowski, invited him to visit Poland, which he did for the first time since his expulsion. The Returns, a major solo show produced in a joint Polish-American effort, followed in 1991. This exhibition, featuring paintings and prints, toured all of the sites of the Polish National Museum system, as well as a location in Hungary. In 1992, Minister Rostworowski called upon Sawka again, asking him to create an installation for the Polish Art Pavilion at the World Expo in Seville, the first participation of a free Poland in an international event since World War II. Sawka created My Europe, a monumental installation of large "banner" paintings.

Never abandoning painting and printmaking, Sawka expanded into multimedia, performance, and architecture. In 1994, he created The Eyes, an artwork- and projection-based theatrical spectacle produced by Tadashi Suzuki at the Art Tower Mito Center in Japan. This piece won the Japanese Cultural Agency Award, and established his career in Japan. He would continue to return to Japan to exhibit and to collaborate on public art proposals, such as one for the United Arab Emirates Royal Family in 1996, the "Tower of Light Cultural Complex," a large-scale public art and architecture proposal. From 1998–2004, he travelled to Japan multiple times to create "UMU" sculptures, artworks in which Sawka used cutting-edge technology to articulate his artistic visions. In 2003, Sawka won a Gold Medal at the Florence Biennial of Contemporary Art for an excerpt of The Voyage, a projected evening-length multimedia spectacle.

Jan Sawka received his last award for the as-yet-unbuilt design of the Peace Monument, Jerusalem, an architectural symbol of interfaith unity. When the jury of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) awarded him the Excellence in Architecture Award for the design in 2011, their comment was brief, but to the point, "Poetry and passion… who could argue with this concept?"

Jan Sawka worked until the last minutes of his life. Obituaries around the world marked his passing, including extensive coverage in the New York Times, Los Angeles Times, Art Forum, ArtNews, Hudson Valley publications, and a multitude of publications and news outlets in Poland. Within nine months of his death the National Museum of Art in Krakow, Poland, organized a large-scale memorial show, drawing on the extensive holdings in their collection.



Foreword

Wayne Lempka

The Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art is pleased to present Jan Sawka: The Place of Memory (The Memory of Place) as one of our featured Spring 2020 exhibitions. Jan Sawka (1946–2012) has had a long and notable connection with the Museum as you will read in the guest essays in this catalog. Yet, his career goes well beyond the Hudson Valley as his artworks are held in over sixty museum collections worldwide.

The two themes in this exhibition, memory and place, are inextricably tied together, and when looked at as a whole they very much are related to modern identities. Losing sight of memory means losing sight of place and all the external factors that help shape us as individuals. Jan Sawka, in his quest to highlight these two important human components, has produced a body of work that helps to challenge our sensibilities and provide a common ground where one can interlace these two ideas in a simple but thought-provoking way.

Presenting this exhibition is a great privilege for The Dorsky Museum—especially given Jan's connections with former Museum staff members and the Dorsky Family.

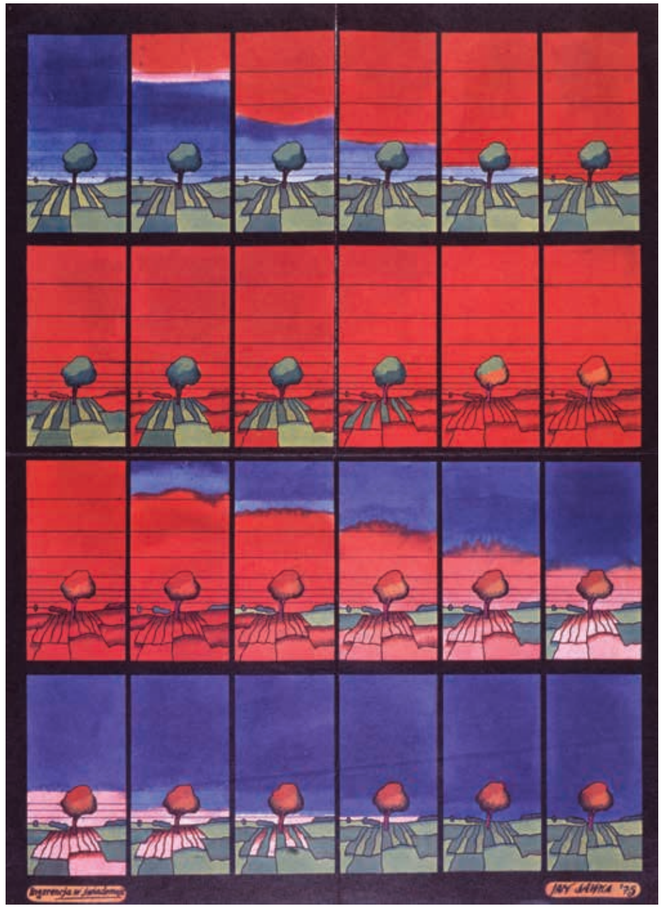
As with any project of this magnitude, there are many people involved from both on and off campus, and I would like to recognize the following for their contributions: Hanna Maria Sawka and Frank Boyer for co-curating this exhibition and for their catalog essays; Hanna Sawka, Jan's widow, whose vast knowledge of her husband's work was critical in telling his story; Neil C. Trager, former Dorsky Museum director, who provides an insightful catalog essay on his personal history of working with the artist and Sawka's early involvement with SUNY New Paltz; The Polish Cultural Institute New York, the Polish and Slavic Federal Credit Union, David Rosco, and the James and Mary Ottaway Hudson River Catalog Endowment for providing funding towards the production of this catalog.

As always, I am deeply grateful to our talented Museum staff who give so generously of their time and expertise to help The Dorsky achieve so much: Anna Conlan, Amy Pickering, Bob Wagner, Zachary Bowman, Amy Fredrickson, Janis Benincasa, Sara Pasti, Graduate Assistant Nicholas Rouke, collections volunteer Susan Shaw, and student assistant Katharine Vrachopoulos.

The Museum is also indebted to SUNY New Paltz President Donald Christian, Jeni Mokren, Dean of the School of Fine & Performing Arts, to the SUNY New Paltz Foundation Executive Director Erica Marks, and to Jeff Lesperance from Design Services for his beautifully conceived and executed exhibition catalog. Last but not least, I wish to thank the members of The Dorsky Museum Advisory Board, who support the Museum's exhibitions and programs in a vast variety of ways.

To all of you, I say, Dziękuję bardzo!

Jan Sawka
Interference Into Consciousness, 1975
Offset print
30 x 23 in.



Jan Sawka: The Place of Memory (The Memory of Place)

by Dr. Frank V. Boyer

In 1976, the communist regime of Poland abruptly expelled Jan Sawka, award-winning artist and long-time political gadfly. Suddenly, he, his wife, and their infant child, were refugees. None of them would see Poland again until after the fall of the Soviet bloc in 1989. It is not surprising that for Sawka place, and the places through which a human life passes, became a vital topic in his work. In exile, beset with the memories of what was lost, the theme of consciousness that he had already explored under communism intensified and focused especially on memory. The works of this exhibition reveal Sawka's artistic explorations of place and memory, as his exile shaped them.

Jan Sawka took into exile his artistic talent, his training and skills, and his mind, with its memories, imaginings, hopes, and aspirations. He had an innate ability to vividly visualize images. He employed his skills as a draughtsperson and colorist to construct the images that appear in his art, working from and depicting as effectively as possible the vivid mental images which he saw on the screen of his consciousness.[1] He never worked en plein air, directly from a subject, and only rarely from a photograph; instead, he created the vast majority of his painted, drawn, and engraved images directly from mental images—remembered, imagined, or both. Thus, places in Ulster County, New York, were presented in a way commensurate with landscapes set in Italy, France, Poland, Colorado, or California. All of these places were made equivalently present by the workings of his visual memory. Because of this working method, Sawka focused with great intensity on the flow of his own consciousness, and all of his works are about consciousness as much as they are about the objects depicted. For this reason, his works may provide an angle of approach by which the viewer is able to explore their own consciousness, their own memories.

For the exile, places that can only be accessed through memory due to the circumstances of exile carry with them a particular heft that weighs down the heart. An example of a lost place appears in The Letter #3 (1979, p. 33), a painting that memorializes a building in Krakow, Poland, that was important to Sawka and the poets and performing artists with whom he created counter-cultural performances during his early years of both artistic activity and resistance to the communist regime. For all of us, places and people pass away, yet the exile knows this hard truth more poignantly, for things and people are ripped away before their natural time. The Letter #3 is an act of remembrance and homage to the first location of STU theater, a place special to Sawka and to the people who came together there.

In Intrusion (1987, p. 36), Sawka pointedly addresses the Soviet oppression that separated him from his Polish homeland, and still persisted, more than a decade later. The piece refers to one of the side effects of that domination: a childhood in one of the most ruthlessly exploited and polluted parts of Europe, the coal-mining district of Upper Silesia. To those living there, the very high rates of asthma, cancer, and birth defects were common knowledge. If you went outside for a moment, you

found black specks of particulate pollution on your clothing and in your hair. It was normal for children to be kept indoors in times of high pollution. The people living through these circumstances viewed the environmental degradation as an intrinsic and pervasive impact of the regime.[2]

Intrusion shows a landscape being invaded by a thick, undifferentiated tide of red that is foreign to the structure of the space and the objects in that space. The redness is not part of the world depicted, and enters the space as if it were from a different universe. As the intrusion continues, a wider area of the landscape is covered, captured, destroyed.

Viewing Interference into Consciousness (1975) clarifies the message of Intrusion, not only by its similar form and visual rhetoric, but also in the title, which underlines the symbolic nature of the landscape. The piece is not merely about place, but it is about the awareness of the people living in that place. In Interference into Consciousness, the invasive process, shown in its initial stages in Intrusion, continues, with the red tide spreading until all of the landscape is "captured." Then the process reverses. It is as if by drawing on its essence, the landscape, the place, and by extension, the associated community has been able to fight back. Finally, the landscape is nearly restored, but the central tree retains the invasive red coloration. This last remnant of red carries the message of the piece. The tree is a symbol for the consciousness, a realm in which the effect of the intrusion cannot be completely counteracted. The psychic scars remain.[3]

Both of these pieces show how masterfully Sawka is able to deploy conventions of art developed in one period or place against those of another, in order to construct both a coherent work and a powerful message. This use of multiple conventions within one piece is something that he does often in his art. In this case, he opposes the traditional western conventions of landscape and perspective developed in the Renaissance against modernist abstraction, powerfully communicating a complex message through visual means.

The communist censors had no problem understanding his use of color symbolism and the sophisticated visual rhetoric of Interference into Consciousness. They interpreted it as referring to the entry of something foreign into a sylvan setting, something unnatural, for example, the military, economic power, and social domination of the Soviet Union entering Poland. They were not pleased. This piece was a major factor leading to Sawka's exile.[4] We thus have a clear and unequivocal pronouncement on the work's meaning by the interpretive community of the Polish communist censorship apparatus. Significantly, although the foreign intrusion is in the end almost entirely cast off in the work, the persistence of the negative effects in the minds of those who have lived through such domination renders this piece essentially tragic.

Another example of Sawka's approach to the themes of place and memory appears in Asbury Notebook (1981, p. 32). When Sawka and his family first visited Asbury Park, New Jersey, in the late 1970s, the shopping district to the west of the tracks, away from the beachfront, still displayed much of the devastation that had resulted from the race riots of July 1970. People from the community told Sawka of the war-like scenes of death and destruction they had experienced. The evident damage and the accounts of the people aroused his life-long opposition to oppression. The result was Asbury Notebook.

Asbury Notebook displays an "agglutinative" or accretive method of clustering images to build up the overall piece. Tiled vignettes fill the upper half of the piece, arranged as if floating in the sky, inviting interpretation as memories of Asbury Park: memories of physical details, of events, and perhaps of fragments of narrative. The portrait-like figures presented with little context, form a kind of frame along the edge of the piece, suggesting that these are people remembered or imagined as part of the place. The relationship between the figures of the people and the vignettes invite speculation, confabulation.

Asbury Park loomed large in the imagination and memory of the artist; it appears in three images in the Post-Cards folio (1985–92, pp. 52-122). Sawka was fascinated by the once-prosperous and populated casinos, "ornamented villas," and hotels, now decrepit and haunting reminders of better times in the neglected seaside town. He associated the feeling these crumbling hulks gave him with his early life in a once-wealthy and powerful Poland. There the ghosts of history often seemed preferable to the ugliness and degradation of a Soviet-dominated present. Sawka explained the relationship he saw between the Jersey Shore and the Poland of his youth in a letter dated July 15, 2008, to Michael Solow, whose father, Marty Solow purchased Asbury Notebook in 1982:

> The town and its boardwalk were decaying before our eyes, the remains of old glory, half ruined casino, several ornamented villas and shops crowding the small path of the boardwalk—it looked so familiar to us. The post-war Polish resorts destroyed by the neglect of the new regime, ex-German villages once bustling with parks, small factories, and amenities were dying in silence, the Russians took everything that mattered to the East, Polish newcomers from the distant Eastern provinces lost to the Soviet Union were living in the haze of uncertainty. Drifters, crazies and newcomers mingled aimlessly there and here.

In this letter, he then draws a powerful analogy between the repression of the Polish people and that of the community of color in Asbury Park.

In Fading (2005, pp. 26-27), Sawka uses place to address memory, especially its unreliable and vacillating aspects. He painted this landscape in very light tints, as if it were fading, save for a few brightly colored areas which appear to have resisted the evanescence that has affected most of the image. The forms of the trees, a combination of cypresses and pines like those of Tuscany, and the architecture suggest an Italian location. The landscape serves the evocation of the desire to place and hold an image on a mental map; it is not important to pinpoint the actual location.

But Fading is not merely about ephemerality. For Sawka, Italy had a special significance. Not only did he revere it as the wellspring of the art and artists he most admired, he also had spent time in Italy as a young man, touring there with STU Theater. Later, he interned at the design firm Pininfarina, and soon after, was part of a restoration team that conserved the Church of San Stefano in Venice. According to his widow and daughter, Sawka loved Italy and would have settled there after leaving Poland, but the powerful presence of communists in the cultural life of the country at the time made it uncongenial to a refugee from communist oppression. Thus, the fading of the memories of Italy, the home that was never to be, had a particular poignancy for Sawka. It is no accident that Italian places appear in several of the prints in Post-Cards.

Eventually, the refugee builds a new sense of home—as so many millions of Americans have done—from equal parts nostalgia and hope. The place Sawka and his wife eventually chose for their home in their country of exile was clearly related to their displacement from Poland. The Hudson Valley hamlet of High Falls reminded both of them of a beloved place where, unbeknownst to each other, they had both spent summer vacations as they were growing up—a place they thought they would never see again. Indeed, the Rondout Creek, which flows near their New York home, resembles the Dunajec River that runs through the Pieniny Mountains of southern Poland. There, in 1968, Sawka had found refuge among the friends of summer when the authorities sought to arrest him for political activity. Thus, The Hudson Valley had

associations with the ideas of family, relaxation, and refuge, and it is not surprising that it became such an important locale for Sawka. The sweeping twelve-panel polyptych titled Ashokan 1–4 (1998–99 , pp. 28-31) can be seen as a paean to the Ashokan Reservoir, his favorite setting for a stroll in the region, and as representing the activities of human consciousness, especially memory and imagination. Another treatment of the Ashokan Reservoir is also among the three images of the Hudson Valley region included in Post-Cards, his folio of significant place-memories.

Clearly, Sawka's journey as a refugee resonates throughout his artistic practice. The abandoned place, the tumbled-down house, the polluted, half-devastated landscape, carry for Jan Sawka the pathos of lost prosperity and happiness, a pathos that plays itself out in memory. In picturing places and things that have seen better days, he gives expression to an elegiac feeling in much of his work. There is also a sense of wonder in seeing new places, meeting new people. There is a feeling of uplift in the presence of the beautiful vistas of the natural world, an openness to the world. Yet, everywhere in the presence of new people and places there is the potential evocation of beloved places and people who are gone. All of these experiences carry their own bittersweet enjoyment for this exile, as they pass before the eye of the mind, and flow out into a work of art.

Art History, Western Culture, and Jan Sawka's Art: The Polish Connection

Culturally, Poland aligns with the West, and throughout its thousand-year history it has steadfastly maintained its cultural identity as part of Western Christendom.[5] This fact is vital to understanding things Polish. It means that Poland was on the Western side of the Great Schism, adhering to Roman Catholicism instead of Eastern Orthodoxy. It means that its written language uses an adaptation of the Latin alphabet, instead of the Cyrillic. It means that its scholars, for example, Nicolas Copernicus (1473–1543), read and wrote in Latin, the academic language of Western Europe through the 1600s. It means that Poland participated in the Renaissance, the Age of Reason, and the Enlightenment. Krakow, a vitally important city in Polish history and culture, (and, incidentally, also the home of Sawka's forebears, before the communist regime forced his parents to relocate to Silesia)[6] has some of the finest extant examples of Renaissance architecture, many of which Jan Sawka toured with his father, a noted architect.[7] It is not surprising, therefore, that Sawka's cultural and artistic roots draw from the great Renaissance artists, who provided him with models of a tradition of craftsmanship, style, skill, humanist values, and a sense of the artist's role and independence.

Sawka's art-historical roots also grew out of Central Europe, where modern art developed differently than in Paris, Vienna, Berlin, and other major cities of the West. In Poland, occupation and oppression resulted in different priorities for artists. The preservation of traditional culture is vitally important to the survival of the Polish people.[8] In such a context, the concept of an avant-garde has a very different meaning in the Krakow of 1901 than in the Paris of the same epoch. Therefore, to explore the meaning and importance of Sawka's work, it is not enough to see the Polish cultural connection to the West, but to get a sense of the Central European inflection of his work. And to do that one needs an understanding not merely of Poland's tragic twentieth century history, where it was the locus of disasters beyond comprehension, but at least a few salient points of the full range of its history.

In 966, Poland entered into Christian Europe, and quickly became one of the most highly developed nations on the continent. During many periods of its history, the country was prosperous, powerful, and enlightened, and by the 1680's, despite many vicissitudes, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was territorially the largest state on the European Continent. These facts of Polish history are not commonly known outside of Poland, but for students of Polish history they are beyond dispute.

However, at the time of Poland's greatest territorial reach, its unique, multicultural social system had begun to break down due to both internal and external factors. The second half of the eighteenth century brought increasing political dysfunction and the eventual dissolution of the Commonwealth. Through a series of three partitions of Polish territory between the Kingdom of Prussia, the Russian Empire, and Habsburg Austria, the Polish nation-state ceased to exist. Ironically, as the process of partition was carried out, and Poland disappeared as a political entity from the map, its leading citizens wrote and ratified the first democratic constitution on the European continent (1791), inspired by the same Enlightenment principles as the American Constitution.

There followed over 120 years of "captivity," punctuated by hopes of restoration at the hands of Napoleon[9], and failed rebellions in 1831 and 1863. During this time, particularly in the early years of the nineteenth century, the national focus shifted to artistic and intellectual activity. A once-mighty nation-state had been brought low, but the spirit of its people continued, finding expression in their folkways, their religious fealty and observance, and their artistic and intellectual productivity.

Following World War I, Poland once more achieved independence. Poles began the daunting work of knitting together territory politically divided for more than a century into a single political entity. This brief interlude was ended by the horrors of World War II, followed by Soviet domination until 1989. Poland in the twenty-first century is again seeking to find its path forward as an independent state, attempting to carry its identity into a future made by and for the Polish people. Yet the process of healing from an "interference into consciousness," is anything but automatic or easy. In Jan Sawka's tragic vision, the mental and emotional scars never heal.

This brief narration of events and description of circumstances provides important context for an understanding of Sawka's work. The traditions of political and personal freedom—and of art and culture as a means of preserving national identity and resisting oppression—are very important not only for the nation, but also for Sawka as a person, a Pole, and an artist.

Seen from a perspective informed by the narrative of Western European Modernism and Post-Modernism, especially as concerns the trend towards abstraction and the narrowing of technical means, his art is difficult to place. But interpreted in relation to the Polish cultural and historical experience, Sawka's work makes perfect sense. His use of the full range of traditional means of painting for cutting-edge purposes is within a strong Polish tradition of cultural simultaneous cultural creation and preservation as resistance.[10] His art is not reactionary, retro, or nostalgic, but rather is radically experimental within a specifically Polish tradition.

Jan Sawka's role as an artist in exile also has deep roots in Polish tradition. Following the dissolution of the Polish state in 1795, many of the greatest Polish artists, particularly poets and playwrights, did their most significant work in exile. As Adam Zamoyski, in his cultural history of Poland, The Polish Way, states, "The scattered and disoriented nation looked to the poets to make sense of things and the poets grew into the role of the spiritual leaders..." The work of the Polish Romantic poets is intensely patriotic and devoted to the liberation of their homeland and of the human race. The influence of these writers on modern Polish cultural identity is foundational to the work of artists working in all media.[11] As someone brought

Fig. 1
Jacek Malczewski,
Melancholia, 1890-1894,
oil on canvas, 139 x 240 cm.
Photo courtesy of the
Raczynski Foundation at the
National Museum of Art in
Poznań, Poland.

up in these traditions, Sawka understood that exile did not have to mean the end or trivialization of an artist's work. An artist in exile could work both for his people of origin and for people everywhere. It was in this spirit that he felt a responsibility to oppose oppression anywhere in the world, and to work to foster human freedom.[12]

Given the cultural and historical themes outlined above, the Symbolist Art Movement, begun in France in the late nineteenth century, carries particular weight in Poland and the other "subaltern" states of Central Europe. It deserves special examination in Jan Sawka's art.

The Polish version of the Symbolist Movement, called "Young Poland" or "Moderna" in Polish art history, was important culturally for a number of reasons. In many ways, it was both an extension and a critique of Romanticism, the era of Polish literary greatness.[13] It emphasized emotions and spiritual realities, rather than physical realities. At the turn of the nineteenth century, the Polish state still did not exist as a political, military, or economic entity, in spite of every effort to bring it back into existence; thus, an art movement that focused on the intangible was particularly attractive to Polish artists. It was taken up and became radicalized in the hands of Polish artists and writers.[14]

Symbolism entered the mainstream of Polish literature and art. In the visual arts it presented a way of working for change while retaining the traditional techniques of Renaissance perspective and rendering objects in the pictorial space. This was particularly attractive to Polish artists, because it accorded with the ongoing social project of resistance to political hegemony by preserving cultural traditions and social practices, thereby rejecting cultural domination and preserving the Polish identity. This combination of a desire to preserve tradition with a desire to make art that advocates for real social change is central to Polish Symbolist Art.[15]

Of the many accomplished artists who were part of Young Poland, two of the greatest Polish painters, Jacek Malczewski (fig. 1; 189o-94) and Stanisław Wyspiański, (fig. 2; 1894) are notable in relation to Sawka's career and practice. In the painting Melancholia, by Malczewski, the viewer can observe both the resolute skill of the artist in the traditional techniques of oil painting, but also notice the juxtaposition of different forms of space as an important part of the visual rhetoric. Note also that the painting is a statement about the relationship of the artist to the history of Poland. In Polonia, by Wyspiański, something of Sawka's use of color and expressionistic verve can be seen. Like Sawka, Wyspiański worked in many media; not only was he an accomplished painter, set designer, and graphic artist, but he was also a playwright, who, according to Czesław Miłosz, was endowed with a theatrical imagination "...not matched by any of his contemporaries in Europe," and who wrote plays that are "the cornerstone of the modern Polish theater."[16] These artists, both profoundly and problematically patriotic, as well as others of Young Poland like them, served as inspiration for Sawka's generation of Polish bohemian artists coming of age in the 1960s.[17]

Sawka's focus on consciousness, and his representation of the processes of consciousness—of things remembered and

Fig. 2 Stanisław Wyspiański, *Polonia*, 1894, pastel on canvas, 299 x 175 cm. Image courtesy of the National Museum in Krakow.

imagined, rather than the representation of actual objects of the physical world—makes sense in relation to Polish Symbolist art and its use of objects in the physical world, often rendered with great skill and accuracy, as symbols for non-physical realities.

Sawka, with his unique cognitive gifts and talent for drawing, his national and family traditions of cultural preservation and resistance, seems to have been fated to extend the tradition of Polish Symbolism into our era and beyond the borders of Poland. This, however, was not the sum and substance of his project; he sought to explore and integrate into his art the visual and cultural motifs of the world. He wished and worked to be a "world artist," speaking to and for everyone, and advocating for human freedom everywhere.

Notes on Technical Ways and Means

Jan Sawka was a relentless experimenter, constantly testing the limits, edges, and boundaries of the technical means of the disciplines across which he worked. He often worked by posing one convention or style of representation against another, as in Intrusion, rather than working by abstraction or a narrowing of technical means.[18] His radical experimentation may not be apparent at first, because it does not emulate the practice or method of other artists.[19]

Sawka began his technical innovation very early in his career while he was still in Poland. When he started to hand color his prints, his works were refused exhibition, because, according to the art apparatchiks, his method was not printing, it was painting. He continued his development of techniques that commingled printing and painting even though the Polish art bureaucracy did not recognize his efforts. The most significant early validation of this experimental practice came—much to the chagrin of the Polish governmental art establishment—when, in 1975, he received the Special Prize of the President of France for Innovation in Painting at the 7th International Painting Festival at Cagnes-Sur-Mer, France. This, unsurprisingly, contributed to the decision of the Polish government to "allow him to leave," that is, to expel him and his family from the country. His methods were not supposed to be valid, and were not supposed to be worthy of recognition, and their success added to the provocation of the popularity of his art and its subversive content.

Sawka went his own way, ceaselessly experimenting with materials and the methods and combinations of their application. He built up his images using a great number of materials, working over his images until he was satisfied with the effect. He often used graphite, ink, or pastel to create very subtly applied "overlays" of lines, shapes, colors, and figures, as in Intrusion and Ashokan 1-4. Sometimes he would use ink to create an effect like that of an engraving. He used many forms of cross-hatching as overlay. He would add paint to the varnish that he used to coat every painting, providing a translucent tint, as in Letter #3. In some paintings, he would use a layer of dry pastel over the already dry acrylic paint and then apply varnish, causing the dry pastel to mix into the varnish, creating variations. He mixed all colors himself, buying only primary colors and black and white paint, sometimes mixing them directly on the plate for a print or on the support for a painting.

One tactic Sawka uses in his cross-media experiments is to use characteristics of one medium as a stylistic manner in another, for example, the repeated lines of a print are drawn in ink onto a field of color in a painting. He would work an image fully integrating the elements of painting and printmaking in order to build towards an effect suited to the piece at hand. Sawka's task with every work was to transcribe as accurately as possible the image in his consciousness onto whatever support or surface he had chosen, using whatever means necessary.

The search was not for an image, but rather, for its means of realization, and he fully utilized his encyclopedic knowledge of images and techniques across all the media in which he worked.

In addition to his experiments across media, Sawka problematizes the means and styles of figuration, as they have been practiced in both printmaking and painting throughout art history. In his work, perspective and other illusions of figuration are part of the experimentation. He employed a full panoply of technical and stylistic means to create and explore subtle "slippages" and disjunctions, and to explore the nature of the two-dimensional surface of the work. This experimentation reveals a nuanced understanding of the semantic import that variations of treatment can create, while still working with coherent images that reference the physical world. This aspect of his work is related to his focus on consciousness, because the representation of objects in the world is seldom simple and straightforward—the "how" of the creation of the image recalls the mind of the maker who decided on the specific treatment.

These two forms of experimentation are apparent in this exhibition. Firstly, because it concentrates on printmaking and painting, two of the media in which technical cross-pollination was carried out most thoroughly, one can easily see the effects of treating prints like paintings and paintings like prints. In both of these media, the experiments regarding the conventions of figuration are also clearly visible; they are salient in paintings like Asbury Notebook and Letter #3, but can also be observed in works like Memory and Partial Recall. In many of the prints in Post-Cards, the handling of color is like that of painting, and what initially appear to be conventional perspective images shimmer between the illusion of three dimensions and the reality of flatness when viewed closely. By keeping in mind these two areas of technical experimentation while viewing the works, subtleties of treatment and form emerge.

One of the most common features of Sawka's oeuvre, especially in his large-scale work, is an agglutinative method of construction, mentioned above in reference to Asbury Notebook. In this practice, he builds up large and complex images by juxtaposing or superimposing many smaller images in a dizzying number of ways. Each image is usually visibly distinct, but the forms and treatment of the edges establishing that distinctness are multiple. There are many types of frames. The image may be recessed or built up in a variety of ways. Often these spaces and the objects within them are not completely depicted, cut off by framing, or occluded by images layered over them. This method of constructing the piece superficially resembles the fragmentation of perspectives typical of Cubism, but is actually very different. Rather than a single subject being broken up as if seen from multiple points of view, in these pieces a large number of separate spaces—rendered using perspective systems developed in the Renaissance—are placed in close proximity, each piece possessing its own "point of view" and creating its own principles of juxtaposition or placement.

One can view the agglutinative style in general as a formalization of Sawka's tactic of the "rubbing against each other" of different technical or stylistic effects from across art history. The use of multiple images to create a coherent whole may be traced back to Medieval and Renaissance altarpieces, in which not only were multiple figures and vignettes represented, but also (foreshadowing Symbolist art), multiple levels of reality, including Heaven and Hell. Sawka was familiar with examples of clustering images from his studies, and also from his work restoring churches in Poland and Italy.

Although these works suggest a collagist method, Sawka generated all of the images, transcribing them into the piece from their appearance in the theater of his mind. Through his process of envisioning and transcription he has appropriated even objects which seem ready-made elements, imbuing them

with a personally inflected significance. Each image takes on meaning from its passage through Sawka's practice, as much as through any reference to the original source or from its placement in the finished work of art, and its relationship to the images and physical material that surround it in the work. Such pieces display a representation of the flux of his consciousness, both in the moment of composition and in the fiction of the timeframe represented in the piece, played out in the construction and treatment of the images, and the relationships between the images.

As part of his practice of problematizing the conventions of figuration, Sawka developed a number of visual gestures or motifs—three of which appear in many of his works. The first motif is a complex system of iconography that resembles hieroglyphics—a kind of picture writing that was uniquely his own, and which he used in many of his works. He often arranged these signs like words in a billboard or book, in parallel rows, with similar images repeating over and over, in combinations that he organized with such complexity as to appear random. They are not.

Secondly, he created strings of letters that feel like written language but have no direct linguistic reference; they are a visual element without semantic import. He formed these elements in many different font-like ways, and shaded and rendered them to achieve different effects. Sometimes they are indecipherable, purely a visual motif. Sometimes it appears that he wrote in an unknown language—one often unique to the particular piece—and although carrying a semantic "atmosphere," the text ultimately calls attention to itself as an expressive visual form. Both of these motif systems of are used in Ashokan 1-4, where he used them to evoke the particular dream-like state that occurs when one gazes at a large body of water.

The third system of motifs is a system of lines that seem taken from a diagram or blueprint. These sometimes have arrows pointing in various directions, or numbers which seem to refer to some kind of measurements.[20]

When encountering these elements in Sawka's artworks, one can admire them for the visual inventiveness and skill with which he executed them—they give an impression of order and meaning, and seem to invite the viewer to figure them out. But in conversation, he insisted that these three visual motifs do not have any referential meaning, but that the viewer's desire to make meaning of them is a big part of their importance.[21]

Technique is an important aspect of Sawka's work, both in its creation and in its reception. Each emergent piece, in his experience of visualizing it, included detail informed by his encyclopedic visual memory and knowledge of art materials and techniques. Thus, his visualized images prompted the means of their own realization. For the viewer who looks closely at how each work was executed, the result is an experience rare in contemporary art: work created for them by a consummate artist, inviting them to revel with him in his mastery, and in the freedom such mastery confers.

A Final Word

Throughout his career, working across many different media, Sawka created work directly from his life as it registered on the screen of his consciousness. He labored with intense dedication, using his finely-honed skills to embody his extraordinary mental images as fully-formed artifacts. He wished to inspire others as he was inspired. He sought to provide aesthetic experiences that are freighted emotionally, conceptually, and very often politically.

Sawka carefully designed each piece to have immediate impact, but his works reward prolonged and repeated viewing; each invites deep reflection and profound interpretation. Ultimately, Sawka's work is about human existence at its most essential and, at the same time, its most individual. It is an invitation to voyage more deeply into our experience of consciousness, memory, and imagination as they are revealed in his art, and in our own lives.

Private Conversations Which Informed This Essay

Gerould, Daniel and Jadwiga Kosicka. Private Conversations. 1995–2008.
Daniel Charles Gerould (March 28, 1928 – February 13, 2012) was the Lucille Lortel Distinguished Professor of Theatre and Comparative Literature at the CUNY Graduate Center and Director of Publications of the Martin E. Segal Theatre Center. Daniel Gerould was a specialist in, among other things, Central and Eastern European theatre of the twentieth century, and fin-de-siècle European avant-garde performance. Over the years, we have had many conversations at their home, usually talking about theater in the wider cultural context. I met Jan and Hanna Sawka at the Gerould home in Mt. Tremper, NY in the summer of 2001.

Sawka, Hanna. Private Conversations. 2001–2019.
I have enjoyed many conversations with Hanna Sawka regarding Polish history and culture, in particular how the themes of Polish culture reverberated in Jan Sawka's art. Her complete knowledge of Jan Sawka's studio practice, and of the thinking and effort that went into his work is leavened by her profound understanding of the ethos of the Polish intelligentsia. She shared with me many stories regarding the family's struggles with the communist regime in Poland, and their commitment to resistance to oppression of any form. Hanna Maria Sawka also participated in many of these conversations.

Sawka, Jan. Private Conversations. 2001–2012.
During the years listed above, I had almost daily conversations with Jan Sawka regarding world politics and culture in general, and Polish culture in particular, while working on artistic projects together. Our talks touched on the importance of Young Poland to the artists of his generation, on his admiration for artists of the Renaissance, and of the cultural importance of Poland's alignment with Western Europe. He shared many stories regarding his early artistic exploits.

Endnotes

1. During the last eleven years of his life, I was able to observe Jan's practice as an artist on many occasions. Since his death in 2012, I have had many conversations with Hanna Sawka regarding Jan's studio practice. In particular, detailed conversations during the last two years regarding his work on Post-Cards, and how his print-making process related to his work as a painter helped to clarify the importance of visualization in his work.

2. This detail is from conversations with Hanna and Hanna Maria Sawka.

3. Hanna and Hanna Maria Sawka pointed out that this is the interpretation intended by Jan.

4. Sawka (n 2)

5. The facts cited in this paragraph, and the following brief narrative of Polish history, including Napoleon's manipulations and the cited rebellions, are available in standard histories of Poland, including the Zamoyski and Davis texts listed in the bibliography.

6. Sawka (n 2)

7. Conversation with Jan Sawka.

8. The use of Polish folkways and domestic culture as a means of resistance to oppression is a major theme of At Hanka's Table, the book written by Hanna Sawka with assistance by Hanna Maria Sawka, and included in the bibliography.

9. Napoleon created the short-lived Duchy of Warsaw, a client state, from territory ceded by Prussia. One hundred thousand of the soldiers of Napoleon's army that invaded Russia in 1812 were Polish (Davis, 304).

10. Sawka (n 2)

11. The cultural importance of the Polish Romantic poets and writers is universally recognized in the literature on Polish cultural history. It is a major theme of Miłosz, Davis, and Zamoyski, whose texts are in the bibliography.

12. This statement is based on many conversations with the artist and with Hanna and Hanna Maria Sawka.

13. (Miłosz, 358).

14. Miłosz in particular points this out in The History of Polish Literature (Miłosz, 326).

15. The nature of the Polish tradition of cultural resistance, and the relationship of Young Poland to contemporary Polish theater and art were frequent topics of my discussions with the late Dr. Daniel Gerould, and his wife, Jadwiga Kosicka.

16. (Miłosz, 358).

17. Jan and I discussed the art movement of Young Poland as an influence on him and his generation. He singled out Malczewski and Wyspiański as influences on him. He particularly admired the range of Wyspiański's activities.

18. Sawka insisted on the importance of being able to draw and paint using the full range of artistic technique. He had little or no appreciation for the work of artists who were limited in their ability to draw, like Rothko and Pollock.

19. When Jan and I discussed contemporary artists, he spoke positively of the work of a few, for instance, Edward Hopper. However, there was never any sense that he emulated any of his contemporaries, nor, since he had left Poland, in any way was part of a "group" or "movement" with them.

20. These hieroglyphic signs and marks can be approached as both a manifestation of Sawka's experimentalism and means for his problematizing of the traditional means of painting and drawing. These marks and signs are ways of playing with the illusion of space provided by perspective, and of juxtaposing or interposing different systems of spatial illusion. When perusing these visual elements, the viewer may also think about the nature of the space that surrounds, is implied by, or supports that mark. For example, the "extra" lines in Memory serve the purpose of drawing out how the illusion of space is organized in different parts of the painting.

21. After many years of viewing Jan's works, I increasingly find that the effect of attempting and failing to apprehend the sources of the imagery leads me to a state of heightened awareness in which I am particularly sensitive to both what I am seeing, and what the possible meanings of what is seen might be. Again, my puzzlement leads me to speculate, and, by staying with the speculative viewing experience, to pay enhanced attention to the flow of my own consciousness. The imagery, existing in a mental state of not-knowing, evokes associations, memories, and my own visualizations. I believe that this effect is intentional, and that Jan was meticulous in organizing his artwork to provide opportunities for the viewer, by means of the work, to focus on the processes of their own consciousness.

Bibliography

Cavanaugh, Jan. Out Looking In: Early Modern Polish Art, 1890-1918. Oakland: University of California Press, 2000.
This is an important work in English that places Young Poland in the context of the Central European Secession.

Davies, Norman. God's playground: A History of Poland, revised edition. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.
In two volumes. This is the standard comprehensive history of Poland in English; a Polish translation is used as a history textbook in Polish high schools.

Miłosz, Czesław. The History of Polish Literature. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983.
A very important study that gives a sense of the intellectual arc of Polish culture from the angle of vision provided by the literary tradition. As Polish artists, writers, and theatre artists collaborated extensively after the latter half of the 19th Century, movements in literature were reflected in movements in other media.

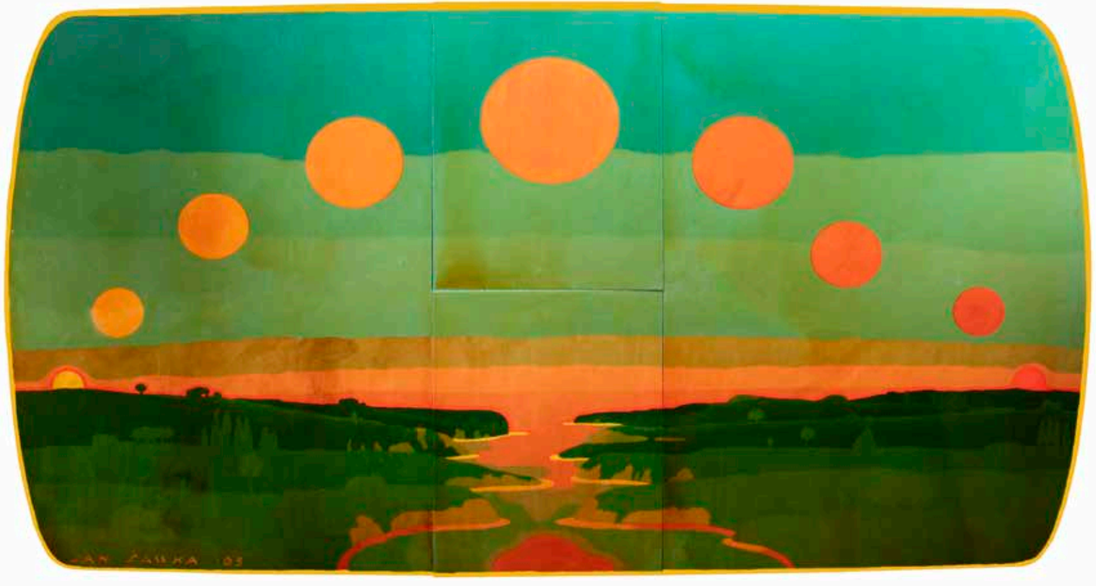
Sawka, Hanna, with Hanna Maria Sawka. At Hanka's Table. New York: Lake Isle Press, 2004.
The importance of Polish domestic culture and folkways as a means of resistance to oppression is a major theme of this book. It is the best source for biographical information regarding Jan Sawka, and for an account of the life from which his artworks sprang, written by the persons who knew him best.

Jan Sawka. The official website of Jan Sawka and the Jan Sawka Estate, maintained by Hanna Maria Sawka, www.jansawka.com, 2019.
Jan Sawka made the original selection of images and information to be included, and generated the original calligraphy, so that the site feels like a work of art. His sensibility and his style is everywhere. This site is the best online source for writing about his career and work.

Zamoyski, Adam. The Polish Way: A Thousand-year History of the Poles and their Culture. New York: Hippocrene, 1994.
This book focuses on Polish culture within the context of politics or economics, rather than a comprehensive narrative of events, thereby presenting certain cultural themes and trends very clearly.

Artwork in the Exhibition

Fading, 2005
Acrylic on Masonite
49 x 81 in.
Courtesy the Estate of Jan Sawka
Photo by Camille Murphy



Fading, 2005
Acrylic on Masonite
49 x 81 in.
Courtesy the Estate of Jan Sawka
Photo by Camille Murphy

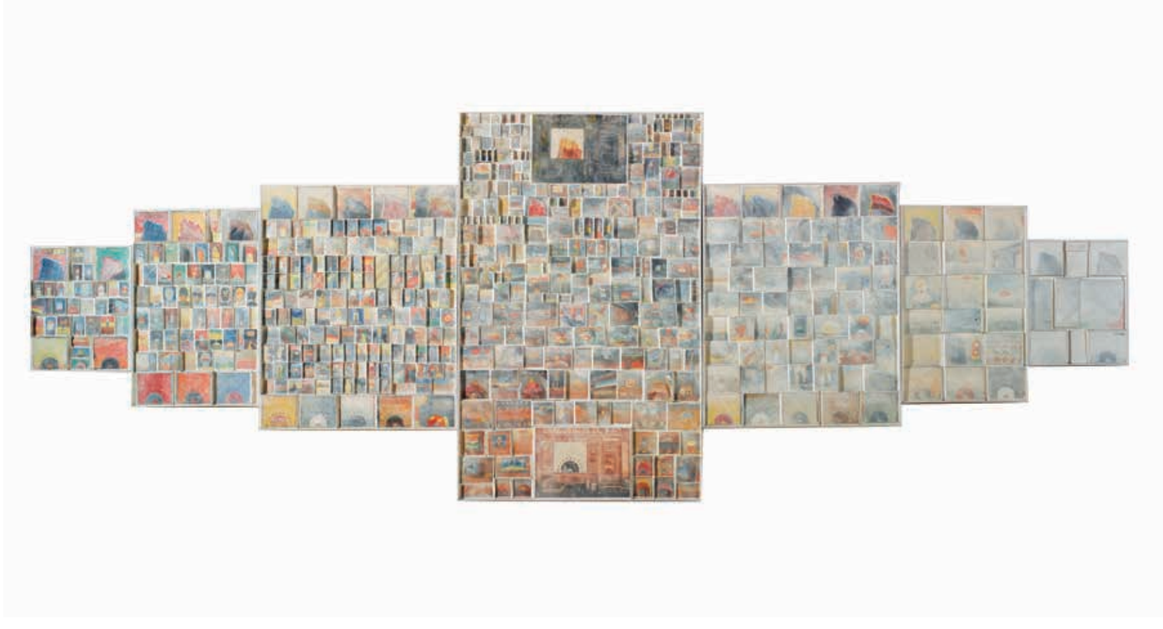
Ashokan 1, 1998-99
Acrylic, ink, composite on Masonite
55 x 173 in. each triptych
Courtesy the Estate of Jan Sawka
Photo by Ward Yoshimoto

Ashokan 2, 1998-99
Acrylic, ink, composite on Masonite
55 x 173 in. each triptych
Courtesy the Estate of Jan Sawka
Photo by Ward Yoshimoto

Ashokan 3, 1998-99
Acrylic, ink, composite on Masonite
55 x 173 in. each triptych
Courtesy the Estate of Jan Sawka
Photo by Ward Yoshimoto

Ashokan 4, 1998-99
Acrylic, ink, composite on Masonite
55 x 173 in. each triptych
Courtesy the Estate of Jan Sawka
Photo by Ward Yoshimoto

Asbury Notebook, 1981
Acrylic, graphite, mixed media on Masonite
48 x 73 in.
Courtesy Jan and Michael Solow
Photo by Krys Krawczyk



The Letter #3, 1979
Acrylic, watercolor, ink, varnish on board
48 x 11 in.
Courtesy Jean Feiwel
Photo by Ward Yoshimoto

Partial Recall, 1997
Acrylic on Masonite
67 x 99 in.
Courtesy the Estate of Jan Sawka
Photo by Camille Murphy

Passing Away, 1988
Acrylic, varnish on Masonite
66 x 96 in.
Courtesy the Estate of Jan Sawka
Photo by Camille Murphy

Intrusion, 1987
Acrylic, composite on Masonite
38 x 83 in.
Courtesy the Estate of Jan Sawka
Photo by Hanna Maria Sawka

The Memory (or *The Mirror)*, 1986
Acrylic on Masonite
48 x 40 in.
Courtesy the Estate of Jan Sawka
Photo by Amanda Schweitzer

“Post-Cards” Introduction
by Hanna Maria Sawka, MFA

The persistent sound of a needle scratching plexiglass is a part of my earliest childhood, a sound that I would hear well into adulthood, a sound that was extinguished only by my father’s death. The length and the rhythm of the scratches would change with the length of the lines or hatchings. It was not a quiet scratch, but a determined, loud sound as my father scratched hard to create lines deep enough to hold ink for the printing process. His table added some resonance to the sound, thereby filling our apartment in New York City and later, the upper floor of his studio in High Falls, with the patient, repetitive scrapes. The scratching, often accompanied by music on the radio, was not an annoying sound. It was part of my father’s monk-like concentration as he bent over a plate on his work table. It spoke to me of focused purpose and gave me a sense of peace.

The etching process created the largest callus on his finger that I have ever seen on a person! It was not only large, but it went beyond being a simple bump. Its cracks were darkened by ink or paint. A part of it had an indentation where his etching needle fit perfectly, the artist and his tools perfectly adapted to each other. That etching needle was an essential part of the place he had made for himself in the world.

One year after my father’s passing in 2012, my mother and I, pursuing what will likely be a decades-long project of cataloging his work, contacted the Rare Books Department of the Library of Congress, which holds a significant collection of my late father’s work on paper. We wrote to ask about the two folios of fine prints by him in their collection, A Book of Fiction and Post-Cards. Katherine Blood, the current Curator of Fine Prints, informed me that the Post-Cards folio was accompanied by a typewritten and handwritten manuscript entitled “Little” Comments About the Post-Cards. It was the first time I had heard about such a manuscript. Once I had access to the manuscript, I was surprised by its appearance; I expected a series of separate sheets. Instead, my father had taped twelve pages together to create a long, illustrated scroll. This scroll was a letter my father had written to Elena Millie, who had worked as a curator in the Division of Posters and Prints for over three decades, during which time she had acquired some of my father’s works on behalf of the Library. She finalized the purchase of the Post-Cards folio in February, 1992. This, along with references in the letter to an exhibition and projects in Europe, makes it likely that the manuscript dates from January 1992. The extant manuscript starts with page two. The missing first page was perhaps retained by Ms. Millie, because it did not contain information she considered relevant to the folio of prints, or germane for archival purposes. Unfortunately, we will never know for sure. Ms. Millie died in 2017, so we cannot ask her about that missing page, or about conversations regarding his work that my father must have had with her.

The manuscript as we have it begins with an introduction to Post-Cards, considered as a single coherent artwork. After this, my father assigns titles and offers a backstory for each individual image. Had it not been for this letter (which had been waiting to be discovered for many years), we would never have known the stories behind several of the plates. My mother would certainly have been able to provide guidance for most, because along their 39-year life journey together, she had shared many of the same memories. Still, both my mother and I were surprised to learn a few of the stories. A folio in the holdings of the Sawka family/estate, edition number 5 of “20” (my father never completed the 20 folios, as he had intended) has my father’s notes on each of the plates detailing the location and year of each image, and we thought that these notes comprised the extent of the documentation regarding these pieces. Aside from that, we thought we would have to rely on our memories to fill in the gaps, as best we could. Thanks to the discovery of this letter, long ago stored away in the Library of Congress by a consummately professional curator and archivist, we have received a direct message from my father with far more specific information about what he called the “vistas” of the Post-Cards folio.

Some of the descriptions in my father’s letter to Ms. Millie do not fully explore some of the memories. For example, in the text referring to Post-Card #21, MONTMARTRE (p. 113; 1989), my father describes how our family was more or less abandoned by the then-director of the Pompidou Centre in his apartment in Montmartre during the searing heat of August. When we

Fig. 1
Jan Sawka Sr., postcard sent from Winterthur to family in Nazi-occupied Poland, 1942.
Image courtesy the Estate of Jan Sawka.

Fig. 2
Jan Sawka Sr., reverse of postcard, 1942. Image courtesy the Estate of Jan Sawka.

read this description, my mother and I know what my father left out. One thing was hunger, as the stipend for my father's residency had never materialized and we were left with no money. And there was something far more terrible that he had omitted: that month, my grandfather, Jan Sr. had died. Our expulsion from Poland prevented us from returning and attending his funeral. My father faced his grief stoically and continued working, creating a design for a poster titled "Car of the Year," depicting a combination Russian-American tank prowling a city street. Later this poster would win him a Gold Medal at the Poster Biennial in Poland. Surely, it was his grief, the hunger, and his feelings about the global political situation, which had thrown my family into exile, that so deeply etched the view of the Montmartre street into his mind. It is a mark of this manuscript's importance to the reconstruction of the narrative of my father's life and work that my mother was able to fully recall the heart-wrenching circumstances upon reading the evocation of the severe summer heat.

The discovery of this manuscript, and the illumination it cast on the origins and understanding of these images, has come to be in itself to be a revelation of the nature of memory. In fact, this manuscript is a significant part of the inspiration for this exhibition.

There is another memory that I feel is relevant to share concerning the Post-Cards. My father spoke many times about actual postcards that his father, Jan Sawka senior, sent to his mother during World War II. When Poland was overwhelmed in the brutal invasion by Nazi Germany in September 1939, Jan Sr. was one of many Polish officers and soldiers who escaped Poland and continued to fight against Germany with the Allied forces. Initially, he fought with French forces, but when France surrendered, he was one of thousands of Polish military personnel who fled to Switzerland, where they were interned. During his internment, Jan Sr. sent many postcards to his wife, Maria. The postcards made it across enemy lines, because he made them appear to be inconsequential, often writing on postcards with kitschy images and banal or conventional content. He was, however, not only letting his wife know that he was alive and well, but was also sending her secret messages, coded via references to poetry, literature and history (fig. 1, 2; 1944). These messages were designed to escape the notice of the Nazi occupiers, who controlled all governmental services in occupied Poland and who were sure to screen all correspondence that entered the territory they occupied. Recruited in Switzerland by British intelligence, Jan Sr. would return to battle, assigned in the latter part of the war to British, and later, American forces as a sapper. He participated in the Invasion of Normandy (D-Day), landing in the first wave at the notorious Omaha Beach. By the war's end, having risen through the Allied ranks, he was a decorated officer in the rank of Major.

In spite of being a member of the Allies, through its government in exile, and in spite of thousands of Poles fighting and making major contributions in the battles of WWII, Poland was handed over to Stalin at Yalta. My grandfather returned to a Poland that was under a new occupation. It was the era known as the Stalinist Terror. Soon after his return, he was denounced because of his political beliefs, and thrown into a prison that would eventually become notorious as a place for political prisoners. He was held and tortured for seven years, only to be set free during the "Thaw" after Stalin's death. Unfortunately, the story of my grandfather's return to a captive Poland, and his treatment at the hands of those in power, is not an unusual one.

During Jan Jr.'s early childhood, he was not only fatherless but his family also continued to undergo raids of their home and faced other forms of harassment. I wonder if the postcards were reminders of his missing father during this dark childhood? The war-time postcards certainly were treated as something special and some remain in my family's hands to this day. What I do know for certain is that those postcards made a great impression on my father, who spoke about them many times. Postcards loomed large in his imagination, and were something "ordinary" that was filled with extraordinary meaning for him, as is obvious from the images that he created for Post-Cards.

Jan Sawka's Fine Prints

Jan Sawka learned the techniques of drypoint etching while completing an independent study program, designed specifically for him, whereby he earned both an MFA in Painting and Printmaking from the Academy of Fine Art in Wrocław (pronounced Vvrotz-Wavv) and an MS in Architectural Engineering from the Wrocław Polytechnic. At the Academy of Fine Art, he studied a variety of printmaking techniques, including linocut, aquatint, lithography, serigraphy, woodblock printing, engraving and etching. He learned these under the guidance of Stanislaw Dawski (pronounced Stanislav Dav-ski).

The story of how Dawski came to be a professor in Wrocław is dramatic, but not untypical, for a member of his generation. He had been imprisoned in a Siberian gulag for political reasons. Upon Stalin's death, he had been freed in a general and abrupt amnesty—freed, but not provided with transportation to cross the thousands of miles that he had to traverse with no provisions, passing through a hostile and dangerous land. He set out walking, and walked all the way back to Poland. He was one of the lucky few who made it home.

Dawski was one of several professors at the two schools in Wrocław who understood Sawka Jr.'s politically delicate situation as a member of a family and social class that were deeply suspect to the communist rulers of Soviet-dominated Poland. These professors worked together to prevent his expulsion and devised–for the very purpose of protecting him, what may well have been the first independent study program in post-WWII Poland. Thus, besides the fact that Jan Jr. had a very wide range of exceptional talents, which needed to be accommodated by devising parallel programs in two institutions, the program was also designed to prevent his forced conscription into the army. If the communist regime decided to target him and he was expelled from one of the schools, he would still hopefully retain student status at the other.

Dawski and Jerzy Rospendowski (pronounced Yerzy Rospendovski), who supervised his studies at the Polytechnic, were Sawka's main educational guides. Dawski, who was Jewish, and Rospendowski, who was from an old noble family, were both members of the Polish Intelligentsia—like both sides of Jan's family—and understood his perilous situation. Coming from this background alone could lead to the targeting of an individual or family by the communist regime.

The term "Intelligentsia" was a social classification of a uniquely Polish variety. It had developed as a result of the oppression of Poland that had begun in the late 18th century with the partition of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Members of the Intelligentsia were the secular, educated members of society. They were often impoverished nobles or urban people who assumed roles as leaders of their society, by reason of their education, not through the traditional feudal system of landed nobility, which to a great extent had ceased to exist after the Uprising of 1863. Education and the maintenance of language, culture and identity were their way to preserve a nation through decades of occupation—at times so severe, as in the case of the Prussian and Russian occupations, that it included the banning of the Polish language in public. The Intelligentsia was the social group from which the bright lights of an occupied nation came forth—Frydyryk Chopin, Joseph Conrad (Józef Konrad Nałęcz Korzeniowski), and Marie Skłodowska Curie, to

name a few. Education and cultural enrichment were matters of national survival, and efforts in those realms were led by such families. The Intelligentsia also produced leaders of Polish uprisings such as Tadeusz Kościuszko, famous outside of Poland for his participation in the American Revolution, and those who led the WWII Resistance. The influence of the Polish Intelligentsia was not lost on any of the various occupiers, who, although they sometimes needed the intelligentsia to rule, distrusted them. Sawka's training was carried out in the tradition of patriotism and cultural advancement within and to which his instructors, his family, and he had a deep, nearly genetic commitment.

Dawski trained Sawka in engraving and etching on metal plates, the traditional way to create drypoints. He gave Sawka a very high-quality pre-WWII steel etching needle, one of Sawka's most precious possessions, that he took with him into exile and that was in his possession to the last day of his life (fig. 3). With this needle, he began creating prints from the outset of his career. He created all his drypoints with this one needle, and his love for this needle (and most likely for his mentor) is evidenced by his many depictions of it in artworks that he made over the course of his life. (It was also this needle that I heard scratching as he etched his images, for all those years.) (fig. 4)

Drypoints became part of Sawka's regular practice. Early on, he departed from etching on metal plates, because he had

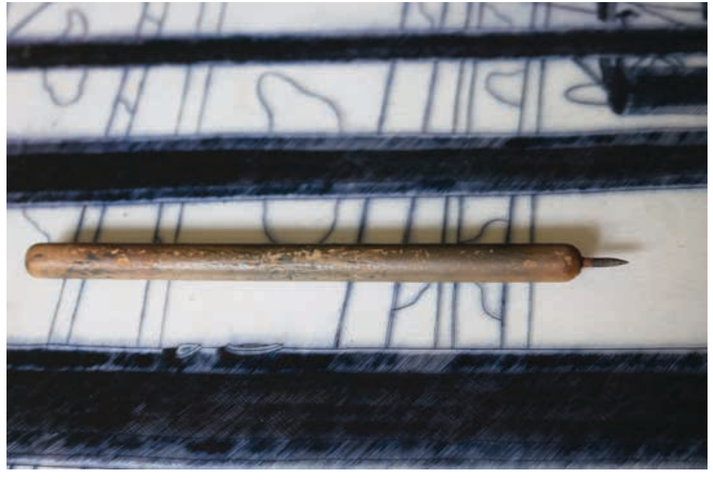


Fig. 3
Jan Sawka's etching needle with *Post-Card* plate in background. Photo by Camille Murphy.

Fig. 4
Jan Sawka, painting of etching needle. Photo by Hanna Maria Sawka.

strong allergic reactions to the acids and chemicals used in the process. Instead of etching in metal, he used the steel needle to etch in plastic—plexiglass, to be specific. According to an unpublished text about Sawka's posters and printmaking recently found among Ms. Millie's papers by her family,

> "He discovered the use of plexiglass as an acceptable printing plate one day, while sharpening an engraving tool. The tool scratched the surface of the plexiglass, and he discovered that the "plexi," when printed, held the line perfectly, and that the impression was as clear and precise as the line from a metal plate. He also realized that, when stored for some time, the plexiglass plates would not corrode as the zinc plates did. From then on, Sawka was engraving on sheets of plexiglass and then hand coloring the prints as they came off the press."

This material is far more demanding than metal, because working in metal allows the artist to correct mistakes, either by the application of chemicals to erase the error or by hammering errors or imperfections out of the metal. No corrections whatsoever are possible in plexiglass; one's process must either be completely free-form or completely planned and assured. Sawka opted for the latter.

In his early years of printmaking, Sawka created many stand-alone, hand-colored drypoint prints, but, starting in the early to mid-1970s, the prints also became part of his painting practice. He used drypoints as templates in sequential works, with every single piece individually hand-colored to create a new progression within the sequence. It was for this practice that

Fig. 5
Jan Sawka with Nadyezdha, his printing press, c. 1970. Photographer unknown.

Sawka received a special award in the name of the President of France for Innovation in Painting for From My Head and I See My Great Theater, in addition to winning the Oscar de la Peinture at the International Festival of Painting in Cagnes-sur-Mer, France in 1975. In the exhibition that this catalog is accompanying, the polyptych titled The Letter #2 is a piece created with drypoints, with two prints incorporated into the largest panel of the painting, setting the theme for the rest of the piece.

Sawka's talent led the department at the Fine Arts Academy to take action to "organize" an etching press for him. The maintenance crew of the school used salvaged pre-war parts and a roller to fabricate a press, which, in line with his ironic and absurdist sense of humor, Sawka nicknamed Nadyezhda Krupskaya, after Lenin's wife (fig. 5; circa 1970). Eventually, exile forced him to part with Nadyezhda, whom he bestowed upon an artist friend prior to departure. It was a fateful parting, leading to a painful separation. During his year and a half of residency at the Pompidou Centre in Paris, he had no access to a press, and Nadyezhda was sorely missed. Indeed, it was to be a few years after resettling in New York City before Sawka finally found his way to an etching press. In 1983 he began a residency at the Pratt Manhattan Graphics Center, under the direction of Andrew Stasik. The long-awaited reunion with drypoint etching did not take long to bear amazing fruit.

It was at the Pratt Manhattan Graphics Center that Sawka would create a folio of prints called A Book of Fiction. The idea for the folio was born during Sawka's discussions with Walter Herdeg, the publisher of Graphis Magazine, which at that time was the premier publication about graphic design and arts, recognized the world over. In response to Sawka's concern about the apparent demise of beautifully designed and printed books, Herdeg challenged Sawka to create a beautiful book that would embody his ideals. When Sawka presented a hand-drafted prototype of the book (fig. 6, 7) to Herdeg in 1982, Herdeg declared that it might be impossible to in fact publish such an ambitious work.

Sawka was undeterred by Herdeg's opinion concerning the challenges inherent in the project. As the artist-in-residence at the Pratt Manhattan Graphics Center, in 1983 he proceeded to create his ideal book. He engraved five "chapters" with five pages each. As part of his concept of the book, which included a visual exploration of the phenomenology of reading, Sawka deployed within the images he engraved writing that had no actual meaning; rather, it served as a visual signal, evoking and invoking the experience of the written word as a visual experience. It is worth noting that Sawka executed the writing on the plexiglass in mirror-image. The noted scholar of Renaissance Art, Dr. James Beck of Columbia University once noted that his execution of writing in mirror-image reminded him of Leonardo Da Vinci's notebooks. The writing, made of actual, recognizable letters that are strung together in meaningless sequences, but with enough structure to suggest sentences and paragraphs, is deployed in a staggering variety of ways in relation to the other visual material presented on each page. Some images seem to spring from the written page, others are framed within cartouches, distinctly separate from the rest of the image (fig. 8). Each page provides a unique combination of relationships of form and color, organized around the image of text as image among images. He had a very clear—and very complex—purpose always in mind.

In his preface to an offset version of the book, Sawka described A Book of Fiction as his "homage to all the great books" and as a "book in which the text is secondary. Barely visible. A kind of background for the images. A translation of written images into visual ones. A universal book of the visual scenes from various books, from books in general. Why such a treatment? Reading a book, you build the images of the action,

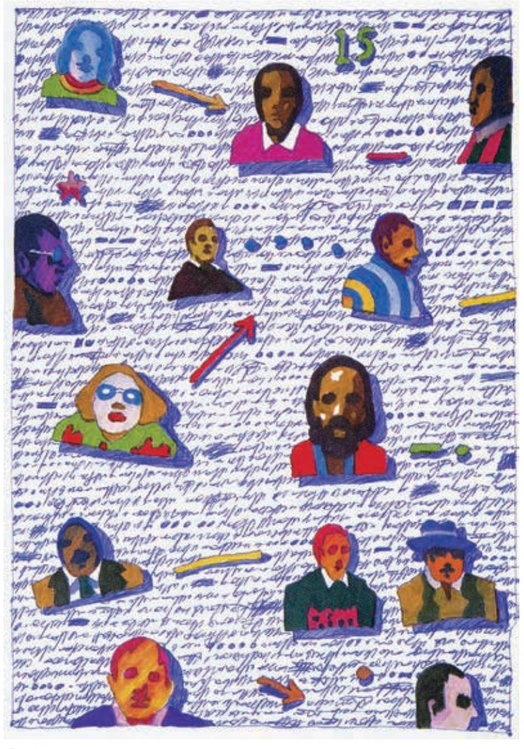


Fig. 6
A page from Sawka's prototype for *A Book of Fiction*, 1982.

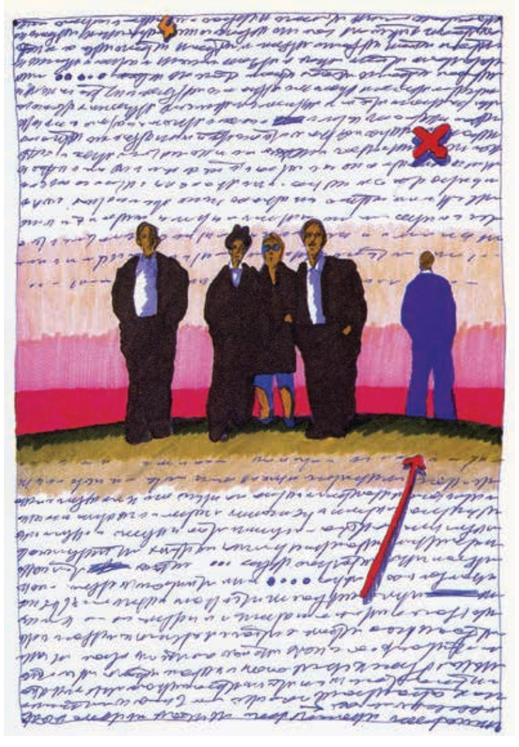


Fig. 7
A page from Sawka's prototype for *A Book of Fiction,* 1982.

see the interiors and the landscapes, the faces of the characters, according to your own power of imagination. You see and feel the action in the private screening room of your mind, using the script written by the author". In his book Fantasm and Fiction: On Textual Envisioning, critic Peter Schwenger views this work as an example of one that centers around the process of envisioning a written text. He points to how the images allude to the very structures of writing that help manifest the images in our minds, such as how "serried and repetitive patterns are common in its pages, arising out of patterns inherent in writing " (93).

A Book of Fiction was Sawka's euphoric reentry into printmaking. He completed twenty-five folios and eight artist proofs at the Graphics Center. He individually hand colored each folio, resulting in unique works of art. Ten of the folios are hand bound. (One such bound original is in the collection of the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art). Andrew Stasik recognized the achievement and organized a public exhibition to show the work at the Pratt Manhattan Gallery. Sawka's gallery representative at the time, Sid Deutsch, recognized the opportunity that this provided and set about organizing a two-part commercial show at his gallery and at an additional, rented space in SoHo to open at the same time as the non-commercial show at Pratt. The three-venue event opened to the public on April 13, 1985 and was a great success that led to significant outcomes. Sales from the Deutsch shows helped the Sawka family realize a long-awaited dream of purchasing a home and studio, the High Falls location where Sawka would live and work for the last 27 years of his life. In addition, one day an editor from Clarkson N. Potter Publishers happened by the Pratt Manhattan Gallery and saw A Book of Fiction. Walter Herdeg was ultimately proven wrong (to his delight!): in 1986, Clarkson N. Potter and Sawka selected one of the folios for an offset edition of A Book of Fiction, which was then printed in the highest possible quality and in a texture as close as possible to that of the original. After a launch at Rizzoli Books, it garnered many positive reviews in the press and sold out entirely.

Fig. 8
Jan Sawka, a "page" from *A Book of Fiction*, 1983

Encouraged by the success of A Book of Fiction, Sawka set about creating his next drypoint project, Post-Cards. He wanted to continue the explorations of mental processes that he had addressed in A Book of Fiction, developing directions and methods in the new work.

As a major first step, he purchased his own etching press, the first he had owned since his beloved Nadyezhda. To this day that press stands guard on the first story of his studio, surrounded by serried rows of paintings. As he describes in the manuscript, he worked on Post-Cards between other projects, the luxury of having his own press allowing him to work in this way. His original goal was to create twenty numbered folios, but only five complete folios are known to exist. The Post-Cards folio that has a prominent place in The Memory of Place exhibition is an edition purchased by Samuel Dorsky, Sawka's gallerist for several years. Following Samuel Dorsky's death, Dorsky Gallery Curatorial Projects donated this folio of Post-Cards and a bound folio of A Book of Fiction to the museum that bears his name.

The Creation of the Prints

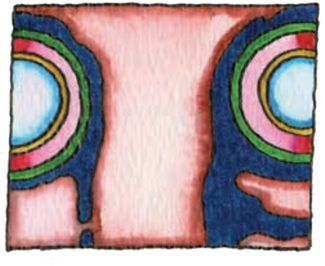
The word "print" often indicates a mechanical reproduction, which can mean thousands of copies of one image, originally drafted or etched by an artist. A factory-type setting may come to mind, bustling with "technicians" or "assistants," filled with whirring machinery. In the case of Sawka's print output, nothing could be further from reality. The image that is truer is that of Albrecht Durer, laboring in his studio. Sawka hand-engraved each plate, hand-inked it, turned the wheel himself on an intaglio press, and finally hand-colored each print. Each finished image is unique, from the inking of the plate to the coloring of the final prints. This is what defines a "fine print."

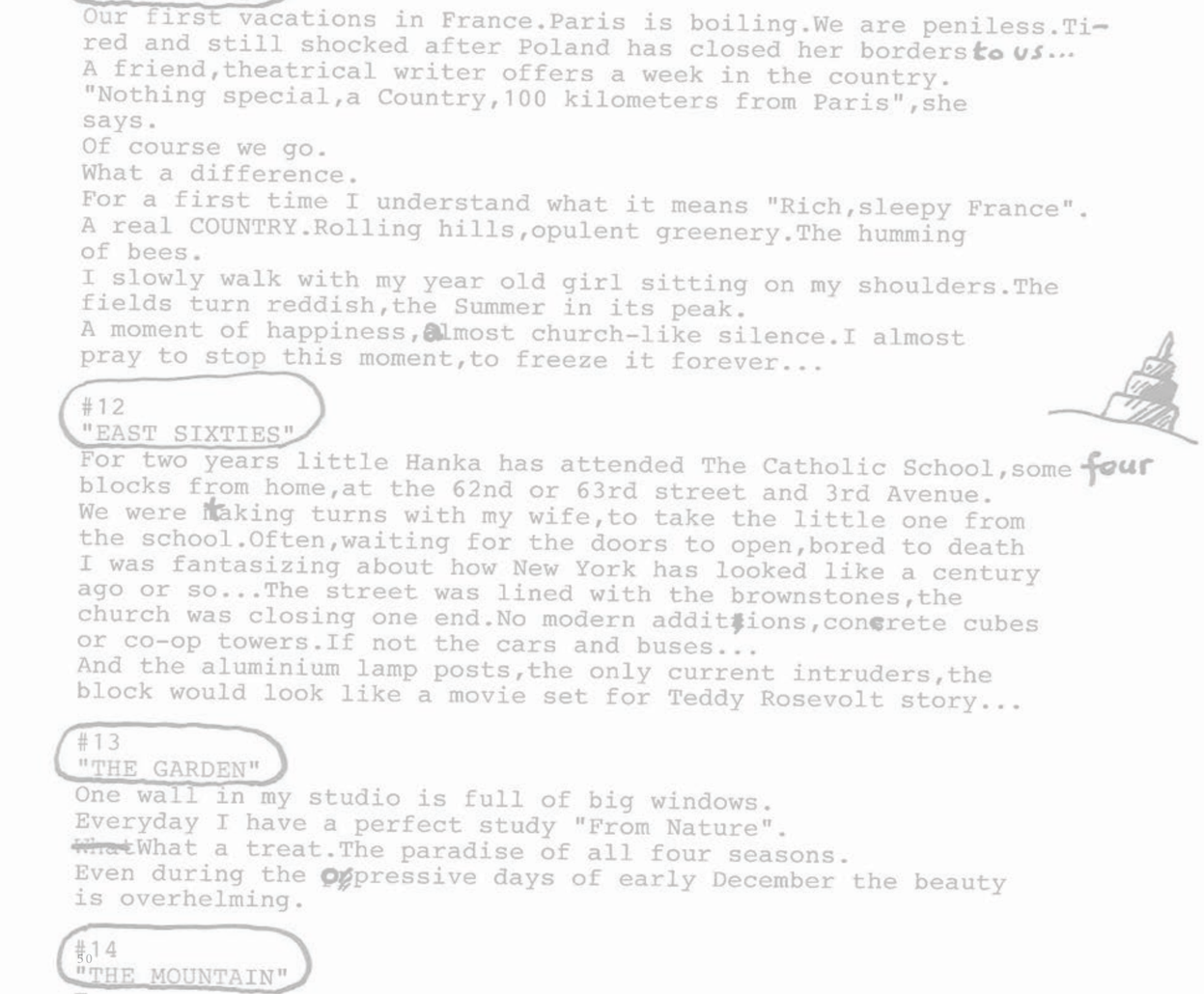
The process would start with etching the plates, in which he would incise the image in reverse on the surface of the plate. In other words, he would create a mirror-image of the intended artwork when etching. In Sawka's case, there was no sketch, no drawn image that would act as a guide in creating the plate. Although plexiglass is clear, he worked with nothing but a white sheet of paper underneath the plate. He used one hand to etch, the other to turn the plate. He usually started to create the image at one corner of the plate. From there, he would work his way across to create the complete image. He created no guidelines. He was precisely executing an image that he could see precisely in his mind. As noted earlier, there was no room for error given the nature of the materials with which he was working. Needless to say, this working method is exceptional.

Once a plate or plates were complete, Sawka would prepare for printing, which he always did with the assistance of his wife, Hanna "Hanka". First, he prepared his etching press by making sure that it was evenly calibrated. Intaglio printing requires great pressure that allows the paper to be squeezed into the etched lines. A heavy roller provides weight to create this pressure. The roller position must be precisely calibrated, so that one side does not apply more pressure than the other, or the plate will crack, and all the effort in scribing the plate be irrevocably lost. The Arches paper Sawka used is manufactured specifically for intaglio printing. The couple would also have prepared a large, shallow bin of water for dipping the paper, as well as lain flannel blankets on the press. These blankets would soon sandwich the plate and paper. Next, Sawka would rub Charbonnel etching ink into the plate. He used only primary colors, which he would mix together to create a variety of colors. He would mix the colors directly on the cotton cloth that he was using to apply the ink onto the plate. He would also mix the colors on the plate itself, as he was rubbing the ink into the etched lines. He aimed to achieve many variations in color, which he carefully controlled.

The next step was the removal of ink from the areas between the etch-marks. This meant cleaning the plate carefully of excess ink. First, Sawka would use clean cotton cloths to mop up the extra ink. Then, he would use pages from old New York City phone books to clean the last traces of ink. For years, Jan and Hanka had been collecting a stack of such phone books, which, being extra-thick, were printed on thin, but strong paper. Sawka had discovered when he was working at the Pratt Manhattan Center that this paper had the ideal absorbency and strength for the task, leaving no residue on the plate. Once the plate was clean, with ink present only in the etched lines and marks, he would lay the plate on the bottom blanket of the press's bed. Next, he would clean his hands of the greasy ink using turpentine. At this point, Hanka would quickly dip a sheet of paper in the water, with a single fluid motion, after which she allowed any excess water to drip off. Sawka would lay it carefully and evenly on the plate, which he then covered with another flannel blanket. At this point, by turning the heavy wheel of the press, the plate at last was put through the press and under the roller. The turning of the press was very strenuous. At the end of the process, he would remove the print and allow it to air-dry. Once a print was dry, it was ready for hand-coloring. In the case of Post-Cards, he used watercolor pencils, inks, acrylic paints, fluorescent poster colors, and soft pencils and pastels. Of the five existing folios, each series is colored differently, comprising a unique work of art.

Sawka, Jan. A Book of Fiction. Clarkson N. Potter, 1986
Schwenger, Peter. Fantasm and Fiction: On Textual Envisioning. Stanford University Press, 1999.




Our first vacations in France.Paris is boiling.We are peniless.Tired and still shocked after Poland has closed her borders to us...
A friend,theatrical writer offers a week in the country.
"Nothing special,a Country,100 kilometers from Paris",she says.
Of course we go.
What a difference.
For a first time I understand what it means "Rich,sleepy France".
A real COUNTRY.Rolling hills,opulent greenery.The humming of bees.
I slowly walk with my year old girl sitting on my shoulders.The fields turn reddish,the Summer in its peak.
A moment of happiness,almost church-like silence.I almost pray to stop this moment,to freeze it forever...

#12
"EAST SIXTIES"
For two years little Hanka has attended The Catholic School,some four blocks from home,at the 62nd or 63rd street and 3rd Avenue.
We were taking turns with my wife,to take the little one from the school.Often,waiting for the doors to open,bored to death I was fantasizing about how New York has looked like a century ago or so...The street was lined with the brownstones,the church was closing one end.No modern additions,concrete cubes or co-op towers.If not the cars and buses...
And the aluminium lamp posts,the only current intruders,the block would look like a movie set for Teddy Rosevolt story...

#13
"THE GARDEN"
One wall in my studio is full of big windows.
Everyday I have a perfect study "From Nature".
~~What~~What a treat.The paradise of all four seasons.
Even during the ~~op~~pressive days of early December the beauty is overhelming.

#14
"THE MOUNTAIN"

Jan Sawka's
Postcards Manuscript

Editor's note: I have edited this manuscript for clarity. English was my father's second language. Often, he is directly translating Polish idioms or is using English in idiosyncratic ways which are vivid and expressive. My edits are meant to bring out the eloquence of my father's prose, by clarifying those points where the language barrier may have interfered with his intended meaning, without robbing it of its unique personal voice.

The Manuscript
"Little" Comments About the Postcards

The plates were etched as they appear in the folio, not chronologically, they simply show the spontaneous arrival of "vistas." The first was etched in April of 1985, before I left New York to the countryside. By late August, eight of them were complete. The mess of the new life, renovation of the studio, frequent trips back to New York – all of this didn't help to continue.
In the spring of 1986, I proofed them at a newly opened, friendly graphic studio in New York.
They exceeded my expectations, suddenly I felt a rush of energy and quickly new ones started to materialize.
As usual, I completed the etching on the plates between other "assignments," primarily paintings (in my big studio I was elated to at last have A SPACE) ...

In 1987, I had some 15-17 plates ready. I started to proof them seriously now, finishing each with watercolor, and pastel, making them as unique as possible.

I bought my first OWN real intaglio press in 1988, which sped up the entire process.
By 1989 all of the images were finished, by early 1990 the first complete folio was ready.

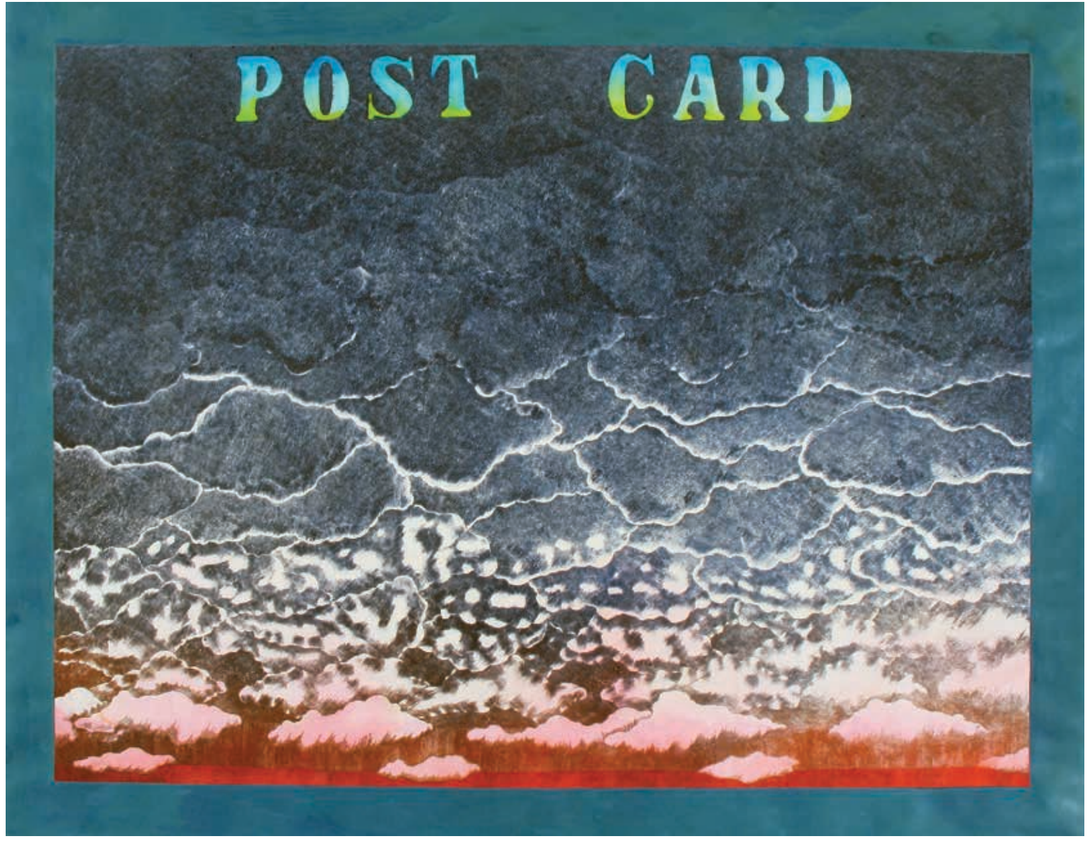
I decided to send you my only one "private" folio, instead of asking de Andino to give you the one he has. The reason is simple. I know the budget of the Library is not Pentagon-scale, the gallery price is rather steep. On the other hand, I am financially strained to the limit (two trips to Europe last year were completely financed by me), for the preparations for a show in Poland are largely on my shoulders. It would be not too good to lower the price for the Library at the same time to give a dealer his 50%. And, it is my "contact," not his. I think we can discuss the price's range in the $15000 figure.

And now, let's go to the Post Cards, as they unfold.

#1

“THE SKY”

I was living in a garage at the outskirts of ancient Cracow for two of my most important years, 1971-72, while working with STU Theatre and helping poets to publish their poems illegally... With a friend, another member of STU, originally a nuclear physicist turned hippie and actor, we rented this garage. We lived in it and had a studio. We sat on the doorstep during the wee hours, dreaming. Talking art and plans, planning trips. We listened to tapes of Woodstock, Hair and Dylan. The sky over Cracow was dark with an unhealthy haze of pink, smoke and Sulphur pouring from the nearby steel mill… We were free, floating in the space of the night and a dream…



#2

“THE CHIMNEYS”

Two years later I came to Paris. I was invited by two young curators at the Pompidou Center. They saw my side-show at the Poster Biennial the summer before, liked it and decided to “try” me out… I was tired, amazed and confused. My French was limited to Merci Bien, English is not their forte… I stayed with one of the curators, at his Montmartre flat. The maze of narrow streets, practical isolation from the street (the language barrier) — I hated to ask for directions home. I tried to memorize all the turns. And this is what lingers on in my brain to this day, the chimneys, typical Parisian chimneys, two million of them in existence. But these pictured are mine, forever…

#3

“THE FIELD”

This goes back to the mid-sixties. I studied in Wroclaw, Southwestern Poland. I started to date a girl, a new teacher, who got her assignment at a little town, 30 miles west of Wroclaw. One afternoon I arrived by train to meet her, an hour too early. I walked aimlessly around the town. A little forest, through it a cut with a gravel road. I was walking slowly in the deepening shadows of the upcoming evening. And suddenly, light exploded. A field opened up, flat and enormous, running toward the horizon, full of the blinding light of the sunset. What a view, what brilliance of Nature’s Designs… To a child-artist, still in the very formative years, it was a true shock, this unexpected glory of land and sky and air…

#4
“THE ALLEY”
Since I was a child, I was fascinated by Mean Streets, back alleys, the amazing zones of twilight, where the city meets the suburb, a good street turns darker and the first working class bars smellishly open their arms… Little workshops, parking lots, somewhere in Poland or in London, or in Turin, where I saw a truck being loaded with a couple of low, cigarlike racing cars, obviously some antiques from the fifties… My mind was full of sudden, suspicious questions, “why here, a robbery or some illegal exchange?”
I passed silently, unnoticed. The picture remains, and the night, and the smell.

#5
“RAILROAD STATION”
Not a station really, rather the huge junction of tracks, near an industrial town. That’s it.
In the late fifties, after Stalin died, the Scouts returned to Poland. For only a few short years they remained close to their original character. Later they were squashed into the old mold of a political, militaristic caricature.
But I joined them in those years. I was 11 or 12.
We tried to follow tradition and make routine cross-country marches, with a compass and all the countryside to ourselves is what you see in this picture…

#6

“THE SUBURBS”

While in Wroclaw, I lived in small rented rooms, usually at the city fringes. I worked, usually painting into the early morning. Battered, with eyes full of sand, I would unwind, watching the awakening of the world, my last cigarette in hand.

“They” were waking up, to scramble to work…

And me, a free spirit, was going to rest.

The first victories of a sick mind…

But, what a color of the air, what a serenade of shifting shadows and turning colors, what hope all around, A New Great Day…

#7

“ASPEN, COLORADO”

My first visit to the States. Aspen Conference, Bicentennial. Together with Shigeo Fukuda I drifted off course. Instead of going to listen to Milton Glaser or Tom Wolfe, we drove some miles out of the village. We left the jeep on the shoulder of the road and slowly began to walk over a meadow. I was tired, jet-lag pushing me down, chaos governing my mind. Two weeks before, I had left Poland and I really didn’t know what to do…

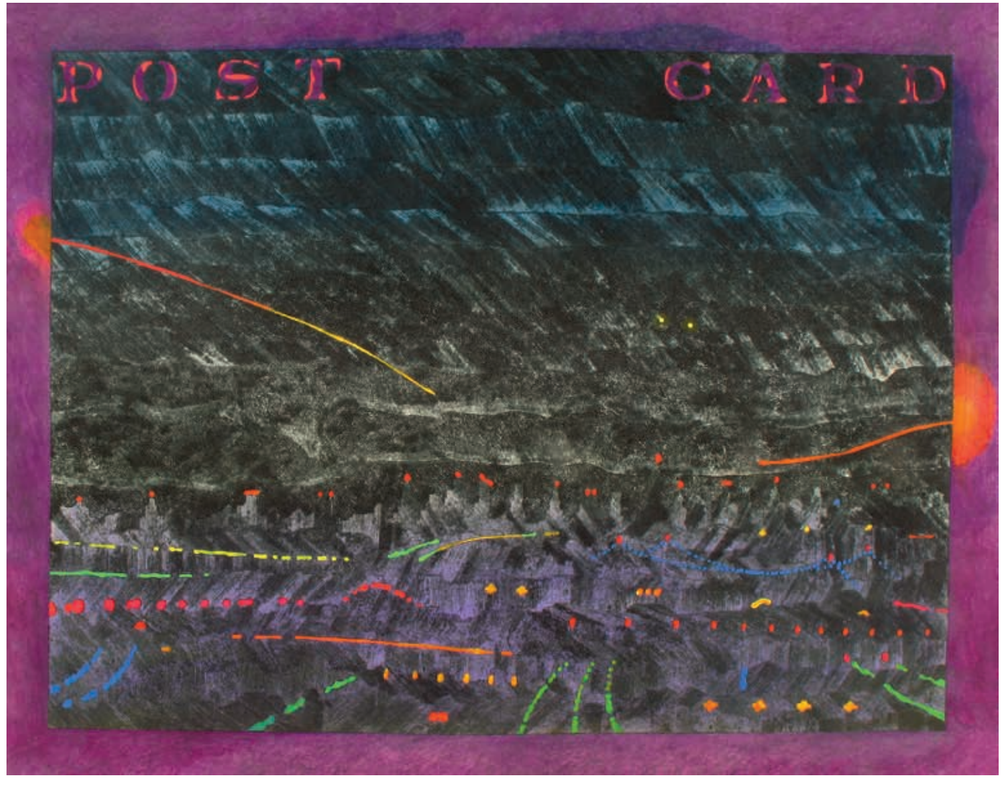
I was truly in limbo. Somehow, I knew where I was, in MY DEAREST OF ALL DREAMS, in America, but the reality of it still escaped me.

The grass was so green and rich it almost glowed like in an acid trip. The air was sharp and only helped to intensify the colors around.

We walked in silence, suspended in space with a breeze playing with the grass. For a moment, it looked like we never would reach the end of the meadow.

Then I spotted an incline, sort of a deeper color of the grass, nothing dramatic. I started to follow it and slightly to the right I spotted A THING. Two mailboxes so familiar, so well-known from American movies, from Vermont to Oregon… Ha! I had arrived!

It was America. Real and on my own small, private scale.



#8

“MANHATTAN FROM THE WHITESTONE BRIDGE”

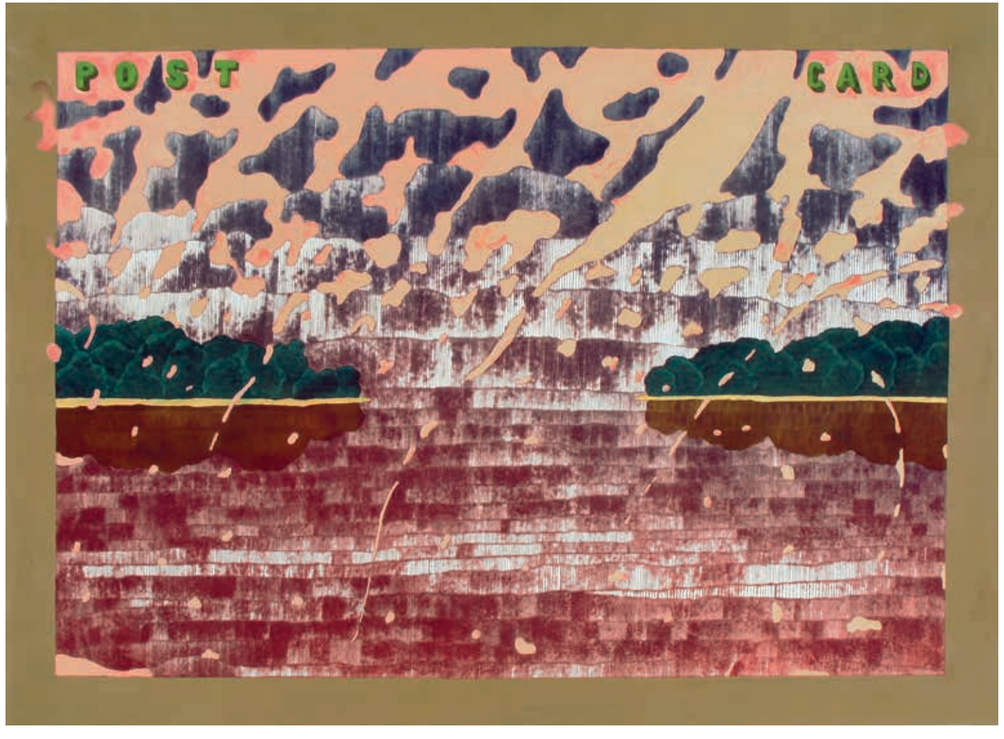
It was late August and we had dropped our friends at JFK Airport. A quick operation one way, a major pain returning home. After crawling across Queens, we started to climb the Whitestone Bridge. And then, traffic stopped. We sat idling with the air conditioner’s compressor wailing in agony for an agonizingly long time.

To the left, we saw the amazing view of Manhattan, partially obliterated by smog, terribly two-dimensional, in a haze of the summer’s heat. Slowly, darkness overwhelmed us, the first lights were twinkling, the shapes of bridges outlined by blue lights.

I was wondering aloud, “How could somebody sane survive fifteen minutes in this hell…”

All of the days, months, years, struggles of our eight years spent there came back to us. The spectacle of memory, a silent film’s décor.

#9
“MAISONS ALFORT”
In Paris, we moved to a suburb, across from the Boulevard Periferique, to Maisons Alfort. 5 minutes off the Metro station, 100 meters from the Marne’s banks, almost the countryside. The streets were empty for most of the day. The houses, some more opulent than the rest and belonging to professionals, while the smallish and cheap ones like ours were all walled. Not fenced. Walled.
We stayed for a year and a half.
We knew only one person.
An Italian lady, 65 years old.
After 45 years in Paris, also a stranger.

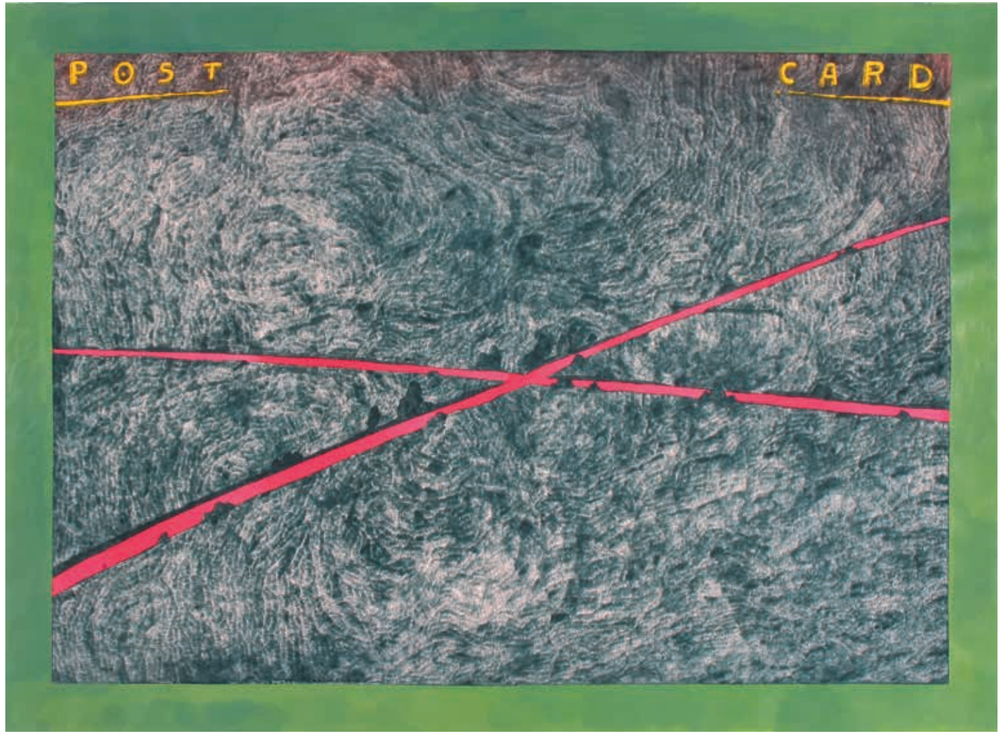


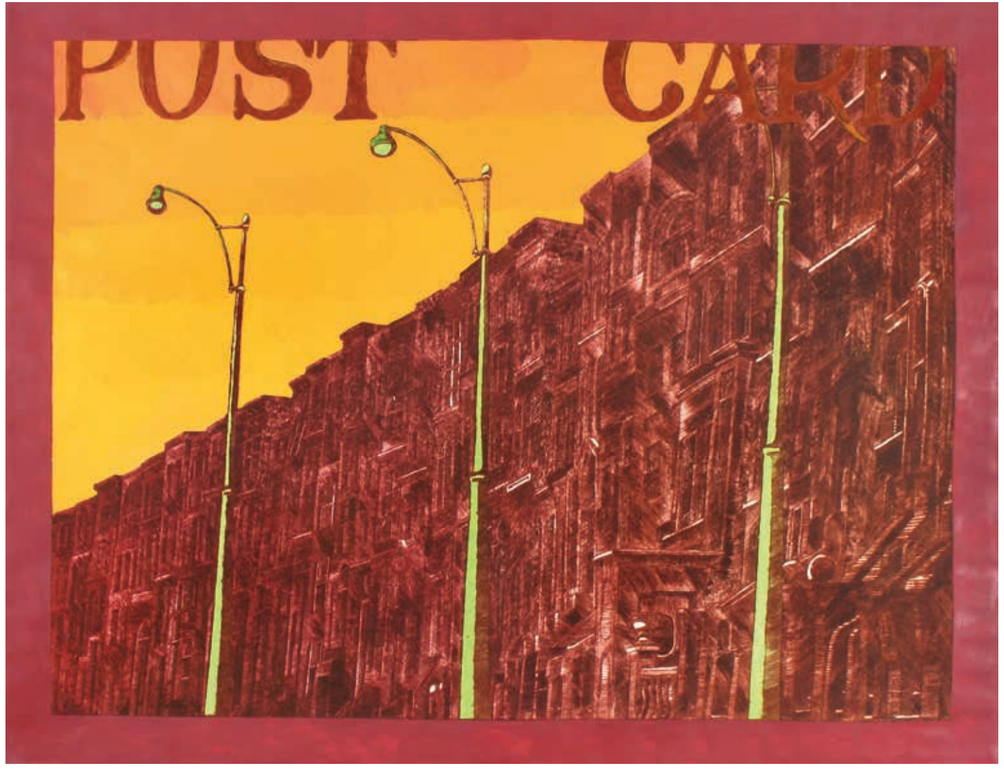
#9

“BLIZZARD”

To unwind, to reflect for a moment, to sort things out; I take Hanka and we go to the Ashokan Reservoir. It is a body of water, separating us from Woodstock. It looks like a Norwegian fjord, sort of. Great during warm days, the dog runs free, chasing our daughter on her bicycle. The asphalt road, closed to traffic, runs along the water. One day, we went in late November. The weather looked OK, but while two miles from the car, on this road, the wind suddenly
came.
The sky started to change, grey clouds racing across the waters. The sun died, last rays illuminating the flurries of the first blizzard of the winter of 1987…
We ran toward the car, still turning our faces toward the spectacle unfolding before our eyes.

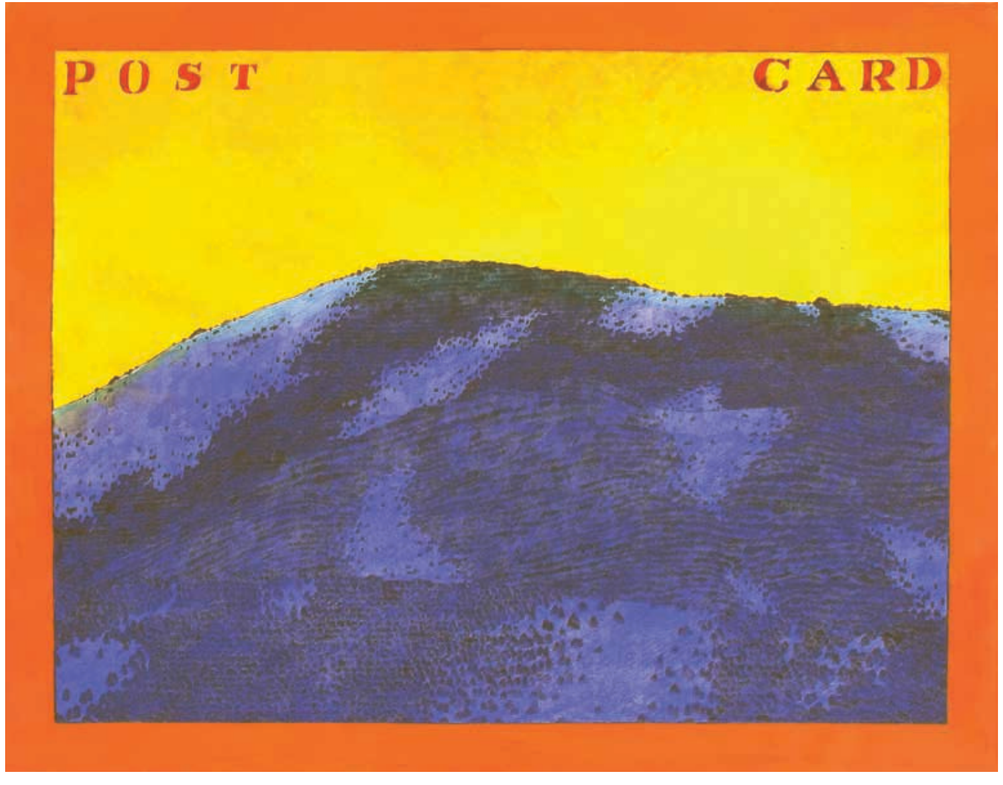
#11
“CROSSROADS”
Our first vacations in France. Paris is boiling.
We are penniless. Tired and still shocked after
Poland has closed her borders to Us. A friend, a
theatrical writer, offers a week in the country.
“Nothing special, just countryside, 100 kilometers
from Paris,” she says.
Of course we go.
What a difference.
For the first time, I understand the meaning of
“rich, sleepy France”. Real COUNTRYSIDE. Rolling
hills, opulent greenery. The humming of bees.
I slowly walk with my one-year-old girl sitting
on my shoulders. The fields are turning reddish,
Summer at its peak.
A moment of happiness, almost church-like silence.
I almost
pray to stop this moment, to freeze it forever ...





#12
“EAST SIXTIES”
For two years, little Hanka attended a Catholic School, some four blocks from home, at 62nd or 63rd street and 3rd Avenue.
We took turns with my wife, to pick up the little one from school. Often, waiting for the doors to open, bored to death I was fantasizing about how New York must have looked a century
ago or so ... The street was lined with the brownstones, the church closed one end. No modern additions, concrete cubes or co-op towers. If not for the cars and buses ...
And the aluminum lamp posts, the only current intruders, the block would look like a movie set for a Teddy Roosevelt story ...

#13
“THE GARDEN”
One wall in my studio is full of big windows.
Every day I have a perfect study “From Nature”.
What a treat. The paradise of all four seasons.
Even during the oppressive days of early
December, the beauty is overwhelming.



#14

“THE MOUNTAIN”

For years, my parents would take me to a mountain village, near a famous river gorge in the Pieniny Range, about 100 miles south of Cracow.

It was a family tradition, a part of our life, to go there. Summer did not start until we went there.

I remember every wrinkle of the field, every stand of pine trees, it is all engraved into my memory.

Crossing a bridge over the fast racing river you turn your eyes to the right and see the famous range of the Pieniny. I crisscrossed it so many times I can’t count.

When you turn your head to the left you see a distant range.

Not as pretty and dramatic, without the white towers of limestone. Rounder, softer, with little islands of meadows, the mountain stands still, on the sidelines of Nature’s Spectacle.

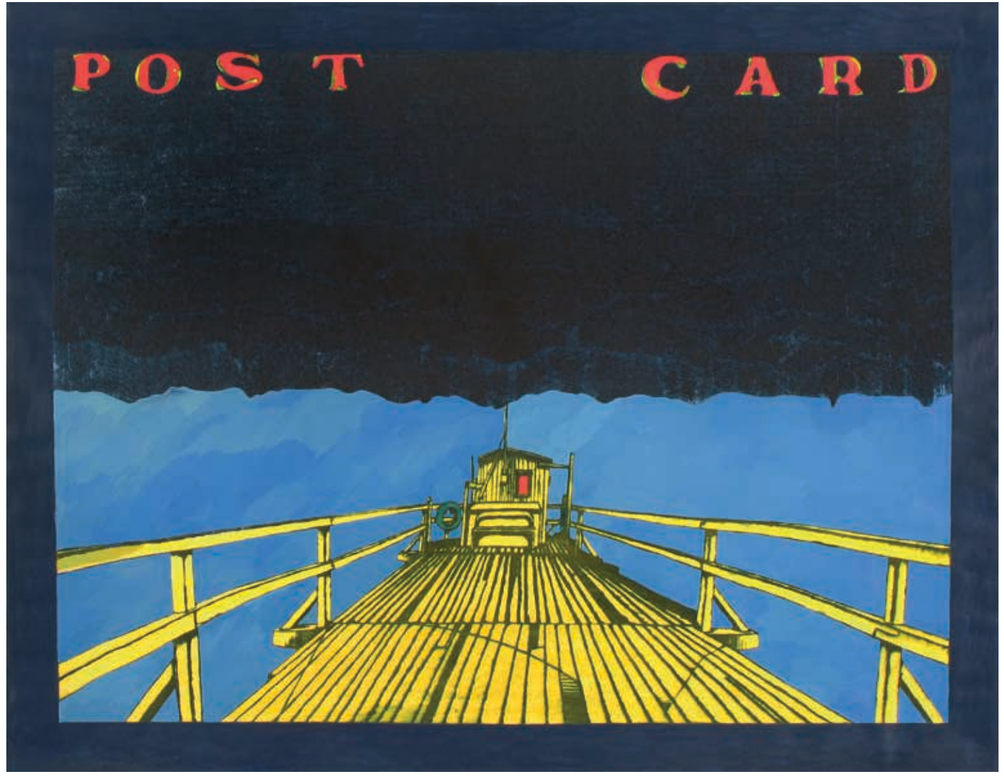
I never climbed its gentle slopes. She kept her secrets away from me.

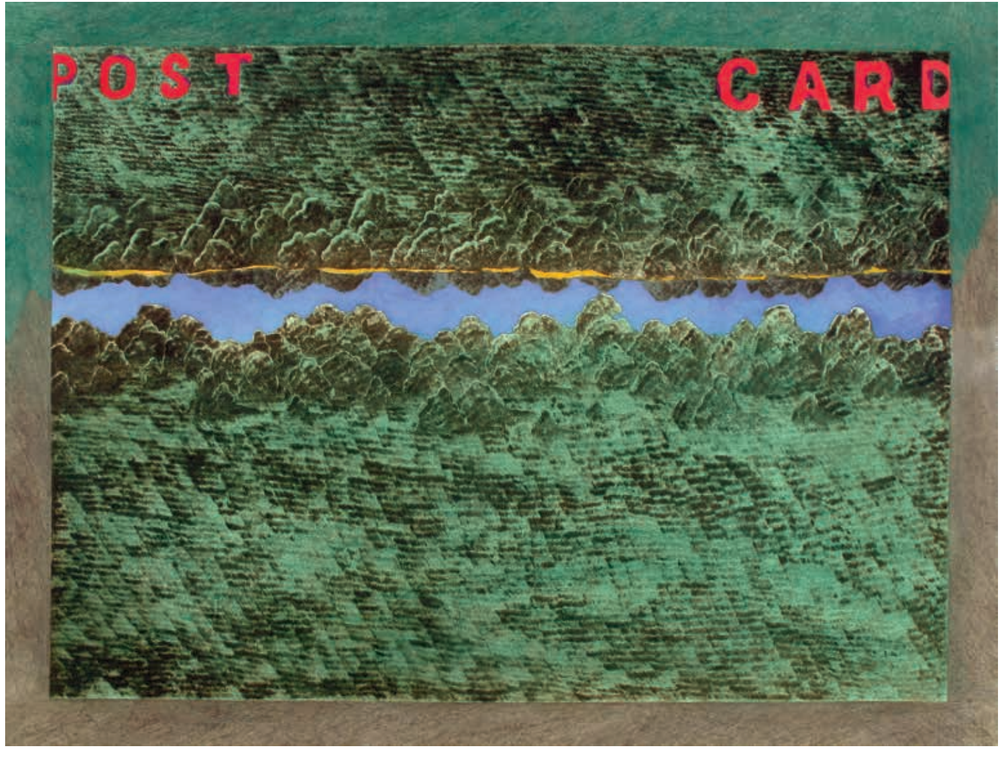
It’s why it intrigues me the most.

#15

“THE PIER”

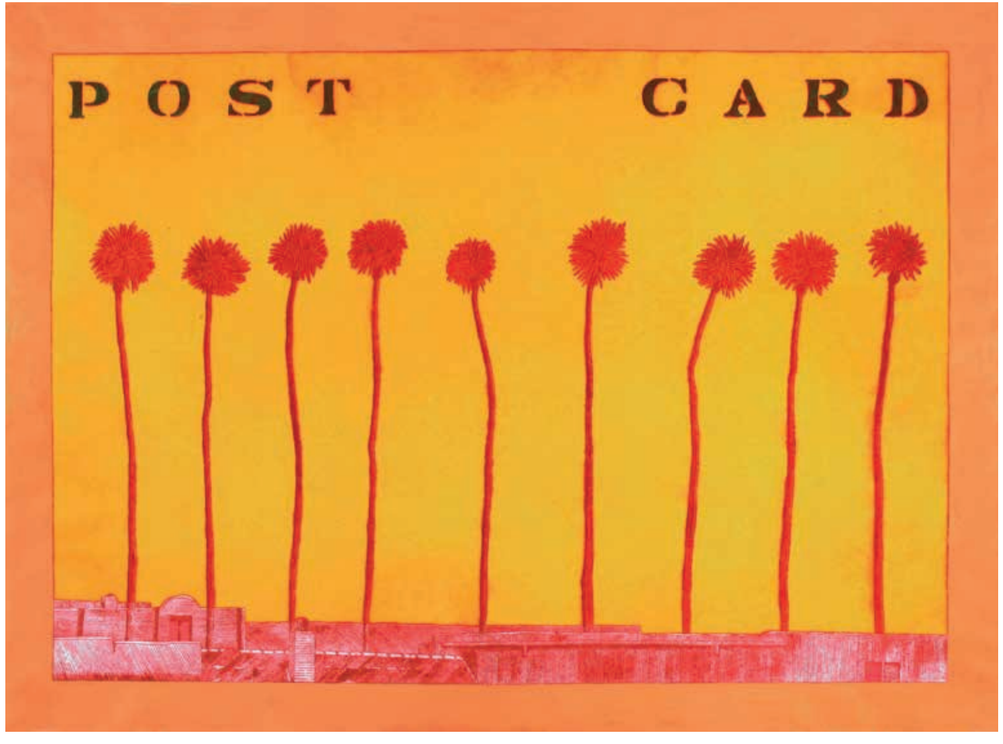
I don’t swim. I hate water.
One day in the Summer of 1982, at the New Jersey shore, I had my closest encounter with THE SEA. A rainy storm was howling over our heads for a couple of days. Crowded in a rented room some blocks from the beach, we were going bananas. Mostly me, as usual.
I dislike vacations, after a week I feel crazy and try to paint or draw.
I left the house and walked along the shoreline, completely deserted aside of some teenagers braving the wind.
I stopped by the pier, the only one around, with a little cabin at its end, a sort of fishermen’s club.
The pier was fighting the storm, shaking and vibrating. Instantly, I was scared and lured by it. I walked slowly, with my heart pounding in panic, walking over the planks, seeing the wild waves underneath. Finally, from behind the cabin, I watched the storm, feeling like a yachtsman struggling against the raging sea. I was terrified and overwhelmed by a strange and vague understanding of the allure of THE OCEAN.
It is not my cup of tea, for sure, but at least I could feel what it means to those who go and fight the REAL THING.

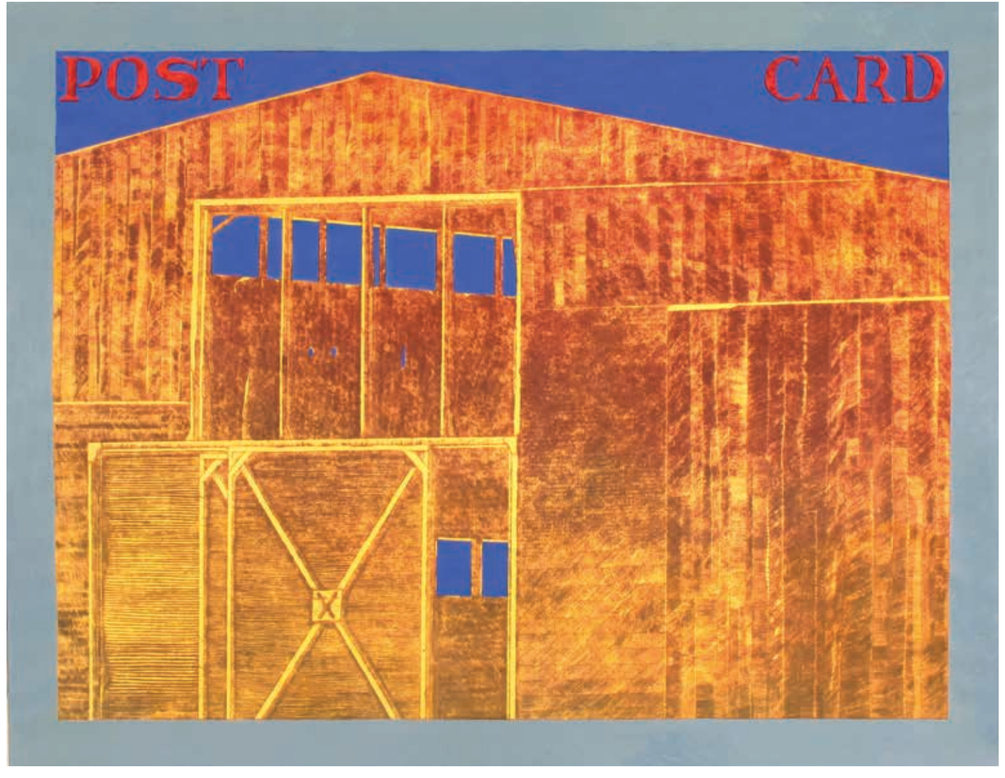




#16
“RABA RIVER”
When I was a really small boy we would go to a house in the countryside, at the foothills of the Beskidy Mountains. We would stay at the old dacha of my once prosperous family. In the summertime, we walked two miles to the Raba River, a lazy little blue ribbon of water. Surrounded by bushes, it silently went by, hardly a threat.
But every time we approached it, I got chills.
My grandmother had told it over and over, hundreds and hundreds of
times, pestered by us to recount it again.
The Story of the Big Flood Of 1933. The Raba River swept away and carried houses (one was observed to still have a candle burning inside), cattle and even bridges. THAT little NOTHING, carrying bridges, could you imagine?

#17
“L.A.”
I flew to L.A. non-stop from Paris in March of 1977. It was the first time. Half-dead, I was picked up by a friend and he drove me to his Benedict Canyon house. Past the Bel Air gates, Beverly Hotel and all that Hollywood jazz. I had a shot of scotch and collapsed. The next day, I was idling away some time at the friend’s office, 6121 Sunset Boulevard. The windows of the office were tinted, they are all tinted there.
I saw the low contours of Hollywood spreading around. Completely unromantic, bare, discolored by the tint, faceless.
Only a nearby row of Queen Palms were there to telegraph a message to me — “Hey, you, this in fact is Los Angeles, no kidding…”



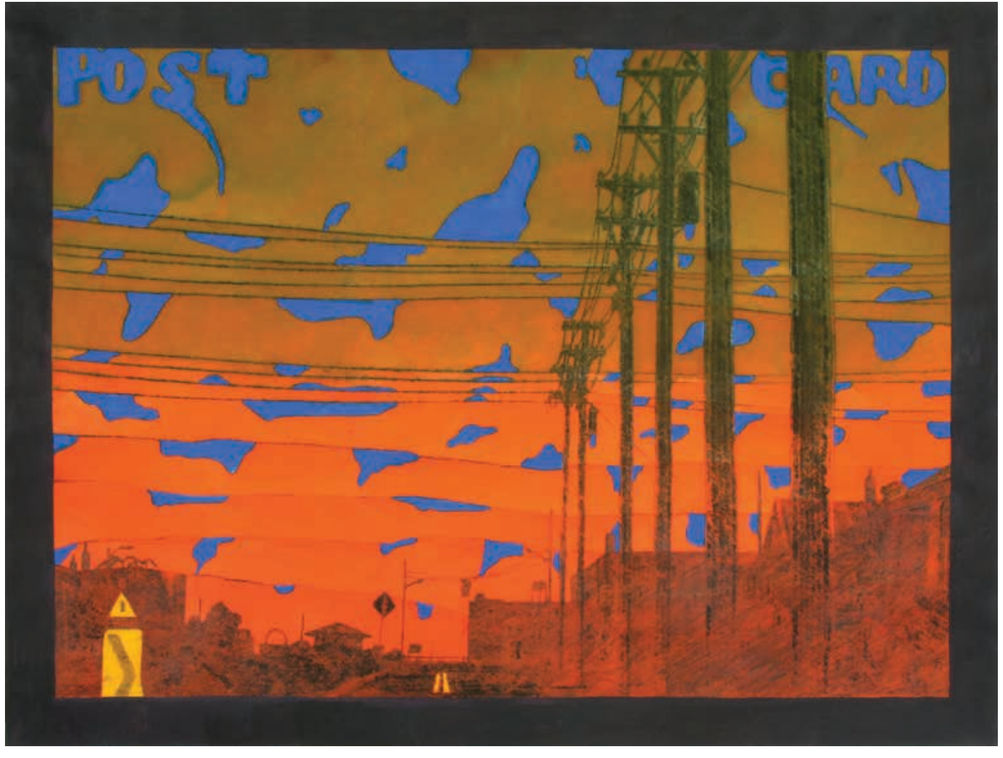


#18

“A WAREHOUSE”

In Maisons Alfort, we would stroll around, crossing the Marne to the fringes of Bois de Vincennes. It was a gray area, full of mysterious buildings, some remnants of 19th century Institutions, some appearing to be secretive installations (certainly our impression only). Like the one depicted here, this old corrugated warehouse, freshly painted, but still empty. “It is waiting for James Bond,” Hanka concluded…

#19
“ASBURY PARK”
Our first “resort” in America. The cheapest rooms, an air of despair, the decline of nearly-beautiful, but too-grandiose casinos, and an empty and crumbling amusement park that remembered the turn of the century. But it was the first vacation we spent on our own, not at someone’s mercy. And this is why I remember it more fondly, than walking in downtown Courmayeur from the Cristall Hotel to the English pub, which looks more ridiculous in the Italian Alps than a casino in Asbury Park.



#20
“TUSCANY”
May 1972. I try to travel cheaply across Tuscany. The train is the mode I choose. Third class. It stops at every station and in between. A young Hemingway had to have been evacuated from the Front to the hospital in the same car, I’m sure. In 1917. The train tries to pass over the Apennines. It is agonizing. Half-asleep, with my face one inch from the greasy window, I come to know the curves, shapes, and incredible proportions of the Tuscan landscape. Little towns, sepia-colored walls and the roofs of one thousand delicate gradations of red. Little ravines spanned by three-century old bridges. The trees appear to have been designed to complement the houses and structures built around the pines and cypresses.
The best lesson from the chosen land of the Man from Vinci and Il Commendatore from Modena…

#21

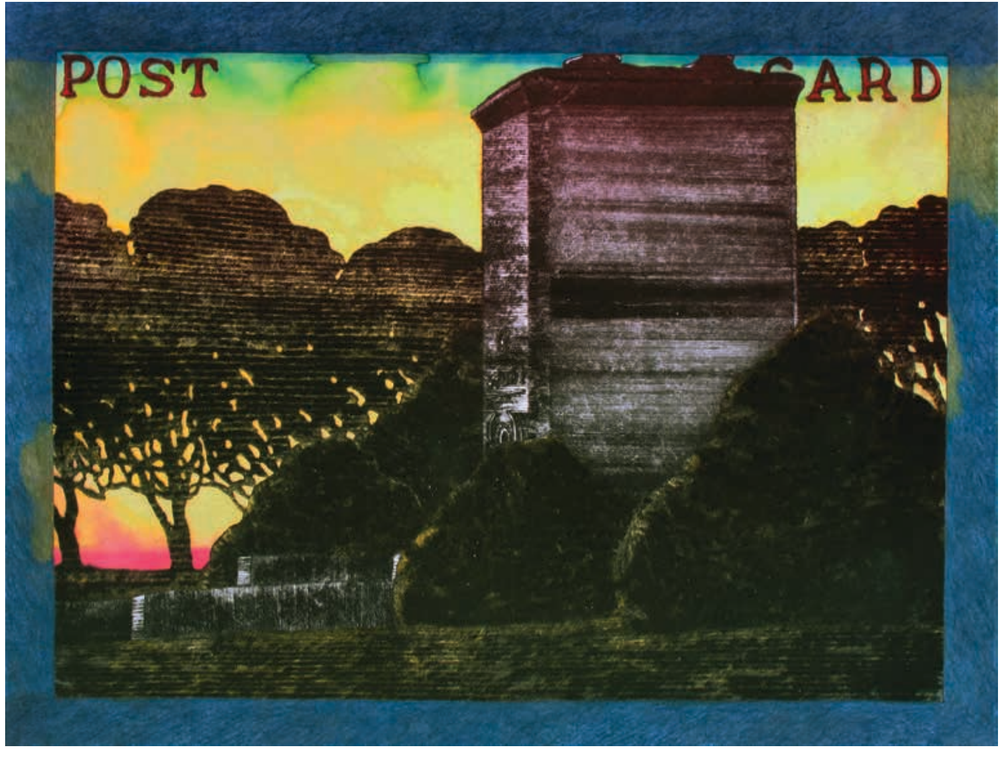
“MONTMARTRE”

Our host in Paris, the Pompidou curator, lived in Montmartre, on the less fancy side, to be precise. We arrived from Poland at the beginning of Summer. Nothing worked. We were left in his apartment to wait for his arrival back from vacationing in Deauville, as well as for the opening of the new season.

Great time.

Every day, or rather, every evening, when our child was asleep, we would stand in the window. It was the first opportunity to open the window after another day of 100 F heat.

Everything around us was one hundred fifteen percent Parisian and Montmartre. The stairs, so typical. The shapes of the doors and windows. The noise. The entire timeless picture was lit in jarring, glowing colors by an immense billboard overlooking the corner of the street. An amazing contrast, almost surreal. I told Hanka if somebody made such a picture, people would think it was a montage…



#22
“THE MONUMENT”
They are everywhere. In Russia and Prussia. This is one that I pass every year when I go to visit friends in New Marlboro, MA. It stands in a little town whose name escapes me, at a fork in the road. It is partially camouflaged by bushes. It probably honors the Civil War dead.
Such monuments are so ubiquitous, you take them for granted, like boulders, old oak trees and street signs. The public Memory at work.

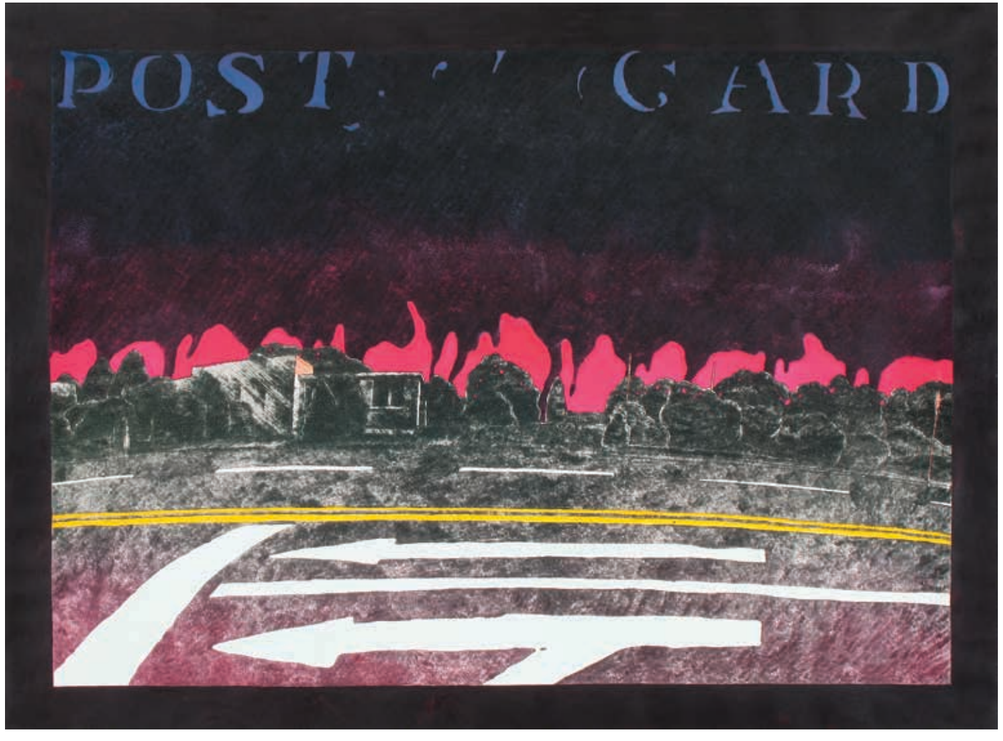
#23
“THE STORM”
Sometimes it happens. Nature produces a masterpiece of ABSTRACT ART. When, in the late afternoon, during full summer, the wind picks up during the full stillness of the hour. And the air darkens suddenly. The line of the distant forest merges with the sky, both turning dark blue. The lighter fields, a minute ago flush with color, age rapidly. They gray and quickly turn blue, joining the forest. For a split second, all is one, a wild abstract painting. Suddenly, deeply inside the blue nothingness, above or below the line of the horizon, now invisible, lightning flashes. In an instant, rain races over you. All turns gray. YOU run for cover. The spectacle is over.

#24

“VILLA”

Asbury Park again. A goldmine of vistas.
About five blocks inland from where we would rent a room for the summer, a no-man’s-land begins. “They” have crossed the tracks and slowly crawl on. The locals comment.
In the middle of this zone, a villa stands. Still in great shape. Full galore. Empty, no “For Sale” signs. We ask how long it has been empty. The locals say that it is for sale, for real. The owners panicked and are trying to sell, no thanks…
You walk by and watch the villa with unusual intensity. Like you are watching a soldier just rushing to clear the minefield. You hope and pray, but you know he has no chance. Like somebody stricken by a sudden cancer.
Deep inside it cries to you how awful it is to die at such an age, with no wrinkles and standing on beautiful legs.

#25
“MILANO”
In 1972 I arrived in Milano, Italy. With a theatre. Travelling with a countercultural pack of crazies from Cracow, Poland, Bradford, England and Vermont (Bread & Puppet). We were scheduled to perform at Teatro Piccolo, to amuse the Establishment. The hosts told us that the hotel was being “NEGOTIATED” for us. Go and enjoy the city, come later.
Fueled by a pizza and espresso, we started our day. Along Via Magenta we reached IT. Almost invisible, in the gloomy lights of restoration teams, it looked great. More dream and pure legend than the real thing. THE LAST SUPPER. By The Master. We drove to the “hotel.” A crumbling motel, really a truck stop. Sort of a Third-World’s truckers’ haven. Turks, Bulgarians, the occasional Pakistani. And we, the hippies. In Milano, Home of the Last Supper…



#26

“ROME”

There are cities where you feel instantly at home. They are located in Europe, however not in Scandinavia or England. Neither in Switzerland, with the exception of Lausanne.

It is Prague and Cracow, Nancy and part of Paris. Barcelona, too. Florence, Verona and Pisa.

And Rome.

They are all Rome. The walls with ancient plaster, doves, watered streets just before dawn.

And the windows, opening wide, Venetian style, reflecting the sun and the sky. You walk slowly, aimlessly and happy. You know they were there, they will be forever.

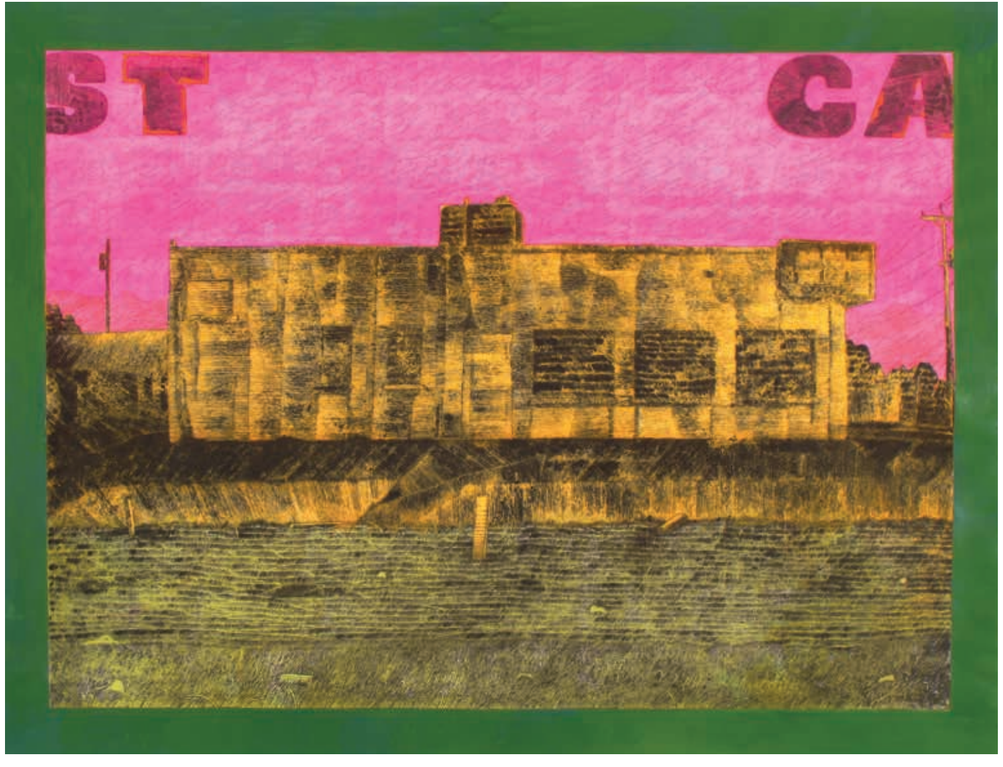
Nothing matches an early morning, around six thirty, espresso in your hand and the sun rays dancing on the walls reflected by the opening windows.

#27
“THE GIRLFRIEND’S HOUSE”
When I was 17, during the holidays
in the mountains, I dated a girl.
We walked and kissed. It was all we
did. It ended immediately when school
started. Mutually. I don’t remember her
name and she doesn’t mine, for sure.
But I remember the house she stayed in.
The balcony and the steep roof. I could
point it out to you immediately if I am
ever in the same village again…

#28
“ZABRZE”
I was born there.
And lived there until 1964.
It was the most polluted place in the world. Ten coal-mines, several coal-processing plants within
—
HERE MY TYPEWRITER HAS GIVEN UP…
I MUST CONTINUE BY HAND…

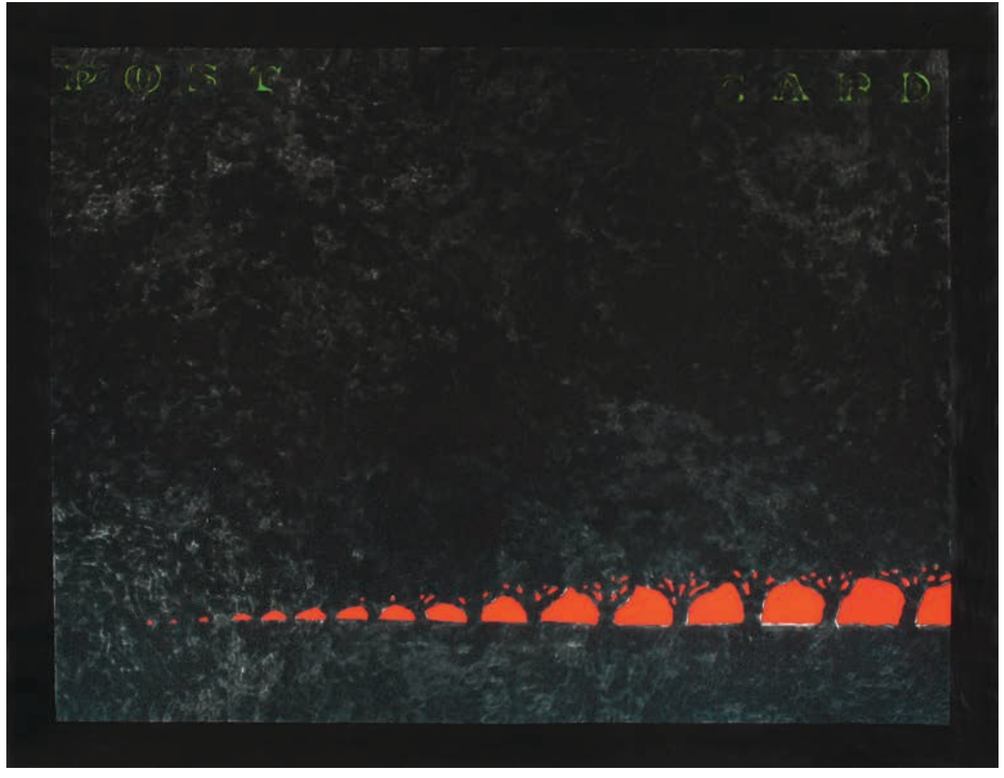
True, it is a place everybody wants to leave.
Soon. Today…
My family, originally from Cracow, was “relocated” here in 1945. My favorite spot was a railroad bridge. I would slow down for a second and focus my eyes on the horizon line where the tracks came to the sky’s border. The escape route…
To a colorful world…
I couldn’t wait, and never looked back…

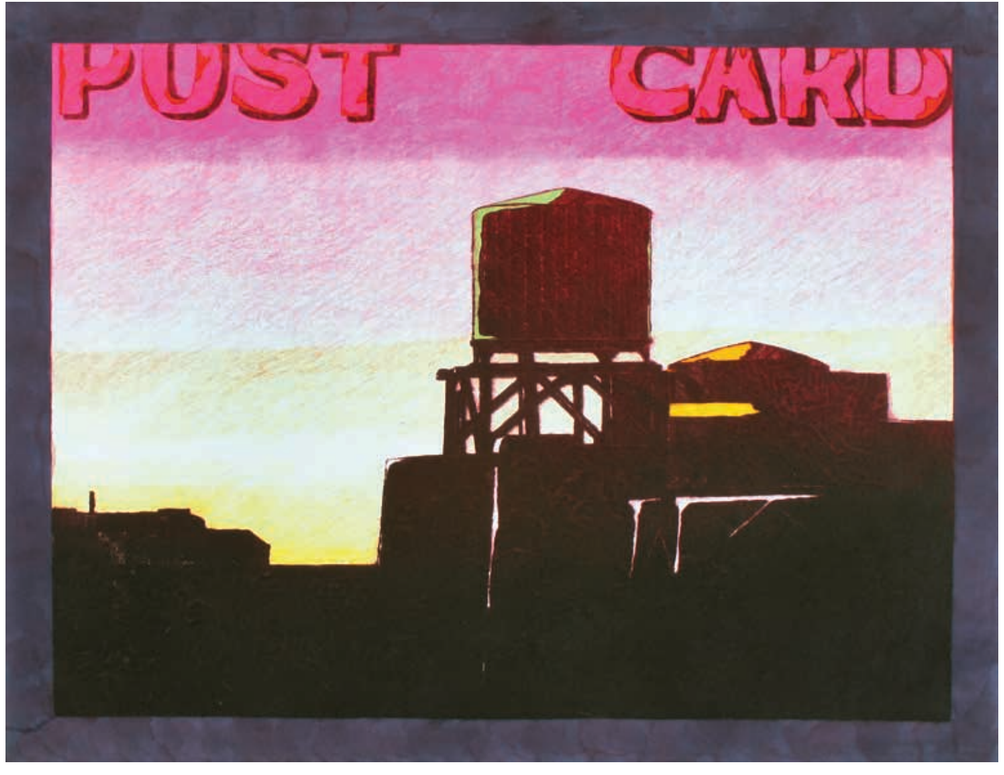
#29
“THE RESTAURANT”
Asbury Park revisited. A corner lot.
Concrete infested by weeds and garbage.
Nondescript shape, boarded. Slowly, you
start to “decode” the shadows of letters,
and the text emerges — “Asbury Park Inn” …
Somebody ran it, people stopped by, ate
here, drank beer, smiled…
Small thing, nothing to write home about.
But still, the remnant, the place of
somebody’s dream…
There are abandoned castles, why not inns…



#30
“FLORENCE”
Actually, it is Florence’s Belvedere, the fort towering over the city, the best vantage-point. When the weather permits…
One day I climbed the hill, in a rainy, misty morning, hoping for an abrupt change of the weather. Not today, sorry…
I sat there, soaked with the drizzle, and waited. I studied a group of cypresses and a lonely pinia (ed. note: pine).
Outlined by the mist, like a sculpture, a Gaudi creation, only a silhouette against a reddish sky. Florence never appeared as the backdrop. But it was there. I know, because I was sitting at the Fort Belvedere, a mere 2 kilometers across the Arno river from the Boticellis at the Galleria Uffizi…

#31
“HONFLEUR”
My Parisian hosts took me to Deauville, a combination of Atlantic City and Newport, R.I., all in a grandiose European style. A strange excursion — they were raging Leftists. Deauville and Leftists? How is this supposed to work?
It works, because it is France.
For five days you struggle against the Establishment. And by Friday, you rest. With the Establishment. Nice Combination.
From Deauville we drove to Honfleur, a tourist mecca of today — a town of painters, an Arles of the North — Gaugin, Matisse, van Gogh…
My curators were happy — how great it was to see all those painters together…
Starving, penniless, distressed — this was my sarcastic comment, to myself.
We drove back. Suppertime.
Halfway to Deauville we stopped to admire the Channel. In the red haze of the reflected sunlight somewhere in the bay…
I stood silent thinking about all the souls of those great colleagues “flying merrily around picturesque Honfleur,” which was put on the tourist map by them, according to the Michelin Guide…





#32
“TANKS”
During my first visit to New York in April of ’77, I stayed at Westbeth — a strange place. An old factory turned into an “artist’s condominium.” A studio belonged to some Polish-American foundation. Instead of a three-month stint, I got a week. A week for free is a week, isn’t it?
The place is situated between SoHo and the Village…
You don’t see Wall Street with its Twin Towers, you don’t see the Empire State Building either. What you see are the water tanks — the equivalent of Parisian chimneys.
What a strange animal such a tank is, all wooden, with fresh planks — sitting on top of the entirely-concrete mountains of buildings… only in America, my friend…

#33

“MOHONK MOUNTAIN”

This is a short-cut from New Paltz to my village, over Mohonk Mountain, a steep cliff with a glacial lake on the top and a hotel that looks like the set of a horror movie…

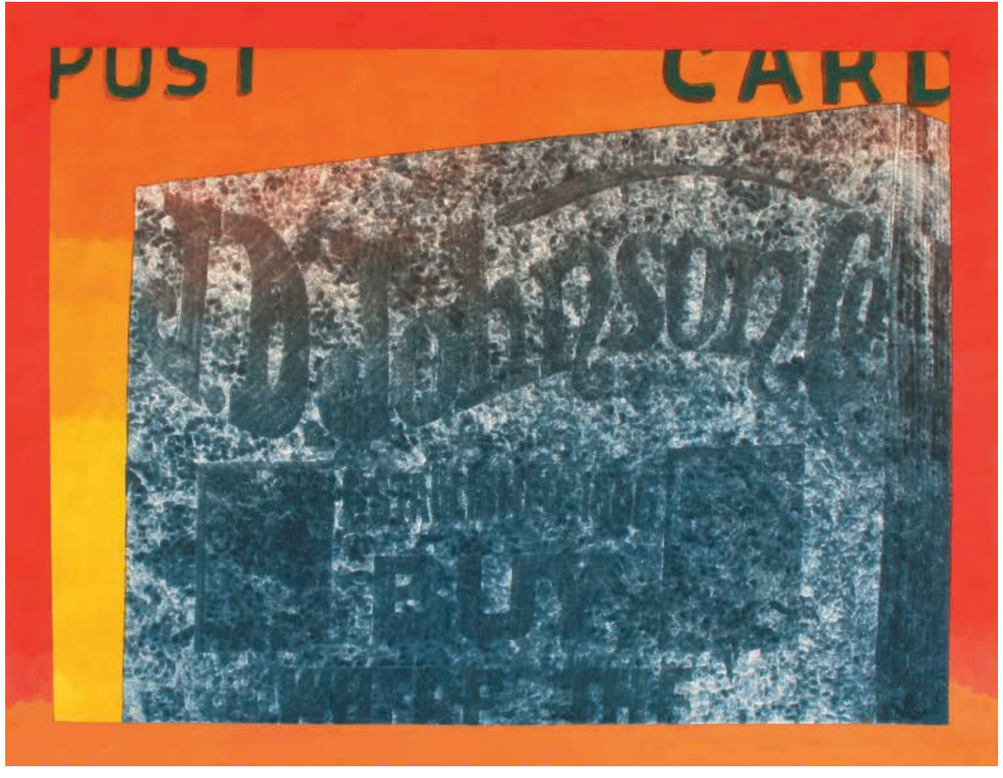
During the summer, up through September when everything is turning red and yellow in Upstate New York, Mohonk as seen from this road looks like a Brazilian jungle — so rich and dense.

Driving a car, you reach the summit of a little hill and suddenly, the road drops. The car gains speed. You go quickly downhill facing the enormous body of the mountain, dark with its forest, for a short moment it really scares you, you feel like in the Amazon jungle…

The car reaches the bottom of a small valley and climbs uphill again…

Suddenly you see the familiar pine trees, nothing exotic. You know, you’re home.

But, thanks to this magic moment, you have passed into another world, if only for a minute or so, but you have been there…



#34
“POUGHKEEPSIE STATION”
There is an old warehouse across the tracks at Poughkeepsie, NY Station. You can see that it was repainted over and over countless times… I don’t know if “J.D. Johnson” is still located there or if it is being carried on, continued for the pure sense of being a graphic landmark. The composition is slightly rough, obviously during each repainting, some finesse of the original design is lost. I love it.
I love all old commercial “murals” that are slowly fading and being replaced by glowing, standardized billboards…

#35
“BROKEN PLATE”
It is not really a broken plate. Rather, when I knew my series is close to its end – I tried to push through the layers of memory and dig out the oldest of the very first “notes” from my life…
And the results are here – probably, I’m not sure; some tree, the sense of nature, earth, a house…
We all are holding them, as our “archeological findings” from the past – the older we get, the more vivid they start to be…

#36
“ON THE ROAD AGAIN”
I’m happy now – I have my home, permanent, my land, a sense of belonging. I can’t complain. But… Every time I travel, quite often these days, I have a moment, or two…
The moment when you drive over the gentle curve of a country lane and you see a valley, a house, the hills in the distance.
And something deeply inside of you makes “a line…” – “Let’s stop, look it over, what a place, it would be great to have it, to see the vista, to settle here…”
The moment lasts a couple of seconds, you smile to yourself, drive steadily, unmoved, until you spot another point, it could be somewhere in Italy or France…
And the voice inside starts again…

Love, Jan

Fig. 1
An installation view from Jan Sawka's first show at the Dorsky Gallery, New York City, 1989. Image courtesy the Dorsky Gallery.

Encountering the Artist, Jan Sawka

by Neil Trager

I first met Jan Sawka in 1987 in the College Art Gallery at SUNY New Paltz, where I had been director since 1981. Jan came with his wife Hanka (Hanna) to introduce himself and to invite me to his studio to see his collection of Polish posters, some of which he had designed. Although the initial visit to the studio focused on that collection, his paintings were prominently on view and immediately of interest. Jan was quite up front about his interest in showing at the College Art Gallery. Although I wasn't fully grounded in his work, after many additional studio visits, I began to understand it and decided to plan an exhibition.

When I first saw Jan's work, I immediately appreciated the range of skills and the different techniques he employed, and how he combined them in a manner that broke down barriers between the different media. I realized that a major exhibition of Jan's paintings, prints, and sculpture would be very instructive to students and that it would also be a lot of fun to put together because Jan was a genuinely engaging person. Concurrent with our developing the exhibition, the president of the College, Dr. Alice Chandler, was involved in bringing Vladimir Feltsman, a Russian pianist, to America. Feltsman was a very talented musician, and was considered a dissident artist in the Soviet Union. After arriving in New Paltz, he was awarded an endowed professorship in the music department. To celebrate the occasion of bringing him to New Paltz, the president created an event that was to become the first fundraising "Gala" held at the college. At the same time, I was working with Jan, who had a similar history, being a dissident artist exiled from Poland. Neither artist was welcome in their own country. It soon occurred to me that we should partner with the plans to celebrate Feltsman's arrival in New Paltz by pairing Jan's exhibition with that event. We planned to mount the exhibition, to host a symposium on contemporary art, and to present a concert by Feltsman and end the evening with a formal dinner and dance.

While working with Jan, I saw that he was looking to move ahead both in the art world and with his work. He had some representation in the New York gallery world, but it seemed fleeting. Although the College Art Gallery was small, and it was in a small town in the Hudson Valley, it had a very fine reputation. It was clear to me that the Gallery could benefit by collaborating with an international artist and that the artist could benefit as well. I learned early on that Jan was a superb collaborator. The hallmark of successful collaboration is that everybody gets what they need out of the relationship; it is not necessarily articulated or defined, but is realized as you go through the experience. I felt comfortable collaborating with Jan because I knew that he understood this.

To move ahead in his career, Jan was looking for new gallery representation. I introduced him to Samuel Dorsky, an art collector who had a gallery in New York City. I invited Sam and his wife Florence to visit the studio in High Falls to meet Jan. I hoped that Sam would be interested in purchasing a piece or at least showing Jan's work in some capacity. As I recall, Sam didn't know what to make of the work. His background and interests were far more conventional than what he saw at the studio. There he was, encountering a panoply of imagery that

Fig. 3
An installation view of Jan Sawka's "Banners" show at the Dorsky Gallery, 1991.

he couldn't get a handle on, while Florence loved it. One of the objects presented was a black leather motorcycle jacket on which Jan had elaborately painted. Florence Dorsky left the studio wearing it, after prevailing upon Sam to purchase it. That visit began a dialogue between Sam and I about Jan, including the fact that I was curating a major mid-career retrospective exhibition at the College Art Gallery—and wouldn't it be great if he would do something for Jan in his gallery. Sam became more interested in Jan's work and a professional relationship did develop between the Dorsky Gallery and Jan. Sam eventually purchased several paintings and agreed to do an exhibition prior to the retrospective. He also agreed to help fund a catalogue to document the exhibition; Sam was a firm believer in the importance of catalogues and scholarly research. When I proposed the catalog to him, two distinguished scholars had committed to providing essays for the catalogue, Professor James Beck from Columbia University and Elena Millie, curator of works on paper at the Library of Congress. These contributors appealed very much to Sam. It also appealed to President Chandler, who continued to endorse the exhibition and the publication, providing additional funding, primarily through the SUNY New Paltz Foundation.

Jan's imagination was boundless, and he always had many "irons in the fire." His method of working would always involve many ambitious projects at the same time, fully cognizant of the fact that only some would come to fruition. The ones that heated up, would immediately be pulled out and

Fig. 2
An installation view from Jan Sawka's "Banners" show at the Dorsky Gallery, 1991.

worked on. Many of Jan's ideas and projects were very long standing and far reaching. I saw that he firmly believed that all of his ideas would be realized, and although disappointed if they didn't, he would just move on to the next "iron" that heated up. I admired that, and that attitude kept us working productively together for a long time.

One iron that heated up and became quite hot—one that I was quite skeptical of when first described to me—involved the Grateful Dead. While working on the exhibition Jan started talking about producing a stage set for Jerry Garcia and the Grateful Dead. And I think I might have rolled my eyes and in a possibly condescending way said, "Oh… okay…that sounds exciting." Well, not only did it sound exciting, it was real. After each visit with the band in California, he would come back with stories and share ideas he had for the creation of the monumental stage set. It would comprise an installation of airbrushed banners that spanned and enveloped the entire stage. As the design for the set evolved, I remembered that Jan's background was steeped in architectural studies and producing theater stage sets. What he was describing and producing started to make sense to me.

Fig. 4
An installation view of the 1989 Jan Sawka Retrospective, at the College Art Gallery, curated by Neil Trager. Photo by Neil Trager.

Jan generously invited me to participate in the installation of the project. He knew that I was a photographer and he wanted me to document the installation of the set at two venues, Foxboro Stadium and Giants Stadium. Indeed, one day in early July, 1989, Jan, his wife Hanka, his daughter Hanna and I piled into a little Toyota Corolla and wended our way to Foxboro. When I walked into the stadium, I was completely overwhelmed by the massive steel frame skeleton of what was to become one of the most impressive outdoor installations that I've ever seen. The scaffolding which was 144 feet wide, 67 feet high and 47 feet deep spanned the entire stage. The banners that would drape the frame were just starting to be unpacked and I began taking photographs immediately. I had invited Sam Dorsky to come to the stadium and he and his daughter Karen arrived not long after we did. Jerry Garcia, the band's leader, was there to greet us. He was very friendly and clearly excited about the project. The Dorskys were impressed and so was I.

I spent two days documenting every aspect of the installation, the finished set, and then the concert. When I was finished with the photography, I had the opportunity to listen to most of the concert from the sound-stage, enjoying the music and the fantastic light-show Jan had designed to animate the set throughout the performance—it was magical!

After the installation at Giants Stadium Jan said to me "Why don't we use the banners to decorate the room where the gala is going to be held in the fall?" The "Gala" was to be held in a very large room in the student union building on campus. Jan contacted the band and they agreed to lend us enough banners to decorate the entire perimeter of the room. And then, in the way that Jan would always seek to collaborate, he said, "your pictures should be part of this." I was flattered by the invitation and created a slide show that was projected on a screen in the "multi-purpose room" throughout the evening.

Fig. 5
An installation view of the 1989 Jan Sawka Retrospective, at the College Art Gallery. Photo by Neil Trager.

Fig. 6
An installation view of the 1989 Jan Sawka Retrospective, at the College Art Gallery. Photo by Neil Trager.

The lighting in the room was very dramatic, designed and executed by Jan. Vladimir's concert was superb, the symposium was enlightening, and the exhibition was stunning.

Jan's retrospective was on view in the College Art Gallery for six weeks and the gallery was always full. I was often in the gallery talking about the work and working with faculty who would then spin off projects that would become assignments for the students—fulfilling my personal goals for the exhibition. The show travelled to two "sister" institutions, the Dowd Fine Art at SUNY Cortland, and the Tyler Art Gallery at SUNY Oswego. The directors were colleagues of mine and I was delighted that they had such a positive response to the show that they brought it to their galleries.

I believe that seeing the exhibition travel energized Jan in a way that otherwise was elusive for him in the New York City art scene.

THE CATALOGUE

As was often the case, Jan took complete control of things and declared that he was going to design the exhibition catalogue. I approached Jan's pronouncement with some trepidation, not sure I wanted to give up control. However, his vision as he described it was "an offer I couldn't refuse." Together we worked diligently on the catalogue. Many visits were comprised of choosing works to be reproduced and looking at elements on the maquettes that were hand drawn. The finished design was powerful and elegant, something only Jan could have conceived of and accomplished. It was masterful. While we were working with printers that specialized in fine art reproduction, I still examined every plate and galley as they came off the press. If the reproductions weren't perfect, they were sent back to be reprinted. The finished book accurately portrayed the quality and spirit of Jan's work as well as the

Fig. 7
Offset lithograph poster by Jan Sawka promoting his retrospective at the College Art Gallery, 1989. Image courtesy the Estate of Jan Sawka.

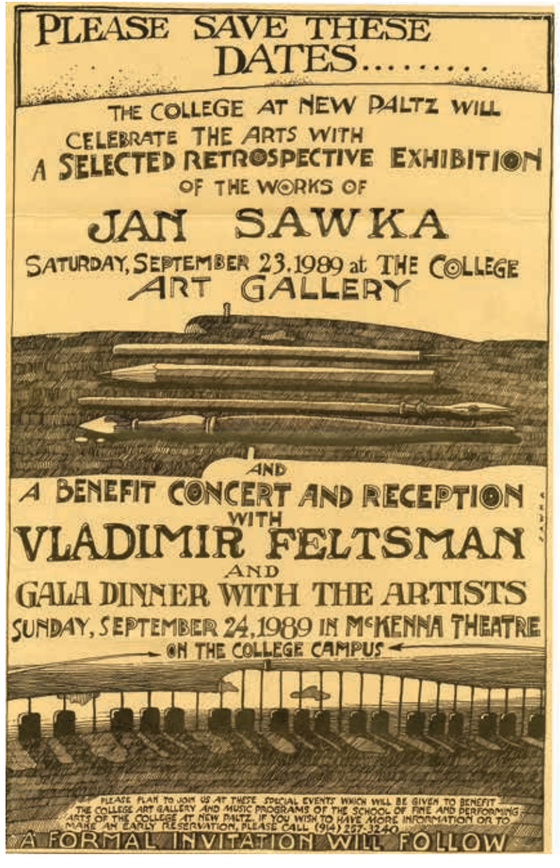


Fig. 8
Jan Sawka designed this "save the date" announcement for the Gala, 1989. Image courtesy the Estate of Jan Sawka.

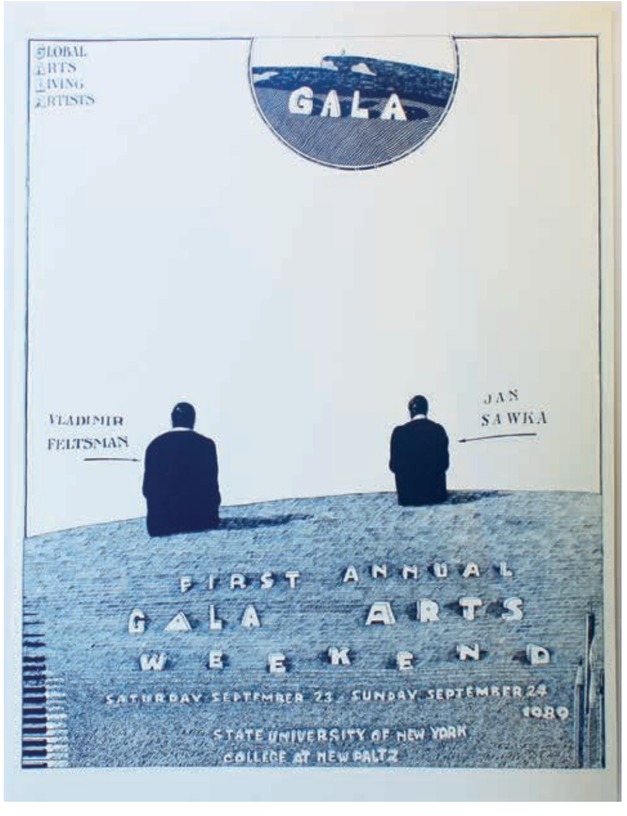


Fig. 9
Offset poster by Jan Sawka for the first fundraising gala for the art gallery at SUNY New Paltz, featuring Jan Sawka and Vladimir Feltsman, 1989. Image courtesy the Estate of Jan Sawka.

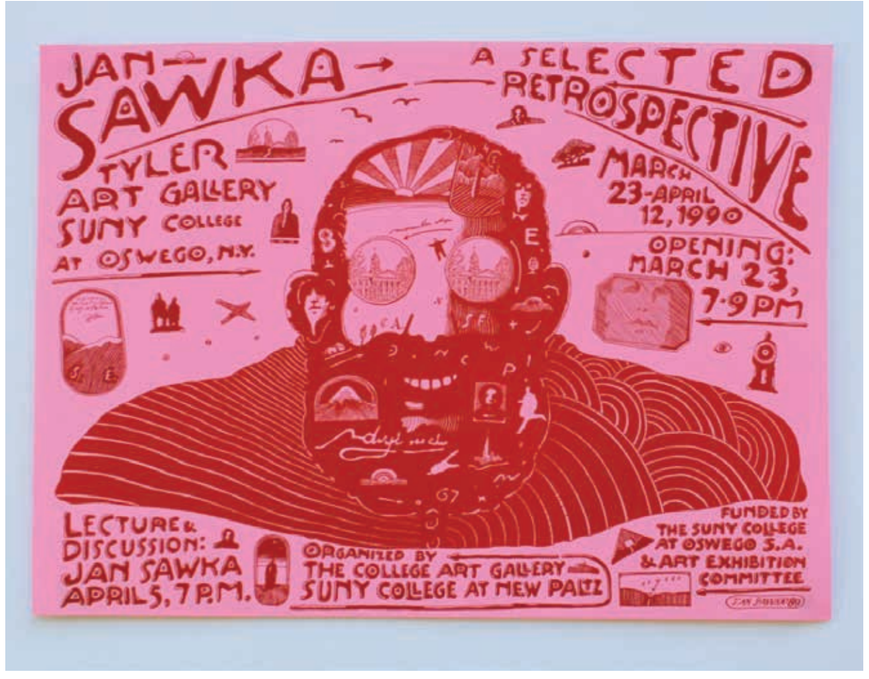


Fig. 10
Jan Sawka designed this poster for one of the stops of the retrospective's museum tour, The Tyler Art Gallery at SUNY Oswego in 1990. Image courtesy the Estate of Jan Sawka.

spirit of the artist. It was a unique and significant contribution to art publications in general, and a joyous celebration of the exhibition and his career.

THE POSTER

For the Gala poster Jan embraced his early identity as a graphic designer and created a wonderful piece, which depicted him and Feltsman sitting in a field gazing at Mohonk Mountain. It celebrated the Gala, the region, the concert and the exhibition. A copy of the poster, autographed by Jan and Vladimir, hung in the president's conference room for many years.

THE CODA

Jan was a dreamer. He had large fantastical dreams and could express them visually. Although I think Jan remained frustrated by the New York art world and with its complex obstacles, he would ultimately blaze a new path for himself, creating ambitious outdoor installations which garnered international attention. His new work was as unique as his path. The success of the retrospective and the impact of the Grateful Dead stage set engendered in him the confidence he needed to go on to develop ambitious projects in the Middle East and Japan.

Jan's retrospective was as pivotal to my career as it was to his. It enhanced my credibility with the faculty, the College Administration, gallery patrons, and with Sam Dorsky.

After meeting Sam in 1986 we developed a genuine friendship. He was very paternal, and he became very interested in the College Art Gallery and the project with Jan. He liked what he saw. He liked seeing Jerry Garcia and shaking his hand. He liked seeing the quality of the catalogue and was impressed by the exhibition and Gala. In 1990 at a meeting with Sam being held to explore ways that he might help the College Art Gallery, I shared my dream with him--to expand the college art gallery for the specific purpose of showing the permanent collection and to use it for teaching purposes. It was a dream that Sam decided to help bring to fruition and one that his family supported. Sam ultimately made the lead gift to expand the College Art Gallery which evolved into the creation of the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art.

Jan was a phenomenally successful artist because he never stopped evolving in his work…never stopped working as he evolved. It was a confluence of fortuitous events that brought Jan, Sam Dorsky and I together at a very special time in all our lives. It is fitting that the Dorsky Museum is mounting this tribute to Jan and telling the story about his unique relationship with SUNY New Paltz and how in many ways it helped paved the path that led to the creation of the fine museum that Jan's work is now featured in.

Samuel Dorsky passed away in 1994. The Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art opened to the public in 2001. Sam's children, Sarah, David, Noah and Karen remain ardent and generous supporters of the Museum and I remain eternally grateful to them for their commitment to it.

Neil C. Trager
Founding Director
Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art

Fig. 11
Jan Sawka's art installation for the Grateful Dead's 25th anniversary tour, 1989. Photo by Neil Trager.

Installation view of "Conversation," Jan Sawka's exhibition at the Sid Deutsch Gallery in 1983 featuring a working telephone booth that was also a painting. Photo by Krys Krawczyk.

Jan Sawka by Elena G. Millie

Editor's Introduction

In 2018, my family received correspondence from Neva Day, a person whom we had never met before., Ms. Day told us that she was the niece of Ms. Elena Millie—an old friend of our family—whom she called "Auntie Lane." She bore the sad news that her aunt had passed away in 2017, and that now she was settling her aunt's affairs. She described to us how, as she went through her Auntie Lane's papers, beautifully illustrated items of correspondence made an impression on her, leading her to set them aside. She described how she began to piece together the letters with some texts that her aunt had written, understanding that they all had to do with an artist named Jan Sawka. Ms. Day found a series of papers that appeared to have to be related to a presentation Ms. Millie was to give concerning this artist. The documentation that Ms. Day found, together with information in the archives of the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art, allowed us to piece together that this was a talk that Elena Millie had written for a symposium that was to take place on September 23, 1989 at the State University of New York at New Paltz. The symposium was an event in conjunction with Jan Sawka's mid-career retrospective exhibition, curated by Neil Trager at what was then the College Art Gallery, later to become the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art. Ms. Millie was listed on the event flyer as a speaker, however, museum archive notes reveal that she never spoke at the symposium due to a series of flight cancellations caused by Hurricane Hugo. Ms. Millie had been the Curator of Prints and Works on Paper at the Library of Congress, and had been instrumental in that institution acquiring folios of Jan's major graphic arts works A Book of Fiction and Post-Cards. Given Ms. Millie's role in Sawka's life and career, the historical significance of this never-published statement about Sawka's achievements in engraving at the time of his retrospective, and the light that her comments cast on Post-Cards, I felt it was appropriate to include the complete and unedited text of her presentation.
—Hanna Maria Sawka

Have you ever met an "artistic happening"? I have, and his name is Jan Sawka. Born in Zabrze, Poland in 1946, son of an architect, Sawka grew up surrounded by books in a house that included an intellectual milieu. When it came time for Sawka to choose a course of study at the University, Sawka wanted to enter the Fine Arts Academy in Wroclaw, but was persuaded instead by family members to study something more practical— architectural engineering at the Polytechnic Institute. While engaged in this "forced" choice of studies, Jan sought entertainment through outside interests—cabaret, jazz, film, theater, poetry, and literature. His thirst for freedom to pursue knowledge in any form was vast. Although he soon narrowed his architectural studies to consist mainly of design courses, he was still dissatisfied, and joined the Fine Arts Academy, as well as some reactionary student groups. He was like a human sponge, absorbing everything that interested him. He saw no difference between the different disciplines— painting, drawing, drama, graphics, poetry, and literature— but felt that they were all related.

In the 1960s, while in Krakow, Sawka started designing posters for the avant-garde theater STU. He became aware that the poster medium offered the avenue with the greatest freedom of artistic expression. The fresh outlook these posters presented made people aware of his artistic talent, and some of his posters were selected to be included in the famed International Poster Biennale in Warsaw. By the time he had finished his studies in the 1970s, Sawka's name as an artist and designer was known, and he was receiving requests to design posters for various cultural events. In some ways, Sawka could be called a Renaissance artist: illustrating and printing poetry books, creating set designs and backdrops for music festivals, designing posters for jazz concerts and the avant-garde theater, and, his greatest love, painting. In 1975, he won a special award for a painting entered at the International Festival of Painting held at Cagnes-Sur-Mer, France. In 1976 however, along with several other actors and artists who had sought and fought for greater freedom of expression, Sawka was asked to leave Poland as an undesirable dissident. He came to the United States by way of Paris, with his wife Hanka, who had studied to be a psychologist, and their six-year-old daughter, Hanna.

Excited to have finally arrived in a free country, and to be in the so-called "art center" of the United States, he exclaimed that "New York is where you go to cook Modern art." Shortly after his arrival inNew York, the poster Jan had submitted to the 1978 International Poster Biennale in Warsaw, titled "La Voiture de l'Année" (Car of the Year) was selected as the gold medal winner. Part of the prize included an exhibition of his posters at the prestigious Poster Museum in Wilanów the following year. Sawka was considered somewhat of a visionary after that, as his poster depicted a new-style Russian tank rolling down a city street. Being internationally recognized as a serious artist helped Sawka land a job creating illustrations for the "op-ed" pages of the New York Times and the Boston Globe. He soon realized, however, that, in New York, painting was the accepted "fine-arts" medium which he would have to pursue up the ladder to success.

Sawka searched for a dealer to represent him—one who would not ask him to compromise his artistic values, but who would let him paint as he wanted. This was no easy task. Nonetheless, Sawka was settled in a country with free avenues of expression, and he was bubbling over with pent-up ideas just bursting to be translated into visual art. He finally found a dealer, and prepared his first one-man show in 1982—which received not a single review! Undaunted, Sawka changed dealers, prepared a brilliant show, sold three-fourths of it, and received one rewarding review. The following year, in 1985, Sawka set out to complete the impossible— three shows opening simultaneously in New York. These three shows demonstrated the wide-range of Sawka's artistic skills: paintings, printmaking, three dimensional objects, a book without words, assemblages, collages, and even a poster. The compositions were carefully and thoughtfully laid out— all hand-crafted, never using mechanical aids such as an air-brush or photographs, painted with bright colors, sometimes using day-glo acrylics, and including strong calligraphic lines and sharp definitive edges. At this time, neo-expressionism was the "in-thing" and Sawka's work was somewhat belittled by the critics for not being in this pseudo-mainstream of visual art, original, true, but not of the accepted mold. Sawka knew, and had proved before in Poland, that one could be out of the "mainstream" and still create "real" art without compromising one's ideals. But his expertise was down-played by the critics for not conforming, and for combining disciplines, something which he freely and purposely did to create a greater impact, using whatever combination would produce the desired results. Soon after this marathon showing, the "pseudo-neo" trend of the moment began to crumble, and dealers, in looking around, discovered Sawka's work—original, solid, and something to be acknowledged.

"Ebullient" is the perfect word to describe Jan Sawka, and his ebullience spills over onto everything around him—the people he meets, his work, the ideas he shares. He is a man obsessed with life and all its ramifications, and he shares these concepts with us through his art. Life is a movie to Jan, always going on, going forward,—evolving different scenes and scenarios, but dealing with the same problems of life, death, love, loneliness, and everything in-between. He is a man, in the words of Admiral Farragut, whose life says "damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead."

Sawka is always striving to create and express more. His works are artistic expressions of life through the eyes, ears, head and heart of Jan Sawka. They shout "Hey, this is me, this is Jan Sawka, this is what I am about. Come closer, learn something, see what I am saying." His works are also narrative, where the viewer supplies the dialog or story, or where Sawka converses with the viewer— serious dialogues, some gossip, a few jokes, shared hopes, dreams, fears, contemplations— poetry in pigment.

His paintings are colorful, imaginative, dramatic, and timeless. They are fanciful, sometimes sarcastic, often including people caught up with their own thoughts, or conversing with others— all very real, and yet surreal at the same time. His poster designs, which he still does for some small theaters, are direct, and have been reduced to the basic elements. His illustrations are poignant and biting, and his three-dimensional constructions are brilliant, reflecting skill and craftsmanship.

Nothing is sacred to Sawka. To make a statement about literature, Sawka paints a book that is also a print, complete with five chapters and no words. To make a statement about conversation, he constructs a telephone booth that is also a painting. He hand-paints on etchings drawn on pieces of plexiglass, rather than on zinc or copper plates regularly used by artists. He discovered by accident, that the plexiglass holds the image perfectly and will not corrode like the metal plates. He interrelates, dissects, transforms, and manipulates all the traditional forms of painting, constructions and printmaking to achieve a general idea of one-ness.

Now, after a long struggle, Jan Sawka is doing what he has always dreamed of doing— creating works of art in tranquility and peace. He has resettled, from his cramped city apartment, to a farm in upstate New York, whose barn he has converted into a huge studio. As a successful painter, printmaker, poster artist, set designer, and yes, even an architectural designer, he is now able to choose commissions that interest and please him. Memories of the past, images of the future, and ideas of the present continue to bubble forth from Jan, and we are the richer for them. Yes, Jan Sawka is successful. He does what he wants. He remained himself. He is Jan Sawka.

Jan Sawka at work in his New York City home, late 1970s, photo by Krys Krawczyk.

Exhibition Checklist

All works by Jan Sawka

The Letter #3, 1979
Acrylic, watercolor, ink, varnish on board
48 x 11 in.
Courtesy Jean Feiwel

Asbury Notebook, 1981
Acrylic, graphite, mixed media on Masonite
48 x 73 in.
Courtesy Jan and Michael Solow

The Memory (or The Mirror), 1986
Acrylic on Masonite
48 x 40 in.
Courtesy the Estate of Jan Sawka

Intrusion, 1987
Acrylic, composite on Masonite
38 x 83 in.
Courtesy the Estate of Jan Sawka

Passing Away, 1988
Acrylic, varnish on Masonite
66 x 96 in.
Courtesy the Estate of Jan Sawka

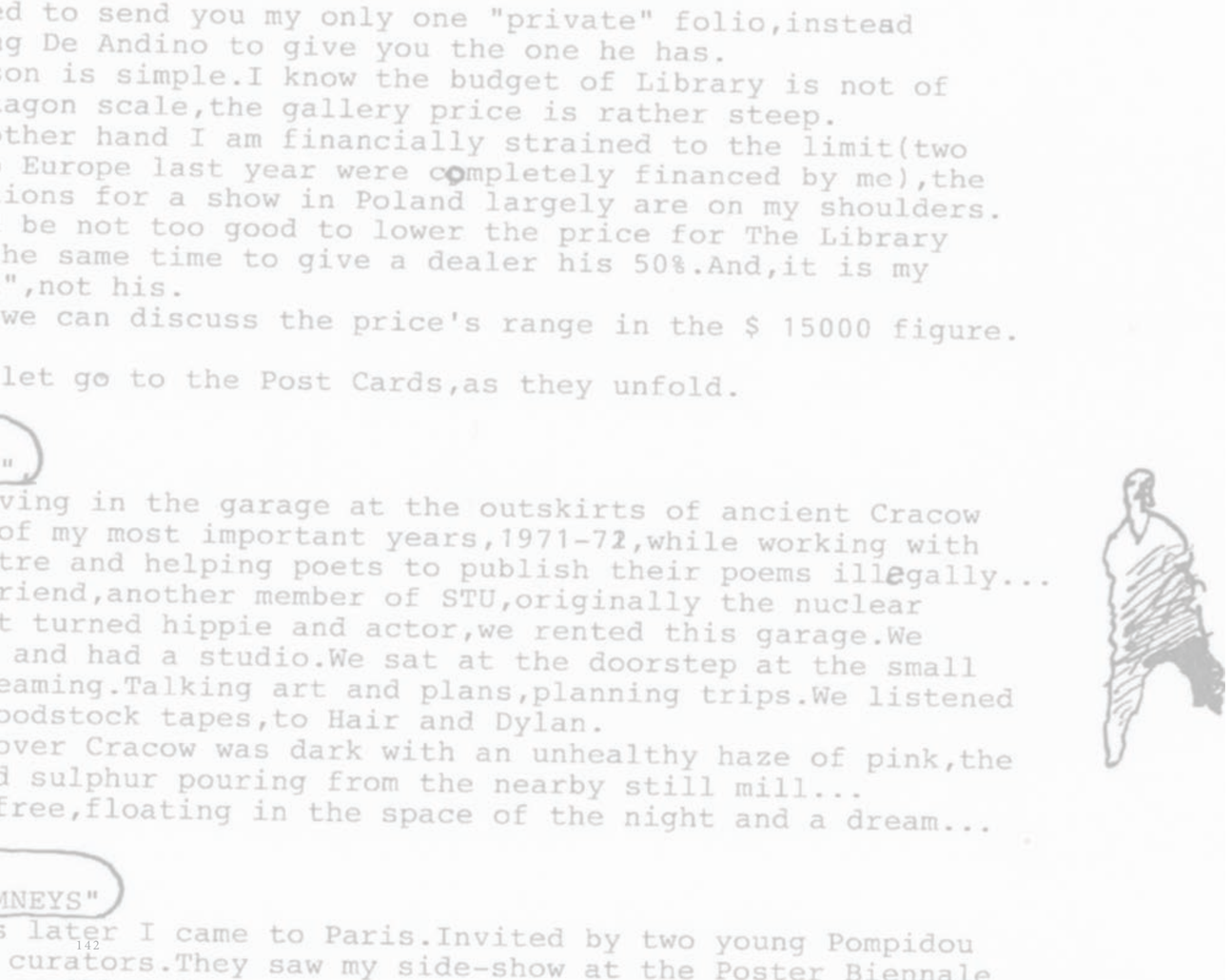
Partial Recall, 1997
Acrylic on Masonite
67 x 99 in.
Courtesy the Estate of Jan Sawka

Ashokan 1–4, 1998-99
Acrylic, ink, composite on Masonite
55 x 173 in. each triptych
Courtesy the Estate of Jan Sawka

Fading, 2005
Acrylic on Masonite
49 x 81 in.
Courtesy the Estate of Jan Sawka

Untitled (Tabletop), n.d.
Acrylic, enamel on wooden table
38 x 66 x 28 in.
Courtesy the Estate of Jan Sawka

Post-Cards, 1985-92
Watercolor drypoint etching
Portfolio of 36 prints
20 x 25 in. ea.
Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art, gift of Dorsky Gallery Curatorial Programs, 2007.010.022.001-.036



Acknowledgments

Deeply heartfelt thanks to Hanna Sawka, widow and partner of Jan Sawka, for your advice, guidance, and your willingness and patience in sharing your profound knowledge and understanding of every aspect of his work. This exhibition would have never been possible in this form without you.

We are thankful to Wayne Lempka and the Dorsky Advisory Board for seeing value in our proposal and accepting this project. Thank you, Wayne, for your ongoing help and guidance.

Our gratitude goes out to the amazing team of professionals who staff the Dorsky Museum, especially to Anna Conlan and Amy Pickering, whose help with every aspect of the exhibition and this catalog has been absolutely essential! Thanks to Zach Bowman, who worked with us to create community-oriented programming to broaden the outreach of the exhibition.

We wish to thank Jeff Lesperance, for his patient and skillful work on the design and layout of the exhibition catalog, helping to prolong the impact of these works and the story they tell.

Our gratitude also goes out to Dorsky Museum Founding Director Neil Trager. Thank you, Neil, for the essay you wrote for the exhibition catalog, and, more broadly, for your role in helping to bring the work of Jan Sawka to others by curating his 1989 mid-career retrospective, with its groundbreaking catalog, at what would soon become the Dorsky Museum. Thank you, as well, for your superb photographs of the Grateful Dead installation, also of 1989, which have done so much to draw attention to that very important achievement.

Thank you to the Consul General of the Republic of Poland, Maciej Gołubiewski, for your help, your understanding of the value of this project—and for your advice!

Thank you to everyone who provided funds or assistance for the production of this catalog. We are very grateful for the support of the Polish Cultural Institute, and would especially like to thank Izabela Gola for her in-person support and knowledgeable input. We wish to thank the Polish & Slavic Federal Credit Union for coming to the rescue with urgently needed funding for the documentation of artworks for this catalog. Thank you, David Roschco, for your immediate generosity, and for the memories of your uncle, Samuel Dorsky, that you recalled to us! We are grateful for the generous support of the James and Mary Ottaway Hudson River Catalog Endowment. Thank you, Michelle Kucia, for your help.

Thank you to Jean Feiwel for loaning The Letter #3 for the exhibition. Thank you, Michael and Jan Solow, for loaning Asbury Notebook, as well as for your donation towards the catalog. These works provide an important part of the story

of Jan Sawka's vision of the place of memory in human consciousness.

Thank you, Neva Day, for uncovering and preserving your Auntie Lane's texts about Jan Sawka, for reaching out to share them with us, and for granting us permission to include her essay in this catalog.

Thank you, Aaron Rezny, for your generosity in helping to organize the photo shoot of Letter #3 and Ashokan 1-4, the largest artworks in the show, and to Ward Yoshimoto and Orlando Marra, for your skills and artistry in creating the images, which not only enrich this catalog, but are already assisting scholarship regarding those works.

Thank you to the Raczyński Foundation at the National Museum of Art in Poznań, Poland, and to the National Museum in Kraków, Poland, for providing artwork images and permissions.

Thank you to Gregory Bray, professor at the Department of Digital Media and Journalism, SUNY New Paltz, for your key work in capturing the interview with Neil Trager, which became the basis for his essay in this catalog. Thank you, Matoaka Little Eagle, for your heartfelt support of so many of our efforts and for transcribing the interview with Neil Trager, a key step in its transformation into the essay. Thank you, Rich Hines, for your friendship and support throughout the process of putting this show and catalog together.

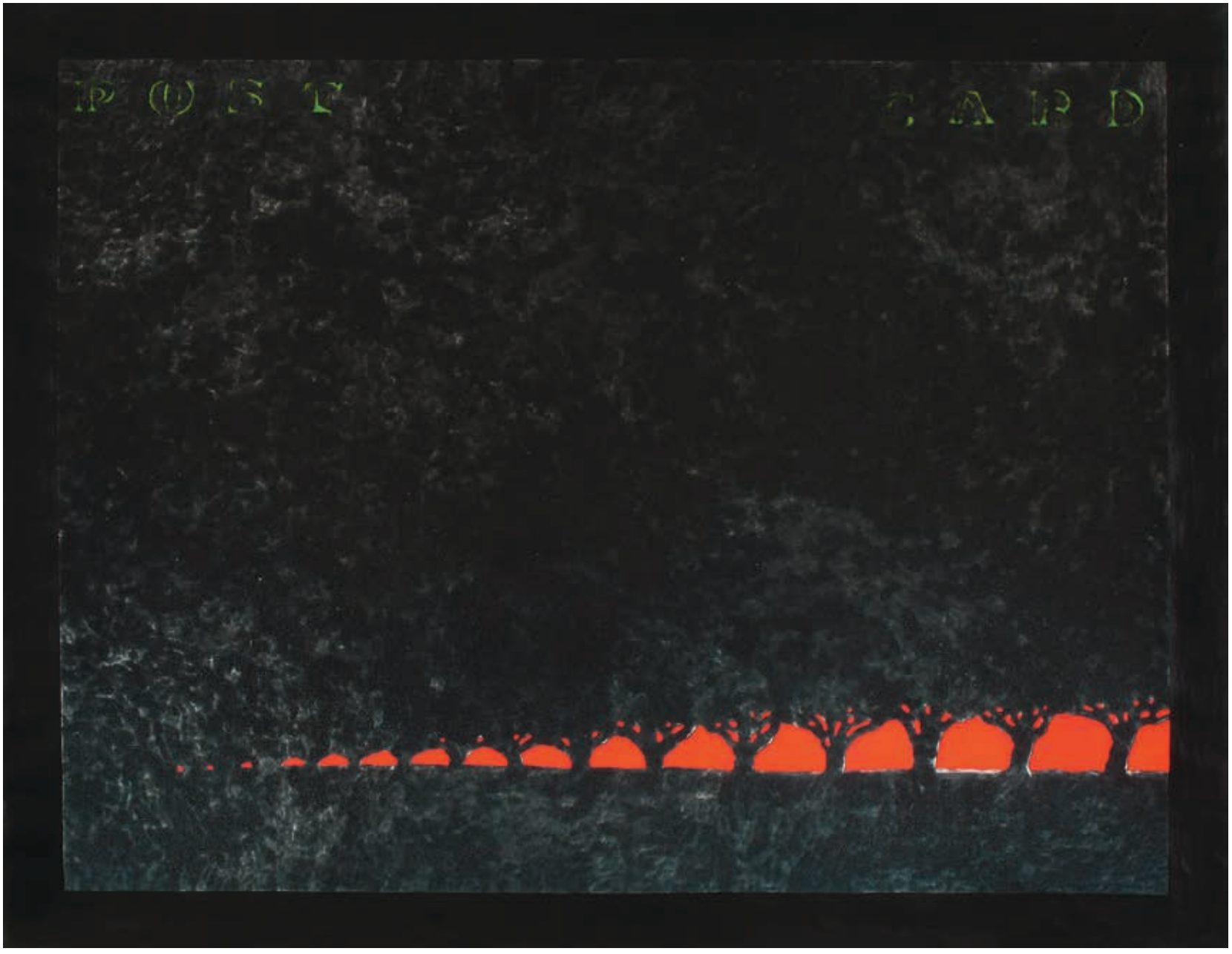
Thank you to the most disciplined and relentless interns ever, Camille Murphy and Erin Wolcott, students of the SUNY New Paltz Department of Digital Media and Journalism, for your fine work creating images of artworks, as well as some very hard and important work, over several hot summer days, in Jan Sawka's High Falls studio.

Cover: Jan Sawka, *Partial Recall*, 1997, acrylic on masonite, 67 x 99 in., photo by Camille Murphy.
Back cover: Jan Sawka, *Post-Card #31*, c. 1990, Watercolor drypoint print etching, 19 x 25 in., Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art, gift of Dorsky Gallery Curatorial Programs, 2007.022.031.

I was truly in the limbo.Somehow I knew where I was,in MY DEAREST OF ALL DREAMS,in America,but the reality of it still escaped me.
The grass was so green and rich it almost glowed,like in the acid trip.The air was sharp and only helped to intensify colors around.
We walked in silence,suspended in the space with a wind playing with the grass.For a moment it looked we never reach the end of the meadow.
Then I spotted an incline,sort of deeper color of the grass,nothing dramatic.I started to follow it and slightly to the right I saw THE THING.Two mail boxes so familiar,well known from American movies,from Vermont to Oregon...
Ha!I have arrived!
It was America.Real and at my small private scale.

#8
"MANHATTAN FROM WHITESTONE BRIDGE"
Late August we dropped our friends at JFK Airport.Quick operation one way,the major pain returning home.After crawling across Queens we started to climb The Whitestone Bridge.And then,the traffic has stopped.We sat idling with the air condition's compressor wailing in agony for agonizingly long time.
To the left we saw the amazing view of Manhattan,partially obliterated by smog,terribly two dimensional,in a haze of the Summer's heat.
Slowly darkness was overhelming us,first lights blinking,the shapes of the bridges outlined by blue lights.
I was wondering aloud-"How somebody sane could survive fifteen minutes in this hell"...
All days,months,years,struggles of our eight years there came back to us.The spectacle of the memory,a silent film's decorations.

#9
"MAISONS ALFORT"
IN Paris we moved to a suburb,across the Boulevard Periferique,to Maisons Alfort.5 minutes off Metro station,100 meters from



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