

Context / Contextualism

Professor Anna Tyczyńska has been running a variety of art and research activities at the Faculty of Art Education and Curatorial Studies (previously Art Education) since 2015. She engaged in those activities 2nd Interdisciplinary Drawing Studio and students specialising in Curatorial Strategies and Art Promotion at Art Education in Fine Arts studies. The aim of the project entitled *Context/Contextualism* was propagating the theory of contextualism of Jan Świdziński amongst the youngest artists. The author of the project wanted to spark off a discussion over a contemporary understanding of Świdziński's ideas. Tyczyńska put forward a question about their contemporary value. She hoped to inspire some reflection over the contextualism in theory and visual arts. There were happening such activities as: artistic workshop at the Railway Station in Poznań (13/04-17/04/2016); a scientific conference entitled *Contextualism. The Contextual Art as a Diagnosis of Contemporary Art Relations within Social and Public Space* (UAP, 14/04/2016). There were also exhibitions: *By entering a museum you do not become more beautiful* (University of Arts In Poznań), *Context/Contextualism* (Poznań Railway Station), and end-of-year review exhibitions (6-11/06/2016). As closure for the above mentioned, Tyczyńska proposed a scientific discussion, which took place in Strzeszynek on 28/09/2017, entitled *Art in Context – in reference to current exhibitions of contemporary art*.

Jan Świdziński, who died in 2014, has often been compared with Joseph Kosuth. In a similar way to the American Artist, Świdziński's work may be divided into two periods: analytical – related to the artist's interests in linguistics, semiotics and logic; this period is marked by the publication of *A Dispute over the Existence of Art* (1965-1970) and contextual - after the publication of his manifest in 1976 entitled *Art as Contextual Art*.

Świdziński saw context as a key element for the art of late conceptualism. A context for him had to be related to the worldwide art discourse. Ewa Gorządek writes: "A context consists of a specific collection of standards, values, meanings and discourses of various types that make it pos-

sible for art to be defined and verified. It is worth remembering that art is a process, and that the context is never final – it is constantly changing”¹.

According to Łukasz Guzek, art in theory of Świdziński was rooted in the world, in which we live, in the context of contemporary culture and civilisation, which tend to result from historical transformations of society and culture ². Therefore, we may assert that Świdziński exited out of hermetic art space. When Kosuth turned to anthropology, the Polish artist turned to contextual art projects. He found his inspiration in the ethnography of local cultures (*Local Actions*, Kurpie Region, 1977-78; also in Mielnik, 1981). Art linked with context loses its autonomy. It faces the ever-changing reality.

Tyczyńska’s project – *Context/Contextualism* – asked questions about the currency of art as contextual art. She wanted to find out why Contextualism has been omitted in Polish art research. Especially, when we experience so much the contextual character of contemporary art, its inseparability from a context. The return to the idea of contextual art was to show a broader field of operation for Świdziński’s theory. Tyczyńska also hoped to introduce contextualism into the dictionary of terms describing contemporary phenomena in art.

The text by Łukasz Guzek „Art as contextual art. Jan Świdziński’s theory and practice in view of the 1970s art” shows the process of development of contextual art in the 1970s. Guzek highlights how in that process the autonomy of art was broken away from. He underlines the significance of the artist in the worldwide art: „Świdziński belonged to those Polish artists, who while working in Poland, managed to introduce their art to the world’s art discourse, which at Świdziński’s time was dominated by a conceptual tendency”. In his text, Guzek also discusses the artistic path of the artist, his participation in important conferences concerning conceptualism. The author mentions Świdziński’s relations with Joseph Kosuth. The text presents Contextualism as a result and a consequence of conceptual revolution. Its basic value, according to the author, was in its openness for interpretations.

Anna Markowska in her text “Contextualism. Art in the political and social context of the 1970s Poland” shows how the practice of Jan Świdziński was entangled within social and political issues. She also discusses other artists associated with Świdziński as well as the Recent Art Gallery, which opened in 1975. She mentions such artists as Anna Kutera, Romuald Kutera and Lech Mroźek. The author hypothesises that Świdziński, by accepting a social-political situation in the People’s Republic

» 1 Ewa Gorządek, *Jan Świdziński*, Culture.pl, <https://culture.pl/en/artist/jan-swidzinski>

» 2 Łukasz Guzek, *Rekonstrukcja sztuki akcji w Polsce*, Polski Instytut Studiów nad sztuką Świata, Wydawnictwo Tako, Warszawa-Toruń 2017, p. 311.

of Poland, wanted that situation to determine his art. Therefore, there seems to be a suggestion that he tried to work out his own ‘third way’. According to Markowska, Świdziński aimed to reveal that reality. He wanted to give art a radical anti-colonial feature. He believed in an anti-capitalist approach to art. In conclusion, Markowska directs our attention to a great value introduced by Świdziński. To be constantly travelling; moving – this is the feature of nomadic view of art, which we observe in contemporary exhibitions and meetings. The same feature the author sees in the project organised by Tyczyńska at Poznań Railway Station.

While mentioning the anti-colonial aspect in Świdziński’s art, it is worth noting here the text by Piotr Lisowski. Lisowski notices that: “thinking, born in the provincial part of the world, that inspired so much interest worldwide. It allowed for developing a tool to oppose conceptualism, domination of Western art and pressure exerted by the economy on art. We begin to understand the popularity of contextualism in such countries as Sweden, Canada or Argentina, as well as an interest of artists and activist engaged socially and politically”. Lisowski clearly points that art should be linked with reality, it should result from it and create it. Art should be included in reality and that was the purpose of contextualism.

Jan Przyłuski in his text entitled “To recover art for the development of consciousness

Notes on Jan Świdziński and contextual art” recalls his personal contacts with the artist and his works. The author stresses that it is difficult to describe the artist’s heritage because his practice and theory still contain many different mysteries. The author’s interpretation of Świdziński’s art concentrates on their pragmatic and performative aspects. Przyłuski analyses Świdziński’s works by referring back to Hegel’s dialectics and Deleuze’s philosophy. The author describes contextualism as a theory of culture, and therefore a specific proposal “to interpret the social phenomena and art activity within a given reality”.

Bartosz Łukasiewicz in text entitled “Contextualism vs. The Rest of the World – a Three-Round-Duel” admits that his aim is not to reconstruct Contextual Art in Poland but to try to answer the “question if the theory of art as contextual art may be applied to explain today’s reality with the use of contemporary language”. He also wants to direct our attention to the obstacles, which make it impossible for this theory to exist in common consciousness and scientific discourse. The text, according to the author’s intentions, takes a form of a metaphorical boxing match. It has three rounds. In one corner, there is Świdziński with his theory, in the other, there are his opponents. The author concludes: “I would like Świdziński to talk about emancipation from ideology; about the fact that searching for something meaningful and permanent has so sense because

nothing like that has ever existed. I would like his life and art to become an appeal to search for the twisted appearance of sensibility”.

Bieczyński in “Normative aspects of Świdziński’s theory – contextual art and a definition of art in legal science” discusses legal definitions of art. The author views their inappropriateness to ever-changing art practice. The author writes “Legal sciences, so far, have not tried to investigate the phenomenon of art definition in the process of negation arising as a result of one art trend replacing the other. Meanwhile – it seems – that such an attempt may lead to explaining some issues connected with difficulties in qualifying the latest art as a work of art in legal terms”. For that reason, the author suggests dipping into Świdziński’s conceptualisation of art and analyses the theory of contextual art. Its normative nature is related to the legal normatism. It is obvious that Bieczyński does not aim to show that the theory of contextual art may represent a ready-made prescription for cognitive short-comings in legal sciences as far as the estimation of an artwork’s value goes. What is important here is to show how the various theses shed light on the way artwork is understood in law.

Grzegorz Dziamski’s article entitled “Contextual Art in Globalisation” consists of three parts. The first part focuses on the birth of art as contextual art and it attempts to answer a question of what it was. In the second part, Dziamski talks about the process of globalisation. The third part applies the idea of contextual art in the global art world. The author inquires into an issue if Świdziński and his followers went ahead their time and epoch. The conclusions are rather negative. However Dziamski highlights that the arguments of contextual art acquire new meanings in the face of today’s globalisation. “Art has always been created in some context, but for a long time, we have not paid proper attention to this fact. We advocated the universal art, transcending the contexts, in which it was born. We focused on the art of de-localising its message”.

Izabela Kowalczyk carries out an application of contextual theory in present-day art. In her text – “Contemporary contexts of contextual art - around the idea of Jan Świdziński” – the author discusses a concept of an exhibition, which hasn’t been take place yet. The idea of the exhibition is to confront artworks by contemporary artists with Jan Świdziński’s concepts. The viewers would observe a form of a dialogue. The exhibition’s concept was based on a reflection over the currency of Świdziński’s ideas, especially in the context of present interest in relational aesthetics. Art, in this aesthetics, is seen as a social practice encouraging relations and establishing communication. This idea matches very well with Świdziński’s concepts. In her exhibition project, Kowalczyk puts forward the following: “how many ideas of Jan Świdziński can find recognition, how many of them may appear to be current and trend-setting while still func-

tioning on the margin of the deliberations of Polish art historians? It is worth also considering if an alternative art history can change the image of contemporary art?”.

In this volume, you will also find a transcript of a discussion – “Art in context – in reference to current exhibitions of contemporary art”. It belonged to a seminar entitled “Skoki na teorię” („Pounce on Theory”) organised by a Department of Art History & Philosophy at our Faculty in Strzeszynek near Poznań. The discussion considered the concepts of contextualisation in relation to contemporary art. It also focused on finding contemporary artworks, which conceptually link with contextual art. The participants reviewed such international exhibitions as Venice Biennale or Kassel’s Documenta. The debate gathered: Anna Markowska, Adam Mazur, Izabela Kowalczyk, Marta Smolińska, Justyna Ryczek, Sławomir Sobczak, Sonia Rammer, Jan Wasiewicz, Tomasz Misiak. It was chaired by Anna Tyczyńska.

The further on “Zeszyty Artystyczne” shall present a documentation of students’ actions carried out within the project entitled “Context/Contextualism”. This year-long project consisted of a research work, conference and exhibitions. The research work, which usually assumes a form of a site-specific workshop, remains one of the most important elements of the program realised by 2nd Interdisciplinary Drawing Studio. The workshops have been organised since 2010 in various locations around Poznań, for example, devastated buildings of a former Railway Hospital, ROZBRAT squat, Dolny Łazarz district, the former Tramway House, The Botanical Garden, or the space of summer swimming-pool in Kasprowicz Park. Working in context allows students to view the space from a wider perspective. They have an opportunity to examine the natural, urban, and social space. The analysis of the observed problems influences and inspires the creation of highly engaged and meaningful artistic utterances.

The choice of Railway Station in 2016 was not incidental. Jan Świdziński, the patron of workshops, said:

“Those who deal with art nowadays are very similar to tourists. They stop for a moment, they meet other tourists (...), they establish contacts, they exchange remarks, and they continue their journey. No-one wants to convince or change anybody. What is heard is not a theorem. We do not know if it is true or false. In a similar way, others perceive us. There is only a fact of my meeting and action – and the fact that others were engaged. There were forces in action. They influence, activate and inspire us. They mutually result in unpredictable effects, which bring on even more unpredictable consequences. Art is not like life – it belongs to it. It is neither natural or artificial. It is as it is. As it happens to be”³.

The workshop united participants from Poznań University of Arts, Gdańsk Art Academy, Kraków Art Academy and Shanghai Normal University in China. Students discovered theoretical and practical aspects of contextual art. They created projects (interventions, ephemeral actions, video, performance) within Poznań Railway Station. That place became their workplace, a meeting point, and most of all, a place of joint experience. On the last day, the participants celebrated a traditional Sunday Breakfast, which in the context of the public Railway Station, turned into a happening. The station also became a presentation place for selected works created during the work on the project. The exhibition – Context/Contextualism – was open to the general public: passers-by, travellers and tourists.

As I already mentioned, the workshop was accompanied by a conference Contextualism. The Contextual Art as a Diagnosis of Contemporary Art Relations within Social and Public Space (UAP, 14/04/2016). The conferences and meetings dedicated to Jan Świdziński and Contextualism have been organised before by various institutions, but they mainly focused on the historical context. The Poznań conference aspired to examine the topic from a new, wider perspective, therefore the organisers invited those representatives, who did not voice their opinions on Contextualism, or Świdziński's practice before. The voices of historians and theorists of art were confronted with the voice of the youngest generation – students specialising in Curatorial Strategies and Art Promotion at Art Education in Fine Arts studies: Daria Grabowska, Paulina Brelińska and Patrycja Olichwiruk. Their texts complement this section of the publication. ●