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Art as contextual art.

Jan Świdziński's theory and practice in view of the 1970s art

In the 70s, art was dominated by Conceptual Art. We can say that it was a conceptual decade both in world's art and Polish art. In Poland, this is a moment in the history of contemporary art, in which the world's art and Polish art were developing in parallel. Despite the iron curtain, the artists had wide contacts and knowledge about the world's art. They used that knowledge in their practices. As a result, we witnessed a development of an interesting, local form of conceptual art. It generated many valuable artworks. Polish art, at that time, was developing in partnership with world's art. In the history of contemporary art, which development was marked by the changing Avant Grade currents of the 20th century, the 1970s showed the first phase of consistency between Polish and world art. I understand the consistency here as parallel issues in focus and applied medium. I focus less on the relatively isolated individualities featured in a cultural environment, or 'art world' of the time. For various reasons, mainly because of political reasons, this type of development in parallel was not possible to happen earlier in Poland.

Conceptual art in the 1970s was not a homogeneous phenomenon. It comprised of geometric abstraction, art and science trends (it involved technology, applied sciences on the one hand and philosophy on the other), performative phenomena and – the most important ingredient – media art (photo & film). Art, at the time, possessed an internal dynamics. I shall present a summary of changes within conceptual art and the role Jan Świdziński as well as his theory of 'art as contextual art' played in it (contextual art is often referred to as contextualism).

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. What is more – he led his art dialogue with the world art exactly when it was undergoing some main developmental processes. Those Polish artists, who became famous in the world, achieved their position as result of finding interesting, individual solutions for art issues in focus. It is important to note here that those issues had been posted before by other artists and they resulted from cultural processes happening somewhere else. Świdziński with his contextual theory not only participated in the ground-breaking moment for the world art but also contributed to that process. He appeared exactly in place and time of the 70s' art when a key paradigm (pattern, model) change was happening. There was a change in thinking and defining art. It was a transition point from modernism to postmodernism. We can see it now with historical distance in view. While undertaking the study of his theory now, we must situate ourselves in the roots of contemporary times. We need to relate to the foundations of our culture, 'the world in which we are living' – Świdziński used to say.

In essence, conceptual art carried out 'Copernican' revolution in terms of art estimation. The traditional hierarchy of art estimation assumed as a starting point an artefact, a material and visual way of studying it. In contrast, in conceptualism, the hierarchy is reversed. The artefact is no longer more important than the meaning (a concept idea). The definition of art changed. To use Joseph Kosuth's language (the creator of conceptual trend), art is 'making meaning', and an artefact is only a form of presentation.

We assume that the beginning of conceptual art is marked by the publication of Kosuth's text: 'Art after Philosophy' (1969)¹. Kosuth (born in 1945) arrived in New York. He used this text-manifest, to sum up the key art problems of that time discussed in his art community. This was the time of squaring up with the tradition of the Avant Garde, which for America was an import. In reality, it meant summing up modernist way of defining art as an issue itself, art, which mainly aimed to study its formal and artistic issues (art for the sake of art, in other words). To put it differently, we are talking about a tautologic definition of art; or a definition based on a tautology. In contemporary history of art, we can see different artistic solutions to the above issue proposed by various avant-garde formations. Kosuth, instead of searching for an answer through form creation and visual representation, proposed dealing with

» 1 Joseph Kosuth, "Art after Philosophy," in *Art after philosophy and after. Collected writings 1966-1990*, ed. Gabriele Guercio (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), p. 13-32.

the very definition of art. That move provoked turning toward researching methods and art's tools in philosophy, logic, linguistics, semiotics. 'Art's only claim is for art. Art is the definition of art' – to quote here the last sentence from Kosuth's text.

When Świdziński (1923-2014) published his text entitled 'The dispute about the existence of art' (1970)², it resonated in Polish art world, especially amongst artists of the younger generation. The text was seen as a manifest, and it aimed at summing up the present understanding of art (its definition). Kosuth's claims tried to achieve a similar thing. Świdziński wrote: 'The concept of art is a relation between language in which that concept was formulated and a subject or activity'. He highlighted not only the original, formal and artistic answer to the question about art definition, but he also pinpointed the linguistic one. Kosuth's and Świdziński's ideas may be similar – however it is not the next avant-garde, or visual suggestion that provide the key, but the definition itself. In the past, there were many novel and visual attempts to define the definition.

There is one more thing that connects those two texts – a reference to Marcel Duchamp. Kosuth captured it very well while writing that 'all art after Duchamp is conceptual'. It was Duchamp who for the first time managed to catch what the essence of art is (and so its definition). He did it by turning upside down the hierarchy of artefact estimation – meaning, mainly by introducing 'an invention'; a ready-made. For that reason, for both Kosuth and Świdziński, Duchamp became a 'patron' of contemporary art.

The recalled above texts discuss the issue which opened the 1970s – the decade of conceptual art. They also show that Kosuth in the contemporary then centre of the art world, and Świdziński on its margins, were considering the same contemporary art problems.

However in the middle of the decade, a shift in the theory happened, the manner of defining art underwent re-valuing. The time of the mid-70s is the time when the changing paradigm, pattern or thinking model is more and more articulated in architecture and design, as well as in literature, philosophy, sociology, etc. Post-modernism as a widespread current came to be. The results of that global change in thinking (in all walks of life) are still visible today. Also today, the description of those changes represent the basic description of the 'world we are living in'. In art, both Kosuth and Świdziński attempted to approximate that new cultural situation. They meet again; this time in person.

We may assume that a breakthrough was marked by a publication of a text by Kosuth 'Artist as Anthropologist' (1975)³. In that text, Kosuth

» 2 Jan Świdziński, *Spór o istnienie sztuki, Życie i Myśl* no.: 5 (1970): p. 98-105.

» 3 Joseph Kosuth, „Artist as Anthropologist,” in *Art After Philosophy and After. Collected*

literally (*expressis verbis*) rejected his previous beliefs seeing them as modernist. Instead of modernist deliberations about art definition, he proposed to artists a new role – of an anthropologist examining culture and situating a human-being in the centre of his/her research. A word; a text is interesting to him not as a way of defining art, but as a medium of cultural meanings in the context of which contemporary art is created. We need to view that change from a perspective of his anthropological studies and visits in Australia.

Świdziński in 1975 wrote a text entitled 'Cinema Model'⁴. He explained in it the key role of a film experiment for the introduction of new models in thinking about art. The text summarised his work with *Warsztat Formy Filmowej* [Film Form Workshop]. It was a media art group (an experimental film), which gained rather a high position amongst world creators of avant-garde films. The group was a phenomenon in Polish art, and it contributed into world art with new values. FFW played a leading role in introducing to conceptual art issues related to photo-film media, that highlighted its characteristics in that area. For Świdziński that cooperation was an opportunity to link linguistics issues concerning defining art with new forms of media art. Świdziński himself used photography and film. Let me note here that his theoretical activity (writing texts, lectures, discussions) was equivalent to creating artwork (in a similar way he treated organising work i.e. conferences, art events, exhibitions and galleries). In the above-mentioned text, he discussed for the first time a formula, which later on became the formula of 'art as contextual art'. Therefore we may ascertain that contextual theory formed within the field of media art.

In 1976 Świdziński with a group of artists, who mainly worked with photography, went to Lund for an exhibition. The exhibition was organised by Jean Sellaer, who closely cooperated with the major artists of that time. They were mainly associated with Fluxus. Sellaer ran in Lund St. Peter's gallery (the gallery took its name from the square and cathedral it was close to). The exhibition's title was *Contextual Art*. The name came from the main insights from 'Art as contextual art'⁵ text, which Świdziński brought to Lund as a theory accompanying the exhibition. The text was published in a form of a booklet in English (Polish edition appeared a year later). The title of the exhibition and the text represented the key to describe the forces permeating art world at the time. The booklet travelled to Amerigo Marras, a friend of Sellaer. He was

Writings 1966-1990, ed. Gabriele Guercio (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), pp. 107-128.

» 4 Jan Świdziński, „Model kina” in *Żywa Galeria. Łódzki progresywny ruch artystyczny 1969-1992*, ed. Józef Robakowski (Łódź: Łódzki Dom Kultury / Galeria FF, 2000), pp. 166-173.

» 5 Jan Świdziński, *Sztuka jako sztuka kontekstualna*, Warsaw: Remont Gallery, Art text, 1977).

responsible for Toronto Centre for Experimental Art and Communication (CEAC). In this same year, he organised in Toronto the Contextual Art Conference, which was dedicated to Świdziński's theory. The conference was attended by many different major artists and people from the art world. Kosuth also came. He used in his texts (he wrote as many texts as Świdziński) the word 'context'. But he did not make it a keyword for his theoretical concerns (for him the keyword was anthropological art). He understood very well the role of Świdziński's text as a way of capturing the essence of changes in art at the time and its parallel nature to his theoretical and artistic research. After the conference, Kosuth invited Świdziński to visit him in New York. He introduced Świdziński to that world (Świdziński, however, was more interested in visiting an Indian Reservation land). After that encounter, Kosuth always felt a lot of respect for Świdziński. The discussion, which took place in CEAC, was published in Świdziński's book: *Quotation on Contextual Art*⁶. Świdziński became, thanks to that conference and text (Art as contextual art), known in Canada. He would visit Canada often later as a result of invitations to exhibitions and lectures. It was in Canada that his book, summarising contextual art – 'Art, Society and Self-consciousness', was published (Calgary, 1979)⁷. In the final chapter of the book, Świdziński proposed a contextual practice, which was all about creating by artists their art world. He encouraged to create their exhibition places and what follows – their system of an estimation, which would be independent from large official art institutions. It would be artists, not institutions, who would determine what art is. We would also avoid a social division into; those who know and those who get to know'. This alternative system of valuing functioned successfully in Poland in the 1970s. It took a form of informal and changing network of conceptual galleries, which was co-created by Świdziński. This idea gave rise to the art centre in Le lieu in Quebec City.

'Art as contextual art' presents a formula recorded in a style of logic sentences (and therefore in a style of early conceptualism), it defined the essence of contextual art theory:

Object 'o' assumes meaning 'm' in time 't', in place 'p', in a situation 's', in relation to an individual/individuals 'i', then and only then.

The way context is understood in Świdziński's theory is specific, and it differs from an everyday understanding of the word. Common-

» 6 Jan Świdziński, *Quotations on Contextual Art*, ed. Michael Gibbs (Eindhoven: Het Apollohuis, 1987).

» 7 Jan Świdziński, *Art, Society and Self – consciousness* (Calgary: Alberta College of Art Gallery, 1979);

Jan Świdziński, *Sztuka, społeczeństwo i samoświadomość*, translated by Łukasz Guzek (Warsaw: CSW Zamek Ujazdowski, 2009).

ly – everything always exists in some context, and then entire theory seems to be asserting what is obvious. However, Świdziński accentuates changeability of meanings. He captures the dynamic character of art, culture and reality around us, and finally – he postulates the dynamism of our thinking about contemporary ‘world we are living in’. While using contemporary terms, we can say that he pinpointed the performative character of meanings. For that reason also Świdziński took up performance and other forms of ephemeral actions (for example installation) as his way of practising art. If modernist art and all of the Avant-garde formations craved for creating one and always commonly presiding definition of art, then Świdziński was saying that such definition is not possible in contemporary art. We may define art only in the context of our here and now, because in a different situation, place, for other people, art may be something completely different. Meaning is not something permanently linked with an artefact. Duchamp showed us that. Meaning is not permanent – it depends on context, it is created by us here and now. Artefact as a sign is an ‘empty sign’. It depends on us to fill it with meaning. This is the mechanism of the ready-made. Now, this mechanism has to be expanded to cover the functioning of meanings in culture. Kosuth did it by expanding it to encompass cultural discourse, which he treated the same way as ready-mades. Świdziński, except for ontology of art and artefact (that is an answer to a question about the entity status of art & artwork) was interested in ethical aspect (the practice of participating in the art world, the status of an artist and a viewer). In conceptual art, the difference between the creator and receiver was annulled. Contextualism deepened it further. What happened was a translocation from art ontology to hermeneutics – that means that art became the domain of interpretation. And so, the creation of artefacts does not come from a development of art forms, and it is not subjected to creating novelties. It comes from a personal interpretation of reality. These are the consequences of the conceptual & contextual break-through: the act of reversing the hierarchies of estimation in art. Contextualism descended from conceptual revolution. Świdziński was also inspired by research, which was done by Yehoshua Bar-Hillel. He examined possibilities of automatic translation. Bar-Hillel assumed that the meaning of a word is decided upon ‘pragmatic context’ – in other words, the environment which surrounds the word in a sentence. The conceptual theory is also a result of many journeys done by Świdziński. During those journeys, he studied Non-European cultures. He was therefore similar to Kosuth. Their criticism of modernism had the same foundations. They were joined in a belief that meanings constantly undergo the process of updating and exchanging in multicultural, multi-ethnic environment. Culture is

a database, which is used by a contemporary artist. It is a 'material' for art. Contextual art and anthropological art describe that historical moment because our way of thinking has to learn to deal with global challenges of an ever-changing world – it is also our contemporary 'world we are living in'. The cure is in being open to a variety of interpretations, to be open for creating meanings in a context. The acts of closing off carry the danger of totalitarianism. ●