

# Piotr Lisowski

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A curator and an art historian, an independent researcher of contemporary art, a lecturer.

Piotr Lisowski graduated from the Faculty of History at Nicolaus Copernicus University in Torun with a degree in the history of art and culture. He also did a postgraduate study in Curatorial Museum Studies with a specialisation in Contemporary Art at Jagiellonian University in Kraków.

Lisowski is the creator and curator of Jerzy Ludwinski's Archive in Wrocław Contemporary Museum. He is also a co-creator and a curator of a contemporary art gallery *Milość* in Torun. In 2014, he received a culture scholarship from The Ministry of Culture and National Heritage. Between 2007-2016, he was a curator at CSW *Znaki Czasu* in Torun. He was also a lecturer at Fine Arts department of Torun University.

He is an editor of various publications on art, and he is an author of many texts on art. From December 2016, he is a curator of exhibitions at Wrocław Contemporary Museum.

Piotr Lisowski is a curator of such exhibitions as *Black Spring. On the independent Wrocław the 1980s' music scene* (Wrocław Contemporary Museum, 2017), *The Bones of all people* (CSW, Torun, 2016), *Epidemic* (CSW, Torun, 2013), *The Country of War. Works from the collection of Exchange Gallery* (CSW, Torun, 2012), and finally *Jerzy Ludwinski. Filling in empty spaces* (CSW, Torun, 2011).

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# **I am speaking non-stop for 2 minutes. Jan Świdziński's Contextualism**

A black and white photograph was found in the USA – Świdziński recounted. It depicted a crowd of people. The multiplied image was accompanied by a text:

‘Artists, scientists...we are persistently talking about a human being. Our utterances assume various forms, colours and languages.

We are not talking about a human »in general«, we are talking about a particular human, the one that exists in reality, the one, which is defined by a situation he [or she] exists in.

We are not talking about people without their presence.

We are not talking about people. We are talking to people about what is important to them.

Let us not decide without their participation!

Art must cease to be a dispute with itself.

Art’s meaning is not defined by its internal structure, but a particular situation, in which it functions, and for which it functions<sup>1</sup>.

Świdziński did this work in 1978. It was shown for the first time at an exhibition in Mała Gallery in Warsaw. The work showed the status of Świdziński’s thinking at the most dynamic moment of growth in contextual art – an art trend, he developed. The artist often combined a photograph with a text. He saw a photograph as something taken out from reality. The text was far more important for him. It did not represent a usual commentary, but it was an intervention aimed at transforming something (in this case a photograph) into a new fact. Later on, it was a performance that became the primary form of Świdziński’s expression. Performance, for its

» 1 Cit.for: Jan Świdziński, *Stale mówimy o człowieku* [We are persistently talking about a human], [in] *idem, Konteksty, selected texts* T. Majewski, W. Tatarczuk, Galeria Labirynt, Lublin 2010, p. 137

natural union with place and time, seemed to Świdziński as the most appropriate to express the ideas of contextual art. Still, we should not view his art practice as a simple translation of his theoretical assumptions. What we are dealing with, in his creative work, is a dialogue between those two spheres and a resulting from it evolution<sup>2</sup>.

Świdziński did not leave a lot of object-based works. In his practice, he was interested the most in creating messages. A message in words, a text or performance is based on a process, which is active and changeable, whereas an object is something static. This dependency was the key for him to define the predominant role of art – the description of reality. The reality is subjected to continuous change, for that reason, the changes in art belong to a natural process.

Świdziński, while working on 12 points of contextual art, scrutinised and analysed everything that was happening in global art circuit. He was in touch with contemporary art-criticism debates. Towards the end of the 1960s, he finally gave up painting. He argued that: (...) when I realised that painting had become a form of self-reflection, a creation for its sake, and it does not allow for communication with others – I stopped painting<sup>3</sup>. He started oscillating towards conceptualism, while at the same time, he began constructing his expository concept, which lay the foundations for his contextual art theory.

The text entitled ‘Dispute about the existence of art’<sup>4</sup> from 1970 is perceived as the beginning of Świdziński’s theoretical path. In that publication, the artist analysed the situation of art in the 1960s. He considered the theses hailing the end of traditional art. He drew attention to the moment when the function of art was reversed. Art stood against an object while emphasising the role of an artistic attitude towards the world. He recalled two important exhibitions from 1969 *When Attitudes Become Form* (Kunsthalle in Brno) and *Conception. Documentation of Today’s Art Tendency* (Städtisches Museum in Leverkusen).

In the same text, Świdziński also noticed one more thing. It was one of the essential points in the context of his later concepts. Art theory spoke of artwork as a thing in itself. While rejecting the function of meaning, it focused on examining the form. ‘In this concept’ – he wrote – ‘artwork is not a manifestation of a different thing stuck inside it, but it exists for its sake. It is separated from everything it is surrounded with. A painting appears as a construction of colourful spots; a sculpture – a construction

» 2 G. Borkowski, Jana Świdzińskiego działania z fotografią, <http://Świdziński.art.pl/borkowski/html>, (accessed on 28.08.2016)

» 3 Cit.for: Ł. Guzek, Jan Świdziński – artysta między-epoki [Jan Świdziński – an inter-epoch artist], [in] J. Świdziński, *Konteksty...*, p. 247-248.

» 4 This text was published in *Życie i Myśli* [Life & Thoughts] magazine (1970, no.:5, p. 98-105).

of spatial forms, a literary piece – a composition of words. (...) Talking about art is a process of creating on top of one language (the language of colours, shapes, forms) another language (writing, words). The act of preserving a full autonomy of both languages leads to breaking the relations between them. One thing stops signifying another<sup>5</sup>. This process has got its roots in Renaissance, and it resulted in the present situation, where a word acquired a status of an independent entity from an object. Thus, the word lost its connection with the object. The culmination of that process for Świdziński was conceptual art, which dealt exclusively with concepts. That feature meant that it failed to demonstrate an ability to describe reality. That fact became an essential argument in conceptual art criticism, while at the same time, it also lay the foundations for contextual art.

Świdziński, while working on his concept, opened a dispute with one of the most dominating tendencies in contemporary art discourse. It seems that his action was conscious and subordinated by not only insights but also a will to develop his image of art, which would influence international art world.

The key in propagating the contextual art was an exhibition in St. Petri Gallery in Sweden (the gallery was described as an Archive of Experimental and Marginal Art). The gallery was run by a French artist Jean Sellem, and he had connections with Fluxus and Situationist International. The gallery mainly showed experimental and engaged art. In 1976, Świdziński prepared an exhibition there. It was entitled, Contextual Art. He invited to participate in it artists he worked with in Poland. They were media artists, members of Film Form Workshop from Łódź (Wojciech Bruszewski, Józef Robakowski, Ryszard Wasko), artists associated with Wrocław Gallery of Contemporary Art (Romuald Kutera, Anna Kutera, Lech Mrozek) and Warsaw based artists: Henryk Gajewski, Zbigniew Dlubak and Andrzej Jurczak.

The exhibition was accompanied by a booklet in English. It contained Świdziński's manifest about contextual art<sup>6</sup>. This publication is often referred to as 'the yellow book'. It was well-received and inspired many discussions. To Lund, there also came Amerigo Marras, the director of the Centre for Experimental Art & Communication (CEAC). It was an important institution functioning in Toronto. It combined art with social activism. Marras believed that Świdziński's idea was a novel proposal, which rejected all previous models of art, which were put forward by ar-

» 5 J. Świdziński. Spór o istnienie sztuki [A dispute about existence of art], [in:] idem, Konteksty..., p.10

» 6 J. Świdziński, Art as a Contextual Art, ed. J. Sellem, Galerie St. Petri, Archive of Experimental Art, Lund 1976.

tists from the time of modernism – starting from Duchamp, and finishing off with Art&Language<sup>7</sup>. It was Marras who suggested to Świdziński organising an international conference on contextual art in Canada.

After presenting his theory of contextual art in St. Petri Gallery at the end of 1976, Świdziński wrote: ‘When some code of art is established socially (we see a rise of a residing aesthetics in a given historical period) it is then that an interaction between an image of the world created by art and other images created by civilisation is prevented. The durability of a system of civilisation becomes a guarantee for the durability of other systems created by that civilisation. The period of creation of new art rules (new code) is a period of doubt, which undermines rooted beliefs about both art and empirical reality. This is the period of the avant-garde, which shall last as long as it is not subjected to the process of institutionalisation; as long as the new aesthetics is not born. This was the fate of 1960's avant-grade. This is the moment for the new avant-grade.’<sup>8</sup>. The direct response to such situation was meant to be contextual art.

Łukasz Ronduda draws our attention to the fact that Świdziński promoted contextualism as a ‘native idea born in a socialist system’ and as ‘a weapon tool’. He did not talk about another refined intellectually art theory. While saying it all, Świdziński followed a thought-through strategy aiming to build an international coalition<sup>9</sup>. On the one hand, we see a Polish context – a country from Eastern block, which was Świdziński’s home and which, in the context of the global art world, was colonised. Świdziński was against thoughtless copying the conceptual aesthetics or any other aesthetics for that matter. ‘While considering conceptualism in general’ – he wrote in one of his texts in 1971 – ‘I contemplated the issue from a position of someone who is not in New York or Dusseldorf, but right here. I have always been intrigued by our talent to copy all novelties from the West, without a desire for an appropriate appraisal of not easily visible sense to put forward a question what we could do with it for our use’<sup>10</sup>.

On the other hand, it was that thinking, born in the provincial part of the world, that inspired so much interest worldwide. It allowed for

» 7 A. Markowska, Trzeba przetrzeć tę szybę. Powikłane dzieje wrocławskiej Galerii Sztuki Najnowszej (1975-1980) [We need to wipe that glass. The troubled history of Wrocław Contemporary Art Gallery] in Akademickie Centrum Kultury Pałacyk, [in:] Galeria Sztuki Najnowszej, ed. A. Markowskiej, Muzeum Współczesne Wrocław, Wrocław 2014, p. 40.

» 8 J. Świdziński, Potrzeba nowej awangardy [The need for new avant-garde], [in:] Oferta Galerii Labirynt '76, exhibition catalogue, Galeria Labirynt, Lublin 1976, pages unnumbered.

» 9 Ł. Ronduda, Elastyczność pozwala nam istnieć. Sztuka kontekstualna Jana Świdzińskiego [Flexibility allows us to exist. Jan Świdziński's Contextual Art], [in:] idem, Sztuka polska lat 70. Awangarda [Polish art of the 70s. The Avant-garde], Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej Zamek Ujazdowski, Warsaw 2009, p. 202-209

» 10 J. Świdziński, Konceptualizm [Conceptualism], [in:] idem, Konteksty..., p. 28.

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.

Anna Markowska while describing the atmosphere of discussion evoked by Świdziński abroad, attempted to explain it in the following way: ‘As contextualism distanced itself from essential definitions of art outside history, and it saw in it pragmatically and socially negotiated agreement; what is more, its de-sacralised definition-making was devoid of metaphysical assumption, all of that made it perfect for left-wing debates of sociological and engaged art’<sup>11</sup>.

Irrespectively of the discussion dynamics, and the popularity of contextualism’s theses in certain groups, Świdziński wanted to create a doctrine diagnosing contemporary art, which would meet the challenges of its changes and changes in the world. The artist elaborated his assumptions in a book published in English in 1979, in Canada – *Art, Society and Self-Consciousness*. What is interesting, Polish translation was published thirty years later (Warsaw 2009). Świdziński while expanding his assumptions, placed contextual art in a wider historical scope. By doing so, he attempted to prove a relationship between art action and social, economic and political changes. Łukasz Guzek noted in an introduction to Polish edition of Świdziński’s book that in Świdziński’s opinion ‘art, similarly to history, cannot be considered in separation from life practice. In this way, an activity of a man is subjected to the process of contextualisation’<sup>12</sup>.

Contextualism for Świdziński was a model of contemporary art belonging to a civilisation of rapid changes. He created it so that he could carry on describing the ever and fast changing reality. ‘An excessive acceleration of contemporary civilisation’ – the artist wrote in one of his texts from the end of the 1970s – ‘is a result of an activity of a defined, historically conditioned system. A result of an excessive acceleration of civilisation is a loss of semantic relation between the sign system, used by culture and a sign reality. The concepts, which we use to denote reality, do not keep up with the fast changes happening in reality. We need to understand reality to construct it. To understand it, we have to define its meanings each time from the start depending on a present context’<sup>13</sup>.

» 11 A. Markowska, *Trzeba przetrzeć tę szybę...*, p.42

» 12 Ł. Guzek, *Wstęp – od tłumacza. O książce* [An introduction – from a translator. About the book], [in:] J. Świdziński, *Art, society and Self-Consciousness* [Polish version], translated by L. Guzek, Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej Zamek Ujazdowski, Warsaw 2009, p.32.

» 13 J. Świdziński, *Sztuka i przeobrażenia społeczne* [Art & Social changes], [in:] idem, *Konteksty...*, p. 107.

Art should assume a form of an action, which is happening in reality. Art should flow from that reality, while at the same time it should create it. It should change and transform it. This combination of art and reality was not perceived by Świdziński on a principle of inclusion of reality into art (the way it was done by artists after Duchamp's gestures) but on the inclusion of art into reality. This is what contextualism was for. Art happens in a given place, in a specific time, with a participation of particular people. It is happening in here and now, as any other moment in life.

What is important however is the fact that contextualism was meant to act in the sphere of meanings, because for Świdziński political and social engagement was less important. Those engagements did not have for him a real influence on reality. What fascinated Western artists in contextualism was its capacity and radical character linked with an idea of spreading art into social, economic and political areas. In Poland, this type of activity was not possible.

Świdziński tried to dilute the concept of art in reality by reacting to a situation. In its assumption, this attitude was not meant to be an alternative to an existing situation, but an attitude creatively using and shaping the situation. It came from a disquieting feeling of the world disappearing. That feeling resulted from the absence of an adequate art language to describe that world. While defining that language, an artist arrived at a rather brutal assertion that art is immersed in the context of everydayness and that there cannot be dual dependence.

In the 1990s, Świdziński said in one of the interviews: 'Action is a result of a context. Work of art does not exist independently; it is an open book; its reading is dependent on a situation, which is different for different receivers and we all create the work of art. I create an idea, which in a given situation shall function somehow, but differently for different people'<sup>14</sup>. All his actions have their origin in a need to communicate, which may change the attitude of a receiver. Art acquires meaning only after acknowledging the social context, after being embedded in the sphere of meanings used by civilisation. Only in this way, it may be deprived of a possibility to become something abstract. Art speaks about reality, it is fixed in it, and it is determined by it. It is happening here and now. We are not interested in 'How', but 'what' it has to say.

In 1975, Świdziński made a short film, which he entitled *I am speaking non-stop for 2 minutes*. The face of the artist is looking right into the camera all through the recording, and as the title suggests, he is saying words. The artist is moving his lips ferociously. The film is witho-

» 14 Sztuka kontekstualna. Z Janem Świdzińskim rozmawia Eulalia Domanowska [Contextual Art. Eulalia Domanowska in conversation with Jan Świdziński], <http://Świdziński.art.pl/domanowska.html>, (accessed on 30.08.2016).

ut sound. We do not know what the artist is saying. Perhaps he is speaking about contextualism. Perhaps he is speaking about a human-being, perhaps he is ironic, and he is only moving his lips. Undoubtedly, the fact of silent message opens for us a series of contexts. However, to give the voice to Świdziński in this conclusion, we shall quote his words: 'Let us not worry if it is art, or not, let us act. We can say something about the time we are living in'<sup>15</sup>. ●