

# Jan Przyłuski

---

---

A visual artist, a film director, an editor, and a cultural expert.

In the mid-90s, he co-created an action group called *Relativo*, which experimented with cinema, artistic provocation and - as he himself called it - 'a small direction of emotions'. Around the same time, he created a collection of *Phenomenal movies*. He co-created with Jan Świdziński the first festival *In the Context of Art / Differences*, and the result of this collaboration was his documentary debut (2006) entitled *The Differences*. He is the author of video projections for Krystian Lupa's famous theatre performances *Persona. Marilyn* and *Persona, Simone's body* were shown in Dramatic Theatre in Warsaw. He edited several documentary and experimental films, including *The Glass trap*, nominated for the European Film Award in 2009, or an impressive documentary dedicated to the work of Zofia Rydet - *The Stone and Fish* (2010).

Przyłuski is the author of a book entitled *Action Art. Ten events in Poland*, which is the history and hermeneutics of pioneer performative actions in Poland. He is also the author of an audiovisual publication entitled *Warpechowski. The Path of a Performer* published in 2014 by Zachęta.

---

# **To recover art for the development of consciousness.**

## **Notes on Jan Świdziński and contextual art**

### **Is contextual still current? Is everything contextual about contextualism?**

Jan Świdziński said that he wrote four books because the writing was rather easy for him. Writing about Świdziński is not easy. Even if I were to talk about Jan, not his thought, I would have a problem. It is hard to describe him; it is impossible to define him. He was fluid-like, like water, delicate and decisive, yet at the same time, he was translucent and impenetrable. When after Jan's death on 9th February 2014 I started writing about him, I ended with four sentences. The text seemed general, so I stopped: 'During his life, people used to say about him that he created one of the most distinguished concepts of contemporary art in Poland, if not in the world. Or I wrote: 'perhaps it is the only theory of art today which allows us to get out of the dead ends of conceptualism (which seems to be distant, but it holds contemporary art in rigid dead ends)'. It is impossible to write about him with references to the philosophy he proposed. Especially because I met him in a situation of an exchange of thoughts, in a discussion, in time, which was very intensive mentally, scientifically and intellectually. I was then a young person, and I did not understand a difference between a conceptual mind and a mind; theories and definitions were synonymous with propositions of attitudes, expressions of feelings, sensations and thoughts. I did not know that Świdziński's thinking concerned that distinctions, that his philosophy (especially descriptions of the logic of norms, epistemological logic, game logic, etc.)

acting on anthropological level created a plane for thinking without losing a contact with life and present multilevel moment. I would like to put forward an additional question in an attempt to answer the question if contextual art is still current: what does it mean for something to be current, or what it means in the context of Świdziński's thinking. 'How would you define something current?' – asked Bartosz Łukasiewicz in one of the most important conversations he had with the creator of contextual art<sup>1</sup>. 'Today the current is positioned within a process. I wrote several years ago that we are living in the epoch of faster and faster changes which lead to entropy (anomia). But for example, the theory of chaos makes attempts to control this entropy. What is chaos anyway? - Is it a state of our mind with things happening around us. And now – since they regularly exchange, I cannot find a stable point in this changing situation. In physics for example – the theory of relativity introduced the fourth dimension: time; a parameter which may be temporarily defined for a given point, which shall cease to be itself - or whatever it was at the moment of describing it. (...) Many artists believed that they could create time. I do not create time, but I participate in the process of making it'.

Participating in time is for Świdziński the same as creating. It is a free process. It is subjected to social norms and cultural patterns, which define the subject (an artist) and a context. They specify the conscious and unconscious framework for all participants in a cultural game. Action, according to Świdziński, requires some double-value logic – a binary opposition. Success – no success; I believe – I don't believe. It is an oppressive situation, Foucault would say. The norm forces onto an activity a normative harness. Świdziński, however, claims that opposition and polarisation do not define the essence of our contemporary discussions and situations. The fight between individualism and norms leads to tension. That, in turn, defines the concept of freedom: full freedom is simultaneously a total separation, a lack of relation (Hegel's freedom - (...) the free entity is also an empty entity, independent, and when there is no relation, there is nothing that creates it'). A person, who believes in contextualism preserves a performative aspect in this issue immediately. This is 'a beautiful thought, but only in theory'; in practice (artistic, cultural) this is a utopian view, impossible, impractical (and thus it lends itself to ideological abuse - see: the fate of the theoretical 'use' of Hegel's thought).

For Świdziński, it was rather natural to see dualities, tensions, dynamic situations. His personality made him prone to intellectual considerations in positive understanding. While at the same time, the fate pushed him to act in the world of every growing diversities, in the chaos

» 1 The influence of the current state category on Świdziński was noted by Bartosz Łukasiewicz in his conversation with the artist (Art & Philosophy no.:29, June 2006).

of many different attitudes and concepts. He functioned in the world of information bomb and an explosion of an undefined imagination. For him the act of ordering reality, separating the chaff from grain, naming, forming categories, adopting different stands was an essence of being. He needed contextualism, on the one hand, to act, on the other to understand and 'withdraw in freedom'. In a conversation for 'Action Art' film, he told me: 'It is one thing to know art or to understand the difficulty to understand it; another thing is to understand that we create it. We cannot persistently speculate, and we need to do something constructive. And hence the idea of contextualism'. On some other occasion, Świdziński developed this idea by saying: 'Today is characterised by the constant clash of attitudes. A similar thing is happening to context. It overpowers me, I try to pick it up, to adjust it, but there is this fear that by creating it, someone else simultaneously co-creates it from outside and through that my reception is changed. Deleuze spoke about rhizome, and I believe that it is a good comparison. Rhizomes because we can form a new context only within the scope of withdrawing from the old one. To pull out into freedom, and therefore a total freedom'.

Świdziński liked Deleuze. I do not know if he met him. He smiled at my questions about his links with Deleuze, when I asked about them in relation to the publication of Michał Herera's 'Difference and Repetition'. But later, many years later, when I was working with Kuba Szred on an event with Świdziński (his nameday celebrations in The Knot project), the two topics were linked (the knot and contextual art): 'Art is something, what he defines through context. Context from contextuare in Latin means entanglement. We are entangled<sup>2</sup>. That was the way he saw Deleuze's chaos-mos, in which entanglement is both relative and relational. The difference (according to contextualism, in art today, there are no universal values, there are differences) they became for Świdziński a central category. He named his performance art festival in 2006 'In art context/Differences'. I introduced the Nietzsche's references into Świdziński's philosophy in a text published in the festival's catalogue (it focused on an affirmation of differences)<sup>3</sup>. The meaning of contextual art cannot be brought down to a banal assertion about the essence of everything that happens around art; in the net of relations creating conditions of the art message (for example social issues, situations, cultural differences, roles

» 2 On 24th June 2010, there was a meeting entitled 'Evening in Context', see The Knot – linking the existing with the imaginary. Mobile unit for artistic production & presentation, eds. Markus Bader, Oliver Baurhenn, Kuba Szreder, Raluca Voinea, Katharina Koch. The Internet Information: [http://knotland.net/index.php?id=85&L=2&tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=443&cHash=2f4f3a8489628cc016b44dc4ff87985f](http://knotland.net/index.php?id=85&L=2&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=443&cHash=2f4f3a8489628cc016b44dc4ff87985f) (accessed on: 12.12.2016).

» 3 In the context of art / Differences, the festival catalogue, eds. B. Lukaszewicz, MCKiS, Warsaw 2006

and background diversity co-creating any situation in human population, etc.). The force of contextualism lies in the act of opening towards differences. In other words, in assuming a logic ethic or aesthetic attitude which allows overcoming boundaries of an individual identity, and which protects from copying what is already known, from projecting the old over the new, here and now, what is unrepeatable and individual. Art, therefore, is 'action in the context of reality', it is a form of activism in the sphere of changes in human perception and sensitivity.

On the other hand, performance (art par excellence contextual) and its meaning are dependent upon a moment, upon a contact with an audience. It has got a rhizome-like character. What an artist does stimulates in the audiences 'nerves', gives birth to associations. It allows the viewers to become a co-creator. The differences lie at the basis of creation. Świdziński saw in culture-social context a human. In the human background, he noticed a genetical conditioning which should be understood. Understanding it leads to the act of liberating. This is the way I read – I am not sure if correctly – the third part of his book title 'Art, society, self-awareness'.

In a way, Jan Świdziński made things clear. He was unconditional in a similar way to Nietzsche when he wrote about morality. 'For too long I have been left in the world of fiction, which was imposed on us and which we accepted'. We are stuck in the matrix, we deceive ourselves, and we pamper ourselves. It is impossible to carry on ignoring reality in which we live. It is that reality that sets boundaries; it represents our natural environment and our horizon. 'It is impossible to step outside it; to run into the world of clean, art media, we cannot afford the luxury of a double life: LIFE NOT FOR REAL AND LIFE FOR REAL.'

Jan Świdziński shall not be found in an anthology of art manifests. Even though, his 'Manifest of art as contextual art' wins over all art statements of the second half of the 20th century and the first 17 years of the 21st century in clarity and force (this is my opinion). It is rather bad that it is not included in a collection of the most influential art manifests published in Poland by 'format p' and prepared by editors of this quarterly magazine. Świdziński's manifest exists. Contextualism and Jan Świdziński exist in the consciousness of a vast art, critical and curating community (both new-york-like-central-leftwing-elitarian as well as dwarf-like-conservative-folk-like groups acknowledge Świdziński). Now, at the time of political absurdity, the contextual proposal of Świdziński should be viewed in the light of newly formed social criticism. Thus in a context of an impossibility of art in control societies (to quote Michal Here). Political neutrality of contextual stand is impossible to achieve for

obvious reasons, and it has never been possible. From the start, there was an adoption of a more diversionary, confrontational practice. It was visible in the works of Jan Świdziński, the creator/ discoverer (and employer of the practice), as well as the artists closely working with him. The main line has been a line of division between art and commerce. The black character for the contextual community has been so-called art world and market-related art communities (that has been put in opposition to independent, free art practices). An art form, which has been free from market influences for a relatively long time, is performance art. It has always been difficult to commercialise and to take over. But at some point in time, even that form gave in. Documentation of performance art has become appreciated by collectors. The community of contextual-performance followers developed a non-formal hierarchy of authorities. On the other hand, the events of recent years show an unbelievable growth: in 2009 we witnessed an explosion of publications about contextual art, in 2014 there was the first monographic performer's exhibition in National Gallery. We can see it as a moment of entering of performance art into mainstream art, and a change in way action art is talked about. Finally, there are conclusions-consequences: once performance art entered the main stream, then the force of diversification, the logic of multiplicity and otherness and a philosophy of symbolic effectiveness stormed through the veils of power structures. The Performance chaos-mos influences those structures from within irrespectively of whether the representatives of power realise that fact, or not.

It seems that the materialistic mono-centrality crushed the multi-value culture of communication and art, that it subjected it entirely. We cannot be further away from the truth. It is not about the fact that one-year Interactions Festival, which has been functioning for 15 years, did not receive the funding. Or that one of contextual art festival creator started working in an advertising agency. Let us not get fooled: the hand of the market is evident. Under a table, there is going on the second 'return of the real'. Also, it is not happening without the knowledge and participation of the culture creators and artists. Świdziński knew about it, and so he wrote: We cannot carry on separating art from life and life from art. We, the ARTISTS, need to re-think the role we played in the propaganda of a fictitious image of the world. We need to reconsider our participation in the creation of a myth which divides people into: those who know and lecture, and those who create – and those, who are passive and taught.' We know that the world of experts. This world is partially responsible for the 'return of the real' in a shape of res-sentiment agents. Those experts are responsible for the act of subjecting art to capital (definitely not to social capital).

So: what art is needed today? – Świdziński asked. ‘The one that does not construct an image of reality, but it PARTICIPATES in it. The one that RE-ACTS not describes.’ This is the basis of art as contextual art. We should add to it another plane, a relative one and rather ‘esoteric’ in its nature. An artist, according to this formula, is similar to an anthropologist who visits others (we are talking here about visiting our culture or a foreign one, or simply some other situation). If this seems too simple, we should put forward a question of if today all art is contextual. Or, let me put this question differently – I am interested in the question of if we should consider all art as contextual; should this art arise consciously, in the mind of the creator as a contextual one? To answer the questions, it would be useful to investigate a short history of contextualism. It has been recorded by Kazimierz Piotrowski and Łukasz Guzek<sup>4</sup> in their grand work. Let

- » 4 Kazimierz Piotrowski, Czy człowiek istnieje tylko konceptualnie. Antropologiczny wątek w myśli Kosutha i Świdzińskiego [Does a man exist only conceptually. An anthropological thread in Kosuth and Świdziński’s thinking], in: „Discourse. Scientific Magazine of The Academy of Fine Arts in Wrocław ” 2013 no.: 16, p. 251-274; online access: [https://www.asp.wroc.pl/dyskurs/Dyskurs16/Dyskurs16\\_PiotrowskiKazimierz.pdf](https://www.asp.wroc.pl/dyskurs/Dyskurs16/Dyskurs16_PiotrowskiKazimierz.pdf) (accessed 14.2017). The same author about Świdziński and contextualism: Kazimierz Piotrowski, Kryzys znaczenia w sztuce. Josepha Kosutha przejście od tautologicznego do zantropologizowanego modelu sztuki [The crisis of meaning in art. The approach of Joseph Kosuth from a tautologic to anthropologic art model], „Obieg” 1991, no.: 9–10, p. 17–19; Sztuka jako sztuka kontekstualna. Jan Świdziński o koegzystencji absolutyzmu i relatywizmu kulturowego [Art as contextual art. Jan Świdziński about a coexistence of culture absolutism and relativism], „Exit” 1996, no.: 2(26), p. 1220–1231; Jan Świdziński w poszukiwaniu logiki bez cierni. Kontekstualizm a logiki i rozumowania unieważniające zwane niemonotonicznymi. / Jan Świdziński in Search of Logic without Thorns. Contextualism and Logics and Invalidating Reasoning Called Non-Monotonic Reasoning, [in:] Festiwal Globalnej Komunikacji – Global Communication Festival, edited by Ł. Guzka & B. Łukasiewicz, Mazowieckie Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej „Elektrownia” in Radom, Radom 2009, p. 20–25; Hommage à Jan Świdziński. Próba wprowadzenia do „Sztuki jako sztuki kontekstualnej” [Hommage a Jan Świdziński. An attemptive introduction to „Art as contextual art”], „Art & Documentation” 2009, no.: 1, p. 5 – 21; Jan Świdziński i nieszczęśliwa świadomość (od unistycznej do kontekstualnej redukcji), „Art & documentation [Jan Świdziński and an unhappy consciousness (from unistic to contextual reduction)]” 2011, no 5, p. 91–93; Konceptualizm jako konceptyzm [Conceptualism as conceptism], „Art & Documentation” 2012, no 6, p. 109–117; The Promises of Unism, Zonism, Contextualism, and (Dia)Critical Art. Some Aspects of Performativity in Polish Art (1923–2008), „Art in Inquiry”, no 14, p. 119–146. Selected texts of Łukasz Guzek on this topic: Łukasz Guzek, Documentation is a communication problem. A conversation with Jan Świdziński, in: „Fort Sztuki”, no.: 1th, October 2004 - the first issue of the magazine accompanying the exhibition entitled „Documenta dokumentu/ Documenta sztuki [Documents of the documents/Documents of art]”; Jest jak jest. Rozmowa z Janem Świdzińskim folder z wystawy [It is as it is. A conversation with Jan Świdziński, a folder from the exhibition], ODA Piotrków Trybunalski, 18th June 2009. Kontekstualizm i No logo [Contextualism & No logo], in: The International Festival in Context of art / Differences. Radom, Warsaw: MCK Warsaw, 2007. Co stanowi kontekst sztuki? Uwagi na temat sposobu rozumienia pojęcia kontekstu w sztuce kontekstualnej Jana Świdzińskiego [What constitutes the context of art? Notes on the topic of understanding the concept of context in contextual art], in: Global Communication Festival, p. 8-19. Radom: Centrum Sztuki Elektrownia, 2009. (Materiały pokonferencyjne: W kontekście teraz. Wokół książki Jana Świdzińskiego Sztuka i jej kontekst – przekład Łukasz Guzka [Post-conference materials: In the context of now, Around the book by Jan Świdziński Art and its context – translated by Łukasz Guzek]). Sposób użycia pojęcia kontekstu przez Josepha Kosutha i Jana Świdzińskiego [The way of using the idea of context by Joseph Kosuth and Jan Świdziński], in: Wokół sporów o definicję przedmiotu sztuki. Miejsce konceptualizmu, kontekstualizmu i sztuki pojęciowej w historii sztuki najnowszej [Disputes about

me bring to light only some principal issues, which theorists managed to solve (partially)<sup>5</sup>.

Piotrowski suggested four theses to draw differences between conceptual and contextual art, which picture the issue in question (they are however rather controversial)<sup>6</sup>.

**Thesis 1:** The first difference dependent on which direction the tilt goes – logic of thinking, or aesthetics of thinking. The difference between conceptualism and contextualism may be defined by a term: conceptism (asterism). Kosuth rejects aesthetics, Świdziński does make a context an absolute notion.

**Thesis 2:** Świdziński's contextualism is better than Kosuth's conceptualism. Reason: conceptualism is an extreme form of relativism (anomia), and the work of art is (not) a tautology.

**Thesis 3:** We cannot reduce contextualism to a statement that an artwork is not a tautology.

**Thesis 4:** Contextualism assumes non-monotonic logic<sup>7</sup>.

the definition of art subject. The place of conceptualism, contextualism and concept art in contemporary art history], ed. Bogusław Jasiński, p. 10-22. Gorzów Wielkopolski: Galeria Sztuki Najnowszej, 2009. Jan Świdziński – artysta między-epok [Jan Świdziński – an artist between-epochs], in: Konteksty, ed. Grzegorz Kondrasiuk, Tomasz Majerski & Waldemar Tatarczuk, p. 243-258. Lublin: Galeria Labirynt, 2010. (Antologia tekstów Jana Świdzińskiego). L'itineraire de Jan Świdziński, / Droga Jana Świdzińskiego, / Itinerary of Jan Świdziński, in: Jan Świdziński en contexte / Jan Świdziński w kontekście / Jan Świdziński in context, p. 27-90. Quebec: Edition Intervention, 2015. And also a book: Performatyzacja sztuki. Sztuka performance i czynnik akcji w polskiej krytyce sztuki [Performing art. Performance art and the element of action in Polish art criticism] Gdańsk: ASP in Gdańsk, 2013.

- » 5 In order to correctly define contextualism as a philosophical current, we should show and (in a dynamic model) compare its four foundations: the theory of contextualism, history of contextualism, history of Jan Świdziński's art practice with a view of the 20th century general culture history, and the practice of contextualism, both artistic (proto-contextual: the works by Anna & Romuald Kuter, Kwieć Kulik, Warsztat Formy Filmowej, Zbigniew Dłubak, Permafo, Natalia LL, Andrzej Lachowicz, Atanazy Wiśniewski, Paweł Kwieć, Zygmunt Rytko, etc.), as well as culture-creative-animal entities (a history of art festivals: I AM in Warsaw, Intercation in Piotrków, EPAF in Lublin and Warsaw, In the context of art/differences in Warsaw, etc.
- » 6 Kazimierz Piotrowski, Krzysztof Zarębski. Erototematy słabnącego erosa. Przyczynek do dziejów sztuki performance w Polsce i Stanach Zjednoczonych po 1968 roku [Erotic-topics of an eros growing weak. The introduction to the history of performance art in Poland & the USA after 1968], MCSW „Elektrownia”, Radom 2009, chapter „Oferta awangardy”, especially p.129-140.
- » 7 More on that topic: Kazimierz Piotrowski, Estetyka niemonotoniczna. Implikacje sporu konceptualizm vs kontekstualizm [Non-monotonic aesthetics. The implications of a dispute: conceptualism vs contextualism, [in:] Konteksty sztuki. Konteksty estetyki. Tradycje i perspektywy estetyki, vol. I, ed. K. Wilkoszewskiej & A. Zeidler-Janiszewskiej, Wydawnictwo Oficyna s. c., Łódź 2011, p. 259-268.



## The chaos of life and the practice of contextualism

On the other hand, the final re-definition of contextualism happened, in my opinion, in a book by Świdziński entitled *en context / Jan Świdziński in context*. It was published simultaneously in Cracow and Quebec<sup>8</sup>. This work changes significantly the theoretical stand here in question (but it does not exhaust the issue). In the book, we find several different opinions of the most distinguished practitioners and thinkers of contextualism. (I shall discuss this work in the context of our considerations while quoting large fragments from the book, as I believe that a distribution of that work may make its wide reception impossible).

The book is composed of short essays by six theorists and artists: Paul Ardenne, Artur Tajber, Łukasz Guzek, Briana Dyson, Richard Martel and Bruce Barber. The heterogeneity of the opinions shows to us how differently contextualism may be understood. We also notice its multi-form functioning and diverse practices. The range of texts starts from a free discourse of French aesthetic's philosophy (Ardenne). Next, we have personal notes on Świdziński in the context of art world and consumption (Tajber). Following that there is a sketch of Świdziński's biography and thinking (Guzek). After that, there is an account of activities of an independent contextual group and its social undertakings (Dyson). Next there is a story of a long cooperation with Świdziński and a short history of its development through the eyes of one of the most active propagates of the idea (Martel), and finally, there is also a lecture delivered by Świdziński with some introductory questions (Barber).

Paul Ardenne, the author of a book entitled 'Un Art Contextuel'<sup>9</sup> speaks along the lines of Kosuth in his 'Artist as an anthropologists': a creator goes out, enters into the social, the creator is forced (but also willing) to take part, to engage. This form of engagements, similar to Goffman's direct communicative activity, requires from an artist being for 'the others', meeting with a social element, with everything that is not accepted in that society, with all that brings joy and what we would like to develop. 'An artist (in principle) does not subdue the world, but propels it' – writes Ardenne. He believes that the role of an artist is soft engagement and prompting the world around. This act of making things dynamic is achieved in a skilled way, artistically. Without prompting, we are threatened with stagnation, somnolence and laziness. And – on the other

» 8 Jan Świdziński *en context / Jan Świdziński w kontekście*, ed, Richard Martel, Les Editions Intervention, Quebec-Kraków 2015.

» 9 Paul Ardenne, *Un art contextuel. Création artistique en milieu urbain, en situation, d'intervention, de participation*, Flammarion, Paryż 2009.

See also a conversation with the author: <http://esse.ca/fr/dossier-lart-contextuel-un-entretien-avec-paul-ardenne> (accessed on: 11.01.2017)

hand – the dynamism brought to conflict, an unproductive argument or provocation shutting off any dialogue, does not lead to anything either. According to the French philosopher, Świdziński can be for us a reference point in working out our forms of engagement. This is because he ‘was able to create in unpoetic times, which resembled a bit clinical death, a work which persistently asks about ties between an individual and society’. This is a question about what is ‘between us and the others, in a triangle setting I-other-mine which controls the essence of human relations’. It is interesting to consider the question of how this something between us and others we can create as contextual artists. What is, in essence, the ‘symbolic plague’, lack of social communication, an internal illness of body division which should be created by culture? To simplify – writes Ardenne – ‘it is a power which manifests itself in a growing dissipation of socio-political values. It appears with the dusk of modernity, at the time of anomic post-modernism and gradual rejection of ethics in favour for maximum performance and brainless pleasure. In this game, art functions as a superstructure. Marx would call it an overriding practice, which is responsible for vital creation. Certainly, it is an overriding structure of a cosmetic value: a product of entertainment, a collection of expressions making the time pleasing. In this situation art becomes ... a tool (...)’. This view links with the return of the real, which we currently experience in Polish socio-political landscape. We witness the return of the ‘ethics’, neoconservative approach, and the practice of utilising based on a grant system has no end. What we need is new communication. ‘How can we reproduce in this situation an acceptable symbolic space, which would be both full of tensions and agreements, molar and molecular, for me and all, caring and offensive, a symbolic space, which would mirror our desires’. Art may take an active part in this fight – it would be a fight for protection against a return of ideology – we need to note here that Ardenne assumes as ideology an attitude of being non-political, or submissive forms of engagements, which continually accept compromises with the power. Art may be effective in this dimension ‘if it protects itself from non-critical self-reproduction and manages to preserve an independence from the market so that materialistic drives do not become the main condition defining its value.’ There are two basic dangers: extreme product-focus and mad fetishism. What we should do is to restore the basic drive of art, when it shed its serving role of appreciating church, noble or gentry power. This drive has always been working (artists included) on ourselves<sup>10</sup>.

In this way, we arrive at new contextual aesthetics, which Ardenne suggests. It is neither a post-consumption wellness nor neoconservative asceticism, which shall react to a rather short duvet with anger. We are

» 10 *Ibidem*, p. 50.

to work on ourselves to 'study our potential of otherness and difference deeply, the potential of *différance* and forced or freely accepted alienation. We can recognise in it one of Świdziński's light-motif. Those who do not respect reproduction and who do not enjoy tradition, the future of art and its dynamics is here, and nowhere else.' I have no idea where Ardenne found this idea in Świdziński's writings. I cannot think where Ardenne could have found a sentence about working on yourself. I am also not sure if that place can be defined, or Ardenne's writings are soaked in the spirit of engagement - transformation - conversion - transmutation. His insights are very strong, and it is worth reading them with double attention.

Artur Tajber ('Performance art and Contextual Art') remembers the time when Świdziński was in Kraków in 1981. The artist was talking about 'the stratification of the world, about split life, about abruptness of reality and about the need to move art from the sphere of fiction to reality, into a real context'. Tajber, who created Intermedia Department in Kraków Fine Art Academy (the first in Poland when students could practice contextualism while studying performance art) draws the situation in binary categories: truth versus image ('this dichotomy is unarmed – where necessary, and sharpens it – where indispensable, the concept of context'). The form which is the most contextual turns out to be (more than performance art) a conversation. According to Tajber, a conversation opens us up to another person and context. According to Tajber 'context which space applied to the work of art is (potentially) inside the work'. In the conversation with Świdziński, Tajber drew a reflection about relations (variable components of the system), which constitute the currency of 'the work of art', and this consideration is seen by him as analogous to Świdziński's thinking. Tajber speaks in his text about Świdziński in the context of their visits at various performance festivals (In Vilnius 1997, in New York 2005, Stockholm 2007). His words make Świdziński and his attitude more understandable. We begin to understand Świdziński's approach to reality (or to truth really). Tajber defines it as a balance between extreme realist and mystic, who manages to retain steadiness and a sense of humour thanks to the skilful use of logic (the logic of language, paradox and irony). (On Koestler's scale – Świdziński is a 100 % Yogi, who has abilities to be a Commissar). The second issue that Tajber mentions in his text is the contrast between art and commercial aspects. In Stockholm in 2007, there is a situation, which makes us consider if 'the socially accepted properties of ,art fair' and ,the space of art fair' (...) mean that everything that happens there is art. It is interesting to consider if the protests of art dealers against performers who stopped too close to their exposition and security guards interventions should be treated on equal terms with performance, objects on display, and paintings'. According to Kosuth's

definition of conceptualism: If something is called by a person (people), a group art, then it is art). Paradoxically speaking this is where a potential tension point is found. Even though (as I showed in Piotrowski's theses) there seems to be no problem.

Lukasz Guzek in 'Świdziński's Path' traces Świdziński's art heritage. He reminds us that Jan started his career in dancing being taught by Leon Wojcicki, the first after Nizynski dancer of Diaghilev's ballet. Świdziński studied architecture at Warsaw Polytechnics before the war, and later he studied painting in the studio of Jan Cybis. He also studied printmaking at Fine Arts Academy. He had experience in informal painting in the 1950s. He finally abandoned it all for conceptualism. In 1971 in Nowa Ruda, he formulated his famous text 'The Dispute about the existence of art', which was rooted in Ingarden's thinking. Guzek discusses Świdziński in the broad width of historical changes. He deals with the topic in the context of Świdziński's relations with Kosuth's *Art After Philosophy*<sup>11</sup> and *Artist as Anthropologist*, from the moment when *Art as Contextual Art* was presented in Sweden during an exhibition in St. Petri Gallery, and after a meeting with Kosuth in Canada a year later at the conference in The Centre for Experimental Art and Communication CEAC in Toronto. The next important moment in the history of contextualism is the time of so called *Activities in Kurpie*. They were participated by The Kuters. The artists mainly worked with the medium of photography, but there was also a visible contextual-performative attitude. In 1979 the publication of *Art, Society and Self-consciousness* delineated a break-through in the contextual thinking, its re-definition and widening of its field. A famous contextual formula appeared then: Object 'O' takes over the meaning 'm' in time ,t', in place 'P', in a situation ,s', in relation to a person/people 'p' then and only then. Contextual art – Guzek concludes – remains 'the key achievement of Polish and international art at the time of change from modernism into post-modernism'.

The text by Brian Dyson about Syntax Art Society is probably the most peculiar part of the collection of texts. It is a very practical approach to contextualism and one of the first social-radical activity in the history of contextualism. The undertakings, challenges and communicative solutions show that contextual art may be perceived as a social practice, as an activity directed towards local community, which is confronted with its limitations, prejudices. And the tool to overcome those two can be achieved through interventions and educational practices.

» 11 See. Joseph Kosuth, *Art after Philosophy and After*. Collected Writings, 1966–1990, ed. by Gabriele Guercio, foreword by Jean-François Lyotard, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts – London, England 2002.

An essay entitled 'From conceptual art to contextual art' by Richard Martel is short and very difficult to summarise. It discusses international contextual thinking. But first, the text focuses on the situation in which contextualism grew: conceptualism as de-materialisation 1965-1970, Situationists, landscape after Duchamp-Manzoni, Morrisi-LeWitt\_Reinhard, Art&Language in England, Kosuth in NYC, Collective d'Art, Sociologique in France. The meeting of Świdziński, Kosuth, Charlesworth and Fischer in November 1976 was important, but for Martel (and for the majority of world art community) contextual art appeared in Toronto in 1979. The following history is a bit too complicated to settle the most important points. Therefore, I shall leave it here. I believe that what is essential is the fact that Martel calls himself in this text 'the spiritual son' of contextualism. Świdziński's lecture where he greets Bruce Barber shall be omitted since it is not the voice of Barber, but merely an opening and Świdziński presented his thought fuller in other places.

The best documentation of Jan Świdziński's performance art (performance art is a direct expression of what is contextual art) was done by Artur Tajber – a restless soul, a media artist from Kraków, and a lecturer. The documentation was done two months before the 90th birthday of Jan. The performance was executed on the 13th March in Jan's home, which is very small, and humble (capitalism versus art) located at Warynskiego Street. This is where the creator of contextual art spent his entire life. To be precise, he was born on 25th May 1923. It is easy to calculate, Jan was born in a very special year (I shall show now my love for number 23). It was the year of publication of *Ulysses* by James Joyce, and it was the year when Marcel Duchamp finished working on *The Large Glass – The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*. It must have been a very interesting year. Jan, who lived for a long time, almost like a Chinese Zen patriarch, used to draw in the air difficult to understand (but clear for the heart) empty gestures. He was also like a turtle in a shell of his large armchair from which he was emitting his energy. He moved that energy from the level of heart and throat from himself towards the direction of someone watching this amazing documentation. The action lasted for a while; it was not a singular gesture. This is performance art of the highest standard. The video recorded by Artur Tajber allows transmitting this energy to others. We can hear voices of Świdziński's friends in the background. There is a voice of the artist-documenter, except for him (I assume) Łukasz Guzek (the most important commentator of Świdziński's works in Poland and a critic of non-mainstream art). There is one more person, perhaps it is Fredo Ojda from Actions Gallery. Perhaps it is Richard Martel from the Canadian *Le Lieu* (on, it is impossible, he visited

Poland sometimes before) and there could have been someone else. This birthday was an incredible event. It took place everywhere and locally: At Interactions Festival in Piotrkow (the only in the world festival of performance art, which has been going on for 16 years), in Świdziński's flat in the evening during a birthday supper with his relatives and friends: Jan's wife - Rena, daughter - Natalia, Adina Bar-On - a distinguished performance artist from Israel and several other friends.

This is the armchair, he spoke from, about the changes in art in many different meetings, conversations and interviews, which I had a privilege to carry out. Today, they represent one of the treasures of Action Art Archive. I met him relatively late; I was introduced to him by a cousin we shared (Isabel Chełkowska). I assisted her at the time as a scenography assistant in Grand Theatre. It turned out that the three of us were related, but due to his age and respect I felt for him, I still referred to him as 'Mr Jan'. What was the most important was the fact that we became friends and after our first meeting Jan asked me to be a press spokesman for the festival he was working on. That was the festival, which he did not want to call an art festival. At the time he questioned an art activity for the sake of (wider understood) culture activity. He called it in the end 'In art context – Differences'.

It is quite probable that I will never find out what a duality of personality was found in this Gemini born on 25 May 1923 in the year of Water Pig. I heard once that 'swidz' is a word connected to water, to some water plant, and water is a soluble environment. Mr Jan was a specialist in clever solutions. He introduced into his philosophy of art a concept of 'suchness'. This was a rather different approach to matters in the circle of conceptual theorists and art historians and aestheticians. 'It is as it is – he executed a performance under such title many times. There were not that many artists in Europe who were inspired by a sensitivity close to Chinese chan. Suchness. It took Miłosz his entire life to write at the end 'It'.

Świdziński's approach to conceptualism (this is the root of his entire reflection about art) gives us the right to claim that he aimed to calmly and consistently undertake a conceptual war machine. He wanted to put a conceptual mind in its place, and he wanted to create space for free feelings and discoveries. He was wary and restrained in the face of institutionalism, as well as the art world, snobbery or supposedly left-wing elites of cosmopolitan circles. Commercialised aesthetics ceases to have anything to do with sensitivity and sensation; it turns to its opposite, full of prejudices and fights for fame and money. He postulated a direct encounter with art integrated with philosophy, life in harmony with aesthetics, sensitivity and intellectual culture. He was an unpretentious father of Po-

lish contemporary art, he worked from his centre of the world, a modest flat in the attic at the Politechnika Metro station in Warsaw.

While organising his festivals, he received calls from Russia, Japan, the United States, Israel, France and Holland. In all these countries, Świdziński had friends, artists and activists. He was a man of amazing intelligence and sensitivity; he was very humble. It is enough to see how someone so eminent lived like. He lived in simple conditions, and he worked for many years in a two-room flat with his beloved wife, books, a dachshund, who reacted only when he was called in French. Regarding material value and the preciousness of the object of the work of art, he shifted the emphasis on interpersonal communication, contact and conversation in a given situation. It's hard to understand. He was not interested in an object in a museum or a gallery, not a fetish filled with energy, made by an artist, displayed in a museum, but he was interested in contact with another person, in an unpretentious, open communication. When he talked about happenings or Fluxus, it was clear that he was talking firsthand that he was there, saw, talked to people. It was not a theory in the sense of a literature of scientific literature, but a theory as a kind of reality view (as in the Greek source of the word), a specific view of the world. Also, when he talked about the emergence of contextual art, he always emphasised, „I did not propose a new theory of art, but I claimed that art becomes such and such a thing if we want it or not.” But he said it without any burden; he did not emphasise his importance because of the priority in discoveries or powers related to knowledge or position in the environment. He said it (almost) shrugging his shoulders, „this is how it is”, „it is the way it is”. It seems that the closest to him was the poetics of unpretentiousness, lightness, and at the same time charm and dignity (John was a descendant of a noble family, his noble origin, his aristocratic spirit was felt in his presence). He would distance himself from it, as from everything. ‘If something is too hard, it breaks’, ‘if the bowstring is tightened too much, the bow will snap’, he knew that, and he respected the power of this path. This is perhaps why he lived for 91 years. One day I asked him how he does it, how to live so long ( a very indelicate question of a youngster) and I heard: ‘You know...I don't worry too much’.

The philosophy of ‘it is as it is’, suchness is linked with transformation. It is similar to contextualism, and this can be very helpful in understanding it properly. Allegations of relativism sounded very serious. I often worried that I would not be able to use contextual theory in practice since the complexity of the context is so plural that it causes constant reflection, infinite referencing to constantly new, other signs (infinite semiosis). How is it possible to decide, since the semiotic (and decision-making) process never ends, the new factors constantly appear,

constantly change, modify, transform? And yet Świdziński, in the impermanent saw the possibility, the support. 'The context does not create an entity as something permanent, but it creates an entity for that moment. At this moment It is, It exists, It is not relative, It is not chaotic, it is what it is, now. Maybe, it's even a short moment, but it is'<sup>12</sup>.

An aesthetic judgment, deciding whether something is 'good' or 'bad art' too often becomes a residuum ego, sometimes it becomes even a tower of pride. The elitism of art is not a matter of qualifications. It is all about internal coherence, of the received order, as Ingarden would put it. In fact, the most important effect of contextualism is a cognitive transcendentalism. The act of directing the attention to the context is tantamount to transferring it to the outside of the work, to the network of meaningful relationships in which it is located. A network, a rhizomatic-structure was a primary feature for Świdziński. He claimed: a work of contextual art does not work in the sphere of aesthetics. Later he talked about the sphere of art as if he talked about something where we give ourselves to what is subjective, ephemeral, subtle 'as if in a dream'<sup>13</sup>. He was not afraid to highlight amongst the artists and critics of art the irrelevance of art, its role and importance for life, its potential, possible and real relationship with life.

Łukasz Guzek at Świdziński's funeral recalled the words of Marcel Duchamp: 'It is always Others who die' to mark how impossible to imagine for us is a departure of someone like that, and how difficult it is to understand the mystery of death. He also compared Świdziński to Duchamp because he created an amazing and novel thought locked in a shape of an art puzzle, in the context of art. It is a mystery which for many years fed countless attempts to decipher it. People were inspired by it, and it has fuelled and is fuelling the lively current of culture. After Świdziński's death, some people spoke calmly that Jan was at peace with his fate. A beautiful person, a beautiful life! Apparently, Ludwig Wittgenstein on his deathbed was to say: Tell them that I had a wonderful life'. The face of Jan Świdziński said exactly that.

It is twelve o'clock at noon. Eighty-year-old Świdziński gave me another cigar and poured some more whisky. The atmosphere made me accept the invitation, and I forgot completely that I came by car, and that I would need to leave it there. Jan plunged into a stack of magazines, and he took out 'The Fox'. It is a legendary magazine of American conceptualists, Kossuth,

» 12 Those incredibly important for contextualism words Świdziński said in a film by Piotr Weychert, Jan Świdziński. Beyond the delivered context, prod. Studio kontakt, Warsaw 2013.

» 13 In my short film for the project The Knot Warsaw 2010.



Beinbridge, Atkinson and Michael Baldwin. His friends would bring for him to Poland a lot of magazines from the West. He read them all, thanks to that he was rather knowledgeable about the processes happening behind the Iron Curtain. . He would write letters to authors he got interested into. They would send him their other publications and invitations to various meetings. Sweden, Holland, France, the USA, Canada – Świdziński used to visit all those places, and in each of those places, he would provoke lively discussions about state of the art. They were so active that many years later it turned out that Świdziński's concepts found their overt and hidden continuations. For example, we can include in the non-direct group, Nicolas Bourriaud's ideas, or Zmijewski's social art application<sup>14</sup>. Łukasz Guzek compared Świdziński's later ideas to 'No Logo' by Naomi Klein, and Łukasz Ronduda in his text about Świdziński revealed for the first time his fascinations with the artist-curator model<sup>15</sup>.

The history of contextualism according to Świdziński's short introduction represents the following pattern: from Kant's time 'elevated thoughts' became a way to open up for the concept of 'art', that in turn gave us a conceptual definition 'Art is a definition of art' according to Art&Language group's formula. The contextual art's points represent one issue, as well as its ability to self-define itself (in a similar way to the ability of conceptualism to self-define itself, or a self-definition of art in general captured by the conceptual theory). The second issue in question is the avant-garde feature of the Art&Language group (it has existed since 1969), its approach to the necessity of cultural change as a change for the better. Świdziński distanced himself from that. Polish logic tradition helped him. Especially his knowledge of the Lviv-Warsaw school's achievements. As a result, he was able to depart from the boundaries of Wittgenstein's ideas, which laid the foundations for the Art&Language theory. He understood and comprehended differently what tautology was. In 1970, he wrote from that perspective 'The dispute about the existence of art', he stayed faithful to a position of an independent thinker. Joseph Kosuth was at that time (between 1967-1985) a lecturer at The School of Visual Studies in NYC. In 1969, he published 'Art After Philosophy', which addressed the consequences of Wittgenstein's theory of the world of art, aesthetics and

» 14 Cf. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Estetyka relacyjna* [Relational Aesthetics], Kraków 2012 (original publication in 1998). Artur Żmijewski, *Stosowane sztuki społeczne* [Applied Social Art], in: „Krytyka polityczna” 2007, no.: 11/12, p. 14-24.

» 15 Cf. Łukasz Guzek, *Kontekstualizm i No Logo* [Contextualism & No Logo], in: *Międzynarodowy Festiwal W Kontekście Sztuki / Różnice*, 28.09-01-10.2009 Warszawa-Płock-Orońsko-Sokołów Podlaski, MCKiS Warsaw 2006, p. 10-11.  
Łukasz Ronduda, *Elastyczność pozwala nam istnieć. Sztuka kontekstualna Jana Świdzińskiego / Flexibility Makes Our Existence Possible. The Contextual Art of Jan Świdziński*, *Piktogram* 2006, nro.: 3, p. 23-39.

logic of creation. It may be summarised in short ‚From a concept to an insight’. His stand was not one-dimensional, it was not restricted to logical and linguistic solutions. He was, for example, a curator of an exhibition about censorship in Freud Museum (I suppose as a result of the political activism of his partner – Sara Charlesworth). In 1975, Kosuth arrived at a point of a deadlock, and he wrote ‚Artist as Anthropologist’. It would be worth to compare in detail not only the content of both deliberations but also their separate contexts of creation and functioning; as well as the material beyond theoretical one, which is ingrained in them (outside postulates, theses or formulas)<sup>16</sup>.

Between those two publications of Kosuth, we may discern the conceptual time in the art (1969-1975). Świdziński saw then the time of ‚problem escalation’: a question ‚what is art’ stratified and became more complicated. It is impossible to answer that question without bearing in mind the context. It is interesting to ask if someone who covers a canvas with a paintbrush is an artist, or perhaps art is an event during which 12 horses enter Attico gallery in Rome (Cornellis). The fact that art exists is not determined by its execution by artists, but the act of calling it art.

The starting point is an action (a set of praxeological logics, which is not linguistic) Świdziński developed it with precision – we are dealing with a multiplicity of logic governing the reality: the logic of norms, the logic of freedom, epistemic logic, game logic. What comes out of it is an extended theory of contextualism (mature, but exceeding the theses of Manifest and earlier short philosophical synthesis) asking for example questions about the contextual practice. The world of undefined identity, a local reality, art as a local action, an action of an artist. The act, action, performance, event, ephemeral nature determine new contextual art, and on the other hand, they determine incredible respect towards what exists, what appears and what is left. The value of documentation grows – the next step is an archive. ‚Art & Documentation’ organised by Łukasz Guzek, the most important archives of performance art (ASA by Boris Nieslony, Action Art Archive, CinemaMuseum and other Open MSN Archives in Warsaw, ACTIV linked to Fine Art Academy in Brussels and Beatrice Didier – they are only some examples of the wider phenomenon. ‚Matter’ understood in a particular way (papers, documents, video, photographs, recordings, relations). But also education and pedagogy (Artur Tajber and Arti Grabowski in Kraków, Łukasz Guzek in Gdańsk and Kraków, Anna Kutera in Wrocław, Anna Tyczyńska in Poznań, Maria

» 16 See: Kazimierz Piotrowski – Erotematy słabnącego erosu. Przyczynek do historii sztuki performance w Polsce i Stanach Zjednoczonych po 1968 roku [Erotic-topics of an eros growing weak. The introduction to the history of performance art in Poland & the USA after 1968], pages 127-141

Wrońska in Wrocław, Ewa Zarzycka, Józef Robakowski in Łódź – these are the new fields of contextualism and a group of contextual art ‚agents’. Łukasz Ronduda represents someone, who is close to that field – an artist-curator (an art critic and a contextual theory historian, but also perhaps its continuator). He understands art as an empty (clear) sign; he applied institutionally contextual formulas in an international environment. It is important to note here his exhibitions-social actions (2012 Polish National Art, 2016 Bread and Roses) and other activities (a book about Oskar Dawicki and a film entitled Performer). Creative work of all above-mentioned artists goes beyond Świdziński’s formula. It also inscribes itself into contextualism as a way of approaching art. It is noticeable on the international scene, where the influence of Świdziński is not yet discussed, but both Anselm Franke and Nicolas Bourriaud could not act if not for the Polish thinker. Art as a model and a dream, as well as the topic of ‚Świdziński and philosophical anarchism of Paul K. Feyerabend’<sup>17</sup>, are all themes good for the next article and situation.

### **Is everything contextual in contextualism?**

Contextualism is a culture theory. It is a suggestion to interpret the social phenomena and art activity within a given reality. It is a logical and praxeological theory. It concerns not only the language of the culture signs but also practices, situation and ways of behaving. Indeed, in recent years, as a result of popularising contextual theory, but most of all thanks to the publication of Świdziński’s texts and performance art events, which unite various artists, who accept the formula suggested by contextualism, there started a general debate about contextualism. Speaking about it does not mean that the theory or its practices were studied in depth. Certain art communities relating themselves to contextualism have understood the concept since the end of the 1970s. Various symposiums, meetings and festivals focused on Świdziński’s idea of a ‚context’. Still, it is only now that general language absorbed ‚contextualism’ as a motto without investigating what it is all about as a result the concept was captured from a common language perspective, it acquired a superficial literary theory meaning. Meanwhile, deep inside Świdziński’s theory, there are many different mysteries and inconspicuous ethical, logical and aesthetic suggestions for a contemporary person. Understanding a context is closer

» 17 Feyerabend’s theoretical anarchism („Przeciw metodzie [Against Fashion]”) made great impression on Świdziński, especially in the place where Feyerabend showed, that ‚inscience facts are selected to confirm theories, not the other way round’. That was the moment of de-illusion. From that moment Świdziński defending his theory of art as contextual art was more precise, honest in defining the subject, and he stopped himself from ‚anarchistic’ free game of associations and free multiplicity of arguments.

to Derrida, Deleuze, Feyerabend and new logic, then to a common saying ,something in a context of something else' meaning ,something in relation to something else'. Since contextual theory was created in experimental conditions (both aesthetic and social conditions), and its creator/ discoverer acted in culture, for that reason the question, we put forward here, should be expanded or modified. As Świdziński used to say ,art is only a name of some cultural activity'. ●