

Bartosz Łukasiewicz

An independent visual and performative artist, a curator, an art theoretician, a designer, a film director, and a screen-writer.

In 2006, Łukasiewicz graduated from the University of Warsaw with a degree in Philosophy. For many years, he was the general secretary of the International Festival *In Context of Art / Differences*. He was also the director of the Global Communication Festival, and he was the artistic director of the magazine *Art and Documentation*, which published artistic texts between practice and theory. He created many, various performances in Poland and abroad.

At the moment, he works in an advertising industry, because as he says - he has not got that many positive things to say about the artistic industry (and he would not like to appear as a malcontent).

The sense of his actions shifts from theory to the practice of understanding communication processes in today's increasingly digitalised world. This digitalised world crashes the line between the notion of an artist and a craftsman interested only in self-promotion.

Contextualism vs. The Rest of the World.

A Three-Round-Duel

A Warm-up

Almost everything has been said about Jan Świdziński and his theory of art as contextual art. What is interesting – a large number of interesting and in-depth studies, translations, articles, analyses and treatises have not strengthened Świdziński's position in the history and theory of art (both in Poland and world-wide). If we witnessed any strengthening, it is that of the most underestimated and un-promoted status.

In Poland, for example, the knowledge about Świdziński is – let us not get fooled – minimal. Unfortunately, opposite to what is claimed here, the awareness of Świdziński's work abroad is as minimal as it is here. Certainly, a collective of specialists, historians and art theorists may be excluded from the unaware. Why? Because I am not talking about people to whom access seems rather limited. I am speaking here about the existence of Świdziński in collective awareness – in mass culture; pop-culture. I am talking about being a bit like Grotowski – a bit more contemporary and a bit less dusty. Not that many people understand Grotowski's concepts, but he is considered a great theatric artist. He was one of the few true ones – we would say today – the influencer. I am talking about transforming Świdziński from a local and peripheral player into a world class champion.

The following text shall concern a precise re-construction of art as a contextual art. I am not interested in placing the theory in the context of art history. Finally, I shall not concentrate on the 'underground' performance art community, which Świdziński identified with and came from. The quest for Świdziński's championship is interesting for me only here and now in the context of the year 2017.

There are two reasons for which I decided to act this way. The first one is rather prosaic: I analysed the theory of art as contextual art in my

previous works and articles¹. My work was thorough and objective, therefore repeating the same assertions dressed in other words does not seem to me honest for a reader genuinely interested in the topic. Secondly, for reasons described at the beginning of this article, it is almost a tradition that every text concerning Świdziński and his theory opens either with its reconstruction or places it in a historical context.

In a sense, I understand the intentions, which guide the authors of such texts. They depart from a similar to mine assumption that Świdziński and his theory is practically anonymous. It is not a problem for me – especially that I am saved from creating such reminiscences... On the other hand, I wonder if those good intentions tend to fossilise some stereotypes which arose around Świdziński and his work. The stereotype of eternal absence in ‘wider current’ and collective consciousness.

I believe those are necessary premises for this article to deal with completely different aspects of the theory of art as contextual art and for the article to be composed in a different way. I have decided to search for a key, which would help me to approach the theory of art as contextual art in a new, creative and ‘contemporary’ way. By ‘contemporary’, I mean free from too much theorising, as the acts of theorising may bring a serious cognitive barrier for many people. Contemporary also means using a more contemporary language, which enables us to talk from a perspective of today, not from the perspective of a period between the end of the 1970s and the first decade of 21st century. I decided to focus on a question if the theory of art as contextual art may be applied to explain today’s reality with the use of contemporary language.

In other words – a challenge does not lie in the reconstruction of Świdziński’s thought, but in an attempt to capture its category with contemporary language. What for? To see what obstacles there are preventing it from making its way into wider consciousness and discourse. And here, I mean not only academic discourse but a broader scientific one.

As a symbol for this challenge shall be a three-rounds-duel – a three-parts-text. In one corner of the ring, we shall have Jan Świdziński and his theory of art as contextual art, on the other end, there shall be his opponents. The choice for this structure is dictat-

» 1 B. Łukasiewicz, *Kontekst i znak w teorii sztuki Jana Świdzińskiego* [Context and sign in Jan Świdziński’s art theory], MA dissertation nr. 3501-MGR-FF-81121006573 supervised by Prof. Iwony Lorenc at Wydziale Filozofii i Socjologii Philosophy & Sociology Department of Warsaw University, Warsaw, 2006,\
- Bartosz Łukasiewicz in an interview with Jan Świdziński, [in:] *Sztuka i filozofia*, no. 28, Warsaw, 2006,\
- B. Łukasiewicz, *Logika modeli i modele logiki* [The logic of models and the models of logic], [in:] *Art & Documentation*, no. 2, Łódź, Poland, p. 5-26, Łódź, 2010,\
- B. Łukasiewicz, *O pojęciu ‘kontekstu’* [About the concept of ‘context’], [in:] *Art & Documentation*, no. 05/2011, 05/2011, Łódź, 2011

ed by me being an advocate of violence – the opposite. Perhaps, this non-standard approach shall introduce a breath of fresh air into more and more crowded world of contextualism, and in relation to some issues, it allows to introduce a bit more decisive and dynamic approach.

Let the judge in this duel be common sense, knowledge and integrity.

Round 1: Do we understand each other at all?

The first blow to Świdziński, in the first round of the duel, may be a question concerning a way of presenting Świdziński's theory. I mean, here the author's way of presenting and the way interpreting people present his theory: Is the theory of art as contextual art so difficult in reception that it makes it impossible for people to comprehend it when they possess basic knowledge about contemporary art and art in general. The answer is not obvious. Some texts by Świdziński² are rather easy in reception. Other³ texts require a far bigger theoretical and historical knowledge. We can view texts which undertake the analysis of his theory similarly. There are authors whom it is not difficult to understand – in particular when they guide us meticulously through the meanders of the theory while using simple language. There are also texts, which in nature cannot be simple and not everyone shall have the facility to understand them, (what is interesting, those texts also include my texts, I carried out an in-depth analysis and criticism of the logical basis in Świdziński's argumentation⁴).

We may, however, risk a claim that on a basic level the theory of art as contextual art may be presented in a commonly understood way.

Of course, it is worth considering what is more important. Should we translate a 'good' theory into the common language? Is it correct? It is impossible to reduce, for example, a complex theory of relativity into one sentence, since to understand this one sentence shall not denote the understanding of entire theory.

From the times of middle-ages, we have a principle called Occam's razor. According to it, when we attempt to explain phenomena we need to strive for simplicity. We should choose such explanations, which base

» 2 J. Świdziński, *12 points of contextual art* [at:] <http://Świdziński.art.pl/12punktow.html>, J. Świdziński, *Art, Society and Self-consciousness*, translated by. Ł. Guzek, CSW Zamek Ujazdowski, Warsaw 2009.

» 3 J. Świdziński, *Sztuka i jej kontekst [Art and its Context]*, pub. ODA Piotrków Trybunalski & MCSW Elektrownia w Radomiu, 2009, J. Świdziński, *Freedom and Limitation _ The Anatomy of Post-modernism*, Syntax Publishing, Calgary, Alberta, Canada 1988, J. Świdziński, *Quotations: on contextual art*, Het Apollohuis, Eindhoven 1988

» 4 See: page 1, endnote 1.

on the smallest number of principles and concepts⁵. This principle is also called ‘the law of parsimony’. It is easy to work out that according to this concept good theories are those which allow us for better and more effective understanding the reality around us without spending too much time-solving hundreds of concepts and assumptions, which guard it.

There is no incident in me calling here William Ockham and his postulate of logical simplicity and clarity of utterances. If we assume that one criterion of possibility for a wider understanding of the theory of art as contextual art is precisely the possibility of representing it in a simplified form, it transpires that the starting point of Świdziński is favourable. It also means that low understanding and low popularity of his theory does not originate from the language of its description. It is executed correctly.

So, this round belongs to Świdziński and his theory of art as contextual art. 1:0.

Round 2: A strong contextual punch.

A short break and we begin round two with a strong ‘blow-under-the-chin’ question: Perhaps, it is not about the fact that the theory is incomprehensible, but that it does not reveal too much today. And therefore its novelty went away together with times when it was characterised with real vitality, freshness and originality.

Let us look at the facts. In this collection of texts, we find a text by Łukasz Guzek, who wrote⁶:

‘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. Commonly – 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.

As a result of this fragment, I would like to put forward a few ques-

» 5 Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Occam%27s_razor, Last edit: 13:36, 14 mar 2017.

» 6 L. Guzek, *Art as contextual art*.
Jan Świdziński’s theory and practice in view of the 1970s art.

tions. Not because Guzek constructed something inappropriately. The opposite. Questions I strive to ask concern the theory of art as contextual art. Let me note here that these questions are not logician's, art historian's, or anthropologist's. They are basic, intuitive questions, which arise in the minds of most rationally thinking people – the ones who watch this duel.

For example: how do we know that two objects cannot assume the same meaning at the same time? Why does the author claim that objects acquire meaning about people when they give them the meaning? Perhaps Świdziński believed in the ideas, which he criticised Kossuth for? Perhaps he tended towards Platonic idealism. Maybe the explanation is much simpler and – against what Guzek suggests – it is bluntly colloquial: the meaning, which we put on objects, concepts and personal experiences is changeable and unsteady, so depending on, for example, the moment of uttering them. Ok, so we agree: it is performative.

I am still, however, intrigued by the question of the novelty of this approach. Those facts were written about in the 1950s, so 30 years earlier, by a famous Austrian logician Ludwig Wittgenstein in 'Philosophical Investigations'⁷.

To understand this question a bit better, let us move the clock from 1953 (the date of Investigation's first publication) to 1979⁸. Świdziński publishes his first book in which 12 points of art as contextual art are subjected to theoretical study. In those times, painting was going out of fashion [Świdziński 'talked about it when he discussed the reasons why he stopped painting'⁹]; top of the tops belonged to art freed from subject-fo-

» 7 L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by B. Wolniewicz, PWN, Warsaw, 2012.

» 8 J. Świdziński, *Art, Society and Self-consciousness*, translated by Ł. Guzek, CSW Zamek Ujazdowski, Warsaw 2009.

» 9 Bartosz Lukasiewicz in interview with Jan Świdziński, [in:] *Sztuka i Filozofia*, no 28, Warsaw, 2006.

» 10 In this context, it is worth noting a conversation with Stefan Gierowski, a senior of Polish Abstract Art, in which, he discusses the context of creating his works. As we see, painting is not necessarily non-contextual as Świdziński wanted to see it. It is also worth mentioning here Wilhelm Sasnal and his paintings, which are in principle 'a contextual window' of painting. '(...) You said once that abstract painting has got a greater ability to formulate general concepts than figurative painting. Does it mean that abstract painting is connected with times in which the artist lives?

I have never thought that it could be otherwise. Everyone belongs to time they create in. Politics tend to change very quickly, and certainly it requires propaganda, there is a lot of art in propaganda – it has always been like this. In Ancient Rome, there were pictures of emperor everywhere. Emperors changed, the pictures changed, so the artists were truly up-to-date. Not much is left of that, Pompeian frescoes – that's all is left. They show that real timeless world. If you paint a picture – does not matter if it is figurative or abstract – it is connected with some period, it is an answer to the time it was created in. Perhaps I am mistaken...The Futurists shouted a lot that their art is the world as it was. Impressionists said the same thing. So following that we arrive at the time of abstract art and it is as a contemporary world as higher mathematics is. The abstract painting also relates to its time. However, it should last longer than for a brief moment of now (...).

Is being an artist equivalent to being an idealist?

cus – the conceptual art; we are talking about the times when performance and installation were born and slowly matured.

What is significant, those were the times when contemporary art then had a real, intuitively correct reception. Let me quote here a few statements: ‘It’s a bit like Picasso...’, or ‘I could do that too!’. I am under impression that those statements were rather well collected with the avant-garde theory of art – anyone may be an artist. It does not matter that they were negative and ridiculing. The understanding or its lack was less important than the fact that those statements were right to the point. People reacted to art, which no-one wanted to explain to them the way they were taught about it – they juxtaposed it with the very thing they did not understand either before its appearance. Often, they reduced art to absurd by claiming that to make art you do not have to be an artist spelt with capital A [They had in mind great masters of sculpture, painting, architecture. They identified art with its Greek meaning – skill, perfect mastery of craft and technique]. Another approach to the problem boiled down assuming that the art in question requires a basic level of intellectual and manual skills, which the speakers felt they possessed.

We assume an extreme individual attitude, and we would need to say then that each of them had a different sense of aesthetics and they related to different attitudes and art objects. But, why shouldn’t we treat that phenomenon from a wider perspective and notice in it a contradiction of what Świdziński claimed? That, in a certain time, many people would assign the same phenomena to the same meaning. What is more – not: ‘then and only then’, but ‘then and not only then’. Why should we accept as a certainty that we may always describe everything using logic statements connected with unchangeable laws of logic and mathematics? That attempt (for example describing opinions and expressions) in its essence would contradict the very laws. It would be a bit like trying to explain with logical equation the meaning of life.

It is certainly the case of a perspective – here this perspective is not very intuitive and applicable only from the view point of a micro-world reduced to an individual experience. It does not have –because of the con-

I believe that yes, it is. We need to return here to the concept of ideas, so we need to focus on Ancient Greece and Plato. Something very important started then. An idealist is a person who had an idea. If you have it, your actions acquire a certain meaning. Because, if you have not got your idea, he become an imitator. And we need to be wary of imitation, it is a problem, which surfaces art now and then – in different places, in a different way, at different times. It’s very interesting that you ask me about it. Who today speaks about ideas? (...)

Source: <http://www.rp.pl/Plus-Minus/305189904-Stefan-Gierowski-Jak-namalowalem-Dekalog.html/#ap-1>

Małgorzata Piwowar w rozmowie z prof. Stefanem Gierowskim „Jak namalowałem Dekalog”

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textual rule/equation – anything in common with another experience and another individual. Everything from this view point appears atomically and there is no contact possible amongst the elements. It seems to me that even Pascal strived to overcome this type of radical individualism with some form of the absolute...

To sum up: in this round, we did not deal with anything spectacular, except for failure. This failure is not a knockout; it may be a knock down after which we may rise to our feet. The same thing is happening to Świdziński's heritage. There is also a very important lesson to learn from it: a persistent attempt in credibility claims, which are contradictory, may not bring about anything good. If we are capable of understanding the essence of art theory as contextual art, but the theory's assumptions are based on wrong premises, then such art may not be accepted. I would not be inclined to appreciate, promote it, or finally to crown it with the title of the most important theory in the history of art. This is not the way to win a competition. Such actions are destined to failure, and the theory to be forgotten. The best scenario would be for the theory to be stuck in the ring corner without a possibility to continue the fight.

The final question – before the final round of this text – is: 'What's next?'

Round 3: Are we persistently talking about a man? So, let's talk about Świdziński!

So for now, we have a draw. But neither of the players has been prepared for that. Both parties are trying to work out how to win this duel. What to do to tilt the scales to your advantage.

In situations like that, it is worth sometimes to change the approach. To reject all plain schemata, which we used to think and act. To refresh the mind, try something new, approach the problem from a side, which we have not examined yet. The problem for us is the fact that Świdziński was not only a theorist but also an artist. Why is it so essential? Perhaps because it is in his art that we find a solution for certain contradictions so strongly accented in the second round. Let us not forget that this art is the natural extension of the theory of art as contextual art.

For that reason, we shall review the most known actions by Świdziński. I believe the author shall describe them best:

(...) There is no sense in writing about all those actions: I will describe only three actions. The first one is an action, which happened in a Kurpie village. It was a place inhabited by very traditional society, and they lived far from the big city culture. The people, we got in contact with thanks to some ethnologists, who worked there for a long time – had their own, traditional, set system of values and image of the world. That image

was different from what we (the comers) possessed. The reality, which was changing rapidly, had not reached them yet. We discovered very soon that Kurpie were exceptionally skilled people. They were farmers, craftsman, blacksmiths, locksmiths, carpenters building houses, watchmakers. When we visited them, they showed us proudly their products. That versatility which arose from specific, life conditions had a direct influence on their aesthetics. It was filled with a pragmatic pursuit of self-sufficiency and independence. On the other hand, Kurpie emigrated for work to America as it was impossible for them to sustain their lives from their sandy soil.

Another work, which I did in 1981 was called *Wolność i ograniczenie* [Freedom and limitations] (hence the title of the quoted book). The topic, which the book dealt with, had its roots in the history of a village lost on the border between Poland and Russia in Mielnik. For that reason, I shall describe the beginning the action, which we undertook there...

We may say that it was an unsuccessful journey. A group of artists went to a little village by the Bug river. It divided two not always friendly (most often hostile) countries. We had a film recording equipment, cameras and some materials for recording. This collection of things perhaps gave us the unwanted official look of media people.

We tried to enter into a deeper contact with local people – more than being presented with local products – but we were unsuccessful. Local people demonstrated their lack of interest in contact with anyone from the outside. After many attempts finished with failure, we wanted to return home (those who were left from our group). I with some other artists decided to wait.

It was late autumn and as always in Poland at that time of the year, the weather was terrible. I set up the tripod, and I mounted on top of it a camera. I decided to take 24 photographs. One picture every hour in 24 hours. I photographed the same uninteresting view from my room's window. While waiting hours to take another photo, nothing was happening outside. You see a fragment of an empty road, some trees, some buildings scattered here and there. The road was empty most of the times. Sometimes someone went past. A truck would go past. When it got dark, the street was lit with street lamps; they went on one after another. Some lights lit up the windows of nearby houses, and then there were only two street lamps left. When it was light, a car went past again. If it was not the same as previously then it was a very similar car. Someone crossed the road again. A dog ran across the street.

Behind this non-action, there was a long and sad history of a village devoid of an identity. It was Polish, and then it was Russian. The population consisted of Poles who had their church there. They used to go to their church every Sunday and during holidays. The second half of pop-

ulation comprised of Ukrainians, who had their Orthodox Church. After Sunday mass, they all went to an inn for vodka. Right outside the inn, they would form a queue. One after another they were approaching the counter and they would drink quickly the ordered glass. And then they would return to the queue to repeat the same routine gesture. Depending on how much money and endurance they had, they would join the queue twice, three times and even more. Standing there, they were silent. They would utter only the necessary words. They were mistrustful towards the outsiders, but they did not trust each other either. Distrust was a lesson learnt from the history. Being too open, often finished rather badly for them. Someone eavesdropped, someone else tipped the police, and you would go to a prison, or you would be sent to a camp. War, deportations, executions. At best, there were sanctions and confiscations – this was the experience of a long history in that area.

After a few days of our stay there, we concluded that we had no values, no image of the world, which would overcome the mistrust towards us and which would be useful for them. These Melnik problems allowed me to create an artwork, which consisted of the pictures from my window and a text describing the situation.

‘The trouble is in the fact that the meaning, which we connect with art, joins itself with meaning, which a specific society assigns to reality. Its world image, its code of behaviour fits in norms of historical experience. We as artists are the ones, who come from the outside with our specific situation, with our institutional and occupational context. We are aware that art may make their lives more beautiful.’

We concluded that at the end of our stay in Mielnik, we should stick out posters in the most populated places with the following texts.

*DO NOT SUSPECT THAT ART IS CAPABLE OF CHANGING
YOUR LIFE EVEN FOR A BRIEF MOMENT OF TIME. ART IS AN
ILLUSION. AVOID ALL ILLUSION.*

I presented the exhibition entitled Freedom and Limitations in several places. It continued and developed the Kurpie’s and Mielnik’s issues. It was shown for the last time without being shown in Kraków. This is not a contradiction – I see it more like an irony of fate – because on the day of the exhibition opening The Marshal Law was declared. Union members and activists were arrested. The Solidarity Union, the only independent in this part of Europe trade union, was closed. Wałęsa was interned.

I am writing about it because all actions of socially engaged art acquire its final sense in the defined context of time, place, events. The art action fits in them. An example of my unrealised exhibition Freedom and

Limitations illustrates this stand very well... Censorship did not allow for the opening to happen. However, the posters saying 'Jan Świdziński – Freedom and Limitations' hanging around the entire city. People started to gather up in front of those posters, and they were exchanging their political views. It lasted no longer than a few hours, and the authority noticed the subversion of the situation and ordered the removal of all posters.

Those three examples of local contextual activities show the sense which transpired in specific situations of reality context. Everything was happening in place and time, which took the importance away from independent and autonomic 'art for art'. I believe that there was no accident in the fact that an idea of art as something dependent on context came to my mind, bearing in mind the place and historical conditions I lived in. What was essential in local activities, which I discussed here, also happened in my other activities. At the end of The Marshal Law, at the period of repressions and drastic limitations of personal freedom, I presented an exhibition combined with performance in Labirynt Gallery in Lublin. That was a period when all artists in protest boycotted cultural activity. They did not take part in exhibitions, and they did not participate in any events organised at the time. An exception was found in Lublin, because of the director, Andrzej Mroczek, who was not liked by the authorities for his liberal beliefs. For that reason, they were searching for a pretext to close the institution he ran. We supported Mroczek, and we did not want to give the authority any pretext. On the other hand, we wanted to be active.

I named my presentation in the gallery 'Painting Over'. When militia took down leaflets and posters from the walls, there was always someone who would write slogans. They would be painted over to cover them with new posters and new slogans. I also painted four walls in the gallery leaving one empty place where during the exhibition I wrote the following text:

'Thinking about Heidegger.

Between what has been painted over and what is – there is a distance and difference. The meaning of distance is in separating things. Paradoxically what has been painted over is simultaneously fixed. It becomes an Entity while not being one. I resigned from words, images and signs unequivocal for everyone. The distance, which emerged between You and what was painted over has got a meaning only for You. Distance expresses itself in an intimate listening while creating a space in which there is remembering and forgetting time¹¹.

» 11 J. Świdziński, *Zamazywanie [Painting Over]*, an exhibition catalogue, BWA in Lublin, May 1983

Next, I painted the whole text with white paint. I demonstrated how from underneath the paint emerges what was painted. (...) ¹²

The actions described by Świdziński should be complemented with Empty Gestures – a series of performances during which Świdziński executed strange, devoid of any meaning gestures with his hands, body, sometimes objects.

Ok. So, we have a better overview of the situation now. A real man has emerged from underneath the theory and text. He tried to put his theory into practice. Can we be sure of that?

The actions described are certainly a great illustration of how a given context, a set of events and conditions taking place in a specific time and place influences our actions and their later reception. The problem lies in the fact that these actions possess to the same extent timeless and universal qualities. The reason for that is their anchoring in the context of their creation. Therefore, claiming that they had their defined meaning only in a given place, time and for particular people is a bit misleading. I believe we should say that the context of their creation highlighted their uniqueness, not their meaning, which we give to them yesterday, today or tomorrow. Their contextual feature did not create a barrier, which would prevent us from their de-coding.

It is important to pay our attention to how Świdziński described them. The clarity, readability, and simplicity make everyone – even the people who do not possess any knowledge about Kurpie, Podlasie or Marshal Law – understand what the uniqueness of those actions was all about and what meaning palettes were assigned to them.

It turns out that ‘contextualism’ of those works understood as a subjective form is simultaneously its contradiction. They are works which say more than the already quoted ‘contextual equation’ suggests [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]. There is a point to ask: is this dualism; that contradiction intentionally included by Świdziński in his theories and actions, or not?

Unfortunately, that question is intractable. During my many conversations with Świdziński, he admitted that on a logical level there were contradictions, which importance he did not realise at the beginning and he did not care too much about, in later stages they were neither removed or solved. For that reason from the point of view of logic, a theory like that is difficult to justify or link with Świdziński’s art practice. Unfortunately, it stands a witness to a failure, for which, we cannot add any points in our fight.

» 12 J. Świdziński, *Sztuka i jej kontekst [Art and its context]*, p. 67-73, published by ODA Piotrków Trybunalski & MCSW Elektronika in Radom, 2009

We should also remember that theory and practice of art as contextual art should not be treated as a closed set [even though Jan Świdziński is gone], but it should be seen as an open one. Its openness is not determined by the formal language in which that theory was constructed, but the meanings that theory shall never define unequivocally. If we turned the vectors to appraise the practice, not from the perspective of theory, but the other way round, it would turn out that the theory was not aimed to formalise and determine concepts of art, but to de-construct them.

Let us imagine images used by Świdziński titled with something we call memes today; let us look at Empty Gestures and let us compare them with selfies – they show the same emptiness without meanings; let us treat painting over as acts of exclusion, removal and permanent information manipulation. The internet here is a great ally of Świdziński. Thanks to it the points Świdziński lost in this round may be balanced by those which he now received.

We have a draw. No-one losses, but no-one can be called a winner... The duel is finished. How about a rematch? It is worth thinking about it, but now it is time for a different question: Is it possible for Świdziński to be cool today after such a fight, and how to build and strengthen that image?

The end of the gala: A contextual man

I would like Świdziński to talk about emancipation from ideology; about the fact that searching for something meaningful and permanent has no sense because nothing like that has ever existed. I would like his life and art to become an appeal to search for the twisted appearance of sensibility.

I know however that it is not entirely true because I had a pleasure to meet Jan Świdziński and in his theory, it was not the twist that put everything in motion. I believe that it was one of the reasons for which that theory is criticised: its reality, its subjective value and the individual feature is something too serious and not subjected to periodical reduction to its contrary, also in the humorous sphere.

But this is only half of the truth because Świdziński was a very good artist, who in his art was able to balance – if not cancel – too much attachment to formalisation, logicity and order, which in the sphere of emotions was not possible to keep. That is where his actions came from. They were a complete negation of the theory he professed. This was dualism. It meant that the theory was enriched with practice representing its contradiction, but also its complement. Perhaps the fault should be searched in Hegel or Marxists dialectics of the times, in which he lived and worked. There is no contradiction in it. There is certainly no lack of logic. A skill of drawing from different sources has nothing incorrect in it.

If I am to think today about the theory of art as contextual art as a theory alone – being isolated from the opposing it practice – then I need to reject it with a clear conscience. However, when I think about it in the context of Jan Świdziński and his art – the case is different. I understand the inevitable split or impossible to reconcile separation. It is visible enough that between the sides there is a distinct line. It is at the same time a crack so small that with one step we may move from one side to the other.

As an anticipation of our times, his attitude seems to be iconic and symbolic. Świdziński was a contextual man before it became fashionable and now exerted. He was suspended between reality, practice and its equivalent: a virtual world of ideas. Just like humanity at the age of the internet. Just like us today.

In my opinion, this history does not deserve for cheap congrats cards, or radical rejection and criticisms with ‘digging in the papers’. This is a history subjected to analysis; I believe there are enough of them. This is a story of an attitude, which requires now fictionalisation...

I do not know what form it should assume. I know that if today we want someone to understand the uniqueness of Świdziński, his art and theory, then we should use a language easy to understand by everyone, not just a few. For the same reason, Świdziński should be brought forcefully into main stream art. At the moment, he is there only symbolically, in the described by me boxing ring. He is always stuck and immobilised by the ‘love’ hug of his adorers/contestants.

Is this circulation also standing in place?

This is a material for a completely different story...

Postscriptum

I used many different gadgets in my presentations. I took them out of the box during many different performances. Lately, I have shown the boxes. They were empty...

Everything is changing, and it is permanently changing. This is the sign of communication epoch. We have dynamic mathematics instead of static one. The theory of catastrophes, where catastrophes stay catastrophes for as long as we know how to deal with them and we find a logarithm to explain them. Empty place – sad – but possible to fill. By someone, By us¹³. ●

» 13 J. Świdziński, *Sztuka i jej kontekst [Art and its context]*, p. 87, published by ODA Piotrków Trybunalski & MCSW Elektrownia in Radom, 2009