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Izabela Kowalczyk graduated from the Institute of Art History at the University of Adam Mickiewicz. In 2001, she received her PhD degree in Humanities. Her dissertation was entitled *The Body and Power in Contemporary Polish Art*, it was supervised by Piotr Piotrowski. In 2012, she obtained a Postdoctoral degree in Humanities in the field of Cultural Studies. Her habilitation dissertation was entitled *Journey to the Past: interpretations of the latest history in Polish Critical Art*. It discussed selected examples from Polish Critical Art. It addressed the questions of history and memory.

She is an author of books on critical art, feminism and the re-interpretation of history in Contemporary Art. She has written over 200 articles for various collections and scientific journals. Kowalczyk is a winner of Jerzy Stajuda's Artistic Critics Award for critical and scientific activity and she also won the award of the Association of Art Historians for the book *Body and power. Polish critical art of the 90s*.

The most important exhibitions curated by Kowalczyk include: *Dangerous connections between art and the body* (Municipal Gallery Arsenal, Poznań, 2002), *The charms of power* (on dispersed power, ideology and seeing) (Arsenal, Poznań, 2009), *Micro-utopias of everydayness* (CSW, Torun, 2013) and *Polish women, Patriots, Rebels* (Municipal Gallery Arsenal, 2017).

Contemporary contexts of contextual art - around the idea of Jan Świdziński

Izabela Kowalczyk

The above title is also a title of an exhibition project I wanted to organise to accompany a conference on contextualism¹. Unfortunately, it turned out that we (Prof. Anna Tyczyńska and I) did not succeed in finding a venue for this exhibition. Nevertheless - because I treat the above exhibition as a theoretical proposal, the project will be presented in the following text.

The exhibition aims at introducing the contextualism of Jan Świdziński and works of other artists in dialogue with works and concepts of Świdziński. It is about asking questions about the validity of these ideas, especially in the context of current interest in relational aesthetics² in which art can be perceived as a social practice leading to relations and communication, very close to Świdziński's thinking. He wrote that he was interested in art that works in the area of meanings, and which do not produce physical objects. It is not a type of art that offers final solutions or creates closed forms, but it is a kind of creation, which is interested in the social sphere and the operation and testing the surrounding reality, and above all, it is open to the context in which it lives. Świdziński referred in his writings to Marcel Duchamp's actions, and so irony, impersonation, appropriation, simulation and blurring of the boundaries between the true and the false are also significant here.

» 1 *Kontekst/kontekstualizm [Context/contextualism]*, organised by: Anna Tyczyńska, University of Arts in Poznań, 14-16.04.2016.

» 2 Bourriaud, N. *Estetyka relacyjna [Relational Aesthetics]*, translated by Ł. Białkowski, Kraków 2012.

The exhibition focuses on the various trajectories of dialogue that arise between the art of Jan Świdziński and the artists of his time and younger. I am thinking here about such artists as Leszek Przyjemski, Anastazy Wiśniewski, Grupa Działania, Jurgen-Gerard Blum-Kwiatkowski, Zofia Kulik, Zbigniew Libera, Jacek Kryszkowski, Zbyszko Trzeciakowski, but also artists from the younger generation of critical art.

The issue that is worth pointing out is a certain periphery of Polish art, and especially some of its areas of interest. Do the ideas of Jan Świdziński and works connected with the environment of artists operating on the outskirts of the mainstream of Polish conceptualism have a chance to be appreciated and discovered in terms of their invigorating potential? Can factual contextualism be treated as a particular direction of Polish contemporary art? Would not it be sufficient to use the broader concept of critical art as such, which is already well established in the Polish art history? In this case, however, would it not be worthwhile to consider contextualism as a precursor of critical art, as one of it later artists – Zbigniew Libera – suggested?

Libera in his work *The Masters* (2004), kind of a mockumentary, showed a false interview with Świdziński. The work used actual utterances, the interview was allegedly carried out by Ewa Michalik. In the interview, Świdziński answered a question of if he expected that what he did in the 1970s would have had such an influence on contemporary times. Libera puts in the mouth of Świdziński the following answer: 'No, I did not expect it. Not to such an extent. Today, art is almost entirely focused on action, reception, and interpretation. Today, there is no fixation on the object. Today, art is very much involved. It's social. Open to the context. It is the type of art I wanted.'³

Libera with all certainty was right - the dreams of Świdziński did come true!

Questions about the place of contextualism force us to revise the Polish art of the 1970s and 1980s, in which the division between good and bad art is still conditioned by the term 'pseudo-avant-garde' introduced by Wiesław Borowski in 1975⁴. This concept excluded the artists who broke away from the seriousness of Polish conceptualism from the field of interest in Polish contemporary art history for a long time. Those artists focused on irony and contextual play (eg.: Andrzej Lachowicz, Andrzej Partum, Anastazy Wiśniewski and Jan Świdziński). Anna Markowska wrote about it in her book entitled „Dwa przełomy.

» 3 'Sztuka w kontekście Kurpi i Nowego Jorku' [Art in the context of Kurpie and New York], a fictitious interview with Jan Świdziński carried out by Ewa Michalik for „Gazeta Wyborcza” magazine, [in:] Zbigniew Libera, *Mistrzowie i Pozytywy*, Atlas Sztuki, no.: 3, February-April 2004.

» 4 Borowski, W. 'Pseudoawangarda' [Pseudo-Avant Garde], 'Kultura', 23.03.1975.

Sztuka Polska po 1955 i 1989 roku” [Two breakthroughs. Polish art after 1955 and 1989]⁵.

Thus, the proposed exhibition could contribute to a further revision in the field of research on the contemporary Polish art and, above all, the revision of the established hierarchy. It is not about a formation of opposition (as Zbigniew Libera did in his alternative art history: the series of *The Masters*), but about the diversification of the view of Polish art in the 1970s and an attempt to delve into social and political entanglements. This exhibition would also give a chance to reconsider the comfortable place that art occupied in the system at that time, but for which it had to pay the price of being something inauthentic, contributing to that land of absurdity, which was the Polish People’s Republic then. As Markowska wrote, Polish modernism became an official art form in Poland and together ‘with its conservative and reactionary face, it supported the power and was a custom of enslaved minds of authority and hierarchy.’⁶

The exhibition consists of an introduction (*Intro*) and three sections amongst which there would be a dialogue and which would constitute a context for the others: *Art is the definition of art*; *Contexts*; and *Alternative Art History*.

Intro

An already mentioned work by Libera acts as a “liaison”⁷ between contextual and critical art. It would also be a starting point for this exposition. Libera shows in *The Masters* a positive vision of the media world, for which, artistic creativity is as important as politics or economy. However, it turns out that to cope, art must meet the rules of simulation present in the media world. The artist presents as the heroes of the first pages of newspapers his masters: Jan Świdziński, Andrzej Partum, Zofia Kulik, Anastazy Wiśniewski - all these artists, except for Zofia Kulik, also have been marginalised by the history of art itself. It can be said that these creators did not hit their time, their artistic activities passed without echoes - but without them - as Libera shows, there would not have been in the 1990s such the trend as critical art.

It turns out that Jan Świdziński’s words from his numerous texts, such as ‘Spór o istnienie sztuki’ [The Debate about the Existence of Art], ‘A propos «N.S.» Galerii Permafo’ [By the Proclamation of the

» 5 Markowska, A. *Dwa przełomy. Sztuka polska po 1955 i 1989 roku* [Two breakthroughs. Polish art after 1955 and 1989]. Polish Art, Toruń 2012.

» 6 Ibidem, s. 23.

» 7 This concept in the context of another Libera’s work – a book entitled ‘*What is a liaison doing?*’, which was created together with Darek Foks in 2006, acquires an additional meaning

NS” Permafo Gallery], as well as the texts devoted directly to the contextual art itself, are still up to date, and they may be referred to the critical art field. In the first text, the artist paid attention to the problem of understanding faced by art: the understanding of the world by an artist; the understanding of an artist by the world. It should be highlighted that nowadays the form of work is no longer considered, and the most important issue is the problem and the information contained therein. He also emphasised that art is interested in the methods used in science as well as in the theory and methods of information. It is also worth mentioning the conclusion from the text entitled “New Situations in Art” (hence the abbreviation of N.S.) in Permafo Gallery: ‘Art ceases to be a phenomenon excluded from the process of reality, a roll back to the past. It becomes a process that generates successive stages of reality. It is the reality itself, an element that contributes to the structure of the world in which we live, an act of social action.’⁸

Libera’s series entitled *The Masters* can also be read through more general reflection: The art has been marginalised, there is no place for it in the pursuit of sensation and commerce. The art is awkward, sometimes too revealing, sometimes it hurts the audience and creates a sense of embarrassment.

However, we lose something by kicking out from the mainstream the art that enters into a critical discourse with reality. Libera commented on stopping the artist representing critical art: ‘It is not like we lose art, we hurt the artists. We hurt ourselves because we do not know what we might find out. We could miss something, or something would miss us’⁹

It is also about the relation between art and the wider visual culture, which is the context for artistic activities. The analysis of media images, documentary photographs and turning attention to their seductive and sinister power link the interests of critical artists. There also appears a link between Libera’s and Świdziński’s interests.

It is worth mentioning here the work of Jan Świdziński entitled *In Order* from 1994. It consisted of a reporter’s photo showing a desert scene with three soldiers standing over a dead man. Underneath the picture, there was a fragment of a lead-in: ‘our readers see the news ...’ and a short but significant text written by the artist:

“I was looking at this photo in Newsweek,
Peter Turnley took it,

» 8 Świdziński, J. „AA propos «N.S.» Galerii Permafo”, [w:] Idem, Konteksty, Galeria Labirynt, Lublin 2010, pages not numbered

» 9 Bielas, K. & D. Jarecka, *A conversation with Zbigniew Libera, author of ‘Concentration Camp’ made of Lego*, ‘Duży Format’, ‘Gazeta Wyborcza’ magazine, 8.02.2004, p. 10.

'Great picture,' I thought,
 - And what about this guy on the ground?
 - He's dead.¹⁰

The photograph was then processed by the artist in three successive versions. In two of them, the colours became more and more blurry, and the shapes became less pronounced. In the third one, they disappeared almost completely, and the artist introduced a rectangular blue figure in the centre of the work. It appeared as if separated from the blue sky. This work, on the one hand, signified the degradation of death in mass media and its transformation into a media spectacle, the lack of respect for the dead body and in this case the absence of a symbolic burial, on the other hand, the work drew attention to the work of memory. It seems that the counterpoint for this work could be found in Libera series, created in parallel with *the Masters; the Positives*.

Art is the definition of art

The questions about the definition of art and its current meanings are still important for us. In the era of doubt in the arts and the conviction about the crisis of representation, it is useful to return to the consideration over this basic notion. Since the beginning of the avant-garde, the focus on the definition of art has become one of the characteristics of art. Artists have often wondered about its function and purpose. Most definitions appeared in conceptualism, artists often created paradoxical definitions, like the famous phrase of Joseph Kosuth, which has become the title of this part of the exhibition.

Świdziński, for whom Kosuth was undoubtedly a significant figure, also created his definitions of art for example: 'Absurds go from life to art and from art to life', or 'Do not expect that you shall be more beautiful upon entering the palace of art.'¹¹

These slogans would be presented at the exhibition with other attempts at defining art, often in an absurd form. There also would be shown manifestos¹² and documentations. Those presentations would primarily involve extracting irony present in both Świdziński's and other artists' works. Their attitudes could be considered close to contextualism. The irony would be found in the actions of Andrzej Partum (for exam-

» 10 Świdziński, op. cit., pages not numbered

» 11 Ibidem

» 12 For example Jan Świdziński, „Dwanaście punktów sztuki kontekstualnej” [Twelve points of contextual art], [in:] Idem, op. cit., pages not numbered.

ple in his manifestos such as ‘cheeky art’ (1977)¹³ or ‘positive nihilism’ (1982), which was a response to Świdziński’s contextualism), Independent Non-existent Gallery “No” (or ‘Let’ by Leonard Romanov and Ryszard Wietecki, and Non-existent Nodding Gallery ‘Yes’ (1970-1974) by Leszek Przyjemski and Anastazy Wiśniewski).

Romanov and Wietecki inscribed on ordinary rubbish bin their artistic credo: ‘Previous forms of artistic activities performed by people led us to proclaim ‘The State of Emergency’ (27.11.1970). In contrast, Przyjemski and Wiśniewski in their printed programme from 1970 wrote: The non-existent nodding gallery - Gallery «Yes» nods to all artistic activities.” They showed the nonsense of mindless nodding and applauding to everything that was happening in the People’s Republic of Poland. According to Łukasz Ronduda, this kind of activity, which constituted the pragmatic attitude of the neoavant-garde art of the 1970s, was connected with entering the outside world and testing reality.¹⁴

The artists presenting this attitude were critical of “existing social-symbolic orders, ideologies that organised perception and colonised imagination.”¹⁵ It is, therefore, worth stressing that in the conditions of the communist system, the absurdity of those times was revealed. The artists also pointed to their own doubts about art that was deprived of power.

But it seems art currently is also deprived of its power due to the market conditions. Although Ewa Partum says (2014) ‘nothing can stop the idea of art’¹⁶, there is ever greater doubt in the sense of being an artist.

Thus, this part of the exposition would be aimed at encouraging viewers to think about what art is and how it can be defined. Is it just an idea, as the conceptualists saw it? Or rather, as Świdziński wanted, the idea should collide with reality¹⁷, with the context and that is where this collision becomes the most productive for thinking about art. This collision reveals the absurdities existing in both areas, allowing us to distance ourselves from the seriousness of art and life. Therefore, we still have to deal with jokes, irony, nonsense in these activities.

The irony is present in the activities of Ewa Zarzycka, in her ‘spo-

» 13 ‘The art of lack of art is a hope for an answer’ or ‘Art is the same crime tool as any other’ quoting: Partum, A, *Manifest Sztuki Bezczelnej*, in: galleria pro/la, 1978.

» 14 Ronduda, Ł. *Sztuka polska lat 70. Awangarda, koncepcja wydawnicza. [1970s Polish Art. The Avant-garde, a publishing concept]* P. Uklański, Warszawa 2009, p. 12.

» 15 Ibidem, p. 13.

» 16 A title of a public installation, and an exhibition by Ewa Partum in Lodz’s MS2 2014 - 2015, curated by: Maria Morzuch.

» 17 The contextual art stands in opposition towards excluding art from reality as a separate independent subject of art contemplation. Contextual art is dependent on reality and it is an action stimulating new realities. Świdziński, J. *Sztuka kontekstualna (1)*, [in:] Świdziński, op.cit, pages not numbered.

ken performances', which are like a stand-up cabaret, as Dorota Jarecka writes.¹⁸ The artist reveals her own creative process, she reveals herself, she talks about past encounters and events, and reality is mixed with fiction. As Magda Ujma points out, we also see in Zarzycka's actions attempts to grasp the idea of art, there are doubts though, and the artist loses her ability to create. 'The work turns out to be an illusion, dispersed. The pursuit of art idea seems to be a quest for the Holy Grail, and at the same time, the only solution that allows us to stay in art.'¹⁹

While discussing revealing the irony and absurdity of life, one should mention Jacek Kryszkowski's actions, which pointed to the lies (The most beautiful art is a lie), it would be worth to show his *Little Coffin* from 1982. One cannot ignore the whip-in culture represented by for example Łódź Kaliska (with their famous slogan 'God envies us mistakes'), and especially - Adam Rzepecki, and - the funniest Polish creator - trickster: Jerzy Kosalka. Two works which allude to the place of art in our society are *From Nation to Kosalka* (1993, black marble pedestal with the title inscription) and *From Kosalka to Nation* (2015, an installation consisting of a transport box - Made In China -filled with small plaster busts of the artist). Kosalka laughs at the role played by an artist in society. The idea of a statue dedicated to a contemporary artist seems utterly absurd. The patron of the artist, whom Świdziński also liked, seems to be Marcel Duchamp – the father of conceptual art and art joke (an example of Kosalka's work dealing with the question of Duchamp may be found in his work entitled *Pardon Marcel* [1995]).

The doubts about the higher aims of art, but also the crisis of ideas in consumer society seem to be also indicated in the ironical works of Przemysław Kwiek from the series *The Avant-garde is painting Lilacs* (the works have been created since the 1990s). And the ignorance and dislike of contemporary art are revealed perversely in the film by the Supergroup Azorro entitled *The Family* (2004).

The film showed a bourgeois couple with two children watching films about art, reading art magazines, discussing the work of critical artists, the boy creates his own miniature animal pyramids similar to work by Katarzyna. Everything is amusing and absurd because it is hard to imagine such a situation in reality for any "average" Polish family (not a family of artists or art critics). It is worth pointing out that the work of Su-

» 18 Jarecka, D. 'Rozkręcanie zegara. O wystąpieniach Ewy Zarzyckiej' [Unscrewing the clock. Ewa Zarzycka's performances], [in:] Ewa Zarzycka. Lata świetności, ed.: Rayzacher, A. & D. Jarecka, Fundacja Lokal sztuki / Lokal_30, Warszawa 2016, p. 52.

» 19 Ujma, M. 'Z sentymentem i wzruszeniem wspominał ten dzień, gdy po raz pierwszy ujawniłam swoje zapiski w zeszytach. Performatywne pisanie Ewy Zarzyckiej' [With a sentiment and emotion I remember that day when I revealed for the first time my notes. Performative writing of Ewa Zarzycka], [in:] *idem*, p. 79, 80.

pergroup Azorro is based on the institutional context of art functioning. It uses impersonation of the other, seemingly alien to art, cultural productions (e.g., *Les Figurants*, 2005 - the work related to the film *Karol, The Pope*, in which the artists performed as extras).

Some ideas, which I would include in the unrealised yet exhibition, have been realised on the occasion of my other exhibitions, for example, *Microutopias of everyday life* in the CSW Toruń (2013/14). There were shown works by Leszek Przyjemski and Jerzy Kosalka.

While speaking about irony, it is worth mentioning an exhibition entitled *The Status: a parasite* In Poznań, produced by my students from Art Education Faculty (Aleksandra Janz, Aleksandra Jaraszekiewicz and Sylwia Siwiak). It was developed within the framework of my curatorial workshops in 2016. Students presented there among others Tymek Borowski's work. It represented an ironic analysis of contemporary Polish art fields. There were also works focused on irony and pastiche by young graduates of Wrocław Academy of Fine Arts: Katarzyna Frankowska and Iwona Ogrodzka.

In an ironic film entitled *The Fine Art Student says Sorry* (2015), Ogrodzka apologises to the taxpayers, the president, the family and Oskar Dawicki for the futile act of studying painting. Interestingly, her work on the Internet gained enormous popularity, though many viewers took it seriously. Thus Ogrodzka's film, which was a joke, became subversive to the current system of art functioning as well as the education of artists. This follows the economics of relational aesthetics described by Nicolas Bourriaud which indicated that when 'the art object gains a kind of <rebellious aura>, it becomes a source of resistance to its own market distribution or its mimetic parasite.'²⁰ In the case of the work of Katarzyna Frankowska, *I am someone else* (2015), which was also her diploma work, we observe the dispersion of authorship. She invited other artists to make her portraits, or to praise her in the form of a song (a video with Gracjan Roztocki, who sings about the gorgeous Kasia). Thus, a collection of portraits made in the style of the invited artists was created (e.g., Jerzy Kosalka gave Frankowska an image with the inscription: "All my attempts to paint the portrait of Kasia Frankowska were pitiful"!).

Both artists focused on the problem of being noticed in the art world and striving for recognition and popularity. They did it perversely - the first artist talked about the futility of painting studies and the uselessness of a young artist / young female artist for society; the second artist - used the fame of others. In both cases, it is self-irony that is the most important.

» 20 Bourriaud, op. cit., p. 143.

It is worth mentioning that most of the activities discussed in this section combine the distance to the commercialisation of art and the idea of the poor material condition of the artists. This topic also appeared in work by Zbigniew Libera *A Freelancer* (2013), his work in a way was the climax of the exhibition *Status: Parasite*.

Contexts

Jan Świdziński said: ‘Nothing is a value in itself. Everything depends on the specific context in which it exists.’²¹

The purpose of this part of the exhibition is to draw attention to the up-to-date nature of the concept of ‘Contextual Art’, to reflect on the relationships of art with the social sphere, and on the need for escape from conventional thinking about creativity (which seems particularly relevant in the context of the domination of the market which currently dictates the rules of art).

It is worth mentioning other words of Świdziński from the text ‘Art and aesthetics’: ‘Art as a social practice is a social practice in a double sense. Continuing its own history, established by the practice of the past, it opposes it and modifies it under a constant pressure of the non-aesthetic reality surrounding it. At every moment of this practice, it faces certain facts which existence one cannot deny. Its social meaning lies in taking a proper attitude towards one’s own context. That is the art criticism.’²²

In this section, the exhibition highlights the activities in local environments, including the proposals of Gerard Kwiatkowski (Jürgen Blum), who demanded the removal of art from the elite world and spreading it among ordinary people, mainly among the workers. Crossing the borders of art was also postulated at the famous *Dreams Congress*, the Fourth Biennale of Spatial Forms taking place in Elbląg in 1971. Actions taken in the local environment have also become important for the Bydgoszcz-Toruń Activity Group (Witold Chmielewski, Bogdan Chmielewski, Wiesław Smużny, Andrzej Maziec and Stanisław Wasilewski), which promoted “social art”. These creators at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s collaborated with people of a small village Lucim. They organised joint actions with them; they strived for a cultural and social revival of the local environment. Before they arrived in Lucim, in 1976, they held a *Travel Action*. It was carried out in a railway carriage and railway stations on the route Bydgoszcz - Cracow - Cieszyn - Bydgoszcz. The aim was to present travel art. Artists called their work “work-action”, which was supposed to lead the local community to their own, individual and collective artistic creations.

» 21 Świdziński, op. cit.

» 22 Ibidem

The Social art program of the Activity Group assumed ‘the bonding of people within the framework of symbolic communication that occurs in the direct contact of broadcasters and receivers with the sometimes varying roles of sender and receiver.’ It was also stressed action in a particular environment, the act of abandoning by the artists the ‘sender’ status²³. They aimed at the directness of the message, moral responsibility of the creator, linking the work to the place and breaking away with its autonomy.²⁴

From today’s point of view, Świdziński’s contextualism, activities of Blum and Activity Group seem to be very current, if not to say they prepared the ground for activities of such artists as Artur Żmijewski, Paweł Althamer (eg *Brodno action*, between 1999 and 2000), Supergroup Azorro or Elżbieta Jabłońska. Therefore artists associated more or less with critical arts. It is therefore worth pointing out common interests among the artists of the 1970s and contemporary artists concerning relativity, activating the viewer and treating art as a meeting place or, as Świdziński pointed out, as contacting and communicating with others.²⁵

Nowadays the work-activity embedded in the context of the city space is being developed by for example Piotr C. Kowalski, a Poznań artist, in his transition-painting, passing-by images. These images would not have been generated without the involvement of road users: pedestrians or passing-by drivers who leave traces in them, crush them and drive through them. In this way, impressions of the pavement and rain covers are revealed, gas or telecommunication street covers are made visible. It is important to note here that not only a geometric shape of the well appears but also the memory of the city is impressed on the canvas. One of Piotr C. Kowalski’s actions took place in 2009 during Poznań *Urban Legend Art Festival*, organised by Izabella Gustowska, Paweł Leszkowicz and Raman Tratsiuk. The idea of the festival perfectly matched the assumptions of contextual art. All works referred to specific places, extracted their socio-cultural meanings and related histories, and at the same time, they referred to the art space as a meeting place.

» 23 ‘Spacerując po wystawie *Lucim żyje z jej kuratorką, Moniką Weychert Waluszko rozmawia Magdalena Furmanik*, ‘Obieg’, 21.05.2009, <http://www.obieg.pl/wydarzenie/10869>, (accessed on: 20.07.2013). [While walking around the exhibition *Lucim żyje* Magdalena Furmanik talks with the curator Monika Weychert Waluszko].

» 24 Grupa Działania, *A Manifesto „Sztuka społeczna jako idea” [Social art as an idea]*, March 1980, from the collection of CSW Znaki Czasu in Toruń.

» 25 Art as a way of contacting others: My understanding of art, I believe always – more or less consciously, was based on an assumption that it is a form of contacting others. A specific personality with other specific personality. Art has never been for me a description of the world, a knowledge about the world, or a way of capturing it in this or any other form, it has never been an expression of a personality. Art has always been for me a mutual form of communication with environment’. Świdziński, op. cit.

An Alternative Art History

The last part of the exhibition draws attention to the question of forgetting about Jan Świdziński's art and asking questions about the importance of geo-political contexts of Polish art, its marginalisation. There seems to be too much focus on the West, but also failing to perceive some artistic and theoretical proposals that did not emerge from mainstream art. The sad phenomenon of Polish art history and art criticism is the poor knowledge of the non-mainstream works of the 1970s, and therefore the neglect of everything outside the mainstream. This could be because the work as a product was not (is not) significant for artists at the time, but certainly, there occurred a strong influence of the Foksal Gallery and artists affiliated with it. The gallery exposed a strong and widespread reserve to the so-called pseudo-avant-garde.²⁶

Therefore, in this section, I would place works that represent artistic proposals similar to the studies of art historians, and thus something characteristic of Libera's works, something found in his series *The Masters*, something that could be named as an 'alternative art history'.

Piotr Piotrowski paid attention to the dominance of the Western paradigm while writing that the history of our modernity is the history of staring at the West, ignoring local differences and adopting a universal, or Western language. Before 1989, for artists not only from Poland, but also from Eastern Europe, Western art was paradigmatic, and the artists naively believed that the West would verify the criteria of evaluation of art created in our part of Europe.²⁷ After 1989, these criteria and values were increasingly determined by market rules, which are formulated mostly by the Western market (nowadays it would be better to use the adjective: global). This has led to a situation where artists whose works sell in the biggest, or global art institutions located in Western metropolises occupy the dominant roles. In Poland, the institutions that count most are those, which have access to global centres and which managed to break away from a 'peripheral' status.

The relationship between the centre and the periphery is revealed in Piotr Weychert's film about the meeting of Świdziński with Kosuth. By critically analysing this relationship one can get the impression that

» 26 It is worth remembering that in 1972 in Foksal Gallery there was a joint action of Włodzimierz Borowski, Krzysztof Wodiczko and Jan Świdziński entitled *Ekspozycja jednej pracy* [An exposition of one work], 1972 (a leaflet, a documentation). In this work, as Luiza Nader writes, the idea of authorship is dispersed in favour of mutual relations. Nader, L. *Conceptualism w PRL-u*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu warszawskiego, Warszawa 2009, p. 131. Soon after that event, Świdziński i Borowski went separate ways. It is meaningful that Nader in a monograph discussing Polish conceptual art mentions the creator of contextual art only in passing.

» 27 Piotrowski, P. *Awangarda w cieniu Jałty. Sztuka w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej w latach 1945–1989* [The avant-garde in the shadow of Jalta. Art in Central-Eastern Europe between 1945–1989], Poznań 2005, p. 260.

Świdziński obtained an “artistic blessing” from Kosuth, his position, at least in the eyes of his compatriots, increased thanks to this meeting. But it also revealed unequal relations between the centre and the periphery.

The dominance of the centres was ironically described in work by Agata Zbylut entitled *In art, dreams come true, but not for everyone* (2009)²⁸. Her photos showed the author in the flashlights, receiving artistic awards and medals, surrounded by famous politicians and celebrities from the art world, giving interviews, receiving a nomination or professorship from former President Lech Kaczyński, posing with Minister of Culture, Bogdan Zdrojewski. However, all of this was a mere manipulation. What we achieved was an excellent analysis of how today's artistic success is perceived.

As far as artists are concerned, their location in the field of art plays a big role: Where they are from, which studio they chose to do their final artwork in, where they work, with which gallery and environment they are associated? Although for the Polish artistic scene the undisputed centre is Warsaw, there is no illusion - Poland is only a peripheral country in terms of the great art world. Some creators apply the principle of mimicry, as it is described by Homi K. Bhabha.²⁹ This strategy was superbly used by Aneta Grzeszykowska in *Untitled Film Stills* (2006), where the artist impersonated Cindy Sherman and used the colourful covers of the artist's early works. Grzeszykowska did almost the same but not entirely – as the Bhabra says about the mimicry in terms of Freud's thought.³⁰ Grzeszykowska poses in her works the question of what must be done by an artist from peripheral Eastern Europe to be noticed by the centre. The question appears if talking in the art about local issues and someone's subjectivity has a chance to be appreciated, or rather unnoticed and considered less interesting (for example the story of Natalia LL in the film by Karol Radziszewski's *America is not Ready for This*, 2012). Is the imitation of an artist, one of the greatest stars of contemporary art, the only way to be noticed?

It is worth returning here to the question of how many ideas of Jan Świdziński can find recognition, how many of them may appear to be current and trend-setting while still functioning on the margin of the deliberations of Polish art historians? It is worth also considering if an alternative art history can change the image of contemporary art? ●

» 28 Kowalczyk, I. „Agata Zbylut. Pomiedzy teatrem gestow a poszukiwaniem prawdziwych relacji” [Agata Zbylut. *Between the theatre of gestures and searching for true relations*], [in:] „Exit. Nowa sztuka w Polsce”, 1 (93) 2013, p. 6334 – 6344.

» 29 Bhabha, H. K. ‘Mimikra i ludzie. O dwuznaczności dyskursu kolonialnego’ [Of mimicry and man: *The ambivalence of colonial discourse*], [in:] Miejsca kultury, translated by T. Dobrogoszcz, Kraków 2010, p. 79-88.

» 30 Ibidem, p. 84.

