

# Rafał Boettner-Łubowski

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## **A Quasi-Museum Situation /** **A Self-referential Situation (?)**

Observing the territories of experiences of artists creating today, it is worth noting that the contemporary “spatial installation” can in some cases unconventionally adapt the strategies used to construct quasi-museum exhibitions. The aim of such an invention may be to transmit various meanings, to create intriguing emotional situations, to conduct an experiment which is not radical in its character, or to provoke contexts which, to a greater or lesser degree, could at least potentially become points of departure for initiating various “stories and narratives” in the field of artistic education. This kind of activity is very close to me as an artist and a human being. For a few years now I have been interested in creating artistic statements, addressing “art about art” type messages – statements for which the “poetics of quotation” and, perhaps less frequently, quasi-museum exhibition games can become very useful tools, constructing an unusual, “eloquent and reflexive” artefact from the field of contemporary visual arts.

It was a very interesting creative experience to prepare an unconventional spatial arrangement entitled *Self-referential Situation (?)*. This was part of my own solo exhibition titled *Self-referential Reflections 2017–2018*, held at Wozownia Art Gallery in Toruń in December 2018. This exhibition was a very important summary of a certain stage of my artistic and research project at the Faculty of Artistic Education and Curating at the University of Arts in Poznań; it defined the thematic framework of my research. The exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue with reproductions of the works created within the framework of the project and, importantly, by an analytical, extensive text of my authorship which both analysed my art projects and highlighted various conclusions and questions important for the creative pursuits I undertook in 2017–2018.

Unfortunately, in the aforementioned publication I did not discuss and analyse the spatial arrangement titled *Self-referential Situation (?)* that was implemented at this very show, even if its concept crystallised fully some time after the edition of the catalogue of the *Self-referential Reflections 2017–2018* concluded. Interestingly, however, *Self-referential Situation (?)* referred to certain experiences that appeared, as it were, “on the outskirts” of the above area of artistic and research pursuits. These experiences were presented by me in the form of “text notes” in the catalogue of the research project I refer to in this text: “a very interesting creative experience which occurred on the outskirts of my project (...) was for me to participate in a collective exhibition entitled *Landscape in the Space of Interpretation*, masterminded and curated by Waldemar Idzikowski. The exhibition, held in late March and early April 2018 at the Poznań Profil Gallery of Contemporary Art, presented selected landscape painting and prints, including paintings by my long-deceased close relative Edmund Łubowski (1918–1993). This artist was a neo-traditionalist painter, capable of combining in his art references to the accomplishments of the Old Masters and nineteenth-century painters in terms of colour and light with the austere and curt presentation of the motifs presented; in many cases, this brings the created work almost to the limits of painting abstraction. Apart from that, however, he was also close to certain traits of the realistic landscape painting of the 19th century. Edmund Łubowski’s painting and memories of him are an area of reminiscences of great importance for me in personal and artistic terms. At the exhibition *Landscape in the Space of Interpretation* I had an opportunity to show in the immediate proximity of his paintings my own work (...) titled *Painting – Landscape – Object (...)*, which confronted a small-scale quasi-museum landscape, set within a golden frame and additionally displayed on a black screen, with a vintage, metal drawer lock cover set on the surface of the painting to screen its central part completely. My landscape had some features characteristic of Edmund Łubowski’s paintings: the *sfumato*, surface varnish, limited colour palette, and extensive saturation with colour, but it was no literal imitation of my relative’s style. There were some similarities and significant differences between Edmund Łubowski’s works and mine. My work had an intimate character and seemed to be a continuation of certain preferences of last century’s Surrealist tradition, a tradition which was definitely alien to Edmund Łubowski and which did not seem to be a valuable source of inspiration for him. Coming back to the exhibition itself, however, it was surprising that my composition made up of objects and paintings presented at the show emphasized a certain ‘alternative’ possibility of artistic reference to the theme and motif of the landscape, which in the case of a show dominated by graphic and painting works

that were ‘pure’ in terms of discipline was both an intriguing and ‘refreshing’ contextual variety of the artefacts presented there. However, another possibility of contextual interpretation of my intimate artistic expression appeared discreetly. This work could also be ‘read’ as an inviting ‘commentary’ on the specificity and certain mystery of Edmund Łubowski’s paintings. This kind of situation was a big surprise for me, but also an interesting ‘discovery’ of both an artistic and purely private nature”.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, in the catalogue of the *Self-referential Reflections 2017–2018* project, I also noted the following: “the theme which seems especially intriguing and not too often addressed in the context of self-referential reflections about art is potential ‘reflections on art’, highlighting both family and personal ties. Works realized in such an area may open up many interesting, additional perspectives, including those concerning the following issues: memory, discovering various forgotten creative conventions and commenting on their essence, or ‘researching’ emotional relations between representatives of a given family, or people connected by a slightly more distant or unconventional relationship of personal or emotional dependencies. It is highly probable that this dimension will also become a field of my next artistic quest in the future”.<sup>2</sup>

As it was to turn out, “an opportunity for an art project encouraging ‘reflection on art’ and highlighting the family and personal connections” occurred during the planning of the exhibition at the Wozownia Art Gallery in Toruń in 2018. The director of the gallery, Ms. Anna Jackowska, told me in advance that apart from the first-floor room, I would also have at my disposal a small adjacent room. Gallery staff dub it the “Archive”, as it used to perform this very function. Many years ago, it stored paintings and drawings made by children, while now it is a cosy exhibition room. Director Jackowska’s offer proved a real challenge for me. I wanted to refer to some extent to the layers of “memory” of the venue and at the same time remain within the confines of the issues raised by the exhibition I was to hold. As for the show in the “Archive Gallery”, a few concepts emerged and, when arriving for the assembly of the show, I was potentially ready to implement all of them. Ultimately, however, I hit on an “installation” for which I used a few carefully chosen “quotations of the originals”, a self-quote, and a “documentary photograph” displayed on a medium-sized screen. The entire small exhibition space was “modified to a minimum extent” – an additional partition designed by myself was erected – a kind of display “pylon”. It divided the interior into two mi-

» 1 R. Boettner-Łubowski, *Rozważania autotematyczne [Self-referential Reflections]*, (in:) *Rafał Boettner-Łubowski. Rozważania autotematyczne 2017–2018*, exhibition catalogue; publisher: Galeria Sztuki Wozownia w Toruniu, Toruń 2018, p. 15.

» 2 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

ni-sections. The front one was slightly more “official”, while the rear, “hidden” one was intended to be “discovered” by curious visitors to the exhibit. At the front of this small room, on a specially designed quasi-museum display element (a glass plinth with black exhibition screens in a specific spatial order), there was my aforementioned objectal and pictorial work *Painting – Landscape – Object* that was intended to trigger associations with a museum exhibit. To the left of the object, on one of the side walls of the “Archive Gallery”, there was a 1984 painting by Edmund Łubowski titled *A Park Pond*, borrowed specifically for the show from the Poznań-based private collection of the artist’s works. The origin and catalogue note of this work were described by a golden, quasi-museum, engraved plaque. Opposite the painting by Edmund Łubowski, on the other side wall of the annexed exhibition room, there was a digital projection of my black-and-white photograph documenting a fragment of the view of the exhibition *Landscape in the Space of Interpretation*, which displayed Edmund Łubowski’s paintings, including *A Park Pond*, in the direct vicinity of my own composition *Painting – Landscape – Object*. This information was also recorded on a small, engraved plaque placed near the digital projection of the photograph. Apart from the elements described above, the “Archive” space was additionally composed of black five-centimetre thick geometric square panels, which on the one hand resembled exposition screens, and on the other hand could represent hermetic artefacts related to 20th-century geometric abstraction. The arrangement of these forms, with a careful “examination” of the exhibition space, could lead the viewers to the rear, “hidden” part of my intimate presentation, where two quotations from the originals were discretely placed. One of them was a painting composition in the “Capist convention” by Edmund Łubowski from the early 1950s, depicting a portrait of Edmund’s son Andrzej Maciej Łubowski, then a few years old. Above the painting there was an abstract composition on canvas, painted two years ago by my son, Bernard Łubowski (b. 2009). After the application of varnish and a proper frame, it very closely resembled Tachism paintings from the second half of the 20th century. Once again, all the information provided above was also presented on a quasi-museum, engraved plaque, hung near the set of quotations—originals described previously.

However, what could potentially “result” from such a confrontation of visual quotations and from an exhibition space designed like this, “stylised” in a noticeable way as an unusually arranged “cosy museum room”? It is certainly not easy to formulate an answer to the question posed above, but, despite everything, it would be worth making an attempt to provide it, with a caveat that it is not final, unique, and absolutely objective. Certainly, the *Self-referential Situation (?)* I created may have been

treated as a unique “memory enclave”, devoted both to selected “family memorabilia” and to certain problems of art itself. This “Enclave” also provoked a kind of “sentimental journey into the past”, which could potentially affect the emotions of some of its recipients. It was also visually attractive, and the quasi-museum-styled elements of the exhibit created in this case a “familiar situation” – favourable to potential audiences, provoking a peculiar aura of “safety” rather than “hermetic distance or predation”. However, this, I believe, was not the end of the aura of influence of the discussed work. It could have drawn attention to the twentieth-century neo-traditionalist painting by Edmund Łubowski – original as an artistic proposal, but unfortunately little known and hardly promoted at all as an interesting and noteworthy artistic phenomenon in the history of Polish art in the second half of the 20th century. In 2001, I published the first monograph on this painter’s oeuvre<sup>3</sup>, but the presence of his works is unfortunately very limited in significant, currently operating Polish art galleries. My use of quotations from the originals of specific works by Edmund Łubowski – one from the mature period of his career and the other from the time of his “youthful” fascination with the Capist-Colourist convention, which the painter significantly re-evaluated in his later works – was also a peculiar strategy of introducing paintings by this author through the back door, as it were, to one of the most significant art institutions in Poland, i.e. the Wozownia Art Gallery in Toruń. Similarities and differences could be observed between my work *Painting – Landscape – Object* and the landscape titled *A Park Pond* by Edmund Łubowski. These compositions could “comment on each other”, thus revealing their own uniqueness and the play of analogies and differences; their common, expositional coexistence could reveal my fascination with Edmund Łubowski’s painting, but also my distance to the “purity” and homogeneity of his discipline and medium. A digital projection of a photograph documenting a view of a fragment of the exhibition *Landscape in the Space of Interpretation* shows a direct presence of works of art in visual footage and is moreover a record of “a memory trace” – all the more precious since Profil Gallery is no longer operational and there is no way of knowing if it will ever be reopened. The contact with the originals and their photographic “images” shows us how much we lose by limiting ourselves only to learning about various artefacts in an indirect way, although we should remember that in many cases a different type of contact with a work of art is simply impossible. In the “hidden”, rear part of the Archive Gallery I modified, the clash of a small Capist portrait by Edmund

» 3 R. Boettner-Łubowski, *W kręgu światła i koloru. O twórczości Edmunda Łubowskiego [In the circle of light and colour. On the oeuvre of Edmund Łubowski]*, publisher: Polski Instytut Targowy, Poznań 2001.

Łubowski with an abstract painting resembling the Tachism paintings from the 1950s and 1960s by Bernard Łubowski, who is only a few years old, may have been a “confrontation of generations of one family”, as well as an invitation to certain reflections on painting as such, its history, and the assessment of its representation in Poland after 1945 – to a ranking of creative conventions which often situated the “Capist convention” far lower than “Tachism and Expressionist poetics”, which are representative of liberal modernity. Naturally, such “reflections” may be embarked upon by persons who know art history and have specific relevant skills. In the case of the “installation” titled *Self-referential Situation (?)*, the black geometric shapes may also have seemed intriguing; in some cases they “played” the role of artefacts originating from 20th-century geometrical abstraction. Their “hermetic” presence, juxtaposed with compositions of “a totally different character”, could also have invited, at least potentially, possible reflections on art and its various representations.

The above reflections indicate one more, significant aspect of *Self-referential Situation (?)*. While according to my original assumptions it was not to be “didactic”, but rather to provoke reflection and be of a personal nature, potentially it could have been a constructive point of departure for all kinds of educational initiatives targeting different age and social groups. The initiatives could have been implemented by selected artists and educators with a theoretical background in, say, art and culture history. In addition, they could have been characterised by varying degrees of “sophistication” as to the content conveyed, which would not necessarily have had to be confined to a hermetic, elite circle, but could also have been opened up to much more egalitarian features and scenarios of meetings and events offered to participants of planned educational activities. I even think that the latter option could become in this case a very frequently used possibility.

The work *Self-referential Situation (?)* is to my mind an ambiguous “contextual installation” which may be read in a variety of ways, also in ways which may not be especially close to and worthy of my personal “approval” as the author. As a person closely tied with Edmund Łubowski’s painting, I would most probably like my own combine painting titled *Painting – Landscape – Object* to imply an ambiguous mystery of the art of my relative and, indirectly, a possibility of the present discovery/reading of this art and the content it enshrines. Still, my painting–object with a cover for a drawer lock, without a key, may imply “something” completely different, i.e. the obsolescence or “total incompatibility” of Edmund Łubowski’s artistic proposals. I am convinced that such a course may be important for a certain number of recipients of my work and I can respect that. And such ambiguity – although not the only one – deliberately in-

cluded by me in my “installation” does not allow me to indicate the only right course of action or the right order of familiarising the public with *Self-referential Situation (?)*, for instance during a gallery tour of the mini-show analysed in this text. The tour should provide information which is indispensable from the point of view of the project under discussion, e.g. about Edmund Łubowski, the artefacts on display, the family relations highlighted in the *Self-referential Situation (?)*, or more generally about the overall nature of my own oeuvre. Still, any definitive authorial guidelines of my own in the matter presented above would be a kind of “abuse” in a sense, but they could also potentially reduce the ambiguity of the spatial arrangement I created. Its ambiguity is certainly an important basis – and let us repeat once again that it is not the only one – for undertaking various educational endeavours.

These endeavours could, for example, become a multidimensional pretext for initiating a variety of “stories about art and culture”, both those more developed and those that are more liberal and noncommittal in character. Such projects could be provided by educators with theoretical preparation (although not necessarily), and the topics addressed could include, for example, certain general problems, such as remembering and forgetting (certain artistic and cultural phenomena), or acts of evaluation of given conventions and creative attitudes related to ideological or artistic preferences of a given time or period. An equally interesting theme could be in this case a debate about values, tradition, and all kinds of manifestations of continuation or re-valuation of certain representations of broadly construed cultural heritage. The very quasi-museum exhibition / art arrangement (a visit to it and familiarity with its artefacts) might become a starting point for educational activities, while the implementation of a project from the aforementioned area – held in another space than strictly an exhibition space – might be a reminder, with the use of multimedia, of what has been “seen earlier” and present contextually useful examples of works or other accomplishments of art and culture. Naturally, the topics of individual educational initiatives might be made more detailed and intense; the proposal could include, for example, reflections on the practice of quotation in contemporary art and the potential of creative self-referential activities (the topics could target adult audiences). Still, *Self-referential Situation (?)* might just as well be a pretext for the presentation of a “narrative” of selected art phenomena of the second half of the 20th century (e.g. Capist Colourism and *informel* painting), invention of re-valuation of assumptions of the “Capist convention” by selected painters of the time, or the art of Edmund Łubowski, who is little known in Poland today. Besides, an attempt could also be made to trace the differences between various artistic genres and disciplines and the perspec-



tives of the contemporary (including neo-traditionalist) intermedia nature of combining them in a single creative statement. Finally, one could try to present interesting spaces of creative dialogue or polemics that may emerge or actually have emerged in the past between representatives of specific families, including families of artists. Of course, these are just some of the clues to educational projects that could potentially be realized through presentations, lectures, or debates referring to *Self-referential Situation (?)*. However, it must be stressed that apart from the above proposals, when tapping into the potential of the above work one might hold all kinds of art and education workshops for various age and social groups, making them more egalitarian and more “elitist”, depending on the needs. For example, such a workshop might assume the following: cooperation of family members (e.g. children and parents) and their use of old family memorabilia to create unconventional and contextual quasi-artistic statements. Another trace of workshop activity could be in this case the creation by children of small abstract-expressionist images, by way of non-binding analogies to the actions of my son Bernard Łubowski, which resulted in his quasi-Tachism composition that was discussed by me earlier in the text. Paintings by children could become a pretext for presenting the phenomenon of abstract painting and its possibilities in a way adapted to their age and stage of development, so that the educational value of the proposed workshop would create an additional sphere of educational influence. A workshop could be held for young people, adults, or seniors, encouraging these age cohorts to construct a quasi-museum, “neo-traditionalist” combine painting, where the painting structure might be confronted with retro-objects from the family collections of the participants. Such a workshop, depending on the degree of technological advancement of the creation of a “pictorial object”, might involve two or three meetings, which would result in more “refined” works which could potentially become starting points for ever new education initiatives, for instance for the presentation and discussion of selected Surrealist or Neo-Surrealist *objets d’art* or more sophisticated works known to the art history of the second half of the 20th century, such as the combine painting. Equally interesting could be “exercises in interpretation” in search of unobvious meanings “hidden” in artefacts created by the workshop participants. The workshops proposed above could be conducted by artists and art historians within the framework of constructive cooperation, which, in my opinion, would be a very interesting manifestation of their potential educational cooperation. There could no doubt be many more scenarios and concepts of various workshops, the starting point of which could be my work *Self-referential Situation (?)* at the Wozownia Art Gallery. What has been proposed above, however, as possible educational initiatives inspired

by my own quasi-museum “installation” discussed in this text, is in no way intended to be the undisputed nucleus of gallery education projects. Rather, it is to openly indicate the educational potential inherent in the artistic realization I have created, which, in my opinion, helps identify markedly different projects that broaden the cultural awareness of various groups and individuals, other than those that I have myself suggested.

At the end of all the above considerations, I would like to stress strongly that “quasi-museum simulations”, the use of quotations from the originals, suggesting dialogical and polemical relations between the cited artefacts and emphasizing “family narratives” in a balanced form, may build extremely intriguing “artistic integrations”. I hope that I will also be able to activate the contextual potential of such “connections” in the future, in my next creative projects, perhaps also in a typically museum-like space, and perhaps with the possibility of initiating original proposals in the field of artistic education, which, as we all know, is so much needed nowadays and worthy of the highest attention of both the artists and art theorists of the present day. ●