

The –ISM of the CONTEXT / ROMANTIC RELATIVISM

around In the Context of Art – the Differences 2007 performance festival.

(*Contextualism* according to Jan Swidzinski - discussion)

To start with I would like to suggest a competition: a prize for everybody who will succeed in writing a text about art without using the word “context”! I give up without trying; at least because this occasion I am writing about has this term in its title. Whether I like it or not, it has to be about context. However, I will try to make it different – slightly personal, slightly based on observations related to the festival.

I believe that in the analysis of a formative process of art history two rules seem to be essential: firstly, phenomena arise before they are called, and secondly, attempts at calling them acquire their value with a delay. A task set to theoreticians, proper arrangement of this order and sensitive approach to terminology, which after all determines the arsenal of semantic instruments which we use as a consequence.

Looking at the notion of context in Jan Świdziński’s art and a number of substantial essays and popular opinions dealing with this issue I would like to turn your attention to the gap between the author’s intention and popular interpretations. Sometimes it results a manipulated use of Świdziński’s ideas as a support instrument for theses reducing art to a tool of the critique of reality. With respect to the Festival – this year very satisfactory artistically – it would be extremely unjust. Therefore writing an introduction to the considerations on the festival I decided to concentrate on defining the meaning and quality of what is called contextual art (Świdziński’s art) or in a popular but inadequate way contextual-ism..

Jan Świdziński published his postulates in 1976 in Sweden and entitled them “Art As Contextual Art”. However, in Poland the problem were presented to a wide forum only in 2005 when Richard Martel published at Le Lieu in Quebec a collection of Świdziński’s essays "L’art et son contexte", that is **Art and Its Context**. Świdziński seems to approach all that with a charming nonchalance of a recognized artist, although until quite recently mostly by international group of theoreticians and performance artists, and a small group at home (which is often the case of the artists from this area). Around 2004 the niche into which Swidzinski and many other artists were pushed, started to be illuminated by simultaneous rays of light; there were launched projects resembling the forgotten “masters”, exhibitions, talks, a website

devoted to the artist. However, it seems that it was the Canadian publication which brought Świdziński's theoretical works back home, and, as a consequence, a number of more or less adequate references and quotations. To the vitality of the last year's debate contributes also this artistic (or rather performance art) event, Świdziński offers his content-related and spiritual support, organized by Bartosz Łukasiewicz, a graduate of philosophy who researches the artist's theoretical works. It was probably expected that the festival founded by this tandem would constitute an attempt at proving something, building - through the curator construction - some visible proof of theses put forward in the books. However, it did not prove anything. It presented the actual essence of the argument of art as contextual art beautifully, paradoxically and purely. It showed that it did not have to anything, that it was as it was...

The notion of context (or de-context) in contemporary art is as old as it is (how many years? – it is another famous debate). Hence, it is easy to fall into a trap of an apparent obviousness in the mode: contextual art? What is all that mess about?! However, already the very title of Świdziński's considerations from the 70s shows that the author did not mean to suggest establishing a new trend in art as much as **re-interpret the awareness of the creation and perception of art**. The artist cumulates in his work the adequate knowledge of philosophy, art theory and culture to prove that broadly approached **contextuality** is as if *raison d'etre* of art and results from the simultaneous happening of various factors conditioning the momentum of it coming into being, and not – as it would be extremely agreeable to the art activists – intentional introducing of art into a given real situation. Therefore I would postulate to be careful in using the term **contextualizm**.

Without mentioning that it refers to Świdziński's considerations, nowadays this notion is related to a concrete method – site specific – characteristic for art which, in principle, operates processually in a definite place or within a given community. This task oriented approach is rarely related to performance art (especially in its European version) with which Świdziński identifies himself, without any doubt also as an artist.

At this point, I would like to add that, following Richard Martel's commentary published in his book of 2005 and in the successive issue of "Inter" magazine, one can feel apparently innocent manipulation, probably resulting from the editor's work as well as Martel's radical political approach who would be most inclined to place Świdziński's intentions in the sphere of ideological effectiveness rather than analytical thinking. Whereas the manifesto *Je fais ce que je fais* (I do what I do), quoted on the cover,

includes the original purity of the connection of actions with the very person of the artist (personal, individual context) which gets stigmatized with the specificity of the situation of performing an action and its reception, that is the context of time and place. It is a clash of two unforeseeable energies that undergo constant changes. Here art is not perceived as a strategy of changing reality, but as its integral part which constantly reinterprets it as a constant reciprocal exchange.

This mixing of notions (probably unintentional) could have resulted from quoting Świdziński in Paul Ardenne's "Un art contextuel"(2002) which dealt with the later models of contextual art as interventional, interactive, engaged and participating etc, without proper explanations of the origins of the manifesto, its theoretical and discursive character in relation to conceptual art in a given moment, that is 25 years earlier.

However, it is not true that Świdziński's argument has lost its actuality in spite of the media negligence lasting for many years (acknowledged by Ardenne). Misunderstanding around 'contextual art' is partly a result of the semantic adequacy of the word 'context' in relation to two approaches. The theoretical proposition of "Art as Contextual Art" did not hamper the development of a similar terminology around a new tendency of art, entering the space of reality (or the use of only selected 'strategic' elements). It is true that Świdziński opted for taking art out of galleries, but it was rather related, on one hand, to the actual translocation of performance artists (geographical and cultural) and, on the other hand, to a symbolic rebellion against authoritarian institutions, determining what it is and what it is not.

Today, in a new situation (in Poland) of art market the centre of gravity of this argument moved from the search for definitions into determining functions.

Hence, in the light of current – here and now – considerations on the place of art in the modern discourse one can notice a parallel between Świdziński's postulate and widely commented manifesto by Artur Żmijewski advocating art as a reliable source of information on reality, just like other areas of culture (science), although its expression and creation is based on other cognitive methods, that is intuitive and non-logical. I can see here a certain proximity of these approaches, especially in the field of integrating art with other cognitive material which we have at our disposal. However, Żmijewski's approach, revolutionary in its tone is intentional, whereas Świdziński's approach, rhetorically sophisticated is rather deterministic. Hence, contextuality is a characteristic of art functioning in the unstable world, whereas contextualism would be a way of interpreting and interference into environment in order to stabilize certain approaches

(ethical, social, political). The fact that both artists identify themselves with different art disciplines: Świdziński - performer's, Żmijewski –performative, is not insignificant.

The most essential element of both manifestoes is the claim that art is not separated from the rest of contemporary phenomena, it always happens in the present time and therefore it is always filled with the truth of a given moment. That is relativity? It might seem that Świdziński should be its advocate, but he emphasises that he is not. Is it a lack of consequence? For my own sake I called this attitude romantic relativity, although it has to be stressed that Świdziński locates himself in an opposition to heroic and authoritative avant-garde models.

Does Świdziński consider context an explanation close to life emotions of being at the crossroads of the absolutism of avant-garde and relativity of postmodernism? Does he say that art, just like us in life situations, reads the truth and strategy of conduct following the principle "it depends"... A little bit...One can't conceal that contextuality has an element of being „a half measure” and portends a collapse. For there is neither rhetorical attractiveness of nihilism nor heroic pride of absolutism, also in art. It says: do what you do here and now and the rest does not depend on you anyway; it shows that art does not have to do anything because it is determined anyway – before it comes into being and after it. We cannot influence the fate of its episodic manifestation, just like we do not choose the complex entirety of context in which it originates, along with a temporary frame of art of a given artist.

Isn't this feeling particularly familiar to performance artists. Don't we look with longing at "stable objects of art" sometimes?

Symptomatically, although not by accident, the Ethnographic Museum, in the aula of which some presentations took place, is located in the vicinity of the Zachęta Gallery (where the Deutsche Bank competition was taking place at that time:)). A perceptive observer will notice the dilemmas of performance artists who search for a way to go "to the other side". Some have already done it, some will follow perhaps. The artists of more 'stable' media are keen on using performative means, and as a result all will meet up, metaphorically speaking, in the spectacular virtual world of Kozyra's 'dreams'.

And after all it is ok...However, we should not forget that such a multi media performance with a big budget and participation of many people is only a formally developed child of what has been happening for years at performance art events, like this one about which not many people are aware!

However, performance artists continue to work, believing that the ephemeral is „the smallest brother” in art – minute, but determining its essence. With respect to this question on the identification of art the issue of context acquires a special power just in case of performance, also called *l'art actuel*. Here the actuality means identity with the moment and situation and not journalist's hot news. What is funny, *actual* in English is a synonym of what 'actually is' – for example art. But it may be a linguistic abuse of an argument :). Nevertheless close connections of live art and non-artistic were often theoretically supported by context, and more precisely in moving a given situation from life (reality) in the so-called context (or literally space, place) of art. However, it is a typically conceptual manipulation following “art itself is a definition of art” formulated by Joseph Kosuth who was a friend of Świdziński and with whom he disagreed in this respect. “Art As Contextual Art” was his response to “Art After Philosophy” (1969).

One may sum up that if according to Kosuth the power of art is being ar., according to Świdziński its power is conscious being here and now, not in autonomous and conventional space. Art in a contextual approach leaves the gallery of its self-consciousness and moves it into the sphere of distortions of personality, characteristic of our time. The relationship between an artist and viewer starts to be based on freedom, verification of art is independent of an artist, and conceptual alchemy of meanings can be replaced by their unavoidable changeability. And aesthetics...What aesthetics?!

Having gone through this expanded introduction, the time has come to discuss the festival itself. However, these considerations which express thoughts that have been waiting to be released were also to open the path leading to summing up the event which is a pure pleasure. Searching for a comprehensive key to the marathons of performance art is usually difficult and troublesome if one wants to avoid simplifications and reinforced arguments. Of course, presenting the variety of approaches of live art is a valuable and proven curator strategy. However, how great and in a way uplifting is the experience of the event which develops as if nobody interfered into it. The memory of few days in the environment of art which you like and live shapes into a harmonious whole. For although presentations were distinct and individualistic, one could discern a certain spine, which although elastic and dancing was not in danger of discopathy :). One may assume that a natural consequence of how the network of contacts between performance artists works is to create connections among artists who in spite of DIFFERENCES feel performance in a similar way. As I mentioned in the beginning, it was not surprising that one could not feel 'contextual' ideology affecting the festival. People who had never come

across this theory did not find it difficult to understand what it was all really about ...or not.

Malgosia Butterwick, 26.10.2007

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as published in the catalogue of the event