

Polish Conceptualism of the 1960s and 1970s

Images, Objects, Systems and Texts

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The 1960s were a period defined by enormous changes throughout the visual arts in Poland. Early in the decade a neo-Constructivist identity began to dominate the area of avant-garde painting, largely displacing late 1950s *informel*, in part to repudiate the period of Socialist Realism (1948-55), and reaffirm a continuity with the 'authentic' example of the interwar Avant-garde. In this article I would like to focus more closely on the new proliferation of unusual concrete poetry, textual projects, and intermedial works, which then proceeded to develop from the midst of a context which until that point had been defined more by abstract painting than anything else.

Many Polish artists who had begun their careers as painters moved heavily into the use of textual conceptualism and meta-art practices by the mid-to-late 1960s, and in so doing, the direct use of purely textual language initially supplemented, but then very nearly superseded other forms of artistic expression. The following questions are particularly relevant here: what were the reasons and motivations for this shift? Was this in part regionally determined? How did this shift toward the Conceptual both respond to and echo broader world art trends? How can we relate these changes to the specific contextual setting of post-war Poland? And of course the most basic and direct of questions is: 'What is/was *Polish* Conceptualism?'

Conceptual art has been invariably (and rightly) linked to the uses and functions of language. The most prominent method of creating works which challenge the primacy of the visual in favour of other ideas and forms has been to explore the possibilities available in written and spoken texts. Such texts have become the core of what is usually referred to as the 'Conceptual' genre when speaking of contemporary art. However one must also acknowledge the wide variety of approaches used to formulate and construct these texts, as well as their near inevitable gravitation toward meta-commentary concerning aesthetic problems. Among the myriad avenues of textual exploration are:

concrete poetry, manifestos, theories, magazines, statements, bookworks, announcements, posters, pamphlets and criticism.

The earliest use and explication of the term 'concept art'¹ was by an artist/musician associated with the Fluxus group (but not linked with later 'Conceptual art' activity) named Henry Flynt. In 1961, he wrote: 'Concept art is first of all an art of which the material is "concepts", as the material of music is sound. Since "concepts" are closely bound up with language, concept art is a kind of art of which the material is language.'² And by the Summer of 1967, Sol Lewitt had written his influential essay 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art', published in *Artforum*. But as Conceptualism's most famous historical realisations, one could cite the exhibitions arranged by Seth Siegelaub in New York and featuring the artists Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner, Robert Barry and Douglas Huebler in January 1969, and *When Attitudes Become Form*, curated by Harald Szeemann at the Kunsthalle, Bern, in March-April of the same year.³ 'The Dematerialization of Art' essay by Lucy Lippard and John Chandler (written in the Fall of 1967, and published February 1968) described the direction of this newly ephemeral art in its opening statements:

During the 1960s, the anti-intellectual, emotional/intuitive processes of art-making characteristic of the last two decades have begun to give way to an ultra-conceptual art that emphasises the thinking process almost exclusively... The studio is again becoming a study. Such a trend appears to be provoking a profound dematerialisation of art, especially of art as object, and if it continues to prevail, it may result in the object's becoming wholly obsolete.⁴

This predominantly American reading of Conceptualism traces a specific lineage of artists responding to Clement Greenberg's formulations of Modernism and his resultant intransigence toward accepting any art which diverged from this normative critical structure. The artists who had initially engaged themselves with this critique of Greenbergian pictorial ideology were those associated with Minimalism. Thus the Minimalists became the research and development wing for the American strand of Conceptual Art.⁵ In the words of artist Michael Craig-Martin:

I do not think it is possible to account for the art that followed, including Conceptualism, without understanding the importance and impact of Minimalism on my generation of artists, and certainly on me. ... Minimalism provided a framework of attitudes that taken further made whole areas of life, experience and expression, previously considered outside the realm of art, available to artists.⁶

I have presented this extremely condensed and reductive genealogical summation simply as a tool to point out the fact that American Conceptualism was explicitly context – and discourse – specific, though many allegedly 'broader' studies on conceptual art still end up drawing most of their conclusions solely from the art produced from this New York-based centre of activity. Polish Conceptualism, while often well-versed from afar about many of these developments, emerged for the most part independently from this particular historical path. However, it is clear that many 'Western' artists and movements were undeniably of great interest to many of the Polish artists under discussion here.

1 Guillaume Apollinaire did – much earlier on – refer to cubism as a kind of 'conceptual' painting in his statement 'Cubism differs from the old schools of painting in that it is not an art of imitation but an art of conception which tends towards creation.' Excerpt from *The Cubist Painters* (1912) in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, *Art in Theory 1900-1990*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1995, p 182.

2 Henry Flynt, 'Essay: Concept Art (Provisional Version)', in *Ubi Fluxus ibi motus 1960-1990* [exh cat/La Biennale di Venezia], Mazzotta, Milan, 1990) p 109. Originally published in La Monte Young, *An Anthology*, New York, 1963.

3 For detailed descriptions of these two exhibitions see Chapter 13, 'Dematerialization: The Voice of the Sixties', in Bruce Altshuler, *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition: New Art in the 20th Century*, Harry N Abrams, New York, 1994, pp 236-255.

4 Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, 'The Dematerialization of Art', in Lucy R. Lippard, *Changing: Essays in Art Criticism*, E P Dutton & Co, New York, 1971, p 255.

5 See Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass, 1996.

6 Michael Craig-Martin, 'Reflections on the 1960s and early '70s,' [1988] ... *A Retrospective*, Whitechapel, London, 1989, p 114.

QUESTIONING THE DISCRETE ART OBJECT

Throughout the 1960s, not only the painted image but the actual concrete object in art came under increasing scrutiny. The use of found objects and assemblage returned in strength to the context of contemporary art – as exemplified by the exhibition which opened at New York's Museum of Modern Art in October 1961, 'The Art of Assemblage' – and was even for a time labelled 'Neo-Dada.'⁷ Similarly in Poland, various artists began to use objects in ways that simultaneously questioned their importance, and reassigned to them new poetic and artistic functions. This activity occurred early in the decade, and was one of the paths leading to an interest in art which began to divorce itself from concrete objects and results, pursuing instead conceptual and theoretical lines of inquiry.

A number of Polish artists including Włodzimierz Borowski, Tadeusz Kantor, and Andrzej Matuszewski offer significant creative examples to consider in relation to their individually subversive attitudes toward the (art) object. Borowski is particularly important to introduce at this point in the discussion of Polish Conceptual Art, as his works, statements and actions offer the clearest and most definitive articulation of a burgeoning climate of aesthetic doubt and scepticism.

Włodzimierz Borowski (b. 1930) initially an art history student at Lublin's Catholic University and a founding member of the *Zamek* ('Castle') group of artists and critics, began his artistic career by painting dark, cryptic abstractions during the years 1956-58, their largely black surfaces occasionally punctuated by bright bursts of colour. In Borowski's own words, 'The rectangles of hardboard were neither a section nor the illusion of some sort of reality. They were shape.'⁸ In the light of his later achievements, these works are less significant than his ambivalent attitude towards them. He soon became increasingly drawn toward three-dimensionality and sought to expand far

beyond the formal limitations of these painted 'shapes'.

Borowski began to layer his paintings further, and in 1958 he created *Artons* which were mixed-media objects, composed from hallucinatory fragments seemingly extracted from some science-fiction terrain. In actuality Borowski constructed the *Artons* from a variety of quotidian materials such as glass, rubber, and plastic around electric lights which he then powered from numerous portable batteries; thus, as critic Jerzy Ludwinski notes, they 'were shown at the 3rd Exhibition of Modern Art in 1959 and constituted a fact apart. It was the first demonstration of light and kinetic art in Poland and one of the first in the world'.⁹ Borowski had created bizarre, idiosyncratic assemblages which mixed organic and inorganic materials with the self-described intention of making 'compositions as autonomous as living organisms'.



Włodzimierz Borowski,
Arton A, 1958

7 Works by Rauschenberg and Johns were associated with Dadaist origins, and George Maciunas, Fluxus ringleader, used the term 'Neo-Dada' frequently in early 1960s.

8 Włodzimierz Borowski, 'Presentation,' *Atelier 72* [exh cat], Edinburgh, 1972.

9 Jerzy Ludwinski, 'Włodzimierz Borowski – A Journey to the Land of the Infinitely Small,' *Włodzimierz Borowski: Traces 1956-1995* [exh cat], Center for Contemporary Art, Warsaw, 1996, p 14.

During this period, Borowski began to collect discarded, industrially-manufactured materials of all sorts and based his next several exhibitions on plundering this potentially aesthetic reservoir. He then developed the concept – which he continued to use throughout the 1960s – of ‘syncretic exhibitions’. To ‘syncretise’ has been defined as ‘the attempt, especially inconsistently, to unify or reconcile differing schools of thought’.¹⁰ This provides a succinct way of describing the next few years of Borowski’s work – or perhaps his entire career, for that matter. Borowski thrives on the creation of art comprising *inconsistency* and *difference*. His instincts and beliefs regarding the creative process seem perpetually dedicated to the realisation that truth in art (at least *his* art) does not manifest itself in a tidily unified manner. In a 1972 statement he recalled that ‘By 1956 I had ‘killed’ the picture, by 1958 the object picture. In the years 1961-63 I fully concentrated on playing the role of a demiurge and sneered at nature.’¹¹

In 1963 Borowski began to make constructions which incorporated mirrors, both mounted onto two-dimensional boards and as part of large wooden boxes. One work displayed strips of mirror arranged in the forms ‘+’ and ‘-’ (1966). The artist created the term *Manilus* – a conflation of the Polish words *manifest* (manifesto) and *lustrzany* (mirror). As ‘The Mirror Manifesto’ states:

The image makes the object unreal and the illusion – real./Replaces the object of art as a catalyst of sensation./Eliminates ‘noise’ usually associated with image formation. In a traditional image only the ‘noise’ remains, aspiring to the role of information./Reduces ‘noise,’ making pure sensation possible./It is an instrument designed to tune our awareness to the reception of the unusual/...An ideal ‘reflection’ would provided maximum information and require neither the image nor even an awareness-tuning instrument./This, however, can no longer be done.¹²

‘The Mirror Manifesto’ precedes by three years Borowski’s 1966 exhibition at Foksal Gallery in Warsaw – the first solo exhibition held in the recently established gallery – entitled the ‘Second Syncretic Show’, which was almost an act of artistic terrorism in comparison to the ‘normal’ setting for a gallery opening:

I did not even permit the visitors to look at themselves in the mirrors, attacking them with search lights, directed right into their eyes and access to those mirrors was covered behind bars bristling with nails. Meanwhile I sat in this room, watching the reflections of people, broken into pieces by the bits of mirror, watching them move but not noticed by them.

As Jerzy Ludwinski writes: ‘The show which could not be viewed was made by an artist who turned out to be a spectre.’¹³

But why such antagonism on the part of the artist? In part because Włodzimierz Borowski not only subverted formal conventions in this artwork but ultimately the character of its exhibition. The spectators arrived at a situation riddled with confusion and disorientation rather than a calm, placid display so that Borowski could attempt to increase the intensity of experience: *sensation* displacing *noise*. Reiterating his intention, a red neon sign in the Foksal intermittently flashed the word *SILENCE*. Yet the barrier placed in between artist and audience was in fact geometrically ordered and not at all chaotic in appearance, consisting of hanging plastic objects penetrated by an

10 *The Oxford Modern English Dictionary*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1995, p 1109.

11 Borowski ‘Presentation’, *Atelier 72*, op cit, np.

12 ‘MANifest LUStrzany (The Mirror Manifesto)’, 1966, in Jerzy Ludwinski, *Włodzimierz Borowski: Traces*, op cit, p 46.

13 Ludwinski, *Włodzimierz Borowski: Traces*, ibid, p 17.



Włodzimierz Borowski, *Second Syncretic Show*, 1966, Foksal Gallery, Warsaw

array of differing-sized nails: five horizontal rows of three covered the room's entrance like an unusually threatening gate from some twisted fairy tale.

At Pulawy – an industrial town in Poland's far south-eastern tip – during the 'Symposium of Artists and Scholars' in 1966, Borowski delivered a speech (the *Fourth Syncretic Presentation*) and declared the Nitrogen Plant – furnaces for the production of urea – to be works of art:

I say that, amazed by the beauty of the industrial landscape, there is nothing else I can do, but treat the object I'm speaking from as a work of art and give it back to the Management of the Nitrogen Plant. I take this opportunity to ask them to take special care of this object, since it is surrounded by signs, saying 'Explosive'.¹⁴

Art critic and historian Aleksander Wojciechowski has called Borowski's action 'one of the earliest manifestations of Conceptual Art in Poland'.¹⁵

Borowski seemed in the mid-1960s to be torn between profuse, extravagant displays of visual material and a contrasting desire for ascetic withdrawal. He sought poetic transcendence but remained imbricated within his prosaic surroundings. Borowski remains genuinely troubled by art. For him, art retains its utmost importance, but is in his estimation all too often diminished, misinterpreted, and corrupted by general short-sightedness and stupidity. But it is Borowski's relentlessly questioning art which brings many artistic issues to

14 Ibid, p 54.

15 Aleksander Wojciechowski, *Młode malarstwo polskie 1944-1974*, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolinskich, Wrocław, 1975, p 117.

the fore: the role of the artist-spectator relationship, the role played by the artwork itself, how to make an uncategorisable, avowedly different work of art, the uniqueness of art works, etc. These issues would be mainstays of symposia, events, texts, and conceptual works over the following years, and this fact alone attests to Borowski's considerable prescience and acuity as a critical artist.

LANGUAGE GAMES AND NOTION SHAPES

Jaroslaw Kozlowski (b. 1945) began his artistic career in the 1960s, while still a student in Poznan, exhibiting in the prestigious Foksal Gallery in Warsaw and managing the Salon of Debutants of the odNOWA Gallery in Poznan from 1967-69, an opportunity for young artists to exhibit for the first time. Since that time, Kozlowski has gained an international reputation as artist, educator and gallery director. His efforts to support conceptual art in Poland have been prodigious, including his direction of the Akumulatory 2 Gallery in Poznan during the 1980s, which invited many international artists, and made the controversial decision to function throughout the repressive period of Martial Law (1981-83). Retrospectives of his work during the 1990s at both Lodz's Art Museum and Poznan's National Museum have conferred canonical status upon his intellectually challenging and formally inventive work.

For many years, Kozlowski could be categorised as the strictest sort of linguistic-philosophical conceptualist whose work reflected the influence of analytical philosophers, particularly the 'language games' of Ludwig Wittgenstein. But his comment that 'From my current perspective, I would not make a too clear-cut distinction between object and idea,' has been noted as significant in the light of the more eclectic visual character of his recent installation projects.¹⁶ Very frequently Kozlowski 'materialises' issues relating to time, abstraction and language.

Moreover he has always returned to the book as a primary medium for particular projects. Not uncoincidentally, for a time, Kozlowski worked as a librarian (as did Marcel Duchamp), and this becomes more than a parenthetical aside, when one confronts the obvious erudition permeating practically all of his work. Kozlowski has consistently used analytical and theoretical works as a background for visual experimentation. Yet his work rarely seems altogether remote from spontaneity, and perhaps here the influence of jazz (of which Kozlowski is a fervent fan) seeps between the lines. Sometimes his works repeat themselves slightly, but are really variations on a theme, emanating from the same origin, but transforming themselves radically along the way.

Kozlowski's art operates around the use of everyday objects, scenarios, and statements and turns them into provocative conundrums. Those who have experienced the dizzying yet exhilarating mental spiral so rapidly induced by reading Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* can recognise that Kozlowski's conceptual approach shares a similar character of thwarting one's – this time visual – expectations. As the philosopher stated himself, 'A philosophical problem has the form: "I don't know my way about."¹⁷ Kozlowski, by adopting the manner of certain existing models of philosophical inquiry, tends to develop a certain question-proposition by amplifying it, repeating it, and therefore redoubling its ambiguities and innate imperfections. As this development is reified in the concrete form of either two-dimensional images or multi-dimensional installations, the initial question is transformed

16 Comments cited by historians/critics Urszula Czartoryska and Piotr Piotrowski.

17 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Trans GEM Anscombe, Macmillan, New York, 1968, p 123, p 49.

and so too our general assumptions as viewers undergo re-evaluation.

Kozłowski was clearly inspired by the aesthetic possibilities of the 'language games' which Wittgenstein extensively enumerated in the following list:

Giving orders, and obeying them – Describing the appearance of an object, or giving its measurements – Constructing an object from a description (a drawing) – Reporting an event – Speculating about an event – Forming and testing a hypothesis – Presenting the results of an experiment in tables and diagrams – Making up a story; and reading it – Play-acting – Singing catches – Guessing riddles – Making a joke; telling it – Solving a problem in practical arithmetic – Translating from one language into another – Asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying.¹⁸

As philosopher Anthony Kenny points out, Wittgenstein considered the language game 'to mean the study of any form of use of language against a background context of a form of life.'¹⁹ Kozłowski's own 'list' from 1977 effectively outlines his concerns during the seventies: 'ART... as a universal existing in mind... as a cognition for itself... as an indifferent reality... as an indeterminate act... as a game with rules of substitution... as an empty name... as a continuum... as a constructable being.'

A significant early example of Kozłowski's artistic process is the trilogy of exhibitions, which occurred in the successive years 1972 to 1974 in the Foksal Gallery: *Metaphysics, Physics, Ics* [*Metafizyka, Fizyka, Yka*]. *Metaphysics* – the first exhibition – projected a photograph of an ordinary room, including such objects as chair, armoire, television, table, vase of flowers, etc. These objects were assigned numbers up to 24, and these corresponding figures were drawn on the wall, thereby in effect appearing superimposed onto the photo-projection. A tape recording ran simultaneously with the projection, calling out

18 Ibid, p 23, p 12.

19 Anthony Kenny, *Wittgenstein*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass, 1973, p 166.

Andrzej Kozłowski, *Metaphysics, Physics, Ics*, 1972-74, Foksal Gallery, Warsaw



the numbers and phrases such as 'What is this? This is a bunch of flowers. Is this a bunch of flowers?' in Polish, as well as German, French and English. The following exhibition, *Physics*, consisted of the original photograph but this time entirely out of focus, thus a completely indistinct rendering of light and shadow. In the third exhibition, *Ics*, the numbers from *Metaphysics* return as solitary visual elements on the wall of the gallery, and taped recordings describe the look of the now-invisible objects: 'disgusting, amorphous, pleasant, poor, attractive, crumbling, printed, hairy, damaged, cheap, pale, blue'.²⁰

During this same period, Kozłowski began his works in book form, with *language/jezyk* (1972) which consisted of forty-some pages, listing various possible permutations of the alphabet (for example: qaw, qwa, waq, wqa, arw, war, etc). The artist's opening statement reads: '*latin alphabet is the basis for a language/ language is created by words and their construction is based on interrelated connection of all alphabet letters/ quantity of letters in a word is limited by quantity of letters in the alphabet/ every letter can be used once in one word.*' Kozłowski's *language* then becomes a book of nonsense, or concrete poetry as it were, yet based on 'rational' principles of arrangement. *Grammar* (1973) charts out similar territory but this time using the tenses of the verb 'to be' numbered and dryly sequenced as in a child's exercise book. But perhaps the most captivating of his books is *REALITY* which prints only the punctuation from an excerpt of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, the text having vanished, leaving behind only typographic Morse code – the framework of the text 'stranded' without the text.

It is difficult to succinctly assess Jarosław Kozłowski's body of work, as it has been so varied in both concept and appearance, yet the clear intensity of its interrogation of art and reality is unmistakable. Kozłowski uses various formal tools, and then has regularly 'abandoned' them, to initiate new structures for his work. About his 'linguistic explorations', Kozłowski remarked to Jerzy Ludwinski:

I noticed that I was feeling more and more comfortable with them. I enjoyed arranging various conceptual configurations, combinations of more and more ingenious games and logical paradoxes. And again I felt the necessity to abandon that, get away from what Gombrowicz called 'stupefaction with form.' Abandonments are important.²¹

In the mid 1960s, Polish concrete poetry emerged (in slightly belated fashion) and its most important exponent was Stanisław Drożdż (b. 1939). This artist has created his poetry both within book form and as gallery installations, which operate primarily through the inventive use of textual arrangements he calls 'notion-shapes.' He explains their origins:

Pojeciokształty (notion-shapes) whose name derives therefore, from the plastic concretisation (graphically) in material shapes – determined by scientific conditions and not being the results of imprecise (of subjective) acts of artistic creation – of notions, in a registration of pronounced abstraction, the formal contents integrated as essential flexible implements.²²

Drożdż is a multidisciplinary artist, who works in the medium of concrete poetry but has always shown in galleries, in Poland and abroad, collapsing the distinctions so often artificially preserved between visual art and literature. The artist has commented that his works are 'created at the borders of these

20 René Block, 'Jarosław Kozłowski', *Rzeczy i Przestrzenie/Things and Spaces* [exh cat], Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź, 1994, p 54.

21 Jarosław Kozłowski-Jerzy Ludwinski, 'Conversation', *Things and Spaces*, 1994.

22 Stanisław Drożdż, 'Pojeciokształty', with Zbigniew Makarewicz, 'Rozbior dramatyczny przedmiotu', and Jerzy Ludwinski, 'Konkret i "Baba w babie"', *Odra*, December 1968, pp 73-76.

disciplines [science and art], mixing in the minimum of registration the maximum of parts and enriching the freedom of expression'

In the book *From To*, he places the Polish words 'od' and 'do' in a variety of sequences. In patterned rows which cover the page, the letters encircle one another, collide, overlap, collapse, multiply, dance. *Tryptych: Uncertainty, Hesitation, Certainty* (1970), traces the horizontal passage from a field of question marks, to a loud checkerboard of question marks and exclamation points, to an array of exclamation points only. Drozd derives his dizzying poeticism from very simple means, and always fixates upon time. Similarly, in the work *Klepsydra/Hourglass* – originally conceived in 1967, but published in 1990 – Drozd portrays three tenses of the verb *byc* (to be) *bylo/was, jest/is, and bedzie/will be* as making up the differing sectors of the hourglass – as the three words 'fall' from the top to the bottom, they change both identity and significance.²³ Drozd actively shuffles time and space through his verbal-visual actions, even if it is all contained simply and neatly on white pages or white walls. Art historian Alicja Kepinska writing of Drozd's work has emphasised his

analytic treatment of linguistic reality. The analysis pertains to the visual aspect of the graphic signs of writing, and the artist performs such manipulations on its optical basis that he achieves a close union between the symbol and the meaning. The semantic systems of his concept-forms are directed by mathematical and logical determinants: the word detached from literature, isolated from contexts, is freed from wide connotations and presents solely its own semantic content.²⁴

Moreover Jerzy Ludwinski has noted that in Drozd's spatial poems, 'the white background itself becomes significant, which in certain literature was nothing to consider, similar to the silence in the music of Cage, and the lack of images in the exhibitions of Klein.'²⁵

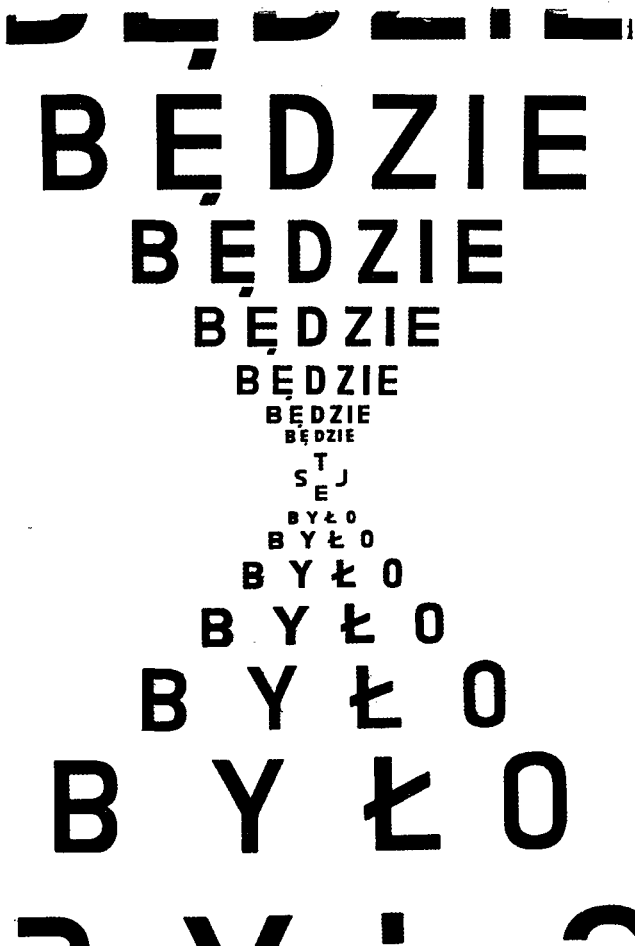
A key work by Drozd is the installation entitled *miedzy*, or 'between' exhibited originally in the Foksal Gallery in April 1977, in which the lower-case letters of this same word cover the entirety of a gallery space, its floor, ceiling, and walls. The letters form orderly rows but turn 360 degrees, becoming as much a series of hieroglyphic permutations as a single word repeated over and over. The viewer then enters a literal and poetic in-between space. How does this work function? As art, sign, wallpaper, design, or perhaps it questions the distinctions between our responses to all these

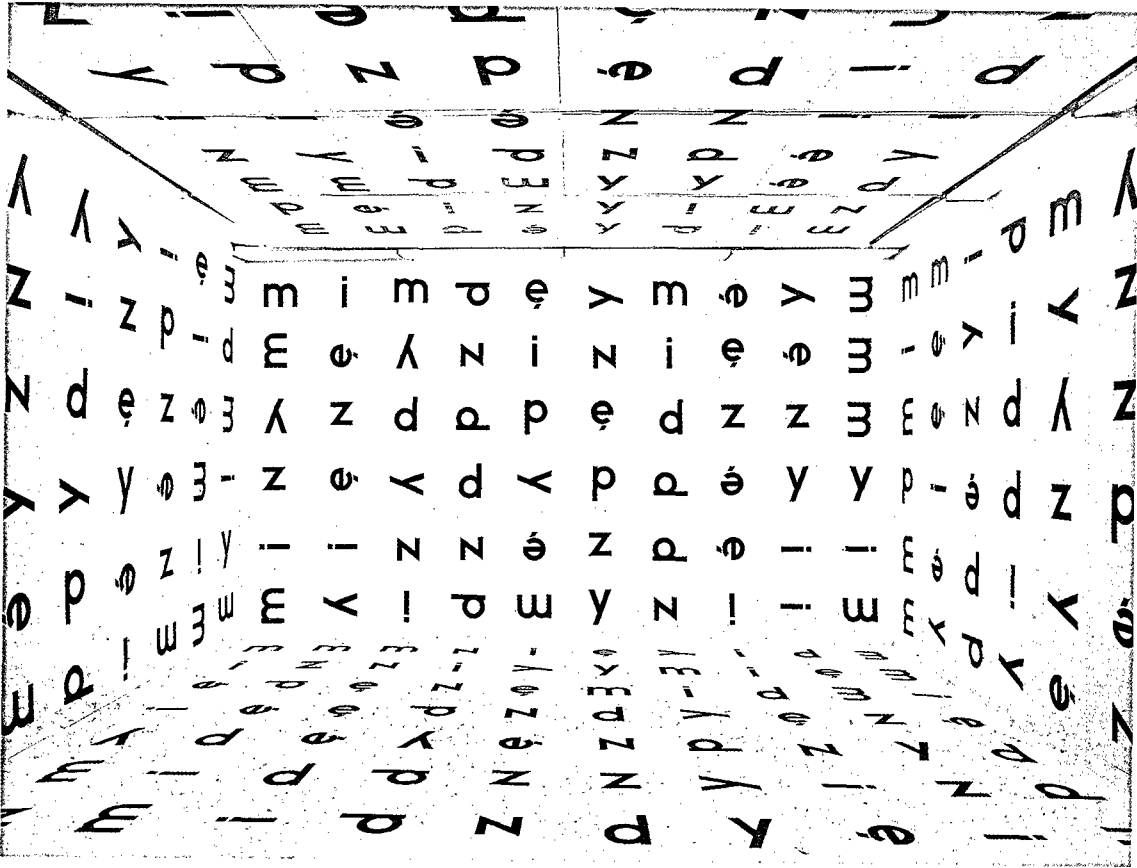
23 Stanislaw Drozd,
Klepsydra, Centrum Sztuki
Wspolczesnej/Akademia
Ruchu, Warszawa, 1990.

24 Alicja Kepinska, 'Between
Theory and Practice',
Projekt, 1977, pp 55-56.

25 Ludwinski, *Odra*,
Dec 1968, pp 73-76.

Stanislaw Drozd, *Hourglass*,
1967/1990





Stanislaw Drozd, *Between*, 1977, Foksal Gallery, Warsaw

varieties of sensory input and forces us to remain the inhabitants of an ambiguous situation.

Typography and design had earlier been major components of the Constructivist ideal of art fulfilling certain social functions. We can see many examples of this, from the expert layout work of Henryk Stazewski to the alphabet conceived by Wladyslaw Strzeminski and certainly the impact of printing processes on Henryk Berlewi's theory of 'Mechano-Faktura'. The war again threw Polish experimental design and poetic work into turmoil, with the significant exception of Stefan Themerson who was then working on many projects in this vein in England. But the 1960s and 70s brought about a resurgence of theoretical statements by artists, in conjunction with the use of texts integrated into works themselves. Of course, the (calli-)graphic aspects of the work of artists such as Roman Opalka, Ryszard Winiarski, and Stanislaw Fijalkowski are extremely pronounced albeit presented within a neo-Constructivist mode of painting.

Emmett Williams writes in the introduction to his important 1967 *Anthology of Concrete Poetry* of the first concrete poems of the 1950s:

The visual element in their poetry tended to be structural, a consequence of the poem, a 'picture' of the lines of force of the work itself, and not merely textual.

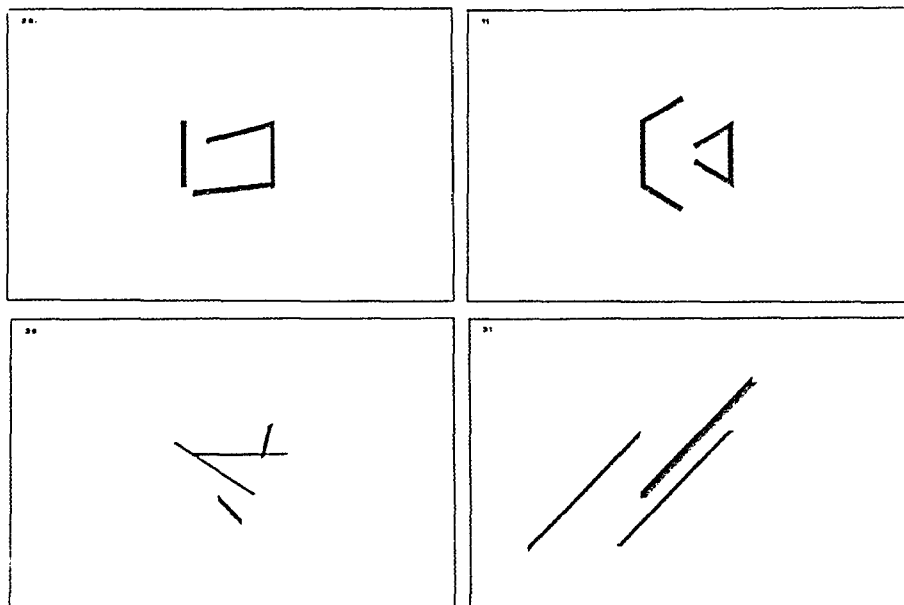
It was a poetry far beyond paraphrase, a poetry that often asked to be completed or activated by the reader, a poetry of direct presentation – the *word*, not *words*, *words*, *words* or expressionistic squiggles – using the semantic, visual, and phonetic elements of language as raw materials in a way seldom used by the poets of the past. It was a kind of game, perhaps, but so is life. It was born of the times, as a way of knowing and saying something about the world of *now*, with the techniques and insights of *now*.²⁶

Books, poetry, gestures, philosophical beliefs – this is not a list of secondary attributes in terms of contemporary Polish art, but instead some of the most crucial components of an artist's practice, which became especially valued by artists during the Communist decades. Many of Poland's greatest writers were banned for years, such as Witold Gombrowicz, Aleksander Wat, and Kazimierz Brandys. (But they were nonetheless frequently read in unofficially distributed copies.) The book retained an almost sacred status which has in contrast, steadily eroded in Western Europe and the USA. A subtle, veiled criticality became the forte of many Polish artists, in the form of oblique poetic statements, discourses on the absurd, and performances imbued with metaphor, legible yet retaining marked ambiguity.

Consider the following statement from Andrzej Dłuzniewski (b.1939), poet, lecturer, conceptual artist, and former director of the Warsaw gallery, Piwna 20/26, in the 1980s, about his early years as an architecture student:

I read a lot at that time, it was the main sphere of my interest. I have read nearly everything that was available and important. It was my best lesson, and I still think that literature is a very important, or even the most important, source of knowledge. It is like talking to other people, like having a relationship with another – close or distant – vision of the world, an exchange of ideas, reflections, information.²⁷

Andrzej Dłuzniewski, *Ikonograms*, 1972-76



26 Emmett Williams, ed, *Anthology of Concrete Poetry*, Something Else Press, New York, 1967, p vi.

27 Piotr Rypson and Andrzej Dłuzniewski, 'I Formulate My Questions with the Means That Are Available to Me ...', *Exit: New Art in Poland* 7.3, 1991, p 250.

Dluzniewski later invited numerous artists to exhibit at his and his wife Emilia's Piwna Street flat/gallery (or as he once described it '*the gallery non-gallery*'). He is a prototypical example of the Polish conceptualist: trained in other fields – having studied architecture for two years, attended philosophy lectures, and worked in Polish television before studying sculpture – he came to art 'out of necessity' and believes that there are much easier paths to choose than that of the artist, who spends much time in creative isolation.

Dluzniewski's sculpture diploma project in 1968 consisted of photographic documentation of changes in 'landscapes' consisting of piles of sand. This was very controversial at the time and was inspired by Oskar Hansen's theory of 'open form'.²⁸ As he retrospectively commented:

I realised then that I would never be a sculptor. I knew that I would not accept the fact that it was the material that decided what was art and what was not. I remember my discussions, maybe naive with friends about what was the subject of debates among British and American artists at that time. I did not hear of the conceptual art, but I formed similar opinions and anticipated a change in values.²⁹

Like Stanislaw Drozd, Dluzniewski's art also originated from the inspiration of poetry and literature. And like other conceptualists such as Poznan artist Andrzej Matuszewski, he has ridiculed the fetishism of 'art objects' instead of creative concepts. In a 1981 article, Dluzniewski wrote:

I value intelligence above everything. Intelligence controls our physical performance in a hop-skip-and-jump and in a pole vault, it allows us indulgently to cherish our emotions taking over the duty of remembering who we are; it has all the wicked means we use – weight, measure, calculation, logic, erudition and scepticism – at its command while our instincts make us plunge happily into a kind of sensuous obscurantism. Man is complex. But those deprived of intelligence do their plunging in a slap-dash and joyless manner. Which reminds me of art where crowds of artists exert themselves cheerlessly and apparently to no purpose dabbling in a mixture of clay, paint, and plaster. They evoke pity but even pity dies out when our intelligence tells us: have no pity, they can always start doing something else, and the sooner the better.³⁰

Dluzniewski has had contact with many other artists and organisers both in Poland and elsewhere over the years, including close relations with Jaroslaw Kozlowski's Akumulatory 2 Gallery, exhibiting there throughout the 1980s. The alternative galleries and idea of 'private art' discussed in Poznan at symposia such as 'New Art in Search of Values' (1978) influenced Dluzniewski in the formation of his own gallery in 1980.

Andrzej Dluzniewski's art occupies a space of intellectual paradox rather than visceral provocation. He uses an accumulation of verbal and visual data, of varying importance, as the methodology of his art. It is subtle and challenging, but rarely without a whimsical perspective. His work appears less heavy and dark than that of Wlodzimierz Borowski, for example, but is instead imbued with a fanciful spirit, a speculation which twirls and colours language, relishing this leisurely play.

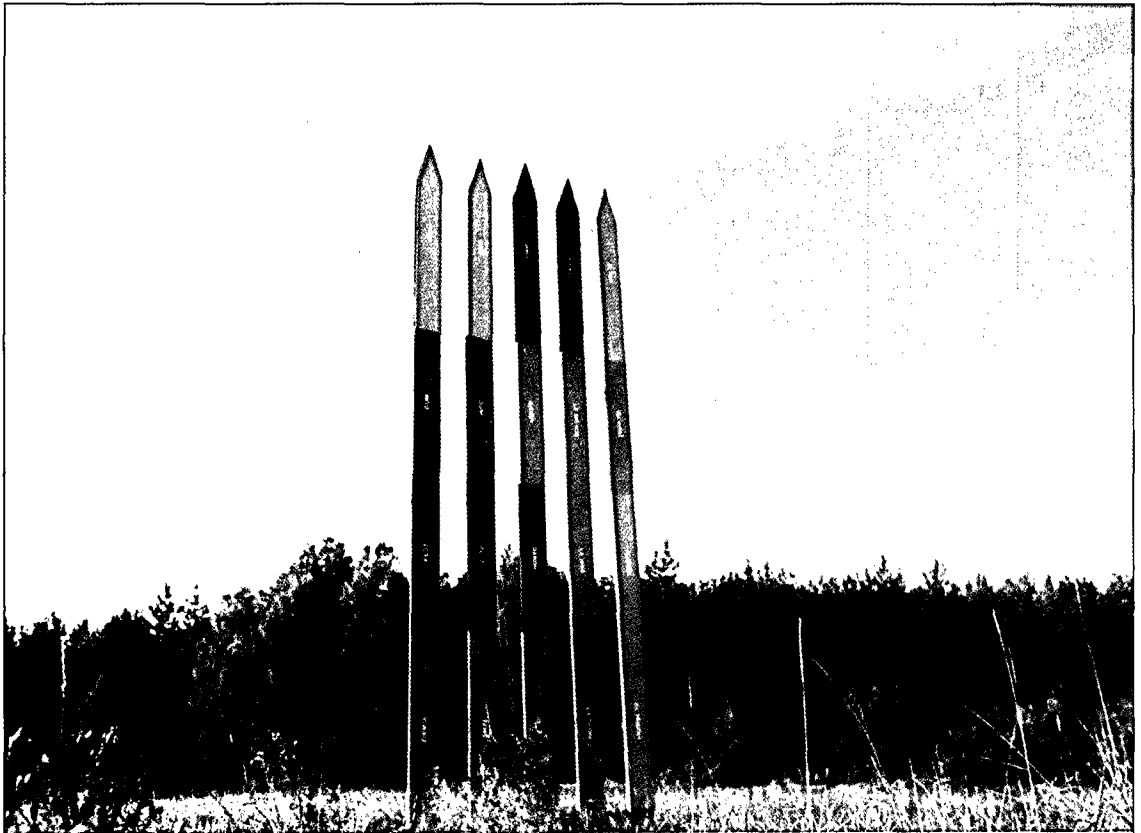
Some of his poems occupy the space of a single word: *ARTYSTOKRACJA* – the conjunction of the words *artist* and *aristocracy*. Or present two large red rectangles of colour, one above the other, with a caption further below reading: *history painting*. Another lone phrase: *litmus person*. And: *1 Consequence Street*.

28 'It is a feature characteristic of the theory of Open Form (which is also its inherent paradox) that it does not allow a work of art to be created and interpreted according to the distinctions of form or style. Primary importance is attached to the problem of personal attitude and the resulting spontaneous reaction to the surroundings ... including the possibility of shaping the surroundings in such a way which would provoke a response in the viewers or participants ...'

'Summary', Maryla Sitkowska, Trans, Maria Olejniczak, *Repassage*. Maryla Sitkowska, ed, [exh cat], Galeria Zacheta, Warszawa, 1993, p 17.

29 Ibid.

30 'Forum: Andrzej Dluzniewski', *Projekt*, pp 143, 4, 81, 55.



ZIEMIA PŁOT DOM NIEBO
 DIE ERDE DER ZAUN DAS HEIM DER HIMMEL
 DE AARDE DE HEINING HET HUIS DE HEMEL
 ZEMĚ PLOT DŮM NEBE
 ZEMLJA PLOT KUĆA NEBO
 LA TERRE LA HAIE LA MAISON LE CIEL
 LA TERRA LA PALIZZATA LA CASA IL CIELO
 EL PĀMĪNT EL GARD EĀ CĀSĀ EL CER
 TOKĒ GARDH SHTĒPI QIELL
 ΓΗ ΦΡΑΧΤΕ ΣΠΙΤΙ ΟΟΡΑΗΘΕ

1993 drewno, akryl, wys. 500 cm

Or perhaps present an imaginary dialogue as in this example:

DIALOGUE VI

PERSONS:

Virginia Woolf (1882-1944)

Kasimir Malevich (1879-1935)

VW Kasimir, tell me if there is the bird of Paradise on the reverse side of your black square?

KM Yes Virginia, of course.

VW Oh, you Russian artists with Polish names, you are uncanny³¹

The series *Ikonograms* (1972-76)³² creates images from the frames which normally surround images – bits of black line stir around a white field, initially in a group of four, almost symmetrical, but they break apart overlap, dance, intersect. Reminiscent of El Lissitzky or Malevich, these lines are constructive elements gained from the deconstruction of the pictorial context. Reconstitution of the picture/image then becomes a changing variety of geometrical groupings, arbitrary frozen elements. The work entitled *22 figural pictures* (1979) extends this idea with the artist himself physically arranging a series of stretchers/frames of varying dimensions.

Dluzniewski's works since the mid-1980s have closely examined the significant role which grammatical gender plays in language. For example, he has created works which assign individual colours to correspond to the masculine (red), feminine (blue), and neuter (green) genders within the contexts of several languages, including German and Polish. He has made prints, paintings, and sculptures that explore this theme. In the artist's words, 'What is the factor that determines notions as belonging to a given gender? Are masculine, feminine, and neutral spheres semantic areas? Which of these notions possess the characteristics of their attachment to a given sex, which were included mechanically, creating the order only within the area of grammar?'³³ *Feminine Area (Obszar Zenski)* (1990) is nearly three pages of Polish words of feminine gender, printed in blue ink in closely typed rows. In a piece from 1985, the words for the colour BLACK in German (green-neuter) and Russian (blue-feminine) serve as captions to a black square, unavoidably summoning the spectral presence of Malevich. Dluzniewski astutely investigates the arbitrary and intentional features of language, calling our attention to the fact that virtually every formal aspect of language can be actively questioned, but so rarely is in everyday circumstances.

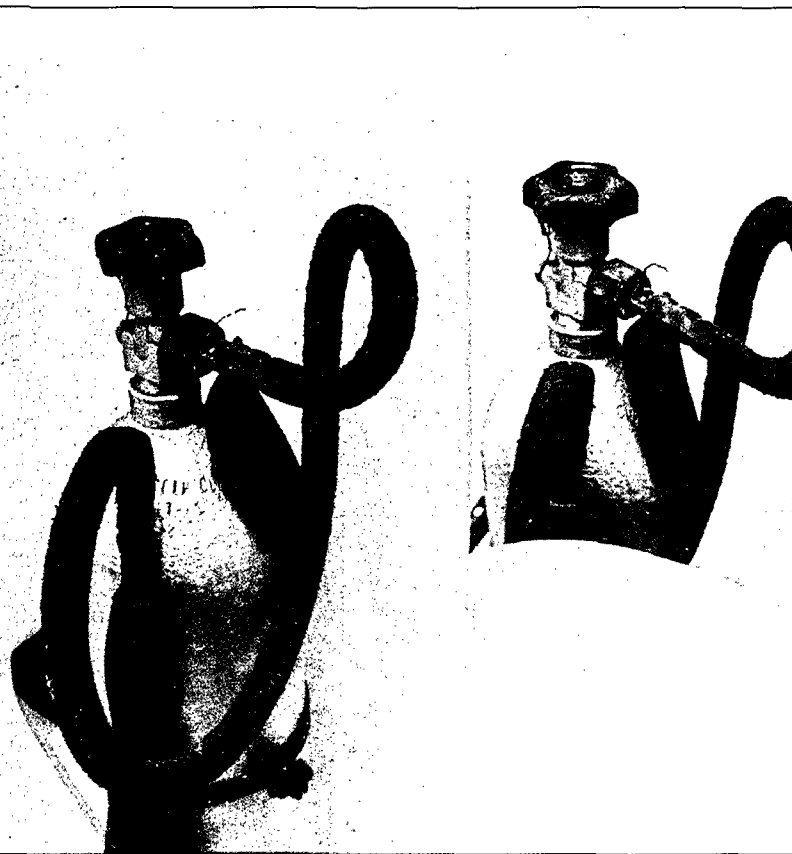
QUOTATIONS AND TAUTOLOGIES

Zbigniew Dlubak (b. 1921) is the most significant Polish artist in terms of theorising and defining the role of post-war photography as an avenue for conceptual exploration. His own life history, like that of many Polish artists mirrors the complex series of cultural and political shifts and ruptures which have occurred since the invasion of Poland by Germany in the summer of 1939. Dlubak studied painting and drawing before the war and during the Nazi occupation; and he also had connections with several Communist organisations. Dlubak later became a member of the important '55' group of artists in Warsaw, along with painters Marian Bogusz (with whom he was interned with

31 *Andrzej Dluzniewski*, Contemporary Art Center, Warsaw, 1991, p 183.

32 Kepinska, *Nowa Sztuka*, pp 259-60.

33 *Andrzej Dluzniewski*, *Gender and shadow*, exhibition catalogue, Galeria Stara, Lublin, 1995.



Zbigniew Dlubak, *Tautologies*, 1971

in Auschwitz and Mauthausen camps from 1944-45) and Kajetan Sosnowski. The group benefited from the increasingly liberal cultural policies that brought about the changes in governmental regime in 1956.

Dlubak had largely refrained from becoming involved in any officially sanctioned cultural activity during the years of imposed Socialist Realism (1948-55) aside from taking on the editorship of a monthly journal on photography, *Fotografia*, in 1953, and continuing in this post until 1972. Even in that capacity he struggled against the watchful eye of the censors, and *Fotografia* principally dealt with various technical procedures rather than aesthetic theories. Dlubak had, however, been one of the major participants in the *1st [post-war] Exhibition of Modern Art* (1948) in Krakow, which was most notably an attempt by Dlubak and the other artists to argue that

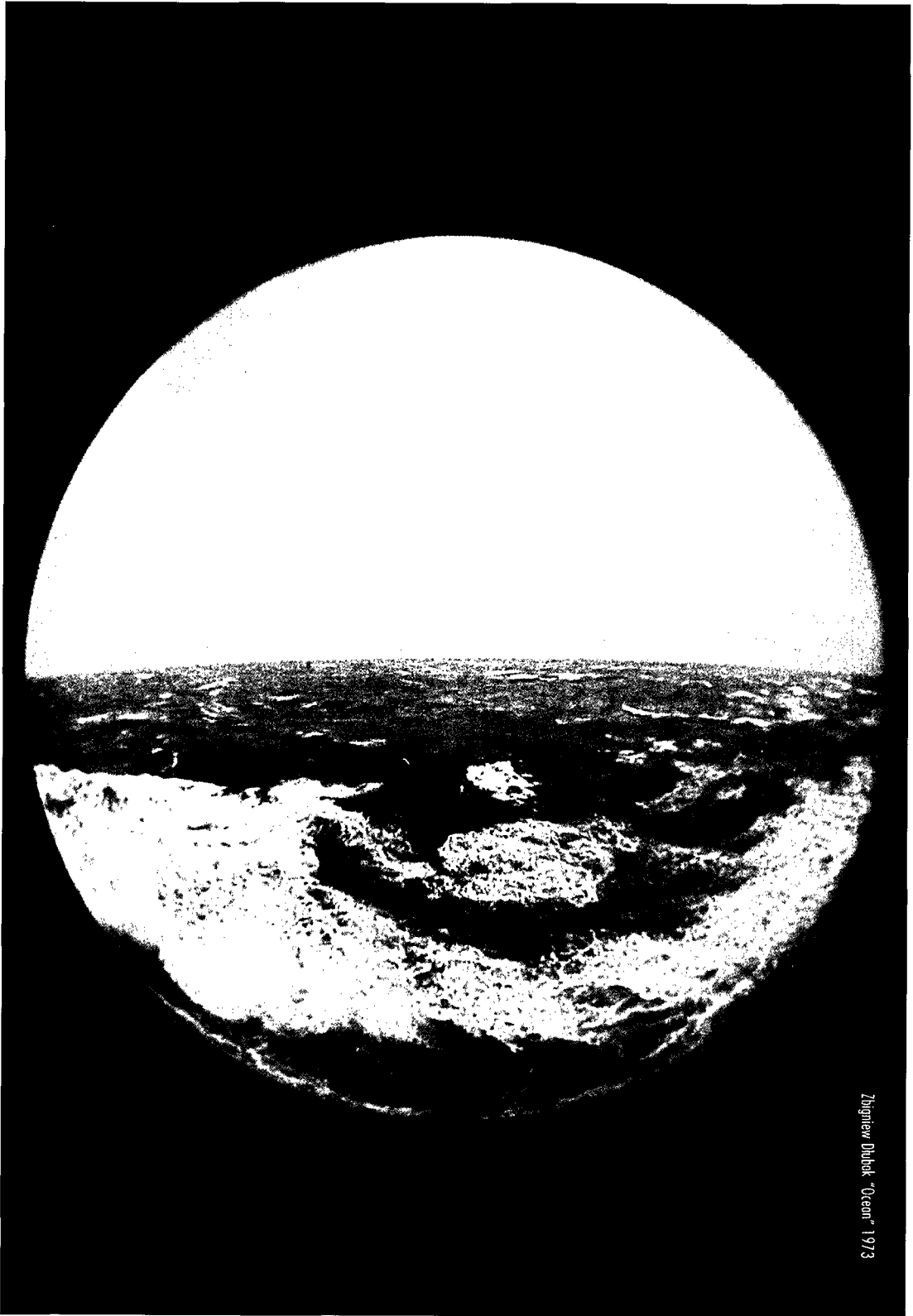
if socialism is connected with progress, it must also be connected with modern art. We structured the

exhibition accordingly. In the entrance hall my photograms showing microscopic and astronomical pictures, etc. were glued on [Tadeusz] Kantor's abstract forms, and those photograms of mine were, in general showing the progress of mankind in the structure of matter and cosmos... Thus, some didactic frames had been created for the exhibition or, to put it better, a strategy was hidden behind it with which we hoped to convince the authorities that modern art can co-exist with their policies and which, naturally, was extremely naive on our part.³⁴

In his statements in defence of Modern Art which he wrote in 1948 and 1949, delivering them at the 1st Exhibition and the Nieborow Conference ('my last public appearance before 1956') Dlubak tried to work the ideological position of the state into some kind of accord with the desire for a continuing avant-garde. In these comments he asserted that while the domains of politics and art could play mutually sympathetic roles, they were inevitably dissimilar. However his statements are an uneasy mixture of 'proper' Marxist jargon combined with subtler attempts to derail dogmatic Socialist Realism.

Dlubak was a long-time advocate of an analytic approach to art rather than an expressionist posture, as when he stated that 'Art itself and its formal rigors, resulting from artistic freedom is connected with certain intellectual control. That is why in opting for existentialism and the notion of freedom, I opposed art informel, ie painting of uncontrolled gesture.' Dlubak's own paintings – one

34 'From the Club of Young Artists and Scientists to the Krzywe Kolo Gallery: an interview with Zbigniew Dlubak held in Paris by Barbara Askanas, on May 1988' in *Krzywe Kolo Gallery* [exh cat], Muzeum Narodowe, Warszawa, 1990.



Zbigniew Dlubek "Ocean" 1973

Zbigniew Dlubek
An Ocean, 1973

series was characteristically titled *Systems* – were highly controlled abstractions, with richly saturated hues, often placed in strong, reverberating juxtaposition to one another. It has been noted that Dlubak in his artistic development continuously became more representational in his photographic work, and more abstract in the context of his paintings.

Dlubak has made a great number of reflective statements about the capabilities of art to function, communicate, exist:

Art means pondering over the possibilities of art, it expresses doubts, leads to the absurd, is self-ironical in its consciousness of its helplessness and that is why it returns to the simplest means and constantly starts from scratch. In this manner, it expresses its very existence and functioning. By constantly going beyond its own boundaries and possibilities, due to self-control art turns into meta-art. Its very essence lies beyond the object which serves only to record something as a symbol, but it also is beyond the reception of the individual.³⁵

As a proponent of a conceptual tradition repeatedly emphasised throughout this essay, Dlubak devalues the art object and instead valorises art as a form of mental-emotional experience which can take on any formal structure.

Dlubak's photographic works of the late 1960s and early 1970s are his most conceptually challenging. Of his series known as *Tautologies* (1971), Dlubak wrote:

It only seems that I place objects together with their views photographically recorded. In fact, I place two views close together and question the identity of the view and the object. The placing together of two views of the same object has a tautological character. From two doubtful elements I form a conviction about the real being of objects.³⁶

As Dlubak described clearly, the *Tautologies* series was an example of the kind of exploration of image-reality and its nominal designations that became a hallmark of conceptualism. Works by other artists as Joseph Kosuth and Jaroslaw Kozlowski also explored these themes, yet Dlubak seemed intent on pursuing these ideas more elaborately for a lengthier span of time. In so doing he exemplified his view that 'Artistic work is the interrogation of art.'³⁷ Leszek Brogowski has pointed out that the originality of Dlubak's *Tautologies* emanates from the fact that

Never before in the long history of philosophical controversy over the existence of the world had anybody thought of reaching a conviction on the real existence of objects, cross-examining them in a 'stereoscopic' manner. Of course, there was no photography when this debate was most heated but the idea is still up-to-date in as far as it may generally concern other 'prostheses' of perceiving the world.³⁸

In February of 1973, Dlubak presented images of the Atlantic Ocean's rippling waves both photographed in direct, straightforward fashion and also the same view taken with a 'fisheye' macrolens which severely distorts the image, lending the appearance of looking through a tunnel or a peephole. With the views presented next to one another, the unreal distortion of camera vision becomes readily evident to the viewer, as it was to the artist when looking through the lens. Dlubak wrote a poetic accompanying text, *An Ocean*, which read:

35 Statement by Zbigniew Dlubak made at the opening of solo exhibition at Contemporary Gallery, Warsaw, 1971, in *Zbigniew Dlubak: Works from 1945-81*. [exh cat], National Museum, Wrocław, 1981.

36 Leszek Brogowski, 'Zbigniew Dlubak: from constituted meaning to the constitution of meaning,' *Trans*, Aniela Korzeniowska, *Magazyn Sztuki* 11, March 1996, p 89.

37 Alicja Kepinska, *Nowa Sztuka*, p 137.

38 Brogowski, 'Zbigniew Dlubak: from constituted meaning ...', *op cit*, p 89.

To annihilate the reflex of evaluation/To accept banality in the simplest way, without accentuating everyday exoticism/To identify oneself with the outside world in order to get rid of the false sense of superiority in relation to the environment/To reject the conviction of sacrificing oneself for the sake of art/To abandon the thought about the excellence of getting rid of everything/To be.³⁹

In a much more recent essay entitled 'Existence Beyond Form' Dlubak the theorist has evidently lost none of his probing, philosophical incisiveness:

For over a hundred years art has been liberating itself from the formal order which, as is believed, is invariably linked with essence. Although the 20th Century has brought many experiments, all of them, not excluding the most revolutionary ones (Mondrian, Malevich, Duchamp, Strzeminski, Ad Reinhardt and many others) are based on substituting one form for another, or on changing the used means/signs which results in the same thing. Doing away with one form in favour of another has only imprisoned art once again although the rigors are new. How can we find the essence of art, expressed through form, but existing much deeper, beyond it? How can we do away with form or remove it into the background, use it only as a means of artistic expression and disallow the forming of trends, stylisations, fashions?⁴⁰

By seeking to integrate the rigours of his own art practice with an equally rigorous theoretical approach investigating the very notion of art, Dlubak has remained one of the most prolific and long-standing influences upon and exponents of Polish Conceptualism, yet during the late 1970s he became much more sympathetic to Jan Swidzinski's revisionist theory of 'contextual art', which questioned conceptualism's distance from its surrounding context, participating in a number of exhibitions under that heading.

'IMPOSSIBLE ART': THEORISING POLISH CONCEPTUALISM

Conceptual art from the late sixties onwards in Poland emerged as the most significant framework for making experimental artistic statements. The aforementioned Włodzimierz Borowski – arguably the most 'conceptual' of artists – commented sardonically on this fact more recently to an interviewer:

Q *From many of your resulting statements, very dramatically you feel the decline of conceptualism.*

A Yes, in certain moments have appeared very many conceptual artists and they have done such blah, blah... Conceptualism became almost a national artistic trend, a Polish fashion or sickness, like tachism or kapizm (*colourism*) earlier. And people began to say 'O Jesus, enough already.' And feeling relief, when once again paintings appeared. Though, these 'savages' likewise were such blah, blah, but at least presented a bit of attempts at painting.⁴¹

Art historian Bożena Kowalska has argued that art movements such as

pop art, ready-made, *arte povera*, or minimal-art... did not carry enough charge for Polish artists who had a greater need than elsewhere, or perhaps an imperative necessity, of conveying a developed charge of reflection and comment... The sphere of conceptual art, on the other hand, offered all the

39 Zbigniew Dlubak: *Prace z lat (1965-1971)* [exh cat] Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej, Warszawa, 1992.

40 Ibid.

41 Hanna Wroblewska, 'Rozmowa z Włodzimierzem Borowskim'. *Magazyn Sztuki* 1, 1993, pp 24-30.

possibilities for coping with the needs of expression of the Polish individuality. This is probably why it appeared in Poland earlier than anywhere else, in the mid-60s, before even the name of conceptualism was coined: first in the philosophical and artistic program of [Jerzy] Rosolowicz, and soon afterwards in [Roman] Opalka's concept of 'counted images'.⁴²

The specifically Polish brand of Conceptualism was clearly not an imported quantity from the 'Western' art world. The critical discourse surrounding the transformations of art since the post-1956 'thaw' had become very curious indeed. As Grzegorz Dziamski writes: 'Polish authors, differently from American critics to be sure, didn't speak about the end of modern art, but on the end of art in general, therefore it is possible to find in their texts such terms as 'post-art' (*posztuka*), 'post-artistic epoch' (*epoka postartystyczna*), etc.'⁴³ One early publication by the Foksal Gallery was even entitled 'The Elimination of Art in Art.' Alicja Kepinska in her excellent survey of post-war art in Poland retrospectively commented that 'Conceptualism isn't, therefore, the end of art, but art such as it was conceived up till now. It is the end of a certain stage of art, a procedure of clearing the field from anachronistic coordinates, and the appearance of a range of new creative possibilities.'⁴⁴

In 1972, Jerzy Ludwinski wrote an essay entitled 'A Convention-free Zone' in which he offered many incisive remarks about conceptual art, both in general terms and in relation to several artists. Perhaps most significantly in this text, he asserts that

Conceptualism does not exist as a new trend in art in which a complex of characteristic features form a unity in style and are associated with it...Conceptualism can be defined as a convention-free zone....Thus this zone includes everything that can be thought of and communicated with the exception of what has already been checked and classified. Any optical similarity between artistic facts is meaningless as is the form in which they are registered. Conceptual art made with the help of canvas, paint, and a brush can be equally well imagined.⁴⁵

Ludwinski's remarks were in part provoked by the belief expressed by many that conceptual art was a simple exchange of properties, such as the pure concept registered in the form of a text, recording, or photographic registration conveniently substituted in the place of a painting, sculpture, or other object, thus initiating a new 'ism', without enacting a true fundamental shift in creative thought.

Ludwinski recognised conceptual art as a momentous break with the art of the past, declaring that there could be nothing in the seventies resembling the artist's groups and shared programmes which defined the 'concise avant-garde' of the 1920s, thus no 'schools of conceptualism.' He cited the fact that 'the distances between the attitudes of individual artists have increased.' But it's important to read this essay historically as a statement which associates conceptual art with a polyvocal, heterogeneous, and incorporative creative identity. Ludwinski links conceptual art to a belief in ultimate creative freedom, and perhaps it would not be going too far to associate 'a convention-free zone' with another, now commonplace term which was then in its infancy: *postmodernism*.

In the history of 20th century avant-garde art in Poland, we see a definite tendency toward systematising creativity; the privileging of the thought process guiding the artist's hand as much as the resultant artistic product made by that hand. These thought processes, recorded as theories, manifestos,

42 Bożena Kowalska, *Polska Awangarda Malarska 1945-1970*, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warszawa, 1975, p 242.

43 Grzegorz Dziamski, ed, *Od awangardy do postmodernizmu*, Instytut Kultury, Warszawa, 1996.

44 Kepinska, *Nowa sztuka*, p 200.

45 Jerzy Ludwinski, 'A Convention-free Zone', *Projekt* 1.86, 1972, pp 2-9.

statements, interviews, essays may differ in intent, scope, theme, and almost every other possible way, but the thought process remains the central factor in question. So that in tracking the theories of art propounded by artists we can also detect a major shift occurring in the existing artistic paradigm. In the newer, more radically conceptual art these artists' proposals often became the works themselves, and thus differentiated from the previous Modernist separation between a visual work and its accompanying textual material.

In Ludwinski's essay he comments upon the fact that the hitherto relatively stable model of contemporary art exploded or boiled over in the period since the late 1950s. As he states, 'It is fascinating to trace the moment when the first crack appeared in the walls of our model of art. However it certainly appeared even earlier in the consciousness of artists. And it took place almost simultaneously and independently in various centres...' This would be a concise way of describing the *proto*-conceptual, *proto*-postmodern trajectory of art which emerged throughout the 1960s and arguably reached its peak sometime in the 1970s.

Ludwinski had previously – in his major statement 'Art in the Post-artistic Epoch' (1970) – described 'impossible art' (*sztuka niemożliwa*) as 'the most altogether radical revolution' in the sixties and after concluding that 'one is tempted to test the characteristic structures of this revolution, even if in this measure it's proper to be careful not only from difficulty, but directly from its impossibility,' enumerated them in the following manner: (1) origins traced back to Dada, Duchamp and geometric abstraction and 'the complete devaluation of the original as well as devaluation of the handmade crafted work by the artist'; (2) 'the elimination of the material object altogether'; (3) 'the entirely different registration of works of art,' such as happenings and textual works; (4) 'art works as actions in time'; (5) 'the complication of the relations of the artist – work of art – public... this intact tradition... three-element segmentation ceased to have any kind of sense'; (6) 'the complete disintegration of structured works of art equivalently in space as well as in time'; (7) 'works of art in the sphere of notions'; and finally, (8) 'art becomes absorbed by reality and simultaneously reality becomes annexed by art.'⁴⁶

But Ludwinski's observations about the post-artistic epoch finished with the following words: 'Perhaps today we are almost not interested by art. Plainly speaking because we overlook this moment, when changing into something different, something we are unable to name. There is nevertheless a certain objective, because this, which interests us today possesses great possibilities.'⁴⁷

CONCEPTUALISMS: ARTISTIC INVESTIGATIONS

Conceptual art, broadly speaking, consists of establishing an artistic means of coming to an understanding with the world. For the Polish Conceptualists discussed here, their means of working were a way of learning more about art, science, linguistics, philosophy – in brief *humanity*. One could perhaps flippantly paraphrase Sartre, to state 'Conceptualism is a humanism'. For all its railing against conformist ideas about art and its occasional flirtations with nihilistic gestures, Polish Conceptualists were actively exploring myriad issues within the arena of their artistic practice. As a cautionary remark made by Jaroslaw Kozlowski at the beginning of the 1990s offered:

46 Ludwinski's essay is illustrated with examples not by Polish artists, but by the Americans Carl Andre, Michael Heizer, Joseph Kosuth, Edward Kienholz, and Robert Morris.

47 Jerzy Ludwinski, 'Sztuka w epoce postartystycznej', *Odra*, April 1971, pp 51-56.

Because of the very strong Constructivist tradition in Polish art (and perhaps also because of the economic situation in our country), the artwork in Poland has never been understood as an object, a product you can sell. It has always been regarded as a message, a way of thinking, of investigating reality, an intellectual and moral process in order to decode the sense of the world. ... I am very much afraid that we will slowly lose the philosophical aspects that have always been essential and characteristic of Polish art in the sixties, seventies and eighties and which provide a different function of art in Poland compared to that in the West.⁴⁸

Certain psychoanalytical interpretations of the period under discussion have put forth arguments that the traumas of war and the repression of artistic freedom of speech lent an important non-verbal subtext to these artists' ways of investigating the world. But is an aversion to political ideology (whether for or against the regime) and consequent evasion thereof, an abdication of responsibility or simply an understandable response of intelligent, creative individuals to a society burdened by an 'insane' government? The veiled hostility and remarkable intensity shown by many of these artists in their works of the 1960s and 70s betray evident societal pressures. It was only after 1980, with the formation of the Solidarity trade union, the accompanying decision of the artists' union to participate in strikes, and the institution of Martial Law soon afterward, that a major political shift occurred, irrevocably influencing the artistic terrain.

However in terms of the awareness of 'world art trends,' émigré artist Krzysztof Wodiczko pointedly remarked in a 1986 interview that

Information about the West is temporarily limited today, but in the seventies it was quite accessible, and is beginning to improve again. Hans Haacke's and Daniel Buren's work, for example, is well known to Foksal Gallery, Akumulatory 2, Studio, and many other galleries. Foksal showed Lawrence Weiner, Art and Language, Victor Burgin, European and American Fluxus, and so on. Poland is marginalised less by lack of information about art in the West than by the lack of information about art in Poland available in the West.⁴⁹

In Poland it had not been generally a case of artists being directly suppressed or censored (at least very often), but instead the strange situation of being allowed a considerable amount of creative freedom at the expense of other personal freedoms (such as speaking directly on the political climate).⁵⁰ It is also entirely clear that local art-scenes often far from the centre of government were able to accomplish more than could ever have been expected in the so-called 'People's Republic of Poland.' Such small and dedicated regional galleries as EL Gallery in Elblag or odNOWA and Akumulatory 2 in Poznan, or the 'open-air' events held regularly in provincial settings prove this point. Much creative energy was then channelled into the pursuit of these 'alternative situations' which could be largely controlled by the artists and further a historically significant (but often overlooked) artistic dialogue.

48 Jaroslaw Kozlowski, 'On Poland,' *Kunst and Museumjournaal* [Eng ed], no 3, 1990, pp 32-33.

49 Douglas Crimp, Rosalyn Deutsche, and Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, 'A Conversation with Krzysztof Wodiczko,' *Discourses: Conversations in Postmodern Art and Culture*, Russell Ferguson, William Olander, Marcia Tucker, Karen Fiss, eds, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass, 1992, p 316.

50 See Hungarian writer Miklós Haraszti's *The Velvet Prison: Artists Under State Socialism*, trans, Katalin and Stephen Landesmann, with Steve Wasserman; Noonday Press, New York, 1989; for a provocative analysis of this situation. 'Artistic production has boomed under communism. Never in the history of Eastern Europe have more pieces of art been exhibited. ... The supposedly unbearable fact of undeniable censorship has compelled not one single artist to refuse any state honor or decoration. ... The persecuted artist is, on closer inspection, just not that unhappy.' p 9.