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Documenting Art as New Artistic Practice

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Bożena Kowalska
Polish Proto-conceptualism

By accepting one of the definitions applied to conceptualism in the research on this genre, as art that "takes the form of objects under the condition that they have a secondary function in parallel with an idea" I draw attention to an exceptional artistic case, that I call a Polish proto-conceptualism. This phenomenon occurred in the first half of the sixties, that is before Seth Siegelaub's exhibition in New York (1969), accepted as the beginning of conceptualism, or even before Sol LeWitt's article in *Artforum* entitled "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" when the term, preceding the trend itself, was introduced into the language of art. For this reason I describe the above mentioned artistic experiments of clear conceptual characteristics, which preceded the accepted beginning of conceptualism, as protoconceptualism.

I include four Polish artists in this category: Andrzej Pawłowski – an author of *Cineforms* (1957) that were famous in the sixties and "The concept of an energy field" (1966); Jerzy Rosołowicz – the author of the "Theory on the function of the form" (1963) and objects made of lenses and prisms that according to the artist were mere examples of his theory of neutral act; Roman Opałka with his 'counted paintings' (1965) that documented the idea of a fight with time; and Ryszard Winiarski inspired by the probability theory, who asked about determinism or indeterminism and treated his works not as paintings but as "Attempts of visual presentation by statistical charts". Contrary to a typical conceptualism, (which was expressed as a record of processes, place marks, announcements, photographic documentation or mail art that was popular in Poland after 1970 and was inspired by similar activities by artists from Western Europe and the USA – the art of the described Polish proto-conceptualists was purely original and autonomous. It was precursory towards the global understanding of conceptualism and, what is very important, in their activity these artists generated an important message with which a significant concept, philosophical idea or analytic reflection was included.

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The most tangible feature of Polish conceptual art at the beginning of the seventies was the rejection of the old language of art (painting, sculpture) in order to reach out for a new medium of the visualisation of ideas. Andrzej Lachowicz saw in this process a transition from manual art to mental art. It was a departure from autographic art, in which artists produced their own individual sign, to allographic art, in which they perform operations on signs. Mechanical registration media (photography, film) made this transition easier and lead to 'depicturalisation', or in other words, overthrowing painting as the main medium of visual art and, at the same time, introduced a new art language — the language of semiology. Photography made it possible to talk about art through the language of signs, not through the former language of emotions, experiences and aesthetic values. That new language, that was used more or less aptly by artists of the 70s as: Zbigniew Dłubak, Jan Świdziński, Jarosław Kozłowski, Andrzej Lachowicz, Józef Robakowski and Ryszard Waśko, turned out to be a significant feature highlighting Polish conceptual art. Photography and sign mutually supported each other in the battle with the old ideas of art.

A negative point of reference for the new art language became phenomenology. Phenomenologists take signs as reality, wrote Jan Świdziński. This mistake was avoided by structuralism, which operates through a neutral and arbitral (systematic) concept of a sign. A sign has an operational character, it is used to explore reality, it also allows for the reformulation of questions posed for art. Instead of wondering about the ways in which art reflects reality, we may ask a different question: how reality is understood by art, what actions are needed to be executed for the process of understanding to take place and, finally, what limits the process?

Conceptual art did not devise such a new art formula and one may doubt whether it was its aim. It changed, however, the language which we use to talk about art. It drew artists' attention to the processes of sign-posting, to how art functions in the world of signs. The artists may freely use all available signs, they may transform

old signs into new ones (secondary signs), they may give them new meanings through manipulation of the context and discover more or less overt mechanisms of encoding signs that are the discourses hidden behind them. Those discoveries became a permanent contribution of conceptual art to contemporary art practice: thanks to them contemporary art appears to be different than art from before a conceptual turn. Its most important consequence, however, is replacing artworks with art documentation.

Maria Hussakowska

What is the Gender of Polish Conceptual Art?

The essay was inspired by Pawel Dybel's book *The secret of the "other gender". Disputes around the sexual differences in psychoanalysis and feminism*, in which he asked a question about the gender of logos. My – less ambitious – attempt was to try to describe the potential of gender in Polish conceptual art. The question is ahistorical, but there are a number of reasons to ask it. Many female artists that were very active during the time of conceptual incitation are invisible. Polish conceptualism which was formed by some artistic couples, historically has lost female faces. Some of these contributors – like Natalia LL or Ewa Partum – we can find out about in the discourse among first Polish feminist artists, but the question of women's input into conceptualism is still open and does not attract enough interest of scholars. Maybe this is because of the fragile and delicate matter of an artistic partnership in contrast with the heroic notion of artistic individuality that is still attractive for conceptual artists. Maybe this is because of dangerous stereotypes about masculinity and femininity and male and female roles in artistic couples. There are very few scholars who are interested in examining the notion of collaboration in its very complex form.

Much of the contemporary discourse on Polish conceptual art has been conveyed through exhibitions. This tactic may be seen as paying respect to the form of an exhibition – a specific, ideal medium to consider works of art not individually, but as they interact with each other. The specifics of conceptual works that were generally visually unattractive in the early seventies has changed, partly because of the most recent generation. The new face of Polish conceptualism is very conservative with regard to the lack of input by women. Unfortunately the belief popular among scholars and curators that women do not do 'serious' work still persists, but fortunately for those women artists who are active and visible – they found a useful label in the discourse. Placing them within the feminist movement, one should not forget their conceptual roots, and should delete the question as to whether their works were serious.

Agnieszka Gralińska-Toborek

An Idea and an Image. The Iconoclastic Aspect of Conceptualism

Conceptualism, as the art of an idea, placed itself beyond aesthetic and sensual experience. As a rule, it did not produce art objects which could be pleasing or that would represent reality. This rejection of an image places conceptualism in a broadly understood iconoclastic movement. When we examine various historical iconoclastic movements (religious and political) we may reconstruct the most important features of iconoclastic awareness and compare them with the essential postulates of conceptualism. The result of this comparison is a striking similarity of both phenomena. To mention just a few linking features of conceptualism and iconoclasm, we may enumerate: a doubt in the adequacy of the relationship between an idea and image, a fear of an idolatrous belief in a material art object, a drive to demystify art and artists, a concentration on a word instead of an image. Iconoclastic mentality can also be characterised by analytic thinking, progressive attitude and irony. However, the question arises if iconoclasm can exist without idolatry; or if conceptualism could have developed without a material object? Even if it rejected it, then the art world (museum, critics, audiences) that shows a progressively stronger tendency to contextualise, flung conceptualism out of "art's orbit into the 'infinite space' of the human condition" (to use the words of J. Kosuth).