

**NON-INDISPUTABLE
RELATIONS:
SELECTED
RELATIONS OF
CONCEPTUAL ART
AND PERFORMANCE
(PART ONE)¹**

Performance may be considered a term defining for many years now a whole jungle of various proposals by male/female artists, changing flat or spatial works of art into proposals stretched in time. This art of actions or events would have its prehistory reaching as far as ancient times (see Diogenes of Sinope). However, as writes Kristine Stiles, special conditions for the occurrence of what is key for the majority of performances include reference to a body as the 'final instance', with the assumption of the priority of persons over objects². In the mid-1970s the term 'performance' was accepted as 'widespread form of art'³ and took the nature of denoting outstanding 'manner of artistic activity'⁴, a new *genre* or a category of art. And it has remained so until now. However, in the past decades transgression attitudes have developed, adding elements of feminism and post-feminism, political or social activism, etc. And at the same time, performances together with other forms and methods have found themselves quite often among larger structures of artistic activity in the continuously expanding tendency to co-opt individuals or whole groups in processes of creating works of art⁵.

Conceptual art in the 1960s appeared as an incredibly groundbreaking and wide stream. In place of, often commoditized, paintings or sculptures conceptual artists started to present 'poorly sellable' records and sets, among others analytical or numeric linguistic indices, sequences of photographs or reproduced works, sets of objects, etc. Conceptual art was quickly labelled as a historical period (such as romanticism or cubism), which is an obvious simplification. However, at the same time, conceptual proposals today occur in constantly renewing mutations. Firstly, they support the development

of a majority of such radical elements of the practice of art, whose authors totally freely make use of 'achievements' of conceptualism in a somehow instrumental way, and even they frequently do not emphasize the fact that they refer to that stream. In particular, it regards the global situation of the recent years with, all in all, interesting proposals in Asian or African environments, appearing *ad hoc*, which makes them different from the arduous ways of art evolution in Europe or America. Secondly, here and there, there appear examples of program post-conceptualism or neo-conceptualism.

If we look for a meeting of both terms (performance and conceptual art), which are located within slightly different scopes of practices, then in particular moments in the history of the past sixty years one may notice some points of ideological similarity, with one particularly strong, present in both areas, attitude against commoditization of art. However, it is most interesting that those terms, coming from quite faraway regions, in the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, already after drawing closer to each other and almost overlapping, started to evolve with a gap growing between them. It resulted to some extent as an advantage of intellectual reflection of male/female conceptualists and, despite all, with a special importance of emotions in performances. In conceptual art there appeared a mutation of hard-to-interpret linguistic-analytical proposals. And at the same time, when there were almost iconic desires developed towards performance artists to return to their actions, a marriage of performances with media evolved, which could record these actions. And media themselves in conceptual art have been treated with a certain dose of reserve (as deaf and blunt tools).

Conceptualism made a fundamental change of the paradigm. It depended mainly on the fact that many people from the artistic circles lost interest in what was dominant in earlier strategies as more or less aesthetic 'art for the retina'⁶. Marcel Duchamp (under

the influence of Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven) opposed this kind of art through his *ready-mades*. In place of works of art being eye-traps he proposed his aesthetically neutral (although with a slight *quantum* of weirdness and a light mould of irony) 'ready-made products'. After an in-depth analysis, these selected and pointed out objects may be considered infallible 'chess-game' moves in artistic-social situational game of the times. An avalanche which was started then provided in the 20th century and in the beginning of the 21st century at least a dozen or so types of solutions how to use single objects or their destructs, register and index them, as well as how to use their parts in various configurations, or to compose sets of objects, e.g. in installations (depending on the context). In conceptual art objects (or their reproductions) are all the time treated a bit emotionlessly, as *exempla*. Performance is different: here they seem to be more important and become changeable as far as emotions are concerned. It may be both too many objects among which the male/female artist is showing off, or for, example tools, that may hurt or in other way modify the look of the male/female performer. After the performances (which by assumption are always ephemeral) objects may be left on display and may be shown as part of documentation. Moreover, in performance objects have double presence: a) during the very action and b) *post factum*. In the *post factum* stage they may become souvenirs.

Abandoning 'retina' works of art is automatically accompanied by a frequently broadened possibility to use verbal elements. They are widely applied in conceptual art, but also from time to time they become significant in performances (e.g. in those which have the nature of demonstration or performative lectures). In both these manners of use they may replace images 'hassled' or 'tired' with layers of paint known in the tradition of art. Using the term *concept art* in 1961 in a pioneer way, Henry Flynt in his nihilistic demonstration

of 'abolishing' the existing art, museums, etc., at the same time, instead of the so-called works of art, he left free space for undertaking linguistic declarations⁷. The main term *conceptual art* was created by Sol LeWitt in 1967⁸ as a juxtaposition to *perceptual art*. Perceptual art according to LeWitt would be represented by works with such a purpose of shaping the form so that it would be attractive in perception. And in conceptual art forms would be treated as the only means for arrangement plans.

In the following years, with the whole wave of critical-analytical attitudes, the quintessential text by Joseph Kosuth *Art after Philosophy*⁹ (1969) became fundamentally important. This text includes many plots which were subjected to diverse interpretations¹⁰. Here, I would like to raise only several issues included in it. The very title attracts attention. It may be explained both as 'art according to philosophy' and 'art after (following) philosophy'. In the case of 'art according to philosophy' it will be opening up to art capable of using achievements of narrow areas such as linguistic philosophy and epistemological analysis. The achievements of these areas became fundamental for Kosuth, and in the majority of works of male and female conceptual artists became the bases for their proposals. However, if we understand Kosuth's work as 'art after philosophy', then, as the author states, we will pay attention to the fact that in the 20th century we may talk about 'the end of philosophy' and at the same time – the beginning of art. What we mean here is disappearance of great versatile philosophical narrations known from the 19th century disappear, with simultaneous development of art 'from scratch' in its modern version. Kosuth, writing on the 'state of art', recognizes high importance of modernism. At the same time, he rejects formalism (which he calls 'vanguard of decorativeness') and the attitude which many times led to the identification of art and aesthetics. Outlining the meaning of his own anti-formalistic approach, he undermines

at the same time tagging conceptual art as one of many tendencies.

If the previously mentioned Flynt had the approach to concepts which 'slimmed art down' towards narrowly treated articulations, then Kosuth betrays a thought of dialectic generalization of the evolution of the whole art⁷. These conclusions are in some aspects similar to Jerzy Ludwiński's, formulated in 1970 in his text that was groundbreaking for Polish art *Sztuka w epoce postartystycznej*¹⁰. The main similarity regards evolutionary character of art and supporting the idea of destroying what Kosuth sees as formalism and what for Ludwiński is a stiffened layout of artistic tendencies and genres. Kosuth, to a certain extent, introduces his own practice as the model sketch of valuable solutions. He also takes into account work of pioneers of conceptual art in the USA. And Ludwiński, who basically from the 1950s with huge empathy recognized issues bothering male/female artists, notices generalized entropicity of art in current understanding. At the same time, he sees opening to new understanding of art directing towards neutralization of contradiction between art and life. As described Luiza Nader quoting Ludwiński, *art melts away and at the same time transcends reality*¹¹. At this point of the visionary perception of evolution of art as directed towards merging with reality, one may almost see the peak of the common great role of conceptual art and performance. But beyond the vision of Ludwiński, in the very practice of art, one could notice how these two artistic practices, after a culminating meeting, start to grow distant from each other. And this takes place both in the approach to language, text or word in general, to the media (mentioned below), as well as to the frame around performance as the genre presentation 'from-to' (notwithstanding whether it lasts two minutes or goes for weeks).

Conceptual art with its 'linguistic exaggeration' adopted many variants of iconoclastic replacement of images with extracts, calculations, discourses and various other forms of notations and records

as significant elements very often present as main proposals of art. In a sense, theory of art was even considered an important manifestation of activity in that area. Examples of an 'influx' of texts could be observed on many exhibitions and in catalogues, especially in the 1970s. At that time, it was characteristic that borders between art theory and art practice blurred; between what was imagined and what was written, the verbal with the visual, etc. The whole trouble of non-translatability of images into words, that Michel Foucault cared so much about¹², here disappears like a soap bubble. It may be like this, but also totally the opposite, because the very border between a work of art and what surrounds it (especially in the area of idea) is sometimes levelled or e.g. 'ploughed up'. What evolved was the possibility, lasting till today, to use in art uttered declarations, recorded or printed inscriptions, slogans, scores, recordings or long theoretical considerations. It does not mean, of course, that something that is expressed through a text, was automatically classified as 'a work of art'. But also the term of 'a work of art' is not so inaccessible anymore. More and more often instead of 'work of art', other terms started to be used such as 'work' or 'proposal'.

Coming back to the role of linguistic elements: texts, descriptions, etc. – their central place in conceptual art may be confirmed here. In performances, on the other hand, (except for the above mentioned performative lectures) various manifestations, scenarios, descriptive plans or reports – all these are situated on the peripheries of the very actions, both preceding them as well as documenting after their occurrence.

When artists in different countries shaped their idea of the form of art not necessarily clinging traditional *genres*, the majority of them looked towards experiments with new media. Then, in a short time, there occurred (basically beyond main interest of male/female conceptualists) an issue of so-called medialism or even a tendency of

media art to march fast towards elaborating its own status as a new art genre. These issues slightly enchanted male/female performers, as they saw a chance in them to consolidate the ephemeric, as well as the possibility to combine their own actions with multimedia. No wonder Michael Rush in his book on new media at the end of the 20th century dedicated one chapter to the relations between 'media and performances'¹³. However, in the area of top male/female representatives of Fluxus (here we have a meeting point of conceptual art and performance) quite early it became important to raise the topic of intermedia. In 1965 it was strongly emphasized by Dick Higgins who treated intermedia as disjunctive mediation between different manifestations of art. Within so variously presented forms (being vehicles driving towards ideas – important for male/female conceptualists) this 'between' became meaningful as *opposition against simple combinations such as multimedia*¹⁴. After a phase of multimedia development, Rosalind Krauss expressed her distaste in 1999. Describing the state of art in the beginning of the 21st century as 'post-media' phase, she did not hesitate to emphasize (a similar opinion is also expressed by many male/female conceptual artists), that the word 'medium' itself may be something toxic¹⁵. It became a fact that after excessive activities involving media, which intensified at the end of the 1990s, the 'post-media art' (Krauss's term) became important and has been important until now mainly in these environments for which achievements of conceptual art are significant.

- 1 This text is very brief and subjective. I refer selectively to terms which I think are important and introduced in specific contexts.
- 2 K. Stiles, *Performance Art*, [in:] K. Stiles, P. Selz, *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art. A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1996, p. 679.
- 3 R.L. Goldberg, *Performance. Live Art 1909 to Present*, Thames & Hudson, London 1979, p. 125.
- 4 G. Dziamski; *Performance – tradycje, źródła, obce i rodzime przejawy. Rozpoznanie zjawiska*, [in:] G. Dziamski i inni (ed.); *Performance*, Warsaw 1984, p. 47.
- 5 A. Downey, *Art and Politics Now*, London 2014.
- 6 The definition of Marcel Duchamp basically used by the author of *ready mades* with reference to painting treated as *la peinture rétinienne*. In translation into English (with a wider definition of art) that is *retinal art*. See: P. Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Marcel Duchamp*, transl. [from French to English] R. Padgett, London 1971; here quoted from reprint of Da Capo Press, Boston 1987, p. 77.
- 7 P. Osborne, *Concept Art*, London 2002, p. 19.

Andrzej Kostołowski

Non-indisputable relations: selected relations of conceptual art and performance (part one)

The text concerns two major concepts in the art of the last half of this century: conceptual art and performance. Conceptual art, which crystallized in the 1960s, has become one of the fundamentally seminal movements in contemporary art. Performance – a phenomenon with long history, since 1970s has been treated as an independent art genre. These two phenomena happen to be merged in various context; both feature an approach directed against the commoditization of art. However, in other areas and contexts crucial differences between these concepts can be perceived. Conceptual artists have adopted an analytical-index relation to objects in their approach. During performances objects often play

a major (also emotional) role, being left behind as documentation. Conceptual art, distancing itself from the so called “retinal art”, i.e. the one that pleases the eye, has adopted utilization of texts or other linguistic materials as an important method of expression. For performance artists (except for performance lecturers), texts and descriptions are located on the outskirts, i.e. as plans preceding actions and descriptions following them. The discussed disciplines of art differ in their approach to media, as well: conceptual art treats them purely functionally, in performances they are of bigger importance, for example combined with multimedia. The conclusion attracts attention to the complicated relations between the two concepts: conceptualism and performance art, taking into account related activities in the 1970s and the difference in approach in the successive years.

KEYWORDS:

ANTI-FORMALISM, OPPOSITION AGAINST COMMODITIZATION OF ART, POST-ARTISTIC STYLE, POST-MEDIAL ART



Ministerstwo Nauki
i Szkolnictwa Wyższego

Paid by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education according to the agreement no. 796/P-DUN/2018 signed on 4.04.2018 r.

The assignment name: Creation of the English version of the Scientific-artistic Journal “Dyskurs” publications; DUN financing – 30 000 PLN.