

# Bożena Kowalska

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## Polish Proto-conceptualism

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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.

Grzegorz Dziamski  
**Documenting Art as New Artistic Practice**

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