

Michał RUT¹

THE ARTISTIC ACTIONS PROTECTING PUBLIC SPACES

The article addresses the issue of participatory art (the so-called political, engaged art), which in its assumptions deals with the subject of marginalized social groups. Such art aims at solving given problems by the diagnosis of a cultural, social and economic situation, by animation actions, media coverage and negotiations between the parties to the conflict. The article specifies the artistic actions which allowed to protect public spaces against the pressure exerted by investors and obliged local governments to conduct restoration work and properly organise places for relaxation and integration of local communities. There is also focus on the experience of Polish artists such as Iza Rutkowska, Julita Wójcik and Joanna Rajkowska as well as the description of the Modraszek Collective action and the selected participatory actions of the project entitled Wrocław – Entrance from the Backyard.

Keywords: participatory art, integration of local communities, public space

1. Introduction

The presence of art in public spaces in the 20th century can be divided into the three types that developed in the course of time. The first approach dominating in the 1960s is defined as *art in public places*. It was mainly a modernist sculpture placed in the urban or green areas context. Such works served purely aesthetic and decorative purposes enriching public spaces, making them more attractive and at the same time popularizing contemporary art among a wide range of society. While those newly designed monuments were replacing traditional obelisks of the 19th century, they more and more resembled contemporary sculpture; one example in Poland is the *Biennale of Spatial Forms* in Elbląg (1965, 1967, 1969).

The second paradigm is referred to as *art as public space*. This approach puts more emphasis on selecting the location for a given work. Such place is not a neutral exposition but it begins to play much more active role and becomes its integral part. Hence, we can speak about *site-specific works* corresponding to the social and historical context of the place. We can speak not so much about

¹ Michał Rut; Zakład Projektowania Architektonicznego i Grafiki Inżynierskiej, Politechnika Rzeszowska; al. Powstańców Warszawy 12, 35-959 Rzeszów; mrut@prz.edu.pl; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1708-8112>

sculpture in public space as about a project carried out by the artist in cooperation with various city partners, architects, administration, etc.

The third paradigm is *art in the public interest*, i.e. art realized in the interest of various groups of the city inhabitants. Works classified in this category often take an unstable, interventionist nature and they serve to make significant community problems public. In this case, the artist becomes an intermediary who attracts attention in a suggestive form and expresses the issues facing marginalized and socially disadvantaged groups deprived of the right to voice in public discourse. This division set on the American ground shows how closely the transformation of public art is associated with a change of mind on artistic practice: there is a transition from aesthetic problems to social problems, from art as an object to art as a process or event, from permanent installation to temporary intervention, from autonomy to cooperation with art audience and from the primacy of manufacturing to action [3].

The sole fact that the artist works outside the studio and accomplishes their art pieces outside the art-exhibiting institution is by no means new. Attempts to aestheticize urban space used to be popular in Modernism. However, in this new formula we can experience a shift of focus from the visual sphere to the conceptual and practical spheres as well as the creation of a process rather than an object, therefore, we can speak about *a project* rather than *a piece of work*. Frequently, the only trace remaining after artistic actions is documentation which is not always professionally prepared. Moreover, this process concerns a specific local community and the problems it encounters. Thus, the actions taken by the artist are quite similar to those that are the domain of political activists. Finally, there is also one more distinguishing feature of such practice, i.e. the artist's position in their relation to the viewer is changed. The artist consciously resigns from their traditional *position of a genius with supernatural abilities* and becomes a partner of the audience being invited to participate in the creative process. It is this feature that allows to refer to this kind of art as *participatory*.

The abovementioned changes are of such a revolutionary nature that they raise suspicion among numerous theoreticians and observers that practices formulated in this way have already left the area of art for good and moved to the area of politics and purely social actions.

In spite of the popularity that this new practice has gained in recent years, the concept of participatory art is still vague and frequently overused. It serves as a *keyword* to define a wide spectrum of phenomena- starting from projects based on a scenario prepared by a professional artist and artistic interventions to the phenomena generated in the network by its users only. There are also many terms in literature that concern the same or a similar phenomenon: relational art, dialogic art, social aesthetics or activism.

The category of social participation is widespread in Poland, however, the discourse on participatory art is limited, except for scattered press articles

and publications devoted to other wider phenomena. It emerged for the first time during the seminar entitled *Art Involved in Public Spaces*, which took place in the Łaźnia (Bath) Contemporary Art Centre in Gdańsk in 2001 and was organized by the two artists-activists- Jay Koh from Singapore and Chu Yuan Chu from Malaysia. The texts of speeches given at the seminar were published in a catalogue of *The City Transformers* project (2002), but it was only in 2005 that the catalogue was printed [8]. In 2008, the discussion panel *Commitment and Distance. The Art Status with Respect to the Social and Cultural Reality* was held at the same place. The text discussing this panel appeared in the publication *Łaźnia (The Bath). Art in Projects of Social Change* [1].

In 2006, Artur Żmijewski with his manifesto entitled *Applied Social Arts* evoked wide interest as he was trying to convince artists to abandon or reformulate the concept of the art autonomy or even to resign from the position of distant critics of the reality and move towards political involvement [17]. Curatorial actions and theoretical reflection on participatory art have been conducted by Agnieszka Wołodźko for many years [14].

This article presents selected artistic actions which can be included in a wide field of engaged art and allowed to improve the quality of public space.

2. Realizations

Joanna Rajkowska is the author of social projects, facilities, films, installations and ephemeral actions and situations implemented in public space. Her projects usually involve working over a specific site, which is historically or ideologically burdened or marked with a lack of identity, trauma or repression.

Rajkowska's most famous realization entitled *Greetings from Jerusalem Avenue*, which consisted in placing an artificial date palm at the roundabout of General Charles de Gaulle in Warsaw, sparked considerable social controversy and the question was raised as to whether this installation should be left standing at Jerusalem Avenue. In the opinion poll carried out in October 2003 by the SMG/KRC Market and Opinion Research Institute, 75% of the city residents were in favour of leaving this installation at Jerusalem Avenue. The installation, which was eventually taken over by the city authorities, remained in place and became one of the most popular tourist attractions of the capital city.

The artist realized her spectacular project entitled *The Rose Passage* in Łódź (Fig. 1–2). It was carried out in a narrow backyard at 3 Piotrowska Street, where the building of the former Polish Hotel from the mid-19th century is located. Having been abandoned at the beginning of the 20th century, it was turned into a municipal tenement after World War II. Forgotten and not renovated for years, the building was eventually added to the *Mia100 Kamienic* project (The City of Tenements), which aimed to restore the monuments of Łódź's architecture to their former splendour. The tenement house was revitalized with the support of many municipal institutions and contractors, namely the city authorities, the Academy of Fine Arts, architectural and design studios and donors.



Fig. 1. The Rose Passage, photo: Andrew Dixon, courtesy of Joanna Rajkowska



Fig. 2. The Rose Passage, photo: Andrew Dixon, courtesy of Joanna Rajkowska

In order to emphasize this joint effort, a commemorative plaque at the entrance to the backyard lists all people, companies and institutions that contributed to the renovation of the tenement. In the years 2013–2014, the artist and a group of students covered the walls of the building with pieces of mirrors, thus creating a very impressive façade which is to attract the city inhabitants and tourists. The creation of a communication route between Zachodnia Street and Piotrowska Street was to help directing the human traffic towards the latter. After the opening of the *Manufaktura* shopping centre, Piotrowska Street lost its rank as the main public space in Łódź and it is *The Rose Passage* that aims to strengthen this function [11].

The most famous Rajkowska's project, i.e. *The Oxygenator*, was carried out by the Warsaw Centre of Contemporary Art at Ujazdowski Castle and it was presented on a green square at Plac Grzybowski in Warsaw from July to September 2007. It was a pond placed in the middle of the lawn, arranged among greenery and ornamental shrubs with water lilies on the surface and fitted with special air-ozonating and fog-creating equipment. It was surrounded by seats for visitors designed by Michał Kwasięborski. Plac Grzybowski is a specific place on the map of the capital city. Initially, it was a crossroads of roads leading to Ujazdowski Castle, Służewiec village and The Old Town. In 1650, Jan Grzybowski, the Governor of the Warsaw District, founded the Jurydyka of Grzybów there and this place was changed into a marketplace. In the years 1861–1883, the monumental All Saints' Church was built according to the design by Henryk Marconi. In the interwar period, Plac Grzybowski became the centre of a commercial district inhabited mainly by Jews. During the occupation, it was included in the Jewish Ghetto and became a place of fierce fighting in 1944 during the Warsaw Uprising. In 1945, it was already a ruin along with the preserved Próżna Street and the partially destroyed church. Hence, this place is marked by a typical of Warsaw and unrecovered trauma of the Jewish society, i.e. the trauma of the Ghetto. After the war, Plac Grzybowski was surrounded by blocks of flats and high-rise office buildings and it was running into ruins constituting the so-called *no man's land*. Rajkowska's installation provided the inhabitants with a place of recreation as she said herself: "The project is to enable the meeting of various communities, inhabitants and guests at Plac Grzybowski. It is an attempt to create this summer a two-month utopian enclave of fresh air, the centre of which will be designated by the pond in the middle of the lawn. *The Oxygenator* is to be an oasis of clean, ozonized air in the heart of the city, where people being near one another and breathing the same air will be able to feel that *neighbourhood* is possible, even though it is only momentary. It is to be a place of meeting without negotiating the terms or probably even deprived of an element of communication. It is just sitting together on a bench by the pond and breathing oxygenated air." The project met with great resonance from the local community, perfectly stressed its needs and integrated the residents in the fight to leave

The Oxygenator in place. This action forced the city authorities to develop the square in a similar way, conduct its revitalization and make it a place of recreation and meetings [10].

Numerous actions of the artist Julita Wójcik point to the basic need of aestheticization and caring for the nearest area. In 2000, she constructed My Garden on the lawn between the carriageways of Władysław IV Street in Gdynia. It was a flower bed of a few metres, which the artist cultivated carefully and where she organized picnics. In the centre of Zielona Góra, Wójcik created a small water reservoir, *The Pond*, being an element associated with the comfort of home gardens. On Gradowa Mountain in Gdańsk, the artist placed a blue sandbox with white clouds painted on it just next to the monumental steel cross towering over the city (*The Sandbox with a View*). Her action conducted in the destroyed Schopenhauer Park in Gdańsk-Orunia gained considerable notice in media. The park was established in the 18th century by Andrzej Schopenhauer, Artur Schopenhauer's grandfather, next to the non-extant family manor and it was to be made available to the public. Wójcik's controversial action consisted in grazing goats being borrowed from the local zoo. The presence of the animals attracted parents with children and strollers. At the same time, media coverage sparked interest in the problems of this part of the city. As a result of these actions, the city authorities developed plans of revitalising the park [9].

The Modraszek Collective [Modraszek- Polish name for Scarce Large Blue butterfly] is a social movement which emerged in spring 2011 on the initiative of four artists: Monika Drożyńska, Cecylia Malik, Justyna Koeke and Karolina Kłos (Fig. 3–4). The movement was created as a response to the plans of the City Council in Cracow according to which the area of Zakrzówek was to be used by a private investor for a residential estate. This posed a threat to the habitats of the legally protected Scarce Large Blue butterfly (*Phengaristeleius*) which has characteristic blue coloration of the wings. *The Modraszek* project was compatible with a relatively strong development of social initiatives which aimed to increase the influence of the residents on the way the city was administered. Many of such socio-artistic projects were established in Cracow with the aim of changing the city by drawing the attention to social issues (*The Urban Project*, *The Salt Project*, *The Strupek Art Group* or *The Silnia Artistic Group*). The creators of the collective, called *Modraszek's mothers*, belonged to a group of artists intervening in public space. Karolina Kłos co-founded *The Tank of Culture* problematizing the revitalization of Zabłocie in Cracow, Monika Drożyńska with her campaign entitled *Sewing a Local Cultural Centre* contributed to saving the local cultural centre in Wola Duchacka in Cracow while Justyna Koeke and Cecylia Malik were responsible for the *Smoleńsk Street 22/8* project, which addressed the issue of displacement of tenants and gentrification [6].



Fig. 3. The Modraszek Collective, Zakrzówek, photo: Bogdan Krężel, courtesy of Cecylia Malik and Justyna Koeke



Fig. 4. The Modraszek Collective, Kraków, photo: Mateusz Torbus, courtesy of Cecylia Malik and Justyna Koeke

Among other things, the collective organized *The Gathering of Modraszek Butterflies* in Zakrzówek and a manifestation in front of the City Hall, both under the slogan “ You can also be a butterfly, paint your wings with blue acrylic”. Numerous residents of Cracow participated in these two events. The action in defence of Zakrzówek was widely recognized due to its humorous and expressive form created by the artists. The people showing solidarity with the actions of the collective expressed it by wearing blue wings on their arms. In the defense of Zakrzówek, the artists also took advantage of public space by attaching wings to monuments in Cracow. In order to get people involved in *the fight*, Justyna Koeke prepared special films that were accessed online and gave instructions on how to make necessary props, act and play at the manifestation. For the same purpose, workshops on how to make characteristic wings were organized as well. Shy people were encouraged to other forms of solidarity such as wearing blue clothes or preparing cardboard butterflies. Monika Drożyńska painted takers’ nails in blue to enable them to show solidarity with *Modraszek* on a daily basis. The action developed dynamically, mainly due to the social media. Supporters of the collective changed their profile photos in the social media and shared links to the event blog. Thanks to the powerful and visual influence, the action quickly attracted the attention of local and national media. The collective is both an original citizens’ initiative and an artistic performance lasting for a few months. As a result of its actions, the City Council of Cracow partly changed its plans of developing the area of Zakrzówek and made it available to the residents [13].

In the era of digital revolution, the creators of culture do not have to be professionals anymore. At the same time, all over the world, more and more individuals are taking responsibility for their city. The topic of social participation is on everyone’s lips. It is one of the priorities of the European Commission for the European Capital of Culture for the years 2005–2019. Involving citizens in the preparatory process constituted a valid element of Pécs’s and Wrocław’s applications for the European Capital of Culture. Long-term Goals of the European Capital of Culture Wrocław 2016 were access to culture and participation:

- Citizens will co-create culture, and will benefit from its variety without limits;
- They will have easier access to both cultural and educational programmes;
- Public space, friendly for social activities and shaping pro-social and civic attitudes, will be created, noticed, described or found.

Throughout the year 2016 in Wrocław carried out several projects, which assumed audience participation: Chór Komentujących Wrocławian, Rebel Babel Ensemble, project microGRANTY, project Cultural Pavilions and other initiatives.

The project „Wrocław – Entrance from the courtyard” was created in 2013 in the Department of Art Mediation of the Academy of Fine Arts in Wrocław. In 2015 and 2016 was part of the visual arts program of the European Capital of

Culture Wrocław 2016, which was curated by Michał Bieniek. From 2017, it will be implemented by the Public Art Studio of the Wrocław Academy of Fine Arts in cooperation with other cultural institutions and institutions. The project involves performing artistic interventions in neglected areas of Wrocław, especially in the backyards. Artists working in a given space worked with the inhabitants so that the solutions worked out were a common negotiated work. The aim of the project was to awaken awareness and responsibility for its surroundings. Simultaneously, residents of the area were stimulated to participate in activities. The organizers wanted to reach the audience directly and to meet the audience directly with the artists.

The prelude to the planned activities was deepened description of the situation created by the Wrocław sociologists cooperating with the Society for Creative Initiatives "ę", Katarzyna Wala and Bartłomiej Lisa, who conducted a study on selected backyards Wrocław. Their effect was formulated in the form of a report, which tries to answer the question: how to prepare participatory action?

The project is based on the interaction and the joint action of artists and residents. The coordinators of the program selected and invited to Wrocław about 40 artists who create in different styles and techniques, used different poetics. Their actions realized on the neglected, forgotten Wrocław backyards. Some projects had a temporary character, because they were focused on cooperation, which ends film showing or video installation. Others were specific, durable installation (garden, tree house, mural). During the project, the artists worked for 30 yards. Below there are described selected projects.

The *Urban gardens* located between Ptasia and Kręta Streets arose in the course of negotiations with the residents of the backyards. Generally, the residents asked for more greenery – especially the kind that would climb the building walls covering unsightly inscriptions and restoration of the walls. The parents also called for a clear separation between recreational and parking space, the introduction of better lighting at night, construction children's playground and a sports field. The process of public consultation resulted in the project of flower beds and installation which enables cultivation of plants. Moreover, the backyards got cleaned up and refreshed thanks to the help of the locals all plants were chosen to be resistant to extreme weather conditions the garden is designed to look its best all-year round. The choice of colours in the backyard was also of great importance – it refers to the hues of Wrocław's football team (Śląsk Wrocław), as the majority of the inhabitants of the backyard were great fans. The authors of the project were architect Tomasz Bojć, the landscape architect Agnieszka Bocheńska and artist Patryk Stolarz, who has done mural.

The installation designed by Dominika Sobolewska, was built on a rectangular lawn located between the two buildings belonging to housing communities. Undeveloped lawn is crossed by paths trodden by the locals. Measure the artist is a reaction to the lack of any functional elements, allowing for integration of

passers-by and residents of the yard. At the intersection of paths built *Zigurat*. A tower platform built with 24 benches refers to the shape of Mesopotamian sacred buildings, encouraging passers-by to spend some time in the backyard.

The most popular project aimed at children is *The Hedgehog* by Iza Rutkowska (Fig. 5–6). The project consisted of a series of animation activities including an 8-foot inflatable hedgehog made of durable, colourful material. The hedgehog made summer meetings pleasant – people could lie down on it, jump on it or even rest on his protruding spikes.

Starting from 2016, Iza Rutkowska was carrying out *The Backyard's Keeper* project in the district of Praga in Warsaw, which aimed to initiate the revitalization of a selected place located in the quarter of Konopacka, Strzelecka, Środkowa and Stalowa streets. In 2016, animation actions were jointly conducted by the residents of the backyard, local activists, urban planners and architects, employees of the District Council and the City Council and members of the international project entitled *PA Culture*. This action assumed long-term cooperation on improving the space of the backyard. Its most characteristic element and an animation tool was a giant inflatable sausage dog at which children used to play and adults met as well. The whole action involved the following elements: integration events (Iza Rutkowska, Ludwika Ignatowicz), working over the project of the backyard space development (Paweł Jaworski), research work, documentation and the evaluation of the whole process (dr hab. Paweł Możdżyński). As part of this action, School of Practical Sciences was



Fig. 5. The Hedgehog, photo: Maciej Landsberg, courtesy of Iza Rutkowska



Fig. 6. The Hedgehog, photo: Maciej Landsberg, courtesy of Iza Rutkowska

established in 2017 and architecture students conducted urban workshops there. In 2018, the city authorities accepted the documentation of the project concept for the backyard revitalization developed by the team (Iza Rutkowska, Paweł Jaworski, students of School of Practical Sciences, residents). Financial resources were reserved for the renovation and the responsibility for managing the backyard area during the renovation was delegated to the Urban Greenery Board of Warsaw. The project entitled *Neighbours' Backyard in the District of Nowa Praga* was submitted by the residents to the Participatory Budget in the capital city of Warsaw and its realization was voted through [5].

3. Summary

The discussed examples show that participatory art started gaining popularity in Poland and it has gradually become an almost mass phenomenon. It accompanies both spontaneous actions resulting from a joint cooperation of different people as well as planned undertakings initiated by cultural institutions or local government authorities. In the latter case, it should be noted that acting at the request of authorities is incompatible with the original idea of politically engaged art aiming to focus on the problems of discriminated groups. Acting in public space often obliges to obtain necessary permissions and hence to gain authorities' acceptance for given actions.

This is particularly apparent in revitalization processes, in which the activity of cultural institutions, location of art studios and the creative sector change the image of a degraded district. The discussed artistic activities allow for the diagnosis of social processes, consolidate the local community, build acceptance for the conducted changes and attract media coverage and thus they *relieve* authorities of numerous obligations. It was already in the mid-1970s that such practices started to be financed on a planned basis in Great Britain by a national institution, namely Arts Council. Currently, supporting and controlling participatory art by authorities has become a common phenomenon, the proof of which is a handbook entitled *Community Arts Workbook* published by Ontario Arts Council and similar publications [15].

An important issue is an attitude of artists themselves as to what extent they are aware of applied means and expected aims? Do undertaken actions reflect their political attitude? To what extent do these actions are based on their sense of social responsibility and to what extent are they just the next step in their career? Since obtaining a grant for social activities is more broadly available, there is a strong motivation to undertake such actions regardless of individual creative intentions. Then such practice in the artists' career would be a one-time escape and an enrichment of the traditional model of working in studio, but not a decision resulting from their convictions to change their method of artistic work and move towards the so-called *post-studio practice*. Irrespective of these *dangers*, the discussed examples show that it is possible to act in solidarity for the overall common good.

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Przesłano do redakcji: 29.06.2020 r.