

Being an artist: a profession or a vocation? Socially engaged art by Joanna Rajkowska

Regina Kulig¹

¹University of Wrocław
- Poland

Abstract The problem of the condition of artists in Poland is rarely addressed in public debate, which is particularly surprising in the world of growing disproportion between rapid development of the art market (the number of galleries, rising prices of auctioning) and still financially unstable and difficult situation of artists. The paper attempts to look at the economic and social status of Polish artists through the analysis of the artistic work of a Polish artist Joanna Rajkowska who tries to find her position in the socio-economic system, without giving up her creative activity. At the end of the paper the author will try to answer the question whether socially engaged art can bring about major changes in the system of financing art.

Index Terms — artists, material situation, socially engaged art, creators' work market, Joanna Rajkowska

I. INTRODUCTION

A report prepared for the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage (Białynicka-Birula, 2008) on the changes that took place in the cultural sector in Poland in the years 1990-2007, showed that the real value of sales on the Polish auction market of paintings increased more than five times. On the website of 'Desa Unicum' Auction House it is written that in 2017, the turnover exceeded PLN 36,000,000, while the most expensive work in 2017 was purchased for PLN 3,830,000 (Anon, 2018).

Both in Poland and throughout Europe, the number of galleries, permanent and temporary exhibitions is on the rise. Various art fairs and cultural events organized in larger urban centres enjoy great popularity. The policy of cities related to investments in art is changing to respond to the growing needs of a society that is getting rich, city authorities want to make the city more attractive for visitors and promote cultural tourism (Evans, 2009) (Ginsburgh and Throsby, 2006) (Sharp, Pollock and Paddison, 2018). At the same time, with this huge increase in popularity of art and the volumes of invested capital, artists still struggle in their everyday life due to low and irregular income; they have to turn to social welfare system (for support

during the period of lack of professional activity or health insurance) which negatively affects their feeling of security now and for the future as artists frequently cannot afford to pay regular pension contributions (Białynicka-Birula, 2008).

Having said that, it is fully justified that those creators of art, who in their actions address the issue of their unequal status in the professional and social world, deserve special attention. One of the artists who undertakes this issue in her activities is Joanna Rajkowska. The artist openly manifests her disagreement and protest against social and economic reality that surrounds her. Her works are focused on social criticism and join the trend of politically engaged art, her projects are strongly connected to the public space and make references to current political situation. At the heart of her actions lies the conviction that art is more than just a commodity. As a generally accessible public good with exchangeable and aesthetic value, art can reveal a critical aspect and has the potential to bring about social change - both short and long-range (Klamer, 1997).

Financial worries trouble many artists on daily basis because projects with high critical potential, ideologically uncomfortable or aesthetically unobvious may encounter problems with implementation (Ginsburgh and Throsby, 2006). As a result, artists deciding to take this path often pay a high price for their uncompromising attitude, a price that translates into their careers and economic condition. An example of such a project was Joanna Rajkowska's *Minaret* (Przewodnik Krytyki politycznej, 2007).

Joanna Rajkowska's artistic ideas are a good illustration of a situation when critical art succeeds and fails at the same time. Using as the example Rajkowska's project *Greetings from Aleje Jerozolimskie*, the paper addresses the problem of the relationship between creative work and its economic aspect. The first part of the text is an introduction to the work of artists and their professional situation. Then, the silhouette of Joanna Rajkowska and the history of the *Greetings from Aleje Jerozolimskie* project are outlined. Finally, financial aspects of work of artists are discussed. The paper is based on desk



research supported by case study and content analysis.

II. THE PROFESSION OF AN ARTIST

Over the past dozen years, the interest of researchers in the labour market for artists has dramatically increased. As a Polish sociologist and art curator - Kuba Szreder – said "culture becomes an area not only of traditional social policy but also of economic policy (Szreder, 2010)". In numerous debates related to the situation of artists (both in Poland and in Europe) two key themes invariably appear. The first is the matter of rapidly developing art market (Pesando, 1993) (Goetzmann, Renneboog and Spaenjers, 2011) (Renneboog and Spaenjers, 2013). The second relates to the polarization connected with it - the structural problem of high unemployment rate among a large group of artists on one hand, and on the other hand, a very narrow group of shining celebrities who have achieved a great success in art (Menger, 2006). The professional situation of artists, as shown by numerous studies, is adequately characterized by the "winner-takes-it-all" model (Zorloni and Ardizzone, 2016) (Abbing, 2008). One of the last reports (Raport z badania oceniającego model finansowania kultury w Polsce oraz wspierania twórców poprzez platformy crowdfundingowe, 2017) related to the issue of financing culture in Poland, clearly shows that the current system of financing the work of artistic creators does not fulfil its assumed tasks. Small differences in talent generate huge differences in earnings, which is why artists more often than other employees are forced to take on other jobs and only a few can afford to live off art only (Menger, 2006). Employment in the field of art is difficult to find, which is why many artists accept jobs even when the remuneration is inadequate or the duties are below their qualifications (Throsby, 1994) (Steiner and Schneider, 2013). Reconciling this state of affairs is explained by the work-preference model, indicating not remuneration as the basic source of satisfaction, but the type of activity performed, compensating for economic deprivation (Throsby, 1994).

Although the problem of economic and professional condition of artists is the subject of scientific considerations, they hardly create a starting point for more thorough analyzes of Polish literature on the subject (Dąbrowska, 2013) (Dudzic and Ilczuk, 2014). The authors of the dissertations focus on the analysis of specific cases, avoiding financial aspects of creativity (Becker, 1982). Numerous problems tormenting the artistic domain appeared on the public agenda for the first time not so long ago. More and more artists/creators are able to exist only thanks to the support from the private sector, inherited property or financial aid provided by their spouse or family (Baumol and Bowen, 1966).

The artists' labour market is significantly different from the traditional labour market of other industries. It is distinguished by the role assigned to the individual attributes and values of an artist. These individual characteristics, often identified with innate talent, do not constitute a subject to a detailed economic verification, for shaping of which generally known positions or forms and sums of remuneration would be used. Art is subject to fashion and changing trends, which is directly related to

changes in tastes and expectations of the recipients, consequently artists' earnings fluctuate and their fate is exposed to precariousness (Sowa, 2011).

There is definitely more uncertainty in professions related to art creation than in other professions. The contribution of time and work invested by artists usually does not result in a good or even stable material situation, the relationship between education and remuneration is extremely unfavourable (Abbing, 2008). As it is additionally shown by the systematic analysis of censuses in the USA, the employment situation of artists deteriorates over time compared to other professions (Ginsburgh and Throsby, 2006). These are professions in which connections, help from influential "friends" or particularly effective marketing (Throsby, 2010) are much more helpful than talent in achieving a good professional position or material status.

III. SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART BY JOANNA RAJKOWSKA

Joanna Rajkowska is an artist known mainly as the author of objects, installations, public projects, films, situations and performances carried out in urban space. Her projects create a collection of both geological and architectural fantasies, artificial archaeological excavations, as well as underwater sculptures and artificial trees. Rajkowska's unrealized ideas often have the character of group social utopias. Many of her projects were born, lived and grew old in public space.

The artist was born on October 16th, 1968 in Bydgoszcz. After finishing high school in her hometown, Joanna Rajkowska went to Krakow to continue her education. In 1987 she began studies at the Jagiellonian University in the field of history of art. A year later, she started studying at the Faculty of Painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow. In 2007, she received the prestigious Passport of Polityka award for "extraordinary projects carried out in public space, for reaching out to a human being wandering around the city (Anon, n.d.)". In 2010, she received the Grand Prize of the Culture Foundation for her lifetime achievement. Privately, Rajkowska is the mother of a girl whose name is Róża. Currently, the artist lives and works in London and Warsaw.

Joanna Rajkowska can be counted among the most important contemporary Polish artists. As a creator, she has a unique ability to transform personal experiences into political and public events. Her artistic practice is to bring everyday existence or trivial incidents to be visible in a social context. Using various media, she works most often in public spaces. Through small interventions and context changes, she reveals a field of tension in which social or ethnic conflicts and discrepancies are generated. For the main purpose of her activities, Rajkowska sets herself a place, a territory in which people will be obliged to re-create relationships and emotional ties and to define their position in relation to a given place.

The most recognized performance of Joanna Rajkowska is the 2002 work *Greetings from Aleje Jerozolimskie*. This project took the form of a public sculpture set in the city space. The objects grafted in the urban tissue, both strange to the native landscape: a palm tree and an artificial pond over which the

ozone fog (Oxygenator from 2007) rises, have turned into an attempt to create new social rites, to omit the language in an interpersonal communication and draw attention to an individual, as well as to determine the place and function of a person living in an urban environment.

Joanna Rajkowska, through her art, tries to provoke social change and raise the universal awareness (Rajkowska. *Przewodnik krytyki politycznej*, n.d.), she attempts to transform the closed, Polish society and the system that rules it. Rajkowska does not affect recipients directly, but subliminally, beyond their awareness- she shocks, changes the mentality and does not allow the recipients to forget her. Of course, it is difficult to expect spectacular effects caused by, for example, a palm tree set in the centre of a capital city, but widening the horizons and sensitizing even individuals or small groups can become a leaven for social change.

IV. GREETINGS FROM ALEJE JEROZOLIMSKIE

The appearance of a life-size artificial palm tree placed on the de Gaulle Roundabout at Aleje Jerozolimskie in Warsaw is the result of numerous reflections of the artist following her trip to Israel, which took place in 2001 and which became even more important after her return – when she was confronted with reality, history and topography of the capital. The genesis of the avenue's name and its connection with the forgotten Jewish complicity in the creation and functioning of Warsaw, were extremely important to Joanna Rajkowska.

The name of the avenue 'Aleje Jerozolimskie' comes from the late eighteenth century when a Polish aristocrat - August Sułkowski, founded in Warsaw a settlement for a Jewish population. The settlement was called New Jerusalem, the nearby road leading to the Vistula River received the name Jerusalem Road, later it was changed to the Jerusalem Avenue. Unfortunately, the settlement survived only two years. Due to the fact that the New Jerusalem was too prosperous, in 1774 Warsaw craftsmen and merchants sued Sulkowski. Subsequently, all his goods were confiscated, Jewish houses were demolished and their inhabitants were dispersed. However, the name of the street remained, except for the period of the Nazi regime when it was called Bahnhofstrasse (Rajkowska. *Przewodnik krytyki politycznej*, n.d.). Today, the name of the street has been completely absorbed by the language, to the extent that it is impossible to recognize it in the context of Jewish history in Poland. Rajkowska decides, however, to bring the Jewish issues to the forefront again - a fragment of our past that has been suppressed and completely blocked out of the general consciousness. Setting the palm tree in Aleje Jerozolimskie she intended to help the public re-learn and re-discover what already appeared to be tamed (Dzido, 2004), although it is difficult to refer to a phenomenon that is not mentioned and which is not commented upon.

The process of creating the palm tree was an extremely difficult and problematic undertaking, at the same time it was difficult to predict what the reaction to *Greetings from Aleje Jerozolimskie* will be and whether residents of Warsaw will be able to accept something so different and exotic. Unfortunately,

it turned out that: "in one fell swoop, the demon of anti-Semitism was awakened and the right-wing attachment to the ritual Christian values could be struck on (Dzido, 2004)". Not only the reactions of ordinary passers-by were sceptical, but also the project was negatively received by the world of art - the palm tree was received with complete silence. The project was seen rather as a public spectacle aimed at getting publicity in the media than true art.

With time, the palm began to live its own life. Due to the fact that it was in public space, people began to attribute various meanings to it. The project divided Varsovians and all Poles into those who wanted a country open to change, responding to human needs, and those who preferred a closed Poland with a traditional, rigid structure i.e. people who were unfavourable to foreigners, migrations and all kinds of changes. When asked about this issue Rajkowska said:

I knew that entering the public space would have to do with the richness of contexts, a million narratives, conflicts, and visions. An attempt to introduce to this variety one more thread, one more meaning is doomed to failure. The only thing I could do was to propose a certain frame within the limits of which people would establish their own narratives (Dzido, 2004).

V. THE ISSUE OF FINANCING THE PROJECT

The palm tree, an Israeli afterimage of Joanna Rajkowska, was financed mainly with the money obtained from German sponsors and one Norwegian company which decided to invest in the artist's idea. Although it was not possible to collect a full amount (she received only 28.5 thousand dollars and needed a few more thousand), the artist decided to take a risk and began the process of setting the palm tree in the centre of Warsaw (Rajkowska. *Przewodnik krytyki politycznej*, n.d.).

Unfortunately, financial problems with the palm tree did not end with its creation, quite the opposite, the budget difficulties hit with twice as much strength. Under the influence of a very strong breeze, the leaves, which were made of green foil attached with tape to a PVC rod, were deformed, broken and, consequently, the palm tree was consistently "getting bald." Due to the fact that production of the tree consumed all the money that the artist had at her disposal, she decided to ask the Municipal Roads Authority for permission to put an advertising banner on the palm tree. In this way, the tree could "pay its own way". An eager advertiser was found quickly and the proceeds from this advertisement would save the project. Unfortunately, the permit was not granted due to a regulation stating that trademarks cannot be placed at a distance of 50 meters from the center of the roundabout (Rajkowska. *Przewodnik krytyki politycznej*, n.d.).

Over time, the project began to generate more and more debts. In the first year of the project implementation, the above mentioned Municipal Roads Authority issued invoices for a total sum of over PLN 10,000. The amount was too high to handle for the Institute for the Promotion of Art, which is the legal guardian of the tree. In the media appeared information about the removal of the indebted palm tree. Having heard this, the Palm Defence Committee (consisting of prof. Michał

Czajkowski, Urszula Dzdziak, Krystyna Janda, Bogusław Kaczyński, Krystyna Kofta, Kazimierz Kutz, Agnieszka Morawińska, Michał Ogórek, Anda Rottenberg, Andrzej Samson, Tomasz Sikora, Tomasz Stańko and staff of 'Duży Format' magazine) asked the authorities of the capital to exempt the project from the rent and to change its category from the "road object" to "public sculpture" which does not require additional fees. In addition, it was requested to relieve the debt already incurred and grant any allowance that would keep the palm tree alive (Rajkowska. Przewodnik krytyki politycznej, n.d.).

In 2004, Joanna Rajkowska sent an official letter to the President of Warsaw, Lech Kaczyński, with the proposal to hand over the palm tree to the city. Unfortunately, there was absolutely no reaction to her proposal. The writing was on the wall for the project. The palm tree became an illegal object, and due to the lack of financial means, it was necessary to remove the already destroyed leaves. However, the palm supporters did not give up. Despite freezing cold weather, a group of people wearing swimming costumes and sunglasses started collecting money to save the palm tree. Signatures were also given under the petition to president L. Kaczyński. Here is a fragment of it:

We would like to express our attachment to the palm tree at the de Gaulle roundabout in Warsaw, i.e. the project "Greetings from Aleje Jeruzolimskie" by Joanna Rajkowska. For us, the residents and guests of Warsaw, the palm tree at the de Gaulle roundabout got permanently inscribed in the city landscape. It is a landmark similarly recognizable as Rotunda or the Palace of Culture; it is one of the symbols of the capital, only slightly more contrary and absurd. The palm tree brings to the dark and sometimes gloomy Warsaw a ray of joy and plenty of positive feelings. It also has a representative function.

(...) We, the undersigned, ask you for the financial support for Joanna Rajkowska's project "Greetings from Aleje Jeruzolimskie" and for the possibility of leaving the palm tree at the de Gaulle roundabout (Pozdrowienia z Alej Jeruzolimskich, n.d.).

In 2012, on the occasion of opening of Euro 2012, a huge football with sponsors' logos was placed right next to the palm tree, without the consent of the artist, who was the only owner of this artistic project. It should be remembered that until recently the city authorities had refused the artist to place an advertisement on the palm tree citing Polish law, which as can be seen in this example, turns out to be very flexible. As a part of the protest, Rajkowska decided to pull the leaves from the palm tree, and additionally on the trunk of the tree she hanged a banner with the eloquent words: "Bread instead of circuses" (Gazeta Wyborcza, n.d.). In one of the interviews, the artist explained:

While billions of Polish zlotys are spent on the organization of a football tournament, spendings on basic social needs are being cut down all over Poland. Kindergartens, schools and community centres are closed; fees for nurseries, public transport and housing are rising. (...) Food, gas, electricity, fuel, water and medicines prices have been raised considerably. (...) Local governments sell more municipal property than they build, while carrying out evictions. (...) The dramatic lack of

affordable housing and mass evictions are only a part of the costs associated with servicing huge cities' debts. The palm tree has been a left-wing tribune for a long time, from which the voice is much more audible because it acts like an exclamation mark. The journalists bemoan the fact that what they considered to be public property turned out to be a "private" project. I am left speechless. They should be sent to the city authorities with a question about the future of the palm tree (Gazeta Wyborcza, n.d.).

Formally, the palm tree is still not owned by the city. For over 16 years, the artist has been paying for its maintenance from her own money. According to the recently passed local land and city management plan, the de Gaulle roundabout in Warsaw is to be liquidated and eventually replaced by an intersection. In the above mentioned plan an entry related to the preservation of the palm tree in the public space of the city has been added, but without indicating the new place for its installation (Gazeta Stołeczna, 2017).

VI. CONCLUSIONS

Contemporary artists are constantly looking for new ways and keys to define themselves as creators, while at the same time they are trying to improve their position in the socio-economic system without giving up their artistic activity. Joanna Rajkowska, despite numerous problems related to subsidies or ways of financing her activity, remains faithful to her socially engaged art, addressing issues which are not comfortable for everyone. The artist often exposes herself to exclusion from the circle of creators supported by public funds.

It happens every so often that artists like Joanna Rajkowska are forced to co-finance their creative ideas with private funds (Rengers and Madden, 2000). Culture creators who seek financial help through crowdfunding and e-patronage websites, say they are nowadays disregarded in the distribution of public funds for artistic activity. This opinion is confirmed by research showing that public subsidies affect the strengthening of the position of the stars and the art market model, in which the winner-takes-it-all, in the public and private sectors (Rengers and Plug, 2001). It would be possible to draw a conclusion about potentially positive impact of the lack of financial support from public funds, but it is known that high or niche art e.g. poetry, symphonic music or experimental art could not survive without support of the state. On one hand, programmes financing artistic activity that reproduce the winner-takes-all model should still exist; on the other, the government ought to support smaller, unrecognized creators, "protect potential but uncertain talents" (Menger, 2006) through appropriate schemes. Attention must undoubtedly be paid to ensure the appreciation of work of artists, including financial gratification, via a precise policy aimed at educating and creating the taste in schools, among potential future recipients, consumers and patrons, and through inviting art into everyday life of people (Ginsburgh and Throsby, 2006).

But there is a question: "does art have the right to interfere with social life, politics and everyday life?" And if so: "what effects does it bring?" According to Piotr Piotrowski, art itself

should become involved and take responsibility for every citizen living in the system of power and manoeuvre (Piotrowski, 2010). This would allow to say that people really need art in their everyday life. Accepting challenges and tasks resulting from current problems and socio-political conflicts, and at the same time possessing historical self-awareness and the desire to participate in the creation of a new history, is today extremely needed. Art that is able to provoke and encourage change can truly affect the social life of people who come in direct contact with it. The case of Joanna Rajkowska, a creator who is recognizable and appreciated, yet still encountering problems in the implementation of her work, makes us conclude that engaged art seems to, in some cases, negatively affect the financial condition of artists and their path to fame and recognition. Consequently, the question asked in the title of the paper whether art is a profession or vocation for artists, should be answered in the context of the creator of *Greetings from Aleje Jerozolimskie*: art is both - the source of income as well as the vocation.

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