

## BERLIN ART BRIEF

Alexander Forbes' take on Berlin beyond the hype

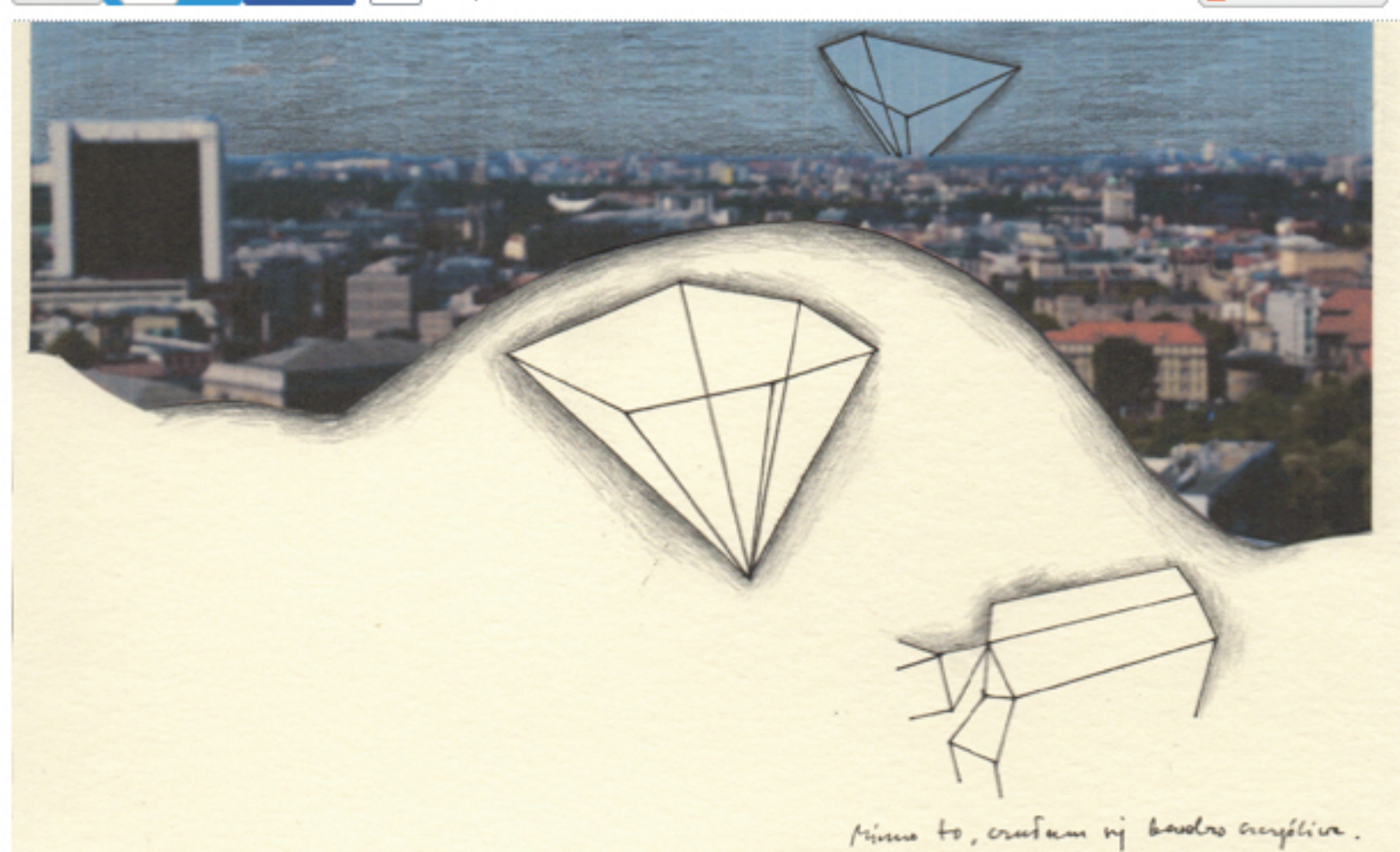


MAY 18, 2012, 5:49 PM

### Rosa is my Gift to Berlin: Joanna Rajkowska Makes a Baby Art

[Pin it](#) [144](#) [veet](#) [Like](#) [1](#) [0](#) Comments

SHARE



by Sidsel Seeberg

History is omnipresent in the spaces around us. If one person experiences a traumatic event they may shun the location of the incident, but if the trauma is collective the urge to avoid these charged coordinates will be collective as well, resulting in places that are either deserted, altered or institutionalized in museums. Contemporary Polish artist **Joanna Rajkowska** refers to these as the wounds of a city, and with her latest project "Born in Berlin – A Letter to Rosa" currently on show at **Żak|Branicka**, she turns her focus to the wounds of Berlin.

In Rajkowska's oeuvre, the line between artistic practice and personal life is fine as silk. It seems no event is too personal and no political issue too charged for Rajkowska to share it, confront it, touch it, however she always manages to do so with a certain delicate sense of poetry.

The exhibition, "Born in Berlin – A Letter to Rosa," is indeed personal at first glance. Centered on Rajkowska's decision to come to Berlin to give birth to her daughter, the exhibition is a communication between mother and child: "It's addressed to Rosa, to my daughter. I try to explain why I did it, why I brought myself here with my baby bump, and why I gave birth here in Berlin. I ask her for permission in a way, for forgiveness," she says; "I wanted to plant her here like a little plant, like Rosa, in this Berlin soil."

The project came about in 2010 when **Artur Żmijewski**, curator of the **Berlin Biennale**, contacted Rajkowska, with a proposition for a collaboration. Rajkowska agreed with a conflicting feeling of simultaneously fitting and not fitting within the framework of the biennale and no clear vision yet of what form the project would take. Being at the early stage of her pregnancy, it gradually dawned on Rajkowska that this life growing inside her was something powerful and something she wanted to share. "Artur was very much involved in this decision, but we decided that there is nothing more that I can do. Even a public project, which I was ready to produce, wouldn't be comparable with the fact that I can bring life here, and we decided that this would be the project," she explains.

The exhibition is comprised of two parts. The first is a film in which Rajkowska takes her unborn child on a tour around the traumatized locations of Berlin. The second is a series of a hundred photographs, drawings, and collages, initially imagined as a storyboard for the film but which eventually acquired a life of their own. When touring the collages and photos of childbirth, the exhibition feels intimately personal and almost diary-like, but it is the symbolism of the actions in relation to places and the histories of these places that is the actual story. I always work in the public space," she explains; "I work it in a highly political context, because I choose places that are charged politically or socially or they are simply traumatized, but there is always a reason for that and it's always political, but I use non-political language."

That Berlin is a charged or traumatized place is undeniable. However, walking in the cobbled streets of the city on a sunny day, one easily forgets. With gentrification happening at high speed, Rajkowska likens the city to a middle aged man in an expensive suit: outwardly doing well but simultaneously worn down from illness and personal struggles, tired and without the language to address what he has been through. According to her, the city, however blooming, is still ripe with taboos: "Berlin cannot find the language, but instead of trying to find the language, you see these monuments popping out everywhere, and I don't think this is it. It doesn't solve anything, it institutionalizes the memory and makes it completely inaccessible. This is the problem. You can't talk about it in a brave way, in a way that is not abruptly unpolitical. You cannot transform it."

With her project, Rajkowska systematically seeks out the wounds of Berlin in an attempt to enter into a dialogue with the history of the city. "You have to be able to touch it. You have to be able to have a lively contact with it", she says with reference to historical taboo. In this spirit, Rajkowska ventured with her daughter to the former Stasi prison in Hohenschönhausen with the intention of spending a night in one of the cells. However, she says she was met with discouragement: "I thought, a new-born baby and me on this bed with this stench of piss: that would be ideal to lift the spell," she says, "and this guy said to me in a really cold voice, he spoke to me like a prisoner, he said: 'This is your private matter, there is no link between the prison and the baby'. And I said: 'This is precisely why I want to do it, the situation is based on the difference'."

What Rajkowska advocates is an abrogation of this divide between private and public matter and the idea that collective traumas are beyond the reach of the individual. "How can you live in a place where you cannot change anything? I mean, the starting point of most of my projects is a feeling of helplessness, that I can't do much.," she explains; "the only thing I can offer is these strictly physical structures that turn people towards each other in some way that doesn't fit within social rituals, Beyond ritual. And then they will have to invent a new ritual of completely different communication."

Daring to talk about something traumatic is linked to a sense of ownership. Talking about one's own traumas feels legitimate, however difficult it may be, while the traumas of others are taboo. Rajkowska is not native to Berlin, yet she takes ownership of its traumas, not by making sense of them but by touching them with the greatest gift in her power; the gift of Rosa, the gift of life. Rosa is named not only after Rajkowska's great grandmother Róża, "the bourgeois wife of a rich dentist," she calls her, but also Polish revolutionary **Rosa Luxemburg** who Rajkowska admires for her independent political mind and civil courage. Whether Rosa will live up to her name is not the essence, the essence is that Rajkowska has set created a symbolic base from which things can develop.

For Rajkowska, most of the art happens after her work is done. Rosa will grow and Berlin will develop in ways that are out of her mother's hands. "Because I work with body, they are long lasting projects. The day of birth was not as significant as the consequences that this gesture might have in the future, let's say in twenty years' time, so I'm kind of an underground artist who initiates a situation and puts certain content into motion, she says; "it's not my part to even watch the consequences. I leave it completely to others to handle the consequences of the project."

Still she hopes that her actions will have touched something, in her daughter and in Berlin alike, explaining, "I believe in the situations which set up a completely new beginning, a beginning which is not weighed down by the history, because I myself do not feel capable of dealing with that. So she is the one, she is the one who will write down her own story of Berlin."

*"Born in Berlin – A Letter to Rosa" is part of a trilogy of exhibitions by Joanna Rajkowska currently on view: "Born in Berlin – A Letter to Rosa" at ŻAK | BRANICKA Gallery through June 16, "Born in Berlin and Final Fantasies" and die Akademie der Künste through July 1, and "Sumpfstadt" at the Polish Institute through 31 August.*

Tags: [Berlin Biennale](#), [Joanna Rajkowska](#), [Sidsel Seeberg](#), [Żak | Branicka](#)