Int J Polit Cult Soc (2010) 23:201–211
DOI 10.1007/s10767-010-9100-x

The Plastic Palm and Memories in the Making: Conceptual Art Work on Warsaw's Jerusalem Avenue

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Published online: 28 July 2010

Abstract In 2001, Joanna Rajkowska, a Polish contemporary artist, made a trip to Israel, after which she decided to make people aware of the significance of Warsaw's Jerusalem Avenue [Aleje Jerozolimskie], one of the Polish capital's main streets. She intended to point out the street's history in a vacuum, as she claimed, caused by the absence of Jewish community after World War II. She "planted" an artificial palm tree—in her view a plant typical of Jerusalem streets—in the middle of a major traffic circle in the center of Warsaw. Even though Rajkowska made a project based on "just" one of the forgotten pasts, it revealed a whole new potential for "other" pasts in that particular space, which suddenly became impossible to be taken for granted as they had been before. Furthermore, the artist opened a new social space in which pasts were brought back to interact with the present. The palm quickly became the object and symbol of much more contemporary Polish struggles: for gay rights, for nurses' wages, for liberal values, and the right to think differently. Rajkowska's palm tree managed to bring these and many other issues to the general public, to make it aware of the everyday inhabited space, to make that space visible—with all its ambiguities, different layers of meanings, interpretations of the past, and visions of the future—while transforming that very public along the way.

Keywords Public art · Memory · Poland · Jews

> … individual memory is nevertheless a part or an aspect of group memory, since each impression and each fact, even if it apparently concerns a particular person exclusively, leaves a lasting memory only to the extent that one has thought it over—to the extent that it is connected with the thoughts that come to us from the social milieu. One cannot in fact think about the events of one's past without discoursing upon them.
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> —Maurice Halbwachs

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Introduction

According to artist Joanna Rajkowska, the origins of the palm project date back to her journey to Israel in 2001. After returning to Poland, she decided she wanted to make people aware of the significance of Jerusalem Avenue [Aleje Jerozolimskie] in Warsaw and to point out the street's history in a "vacuum caused by the absence of Jewish community" (Rajkowska 2008a). Her initial idea was to "transmit a landscape" from Israel to Warsaw "to the street, whose name refers back to Israel" (Rajkowska 2008b). She wanted to plant a row of palms along Aleje Jerozolimskie—one of the busiest streets in Warsaw—plants she found emblematic of Jerusalem's streets. As that proved to be far beyond her financial means, she settled for a single palm tree in the middle of a major traffic circle. In Polish, the word "palm" refers to an expression which describes things that are unbelievable, out of this world, and to put it short, ridiculous, thus the object and its location fit perfectly.

The artificial palm tree was erected in the middle of a traffic circle in the center of Warsaw on a cold, gloomy December day in 2002. Titled "Greetings from Jerusalem Avenue," the 15-m-tall steel column, which was covered with chemically reinforced natural bark and topped with UV-resistant polyethylene leaves, was described by city officials as "the artificial date palm on the island" and originally planned as a 1-year project. Yet despite the numerous controversies it aroused, the palm tree managed to take root in the concrete intersection of Aleje Jerozolimskie (Jerusalem Avenue) and Nowy Świat (New World Street). The traffic island on which the palm is situated is maintained by the Warsaw Road Authority, which is presently considering purchasing the palm from its creator, Joanna Rajkowska. Initially referred to as a "nonroad object" by city officials who are now considering calling it a "legitimate art object located in public space," the palm has been the subject of debate between Varsovians, local authorities, and the media for over 7 years.

One might say that the time needed for the Warsaw municipality to change its mind about how to classify and deal with the palm was also the time during which Varsovians learned to accept, love, and maybe even frame the strange, alien object, originally intended as a temporary installation, with their personal interpretations of the past, present (and the future!).

The Palm's Space: Part 1

What is this public space that the palm tree invaded? It stands in the middle of the Charles de Gaulle Circle (so named in 1990), one of the busiest intersections in Warsaw. It is also in the middle of the Royal Route, a road connecting a string of historic landmarks from Poland's monarchic era, which were restored or, more often than not, rebuilt from the ground up after World War II. Around the circle, there stand, among other things: a bank (from the late 1950s to 2001 the seat of the Polish Press Agency), the Center of Banking and Finance (previously Warsaw Stock Exchange and the headquarters of the Polish United Workers' Party before that), and the Empik Megastore—a chain established in the Communist times that sells books, magazines, music, and other "cultural media." Heading east down Aleje Jerozolimskie takes one to the Poniatowski Bridge, originally built almost a century ago and named after the prince–hero nephew of the last king of Poland. Immediately north of the circle, along Nowy Świat Street, lies the main Warsaw promenade, full of shops, bars, and restaurants. Before the palm was installed, the circle was a barren space that no one noticed, except for when it was occupied for a month every year by a Christmas tree. Once erected, the palm took over the area and drew attention to the space's symbolic value.

Hidden underneath the layer of the present is the history of the avenue itself, the significance of which is easy for Varsovians to take for granted. According to Rajkowska, in an interview conducted by Jakub Dąbrowski, art critic and editor at *Arteon*, a major Polish art magazine, the origin of the name "Jerusalem Avenue" goes back to the eighteenth century when "Polish nobles Józef Potocki and August Sułkowski founded a Jewish settlement called New Jerusalem; but only two years later, when the Jews began to emerge as a too powerful competition for the gentile merchants, the settlement was pulled down, leaving the name of the road leading to it as the only reminder" (Dąbrowski 2008). To the spatial dimension—a piece of the Middle East transplanted to Central Europe—she added a temporal one, which brought the Jewish past, so easily forgotten in the midst of the other histories which have been playing out in that same space, into the present, albeit in an artificial, playful, and pretty much postmodern manner.

The ease with which the Polish people forgot about (or erased from their own memories) the Jewish portion of their past, despite having inhabited the same time and space, is described by Iwona Irwin-Zarecka in *Frames of Remembrance*. The author sees it as a result of the Poles' "own victimization during the Nazi occupation" in World War II, as their own "formative trauma" and, moreover, as a consequence of the lack of trauma associated with the disappearance of Jews from Polish society (Irwin-Zarecka 1994, p. 49, 1989). With the protruding palm tree, Rajkowska drew attention to the Jewish past: it turned out it was enough to place an exotic plant on Jerusalem Avenue and describe her idea to the public.

As if this was not enough of a historical weight, the tree was planted a day before the 21st anniversary of the proclamation of martial law in Poland. In addition, all documents concerning the palm tree were signed by the city just before a new right-wing government managed to install itself in city hall—the newly elected mayor has since become the president of Poland.

Response of the Public

The public response to the palm tree was immediate. Some claimed it was ridiculous and kitschy, others that it was absurd and beautiful. Still others thought about what the foreigners would think: "That we're some lunatics," was one of the quotes found in the dailies (Kowalska and Szczygieł 2003). Overall, people mostly loved it. Varsovians explained that the palm gave them a feeling of hope, of something fresh and new, a sense of surprise and of the unconventional. Artists and curators focused on its alienness as a way to point out the odd nature of other objects in the city, as well as how the tree drew attention to Jewish history. "The palm re-establishes the presence of the East in Warsaw, it refers to a centuries-long historical inspiration drawn from the Orient, but also a present opening towards immigration from beyond the Eastern border, markets and a nomadic temporality, the basis for existence of a major part of the newcomers," said Joanna Mytkowska, curator at the Foksal Gallery Foundation, an influential gallery focusing on contemporary Polish art (Kowalska and Szczygieł 2003).

Mytkowska's mention of "the Orient" adds still another layer of meaning to Rajkowska's project: it was not just about the Jewish past in Poland but also about the connection between Eastern and Western cultures, ties which have been in existence in Polish territory since the fifteenth century. These links have often been downplayed, especially by conservatives, who would rather emphasize the Western European and Catholic "purity" of the Polish state throughout history. But Rajkowska's original interpretation of Jerusalem as a "Jewish city" also begged for a more complex treatment: the city could just as easily be

considered Christian or Muslim. It was the artist's intention to frame the palm in an exclusively Jewish context.

The odd and absurd nature of the project, along with its very public presence, exposed it to the judgment of anyone and everyone. The freedom of interpretation the palm allowed was also understood as a "symbol of allowing yourself anything," as an anonymous writer put it (Kowalska and Szczygieł 2003). The right-wing, extremely conservative government was not very happy about the palm, among other things, because it took the place of the "traditional" Christmas tree, although as art critic Piotr Rypson astutely observed, "[the] palm is a Christian symbol over 1500 years older than our Christmas trees" (Kowalska and Szczygieł 2003). Even so, there were always those who saw the palm as a harbinger of a Jewish invasion of the city, as well as those who saw it and dreamt of warm, exotic places. And there were the traffic police who patrolled the circle, nicknamed "Miami Vice" soon after the tree was installed. Whatever the opinion—political, private, given by art critics, or by journalists—it was hard to find someone who did not have any feelings about the artificial date palm. Needless to say, the press was more than happy to join the already heated discussion.

Media Vision

Gazeta Wyborcza, the major Polish daily, enthusiastically supported the project. When a year had elapsed and the palm tree was scheduled to be pulled down, it was this newspaper that helped establish the Palm Defense Committee (Komitet Obrony Palmy) and draw up a manifesto, which was then signed by artists and journalists. The fourth and last point of the manifesto stated: "letting the palm stay will prove our openness towards … others and towards a diversity of trees, which don't necessarily need to be weeping willows" (Kowalska and Szczygieł 2003). As artists and other palm enthusiasts expressed their desire to extend the life of the artificial tree, the right-wing municipal government became less inclined to do so. This led to yet another symbolic meaning for the palm: leftism.

In *Present Past*, Andreas Huyssen writes, "media do not transport public memory innocently. They shape it in their very structure and form" (Huyssen 2000, p. 30). Indeed, the palm was easy to invest with a whole range of meanings and quickly became an object of media interest—not only for its initial novelty but also because it quickly became a "passive actor" in events eagerly covered by the press, such as the Warsaw Pride gay and lesbian parade (the actual Polish name being "Equality Parade"), which has been stirring heavily publicized controversies each year, or happenings organized by the Polish Green Party, a political party with support fluctuating around 1% of the voting population. The right-wing government's lack of enthusiasm for the palm tree, which not only meant they granted no public funding for its maintenance but also delayed making the decision to allow other people do that work instead, only reinforced the general perception of the tree as a symbol of the left. Rajkowska summed it up in one of her interviews: "The palm shifts left not by the touch of a magic wand, but because of the presence of very different people connected to left-wing groups under its leaves. Somehow it wasn't 'Młodzież Wszechpolska' [All-Polish Youth, a Polish nationalist-Catholic youth group, at the time affiliated with The League of Polish Families, one of the ruling parties] who gathered under the palm, but the Green Party and people from Le Madame [the already closed gay-friendly club in Warsaw, known for its openness towards left-wing organizations]. And it was not the listeners of Radio Maryja [Polish nationalist Catholic radio station] who circulated a letter seeking financial support to repair the palm, but *Krytyka Polityczna*

[Polish left-wing journal]" (Rajkowska 2008c). The media located the tree in a particular political context, even though the artist recognized and acknowledged that the palm had supporters from all across the political landscape. For instance, she posed the rhetorical question, "How can you explain the fact that people whose preferences can hardly be described as left-wing donate money to the palm, including a lady calling herself a 'moher' ['mohair': nickname for old ladies supporting Radio Maryja] who bought two shares for 400 zloty each [a considerable sum for a retired person]? That lady admitted it was her palm, too" (Rajkowska 2008c). Dąbrowski wrote on a similar note: "There is no hiding the fact that the Palm is closer to the Equality Parade or an artistic happening than to the military dress parade under the auspices of the President of Poland … The Palm naturally attracted nurses on strike (it was even adorned with a nurse's cap), minority-rights activists, the Greens, and the left-wing *Krytyka Polityczna* journal which helped collect funds for the renovation of the tree. The media immediately noticed that the Palm had been leaning left but, in my opinion, it had always been leaning left and only some strange coincidence could have kept it neutrally vertical" (Dąbrowski 2008).

The Palm's Space: Part 2

As time passed, the palm acquired more and more layers of meaning, extending far beyond Rajkowska's original idea. A Barthesian "mythology" of sorts (Barthes 1977) was created around the tree through accidental glances, photographs, happenings, demonstrations, and media coverage, each adding new contexts (or "connotations") and, as Dąbrowski wrote about the project, creating a "constantly changing … relationship between the signifier and the signified." Its "original semantic field was marked … by a serious question about the memory of the city's complex, traumatic past, and on the other hand, by the ironic, or perhaps even oneiric, act of placing a plastic palm tree in the middle of Warsaw's winter landscape" (Dąbrowski 2008). The "mythology" associated with the palm tree came about as the result of a whole new set of meanings related to the space the palm occupied, although one could argue that these meanings were merely rediscovered. It was not just a strange object in the middle of a traffic circle, but a trigger of sorts, one which initiated the emergence of a whole new public sphere—a space in which contrasting understandings of art, politics, and most importantly, of the past could be formulated and voiced.

The remaining question is: Would these complex, multilayered memories have been revived without the appearance of the palm? Would the absence of the Jews have become apparent were it not for Rajkowska's intentional linking of this particular tree with that particular street? Would her artwork have received so much media attention if not for the meanings she invested it with, meanings that could not be ignored, in this way emphasizing their validity? Was it also the space she chose, already so heavily loaded with overlooked meanings that with the appearance of the tree it became an almost meaningless cacophony (Kowalczyk 2002)? "When memory ceases to be omnipresent, it ceases to be present at all unless some isolated individual decides to assume responsibility for it" writes Pierre Nora in *Realms of Memory* (Nora 1998, p. 11). In the case of Rajkowska's palm tree, one might guess it was her initial interpretation of the project that not only brought back a particular set of pasts—eighteenth century Jewish settlements, present-day Jerusalem, etc.—but also, in a way, "created" them. In Nora's terms, Rajkowska's obligation to remember makes her own historian. Yet, while referencing a past in which Jewish merchants were visible in Polish society, she also touched upon the Polish–Jewish history in general, provoking discussions, anti-Semitic or otherwise, about the absence of Jews in Poland today, as well

as their believed omnipresence, as explained by a taxi driver: "Like my father once said, it's a symbol of Jewish victory in Warsaw, that they'll plant Jerusalem Avenue with palms" (Kowalska and Szczygieł 2003).

Moreover, "[n]o memory is possible outside frameworks used by people living in society to determine and retrieve their recollections" writes Maurice Halbwachs in *On Collective Memory*, lending a social context to Nora's "lonely" historian (Halbwachs 1980, p. 43). Indeed, the palm's high media visibility contributed to a more mainstream exposure for the ongoing discussion about the Polish–Jewish past, bringing academic debates into the sphere of popular media. At the same time, it also emphasizes Irwin-Zarecka's point about the recent interest in "the fate of Polish Jewry as a *loss*" (Irwin-Zarecka 1994, p. 49), with the emergence of Jewish culture festivals in cities across Poland and a growing interest in Yiddish and Hebrew language classes, not to mention a fairly recent explosion in individual discoveries of Jewish ancestry. Still, one must bear in mind that the past Rajkowska's project invoked was a byproduct of her own take on the present. While her project was the result of the experiences she had during her trip to Israel in 2001, as she liked to emphasize, it began to be perceived as an allusion to the past. She managed to achieve what Irwin-Zarecka calls an "articulation of memory," "a socially articulated and socially maintained 'reality of the past'" (Irwin-Zarecka 1994, p. 54). When Rajkowska pushed the palm into public view, putting an out-of-place object loaded with *her* meanings on a traffic island in the middle of Warsaw, she opened up a space for broader discussion, allowing *other* meanings to come through. The palm could then become an important symbol for a young, open-minded Warsaw public, for urban artists, for Varsovians, and for tourists visiting the city. It was also a symbol for left-wing organizations to identify with and for right-wing organizations to discredit. Its meanings could be and probably were different for each interested party.

Huyssen emphasizes that postmodern culture dwells in the present and so "suffers from amnesia." Society's collective memory is unstable and "always subject to subtle and not so subtle reconstruction" (Huyssen 1994, p. 9). Nora elaborates on the same subject by saying, "[s]ince the past can now be constructed out of virtually anything, and no one knows what tomorrow's past will hold, our anxious uncertainty turns everything into a 'trace', a potential piece of evidence, a taint of history with which we contaminate the innocence of everything we touch" (Nora 1998, p. 12, 1989). If this is the case, should the palm tree be considered a "contamination of our innocence"? If the postmodern present boils down to a lack of memory, an absence of a historical awareness of a daily frequented space *or* of awareness of the significance of a space's name, then the palm must indeed be a contaminant.

Monument to What?

"Not to worry. We already have the marketing of pasts that never existed," writes Huyssen (Huyssen 2000, p. 30, 1995, 2003), a provocative statement that applies to Rajkowska's "Greetings from Jerusalem Avenue." According to the artist, the eighteenth century Jewish settlement lasted barely more than a year and the street's name has remained as the only testimony to that brief social and mercantile experiment. One could say that the name "Jerusalem Avenue" points to the unfulfilled social potential of the past, more than the past itself. If this is so, the palm tree does not so much refer to that specific Jewish settlement as it does to the presence of Jews throughout prewar Poland. At the same time, the symbolic potentiality of the palm and a general openness of the palm's semantic field allow it to be a postmodern carrier of any meaning.

The project's ambiguous meaning is in tune with Lewis Mumford's old claim, that "[t]he notion of a modern monument is veritably a contradiction in terms: if it is a monument, it is not modern, and if it is modern, it cannot be a monument" (Mumford 1996, p. 438). According to him, it is impossible to build a modern monument that does not contradict itself: any monument erected in the modern era is too "alive" and flexible, too easy to invest with a variety of meanings, to possess the fixed references contained within a "true" monument—one built of stone and mortar and which could only have been possible in a premodern era. Rajkowska's palm is almost exactly this contradiction: it alludes to the artist's interpretation of the past, but its form is playfully artificial and the meanings it could embody are highly variable.

In that context, Nora's idea about how memorials displace memory, "relieving a community of its own, interior memory work" (Young 1994, p. 20), is a good example of Mumford's take on the modern monument. The Palm Defense Committee is a nearly perfect illustration of a community forming around the task of turning a contemporary work of art into a permanent public monument: in this case, the monument itself ceases to refer solely to the past and instead concentrates its "community's" focus on the monument's present and future. The original reason for erecting a monument, in this instance the artificial palm, may be disregarded, turning the monument into a Baudrillard-type "free-floating signifier" (Baudrillard 1983, 1990, 1998), while its meanings are produced by the publics it created.

The palm tree can also be seen as an "antimonument," as it is described by James E. Young (2000). According to him, "by themselves memorials remain inert and amnesiac, mere stones in the landscape without life or meaning. For their memory, these memorials depend completely on the visitor. Only we can animate the stone figures and fill the empty spaces of the memorial, and only then can monuments be said to remember anything at all" (Young 1994, p. 37). From this angle, the palm may be viewed as a participant in an array of left-wing demonstrations, the protesters (e.g., feminists, homosexuals, supporters of the European Union) having more than once enthusiastically claimed the palm tree as their "ally" and symbol, associating the palm with specific sets of meanings.

The palm is also an antimonument in the sense that it does not resemble "typical" statues, such as those of Pope John Paul II, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, or Marshal Piłsudski. "But it does not compete with them either," Dąbrowski notices in his article, "it is simply from another world, and from exactly what world, depends on the context and on your associations" (Dąbrowski 2008). Such contexts are located in contemporary society, within the public sphere created by the palm: the municipal political actors from different sides of the political scene; the art world and art critics; the media who sell the "story" of the palm tree; and finally, the Varsovians who have been given another symbolic object in a city already too often perceived both by visitors and residents as a monument to Polish martyrdom. But for Rajkowska, the palm is most significantly "a container for otherness," an ambiguous monument to potentiality, albeit with a historical intention. Given the artist's focus on the past, Zygmunt Bauman's claim that "tradition is the talk of the postmodern town" (Bauman 1996, p. 50) seems accurate.

(Un)political Art

After a plastic "monument to nothing" was planted in the center of the city, the public felt forced to respond. The difficulty was in dealing with an art object outside of the usual safe and hermetic gallery space. This provocative piece of art, too surprising and distinct to go unnoticed, was bound to come under the scrutiny of the untrained public eye. German artist

Jochen Gerz, creator of numerous public works, pointed out the downside of such experiments in an interview: "Everyone thinks that they understand something about art, even though they don't involve themselves with it. If people go to a stadium, they know what 'offside' means, but if people talk about art, they have no interest in knowing anything about it. Everyone has an inner compulsion to understand art. In this connection," he continued, "political art must be simple, crystal clear, and must project a clear conscience" (Schmidt-Wulffen 1994, p. 74). The upside of public art can be drawn from the same logic: if the palm was to thrive in its public setting, it had to be commented on by those who use the space regularly. Yet the space proved to have as much potential meaning as the palm itself: different people and different social meanings have been competing for the location for a long time, and how it has been understood in the past is just as important as present and future interpretations. It is no wonder that the symbolically malleable palm tree quickly became the object of political interest.

In an interview Rajkowska gave 2 months before the palm tree was installed, she said she "worked hard to protect the palm from any ideology" (Kowalska 2002). Nonetheless, a few years later, she claimed that she was "glad the palm [was] drifting left" (Cybiński 2007). What then is the palm about? According to its creator, it is a social experiment in which fights over the tree, and Rajkowska being "flamed" (especially on *Gazeta Wyborcza's* Internet forums), were all considered part of the project. The artist's aim was to see whether and how "Polish society" was able to accept "alien elements." In the end, the vast majority of Varsovians—regardless of political affiliation—wanted the palm to stay; the tree passed the test and was accepted as Varsovian (Kondraciuk 2004). Polish historian Marcin Kula was amazed: "If we were to put something in the capital's central traffic circle back in 1989, it would rather be a monument commemorating national martyrdom. And now an exotic plastic tree stands there. What has happened in the last 15 years that we treat ourselves to a symbol of the tropics?" (Kula 2004).

Varsovians have learned to need the palm tree. The current municipal government bought the copyright to the palm from its author and is presently considering purchasing the tree as a piece of public art to be sponsored and maintained by the city. Rajkowska's work thus achieved another level of the "political": her project has managed to stir up debates about and around the palm tree, as well as over issues of symbolic ownership, and after 7 years, the city government's attitude has shifted from thinly veiled hostility toward cautious acceptance. It is a victory of sorts that this alien object has finally been accepted and supported by the local authorities who in the past have been reluctant to acknowledge Rajkowska's project as a "legitimate" monument (compared to those which honor national heroes, martyrs, kings, and last but not least, artists). If the palm is funded by the municipal government, it will become politically safe and "uncontroversial," anointed, as it were, with political neutrality. Such an act would also strip the palm of some of its ambiguity. As an officially endorsed work of art, it will no longer be open to any and all interpretation nor have the same potential to trigger action. It will no longer provide the same type of public space for antiofficial debate and will lose any potential perversity. Moreover, any meaning the palm might have will almost certainly be informed by its official status, adding yet another facet to anyone's existing frame of reference.

"When historical buildings are being preserved, monuments erected, new museums built," Irwin-Zarecka writes, "the sizeable costs involved in such endeavors are rarely justified on the basis of the present needs of the community. Envisioned as long-term investments, these memory works are to enjoy meaningful life for decades, if not centuries after their original audiences are gone" (Irwin-Zarecka 1994, p. 101). After years of struggling to maintain the work and prevent the tree's removal, Rajkowska's palm is in the

final stages of achieving "immortal" status. It is ironic that, in a city which venerates martyrdom and is rife with somber memorials, it was the frivolous and cheerfully "inappropriate" tree that has been able to re-establish the memory of the street's forgotten Jewish past. Given the conservative government's "accusations" of "leftism" and the Varsovians' wish to focus on the present, this is an impressive achievement.

The Artist's Memory

Rajkowska made a huge commotion with her artificial palm tree. When describing Rajkowska's project, Łukasz Gorczyca, art curator and co-owner of Raster art gallery, a hugely successful independent institution promoting contemporary Polish art abroad, accurately observed that "[t]he idea is not to transform the system in a real and deep way, which is not the role of artists, but to make an important gesture" (Gorczyca 2002). But the palm surpassed the "task" the artist assigned it not only because it "proved" that, yes, Varsovians were capable of accepting a perplexing alien object in the center of their city, but also because the tree was "adopted" and reinvented in such a way that it became legible and familiar. For instance, the youth wing of the Freedom Union (a no longer existing liberal political party with roots in the Solidarity movement) planted an artificial palm tree in Szczecin as their own political gesture against the city's mayor. Asked what she thought about this kind of imitation, Rajkowska answered that she had nothing against a political "palmosis" (Kamiński 2003).

The Freedom Union youth wing's copy of Rajkowska's tree is probably not the last distortion and diversification of what the project has stood for. It now signifies so many different things that Rajkowska's initial idea is hardly visible: with the Jewish context buried under new layers of meaning and the emergence of fresh issues the palm could be seen to symbolize, the tree is becoming more and more exclusively self-referential. Using Huyssen's words, "the new … memorial culture of recent years betrays any real sense of history and has instead turned to spectacle and entertainment, thus giving only a postmodern gloss and destroying any real sense of time past, present, and future rather than nurturing it. … Perhaps the fascination with the past is actually more than merely the compensatory, even fraudulent, side effect of a new, postmodern temporality which hovers between the need for remembering and the fast track of forgetting" (Huyssen 1994, p. 12).

One of the first things forgotten about the palm was its initial symbolic meaning. As time passed, present-day political issues took symbolic shelter under the palm's plastic leaves (e.g., nurses demanding higher wages, feminists demanding the right to abortion, homosexuals fighting for the right to gay marriage), the palm tree's continued existence was questioned, and struggles over present and future matters overshadowed the "Polish-Jewishness" of the palm. It could also be the case that contemporary issues proved easier to tackle than those of the past. What is most often recalled about the palm tree's history is the fight for its survival: defending the space of the traffic-circle island, collecting money to repair the leaves destroyed during harsh Polish winters, and waiting for the city government to sign the agreements as promised. The palm tree has managed to completely occupy the surrounding space, namely, the Charles De Gaulle traffic circle. It has done so to such an extent that the bronze statue of the French hero (an exact copy of the one standing on the Champs Elysées), erected next to one of the pedestrian crossings on the circle 2 years after the palm was "planted," has hardly ever been noticed, let alone become a topic of discussion, heated or otherwise. Perhaps Rajkowska should have been commissioned to create an artificial rooster.

The artist has opened a new social space in which certain pasts have been brought forth and into conversation with the present. It is as if Rajkowska is reinforcing Halbwachs's notion that it is society where people acquire, recall, recognize, and localize their memories (Halbwachs 1980, p. 38). Furthermore, according to Halbwachs "the past is not preserved but is reconstructed on the basis of the present" (Halbwachs 1980, p. 40), and indeed, Rajkowska has been immersed in the ongoing discussion about the Polish–Jewish past in a contemporary context. Her idea, although radical in form, is grounded in present-day interpretations of prewar Poland, and her palm tree brought the issue of Polish–Jewish relations to the attention of the general public. Jerusalem Avenue was intended as a Jewish settlement, New World street was built as the first secular settlement in seventeenth century Warsaw (ironically, the main street in Tel Aviv is also named "New World"), and Poniatowski Bridge used to bear the name of a Russian tsar before it was named after the nephew of the last Polish king. Rajkowska's palm tree made people aware of the meanings of the space they frequent on a daily basis, while also making that space visible in all its ambiguity, drawing attention to different layers of meanings, various interpretations of the past, and finally, visions of the future.

Even though Rajkowska made a project based on just one of the forgotten pasts, the potential for uncovering the pasts in that particular space suddenly became apparent and impossible to overlook. Nora writes that "the past is a world from which we are fundamentally cut off," and that "[w]e discover the truth about our memory when we discover how alienated from it we are" (Nora 1998, p. 12). Yet one can only feel alienated from a past one is aware of, and any truth there is to find is eventually and unavoidably interpreted through the present. If one bears in mind Halbwachs's claim that "we accept remembering in the way society remembers" (Halbwachs 1980, p. 81), it becomes clear that Rajkowska's palm tree not only opened a new space where issues of the present were given a voice, but it also revealed that, when granted such space, society remembers more than it might want to accept.

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