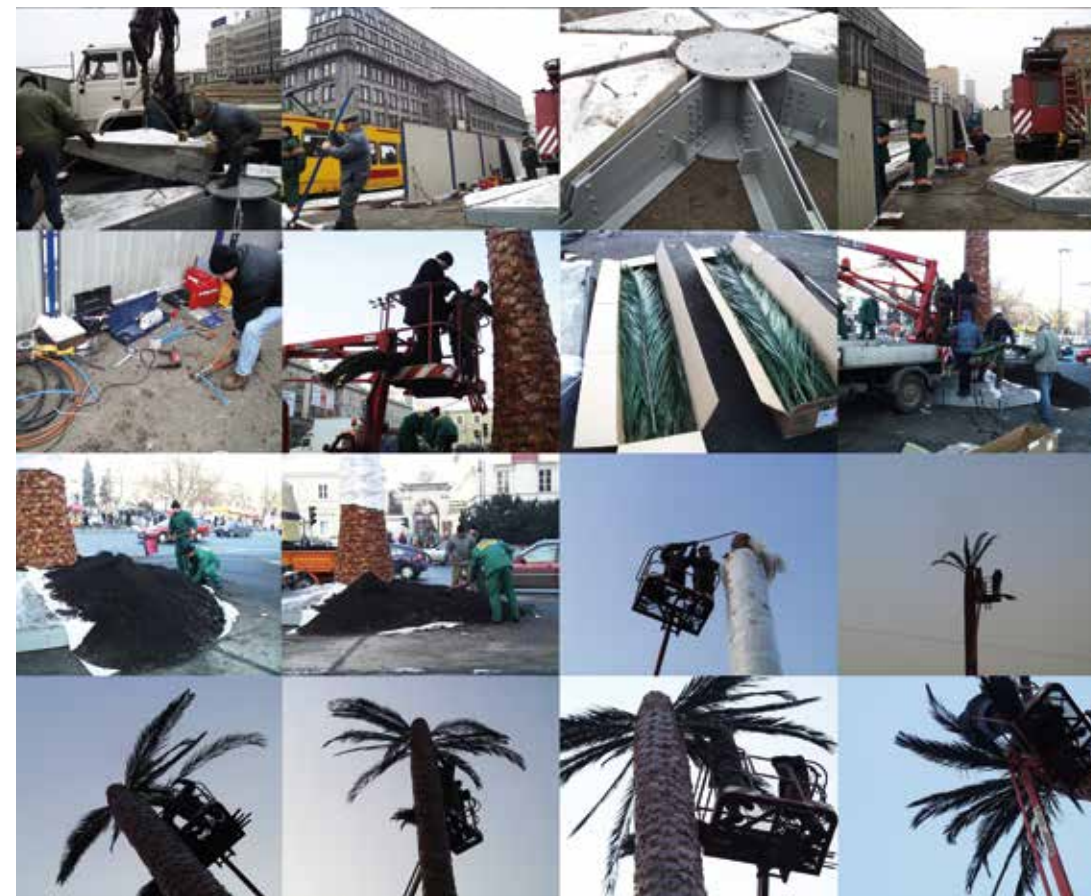


The Public Face of Art

Though locally best-known for her Palm Tree project found on Rondo De Gaulle'a, Joanna Rajkowska has been prolific in her output, leading and creating projects across the world. Now back in Poland, she talks about the world of public art...



Apologies for asking the bleeding obvious, but tell us a little about the story behind *Greetings From Jerusalem* – a.k.a the Palm Tree...

The palm is the ending to a text that has never been published. Artur Żmijewski and I visited Israel in 2001. Back in Warsaw, we wanted to write about the second Intifada and the fierce conflict that we had witnessed over there. At the same time, it seemed (and still seems) that Warsaw was painfully empty without a proper Jewish community – almost as if a part of its heart was missing. Instead of making statements, I felt like something should be done – something performative. This performative gesture was originally going to be a row of palm trees running along Al. Jerozolimskie.

When the palm was unveiled in 2002 it was a watershed moment for Polish public art. Did you ever imagine that it'd still be standing 15 years on? And not just that, but considered as such a positive icon of the city?

Oh, no! The beginning of her existence (it's a she in Polish!) was very difficult: she divided people dramatically. For example, I heard about one family in Kielce that didn't eat their Christmas dinner because they had a big row about the palm tree. I had a permit that allowed the project to

stand on the roundabout for just one year, so even in my wildest dreams I never expected that it would survive longer than that.

Have you had enough of talking about it?

I've had enough of idiots asking me about it, but intelligent questions are always welcome. At the time, the art world was completely oblivious to it. It was a partisan project and Sebastian Cichocki, a curator at MSN, told me many years later that no one was quite ready for a project that had no wider theoretical package.

Is Warsaw doing enough to allow public art to 'happen'?

I've only just returned to Poland so I have no idea about now. But look, I'm running a workshop that will lead to another public project, this time by young artists on Oleandry square. There's a much greater energy and readiness here to make things happen in public spaces and that's pushing the authorities to allow such expression to flourish – politics doesn't work without pressure from below.

Is there a work you are particularly proud of?

Perhaps *The Peterborough Child*. I'm proud of it despite the fact that it was a thorough political failure. I managed to in-

clude the most painful and intimate stories from that time, 2012, including themes of weakness, disease and feminine perspective. Those were vital strategies that worked a bit like an explosive... and then fizzled and failed. I don't mind though, I like failures.

Does Warsaw inspire you?

Always, though I have no real idea how. I can only compare the city to like being in your own enormous studio. I see it as a stage and sometimes that stage needs a prop. The rest is just this incredible energy that manifests itself here: the city feels like a 24-hour spectacle.

What is your artistic dream for Warsaw – what would you love to do or see happen to this city?

My artistic dream is to see less capital in this city, less sodding developers. I would pack them all inside a spaceship and then fly it into a black hole – together with priests, football fans and far-righters of any shade. Now, that's a public project!

Do you have an underlying theme or philosophy when it comes to creating art?

Have you seen *Rejs* (editorial note: a cult Polish comedy

from 1970 depicting the absurdities of life in the PRL)?

What is it that excites you about creating public projects?

Public projects have an intense life that feels all so... organic. It witnesses and it is witnessed. Public projects create a fantastic round-the-clock sense of theater.

What should public art achieve?

Achieve? Nothing. Really. It should be part of our lives.

As an artist, what is your preferred medium?

I choose the medium every time I start a new project. The medium comes from its own inner logic.

What's your next project?

Orphans in Lublin: it's a project that concerns a dark page of our current history – Poland's refusal to accept refugees. We'll be offering rare and precious trees for 'adoption', with each tree representing a Syrian orphan. By planting these trees people will be symbolically adopting these children.

For more on Joanna and her work, check the artist's website at: rajkowska.com