

# Forest Landscape: Joanna Rajkowska's *Rhizopolis*\*

\* *Rhizopolis* – Joanna Rajkowska's installation at the Zachęta National Gallery of Art, 1 February – 29 June 2021.

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## 1. *Rendez-vous* with a palm tree

I have been following Joanna Rajkowska's artistic career for many years. She first caught my attention when an exotic palm tree appeared out of nowhere on a small hill in the middle of the Charles de Gaulle roundabout in Warsaw. Who put it there? Who placed it in the centre of Warsaw and why? And why exactly there and not someplace else? The answers to these questions triggered some interesting observations: I am forever thankful for the creative imagination I discovered in Rajkowska's work.

I first saw the palm tree, if I remember correctly, a long time ago – in December 2002. The artist has created many memorable installations since. They were thought-provoking and creatively challenged and questioned the communal social space.

Apart from *Greetings from Aleje Jerozolimskie*, her other projects include: the provocative *Satisfaction Guaranteed, Airlines*, the now dismantled *Oxygenator* in Grzybowski Square, *Artist for Rent* (two projects in Berlin and Łódź respectively), *Twenty-two tasks, Ravine, Rotor* and *Minaret* in Poznań, which was supposed to be placed on an old factory chimney (the project was never implemented). No wonder then that this time I was intrigued by the title of Rajkowska's newest project at the Zachęta National Gallery of Art in Warsaw – *Rhizopolis*.

Why *Rhizopolis*? What mysterious meaning is hidden in this neologism, created by the author? Let me explain this rather puzzling title. The title – which “sounds” scientific (by the way, the

abbreviation 'rhiz' from the word 'rhizoma', is a medicine made from rhizomes; it has been used by pharmacologists and pharmacists for centuries) – “wants” to be noticed. It draws and “demands” attention, acting as a slogan that circulates in the public space like a magic spell.

Let us decode it. The neologism 'rhizopolis' created by the author consists of two interconnected words. Both come from Greek. 'Rhiza' means a root, a rhizome. 'Polis' is a collective habitat, an urban settlement, a city. The title as a whole, as I have discovered, corresponds perfectly with the main idea of Joanna Rajkowska's work.

## 2. The exhibition at the Zachęta National Gallery of Art

An almost monochromatic poster, filled with cold blues to greys, shows an intriguing picture. There are numerous entangled roots and thick rhizomes hanging from its upper edge and they cover half the poster. Among them, along the vertical axis, there appears a female figure that is visible in front from head to toe. When we turn the poster by 180 degrees and look at the woman's face, we recognize Rajkowska.

There would be nothing particularly unusual in this image, were it not for the eccentric placement of the model. The human figure is “hanging” upside down. Her booted feet touch the upper edge of the poster and are hidden among the roots and rhizomes, and her whole body is upside down – her head touches the bottom edge of the frame.

## 3. Building her own strategy

A constellation of great individuals or, indeed, a galaxy of outstanding artists, was active in Polish avant-garde art at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries. These artists do not belong to the same generation, but their philosophies of art are similar. I am referring here to their prominent presence in the contemporary iconosphere because both together and separately they seem to form an important frame of reference for Rajkowska.

I list them in the alphabetical order: Magdalena Abakanowicz, Mirosław Bałka, Jerzy Bereś, Izabela Gustowska, Jarosław Kozłowski, Katarzyna Kozyra, Dorota Nieznalska, Józef Robakowski, Wilhelm Sasnal, Monika Sosnowska, Leon Tarasewicz, Julita Wójcik... This list could go on and on. Other thought-provoking and internationally recognized artists could be added to it.

Over the years, project after project, installation after installation, step by step, Joanna Rajkowska found her own creative strategy, which made her – and still makes her – a thoroughly contemporary artist with a distinct and recognizable personality. Let me add that neither materials (after all, she used different ones, according to her needs) nor the style (traditionally defined as a recognizable, characteristic artistic “voice”) define her.

What distinguishes Rajkowska as an artist is something else, namely her strategy – chosen by her at the beginning of her career and consistently developed over the years.

It is not so easy to define, because it concerns both the work of art itself and its context or contexts. Rajkowska's artistic strategy, which she has consistently followed for years, combines the specific and brilliantly defined here and now with symbolic spacetime, where the past (I deliberately do not call it history) in its various forms and echoes merges with the wide horizon of tomorrow.

Rajkowska's installations (I am referring, quite conventionally, at this point to a common term for the genre of contemporary art called "installation art"), due to her own choices, never appear in random or semantically indifferent places. They are genre-specific, i.e., they are artistic projects made of various elements, placed in an existing or artificially created space. No wonder that the artist herself referred to some of her works as "social sculptures" or "public sculptures."

It is interesting, by the way, how little importance Rajkowska pays to the "non omnis moriar" hopes and steadfast faith placed by others in their art, and in the longevity of art in general. The ancient maxim "ars longa, vita brevis" may be read in a different light in Rajkowska's case. It is no accident that the genre of art that is particularly close to her own philosophy of art is called "installation:" it can be assembled but also disassembled.

Many of her works do not exist anymore (including *The Oxygenator*) – they have been destroyed. Others were bound to, as it were, disintegrate gradually in the futile confrontation between unstable matter and merciless nature. Still others, for various reasons, were not implemented. Nevertheless, even as designs and concepts, they managed to enter into the collective consciousness and have stayed there, if only because of the resistance or even the indignation they caused. At this point, let me indeed comment on the creative use of context, which is essential for Joanna Rajkowska's work.

Context plays a huge role in her installations. It concerns not only the place, but also the other complementary aspect, namely time. As such, her artworks become, in fact, shocking interventions in existing and previously thoroughly recognized spacetime, which is the carrier of meaning constructed together with a given work. Spacetime is attacked and annexed by a surprising object.

In the case of Joanna Rajkowska, one could even speak of a peculiar act of both civil and artistic courage, in which the artist's unconventional creative gesture and the power of expression correspond to being responsible for the "committed offence." It is not reckless bravado, but personal courage. The courage to undertake artistic intervention which emanates from her works makes them significant events in social life.

#### 4. Entering the artwork

When I went to Zachęta to see Rajkowska's exhibition, I expected something surprising. Something that would communicate her unique artistic philosophy and establish a direct relationship with the audience. Visitors are greeted by a unique feature, even before they enter the building. It is a rainbow gate situated opposite the main entrance to the gallery.

Inside the building, on the ground floor, in the room on the left, the *Rhizopolis* exhibition is complemented by an exhibition entitled *Live Storages: Didactics* (works by Zbigniew Dłubak,

Dorota Podlaska, Leszek Rózga, Andrzej Tobis and the group Twożywo are on display). As the title suggests, all the works on display have a didactic value. The decision to combine the two exhibitions turned out to be fortunate in its own way, especially considering the deeper educational value of Rajkowska's installation.

The juxtaposition of these two exhibitions further inspires an interesting reflection on the poetics and style of reception of a certain category of contemporary art, as opposed to passive, dispassionate contemplation. The *Living Storage* exhibition is viewed as a set of museum artifacts chosen and arranged by museum curators. The viewer remains "outside." It is impossible to say something like that about *Rhizopolis*, which is radically different in its assumptions, carefully arranged and assembled at the Zachęta National Gallery of Art by Joanna Rajkowska.

The installation *Rhizopolis* was on display in one of the rooms on the first floor. It was surprising in itself. A thick and heavy curtain, which resembles a lead apron used during X-rays, separates the corridor and the room – one must breach it (literally!) to enter the exhibition. Finally, once we pass through the heavy curtain, we go to the other side, abandoning the known and entering the unknown.

Once we make this very important step, we find ourselves *in medias res*, beyond the frame which separates what we have left behind from what is just opening up in front of us. Our bodies, feelings and senses begin to feel the psychosomatic pressure exerted on each participant forced to play the role of an actor. The pressure on the viewer is the result of the tremendous pressure of the circumstances, which creates the microcosm of the arranged performance.

A moment later, the visitor is in for another surprise. The room is almost completely dark. Taken by surprise, our eyes slowly adjust to the darkness, trying to see and recognize anything. The lungs (I visited the exhibition during the global Covid-19 epidemic) may hardly absorb the minute particles of residual oxygen floating around in the stuffy claustrophobic room.

Step by step, we enter into the eternal darkness of the space, looking around and treading cautiously on the soft, organic, and bone-dry surface of the forest undergrowth. Other associations come to mind: logging, extraction, debarking, chipping, rootstock, rhizome. Consequently, we begin to think about the process which turns a living tree into dead wood.

We learn that we have become actors in this underground show because the image from hidden video cameras is projected onto a screen in the back of the room. The video is played with an asynchronous delay so that everyone present at the exhibition can see for themselves how they did as actors.

Going back to the roots in Joanna Rajkowska's installation forces everyone who wants to become a thinking and feeling part of it to participate – we cannot not participate as we make our way through the exhibition. The project overwhelms and surrounds every visitor. There is no outside world, at least as long as we are in the exhibition room. Roots and rhizomes hanging from the ceiling touch our heads. Under our feet, as far as the eye can see and the foot can reach, there is only the shredded pulp of boughs and twigs. And on top of all this, there is this stuffy claustrophobic microclimate.

*Reditus in radices.* This return to the roots makes us aware of what roots and rhizomes are – not only for various plants and trees, but also for us, people. We know that the Greek word “rhiza” means “root.” Another Greek word, “rhizome,” means “rhizome.” The rhizome, defined in biological terms, is a thickened underground shoot that functions as storage and spore and as a delivery channel. In short, it is a reservoir of vital juices and life itself.

## 5. Taboos

Joanna Rajkowska violates various social taboos in her artworks, albeit always by means of considerate methods and means of expression. Unlike many other contemporary artists and performers, who are more radical than her, since *Satisfaction Guaranteed* she has avoided scandalous strategies, considering the social consequences of her actions, even if they are carried out in the name of art and artistic freedom.

Rajkowska’s main artistic goal is not just to violate certain taboos, but to perform, with surgical precision, symbolic operations around those spheres and places of common collective consciousness, which are filled with various types of mental and emotional deposits. From the very beginning, identifying the sources of various chronic diseases that society suffers from and treating art as therapy have been very important for Rajkowska.

## 6. Chaos and Cosmos

Yes, it’s us. Yes, it’s about us. About us, with us and/or without us. Developed on a grand scale for several centuries, mankind’s noble project entitled the “progress of civilization” did not fail. The idea of the absolute, boldly and confidently inscribed in the forever optimistic development of the Anthropocene, did fail, however. Humanity has learned about it again, and this most recent lesson was painful. Modern man, as a usurper and sole ruler of all, striving to achieve absolute power in the world, has recently realized his own inherent weakness. In a word, we can only do as much as we can and that is it.

This moment of both individual and collective reflection on the future, which is by no means guaranteed and may never come, is extremely important in the context of the lesson that *Rhizopolis* wants to teach us. Humanity will destroy itself by mindlessly destroying the foundations and source of its own life. What is worse, it firmly believes that it may ruthlessly rule over everything.

Rajkowska points out that *Rhizopolis* can be treated as a film set built by the gallery curators, which, driven by curiosity, we decided to visit and learn more about. What is this set and what kind of film is being made in our presence? The artist knows and we know too. Essentially cosmic, the landscape conceived by Joanna Rajkowska is taken straight out of an apocalyptic movie.

Visiting the gloomy space of *Rhizopolis* is by no means a pleasant experience. On the contrary, the place we are in, separated and dissected from the external environment, allows us to finally see ourselves for who we are, but it certainly cannot be tamed. When I speak of “entering the work,” I mean a carefully

arranged situation in which visitors are “taken” out of the civilized world they know, the world outside, and confronted with the underground, on the existence of which their own existence depends.

## 7. A chick in Pięć Rogów square

Another sculptural installation by Joanna Rajkowska is slowly emerging from the darkness of Warsaw's future – it is a captivatingly beautiful artistic and architectural image, a design for a sculpture. It is a two-meter-tall sculpture of a song thrush egg (in Latin, the name of the bird is *Turdus philomelos*, which is as beautiful as Rajkowska's artwork), which is to be erected in the Pięć Rogów Square (at the intersection of Jasna, Chmielna, Hoża, Szpitalna and Bracka Streets).

The idea was tested out in London two years ago. There, artists displayed a similar outdoor sculpture of an enlarged bird egg, except it was not a song thrush egg but a blackbird egg. Inside the magnificent structure, to the delight of intrigued passers-by, a sound system (emitting the sound made by a chick that was about to hatch) and an inductor (emitting vibrations as if of a hatching egg) were installed. It was indeed an interactive artwork. The multisensory process of its reception, designed by the author with the audience in mind, stimulated and triggered intimate sensual contact with the object encountered in the center of the city.

As I write these words, the fate of the artist's most recent project is still undecided. It has many supporters, but also influential opponents (the main opponent is the provincial conservator of monuments). A bird egg in a historical Warsaw square? No way! It must be a joke. People have already protested against the squandering of public money to pay for the erection of the artificial palm tree. It is out of the question! That one project, at the center of the Charles de Gaulle roundabout located in the center of Warsaw, is enough. It is so bizarre, ladies and gentlemen. After all, we announced that we are bound by the contract for the time being and the palm tree cannot be removed, but after the contract expires, such ideas will not be accepted.

Again, as usual, two philosophies of the city collide with each other and two radically different - quite conventional or, on the contrary, quite unconventional – approaches to public space. To some, a huge, and in addition a vibrating and squeaking, sculpture of a bird egg seems to be ideologically suspicious; after all, it is not known what will hatch out of it. What if it is some blue, stained, pro-ecological contraband, aimed at challenging the self-proclaimed guardians of the principles of good taste. People are already talking about the fact that in the eighteenth century animals were killed in this square for entertainment.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

# KEYWORDS

contemporary art

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**ABSTRACT:**

The article is an analytical and interpretative study of the poetics of the two newest art installations by Joanna Rajkowska.

expression

CONTEXT

space

**NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:**

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