

## **Reparation of Public Space**

**(on the example of actions undertaken by Rafał Jakubowicz)**

*Reparation* is the title of the diploma work Rafał Jakubowicz defended at the Faculty of Painting of the Academy of Fine Arts in Poznań. With his artistic expressions this young artist, who is at the same time a careful witness, commentator and art researcher – he's currently working out a thesis on Mirosław Bałka's creation – entered public space. His attempts can be simultaneously treated as introducing public things and spaces into the area of art. This demonstrates both the symptoms and phenomena characteristic of today's state of things in public and artistic life, the issues of art as such, as well as the individual and social dimensions of the status of being an artist. In his work and attitude Rafał Jakubowicz tries to come out against ravaging of public sphere. At the same time he opposes narcissism and amnesia of the wider and wider circles of artistic sphere. In his small manifesto accompanying his diploma work, he wrote, "To repair means to mend, regain, renew, rebuild. The word *reparation*, taken from the Polish-German dictionary of medical terms, means *healing the loss of tissue...*" In a similar sense I read two projects the artist realised in 2002, both of them in a peculiar way related to public space. These two realisations are *Seuchensperrgebiet* and *Arbeitsdisziplin*.

Jakubowicz is fascinated with criticism. And today's state of things truly demands criticism. He investigates the possibilities and impossibilities of being an involved observer, a viewer participating in what's common. In the first place he analyses whether it remains anything common worth struggling for. He investigates the limits of desensitisation, and the escape from reality, from freedom. He deals with art criticism and, at the same time, with critical art in its – what I must strongly emphasise – original meaning, similar to Krzysztof Wodiczko's accomplishments, for example. Both the artistic criticism and the very art inseparably gone in for by Jakubowicz, are based on the dominant of memory. I mean the memory which, in this case, is the criticism of history. Public art of critical attitude enters into a dispute with, and when enough daring, it declares the struggle in the likeness of *guerrilla* against illusions, stereotypes of identification, and the misuse of language and authority. It does so in the name of regeneration of the escaping reality or at least of the very meaning, in defiance of its manipulated, corrupt and virtual pretence. Each time the critical artist is diagnosing and then seeking an antidote for the current situation. He follows like that in the name of acquiring reality at least for the language, dialogue, social discourse, and in effect, in the name of democracy. In my talk with him (published in "Odra" and in my interlocutor's book *Critical*

*Vehicles*, MIT Press 1988), the aforementioned Krzysztof Wodiczko said, "...I believe the process of denying the world we live in is our obligation".

We know the opinion – Slavoj Žižek is one of its important exponents (he expressed it in the talk published by "Odra" in September 2002) – that it's in our part of Europe, including Poland, that the dream about the revival of common life space can come true. On the one hand, according to this philosopher such a dream could lead, when realised, to avoid the extremes of life in consumer society and in digital virtual universe. On the other hand it could lead to life in misery, on the margin, with the perspective of fundamentalist return to organic communities, i.e. to the life characteristic for the First and the Third World, in Karl Popper's terms. Hence, I think, the importance of the attempts to repair public space in the art created in Poland. And hence my interest in such attempts and actions undertaken by Rafał Jakubowicz.

The artist prepared a huge poster shown within the framework of *NewOut*, the AMS Outdoor Gallery's action, and on the occasion of the *novart.pl* young art festival in Cracow at the exhibition entitled *look at me / spójrz na mnie*. The latter was organised in the summer of 2002 by the Bunkier Sztuki Contemporary Art Gallery in Cracow and the Zamek Ujazdowski Contemporary Art Centre in Warsaw. On the billboard, hanging high on the wall of a tenement house in Cracow, a horizontal inscription looking as if taped on a worn-out typewriter was painted against a blue-grey background. The inscription consisted of one long word in German – the phantom of memory and anxiety: *Seuchensperrgebiet*. This billboard neighboured on another AMS billboard with tempting words "Pay off as you wish" ordered by the MultiBank. What does mean that mysterious word, difficult to pronounce, difficult to be read in the hasty rush of big city traffic? *Seuchensperrgebiet* – *the plague taken area*. This word belongs to those poisoned expressions – even though ironically called "innocent words" by Nachman Blumental in 1947 – which the language of the Third Reich formed in order to define the elements of the machine of crime in a euphemistic way. Analysing LTI (*Lingua Tertii Imperii*), Victor Klemperer wrote, "National socialism has been creeping into the body and blood of the crowd with single words, phrases and sentences, which were imposed and repeated millions of times, and received mechanically and unconsciously". Eleonora Jedlińska reinterpreted thoroughly this realisation by Jakubowicz in her essay presented in the summer of 2002 on the Internet pages of "Magazyn Sztuki" (now published in "Pro Memoria" No. 20, the Auschwitz-Birkenau National Museum news bulletin, and in "Format" No. 44), indicating at its historical, ideological and linguistic references. In her paper *Prawda jest w pamięci. Rozważania o artystycznych realizacjach Rafała Jakubowicza* [*The truth is in memory. Considerations on artistic realisations by Rafał Jakubowicz*], the author recalls the

photograph which she found in *Adama Czerniakowa dziennik getta warszawskiego* [*Adam Czerniakow's Warsaw ghetto diary*]. About that photograph she wrote, "Small silhouettes of passers-by are vanishing in the lane. Snowdrifts reach the windows of the ground floor, snow is everywhere, on windowsills, cornices and ledges, balcony banisters and on cast iron street lamps. Deep frost, wind and snow dust gave the picture its phenomenal character. It reminds the picture of 1989 entitled *Spaziergang* painted by Luc Tuysmans, a Belgian painter highly valued by Rafał Jakubowicz [...]. In Czerniakow's diary, a seemingly ordinary street of a European city is looking like frozen and covered with snow, but on the left in the foreground of the grey-white photograph there is a white notice board mounted on a wooden pole and enclosed with black strip like an obituary announcement. There is a German word *Seuchensperrgebiet* written on the board". Jakubowicz is highly sensitive to the sound and meaning of words, often in German, which haven't sounded yet in the memory of history. He seems to owe this sensitivity to two artists whose creation is the object of his intensive investigations – Mirosław Bałka and Luc Tuysmans, the artists of individual and collective memory. Rafał Jakubowicz carries the questions that are similar to those undertaken by them into public space, thus extracting thought, memory renewal and anxiety. As if warning us against the epidemic of amnesia and blissful calmness. What's puzzling, the response to this realisation by Jakubowicz wasn't wide in the sphere of public reception, in contrast to many other artistic actions on the AMS billboards. And in contrast to his other realisation, *Arbeitsdisziplin*, to which I'd like to turn now. The latter evoked characteristic reactions in the area of corporate, administrative and other institutions, as well as in discussions within wider circles of artistic life and in the media. All this took place as early as before the work was shown in public.

The work *Arbeitsdisziplin* consists of a few elements. Firstly, a post-card, the averse of which, basing on a colour photograph, shows the upper part of the factory with a tower/chimney playing a mysterious role. This vertical element, with a logo of *Volkswagen* group on it, cuts into the twilight sky. In the foreground there is the wire mesh of the fence of the Volkswagen factory in Antoninek near Poznań; the picture was taken through these wires. In the lower part of the post-card there is the caption – *Arbeitsdisziplin* – running against a neutral grey background and looking like taped on the typewriter (similarly to the types of the work *Seuchensperrgebiet*). The reverse of the post-card includes the pale grey image of a guard seen through the wire mesh of the fence, the description of the work, and two addresses: "Galeria Miejska Arsenał, Poznań 2002; WUK Projektraum, Wien 2002".

The second element of the whole project is a *light-box* that can hang on the wall. The box shows the same image of the upper part of the factory that we can see on the averse of the post-card. The third element is a video projection, where we can see the guard walking

against the background of the factory and sometimes looking straight at the camera. This realisation was planned for the Town Gallery in Poznań; Jakubowicz made it himself, without any help during production. It's worth stressing here that we haven't worked out any form of participation of artistic or other institutions in production of works of independent art. I mean in Poland there are no such agencies, like for example ArtAngel in London, which just could deal with production of works, events and facts in the field of art. There is a hope, however, as the team of the Foksal Gallery Foundation – that has acted since recently in isolation from the very Gallery's activity – declares its aspirations after this. Beginning the realisation of his project, Rafał Jakubowicz was looking for support among potential private sponsors. But in the nick of time he realised that it would be ambiguous to demand corporate support in the face of clearly critical message of his work towards one particular concern. *Volkswagen* – it's the name of the German firm which since the thirties had been producing a car "available to the people" of the Third Reich, and which during World War Two was involved in war industry and the *innocent word* (to recall again the title of Blumental's book) *Arbeitsdisziplin*. The work discipline. What is this realisation by Jakubowicz about, what does it appeal for? Well, driving past the plant is the artist's daily routine on his route from his place to Poznań; the factory photographed in his work is inscribed into his everyday landscape. The only element he added to this *de facto* documentary project is just that innocent, but also poisoned word: *Arbeitsdisziplin*. In the interview he gave to the Poznań edition of the "City" magazine in October 2002, Jakubowicz said about his work, "I go past the *Volkswagen* factory buildings in Poznań-Antoniak every day. I was intrigued by the reality of that place, with its characteristic architecture, typical fence crowned with barbed wire, and a guard standing – regardless of the weather – always in the same place, so I decided to take a photo, to shoot a film. There is no manipulation in it. This work has many meanings. Obviously, I've taken into account the past of the VW concern". Asked about 'provocation' in his works, he replied, "Coming back to *provocation* – in what I do I would suspect rather a *provocation to reflection*. I don't want to interpret my works. I'd like to leave the interpretation to the audience. Everybody can read a work in his own way. However, it is worth remembering that what seems to be neutral, unnecessarily needs to be such". What's significant and at the same time complementing the significance of this realisation, a wave of pressures took place a little while before the planned and announced opening at the "Arsenal" Town Gallery (Galeria Miejska Arsenal) in Poznań at the beginning of September 2002. The pressures were initiated by the representatives of the board of the Poznań branch of *Volkswagen*. Thus inspired, the mayor of the city of Poznań undertook to exert pressure on the vice chancellor of the Academy of Fine Arts and on the director of the "Arsenal" Town Gallery. These representatives of those public art institutions in turn started to exert far-reaching pressures on the artist in order to convince him to abandon his project. The representatives of the VW concern have also

directly manipulated the decisions of the director of the gallery, paying him a visit several days before the planned opening of the exhibition. All this was done in a backstage but evident manner, revealing the mechanisms of preventive censorship, stimulated by the concern using the highest representative of the city administration. In this situation we (Jarosław Kozłowski, Piotr Piotrowski and the undersigned) published a letter in the local edition of the “Gazeta Wyborcza” daily. We wrote there, “In a talk with one of us [...] Mr Makowiecki (director of the gallery) stated clearly that he cancelled the show in consequence of the visit paid to him by the representatives of the *Volkswagen* group. According to him, they didn’t demand the very cancellation, but threatened him with legal consequences resulting from unauthorised use of the VW trademark. The logo was shown in the picture of the VW factory in Antoniak near Poznań in a way that could be associated with the history of the VW entanglement in the economy of the Third Reich. The director of the “Arsenal” Town Gallery also said that he feared the reaction of the local authorities of the city of Poznań and the private sponsors. [...] Public life institutions, including artistic cultural centres, are brought into being in order to defend public values. One of these values, being the guarantee of democratic state, is the freedom of expression, including the freedom of art. Therefore a public gallery is obliged to act for the sake of the citizens’ society; it should be a spokesperson of public interest, and not the interest of a private company”. Thus the artist, working individually, without any help from the part of those who should (like public institutions) or could (like corporations) help in the process of production of artistic realisations, encountered counteraction and repressive measures from both sides (going hand in hand). In her text entitled *Corporate Discipline*, which was published (in Polish) on the Internet pages of the “Magazyn Sztuki”, Ewa Mikina wrote, “It is the obvious thing to use the same argumentation and ask why does the corporation encroach on public sphere and why does it tarnish the freedom of expression in so ruthless and (I cannot find a better word) vulgar way? [...] The worst thing in the whole affair is, however, that it has never happened. There wasn’t the case; the oxymoron ‘silent scandal’ presents this non-existence properly. There was no exhibition, no pressures, no demands, and no threats. There was no discussion, no dispute, and no possibility of revealing and articulating the conflict of interests. Protagonists have been appearing only on one side”. We should only add that in result of the wide presence of the very work *Arbeitsdisziplin* and the discussion around it in the media, the author got a few proposals to present the work in various cities in Poland and abroad. Therefore the media seem to be the only open space of public communication. They are, however, interested in sensations, not in art. In the end I recall again Krzysztof Wodiczko’s words, who, in the talk with Jan Kawiorski published by the “Magazyn Sztuki” six years ago, said, “[...] Today art is one of voices in the complex and puzzling discourse between authority and freedom, which is going on in urban spaces. Silence would be our consent to the

disappearance of public space, and thereby the disappearance of democracy, since in result public space would become private and belonging only to the rulers and possessors. It would become a totalitarian work of art made by corrupt local politicians governed by contemporary property and drug magnates and new urban nobility". Therefore the reparation of public space undertaken at all costs in the field of art appears to be priceless, in fact, both for art as such and, especially, for the whole not yet totally desensitised community.

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The text was abridged in agreement with the author