Warning
This digital document has been made available to you by perspectivia.net, the international online publishing platform for the institutes of the Max Weber Stiftung – Deutsche Geisteswissenschaftliche Institute im Ausland (Max Weber Foundation – German Humanities Institutes Abroad) and its partners. Please note that this digital document is protected by copyright laws. The viewing, printing, downloading or storage of its content on your personal computer and/or other personal electronic devices is authorised exclusively for private, non-commercial purposes. Any unauthorised use, reproduction or transmission of content or images is liable for prosecution under criminal and civil law.

Recommended citation:

Publisher:
http://www.own-reality.org/

Text published under Creative Commons License CC BY-NC-ND 3.0
Collective Relocation: Wyspa and (the) Public (for) Art in 1980s Gdańsk, Poland

Alexandra Alisauskas

To visit Moby Dick – Rzeźba ’87 (Moby Dick – Sculpture ’87), an exhibition of work by young Polish artists held in November 1987 in the northern cities of Gdynia and Gdańsk, the audience was required to participate in a number of physical and perceptual displacements. The exhibition was a dual-location project, spread across two cities and two galleries. Instigated by the Polish art critic Ryszard Ziarkiewicz, Moby Dick – Rzeźba ’87 was initially conceived as a continuation of an exhibition he had organised the previous year entitled Ekspresja lat 80-tych (Expression of the ’80s) – a survey show of new-generation Polish art that took its cues from the then popular international painting movements of neo-expressionism, Neue Wilde and Transavangardia – but ultimately focused solely on sculpture and installation.¹ The first version of Moby Dick – Rzeźba ’87 would become only one component of the final show held at the Muzeum Miasta Gdyni (City of Gdynia Museum), a youth cultural centre that also financially supported the event.²

The exhibition was expanded from its originally proposed single location in Gdynia to include an independent open-air studio and gallery space in Gdańsk called Wyspa (meaning “Island”). Wyspa had been unofficially founded a few months earlier in May 1987 by an art student Grzegorz Klaman, with the aid of his colleagues at the PWSSP (Państwowa Wyższa Szkołę Sztuk Plastycznych: State Academy of Fine Arts) in Gdańsk, including Ziarkiewicz, then a lecturer at the school, and another prominent figure in the history of Wyspa, fellow sculpture student Kazimierz Kowalczyk (fig. 1). This hybrid location of artistic
production and exhibition, which incorporated private and public spaces, took its name from its setting on Wyspa Spichrzów (Granary Island). A disused island centrally located in the Motława Canal, Wyspa Spichrzów bears physical traces of its history: its ruined state illustrates its multiple destructions, first by fires in the Middle Ages and later by bombings and flooding around the period of World War II. In the late 1970s, the PWSSP took up residence at this abandoned site, using it as an open-air workshop and storage space for its sculpture department. In 1987, Klaman and his colleagues were given independent control of the space by the Communist state (specifically, by the Directory of Weights and Measurements), at which time they expanded the island’s functions to include exhibitions and the staging of events, loosely defining their activities within the framework of a gallery. Wyspa mounted eight major group exhibitions during its time at this location (1987–1992), including Rzeźba, instalacja, obraz (Sculpture, Installation, Image) (1987), Moby Dick – Rzeźba ’87 (1987), Teraz jest Teraz (Now is Now, 1988), Gnosis (1989), Gdańsk-Warsaw (1990), Miejsca (Places, 1991) and, finally, Projekt Wyspa (Island Project, 1992). Wyspa continues to operate today, under the same name, as a gallery and institute for contemporary art. Since 2004, however, it has been based at a different site (with an equally loaded past) in a group of buildings at the historic shipyards of Gdańsk, where the trade union-turned-independence movement Solidarność (Solidarity) was born.

With the expansion of the location of Moby Dick – Rzeźba ’87 to include Wyspa, the exhibition extended beyond the traditional gallery frame to occupy an area that was physically and ideologically public – a daring prospect in this period of Polish history. Indeed, not so many years earlier, in 1980, general dissatisfaction with the conditions of the Communist People’s Republic of Poland had reached a climax when the Solidarność independent workers’ union was formed around strikes at the Gdańsk shipyards. Due to the “shortage economy” precipitated by the failure of Soviet centralised planning, Polish citizens were deprived of basic resources, including food and toilet paper. The Solidarność movement expressed anti-totalitarian and anti–Communist aims within a programme that was built on romantic notions of a stable Polish national identity, close associations with the Catholic Church, general democratic possibilities based on a free Polish identity and non-violent protest. The emerging movement galvanised workers and individuals across the country, leading to protests against the Communist party’s organisation of industry and labour, Soviet influence in general and the deteriorating
conditions of everyday life. Martial law was imposed by the Communist state between 1981 and 1983 to quell the growing popularity of Solidarność as a larger social movement, resulting in the suspension of individual freedoms and the introduction of social controls, including artistic censorship. The post-martial law period in which Moby Dick – Rzeźba '87 was staged was thus marked by a level of repression that had not been invoked since the Stalinist period, and which would remain in some form until the free elections of 1989. The resonance of these exhibitions was particularly strong in Gdańsk, the birthplace of Solidarność. Any disruption of the visual order of public space at that time risked being interpreted by the authorities as a threat to the Communist Party’s control over the People’s Republic of Poland (to which public locations, and the citizens who existed within them, were often violently subjected). Consequently, many of the exhibitions held at Wyspa were shut down or dismantled just hours after they were mounted, with the artists sometimes taken to the militia office.

Along with the partial move to an open-air space, subject to the order from the Communist state, the formal scope of Moby Dick – Rzeźba '87 was similarly broadened to include both sculptures and installations, as well as public or land art projects by Krzysztof Bednarski, Jarosław Fliciński, Klaman, Kowalczyk, Dariusz Lipiński and Jacek Stanieszewski. Within these slightly different media and varying artistic approaches, each of these artists’ works could be said to possess a messy expressionistic visual style, the scale and sometimes visual tropes of monumental sculpture and architecture and the use of natural materials, whether imported into the gallery or engaged specifically at the Wyspa site. According to the organiser Ziarkiewicz, the overall effect was the creation of a spectatorial experience akin to that generated by the painterly medium, which he had originally focused on for the exhibition. Through this expressionism, the experience could inaugurate “a new total realism [...] present everywhere. It is about universalism, the strange ability to penetrate everywhere, a return to content in a classical sense, and thus a return, undertaken by the artist, to the evaluation of the world.” For Ziarkiewicz, this conception of expressionism opposed the ideologically-oriented goals of socialist realism, in that Soviet socialist visual culture authorised neither this style of artwork nor the exploration of primitive themes. The installations and sculptures thus represented not only an extension of the medium of painting to embrace space, but also a recalibration of that medium towards individual interpretation, “the necessity of emotional
utterances”, or what was conceived as a genuine affective experience through its opposition to the “totalitarianism of content” established through socialist realist painting.¹¹

However, *Moby Dick – Rzeźba ’87* was also the culmination of a site-specific artistic practice enacted prior to the founding of Wyspa. Between 1985 and 1987, a group of young artists led by Klaman and Kowalczyk staged roving actions that disrupted the visual landscape of Gdańsk. These included a line of fire burning from one end of a frozen river to the other that illuminated the cavernous space under an imposing concrete bridge (*Most (Bridge)* from 1985); colossal abstract and figurative “drawings” made from lines dug in the snow or planks laid on the soil that materialised overnight on the hillsides around a ruined Napoleonic fort (*Rysunki na Śniegu (Drawings in the Snow)* from 1987); and an exhibition of expressionistic paintings and sculptures installed without community or state permission in the dank basement of an abandoned barracks in the dead of winter (*Baraki (Barracks)* from 1986). These collaboratively enacted practices would come to be defined as exhibitions in an un-sited space that the artists called the Galeria Rotacyjna (Rotating Gallery) or Galeria Itineracja (Itinerant Gallery). Instead of individual authorship, the roving exhibitions were attributed not only to a collective, but also to an institutional author. This attribution was aimed at protecting the identity of the individual artists against the charge of non-conformism in this period of renewed repression in post-martial law Poland, but would also eventually lead to the more formalised affiliation of the Wyspa Gallery.¹²

The *Moby Dick – Rzeźba ’87* exhibition and its staging at Wyspa highlighted the presence of a number of discourses crucial to artistic production in Poland in the 1980s more generally: the view of neo-expressionism as a critically and politically viable artistic language; of underground artistic production as a sub- or countercultural form of community; and of the alternative art gallery system as a physical and ideological enclave for artistic production, exhibition and socialisation outside the influence of the state. I will limit my analysis of *Moby Dick – Rzeźba ’87*, however, to a discussion of a particular type of object and spatial logic that was explored in the individual artworks and the exhibition as a whole: the monument, or monumental space. The critical project of the exhibition and – as a key exhibition in its history – that of Wyspa was primarily expressed in its deployment and recalibration of the aesthetic and affective operation of the literal and discursive *site* of the monument that ordered public life under communism. As Klaman described it, the
function of Wyspa was to provide a new relationship to public and natural space that might equally develop “interpersonal contacts and artist-to-artist relationships, a kind of communal activity involving a transformation into autonomous clusters, immersing us at the level of individual noise (individual significance).” The collective spatial practices inaugurated by Moby Dick – Rzeźba ’87 through the logic of the monument might thus provide models of collective artistic production and display, as well as a larger category of collectivity in the “public” space that could challenge a collective subject beyond the binaries of Soviet socialism and Solidarność, East and West, communism and capitalism, group and individual, and art and politics.

Moby Dick – Rzeźba ’87 and the aesthetic logic of the monumental object

The Moby Dick – Rzeźba ’87 show took its name from one of the included artworks exhibited at the Gdynia pavilion, by Krzysztof Bednarski (an artist from Warsaw of a slightly older generation). Bednarski’s Moby Dick is a sculptural installation defined as much by its positive as its negative spaces, as much by what the artist presents as by the space filled in by the spectator. Bednarski’s work accommodates a number of double meanings and spectatorial perspectives. For this piece, the shape of a whale’s body was cast from the hull of a boat he had pulled out of the Wisła River. He upturned the moulding of the hull, allowing its material to suggest the outline of a whale. The predatory boat used to chase Moby Dick thus also becomes the body of the whale, blurring the boundaries between prey and victor. Only the top half of the whale is represented, as if floating on the floor of the gallery, under which, and within the hidden depths, the completion of the animal’s body could be understood in the mind of the viewer. The whale, which took over almost the entire space of the Gdynia pavilion, is monumental in scale and constructed from durable industrial materials. Even so, its corporeal unity is broken up through the segmentation of its form and the division of these units, with its body collapsible at any time. Moby Dick is both a representational sculpture and a participatory installation – an object to be apprehended and an environment to be experienced immersively.

My concern here is with this dialectic operation of Moby Dick that also fundamentally defines the formal qualities of the monument beyond
specific ideological projects – that is, the monument as a figuration or representation (either abstract or representational), which simultaneously engages a total sensorial and affective organisation of the spectator’s space. For the philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre, the monument offers “each member of a society an image of that membership, an image of his or her social visage […] a collective mirror more faithful than any personal one.”¹⁵ The monumental object, both as the representation of collective identity and the object through which it coheres, is just one aspect of an affective spatial operation for Lefebvre, who stated that “The affective level – which is to say, the level of the body, bound to symmetries and rhythm – is transformed into a ‘property’ of monumental space, into symbols which are generally intrinsic parts of a politico-religious whole, into coordinated symbols.” The monument is thus a system of representation that establishes this relationship of the body to its space through an abstraction inherent in its object form, in which “reality is changed into appearance”.¹⁶ However, such a transformation of reality into appearance (rendering the monumental as a space experienced flatly like a text) is never total. Rather than disengaging from an experience in relation to the monumental, Lefebvre instead seeks a way of experiencing such spaces as textural – that is, in a way which engages with such aporias between image and object, individual and collective, space and audience.

It is within this definition of the monumental – as a formal model and spectatorial experience that can lead to perceptual recalibration – that Klaman, the figurehead and theoretician of Wyspa, situates its possible political potential in two conversations from 1990 and 1994 with his colleague Ziarkiewicz. He describes the monumental scale emblematic of the works included in Moby Dick – Rzeźba ’87 in terms of a complex immersive environment leading to a more direct spectatorial experience of art: “Classical sculpture, you can walk around – but in installation you can circle among its elements.”¹⁷ Klaman distinguishes the emancipatory, spectatorial experience of monumentality from the monument as a fixed object. He argues that he is not interested in the monument as “an ideological topic, but a formal topic, which is repeated in almost every age […] from Rome to socialist realism.”¹⁸ The monument thus becomes a “ready-made model” that Klaman deploys, the artist himself inhabiting the role of an “autocratic ruler who asked no one for an opinion before erecting the palace”. However, a critical monument can be constructed, with Klaman declaring, “I am different from the autocratic ruler in that I’m building it perversely – in advance condemning it to death. In this way
The artist thus perceives his practice as formally similar to, but subversive of, existing systems of rule, and thus simultaneously disruptive of both aesthetic and political orders of reality.

The formal and spatial logic of the monument, as a publicly located object and spectatorial mode, was reproduced forcefully in this exhibition, legibly subverting the ideological organisation of Soviet socialism by targeting its physical and sensory premises. All the artworks included in Wyspa’s second exhibition borrowed the scale of the monument, as well as the more fundamental monumental operation of dialectically forging an image of the collective, while simultaneously structuring the sensory and physical space that would inaugurate this collective. What the works failed to incorporate, however, was the ideological content of the monument’s operation; instead, they provided incoherent representations of the body and, while immersive, incomprehensible articulations of physical space and the individual’s sensorium. The physical dispersal that characterised the structure of the double-sited exhibition was also intended to be staged by the works themselves, whose aim, according to Klaman, was to place the spectator in an unfixed phenomenological positioning that could develop “a double perspective – from the micro-space of the body, ‘meatiness’, to the macro-field, constructing the ‘shadows’ of monumental structures”.

Doubled positions and perspectives utilised as themes and spectatorial logics functioned as the general operating principle for all the works in Moby Dick – Rzeźba ’87. The exhibition elucidated a metaphorical and actual process of relocation from the public space of Gdańsk, marked by fixed subject positions and didactic monumentalism, to what Klaman described as the obsolescent, “ex-territorium” of the abandoned island of Wyspa. This process was ushered along by Jarosław Fliciński’s work entitled Stan teraz (State of the Present), a site-specific construction composed of two separate installations, Wejście (Entrance) and Linia (Line) (figs. 1 and 2). Wejście introduced the viewers to the exhibition, quite physically, by providing a high-walled, open-roofed corridor leading them from the street outside the island to its main ruined area. Stretching forty metres long and two metres high, this meandering corridor was constructed by Fliciński and the other exhibition participants from cardboard, zinc sheets and paper. The paper sections were covered with expressionist paintings of messy colour blocks and broad gestural lines applied with white concrete and tar. To extend Wejście, this corridor that served as the literal and metaphorical threshold of the exhibition, Fliciński dug into and
utilised the actual physical matter of the island to continue the path of perceptual relocation. He built an eighteen-metre-length embankment out of an accumulation of soil and rubble from the site, flattening the top and placing a line of stones interspersed with shards of mirrors along it. The physical limit of *Linia* was determined by one of the brick walls that made up the ruined granaries on the island. However, Fliciński created a perceptual illusion whereby, through a reflection between the mirrors on the embankment and others placed next to the mound, the line of soil

---

1 Installation view of *Moby Dick – Rzeźba ’87* at Wyspa, November 1987
and rocks was made to look as if it extended beyond, and even into, the brick wall. When looked upon directly, the spectator’s reflection was refracted and cut off by the mirrors, with a coherent body image the price to be paid for the establishment of a visually coherent, self-perpetuating, but imaginary spatial order. While a fixed, but illusory, configuration of space was manifested, the body became the dispersed object to be perceived as multiple, rather than a static representational form or spectatorial position.

Kazimierz Kowalczyk’s installation for the exhibition included two components that similarly confused different perspectival modes. The first, *Ludozercy* (*Cannibals*), was a large black and white painting in a neo-expressionist style, which hung from one of Wyspa’s red brick walls (figs. 1, 2 and 3). The painting shows two line-drawn human heads whose necks disappear at the bottom edge of the canvas, thus giving the impression that the figures are emerging, although flatly, from the soil of Wyspa itself. The confusion between the depicted space of the painting and the actual space of Wyspa is further developed in photographic documentation of this work, in which the viewers are dwarfed by the scale of the painting and consumed by the people-eaters it portrays. Beyond

---

2 Installation view of *Moby Dick – Rzeźba ’87* at Wyspa, November 1987
the representational elements of the work, the ground of the painting similarly expresses what Ziarkiewicz describes as a “medieval mixing of perspectives”.23 Kowalczyk had sewn together a number of maps in order to produce a canvas big enough to hold his image, and through the painted-over white ground, the contours of these geographic lines bled through. The maps, scaled down and spatially comprehensible abstractions of geographic space, were here recombined and established as canvas. As an intellection of a physical fact of space, the map became the material ground for representation itself.

Kowalczyk’s second and interrelated piece, Człowiek z karabinem (Man with a Rifle) (figs. 1, 2, and 3), was a monumental drawing similar to his earlier practices on the hillside of the Napoleonic Forts in Gdańsk. Using white painted boards laid out on the ground, the artist “drew” a simple figure that measured nine metres wide and twenty metres long. Unlike his earlier works, however, Kowalczyk’s land drawing at Wyspa could not be experienced from afar as a vertically-oriented aesthetic experience. As this image lay flat on the soil of Wyspa, the only way the figure of the man could be seen in its entirely was from above the ground, either
from the walls of the granaries where the cannibals were hanging or from the sky. It was more likely for the spectator to find himself or herself standing inside the bodily outline that took up most of the space in front of Ludozerky. Kowalczyk’s installation not only established multiple physical locations, scales and perspectival positions, but also rehearsed the impossibility of any external perspective with which to naturally apprehend Człowiek z karabinem. In this way, the work positioned the spectator in a perceptually recalibrated relationship to the body and its monumental representation.

It was Klaman who most faithfully applied the monumental as a formal and spectatorial model. Postać trzymająca los (Figure Holding Fate, or Lottery), one of the works produced for the Wyspa site of the exhibition, featured a gigantic sculpture of a human torso with one arm outstretched (figs. 1, 4 and 5) sitting atop a small tower made from painted black logs. Behind this construction stood a pyramidal fence-like structure, similarly painted black and serving as the backdrop to the sculpture. In its use of the mandala form, the installation made reference not only to the monumental, but to the trans-historical, universal monument. In spite of this faithful monumentality, it nonetheless represented the impossibility of interpreting it from a single literal or metaphorical perspective. When viewed front-on from a vantage point between the two most imposing brick walls at Wyspa, the effect produced was one of visual coherence.

---

4 Photomontage of Grzegorz Klaman’s Postać trzymająca los (Figure Holding Fate in His Hands), 1987, site-specific sculptural installation. © Wyspa Institute of Art Archives
– the logs blended into the flat backdrop, whose intimated grandeur supported the monumental figure sitting at its summit. When viewed from anywhere else, however, *Postać trzymająca los* immediately revealed its numerous interlocking parts. From the side, it was clear that the figure was set far in front of the fence-silhouette in order to create the illusionistic effect; from behind, it was practically invisible. In establishing a single viewpoint from which this coherence could be achieved, Klaman demonstrated the visual trickery of the monumental form, its lofty content and its representation of the human figure – all contingent on a fixed and singular position and perspective. His subversion of this form lay in his preservation of the collective sensorial experience it inaugurated, by virtue of its scale and totalising nature. Following from this, however, the work is liquidated of its figurative legibility (as a coherent
representation containing a clear message), its sensorial legibility, and thus its affective appeal as an object of individual or collective identification.

Monumental and ideological figuration

In taking up the content, scale and perceptual logic of the monument, the large-scale works at *Moby Dick – Rzeźba ’87* engaged a formal tradition through which the human figure is established as a public site and the human viewer arguably becomes bodily subject to the operations of the site by virtue of its own public condition. The monument and its totalising organisation of collective identity is, of course, one of the hallmarks of Stalinist socialist realism, and was crucial in the project of developing an image and sensorium for the new Soviet man. According to the art critic and theorist Boris Groys, the Stalinist revival and exploitation of classical forms of art in the service of ideological development shows the manner in which its aesthetic project departed swiftly from its avant-gardist roots. In particular, the key ideological operation of socialist realism lay in the spectatorial mode of engagement – one of didacticism and immersion – demanded by classical forms, yet taken to an extreme. In opposition to the “distancing effect” provoked by the avant-gardist laying bare of the formal operations of the artwork, the socialist realist style was emblematic of Stalinist culture’s interest “in various means by which the subconscious could be shaped without revealing the mechanisms of the process”. While the codes and prescriptions of socialist realism, shrouded in a seemingly realistic technique of mimesis, accomplished the content of this programme in the fine arts, and neo-classical architecture provided the sensory immersion and sense of temporal permanence that would allow for an affective transposition of ideology, the monument was the form that combined an organisation of space and a representational mode to impart both the image of a Soviet body and a Soviet sensorium – to borrow the words of Groys, “a total work of art”.

The totalising logic of the monument is by no means exclusive to a Stalinist aesthetic project, or to totalitarian regimes. This fact is manifested quite clearly in the post-war tensions in the organisation of public life and space in Gdańsk, a city marked by both official and dissident attempts to take control of the meanings and operations of public space. Following World War II, the city was “returned” to Poland after nearly
two centuries of Prussian and German possession and settlement. This return, and the subsequent forced repatriation of Poles and Germans, contributed to the establishment of Gdańsk as a city representing a regained Polish homeland. Alongside the rebuilding of the city through the reconfiguration of its population, Gdańsk had to rebuild itself physically. Following intense bombings in 1945 and destructive storm winds in the subsequent months, over ninety percent of the city lay in ruin. Supported by the Soviet state, control of the reconstruction project was handed over to Polish authorities, town planners and architects. The rebuilding efforts in the Main Town, similar to those carried out in the Old Town of Warsaw, favoured a replication and extension of the previous classical style of baroque architecture. Through the purging of any physical markers of German culture, the style chosen served to creatively implement a myth of present and eternal “Polishness” within the physical fabric of the city. In some cases, however, it was merely the surfaces of these buildings that were reconstructed in this classical style and “eternal” national image; behind their repainted and reworked facades that faced public spaces lay block housing, modest apartments and open courtyards in the style of modernist Soviet socialism that marked the organisation of so-called private quarters.

More contemporaneous with the Wyspa practices was the emergence of the Solidarność independent trade union movement, as outlined earlier, in Gdańsk in the 1970s and 1980s. Prompted by declining economic conditions, workers’ strikes continued at the Gdańsk shipyards throughout the 1970s, with a particularly violent incident occurring in August 1970. By August 1980, the movement was led by Lech Wałęsa, with another, more organised, strike held at the shipyards that was supported by workers across the country. As a result of the duration and intensity of this strike, an agreement was reached between the workers and the Communist Party’s Governmental Commission in August 1980, with one of the strikers’ demands being the erection of a monument dedicated to the shipyard workers killed in 1970. *Pomnik Poleglih Stoczniowców (Monument to Fallen Shipyard Workers)* was completed at the end of 1980. The portion designed by the industrial engineer Bogdan Pietruszka is simple in its abstraction and use of industrial materials, consisting of a group of three towers rising to the sky. The monument also demonstrates the negotiation required to fulfill Solidarność’s ideological goal, which focused on the representation of a romantic Polish nationalism based on the country’s Catholic roots. Atop the three towers sit three crosses, bearing three anchors taking the
place of a crucified Christ. As described by the historian Joanna Hübner-Wojciechowska, the monument was successful in matching the ideological aims of the Solidarność movement: “The shipyard workers built themselves a monument to match their own needs, ambitions and possibilities.”

From monumental object to site-specifics at Wyspa

Both Soviet and Solidarność’s attempts at making a claim on public space thus relied on the monument, or the monumental, as an object, as well as a spatial constellation necessary for transforming the political and social organisation of public life. The monument was a crucial form in which to present a collective identity and cohere a collective experience – a physical claim on the public realm and a total sensory reorganisation of its space in terms of its values. At Moby Dick – Rzeźba ’87, the artworks all borrowed the dialectical aesthetics of the monument, but established an alienated spectatorial relationship to the objects in order to undermine their affective lure. We can extend this formal operation of alienation, or “distanciation”, to a larger political project at the root of the exhibition, and of the general project of Wyspa, by considering the connection between artistic site-specificity and public space under communism – a connection theorised by Klaman himself.

Moby Dick – Rzeźba ’87 conceptually began a few days prior to its official opening in Gdynia and Gdańsk when Klaman performed his action Zakopywanie książek (Burying Books in the Ground). Klaman envisaged this action as the preface to the exhibition, or the physical and conceptual laying of its ground. As one of the first actions held on Wyspa Spichrzów since the site became known as the Wyspa open-air gallery, it was also a foundational action that established the focus of the gallery and the art institute that continue to operate today. The event featured Klaman setting himself up in front of a collapsing wall, surrounded by piles of bricks, broken concrete blocks and general rubble. He took a shovel and began to dig a hole, stopping sporadically to throw in a book or two. Once he had exhausted his book supply, he stopped digging and covered the hole with the soil and rubble he had previously removed. With this action he symbolically buried “culture”, leaving it to be subsumed by the “natural” geological processes of the ground in which the books lay, perhaps to be discovered at a later date. Alone on the island, the sole witness to
this gesture, apart from Klaman, was the camera that he had set up on a tripod, which took a series of time-lapse photos documenting his activity as a form of materially and temporally specific labour.\textsuperscript{31}

\textit{Zakopywanie książki} was the clearest materialisation of a specific artistic practice that Klaman had previously theorised in an annex to his Master’s thesis on land art, entitled \textit{Archeologia Odwrótna (Reversed Archeology)}. Written in 1985, \textit{Archeologia Odwrótna} has come to serve as the guiding text for the exhibitions and practices at Wyspa, both for the artist and for interpreters of his work. With no tradition in post-war Polish art that tied in directly with that of his Master’s thesis subject, Klaman’s examples and influences were drawn from the writings and work of British and North American artists, especially Robert Smithson.\textsuperscript{32}

Elaborating on Smithson’s own concerns with the evolution of sculpture into installation, overcoming the sensory, physical and ideological limitations of the art gallery, and a temporality that is attuned to the past but experienced in the present, Klaman defined “reversed archaeology” within the same dialectical state that underpinned much of Smithson’s work.\textsuperscript{33} The essential operation of “reversed archaeology”, as exemplified by Klaman’s action, was the opposite of an excavation or extraction, or what the artist defined as “expression”. Rather, it involved the insertion of materials into the world of matter and its processes, and thus artistic practice into the world as well, or what he referred to as “participation”. Expanding the dialectical logic that he established between expression and participation, Klaman’s text went on to develop further examples: “wrapping-uncovering; separating-connecting; constructing-so that it falls apart; and assembling-disassembling so that it exists again through the consciousness of loss”.\textsuperscript{34} As is clear from this list, Klaman emphasised deterioration, or decay, which is analogous to Smithson’s concept of entropy, as a means of overcoming the “cultural consciousness [that] sneaks in between man and the world” through this concept’s reference to both the temporal and geological processes governing the world that are independent of human action.\textsuperscript{35}

While there was no tradition of land art practices in Polish art, either historically or concurrently with Klaman’s work, there was a strong tradition of open-air artistic activities that equally relied on the de-anthropocentrising capabilities of a natural setting: the “plein-air” events. According to the art historian Grzegorz Dziamski, annual plein-air events, such as the emblematic festival in Osieki, were part of a philosophical “return to nature” that could create the conditions for the emergence of
“a new, postmodern consciousness” generated by the immersive relationship to space provided by the natural location. The particularities of Polish artistic production and the display of works in a natural environment reveal a different approach to that which is most often associated with land art practices; namely, Polish artists’ use of nature itself as a specific medium with a specific formal logic. At canonical plein-air events in Poland, neo-avant-garde artists such as Tadeusz Kantor and Zbigniew Warpechowski enacted site-specific performances framed by the elements of the landscape. By the same token, the painter Piotr C. Kowalski used berries he picked as a paint pigment and lay his canvases on the forest floor, allowing the conditions of the canvas’s spatial situation to paint the picture instead of his own hand. In both sets of examples, nature and the natural setting served an additive function to previously existing artistic media, whether performance or painting, rather than as a medium in and of itself. At the same time, the natural setting tended to undermine the authority of the artist-subject in the creation of artworks.

Beyond the formal innovations occasioned by the plein-air’s natural location, the importance of such events has been largely interpreted through their social and political significance, particularly in terms of the type of artist-subject construction they staged. The retreat to nature provided a physical location that was environmentally distinct from the public spaces of the city and thus the physical markers of the state, which controlled that public space under communism in the People’s Republic of Poland. This physical re-situation was thought to equally provide an affective space as an alternative to that of Soviet socialism that allowed for a subjective freedom from political engagement. Exceeding what Andrzej Turowski described as “Polish ideosis” (Polska ideozia) – a conceptual “space saturated with ideology, limiting the expression of a way of thinking through a predetermined and pervasive perspective […] where individual choices appear against the context of dominating political strategies” – the “return to nature”, while embodying a romantic and utopian ideal of nature’s communal and creative powers, was a means of neutralising the physical and psychical sites of Soviet socialist influence by replacing them with the similarly totalising space of nature. This space was supposedly devoid, however, of human influence, and therefore ideological operations.

Kłaman and Kowalczyk often participated in plein-air events held outside Gdańsk in Pinczów, using these occasions to work through what would eventually become monumental land drawings and installations in public sites in Gdańsk. The imagined destination of their works, however,
was always that of the urban, public space of Gdańsk, and Wyspa in particular. While Klaman conceived the practice of “reversed archaeology” prior to his founding of Wyspa, he argued that it was the specific physical and temporal characteristics of the Wyspa Spichrzów itself that precipitated the works. This theorisation on the part of Klaman illustrates the art theorist Miwon Kwon’s definition of contemporary site-specificity, which itself stems from the practices of Smithson. Such an artistic practice stages the artwork’s attachment to, and influence from, the actualities of its site beyond those of its aesthetic institutional frame, while simultaneously invoking a sensorially immediate experience for the viewer in order to impart a concomitant subjective awareness of one’s own existence in larger social and cultural frameworks. More than just a translation of Western site-specific ideas aimed at developing a site-specificity with the vicissitudes of Wyspa Spichrzów in mind – a version of what the art historian James Meyer refers to as “literal site-specificity” – Klaman defined the aesthetic and affective directness developed equally by land art and the Polish plein-air events as a spatial practice unattached to any specific site. Part of this view of his practice emanated from his conception of Wyspa as an “ex-territorium”, a once used but abandoned site of state-implemented practices and influence. This politically separate but physically embedded space inherently staged a condition of half-distance, which one could both escape from and engage with, both express ideas about, and participate in, the public life of Gdańsk and its liquidation, through the de-anthropocentrising operation of the natural signalled by the island’s ruined state. More critical to Wyspa’s political potential, however, was its development of a conceptual space structured around the affective attachment incarnated by this dialectical site. While based on a physical and actual location, Wyspa offered, for Klaman, not only a phenomenological re-attachment to a specific location, but a model of thought that might overcome Polska ideoza by serving as the literalisation of a dialectical experience of public space that matched the dialectical condition of the human subject within it.

**Dialectical “retreats”**

In his examination of the late Soviet operation of ideology in Russia, the anthropologist Alexei Yurchak argues that the nature of the affective attachment to the spaces and rituals of daily life reveals a political affiliation that is distinct from the binary of official versus dissident. The
question of official or dissident individual action under the state was not a matter of belief or disbelief in the prevailing ideology in the late Soviet period. Overt ideological operations such as slogans, or Soviet rituals like May Day parades, had long become rote practices in which individuals were motivated by little more than self-protection. Because of the omnipresence of these events and slogans, the reach of Soviet ideology not only ordered and regulated public space (the purview of the state), but also affectively modified the individual’s relationship to it, and to his or her surroundings in general. By the 1980s, a lack of investment in the meaning of Soviet routines integrated itself into the everyday lives of individuals, in which political messages, or, as the Czech dissident Vaclav Havel called them, “small component[s] in that huge backdrop to daily life”, were no longer capable of being taken seriously, becoming mere decoration, unnoticed, unheeded, yet omnipresent.

In Poland, the term *emigracja wewnętrzna* (internal emigration) was used by many artists to describe an equivalent act of withdrawal from public and political life as protection from persecution, both physical and psychological. In artistic terms, *emigracja wewnętrzna* manifested itself in the formal retreat to art forms and objects that were better suited to existential reflection than political instrumentalisation (for example, as neo-expressionism has been interpreted). The act of *emigracja wewnętrzna* is akin to the affective process described by Havel, in which he similarly proposed a spatial metaphor as an antidote to the reproduction of ideological logic under Soviet socialism in Eastern Europe: the hidden sphere that would foster a parallel culture in which an alternative political project could flourish. However, this practice was not one that was attached to physical locations per se. The hidden sphere could involve so-called private actions in public (such as certain subtle gestures between people in a restaurant) or public actions in the so-called private sphere (such as kitchen-table discussions of politics), thus revealing the inadequacy of the public/private divide in defining the division of physical and socio-political space under Soviet socialism. More broadly, *emigracja wewnętrzna* was not merely conceived as an act of defence or resignation. After the Solidarność uprisings in the early 1980s, the resulting imposition of martial law until 1983 and the renewed civic repressions that continued even after the state of war was lifted, the foundational ideologies and practices of Soviet socialism in Poland were perceived by the general population as clearly flawed. For many artists and thinkers working in the post-martial law period, a refusal to participate in overt political action, such
as protesting or striking, represented a disengagement from the logic of existing political power by refusing to participate in its logical opposition and its forms and language.48

Such an act of disengagement from the spaces and languages legible as political, whether official or oppositional, did not necessarily mean a disengagement from politics itself. This is a standpoint Klaman himself clearly espoused and which he endorsed through the attribution of a direct phenomenological and affective relationship to one’s environment occasioned through land art and plein-air activities, translated, however, to the “ideological” public space of Gdańsk. In an interview with the art historian and curator Joanna Sokolowska in 2005, he said, “I hated communism and all systems. I had nothing to do with Solidarność and was not looking for such contacts, I wanted to make art.”49 Nonetheless, Klaman claimed, in spite of his pointed political silence, “For me it was a clear interpretation of the political situation. We did not want to say anything directly, go out with banners, agitate.”50 Instead, opposition to the state was potentially manifested in the perceptual and sensorial recalibrations that could lead to interpretations outside of any visual or spatial political logic: “It was a pure form, pure, symbolic action, creating a minimum situation. We acted intuitively, we did not know what was going on in ’68, what such Situationism was all about […] People themselves added the political context to our activities.”51 For Klaman, it was through the practice of reversed archaeology – a process that activated the dialectics of expression and participation, attachment and detachment – that such political activity could be accomplished.

We might consider the larger process intimated by the term emigracja wewnętrzna – a process of retreat from a deep affective engagement in public and political life, but not from politics itself – as a model that provides an account of the oppositional character of the practices represented by Moby Dick – Rzeźba ’87 at Wyspa. This opposition did not involve creating a new artistic language or subject that would be illegible within Soviet aesthetic conventions (as seen in the move to abstraction in Polish conceptualism of the 1960s, or to the body itself as an artistic language in 1970s Polish performance art), nor did it instrumentalise artistic objects as bearers of dissident messages (as seen in Solidarność’s carefully considered visual programme). Rather, the exhibition established an alienated relationship to its objects – in particular, the spectatorial processes produced by a specific form of object and a specific form of public space under Soviet socialism: monumentality. This alienation opposed the affective relationship
staged by official Soviet art, as well as politically-motivated dissident artistic practices whose ideological coherence was matched by its formal and spectatorial coherence. The overall critical project of *Moby Dick – Rzeźba ’87* therefore concerns its establishment of an experience of objects in space that dismantles a coherent collective figuration and coherent sensory experience through the ideological de-instrumentalisation of the monument, without however, dispensing with its form. Instead, an aesthetic *emigracja wewnętrzna* is enacted within the monumental and the public space that is ordered by it, maintaining its immersive logic without sustaining a direct perceptual and affective attachment.

As Klaman wrote in *Archeologia Odwrótna*, Wyspa was to be the breeding ground for an emancipatory affective relationship to space and spatial practices, seen as “a shortcut to a wider, more general quest for another space, another land, a mythical land of artistic fulfilment, a land that is close because it is here, underfoot, the only land offering fulfilment here and now.” More than just utopian musings, Klaman’s views on Wyspa’s situation in the fabric of public space, and the formal problematics it undertakes, might achieve a viable post-Soviet (collective) subjectivity by resituating the literal ground of aesthetic experience. By imbuing the gallery frame with the operations of the body, affect, and the totalisation of the monumental within the public space of Gdańsk (governed as it was by the totalitarian spatio-political logics of Soviet socialism), Wyspa also contributed to a new model for artistic institutions and practices in post-Soviet Poland, in which direct political engagement was critical.

After it ceased operating on Wyspa Spichrzów in 1992, Wyspa returned to its itinerant roots, hosting exhibitions and events at various civic buildings in Gdańsk throughout the 1990s. These, on the whole, continued the site-specific exploration of the urban space of Gdańsk, not only in terms of its former life as a Soviet socialist public space, but also as a representative example of the destructive effects of urban renewal during the period of transition from the Communist People’s Republic of Poland to liberal democracy. In 2004, Wyspa took over a series of buildings at the Gdańsk shipyards, rebranding itself as an institute for contemporary art and receiving NGO status (the first non-profit artistic institution in Poland to be granted this status). Wyspa continues to mount site-specific explorations of this location along with international thematic group shows.

Many of Wyspa’s sponsored exhibitions likewise participated in the development of what is known as “critical art” in Poland in the 1990s. This movement, an artistic practice of the post-Soviet period that focused on
a direct engagement with political issues and exposing the underlying cultural repressions still present in Poland, explored these subjects in tandem with the body. One representative exhibition in 2002 based around Dorota Nieznalska’s sculpture, entitled *Pasja*, which depicted male genitalia on the symbol of the cross, resulted in a very public protest mounted by the Liga Polskich Rodzin (the League of Polish Families). In an event that revealed the ongoing repression in Polish society, not as a result of Soviet socialist policies but of the political accommodation of the beliefs of some conservative and xenophobic cultural contingents within the country, Nieznalska was taken to court and charged with blasphemy, although she was acquitted after a protracted trial. The institutionalisation of Wyspa as an alternative gallery, site-specifically aimed towards a physical and affective imbrication in issues of social and political life in Poland, thus contributed to the maintenance of subjective artistic freedom and the dispersal of repressive collective formations by presenting challenges to the visual conformism of artistic and public space in Poland, as seen during the late Soviet period in Gdańsk.


Michael Burawoy and Janos Lukacs, The Radiant Past: Ideology and Reality in Hungary’s Road to Capitalism, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 87. While ostensibly about the situation in Hungary, Burawoy’s and Lukacs’s study cites Poland as another example of a “shortage economy”, or resource-constrained economy.


As Kłaman stated in an interview with Joanna Sokolowska, “Our actions were illegal, the police would come. Because of Golem [referring to his monumental sculpture with a red cape installed at Wyspa for the first exhibition, Rzeźba-Instalacja-Obraz], and his provocative red coat, I was summoned to the police station.” See Joanna Sokolowska, “Rozmowa z Grzegorzem Kłamanem” in Nova rzeźba lat 80-tych, unpubl. MA thesis, University of Warsaw, 2005, p. 219. Kłaman explained in another interview, “Wyspa and the Necropolis: Reading the Strata”, that it was not merely the militia, but the citizens of Gdańsk who intervened: “Right after the opening of the exhibition the police arrived – someone had told them that there was a convention of Satanists taking place.” Grzegorz Kłaman, et al., “Wyspa and the Necropolis: Reading the Strata”, in Aneta Szyłak (ed.), Wyspa: Miejsce idei, idea miejsca, Gdańsk, Fundacja Wyspa Progress, 1995, p. 55.


Part of this approach was specific to Gdańsk. Socialist realism was a much more direct reference or target in that city than elsewhere in Poland. The painting programme introduced by the Soviets in the 1950s took hold at least minimally in Gdańsk, and from that tradition emerged the “Sopot School” of colourism. For a discussion of this history and style, see Jolanta Ciesielska, “From Reverse Archeology to Post Modernism: What is the new Gdańsk school?”, in Aneta Szyłak (ed.), Wyspa: Miejsce idei, idea miejsca, Gdańsk, Fundacja Wyspa Progress, 1995, pp. 25-35; Kureyko and Tatar, 2011 (note 4), p. 178.

It has also been argued that there was a complete lack of exhibition space in Gdańsk, requiring the artists to move into the streets and spaces of the city itself. See Grzegorz Kłaman, interview by Alexandra Alisauskas, August 2011; Kureyko and Tatar (note 4), 2011, p. 177.


18 Ibid., p. 21.
19 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
22 On one side of this earthwork, Fliciński utilised a cavity in the wall as a pedestal to lay out the board game “Mill”, and place two cards glued to the wall, on which were written two quotes from Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose*. See Ziarkiewicz, 1988 (note 9), n. pag.
23 Ziarkiewicz, 1988 (note 9), n. pag.
24 This trompe-l’oeil effect must have been key for Klaman – the silhouette of this installation would serve as the design for the stamp that would mark all Wyupa publications in the 1980s.
26 For this history, see A. Kemp-Welch, 2008 (note 7).
28 Ibid., p. 112.
29 For this history, see Ost, 1990 (note 6).
34 “Archeologia Odwrótma” closely follows the dialectical ideas and structure of Smithson’s text “Dialectic of Site and Non-Site”, from 1972.
37 Idem, pp. 147-150.
38 The contemporaneous Russian group Collective Actions would similarly use field trips outside the city to engage a type of blank location through which greater philosophical reflection on the art object could be elicited, unimpeded by the spatial and ideological operations of the state as engaged in the Soviet city. See Boris Groys, Max Hollein, Ilja Kabakov and Pavel Pepperstein (eds.), *Total Enlightenment: Conceptual Art in Moscow 1960-1990*, Ostfildern, Hatje Cantz, 2008.
39 Dziamski, 1995 (note 36), p. 139. For a counter-argument of the political escapism of plein-air practices, see Luiza Nader, “The Zalesie Ball: Other Spaces in the Polish Avant-Garde”, in Claire Bishop and Marta Dziewańska (eds.), 1968-1989. *Political Upheaval and Artistic Change*, Warsaw, Museum of Modern Art, 2008, pp. 88-105. Nader discusses a similar plein-air event, the *Zalesie Ball*, to argue that such practices, in conceptual art specifically, inaugurated interstitial artistic, social and political spaces that were not merely an escape from such constructions, but articulated and imagined new ways of affective being in public and in history.
41 See, for example, Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational
Other interpretations of Smithson develop different versions of site-specificity, such as Craig Owens’ analysis in terms of the allegorical. See Craig Owens, “Earthwords”, in October, No.102, 1979, pp. 120–130.


See, for example, Vaclav Havel, Power of the Powerless: Citizens Against the State in Central-Eastern Europe, Armonk, ME Sharpe, 1985.

See, for example, Kemp-Welch, 2008 (note 7), p. 351.

For a brief discussion of this concept, see Wojciech Kozlowski, “Zielona Góra 1979–1991: The Unrecorded Myth”, in Karol Stenkiewicz (ed.), Rejected Heritage, Warsaw; Museum of Modern Art, 2011, pp. 118–129. The term emigracja wewnętrzna is explicitly used in reference to the practices at Wyspa in the text “Treasure Island. Affirmative Structural Outpour” by Pawel Konnak and Zibgniew Sajnóg, in Aneta Szyłak (ed.), Wyspa: Miejsce idei, idea miejsca, Gdańsk, Fundacja Wyspa Progress, 1995, pp. 66–73. This version is a reprint and translation from the original text published in Przedproża, an independently produced art journal in Gdańsk. See Przedproża No. 11, 1991, pp. 2-4. While the term “internal emigration” often describes the spiritual opposition of a group of World War II era German authors to Hitler’s regime, the term as it is used in relation to Polish art of the 1980s might have more immediate precedents in the writings of Polish dissident Adam Michnik.

Quoted in Sokołowska, 2005 (note 8), p. 216.

Ibid., p. 221.

Ibid.


For example, the exhibition Projekt Wyspa from 1992, which was an international exhibition inviting artists to consider the role of Wyspa Spichrzów in Gdańsk’s changing urban fabric at a moment when Wyspa (the gallery/art institute) was fighting to keep its status at that site. See Grzegorz Klaman and Agnieszka Wołodźko (eds.), Project Wyspa, Gdańsk, Wyspa, 1993.


Ibid.