# SPATIAL DIALOGUES AND THE MEMORY OF ABSENT JEWS IN CONTEMPORARY POLISH ART: YAEL BARTANA, RAFAŁ BETLEJEWSKI AND JOANNA RAJKOWSKA

## Uilleam Blacker

## Abstract

*The paper analyses how the work of three contemporary artists deal with the memory of Poland's pre-war Jewish population and the Holocaust. Joanna Rajkowska is one of Poland's leading contemporary artists and her artworks have been displayed in prominent public sites in Warsaw. Her most famous work is her palm tree in central Warsaw, Greetings from Jerusalem Avenue (2002, ongoing), which references, in its form and physical location on Aleje Jerozolimskie, or Jerusalem Avenue, both Jerusalem and Warsaw's vanished Jews. Rajkowska has also used important Jewish locations in Warsaw in other work, such as Oxygenator (2007). Yael Bartana is an Israeli artist, but represented Poland at the Venice Biennale in 2011. In her trilogy of films set in Poland, And Europe Will Be Stunned (2006-11), Bartana uses prominent locations in Warsaw in which to stage performances (the Palace of Culture, the National Stadium, site of the future Museum of Polish Jews) that provocatively posit a return of Jews to Poland. Betlejewski has authored several provocative and creative responses to the absence of Jews in contemporary Poland, such as his I miss you, Jew! project (2004), and his Burning barn performance (2010). The paper will examine the varying strategies through which these artists deal with the problem of the absence of Jews, the trauma of their violent disappearance, and attempt to re-inscribe the vanished Jews back into the landscape of contemporary Poland. The paper argues that all three artists use actual and imagined space in order to create a complex, often ambiguous dialogue between diverse traumatic pasts and the problems of the present. This text is published as a counterpart to the contribution to Disturbing Pasts from the artist Rafal Betlejewski.*

## Biographical note

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An earlier version of this material was presented on the occasion of the project conference 'Disturbing Pasts: Memories, Controversies and Creativity' (20 -22 November 2012, Museum of Ethnology/Weltmuseum Wien, Vienna). To view the film footage on the Open Arts Archive, www.openartsarchive.org, follow this link: http://www.openartsarchive.org/oaa/content/disturbing-pasts-memories-controversies-and-creativity-conference-14

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Karen Underhill has noted that to a large degree it is the 'absent Jew', an idealised, imaginary figure who has the potential to return a lost wholeness and provide absolution for historical misdeeds, who is the key figure in Polish memory discourse about the Holocaust and Poland's lost Jewish communities (Underhill, 2011, p.582). By the same token, this absent Jew, who represents the promise of cultural fulfilment and regeneration, is also the object of fear and hatred, and the source for the continuing presence of anti-Semitism in a country where Jews represent only a tiny fraction of the population (Underhill, p.588; Zubrzycki, 2013, p.104). Poland's Jews were annihilated under the Nazi occupation, and while there is no doubt as to who the perpetrators of this crime were, the role of Poles in relation to it was complex and ambiguous, and remains the subject of difficult historiographical and mnemonic discussions. There were many rescuers, but there were also those who denounced Jews or those who hid Jews, while many looked on with indifference. On the other hand, there were instances in which Poles directly participated in mass violence against their Jewish neighbours, such as the Jedwabne massacre of 1941, or the Kielce pogrom of 1946 (see Engelking, 2001; Engelking and Libionka, 2009; Engelking and Leociak 2009; Fiorecki, 2010; Gebert, 2008; Gross, 2001 and 2006; Grabowski, 2013; Irwin-Zarecka 1994; Zubrzycki 2006; Polonsky 2009).

The suffering of Jews in the Holocaust was minimised and distorted under communism in Poland. This elision, some have argued, suited the majority of Poles, pro-communist or otherwise, who were unwilling to confront the traumas of the recent past, and were still struggling to come to terms with what many of them perceived as 'their own' (i.e. Polish Catholic, and not Polish Jewish) massive wartime suffering and loss (Steinlauf, 1997, pp.62-74; Polonsky and Michlic, 2004, p.6). Indeed, as Genevieve Zubrzycki points out, the monoethnic narrative of national martyrdom was so effectively promoted by the postwar communist state precisely because it was compatible with Poland's long-standing historical tradition of glorifying Polish national victimhood and suffering, often, indeed, in competition with the similar narrative that also lay at the heart of the identity of Poland's large Jewish community (Zubrzycki, 2013, p.96). The trauma of witnessing the mass murder of the Polish Jewish population and the ambiguous legacy of the various, complex roles played by non-Jewish Poles in relation to this, left post-war Poland with what the literary critic Jan Błoński described as 'a bloody and awful mark', a 'burden' that 'we must carry within ourselves, although it is painful and unpleasant': the burden, in Błoński's understanding, was precisely the question of how Poles should deal with the marks left by the 'blood of the Other', by the death and subsequent absence of that other. This was a question that Poles were reluctant to confront (Błoński, 1994, pp.10, 18-9).

The difficult question of wartime and pre-war Polish-Jewish relations has, nevertheless, been confronted and turned to constructive uses in Poland. This rediscovery began in the 1970s with local efforts by the small remaining Jewish communities, but also by other religious and community groups, to preserve the crumbling remnants of Jewish sites in Polish towns and cities, such as cemeteries and synagogues. Grass roots efforts to restore cemeteries spread into wider initiatives that embraced commemorative practices such as building memorials, marking anniversaries, and educational and cultural programmes and events. These processes, spurred on by increasing interest (and pressure) from outside of Poland, grew during the 1980s, and became an open, state-supported trend in the post-communist period. By the post-communist period, a remarkable level of engagement with Poland's 'absent Jew' could be perceived; importantly for this paper, this process began precisely in the physical spaces where the traces of that absence were most tangible (Meng, 2011, p.155).

Cultural figures played a crucial role in the recovery of the memory of Poland's Jews. Writers, many of them Polish-Jewish, like Henryk Grynberg and Hanna Krall, began mapping the absence of Jews in the places they had formerly inhabited, and which seemed to have already forgotten them in the 1960s and 1970s, while others, like Nobel Prize winning poet Czesław Miłosz and novelist, poet and critic Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz, wrote important texts that confronted Poles directly with difficult questions about their relationships with Jews and their roles under the German occupation. As early as 1943, Miłosz's haunting poem 'Campo dei Fiori' had confronted readers with the disturbing image of Poles enjoying themselves on

a carousel while the Warsaw ghetto burned, while much later Rymkiewicz, in his novel *Umschlagplatz* (1988), urged Poles to confront the silence and absence that characterised landscape left behind after the redevelopment of the destroyed ghetto: 'What meaning does it have, can it have, that we live around their death? That is the explanation for why I seek a map of this place.' (Rymkiewicz, 1988, p.16) It is through creating his own map, through confronting the space of the former ghetto, that Rymkiewicz attempts to locate and come to terms with the absence of Warsaw's Jews.

The absence of Jews has also been problematised in the works of some of Poland's most prominent artists. In 2013, Warsaw's Zachęta Gallery held a major exhibition as part of the city's commemorations of the 70th anniversary of the Ghetto Uprising that testified to the richness of Polish artists' engagement with the Holocaust over the last seven decades. Leading figures in contemporary Polish art such as Wilhelm Sasnal, Mirosław Bałka and Artur Żmijewski, whose works were represented in the exhibition, have made important, sometimes controversial statements about memory of the Holocaust and Polish-Jewish relations. Recent years have seen a particularly noticeable upsurge in artistic responses to these problems, even taking on a distinct and new direction in terms of artistic-commemorative practice, a trend that Erica Lehrer and Magdalena Waligorska have described as '[s]ocial and cultural "interventions" undertaken by artists, academics, youth groups, and other culture brokers, [which] began to create provocative spaces of dialogue and self-reflection, in staged installations or happenings in which individuals were asked to participate in active, social forms of remembering'. These new and innovative approaches have, as Lehrer and Waligorska note, crossed the boundary between the world of art and the public sphere, often involving participation, performance and occupying public space, moving precisely into the physical spaces where the absence of Poland's Jews can be most tangibly felt, and engaging with the publics who inhabit these spaces (Lehrer and Waligorska, 2013, p.2). This paper will examine the work of three artists who have worked in the Polish context in recent years, and who have been involved in the trend identified by Lehrer and Waligorska: Joanna Rajkowska, Rafał Betlejewski and Yael Bartana. All three have made high profile artistic statements on the memory of Poland's lost Jews and the Holocaust. All three also deal directly with the 'empty spaces' that are marked by Jewish absence, situating their work in public space either as public performances or as permanent public artworks.

Yael Bartana is an Israeli artist who has worked in Poland and on Polish-Jewish memory. Bartana may seem like a strange choice to begin a discussion of Polish art and attitudes to the Holocaust and Polish-Jewish relations, but she is a relevant choice, not least because her work challenges rigid definitions of culture and ethnicity in the Polish context, as does the fact that she chooses to cooperate with Polish partners and represented Poland at the Venice Biennale in 2011. One of her best-known works is her Polish Trilogy of short films, *And Europe Will be Stunned* (2007–11), which has been shown in leading museums and galleries around the world, and has had a significant impact in Poland, where it was made and first shown, attracting significant media and critical attention. The trilogy was the result of cooperation with Polish intellectuals from the left-wing circles surrounding the journal and political/cultural foundation *Krytyka polityczna* (Political Critique). The films, which posit the return of Poland's lost Jews to the country, were accompanied by the 'formation' of a public movement under the name 'Jewish Renaissance Movement in Poland' (see www.jrmip.org), which held an inaugural congress in Berlin in 2012, an event that was part talking shop to discuss political and cultural issues, but in the main constituted an extended artistic performance based on the ideas and aesthetics of the films.

The first part of Bartana's trilogy, *Mary koszmary* (Nightmares), features the left-wing activist, journalist, writer and founder of *Krytyka polityczna* Sławomir Sierakowski in the role of a political agitator making a speech to the dilapidated, empty national stadium in Warsaw, before it was renovated for the Euro 2012 football championships. The stadium, previously called the 10th Anniversary Stadium, was built in 1955 to celebrate ten years since the Soviet victory in the Second World War, partly using rubble from the destroyed Warsaw ghetto. In the speech, which he co-wrote with the writer and academic Kinga Dunin, Sierakowski implores Jews to return to Poland in order to stop the nation's 'nightmares', to heal its wounded memory, and build a common future. His audience is a small group of children dressed in communist pioneer-style uniforms. In the second film, *Mur i wieża* (Wall and Tower), a group of young Jews, apparently having heeded Sierakowski's call, arrives in Warsaw and builds a small settlement in the centre of the city. The film shows the building of the settlement in optimistic spirit, recalling socialist or Zionist propaganda films depicting workers or settlers in Israel. The group is seen learning the language of their new home, and reposing in a cheerful, hopeful atmosphere; yet the resulting

settlement is closed behind high walls and barbed wire underneath a watchtower. The site the settlers choose is in Muranów, the district of Warsaw that had been the city's Jewish district before the war, then became part of the ghetto, and was completely destroyed by the Nazis during the liquidation of the ghetto in 1943. The site also happens to be the location where large Museum of the History of Polish Jews was built and opened in 2013. The museum sits adjacent to the famous Ghetto Uprising monument designed by Natan Rapoport and built in 1948, although this does not appear in the film. The final film, *Zamach* (Assassination) depicts the 'state funeral' of Sierakowski, cast as a popular and inspiring political leader, after he has been assassinated. The funeral takes place at Warsaw's huge, socialist-realist Palace of Culture and Science, completed also in 1955 as a gift from Joseph Stalin to the Polish people. In a ceremony in a nearby square, against the backdrop of a large statue of Sierakowski, various figures pay tribute to his dream of Jews returning to Poland, and a large multicultural crowd marches under the banner of the Jewish Renaissance Movement in Poland. The list of speakers includes representatives of the Movement, whose banners can be seen displayed around the assembled crowd, but also, for example, the Israeli journalist Yaron London, who speaks against the idea of the return to Poland.



Figure 3.2.1: Yael Bartana, *Mary Koszmary* (*Nightmares*), 2007, film.



Figure 3.2.2: Yael Bartana, *Mur i wieża* (*Wall and tower*), 2009, film.



Figure 3.2.3: Yael Bartana, *Zamach* (*Assassination*), 2011, film.

Joanna Rajkowska, who is one of contemporary Poland's most prominent artists, also refers to Poland's lost Jews in two of her best-known projects. The first, entitled *Greetings from Jerusalem Avenue*, consists of a palm tree that was placed on a roundabout in central Warsaw in 2002, and, despite numerous adventures and moments of uncertainty, stands today as a permanent feature of the cityscape. The project was inspired both by the artist's travels to Israel and her reflections on the loss of Jews from Warsaw. The palm is placed on one of the city's main thoroughfares, the Aleje Jerozolimskie, or Jerusalem Avenue, so named after an 18th-century Jewish settlement near Warsaw to which the road led and which, significantly, was abolished after objections from Warsaw's non-Jewish Polish merchants 'leaving the name of the road leading to it as the only reminder' (Jakub Dąbrowski, cited by Chmielewska-Szlajfer, 2010, p.203). The second work is *Oxygenator* (2007–8), which entailed the redesigning of a small square in central Warsaw to include a pond with fish surrounded by grass, plants, chairs and mattresses. The pond emitted ozone into the air, which had the effect of filling the surrounding air with extra oxygen. The site, Grzybowski Square, was once part of a thriving Jewish community, and was then part of the ghetto during the war. It presently lies immediately adjacent to Próżna Street, a short, dilapidated side street that is one of the very few remaining parts of Warsaw's pre-war Jewish district. Today the street is the focal point for Warsaw's annual Jewish festival, and is slowly undergoing renovation. Warsaw's Jewish Theatre and its only remaining pre-war synagogue, the Nożyk Synagogue, are located on the other side of the square. Also on the square is a church in which Jews were hidden during the war, but where the artist, in her commentary on the piece, describes having found anti-Semitic literature for sale (Rajkowska, 2010, p.77). The project was also realised partly in response to a plan to erect a monument to victims of ethnic cleansing of Poles by Ukrainian nationalists during the Second World War in Poland's former eastern territories, today western Ukraine, a history that, as Rajkowska points out, though tragic, has no direct connection to this specific place (Rajkowska, 2010, pp. 86-7). In the light of the fraught dynamics of traumatic memory and forgetting surrounding the square, the oxygen-generating pond was, in the artist's conception, a way of 'purifying' the air of a place so heavily marked with contested and difficult memory that it had become neglected and shunned by those encountering it on a day-to-day basis (Rajkowska, 2010, pp. 71-104).

The third case discussed here is the work of Rafał Betlejewski, an artist and performer who is known for his innovative and sometimes controversial



Figure 3.2.4: Joanna Rajkowska, *Pozdroowienia z Alej Jerozolimskich* (*Greetings from Jerusalem Avenue*), 2002, multimedia public art installation, photo courtesy of Joanna Rajkowska.

performance projects, many of which focus on memory politics, and two of which, probably his most famous, refer to Poland's lost Jews. The first, entitled *I miss you, Jew!*, begun in 2004, involved inscribing the words 'I miss you, Jew!' on walls and taking photographs of a yarmulke in an empty chair in various location

Figure 3.2.5: Joanna Rajkowska, *Dotleniacz* (*Oxygenator*), 2007, multimedia public art installation, image courtesy of Joanna Rajkowska.

associated with Poland's Jewish past. The project began with Betlejewski making one such inscription in central Warsaw, for which he was arrested, but then expanding the initiative by encouraging people around Poland and Europe to paint similar slogans in their own towns and submit photographs to a dedicated website. Users of the site are also encouraged to leave their own memories of Jewish Poland, Jewish neighbours, or reflections on the loss of these.

Betlejewski's most controversial project was a continuation, or perhaps culmination, of the *I miss you* initiative. It involved buying, transporting, reassembling and then burning an old barn in a village near Warsaw. The project took place in 2010 on the 69th anniversary of the Jedwabne massacre of 1941, during which the Jewish inhabitants of that small town were subjected to a vicious pogrom and then forced into a barn and burned alive by their Polish neighbours. The massacre was the subject of a major controversy in Poland during the early 2000s, following the publication of historian Jan Gross's book on the subject, which challenged Polish narratives of the German occupation that focus on Polish suffering in the first instance or

common victimhood with Jews and the rescue of the latter by Poles (Gross, 2001). The suggestion that Poles could have been so actively responsible for such horrific violence provoked outrage, but also sparked a deep and wide-ranging process of self-reflection in Polish society (Polonsky and Michlic, 2004). The performance was intended by the author to be a cathartic gesture of cleansing from anti-Semitic hatred and from the bitter past of Jewish-Polish relations. Indeed, Betlejewski filled the barn with scraps of paper on which Poles had written anti-Semitic thoughts.

The project attracted widespread attention in Poland and beyond, and was criticised by some as offensive for 'recreating' part of the Jedwabne massacre. Genevieve Zubrzycki has also suggested that the project attracted such disapprobation because, in contrast to the *I miss you* project, it focused on the perpetrator, bypassing the victim, and posited the expatiation of the sin of anti-Semitic violence (Zubrzycki, 2013, p.106). Erica Lehrer and Magdalena Waligorska have levelled similar criticism at Betlejewski, describing the project as essentially ignoring Jews and representing an 'objectionable appropriation' of the memory of the violent death



Figure 3.2.6: Rafał Betlejewski, *Tęsknię za Tobą, Żydzie* (*I miss you, Jew*), started in 2004, graffiti/internet project.

of the Jedwabne Jewish community. The performance was in fact disrupted by young protesters who objected precisely to what they saw as the tasteless appropriation of the tragedy for sensationalist self-promotion by the artist (see http://www.tesknie.com/index.php?id=674).

Encountering the absence of Poland's Jews, and the fears and hopes that this entails, is at the heart of all of the projects outlined above, and in each case, this absence is located physically in urban space (with the exception of the burning barn performance, which is also nevertheless dependent on its spatial specifics, as will be discussed below): in Rajkowska's words (referring to her own works), all three artists make their statements through 'a direct intervention into the fabric of the city' (Rajkowska, 2010, p.85). These interventions occur in places where the absence of Jews is most physically evident: Rajkowska's palm tree is a prominent spatial marker in the centre of Warsaw, referring to a lost Jewish settlement, while the *Oxygenator* evokes the former centre of a Jewish community, and later a part of the ghetto. In turn, Bartana's films occupy real, recognisable spaces within Warsaw, sites that are significant in terms of the city's Jewish past, but are also loaded with the equally complex and difficult memories of communist rule. The post-Jewish and post-communist sites are not, however, easily separable, and Bartana's work demonstrates this intertwining: the stadium evokes connections to the destruction of the ghetto that provided material for its construction, while the district of Muranów, with its typical socialist housing estates, was built directly on top of the rubble of the ghetto. Underlining the interconnectedness of these spaces and their meanings allows the artist to refer to the post-war silence over the fate of Poland's Jews, as the new, socialist Poland built itself, physically and discursively, in a way that would forget the difficult pasts inscribed in its urban spaces (see Janicka, 2012; Chomątowska, 2012). It is this oblivion that Betlejewski attempts to address in his projects aimed at encouraging popular engagement with the everyday urban spaces of contemporary Poland. By using the medium of graffiti, he subverts the common expressions of anti-Semitism that can be found all over walls in Polish cities and elicits the often unspoken desire to recover the Jewish past that is increasingly common in contemporary Poland.

The projects of these artists confirm what many theorists of memory, from Benjamin to Nora have noted: that space, and especially urban space, is a highly resonant medium of memory. Analyzing Warsaw, Michael Meng aptly cites Maurice Halbwachs, the founder of modern memory studies, in this regard:

'we can understand how we can recapture the past only by understanding how it is, in effect, preserved by our physical surroundings' (2011, p.15). It is in space, and particularly in the highly visible and intensely codified and inhabited spaces of cities, that collective subjects inscribe their memories in architecture and perform the rituals that keep memory visible and alive. These inscriptions and rituals take place in significant locations, often where the event that is remembered took place, as is the case with Rapoport's ghetto uprising memorial and the ceremonies that focus on it. Such public spaces are necessarily controlled by authority, by local and central administrations, and are thus subject to official memory policy: hence the difficulties that Rajkowska's unorthodox public commemorative projects faced in being accepted by city authorities, and which she describes in her commentaries on her works (Rajkowska, 2010, p.100-1).

Cities also, however, as Michel de Certeau has argued, provide ample opportunity for the inscription or uncovering of alternative, small, private, anti-authoritative memories (de Certeau, 1984, pp.104-6). Alternative visions of the past appear in commemorative happenings or temporary installations, or in texts, whether literary, theatrical or artistic, about the city. While these can intervene in public space, sometimes indirectly or temporarily, they generally cannot leave a lasting impression without the endorsement of the authorities. In communist Poland, this kind of alternative use of public space for illicit commemoration represented a drastically subversive gesture that could lead to severe punishment, and while this situation has changed completely since 1989, the consciousness of the subversive power of the appropriation of public space still persists, and is, I would argue, one of the factors at the base of the works analysed here.[1] It is, of course, important to note that these projects do not necessarily represent acts of opposition or rebellion: while each artwork has encountered controversy and opposition in some form, it is also true that in each case various degrees of cooperation with and support from local and national governmental agencies, or of various cultural and political establishment groups, have been crucial to the success of the projects. Clearly, the memory narratives and experiments discussed here are not necessarily at odds with mainstream political trends in Poland. Yet, at the same time, the legacy of the struggle for memory in

1    On the illegal commemoration of the Katyn massacres of Polish service personnel in 1940 by the NKVD, which was most consistently focused on Warsaw's Powązki cemetery, see, for example, Etkind et al. (2012).

public space does lend a particular tension and urgency to the gestures being made by these artists.

The idea of appropriating public space in dialogue or confrontation with authoritative discourse and dominant traditions is most relevant to the work of Rajkowska. The palm tree consciously subverts the norms of public commemoration as monumental sculpture. It is not made of stone or bronze, it does not represent an important individual, a hero or martyr of the nation, and it has no ready-inscribed meaning. There is no text on the tree to instruct the viewer on how it should be interpreted. The palm acts, as James Young has described in the context of German Holocaust commemoration, as a 'counter-monument', whose authors are 'ethically certain of their duty to remember, but aesthetically skeptical of the assumptions underpinning traditional memorial form' (Young, 1992, p.271). Referring to a German example of this phenomenon (Jochen and Esther Gerz's *Harburg Monument against Fascism*, erected in 1986) Young describes how the counter-monument works 'against the traditionally didactic fiction of monuments, against their tendency to displace the past they would have us contemplate – and finally, against the authoritarian propensity in all art that reduces viewers to passive spectators' (Young, 1992, p.274). Interpreters of Rajkowska's palm have made similar observations: in the words of Helena Chmielewska-Szlajfer, the palm 'contradicts' the very idea of the monument because 'its form is playfully artificial and the meanings it could embody are highly variable', hence its function as the focal point for the formation of various communities that invested their own meanings into the work, some of which had nothing to do with the past at all (Chmielewska-Szlajfer, 2010, p.207): the tree has been a focal point for various groups to raise their voices within the public space of Warsaw, such as gay rights campaigners or nurses campaigning for better working conditions. The palm has also been interpreted in the press as an expression of the wish of Poles to transcend the supposedly grey reality of everyday Warsaw and reach a better, sunnier place (Rajkowska, 2010, pp. 25-61). On a wider plane, the work also became a focal point for a time for media polemics between the two basic political outlooks that dominate Polish society, that of the left-leaning liberals to which the artist and the palm's supporters belong, and the right wing conservatives, who came to power in Warsaw shortly after the palm's installation and who initially opposed its continuing presence (Chmielewska-Szlajfer, 2010, p.204). While on the one hand the palm could be said to deliberately challenge the conservative worldview (it evoked lost otherness within the Polish

capital, and was taken up by liberal causes), it clearly sought to open, rather than close debate, and its ambiguity did allow it to be embraced by Varsovians of a conservative orientation: indeed, Rajkowska herself spoke approvingly of receiving support from people whose political orientation was quite distant from the leftist one (Chmielewska-Szlajfer, 2010, p.205).

The *Oxygenator* works in a similar way to *Greetings from Jerusalem Avenue*: in contrast to the familiar and fixed stone statue, monument or memorial in the centre of a city square, with its didactic message and fixed meaning, we find the whole square turned into an organic space that invites habitation and active use from those who encounter it, with no overt 'instructions' as to its meaning. As with the palm tree, the reference to the Jewish past of Warsaw can only be worked out through deeper reflection on the work and its relationship with its location, or through further research online, via media reports, or on the artist's website or in her publications. Many encountering these works will perceive them simply as unusual, quirky innovations in the cityscape with no deeper meaning than any other green space, and the works guarantee the right to do this. In a related point, Ewa Klękot has argued that the *Oxygenator* creates a non-overwhelming site that provides the possibility for reflection on the ex-ghetto as a space that is and has been actively inhabited by real people, who may well not have chosen this space as their home, but who, like everyone else, need inhabitable (green) spaces within their part of the city. The work is thus less a representation of any past event as it is a meditation on the experience of inhabiting spaces scarred by past violence. As Klękot puts it, the work is a 'monument that commemorates nothing, and yet asks questions about forgetting' (Klękot, 2009, p.46). In this aspect, but also in its status as a living, fluid, ever-changing space, the *Oxygenator* again recalls Young's description of the counter-monument, which, in his view, by being allowed to change and even disappear with time, '[i]n its conceptual self-destruction […] refers not only to its own physical impermanence, but also to the contingency of all meaning an memory' (Young, 1992, p.295). This function of the work is also dramatically, though not entirely intentionally, underlined by the fact that the *Oxygenator* was ultimately dismantled by the city council and never reconstructed (as had been initially promised). Paradoxically, by incorporating fluidity and containing its own deterioration and disappearance, the project warns against complacency and encourages us to think of memory as evolving, shifting, and, much like a public green space, in need of our constant attention.

The 'counter-monument' approach taken by Rajkowska is in direct contrast to the bombastic triumph and tragedy that dominates Polish monument building, particularly in Warsaw, and which despite its often anti-communist content often seems chained to an aesthetic reminiscent of socialist realism, with muscular bronze figures, barbed wire and jagged slabs of concrete designed to give didactic and unambiguous expressions of heroism and suffering. This can be seen, for example, in the Warsaw Uprising monument, designed at the very end of the communist era after years of unsuccessful campaigning from oppositionists against a regime reluctant to remember the event. The monument features large, masculine bronze insurgents bursting dynamically forth from the underground, shattering slabs of concrete around them. In similar style is the large Monument to the Fallen and Murdered in the East, which commemorates Polish victims of Soviet oppression. Built in 1995, the monument features a large railway cart loaded with bronze crosses signifying the Soviet deportations of Poles and the martyrdom of the Polish nation (though on close inspection some Jewish and Muslim symbols can also be found among the crosses), and a long 'railway line' whose sleepers bear names of sites where Poles were murdered. The monument is situated in close proximity to the site of the Umschlagplatz, from which the Jews of Warsaw's ghetto were deported to the death camps. As is the case with the aborted monument to Polish victims of Ukrainian nationalist insurgents on Grzybowski Square, this project, while describing a tragedy of immense scale, has little connection to the specific site that it occupies (see Janicka, 2012, pp.76-84).

Monuments like those described above do not invite dialogue, but rather overwhelm the viewer with pathos and literalism. As Young observes, they cover the complexities of past events (and, we could add, the complexity of specific physical spaces) with layers of nationalist mythology (Young, 1992). They determine the grievable past, to use Judith Butler's term, defining the identity of those to be mourned, and hand this to the viewer in a ready-made and immutable narrative (Butler, 2009). Rajkowska's projects, by contrast, occupy the locations of traditional commemorative forms, but rely rather on ambiguity and a suggestive silence that invites intellectual engagement with their specific spatial context and leaves space for interaction and dialogue. This emphasis on the suggestiveness of topographical context and dialogue are relevant also to Bartana's work. The aesthetics and symbolism of her trilogy of films evoke Soviet communism, Zionism, contemporary conflict in Israel and the history of the

persecution of Poland's and Europe's Jews through their complex and ambiguous use of urban location. Where Rajkowska displaces the polarising dialectic of communism and anti-communism in the cityscape with a kind of counter-monumentalism, Bartana appropriates the visual, filmic, and spatial languages of propaganda and subverts them through a process of parody and defamiliarisation. For example, in the first film, exaggeratedly presented communist symbols, language and places – the pioneers, the propagandist speech, the stadium – are used unexpectedly to exhort Jews to return to Poland, a highly ironic and subversive gesture, given the fact that communist rule in Poland entailed obscuring the suffering of Jews in the Holocaust and anti-Semitic campaigns in the late 1960s that led to the expulsion of thousands of Jews from the country.

Throughout Bartana's trilogy we can never be sure of where the earnest, liberal rhetoric of tolerance, reconciliation and acceptance end and irony and grotesque begin. This ambiguity has made the trilogy open to widely differing interpretations: commentators have seen the films as a critique of contemporary Israel, or of Zionism in general, or, conversely, as a partial rehabilitation of Zionism; others have seen references to Stalin's funeral, the Gulag or the Soviet Jewish republic of Birobidzhan; others still see the films as a critique of xenophobic attitudes in contemporary Poland (see essays by Joanna Mytkowska, Boris Groys, Jacqueline Rose, Ariella Azoulay and Adi Ophir in Lingwood and Nairn, 2012, pp.130-51; Sclodnick, 2014). As with Rajkowska's works, Bartana's films invite dialogue and multiple interpretations, and indeed, dialogue is incorporated into the films themselves: the 'funeral ceremony' for Sierakowski involves speeches from various individuals with differing views about the utopian project of the Jewish return to Poland, including those critical of the idea, while the variant readings mentioned above are all included in the book that accompanies the trilogy, with no attempt made to synthesise or reconcile the different interpretations.

The meaning of Bartana's films depends to a significant extent on the viewer's knowledge of the spaces that are depicted, and important information about these spaces that would aid interpretation is not presented in any straightforward way. For the non-Polish viewer, the significance of the stadium or the Palace of Culture will not be obvious, and can only be understood through further research; indeed, some have interpreted the first film's setting, symbols, language and aesthetics as referring exclusively to Nazi propaganda, without noting the enormous communist baggage that will be most striking to a Polish (or other Eastern European) viewer (see Sclodnick, 2014, for

such a reading). Even for a Polish audience, however, the stadium's physical connections to the Holocaust (through the materials used in its construction), for example, are not necessarily widely known. In turn, the Zionist symbolism and references to contemporary Israel may well be clear to an Israeli or general Jewish audience, but would need to be engaged with further by non-Jewish Polish or other audiences to be fully understood. It should be noted here that this confluence of different references to situations far beyond Poland has been criticised by some Polish Jewish observers, who see the Polish context as being essentially obscured in the film, and the location as serving as nothing more than a tool through which the artist can criticise, first and foremost, her own country and its Zionist mythology (Lehrer and Waligorska, 2013, p.25). While Rajkowska's work openly invites interaction, and Bartana flirts with inclusion of the public in the 'public movement' arm of the project, it is Betlejewski's work that is perhaps the most reliant of the three on participation on the part of members of the public, who in effect create the project themselves by expressing their own curiosity about and knowledge of the spaces they inhabit. The graffiti inscriptions expressing longing for Poland's lost Jews enter into an unsolicited dialogue with the common anti-Semitic graffiti in Polish towns and cities, appropriating its form and challenging its content. This is a dialogue that can be surprising and confusing, and indeed Betlejewski's initial inscriptions were interpreted as anti-Semitic themselves, given their similarity to typical anti-Semitic vandalism and the prominent use of the work 'Jew' in the slogan; a word which in Polish, as Genevieve Zubrzycki points out in relation to Betlejewski's work, has often been seen (and used) as a derogatory term (Zubrzycki, 2013, p.104). Betlejewski's project was thus a challenging engagement with the Polish urban landscape and its habitual semiotics, forcing those encountering the cityscape to consider the banal hatred so often inscribed in it, as well as to think about the tragedy of the absences that this hatred conceals, and in encouraging active intervention against this hatred the project aimed to draw out urban space's potential as a surface for the public inscription of positive meanings.

The burning barn performance, by contrast, is not a direct intervention in an actual site of memory, but rather engages the Polish village landscape as a generic site of memory, in Nora's sense of *lieu de memoire*, as a trope, or symbolic site, rather than specific physical location (Nora, 1989). The performance takes place in the exact type of rural or small-town community,

like Jedwabne, that saw some of the most problematic relations between Poles and Jews during the war. The power of the performance is perhaps magnified by this approach: through a very direct, violent physical intervention in real public space, yet without reference to a specific mnemonic site, the gesture becomes more widely relevant. The evocation of the massacre in this performance in particular was explicitly intended by Betlejewski to provoke, and elicit participation and response. The project website features lengthy internet forum discussions, including objections to the project, as well as a film about the performance that dedicates a third of its length to protesters who tried to stop it going ahead, and allows the protesters to speak directly to camera. The other aspect of the project, the burning along with the barn of the notes containing anti-Semitic thoughts, also involved direct participation from the public.

Betlejewski also involved the local inhabitants of the village, Zawada, where the performance took place. The film shows a crowd of people enjoying the sunshine, drinking beer and eating, waiting for entertainment. Indeed, some spectators intervene angrily to help oust the protesters who had occupied the barn in order to prevent delay. Although the symbolism of the performance is less ambiguous in itself than is the case with the other artist discussed here, and is made plain by the artist during the performance, the participation of the crowd does introduce an element of ambiguity. Some members of the crowd do not seem aware of the intended meaning of the gesture, but are rather assembled purely for the spectacle itself: indeed, it has been suggested that the artist may not have fully informed them of the intended meaning of the performance (Lehrer and Waligorska, 2013, p.12). The carnival atmosphere surrounding the commemoration of a pogrom also introduces a note of disturbing irony, given the carnival element that, according to some researchers, characterised the phenomenon of the pogrom itself (see Himka, 2011). This atmosphere, at a performance designed to confront Poles with the crimes their compatriots had committed, seems incongruous, and it is unsurprising that some have found it offensive. It could also be added that the seeming failure to fully engage those participating in the performance (as spectators but also in a sense as part of the stage set of the performance – the 'bystanders') demonstrates that an invitation to participation can be tinged with ambivalence, not to say manipulation. Some observers have seen Betlejewski's seeming failure not only to fully inform and involve local people, but also, and perhaps even more importantly, the lack of actual

Jewish voices in his projects, as evidence of a rather insular dialogue whose participants are deliberately limited (Lehrer and Waligorska, 2013, pp.13-4).

While the burning barn episode may have been problematic in terms of nature of its engagement with the public in the immediate vicinity of the performance, it is clear from the framing of the project online and from the wider *I miss you* project that dialogue, participation and reflection on the part of participants are important to Betlejewski's work with the memory of the Holocaust and Poland's lost Jews. While in many ways his work differs from that of Bartana and Rajkowska, this is something, ultimately, that he shares with them. I will end this paper by suggesting one further, deeper level of dialogue, however, that can be seen in all three artists' works: this is a dialogue based not on a discussion or debate over the questions dealt with in the works, but a dialogue created by the overlaying of different spaces and times, one that speaks to deeper mnemonic processes and potentials. This type of multiple spatiotemporal aesthetic has in fact been identified by Lehrer and Waligorska as a key feature more generally of the most recent wave of artistic responses to the Holocaust in the Polish context, which they see as being characterised by the 'simultaneous invocation of multiple temporalities and spatialities' (Lehrer and Waligorska, 2013, p.4).

Yael Bartana, in using specific city locations and through her evocative but ambiguous use of symbols, imagery and aesthetics, evokes various contexts, overlaying early Zionist settlements with contemporary Israeli settlements, which in turn intertwine with the spaces of the concentration camp, the regimented public space of communist Poland and perhaps even Stalin's Gulag; although, as discussed above, it may be true that this can serve to obscure the specificity of its immediate context, in the end, the work is a reflection on the wider problem of 'spacelessness' – the lack of a space in which to be and belong that has characterised the experience of so many migrants and displaced people around the world throughout the 20th and 21st century, and which often leads to the retreat (voluntary or forced), as in the second film of the trilogy, into walled ghettos. Rajkowska overlays similar spaces: those of contemporary Jerusalem and contemporary Warsaw, Warsaw of the 18th century and the interwar period, the long-vanished Jewish settlement and the wartime ghetto. Again, other types of space are suggested, purified spaces free of the compulsory inscription of memory narratives, like the *Oxygenator*, made possible even in the mnemonically overloaded space of Grzybowski Square. Betlejewski's *I miss you, Jew!* project, as represented online, creates

a collage of images of cities and towns across Poland, and in fact also from other East-Central European countries, from Germany, Slovakia and Ukraine. Not only does the project uncover the past city within the present one by pointing to post-Jewish spaces, but it also draws similar spaces together from Poland and beyond to give powerful expression to the wider, regional experience of living in spaces marked by the absence of Jews. In building his political-cultural construct of Central Europe in the 1980s as a response to Soviet domination, the Czech writer Milan Kundera once commented that it was the Jews who were the 'integrating element in central Europe […] its intellectual cement, a condensed version of its spirit, creators of its spiritual unity'. It is this that makes the author 'love the Jewish heritage and cling to it with as much passion and nostalgia as though it were my own' (1984, p.35). Where Kundera presents a mental map of Central Europe united by its Jews, Betlejewski imposes on that nostalgic map a new one that suggests that the uniting feature of the region now is the absence of the Jews, the empty spaces that are often marked with casual anti-Semitic sentiment. Like the other artists discussed here, Betlejewski also evokes non-specific space, in his imitation of anti-Semitic violence in a generic Polish rural setting, which has the effect of evoking at once all space and none in particular.

This evocation of all space at once, and the conglomeration of chronotopes that can be seen in the work of all three artists, could be described using Michel Foucault's concept of the heterotopia. Heterotopias are specific cultural spatial constructs that create 'other spaces' in society: they allow multiple spaces and times to co-exist, collapsing ideas of linear time and strictly bounded space for a more fluid spatiotemporal experience (Foucault, 1986). In Foucault's terms, these spaces represent 'an effectively enacted utopia in which […] all the other real sites that can be found within the culture are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted' (p.24). The heterotopia is like the space beyond the mirror, both real and unreal simultaneously – but it is precisely through contact with this 'other' space that the viewing subject is able to examine, reflect on and reconstitute herself in the real space of the present. Sites of Jewish absence in Poland seem to invite heterotopic readings. Walking through the former Jewish district of Warsaw, for example, Rymkiewicz, describes the 'feeling of doubleness or tripleness in time, the feeling that we are suddenly find ourselves in several time zones'. At the same time, the author gazes into a dark window in one of the few surviving buildings, trying to somehow recapture the site's past

in the space beyond the reflective glass (Rymkiewicz, 1988, p.127). This process is difficult, however, and often, as in Rymkiewicz's case, the recapturing of the past and subsequent reconstitution of the subject in the present is obstructed and fraught: the space beyond the mirror is, after all, by definition inaccessible, even though we seem to see ourselves there.

The heterotopic dynamic as described by Foucault accurately captures the kind of spatial strategies employed in the artistic projects discussed above. Through cross-cultural spatiotemporal juxtapositions between Poland and Israel in the cases of Bartana and Rajkowska, and the collapsing of East-Central European or generic Polish space and time in the case of Betlejewski, multiple sites are created. Here, the community inhabiting the space is invited to discover its past, engage in dialogue with it and participate in its reconstruction and re-articulation, to reflect on its own memories as part of a wider network of related and interdependent pasts that stretch across the state, the region and the world. At the same time, each artist is careful to avoid giving definitive answers to the riddle of deciphering spaces of absence, and each couches her or his project in grotesque imagery, irony, kitsch or deliberate refusal to offer easily discernible spatial-mnemonic narrative.

Michael Rothberg (2013, p.83; see also Rothberg, 2009) has described how certain practices of memory, which he calls 'multidirectional', 'can take into account the kinds of constellations and intersections that emerge from the histories and aftermaths of violence, domination, and transculturation.' Indeed, the Warsaw ghetto is one of the sites that Rothberg identifies as having multidirectional potential, present as it is in the work of writers and artists who engage in disparate colonial aftermaths, from the experience of Turkish migrants in Germany to the black civil rights struggles in the US. These varying contexts intersect and entangle with one another to form complex 'knots' of memory (Rothberg, 2013, p.83). Rajkowska's, Bartana's and Betlejewski's multi-vectored sites perform the same function, overlaying memories of exclusion and violence in Poland with similar problems across Europe, in contemporary Israel and beyond. This type of memory is based not on dominant models of competition over victories or victimhoods, but on the need to share experience and engage in dialogue. This type of practice is not necessarily free of its problems: as Bartana's Polish-Jewish critics point out, orientation outwards to 'larger' contexts can serve to obscure the local and immediate, obscuring the physical space on which the heterotopia is constructed; at the same time, an overemphasis on the local can result in the

exclusion of parties that may have a right to participate in the conversation, as the seeming lack of significant involvement of Jews in Betlejewski's projects might suggest. These caveats notwithstanding, it is clear from the above analysis that the overlapping of various contexts and collapsing of space evident in all of the projects discussed in this paper can provide an effective and powerful alternative kind of public commemorative practice. They bring fresh perspectives on Polish-Jewish memory directly into the public sphere by demonstrating that publicly articulated memory does not have to be the result of top-down monologue, but can rather be the product of polyphony, and does not need to have a defined outcome or provide definitive answers; nor does memory even need to be constantly foregrounded and obsessed over, even in spaces that are designed to evoke it. Warsaw's post-Jewish sites, or the generic spaces produced by Betlejewski, are not static *sites* of memory that showcase singular and unquestionable memory narratives, but are rather tense *knots* of memory that reveal complexity, interconnectedness, and a lack of resolution that is as frustrating as it is conducive to creative, imaginative engagement. As James Young has argued in relation to the refusal of the counter-monument to freeze memory: 'it may also be true that the surest engagement with memory lies in its perpetual irresolution' (Young, 1992, p.267).

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