

# A Colourful Atlas of Artistic Practice

A Review of: Karoline Majewska-Güde, *Ewa Partum's Artistic Practice: An Atlas of Continuity in Different Locations*, Bielefeld: transcript, 2021. 336 pp. ISBN 978-3-8376-5524-7.

**Petra Lexová** (pel.lexova@gmail.com)

Department of Art History, Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic

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## Petra Lexová

This critical monograph on the Polish-born conceptual and feminist artist Ewa Partum (1946 –) written by the researcher, curator, and art critic Karolina Majewska-Güde, is an extensive exploration of Partum's practice. The book critically analyses and evaluates her writings as well her artworks and approaches her work in different contexts and the different conditions she worked under. Ewa Partum was a pioneer of feminist art in central Europe and also the leading female exponent of conceptual art. Majewska-Güde tries to articulate the historical alterity of her work in the various locations she worked, especially Poland and West Berlin, where she moved in 1982.

The sub-title of the book *An Atlas of Continuity in Different Locations* is appropriate, for this concept allows the author to concentrate on a non-linear account, in which she explores the connection between problems and themes from different periods: her years in Poland (1965–82), her stay in West Berlin (1982–89) and the period of her wider transnational activities (since 1989). The main issues in Partum's artistic practice are highlighted with chapters on 'Critical Engagement with Art Infrastructures,' where the author discusses Partum's curatorial practice, 'Conceptual Art,' and 'Feminist Identifications.' These main chapters are preceded at the beginning with a chapter on 'Existing Cartographies,' where Majewska-Güde focuses on the interpretative and historicising writings about the artist's practice and major themes of her work, including, especially, contemporary debate about Polish conceptualism.<sup>1</sup> The book's conclusion offers an overview of the contemporary global place of Partum's work and its institutionalised position. The concept of an Atlas provides a good insight into the main principles of her work when she intertwines the individual activities. The book also examines the close relation between Partum's feminism, conceptualism and curatorial practice in the Adres Gallery (Galeria Adres), and her private life.

The book is based on her extensive research into Ewa Partum's work and, more generally, into central and eastern European neo-avant-garde and performance art, and is informed by a concern with the history of transnational and feminist art practices. Majewska-Güde studied for her PhD dissertation at the Art and Visual History Department at Humboldt University, where she was initially supervised by Piotr Piotrowski and then, after his death, by Susanne von Falkenhausen. The book follows on from previous work by Majewska-Güde which has also included exhibition projects. Amongst others, she curated an exhibition about the Adres Gallery (Galerie Studio in Warsaw, 2019) which was run by Partum in Łódź between 1972 and

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1) See, for example, Luisa Nader, *Konceptualizm w PRL*, Warsaw: Wadawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2009; Lukasz Ronduda, *Sztuka polska lat 70. Awangarda*, Warsaw: Centrum Szuki Współczesnej Zamek Ujazdowski, 2009.

1977 as well as co-curating the exhibition *Techniques of Release* (Galleria Fotografii pf, Poznań 2015) with Dorota Walentynowicz, which presented photographic and video works by Polish neo-avant-garde artists.<sup>2</sup> Through meticulous attention to the materials in the artist's private archive and that of the Adres Gallery, Majewska-Güde reveals the importance of Partum's work during the period of state Socialism in Poland and in West Berlin.

In these circumstances it is understandable that she adopted critical 'horizontal' history as her methodological approach, based on Piotr Piotrowski's ground-breaking books and articles on this theme as well as new critical studies undertaken in the light of his ideas.<sup>3</sup> However, she states that 'Horizontal art history is understood here neither as a methodology to be applied nor as a rigid program to follow.' Instead, she tries to conceptualize horizontal art history as an 'operating system that must constantly be updated and further developed by the user: a conceptual tool that enables us to detect and expose silence and aporias within art-historical narratives.' It has to be said, however, that it was difficult to identify examples of these 'exposed silences' and 'aporias' in the book.

In keeping with Piotrowski's way of thinking, Majewska-Güde tries to demonstrate the ways in which Partum's work has qualities that are specific to central and eastern Europe, and to show how this specificity came to the fore. Hence, rather than looking for patterns and influences in Western feminism, she emphasises the specific nature of her feminist concerns which then have parallels with feminist production elsewhere. Piotrowski's ideas then become the author's most frequent reference point.

## Engagement with art infrastructures

In contrast to Czechoslovakia, where the 1970s were a time of political restriction during the period of 'normalization' that followed the Prague Spring of 1968, politics and culture in Poland in the same years were characterized by a relative opening to the West. The beginning of the decade was a time when the number of artist-run art institutions rapidly increased, putting into place a new kind of artistic infrastructure. Majewska-Güde argues that the dominant model of the art gallery in 1960s as an 'art laboratory' or 'autonomous artistic sphere' was replaced by a type of institution that problematized its institutional entanglement.<sup>4</sup>

When Partum founded the Adres Gallery in 1972 in Łódź, the small gallery was next to the office of the Association of Polish Artists (Związek Polskich Artystów Plastyków or ZPAP). As Majewska-Güde points out, the neo-avant-garde artists and this small gallery aimed to exploit

2) Ewa Partum. *My gallery is an idea*, Warsaw: Galeria Adres Archive, 2019; *Technique of Release*, Poznań: Galleria Fotografii, 2015.

3) Piotr Piotrowski, 'On the Spatial Turn, or Horizontal Art History,' trans. M. Wilczynski, *Umeni*, 56: 5, 2008, 378–83; *In the Shadow of Yalta. Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989*, London: Reaktion Books, 2009. See, too, Beáta Hock and Anu Allas, eds, *Globalizing East European Art Histories. Past and Present*, New York: Routledge, 2018; Ana Janevski, Roxana Marcoci and Ksenia Nouril, eds, *Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe. A Critical Anthology*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2018; Klara Kemp-Welch, *Networking the Bloc. Experimental Art in Eastern Europe 1968–1981*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019.

4) Karolina Majewska-Güde, 'Ewa Partum as a Cultural Producer,' *Post. notes on art in a global context*, New York: MoMA, 2019. <https://post.moma.org/ewa-partum-as-a-cultural-producer/> (accessed 15 October 2021). See, too, Marcin Lachowski, *Awangarda wobec omstytucji. O sposobach prezentacji sztuki w PRLu*, Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego Jana Pawła II, 2006.

their institutional possibilities and initiate dialogue; Partum made a strategic step by placing the gallery near an official institution that would give her relative visibility and access to a professional audience. Connection to an official institution also increased the chances of obtaining occasional financial support.

The Adres Gallery was ‘a place, a situation, an opportunity, an offer, for information, proposition, documentation, speculation, provocation and exposition,’ Partum stated in a manifesto she wrote just before she opened it.<sup>5</sup> For Majewska-Güde the Adres Gallery was also a tool for creating an art network infrastructure, which helped Partum stay in contact with leading art theoreticians such as Andrzej Kostolowski in Poland, László Beke in Hungary, and Klaus Groh in West Germany. This was an interesting moment that had parallels in the Czech environment in the activities of Jiří Valoch, who worked as a curator of the House of Art in Brno. Like Partum, Valoch used his position as a curator to form an international network of contacts between conceptual artists. In both of them we can see the interplay of curatorial and artistic practice.

After closing the Gallery, Partum decided to move it to her mother’s apartment on Rybia Street, and she supported the whole project out of her personal finances. Her statement: ‘*my gallery is my home*,’ written by hand on a note still in the Partum Archive, is significant in its declaration of a new connection between her private and public life. As Majewska-Güde has pointed out elsewhere: ‘Thus, with her new statement, Partum thematized and explored the relationship between art and the everyday, where the everyday was conceptualized as a mode of being rather than as a form of activity.’<sup>6</sup>

## Continuity between Partum’s conceptualism and feminism

Majewska-Güde also analyses the roots of Partum’s feminism and how it relates to her conceptualism. It is not possible, she argues, to identify any specific moment when Partum first encountered or ‘discovered’ feminism for herself. Rather, she slowly absorbed and processed feminist ideas. A good illustration of this can be seen in the changing sense of *poem by ewa*, a work Partum first created in 1971 and has since been constantly re-making.<sup>7</sup>

In the beginning, the poems were part of her Active Poetry presented within individual performances. The *poem* consisted of taking individual letters of the alphabet, which she cut out of paper and scattered in non-artistic settings. Later, *poems* became isolated in the form of single sheets that combine imprints of the artist’s lips with other forms of notation. Most often these were texts with feminist statements such as ‘LOVE’ or ‘my touch is the touch of woman.’ Majewska-Güde analyses two main principles in Partum’s *poems* over the decades: repetition and the question of the ‘subject’ that speaks in each *poem*. Here she presented the genealogy of Partum’s feminism.<sup>8</sup> She points out: ‘Partum’s identification as a feminist artist, perceived

5) Partum published a gallery manifesto in 1971 that was republished in 1972 in *Notatnik Robotnika Sztuki / The Art Worker’s Notebook*, a magazine published by the Galeria Elin in Elbląg.

6) Majakowska-Güde, ‘Ewa Partum as a Cultural Producer.’

7) Ewa Partum artis continues to make them to 2020.

8) ‘(1) Thematizing it, (2) creating works or series of artworks that build upon the same organizing principle (poems by Ewa Active Poetry), and (3) repeating her own gestures or works by other authors (Active poetry),’ 147.

as the extension of her conceptual practice toward reality [mean her everyday life experience as a woman], remained rare – not only in the context of Polish but also East-Central European art history.<sup>9</sup>

In 1980, Partum made *Self-Identification*, a series of twelve self-portraits – photomontages and performance documentation – in which she placed images of her naked body into photographs of public spaces. The artwork is a visual statement both about women’s position in Polish society and about her self-identification as an artist, in opposition to the traditional definition of woman’s place as in the household. The series showed the naked Partum in public areas of Warsaw, walking in the crowd, casually posing beside national monuments and governmental buildings. Majewska-Güde seeks to show that Partum’s effort visualized the impossibility of identifying with any existing normative female subject positions in Poland of that time. In her manifesto that accompanied the work, Partum speaks of ‘the role model for a woman – a creation of the patriarchal society, functioning in the form of the norms of social life, which effectively handicap woman, with the semblance of respecting them.’<sup>10</sup>

The first time *Self-Identification* was exhibited in public, in 1980 in the Galeria Mała in Warsaw, it included a photomontage of Partum, naked, standing in front of the State Council and it was banned. However, the artist also executed a performance during the opening of the exhibition, during which she read out her feminist manifesto, which she wrote on the blackboard, and then left the gallery in order to walk naked through the public spaces of Warsaw. As Majewska-Güde pointed, Partum ‘activated the body as a tool of social dissent available to everybody.’<sup>11</sup>

In addition to discussion of Partum’s artworks, Majewska-Güde presents her unpublished notes from 1980 devoted to ‘investigating the problem of the identification of women in society.’<sup>12</sup> As Majewska-Güde argues, the borders between private and public were porous in Partum’s artwork, a view supported by the art critic Gisliind Nabakowski, who has noted that in Partum the ‘private becomes political and can be utilized to reveal a patriarchal rule in society, which brings her close to the Western artists dealing with issues of identity politics.’<sup>13</sup>

## Between Socialist Poland and West Berlin

Throughout the book, we can see a process of articulating the thematic and semantic shifts that occurred in Partum’s artistic practice in the different socio-political contexts of socialist Poland and West-Berlin. These become clear when she discusses the role of public space. In the chapter on ‘The Space of the Political’ Majewska-Güde focuses her analysis on two paradigmatic works realized in the public space: *The Legality of Space* (Poland, 1971) and *Private*

9) Ibid., 225.

10) Ewa Partum, ‘Self-Identification,’ 1970/80 typescript in the Ewa Partum archive, in Majewska-Güde, 158.

11) Ibid., 163.

12) Ewa Partum, handwritten notes, undated, in the Ewa Partum archive.

13) See Gisliind Nabakowski, ‘Apprehension and Masquerade: “Letter Millionaire” – Ewa Partum’s Path to Conceptual Poetry and Feminist Gender Theory,’ in Angelika Stepken, ed., *Gedankenakt ist ein Kunstakt. Ewa Partum Retrospective 1965–2001*, Karlsruhe: Badischer Kunstverein, 2001, 129–139. Majewska-Güde, *Partum’s Artistic Practice*, 225.

*Performance* (West Berlin, 1985), ‘in order to define a set of tactics employed by the artist in both locations.’

It is interesting to note Majewska-Güde’s claim that Partum had more freedom as a woman in public space in Poland than if she had been a man, for she was less likely to be perceived by the authorities as potentially political, unlike her male colleagues. It was because of these circumstances that it was possible for her to undertake *The Legality of Space* (1971), a work in which she covered Freedom Square (Plac Wolności) in Łódź with a collection of traffic signs and information boards with an accompanying statement, even though the artwork ‘problematized the hegemonic public sphere and indicated the possibilities of free artistic activities.’<sup>14</sup> In contrast to this stands *Private Performance* (1985) which the artist made in West Berlin. Partum continued with her interest in the problem of legality and the bureaucratic and administrative procedures of power, but in capitalist West Germany the issues were different from those in Socialist Poland. Majewska-Güde points out that the issue of legitimacy did not refer to the appropriation of the public space by the official regime but rather to the artist’s new status as a non-citizen or political refugee. *Private Performance* explored Partum’s body as a ‘substitute for a public space, and its legality became not the subject of this work but an effort of it.’<sup>15</sup>

## Partum’s artistic practice after 1989

In contrast to many other publications on Partum, the book does not conclude with 1989, but, rather, goes on to discuss Partum in the reconfigured post-1989 art world and its new artistic infrastructures. It is a logical step that allows the author to show that Partum’s work is not closed and that during the different decades, it reacted sensitively to the environment in which Partum created it.

We can see this transformation in Partum’s feminism. Majewska-Güde shows changes in Partum’s artistic strategies in her self-reflective performances in West Berlin. ‘In these actions, Partum’s focus moved away from social issues [like in Poland] towards conceptualizations of subject / object relations as found in performance art.’ Subsequently, she points to the shift within Partum ‘s feminist practice after 1989, when Partum identify herself with contemporary global feminism.

Majewska-Güde demonstrated this shift in the delegated group performance *Pearls* (2006) performed at the Museo Vostell Malpardita in Spain. Partum there problematized the position of immigrant women cleaners. The performance consisted of cleaning the museum and kissing yellow fabric. Employers of the cleaners were present in the audience. As Majewska-Güde points out: ‘Partum’s *Pearls* is not about complicated cultural identities in the post-

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14) Ibid., 244. – The text of the statement: ‘THE SITUATION OF A TOTAL PROHIBITION, the smaller the field of a manual action, the bigger the expansion of a space as a fact. Through the negation of any situation in the conceptual sphere. THE SMALLER THE FIELD FOR ANY GIVEN ACTION THE BIGGER THE POSSIBILITY FOR AN ENTIRELY FREE SPACE TO EMERGE. THE SPACE IS INVISIBLE, UNVEILED, DISINTERESTED, the disinterestedness of the space is its possibility, it is an artistic fact. Any action here is superfluous. <https://post.moma.org/texts-by-conceptual-artists-from-eastern-europe-poland/4/> (accessed 22 June 2022).

15) Ibid., 253.

national world but rather about national infrastructures that still regulate people's everyday lives in different trans/national locations within a globalized world.'

Majewska-Güde also revives some of Partum's old artworks and performances and consider subsequent presentations, such as *The Legality of Space*, which was performed in a new site-specific version in 2006 in the Wyspa Institute of Art in Gdansk, where she recreated the work to set it in a new context. The artwork was also reinterpreted in a performance in 2012 on Liberty Square in Łódź. The action tried to activate the city dwellers and create 'an inclusive temporary public sphere achieved through social mobilization and the articulation of needs and dreams.' Majewska-Güde shows us that Eva Partum's work is still relevant. Her artistic practice continues to respond to and actively engage with the problems of contemporary feminism, the infrastructure of art, and the tension between public and private space.

## Conclusion

Karolina Majewska-Güde does not aim to offer a final exhaustive re-evaluation of Ewa Partum's work. The book nevertheless offers a comprehensive insight into her art. It makes an essential contribution to understanding the 'rediscovered' personality of conceptual and feminist art of the second half of the twentieth century in Poland and central and eastern Europe. Majewska-Güde, at the same time, disturbs the prevailing male optic of research into conceptual art in this socio-political area. It shows how closed this circle of male artists was, who did not respect Ewa Partum's work at all. Nevertheless, the book convincingly shows that Ewa Partum's work had a unique position in the context of east-central Europe in its connection between feminism and conceptualism. It is also an important book in its view of the female conceptual artist in this context where conceptualism is primarily a male domain. The tracing of Partum's work over the three periods and different socio-cultural environments of socialist Poland, West Berlin and the post-1989 globalised world is perhaps the most interesting part of the book. It illustrates how much Partum's work has changed over time and also how relevant it remains.



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