

*ARTISTIC,
COLLECTIVE,
METROPOLITAN
WARSAW ART
STUDIOS AS
MICRO-INSTITUTIONS*

ARTISTIC, COLLECTIVE, METROPOLITAN. WARSAW ART STUDIOS AS MICRO- INSTITUTIONS

— A PUBLICATION SUMMARIZING THE PROJECT DEDICATED TO THE CAPITAL'S ART STUDIOS, CONSISTING OF: RESEARCH AND AN EXHIBITION ORGANIZED BY STUDENTS, EVENTS IN ART STUDIOS, MEETINGS IN HISTORICAL STUDIOS, WORKSHOPS IN COMMUNITY CULTURAL CENTERS, AND A SYMPOSIUM.

Organizer: *THE WARSAW OBSERVATORY OF CULTURE*
Curators: *ŁUCJA STASZKIEWICZ, VERA ZALUTSKAYA*
Timeframe: October–December 2023
Place: *WOK LAB*, Marszałkowska Street 34/50, and various art studios in Warsaw

PROJECT ELEMENTS:

•→ Open studios

When: 8–10 December 2023

Artists:

VIKTAR ABERAMOK
AGNIESZKA BRZEZAŃSKA
KSENIA GRYCKIEWICZ
JANA KUCZYŃSKA
EMIL LASKA
DIANA LEŁONEK
DINA LEONOVA
PIOTR MACIEJOWSKI
PIOTR MARZEC
JAN MOZDŻYŃSKI
IGA NIEWIADOMSKA
AGATA POPIK
ŁUKASZ RADZISZEWSKI
PAWEŁ ŻUKOWSKI

- Research carried out as part of the Laboratory conducted by *DR KAROLINĘ THEL* at the *DEPARTMENT OF ARTISTIC RESEARCH AND CURATORIAL STUDIES* at *THE ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS IN WARSAW* in October–December 2023 and the exhibition *THE MULTISPACE OF A STUDIO*.

THE MULTISPACE OF A STUDIO

When: 8.12.23–14.12.23

Curatorial and artistic team:

JAGODA BARWIŃSKA

STANISŁAW BULDER

JAN GĘBSKI

AGNIESZKA SADURSKA

MICHAŁ STAŃCZAK

ALEKSANDRA TARKA

DR KAROLINA THEL

PATRYCJA WÓJCIK

Coordination: *ŁUCJA STASZKIEWICZ*

Content-related supervision: *VERA ZALUTSKAYA*

Place: *WOK LAB*, Marszałkowska Street 34/50

- Meetings in the historic artist studios of *GRAŻYNA HASE, KAROL THOREK* and *KATY BENTALL* on 11 and 12 December 2023.
- Workshops in the *WOLSKI CULTURE CENTER* led by *MARTYNA MODZELEWSKA* and in the *PRAGA CULTURE CENTER* led by *WERONIKA ZALEWSKA*
- Symposium: *HOW TO LIVE AND WORK IN WARSAW?* When: 14 December 2023

Moderated by *HANNA WRÓBLEWSKA* president of the Zachęta Society of Friends of the Fine Arts

Participants: *THE COLLECTIVE OF PRACOWNIA WSCHODNIA, PRZYSZŁA NIEDOSZŁA GALLERY TEAM* and *MICHAŁ KRASUCKI*, the capital city conservator

Place: *WOK LAB*, Marszałkowska Street 34/50

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ZALUTSKAYA**

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METROPOLITAN. WARSAW ART STUDIOS AS MICRO-
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LEHNER**

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ABOUT THE PROJECT ARTISTIC, COLLECTIVE, METROPOLITAN. WARSAW ART STUDIOS AS MICRO-INSTITUTIONS

The possibility of having a studio is a crucial issue in the professional lives of most artists. In Warsaw's creative community, this issue has even proved to be sensitive, as access to premises for art studios is limited and the rent is expensive. The *Artistic, Collective, Metropolitan. Warsaw art studios as micro-institutions* project, which culminated in December 2023 as an exhibition held at the Warsaw Observatory of Culture and various events in the city's art studios (including meetings in historic studios), addressed this issue on several levels. In the text, I discuss the three most important ones—personal, institutional, and community—by referring to the research results and the reflections of the people involved in the project.

THE ART STUDIO AS A SPACE FOR THE ARTIST

The key element of the project was the conducting of artistic research which resulted in the exhibition *The Multispace of Art Studios*, curated by art students¹. Our approach was quite flexible when we established collaboration with the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw as part of the laboratory headed by Dr. Karolina Thel. The students who participated in the classes specified their research framework on their own. After conducting

initial desk research, the research team decided to explore the subject of art studios. The research was conducted in two ways. One part of the group interviewed artists who work from their art studios. The other talked to the employees of Warsaw's Property Management Companies (ZGN), located at the local offices in the individual city districts, which are responsible for the process of awarding, as part of competitions, municipal premises intended for art studios to interested artists².



Michał Stańczak, *Telephone*, sound installation, 2023,
photo: Lena Pierga

- 1 *Wieloprzestrzeń pracowni* [The Multispace of Art Studios], Warsaw Observatory of Culture, 7-14.12.2023. Team of curators and artists: Jagoda Barwińska, Stanisław Bulder, Jan Gębski, Agnieszka Sadurska, Michał Stańczak, Aleksandra Tarka, Dr. Karolina Thel, Patrycja Wójcik.
- 2 Interviews with artists were conducted anonymously in October and November 2023.

The issue of art studio functionality and the activities for which such spaces are intended is compelling due to the specificity of artistic work, the definition of which can be highly fluid and therefore subject to many stereotypes in public perception, and the effective management of artist-intended spaces can be challenging for those not involved in the art world. What do we call creative work? Is it the process of producing a particular piece of work, reflecting on its concept, or is it the constant process of looking at reality, talking to others, reading world news, and following the latest theoretical discussions? Croatian artist Mladen Stilinović answered this question ironically a few decades ago in his work *Artist at Work* (1978), which consists of photographs depicting the artist in bed while sleeping. Counting the time spent sleeping as part of the creative work process may seem absurd to some. On the other hand, Stilinović's work aptly points out that the pursuit of a formal division of individual activities into those that are professional and those that are not regarding people working in the field of art is severely limiting and, ultimately, not very useful.



Mladen Stilinović, *Artist at Work*, 1978, photo: courtesy of Branka Stipančić, Zagreb



Stanisław Bulder, Jan Gębski, *2/1*, video, still from the film, 2023

Studying the function of art studios as part of the project was significant in the context of the statutory limitations related to the terms and conditions of municipal art studio use and the misunderstandings they can produce (e.g. the prohibition of living in the studio³). The research team, made up of students, studied how the

needs of artists are catered to at the level of bureaucracy. The detailed process of acquiring municipal art studios assigned through competitions organized by the ZGN and the terms and conditions of their use were depicted in detail by one of the co-researchers and exhibition authors, Aleksandra Tarka⁴. Let me briefly summarize the conclusions drawn from her text. At present, the process of applying for municipal art studios is complicated, and the competition results are hardly transparent. In addition, gaining access to municipal premises from the stock of properties managed by the ZGN does not always provide the artist with comfortable working conditions, owing to the legal limitations imposed on studio use and because rented municipal studios often require considerable investment, as their physical conditions leave much to be desired. As a result, many people decide against entering the art studio competition after having become acquainted with the actual conditions of the pool of studios offered for rent or after a first failed attempt. At the same time, the possibility to rent art studios from the city is the only program aimed at supporting Warsaw-based artists in their needs related to having space for creative work.



Aleksandra Tarka, *I am an artist. I want to have a studio*, graphics, 2023, photo: Lena Pierga

The student interview respondents mentioned that they happened to do a variety of things in the studio spaces, from socializing to lying on the floor to free themselves from the stimuli of the surrounding world. However, in most responses, the function related to the space for producing material objects and the safe storage of artwork together with materials and tools is highlighted as the decisive factor justifying the vital need for a separate space dedicated to artistic work. Irrespective of what happens in this space beyond the actual production of art, the need for separation between working space and living space (even if the two spaces are under the same roof) is crucial for artists. These results, among other things, stem from irregular working hours and the multiplicity of various professional and income-earning activities artists undertake. In moments of intensive work on producing particular works of art, many people need uninterrupted contact with their artwork and prefer staying in the studio until late or even overnight.

3 See herein: Aleksandra Tarka, *Warszawskie lokale twórcze* (Warsaw's creative venues), p. 10

4 Ibid., p. 10–14

On the other hand, living among artwork and art supplies is considered uncomfortable and harmful to one's health. In conclusion, the common denominator inherent in creative work is the vital need for space and the irregularity of working hours and types rather than the specific activities that accompany the process of producing work.

THE ART STUDIO AS A LUXURY

As mentioned previously, even if the process of obtaining a municipal art studio for rent from the ZGN is successful, it does not mean that the lessee will then be able to freely use the rented space. Specific provisions of law—for instance, those prohibiting the use of art studios for residential purposes and the lending for use of the space to others free of charge or subletting all or part of the space⁵—demonstrate that the regulations are not well-adjusted to suit the needs of the artistic community and the way artists work. At the same time, any violation of these rules may result in lease cancellation.⁶ In this context, it is worth noting that even previously, “vacant premises that can be used for residential purposes” could not be allocated as art studios. Since 2022, only commercial premises can serve as art studios. The law does not precisely define what may be considered “use for residential purposes”, but we can infer from these provisions, as well as from the interviews conducted as part of the project, that the premises allocated for art studios are most often not spaces where renters would like to live permanently, except when the work requires staying in the studio for an extended period, e.g. overnight, which involves the need to cook or reheat food and the possibility to rest, which could potentially be interpreted as activities related to “inhabiting” the space.

Commercial properties allocated by the municipal authorities for art studios do not always meet the needs of artists—the most common issues include poor access to sunlight, heating, electricity, lack of hot water, and the lack of an elevator. The technical conditions often impede the creative process—e.g., poor access to sunlight makes it hard to paint, if there is no elevator in the building, it is hard to transport heavier artwork and supplies, etc. As such, it is natural that persons who function well in the mainstream market and sell their work through auctions, galleries, or individually not only have a higher chance of acquiring art studios—the key competition criterion is the declared rental fee⁷—but also have a higher chance of using the rented studios to the fullest, as they can afford to renovate the premises, hire crews to perform specific work, etc. Individuals without the financial means to adapt the studios to their needs and maintain them often forgo renting a studio, which in turn affects the form and even the themes of their work (Łucja Staszkievicz discusses this in her paper⁸).

To a large extent, artists operating outside the mainstream market cope thanks to their self-organization skills, which ultimately contribute positively to the vitality and diversity of the Warsaw art scene. However, maintaining this state of affairs and the qualitative development of the capital's cultural community in the future definitely requires a revision of the modest level of support provided to artists compared to other European capitals in terms of studio space. Comfortable conditions for creative work should not entirely depend on the sale of artwork. The present state of affairs forces artists to constantly decipher how to solve problems and get by, which was aptly reflected by Stanisław Bulder and Jan Gębski in the video work *2/1* created due to the research preceding *The Multispace of Art Studios* exhibition. The video performance consisted of inflating a slightly damaged mattress. Once this was done, the artist lay down on the mattress, from which the air was slowly released, and then the action was repeated. The following text accompanied the work: “Micro studio, micro work, micro art. I stitch myself a place to sleep with my work. Relentlessly, impartially, unhurriedly.” The constrained and demanding access to the infrastructure necessary for creative work affects the quality of the artwork—artists dedicate a disproportionate amount of time to handling issues related to the organization of creative work compared to the making of their art.

THE ART STUDIO AS A SPACE FOR COOPERATION

One way to cope with the situation in the studio rental market is to share premises rented from private individuals or companies with other artists. Currently, Warsaw artists share workspace primarily for financial reasons. In contrast to the municipal premises, mainly located individually in residential buildings, the private rental market offers workspaces in specific artistic enclaves.

5 See § 13 Section 1, Resolution no. LXXIII/2430/2022 of the Council of the Capital City of Warsaw dated 8 December 2022, https://bip.warszawa.pl/NR/rdonlyres/6BCC6FED-3D92-49ED-BAFC-99A1A04C081E/1773533/2430_uch.pdf (access [5.02.2024]).

6 Ibid.

7 See § 6 Section 3, Resolution no. LXXIII/2430/2022 COUNCIL OF THE CAPITAL CITY OF WARSAW dated 8 December 2022 on the terms and conditions of renting space for the purposes of creative work in the field of culture and art, including historic art studios in Warsaw, https://bip.warszawa.pl/NR/rdonlyres/6BCC6FED-3D92-49ED-BAFC-99A1A04C081E/1773533/2430_uch.pdf (access [5.02.2024]).

8 See herein: Łucja Staszkievicz, *W płataninie zależności. Domowe pracownie artystyczne*. [In a tangle of dependencies. Home art studios.], p. 15

For example, in the Śródmieście district, there are several tenements entirely rented for the purposes of art studios or private galleries (on Hoża, Chmielna, Widok, Bracka streets and others). The lack of statutory restrictions in these locations allows for greater flexibility in sharing or subletting premises. For this reason, many studios are shared by artists who remain ambivalent towards this situation. On the one hand, the need to share studios is coupled with space constraints; on the other hand, the opportunity to work in a building with many different artists fosters friendships and the exchange of goods. Artists share tools and equipment, exchange knowledge, contacts and opinions, and all chip in to cover fees and utilities. As a result, commercial rental turns out to be a cheaper and more convenient option for many artists, which allows for greater financial flexibility (a smaller deposit, the possibility of swapping spaces or giving up the studio, the presence of owners with whom one may negotiate the terms of use of the space and the realization of necessary repairs). Despite the declared need for one's own creative space, most artists who share studios find this option to have more perks than drawbacks.



Backstage exhibition view in the studio of Iga Niewiadomska and Piotr Maciejewski on Bracka Street, photo: Lena Pierga

When deciding to share studios, artists try to match according to their interests, but the social aspect is also significant. Being constantly surrounded by other creative people stimulates the development of ideas for collaborative projects—from studio exhibitions to performative, educational, or publishing activities. By inviting artists to participate in a part of the project *Artistic, Collective, Metropolitan. Warsaw art studios as micro-institutions*, which consisted of opening their art studios to the public, we tried to listen to and, as much as possible, support their need to organize specific activities. For instance, the artists sharing the space on Hoża Street had been planning joint projects in the studio for a long time, but the idea was constantly postponed due to lack of time and financial resources. Only when we approached them on behalf of the institution, suggesting a specific time frame for the activities and allocating a specific budget, did they team up to create the *Swamp* zine and plan other autonomous team initiatives. This simple example may incentivize municipal institutions and organizations to support and

collaborate with artists, responding to the needs and ideas that already exist in the community and whose fulfilment requires organizational support. Nevertheless, networking between stakeholders and sharing resources at the level of other, larger or smaller organizations is essential for supporting grassroots activities (a justification and elaboration of this theme is proposed in the paper by Maximilian Lehner presented in this publication).



Documentation of the *Bagno* zine premiere in the studio of Łukasz Radziszewski, Viktor Aberamok, Piotr Marzec, Jana Kuczyńska, Agata Popik, Emil Łaska, and Małgorzata Stelmaska-Cichocka on Hoża Street, photo: Lena Pierga

RECOMMENDATIONS

The critical recommendation concerning revising municipal policies that could support artists creating invaluable artworks and projects, including experimental ones crucial to the development of culture and art, would be to establish a committee responsible for managing issues related to infrastructure. The committee would be made up of representatives of different creative communities. The financial factor should no longer decide who can rent a municipal art studio. Neither is the lack of access to the rental fees declared by other participants of city competitions at the stage of filing applications beneficial to artists. The procedure of renting an art studio from the city should be more transparent, and the rental fee should be fixed from the start—it should fall within a certain bracket and be lower than commercial rental options. Despite some advantages of the decentralization of management of municipal properties, it would be worth considering the establishment of a body to manage the rental of art spaces throughout the entire city or supervise their distribution. Today, the stock of municipal art studios available for rent is strictly centralized, since most of the premises are located in only a few districts (Śródmieście, Ochota, Wola, and Praga-Południe). It would be beneficial to assess the value of the competition submissions in terms of substance, identify the artists' needs and problems, advocate in their name, and propose solutions. Depending on the type of artwork created (size, media, materials), artists could have different infrastructural needs stemming

from their projects. However, the present situation often produces converse consequences—the size and shape of artwork is dependent on the size of the space available to a given artist. Today, artists wishing to rent art studios from the city must compete with NGOs and commercial art galleries, which considerably lowers their chances of renting larger premises. One solution would be to hand over entire buildings for exclusive use by artistic communities that could house studios and workshops where artists could share resources. Considering that the legislative process is complex and lengthy, one recommendation for artists would be to associate and establish organizations that could represent their interests before the authorities. Based on the example of the ARS Art Factory in Tallinn,⁹ we can see that such a strategy produces positive results. Currently, in Poland, we have the Association of Polish Fine Art Artists (ZPAP), which is not very appealing to many artists who are reluctant to join because of its conservative approach. ZPAP has attractive art studios in Kraków on Emaus Street at its disposal, but not many of them. Today, another organization is in the process of establishment, namely, the Civic Forum of Contemporary Art (Obywatelskie Forum Sztuki Współczesnej), which is aimed at representing artists in the fight for their social security and welfare. This is an example that could easily be replicated; artists coming together in other, smaller organizations could collectively or separately look after their interests and be able to respond immediately to any irregularities.

Looking at the art milieu from a broader perspective, we can see that the exhibition sector as a whole, which includes city galleries and museums as well as commercial galleries, directly benefits from artists being forced to self-organize, find ways to produce their work, stimulate the interest of their audiences, and build a community, as is the case with the Przyszła Niedoszła or Pracownia Wschodnia venues. This way, new names and innovative practices emerge in the artistic circle and are later “discovered” and absorbed by larger commercial or institutional entities. Given this, the main logistical, organizational, and financial burden and associated risks fall on the least-protected individuals—artists work mainly as freelancers and therefore have no social security. A shift in thinking about these basic units of artistic work is needed, and the municipal and state authorities should take a greater interest in the grassroots initiatives and support them. City authorities that can influence municipal construction policy should consider returning to the idea that functioned in the pre-transformation years of a top-down order to allocate a pool of premises in newly constructed residential buildings in Warsaw for cultural purposes, including art studios. It is desirable to support individual initiatives that promote activities in and around art studios on an ad-hoc basis and ensure their continuity and stability. The rationale for this need can be drawn on the example of our experience of working on the project *Artistic, Collective, Metropolitan...* carried out by the Warsaw Observatory of Culture thanks to funding from the Culture Office of Warsaw. A relatively wide-ranging overview of the various topics and problems concerning Warsaw’s art studios over a relatively short

time was enabled through the involvement of student participants carrying out research free of charge as part of their studies. The resulting analysis of the individual problems, however, remains superficial. Each issue raised within the project needs to be developed as part of individual research and various activities. We see a need for similar initiatives to be carried out not on an ad-hoc basis but in a cyclical manner, allowing various complex issues to be explored more extensively. It is also necessary to exchange experiences between the teams involved in the process of working on the different parts of the project. The subject of art studios sometimes resonates in various events and discussions organized in Warsaw. Occasionally, calls for proposals are issued for projects related to art studios and these types of projects are undertaken by different entities from time to time. However, there is a general lack of reflection and knowledge sharing, which results in the emergence of initiatives demonstrating the positive aspect of having studios, i.e., presenting these spaces to the wider public as distinct, unusual places, etc. The potential to talk about the problems and possible solutions is lost in such an approach. Moreover, there is still a need to introduce the necessary changes that artists desire, which should primarily be addressed by the ventures undertaken in support of the issue of art studios.

DIGRESSION: HISTORIC ART STUDIOS

The issue of historic art studios is a separate one. Simply granting such status is a good step towards preserving the capital’s cultural heritage. However, the current form of the solutions adopted should only serve as a starting point for introducing more detailed rules for managing such spaces. In particular, specific formal solutions are needed to address the issues of inventory, conservation, ownership, and legal status of the objects found in the historic studios. It is debatable whether landmark status should be granted only after the death of the artist working in a given space. The existence of exceptions to this rule, such as the studios of the living Grażyna Hase and Katy Bentall (Studio Tchorek-Bentall), suggests that we should consider a more flexible approach. Including a particular studio in the Register of Monuments or the List of Historic Studios is an expression of recognition of the work of the individuals who created it, and therefore, ensuring the preservation of their legacy should be primarily in the interest of the city or state. At present, individuals who look after the legacy left behind in the studio, in the archives, etc., are required to pay rent for the premises where the artwork is stored. If they want to receive a subsidy for conserving the valuable objects they look after, they must have a legal entity to do this, such as a foundation. As a result, instead of being compensated for their work, these individuals end up incurring costs. Waiving rental fees for the operation of

9 See herein: Katie Zazenski, interview with Vano Allsalu, p. 21

● a historic studio would not be a significant loss to the city, and it would allow the individuals and institutions managing the spaces to care for the artistic heritage properly. Making it easier for competent individuals to look after their own or other people's artistic heritage and supporting the inventorying, conservation, and management of objects left behind by artists would ultimately contribute to preserving a precious cultural legacy in the longer term. In this text, I do not have the opportunity to go into detail on historic art studios, which requires a careful study of the spaces that have been granted such status, an analysis of individual cases and problems, and the development of functional solutions. I will, therefore, confine myself to outlining the most pressing issues and pointing out the need for action in this area.



Karol Tchorek and Katy Bentall's studio,
photo: Tomasz Jan Szymański and Maks Januszewicz



ALEXSANDRA TARKA WARSAW'S ART STUDIOS

In 2014, as part of the Warsaw *Under Construction 6: City of Artists* ¹⁰ festival, Marta Żakowska studied the situation of Warsaw artists regarding access to art studios made available by the city. Based on her observations, studio availability left much to be desired. In her text, Żakowska provided an overview of the status of the studios and discussed the main problems. Among the challenges she mentioned were the lack of a legal framework for the status of the studios and the issues of the condition and availability of such premises. She considered contributions from artists who shared their concerns and commented on improving their situation. In the following paper, I take Marta Żakowska's text as a point of departure; I primarily elaborate on the problem of municipal artist studios provided to artists for creative activities. My intention was to check which recommendations and suggestions mentioned in 2014 have been put into practice and which still need addressing and call for improvement by the city authorities.

The data featured below are based on interviews and source texts. In October and November of 2023, I conducted both free-flow and semi-structured interviews with officials and clerks of the Property Management Companies (ZGN) of the districts of Praga-Północ, Praga-Południe, Ochota, and Śródmieście. I also spoke to students of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw and an employee of the Office of Housing Policy from Warsaw City Hall. The questions concerned the number of studios available in a given neighborhood, the types of work carried out in them, and young artists' awareness regarding access to municipal art studios. The source texts I used included resolutions and documents regulating the activities and functioning of studios in the city of Warsaw over the last few years. I have also used the information published on the city's website.



Paweł Żukowski's studio in the Wola district, photo: Lena Pierga

SIGNIFICANT CHANGES OVER THE YEARS

Over the past ten years, a few significant changes have occurred regarding premises designated as art studios. The first resolution of the City Council of the Capital City of Warsaw on the status of art studios from 2018 was aimed at protecting historic studios by awarding them a special status and opening them up to residents and citizens of Warsaw, as well as formulating guidelines and rules for the allocation of premises for creative activities by the city. Before 2018, the regulations adopted from the following resolutions were in force: Resolution No. LVI/1668/2009 of the Council of the Capital City of Warsaw from 28 May 2009 on the principles of lease of municipal premises in multi-family buildings for a period exceeding three years and not exceeding ten years, and Resolution No. LVIII/1751/2009 of the Council of the Capital City of Warsaw of 9 July 2009 on the principles of leasing premises that are the housing resources of the Capital City of Warsaw.

¹⁰ See Marta Żakowska, *Miejskie pracownie warszawskich artystów* [Municipal studios of Warsaw artists], Warsaw Under Construction 6: City of Artists, Museum of Modern Art, 2014, https://artmuseum.pl/public/upload/files/pracownie_artystyczne_marta_zakowska.pdf (accessed 27.01.2024).

The 2022 resolution that replaced the 2018 one differs very little from its predecessor.

The most significant changes concern the groups being offered access to creative premises. Under the 2018 resolution, premises were available to graduates of art schools, members of creative unions and associations, and non-professional artists. The 2022 resolution also allows cultural institutions and NGOs to apply for leases. Another necessary amendment is that the allocation of units from the municipal housing stock has ceased. As of 2018, one cannot live in the studios and can only work there. The studios are now allocated from the stock of commercial units.¹¹ In 2022, the city had a stock of 8,536 business premises, of which 539 premises were rented as creative studios. In 2014, Warsaw had more than 80,000 residential units and more than 9,000 commercial units, of which 570 were leased as creative studios—247 from the pool of commercial units and 323 from the pool of residential units.¹² These changes are mainly due to the city's inventory and amended legislation regarding its status. As a result, the studios rented out of the housing pool have been incorporated into the residential pool.

LEGISLATION AND A FEW FACTS

The rules for renting art studios are set out in Resolution No. LXXIII/2430/2022 of the Council of the Capital City of Warsaw from 8 December 2022¹³ concerning the rules for the rental of studios for creative activity in the fields of culture and art, including Warsaw's historic artist studios.

However, the procedure for the leasing of premises for art studios is described in Ordinance No. 198/2023 of the President of the Capital City of Warsaw from 3 February 2023, which provides the principles and detailed procedure for the leasing of studios for creative activity in the fields of culture and art, including Warsaw's historic art studios, as well as the announcements and terms and conditions¹⁴ of the competition for the leasing of premises intended for art studios published by individual districts. The most significant number of studios is located in districts such as Śródmieście, Praga-Południe, Praga-Północ, Wola, and Mokotów¹⁵. Some districts do not even have one available art studio, e.g., Rembertów and Białota, while Targówek can boast of having only one.¹⁶

The individual District Board decides on the type of art studios desired in said district. In addition, the intended use of the premises available for rent through a competition is determined each time via the competition. The most common types of studios include painting and sculpture, architectural, photography, ceramics, and textile art studios. Less common are studios intended for the conduct of musical activities. One exceptional example is the Praga-Północ district, where a jewelry studio is housed in municipal premises allocated for art

studios.¹⁷ The studios can also promote culture, e.g., organize workshops, meetings, and exhibitions. However, among the artists and creators who bid the most in these competitions, it was mainly in painting and sculpture.¹⁸

Who can rent municipal art studios? The right to rent them is granted to:

- 1) Artists who are graduates of art schools or art faculties;
- 2) Members of unions and creative associations, excluding ordinary associations;
- 3) Non-professional artists recommended by creative or scientific communities;
- 4) Cultural institutions managed or co-managed by the city of Warsaw;
- 5) NGOs.¹⁹

Both organizations and creators enter the competition under the same terms and conditions.

THE PROCEDURE OF RENTING AN ART STUDIO FROM THE CITY

Premises are allocated for rent through competitions or tenders. If the premises are not leased via a competition,

- 11 Interview with an official from the Office of Housing Policy of the City of Warsaw, December 2023.
- 12 Data collected after Q1 2014 by the Office of Housing Policy of the City of Warsaw.
- 13 See DZ. URZ. WOJ. 2022.14228, announced: 28.12.2022, <https://edziennik.mazowieckie.pl/legislact/2022/14228/> (accessed 27.12.2023).
- 14 Whenever a competition for studio rental is announced, the announcement is accompanied by regulations and terms and conditions setting out precise rules. The wording of the terms and conditions may vary slightly from district to district.
- 15 See *How to rent premises for an art studio*, <https://kultura.um.warszawa.pl/jak-wynajac-lokal> (accessed 27.12.2023).
- 16 Research and interviews were conducted among students for the purposes of the *The Multispace of a Studio* exhibition held at the Warsaw Observatory of Culture, 7-4.12.2023.
- 17 Interview with ZGN staff in the Praga-Północ district, November 2023.
- 18 Interviews with ZGN staff in the Śródmieście, Ochota, Praga-Północ, and Praga-Południe districts, November 2023.
- 19 Resolution LXXIII/2430/2022 of the Council of the Capital City of Warsaw of 8 December 2022.

they may be leased through negotiations.²⁰ In 2023, the city leased art studios for a term of no more than three years, and in pursuance of special provisions governing the lease of art studios, including Warsaw's historic artist studios, for a term of more than three years, but not exceeding ten years, or for an indefinite term.



View of the *Multispace of a Studio* exhibition at WOK Lab, photo: Lena Pierga

To take part in a competition, an artist must submit a set of documents, including a certificate of completion of artistic studies, a letter of recommendation from the creative community, a statement of not being entered in the Register of Debtors kept by the Economic Information Office, and, if the artist is married, a declaration that the spouse consents to be bound by the obligations pursuant to the lease agreement, and, finally, a bid featuring the proposed rental fee per meter. Also, a deposit must be made, and proof of payment must be submitted to the ZGN. The offer should also feature a statement that the bidder is aware of the physical conditions of the studio and information about the type of creative activity to be carried out in the studio.²¹ Before signing the lease contract for an art studio, artists must pay a deposit of three times the monthly rental fee.

WHAT IS NOT ALLOWED IN THE STUDIO?

“A creative studio may not be used for any purpose other than the declared creative activity,” as is provided in the 2022 Resolution. Using the studio for residential purposes or releasing it to another person for use free of charge without the owner's (city's) consent serves as grounds for terminating the lease prematurely. However, studios can be shared with other artists, but this fact must be declared from the outset in the competition bid and included in the rental agreement.

Municipal studio use is verified during inspections, which are carried out once a year (announced or unannounced)

by the city. Employees of the ZGN pointed out that situations where the lease must be terminated early for misconduct are rare. Usually, if a contract must be terminated early, it is due to defaulting in the rental fee payment.

PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES

Municipal art studio conditions often leave a lot to be desired. Some rental offers state that there is no hot water, ventilation, or bathroom access in a given unit or that the studio is in physical conditions requiring renovation. The artist bears the costs of renovations and repairs (there is no information in the city's resolution about any possible reimbursement of renovation costs from the city), and, in addition, the lessee cannot carry out any remodeling without first submitting a relevant request and obtaining approval from the city. Under the terms and conditions, it is possible to lower the rental fee during the period of waiting for approval to start the renovation work and during the period when the studio is being renovated. Still, the total period during which the lessee is entitled to pay a lower rental fee in connection with renovation work cannot exceed three months. This problem was already highlighted by Żakowska in her text from 2014 and is still relevant in 2023. It is not cost-effective to invest one's money in renovating and remodeling the premises when the rental duration is for only three years.

Another problematic issue is the distribution of information about the possibility of renting premises intended for a studio from the city. Many Academy of Fine Arts students in Warsaw are unaware of this option.²² This applies to current students, recent graduates, and people who finished art school several years ago. Given this, it is recommended that the ties between the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw and the relevant municipal offices be strengthened to promote the option through its communication channels. It would also be beneficial to spread the word about the studios through the city's outlets and strengthen the city's cooperation with art centers and the artistic community of Warsaw.

Another problem observed is that the cost of renting and running the studios often exceeds the financial capacity of most artists. “It is difficult to calculate an average salary for artists who are painters in Poland; in fact, it is impossible to do so for those who are self-employed and work independently. However, for artists who choose employment at cultural institutions, salaries can range

20 A list of premises for rent is published on the city's website, <https://kultura.um.warszawa.pl/konkursy> (accessed 22.12.2023).

21 Ordinance No. 198/2023 of the President of the City of Warsaw of 3 February 2023.

22 Short interviews with current and former students of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, October and November 2023.

from 4,000 to 5,000 PLN before taxes per month”²³, reads an article published on the *Zawody.pl* site in 2021. The artistic

profession does not provide financial stability every month, so many artists are forced to look for other sources of income as well. Not only can renting a studio be expensive, but entering a competition excludes many people at the start due to the high deposits and collateral that need to be paid to enter. To exemplify this, the monthly cost of renting a 40 sq. meter studio in the Praga-Północ district in 2023 was 1,600 PLN plus utilities. It is worth noting that in 2020, i.e., when the rental agreement was created, the rent was 900 PLN. This demonstrates that the rental fee is not fixed and may be increased over time.

The size of the studios is another potential problem. They differ in furnishing, size, access to light, bathroom facilities, etc. The tiniest art studio currently rented in Praga-Południe has an area of 14 sq. meters and, according to a ZGN Praga-Południe employee, the artist “somehow manages to work there”.²⁴ In December 2023, one of the ZGNs offered for rent a 200 sq. meter studio (if a studio is not leased by anyone via a competition, the premises stay in the stock of the given district until a potential lessee shows up). Although every artist may have different needs regarding studio space and creates works of art of various sizes, 14 sq. meters seems impractical, given that artists also need space to store supplies and artwork. It would be worthwhile for the city to recognize the needs of local artists when preparing a pool of premises for rent.



Diana Lelonek's studio in the Wola district, 2023, photo: Lena Pierga

RECOMMENDATIONS VS. REALITY

In 2014, based on artists' experiences, Marta Żakowska recommended how the Warsaw authorities could respond to the problems and concerns related to municipal art studios. Her recommendations included lowering rental fees, improving the physical conditions of the premises, and increasing officials' awareness about the situation of artists and artistic work. She also highlighted the need to adopt new provisions governing the rental of art studios in the city to make the rental procedure more transparent and accessible.

Almost ten years later, the procedure has still not been amended. Art studios are currently awarded via competitions and bids announced from time to time on the city's website and the Property Management Companies' (ZGN) website. Once a certain number of studios become available, the ZGN announces a list of premises available for rental, and the studios are usually awarded to the person who submits the highest bid (rental fee). Sometimes, the type of activities to be carried out in the studio is a significant factor. However, the final criteria depend on the competition committee.

Most of the proposals advocated by Marta Żakowska have not been put into practice to date, including, for instance, the improvement of the physical conditions of municipal studios. Renovations are still the lessee's responsibility, who is forced to renovate the studio at their own expense or with the help of family and relatives.

There is still no top-down law regulating the operation of art spaces. Despite the resolutions in place, the authorities of individual districts are in control of the situation. They are the ones who ultimately manage the situation of the studios in their area. We need a law for art studios (including historic studios) that considers the general need for low rental fees and clear rules on the division of responsibility regarding renovation. It would be beneficial if the law also defined the status of studios and provided solutions and guidelines for cities and their districts.

However, a fundamental challenge remains the lack of communication and understanding of artists. During a symposium on artists' studios held at the Warsaw Observatory of Culture, it was said that the people working at ZGNs do not understand the specifics of creative work.²⁵ One of the artists who attended the event pointed out the lack of inclusion of new media or more multidisciplinary practices in the list of potential activities

23 See Editorial, *Artist-painter. How much can you earn in such a position?*, 9.05.2021, <https://www.zawody.pl/artysta-malarz-ile-mozna-zarobic-na-takim-stanowisku/> (accessed 27.12.2023).

24 Interview with ZGN staff in the Praga-Południe district, November 2023.

permitted in municipal studios. This gives rise to various misunderstandings between the two parties and results in additional

checks carried out in the studios by officials to ensure that what the artists are doing there is indeed art and that they are not breaking the rental terms and conditions by performing other types of work.²⁶ Establishing a dialogue between the city and artists would help solve this and many of the abovementioned problems. It is essential that the city of Warsaw sees the value in artists and their work and treats the situation more as an investment in building the cultural tissue of the city than as a persistent problem that officials do not want to or do not know how to deal with.



Jasiek's House for Imaginary Friends exhibition in Jan Moźdzynski's studio, 2023, photo: Lena Pierga

²⁵ *Artistic, Collective, Metropolitan. Warsaw art studios as micro-institutions*, Warsaw Observatory of Culture, 14 December 2023, <https://wok.art.pl/dzialania/procesy-artystyczne-i-badawcze/artystyczne-spoleczne-stoleczne-warszawskie-pracownie-artystyczne-jako-mikroinstytucje/> (accessed 27.12.2023).

²⁶ A wide variety of materials are often used in creative processes. A denunciation was filed against one of the Prague creative studios, accusing the artists of running an illegal car workshop after someone recorded the lessee bringing car tires into the studio. The tires were supposed to be part of the artists' project.

LUCJA STASZKIEWICZ

IN A TANGLE OF DEPENDENCIES: HOME ART STUDIOS

A ROOM AS A PLACE FOR CREATIVE WORK

Despite the large number of available premises allocated for art studios by district Property Management Companies (ZGN) and those on the private market, several visual artists—primarily students and fresh graduates of the Academy of Fine Arts—do not have studios. For economic reasons, young people have to give up the possibility of using studios in favor of creating their art in a rented room or apartment, occasionally using friends' studios or spaces available at the academy (as long as they continue to study and the people who run the studios allow them to leave their things there for extended periods of time). This text examines the factors preventing or discouraging young art-makers from renting studios and their handling of this situation. The text also addresses the limitations caused by being unable to use a studio. An outline of the problems associated with renting and the constraints arising from using home studios is drawn from the contributions of twenty artists whose ages range between 22 and 37, collected between October 2023 and January 2024²⁷.

There are more than 500 premises in Warsaw designated as art studios by district ZGNs and many premises available on the private market²⁸. The prices of premises for private rental typically range between 600 and 3,500 PLN and depend on the square footage, access to water, heating, and the space's type, location, and placement within the city's zoning plan²⁹. The most common spaces rented for studios are basements, attics, or former dwellings which are technically unsuitable for their original function. The price growth dynamic in the art studio market is similar to that of the housing market—prices are skyrocketing without caps, and, in the current reality of the economic crisis, rental costs



Collective tea drinking in Agnieszka Brzeżańska's studio in the Mokotów district, photo: Lena Pierga

- 27 Although most of the interviews focused on the situation in Warsaw, the process of acquiring studios and studio access is not particularly different between other major cities in Poland.
- 28 The exact number of privately rented studios is not known: no office or institution in Warsaw collects such data.
- 29 It is worth noting that the cheaper offers on the private market are often for short-term leases. An additional cost added to the rental of studios is a deposit of one month's rent or a multiple thereof (depending on the contract).

are rising at a galloping pace³⁰. Adding up the expenses for studios, renting a room in Warsaw at current rental prices on the private market and the cost of living increased by inflation, an artist's studio represents a rather heavy burden, particularly for young people, people doing care work, and those in precarious employment.

However, the solutions proposed by the city do not offer a more secure alternative. Studio seekers must submit an appropriate competition bid stating the proposed studio rental fee, with the minimum fee set by the district ZGN. Applicants are not aware of the amounts proposed by other artists in the competition bids, so they often inflate their proposal to increase their chances. The mayor of the district under which the ZGN is subordinate is—according to Regulation No. 202/2019 of the President of the City of Warsaw of 12 February 2019—to appoint between three and seven people to the commission considering the competition bids, one of whom is chosen by the Office of Culture of the City of Warsaw³¹. Although the regulation specifies that those submitting their rental offer must include a description of their activities and certify that they have completed art education or provide a recommendation from the community, the appointed committees are guided almost exclusively by financial criteria. Thus, those who are more affluent are realistically more likely to win the competition despite their already greater chances of obtaining a studio on the private market.



Dr. Karolina Thel, *Basement*, installation, 2023, and Stanisław Bulder, Jan Gębski, *2/1*, video, 2023
photo: Lena Pierga



View of the ideal studio created by the curatorial and artistic team of the *Multispace of a Studio* exhibition at WOK Lab, photo: Lena Pierga

In the reality of the housing crisis, unfavorable urban policies and inflation, art-makers must find a place where they can work. Confronted with the reality of renting a studio (whether via the private market or premises offered by ZGN), individuals are often forced to eliminate that possibility in favor of working from home, which affects, among other things, decisions about the format and technique of the work, the selected medium, and the possibility of storing the produced art. Art creation at home is associated with several problems:

- a) The risk of permanent damage to an element of the rented room or apartment, resulting in the loss of deposit money when moving out of the property in question;
- b) Safety issues regarding prolonged residence (including sleep) in the environment of the materials used in the work;
- c) Spatial constraints and far lower comfort levels.

Starting with these three problems, it can be argued that artistic work at home is associated with considerable discomfort and a type of anxiety. The limitations are imposed by the square footage as well as by the specifics of the housing tenancy and the conditions of neighborly coexistence. Artistic work which is based, for example, on nailing down looms, drilling screws, etc., is noisy and often carried out after the hours of one's day job, which is the creator's primary source of income. Artistic work in the evenings or on weekends can increase neighborhood conflicts and potentially result in complaints to the landlord.

However, the issue of enforced proximity has a positive side. One interviewee pointed out the need for the proximity of studios as places to exchange experiences and resources³². Such places do, of course, exist on the map of Warsaw (e.g. ul. Bracka 20B, ul. Chmielna 10A, ul. Hoża 52, ul. Widok 22). Still, they are subject to the logic of the private market, in which one person rents a given studio and then sublets to another³³, which does not provide the security associated with the premises' stability to the subletters' detriment. Despite

30 Looking at the price fluctuations in the advertisements available on Facebook groups related to the rental of premises, it can be seen that prices have risen by at least 1/4 of the value of the previous rent in the last two years (see, for example, the prices of premises at ul. Taśmowa 1, ul. Freta 39, and ul. Widok 2 between 2022 and 2024). As a result of this situation, many art creators have had to leave their studios in favor of creating in increasingly expensive rented rooms.

31 Ordinance No. 202/2019 of the Mayor of the City of Warsaw of 12 February 2019, <https://bip.warszawa.pl/NR/exeres/825C246C-6F71-4EB3-B25F-5C26F3316640-frameless.htm> (accessed 29 January 2024).

32 Veronika Zalewska's statement from an interview conducted on 28 November 2023.

33 Such situations occur in the listed tenements. As the interviewees point out, accepting such a situation is often out of desperation resulting from lengthy time spent searching for a studio.

the limitations of renting studios in tenements designed for this purpose by their owners, the exchange of experience

and resources nevertheless takes place—either through acquaintances or access to the resources of an art college.

Caring for another person is a factor that substantially impacts working without a studio. Care labor, mostly shifted to women, consumes much of the time spent in the domestic space, thus affecting the work produced³⁴. Demystifying the unsupportive conditions of artistic production or their entanglement in a web of environmental dependencies thus becomes undesirable in the circulation of creative goods³⁵. The possibility of using a separate studio space would be a significant improvement, assuming the artist can share custody with another person. Such situations do not happen often, given how the aspect of femininity is assigned to domestic work without recognizing the work's value within the framework of social reproduction. This is also influenced by the precariousness of employment and the inability of female artists to benefit from social support due to the absence—since 1990³⁶—of specific legislation regarding creative professions. The practical lack of recognition of artistic work by the state and its peculiarities generates the problem of the inability to use benefits to help those artists who are caregivers.

LABOR MIGRATION

Depending on their network and level of education, those unable to rent an art studio stand between three spaces—their room, the studio(s) at the university, and the occasional possibility of using the studios of people they know. Each of these spaces has its benefits and limitations based on the specifics (square footage, number of people using a particular studio, proximity of relationships, local resources).

Those studying at an art academy are in a privileged position despite not having their own studio. They can use the spaces available at a particular art academy to store some of their work and create it from any materials within and outside of class hours. The academy becomes a place that gives a lot of freedom, as long as the policies of individual studios and departments are favorable toward female students. Using a shared studio space has its advantages: the opportunity to exchange knowledge of materials and techniques used within the same medium, to give each other feedback, and to share resources, including materials no longer needed, or to use materials otherwise inaccessible or ones that would not be cost-effective to purchase in large quantities. However, artists are not guaranteed a place in a given space without receiving space via studio allocation³⁷. Additionally, there is not always space for these artists in the studio after study hours,

when more people in similar situations may gather to finish their work. Having the ability to leave work at the university also has its limitations and ensuing anxieties.

Another type of space is a friend's studio, which can be used ad hoc, e.g., due to the need to work with a technique that isn't possible to do at home. Such an opportunity is, like the university studio, associated with short-term activities and requires negotiation. Using another person's studio is instead characterized by lesser fabrication or the need to use an otherwise unavailable tool on an ad hoc basis. The relationship can primarily be based on exchange or, in some cases, involve a fee (as in the case of ceramic studios).

- 34 Anna Gromada, Dorka Budacz, Jutta Kawalerowicz, Anna Walewska, *Marne szanse na awans. Report from a study on the presence of women at art schools in Poland*, Katarzyna Kozyra Foundation, Warsaw 2016, pp. 30-34.
- 35 Examples of attempts to point out these dependencies—the specificity of artistic work and its precariousness—include exhibitions on care, such as *Radical Parenthood* at the Arsenal Gallery in Białystok, in which the artistic group MATERNAL FANTASIES and Bára Šimková show how reproductive work and its devaluation affect artistic production, and *Mind of a Poor Man* by the artistic collective of the same name at the Sebastian72 venue in Warsaw's Wola neighborhood. More about the second exhibition will come later in the text.
- 36 Jakub Banasiak, *Proteous times. The disintegration of the state art system 1982-1993. Martial law. Second Thaw. System Transformation*, Museum of Modern Art and the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, Warsaw 2020, pp. 442, 445-449. Creative work is only protected by the intellectual property law enacted in 1994.
- 37 In the second year of the bachelor's program and from the first year of the master's program onwards, those studying at art colleges must undergo an intake into selected art studios (the number of studios required may vary depending on the university or faculty). Admission to the studios is decided by the teaching staff.

18 CREATING IN SPITE OF EVERYTHING: WOLNE POKOJE (FREE ROOMS), UMYSŁ BIEDAKA (POOR MAN'S MIND), AND ROOMS-GALLERIES-WORKS



Jakub Kosecki, Maryna Sakowska, *Housing Saga: commission for the agency*, object, 2023



Jakub Kosecki, Maryna Sakowska, *Housing Saga: commission for the agency*, 2023, detail



Martynka Dagmarka (Martyna Modzelewska), *jutro ;))*, instalacja, 2023, dzięki uprzejmości artystki

Forced studio migrations and the constraints of using domestic spaces to produce artworks are thematized in the projects of artistic individuals, especially novice artists. Examples of initiatives using rooms and houses for exhibition purposes, revealing the domestic process of artistic production, include Free Rooms in the Tricity (2017-2023) and the exhibition of the mobile collective Poor Man's Mind at the Sebastian72 gallery in Warsaw's Wawelberg Colony as part of FRINGE Warsaw 2023.

Free Rooms is a Tricity-based gallery initiative by Marta Koniarska and Basia Nawrocka founded in 2017. The starting point for the curatorial collaboration was the possibility of using Marta Koniarska's grandmother's flat ³⁸, which, as it turned out later, had to be sold ³⁹. In this situation, the artists decided to organize one exhibition in the flat, and the action evolved into creating a mobile exhibition initiative meandering through the flats of people who wanted to host upcoming events. The first exhibition curated by the duo was *Camouflage* ⁴⁰, which showcased the work of invited artists ⁴¹. The title *Camouflage* referred to the way in which the works were arranged, which those participating in the exhibition hid in various corners of the space. I read the proposed exhibition practice through the relation of domestic space and artistic production that goes unnoticed or must be restricted due to the nature of the space.

The events of the Free Rooms duo were among the few on the map of the Tricity that remained open to people still studying at art schools and young female artists. The nomadic nature of the initiative was thus a reflection of the relationships produced within the art field, where female and male artists must draw on the support of others in a similar situation to co-create a space for the exchange of knowledge.

38 *Free Rooms*, "Murmur" No. 1, April/May 2018, p. 81, <https://en.magglance.com/Magazine/519fbc364eed-07ea24335b6f049de0a4/white> (accessed 29 January 2024).

39 Mac Lewandowski, *Chaotic conversation with FREEDOMS*, 9 February 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VGQzUWYdBOE&t=101s> (accessed January 29, 2024).

40 See: https://www.facebook.com/events/195877330984004?active_tab=about (accessed 29 January 2024).

41 This was the only exhibition organized by the duo that was not organized by open call.

The collective's exhibition *Poor Man's Mind*, shown in the flat rented by Martyna Modzelewska and Paula Jędrzejczak, is an

example of an artistic practice that makes visible the class conditions of art and the influence of space on the specificity of artistic production. Engaging all five rooms of the flat, the exhibition led us through various threads related to the economic conditions of art and artistic production. However, I would like to focus more extensively on the work of Martynka Dagmarka (Martyna Modzelewska) — *Tomorrow :)* — and Maryna Sakowska and Jakub Kosecki's *Housing Saga: Commission for the Agency*, located in Martynka's room⁴².

The work *Tomorrow :)* consists of a pile of clothes that is a natural product of everyday life, with a mix of items to be washed and those that have been disturbed to choose the right *fit*. The pile becomes an artistic product within the situation of the exhibition and guided tours. The installation addresses the everyday problems of caring for a domestic space that is simultaneously a site for artistic work. The work points to the conditions under which Martynka's objects and concepts are created, which form her creative interests. On the other hand, Jakub Kosewski and Maryna Sakowska's work *Housing Saga: Commission for the Agency* is about the search for housing in a housing crisis and the dream of an ideal home. The work consists of a wax-covered microwave on a stool, with representations that mix *cottagecore* fantasies with video game aesthetics. The scene depicting a burning IKEA store from a perspective familiar from games of the truck-driving simulator genre refers to the rapid arrangement of a new space, which can easily be transposed to the situation of artists' studios. If IKEA were replaced by Castorama (which is not difficult to imagine due to the color scheme of both companies), the work would become a story about the uncertainty in the situation of the artist studio crisis, through the rapid provision of basic materials for the new space and the transportation of the works associated with moving out. In this text, the two situations can be considered analogous due to their randomness and the resulting fantasy of better times when studios and flats are available.

CONCLUSIONS

The decision to rent an artist's studio is not made in a vacuum but is the result of interdependencies consisting of the housing market situation, the issue of employment for creative professionals, the cost of living and the performance of care work. It is important to recognize that urban policy related to artists' studios needs to be reformulated in itself but is only one requirement in the constellation of needs of artists. Adequate regulations related to urban studio access are required, as pointed out by those taking part in the symposium on artist studios *How to live and work in the city of Warsaw?* held at the Warsaw Cultural Observatory⁴³. Accessible urban studios—with at minimum a one-year lease with the possibility of prolongation and regulated rent—could create conditions in which those unable to find a studio

on the private market or constrained by other dependencies could gain access to their own or shared workspace. Turning once again to the issue of the proximity of studios and the associated ease of circulation of technical knowledge, resources, and the creation of an artistic community, it is important for City Hall to collaborate with spaces that already offer such opportunities and to support their sustainability rather than overlooking them in thinking about the shaping of urban infrastructure (such as the Perun case⁴⁴). Therefore, when considering a change in how artist studios are organized for rent, it is necessary to look at the networks of dependencies that interact with artistic work and adapt these spaces to the needs of those starting out in artistic professions.



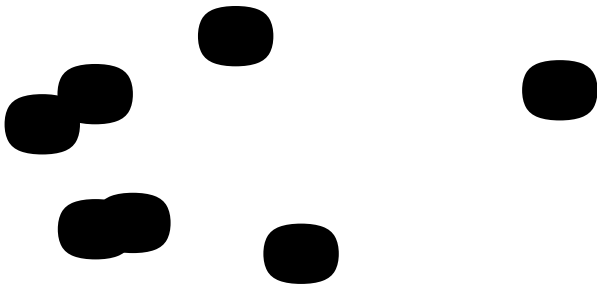
Ksenia Gryckiewicz's studio in Żoliborz, photo: Lena Pierga

- 42 Two other works were also exhibited in the room: *Diamencik xD* by Kinga Dobosz and *I imagine that instead of borrowing money from my boyfriend to pay the bill after a procedure at a private gynecologist's office, I have the opportunity to pay the gynecologist with my painting. At the same time, I know that the painting is worth more (market-wise) than the bill, so this gesture of exchange turns out to be an illogical action in a crisis rather than a Martina Baranowicz utopia.*
- 43 The meeting, moderated by Hanna Orzechowska on 14 December 2023, was attended by people from the Eastern Studio Collective and the Future Unsullied collective who rent premises from the city which they use as studios and galleries. During the meeting, the artists drew attention to the problem of communicating with Property Management Companies and officials while pointing out the lack of appropriate regulations recognizing the specifics of studios and creative professions.
- 44 Perun—an abandoned factory—was a conglomeration of artist studios in Warsaw's Kamionek district. The residents were expelled due to the construction of a new developer housing estate.



Ksenia Gryckiewicz's studio in Żoliborz,
photo: Lena Pierga

Another need is the regulation of rental prices and their increases in the housing market, which affects the possibility of renting premises for creative work, determining the prospects for the continued practice of the artistic profession. The protection of this type of employment, which has not been seen since the neo-liberal reforms of the 1990s, barring the regulation of copyright protection, would not only allow for job protection but also the possibility of social assistance, pensions, and support for care work, which are limited by the lack of recognition of the specifics of the profession. To support artistic people on their way to obtaining adequate conditions for creative work, it is important to address livelihood problems comprehensively.



WE ARE NOT RICH BUT WE ARE QUITE HAPPY. VANO ALLSALU IN CONVERSATION WITH KATIE ZAZENSKI

This interview was conducted on Thursday, December 7, 2023 between Vano Allsalu, current Vice President of the Estonian Artist' Association and Curator on behalf of ARS Art Factory in Tallinn, Estonia, and Katie Zazenski, on behalf of the Warsaw Observatory of Culture (WOK).

ARS ART FACTORY MISSION⁴⁵

“ARS Art Factory is the biggest centre for creating and producing art in Estonia. There are more than 90 artists, designers and creative companies working here and various events and programmes are organised for art professionals as well as art lovers. ARS Project Space has become a prestigious venue for exhibitions and cultural events.

The predecessor of the present-day creative hub is the legendary ARS Art Products Factory (founded in 1975). Art products (ceramics, textiles, decorative metalwork, leather etc.) were designed and produced here by a staff of several hundred artists, master craftspeople and workers that were well known across the Soviet Union, but also in the Nordic countries. Even decades after the golden age of the factory, products made at the Art Products Factory are still to be found in almost every Estonian home—even entire sets of tableware, collections of books or jewellery.

Today, ARS is an art community that combines innovation and history, contemporary practices and technology and the traditional skills of professional art in Estonia. Artist studios, workshops and galleries are the cornerstone

of the contemporary creative centre. The collaborative use of services and resources supports its effectiveness; new works of art, products and services emerge from the encounters between the creative people. ARS Art Factory belongs to the Estonian Artists' Association, which allows artists to have a say in developing the centre and gives them a stronger sense of security for the future.”

KATIE ZAZENSKI:

Could you start by telling me a little about ARS Art Factory, maybe a little background about the building, the organizational structure, how it works, etc.?

45 See: <https://www.arsfactory.ee/?lang=en> [access February 17, 2024]

VANO ALLSALU-

Vano Allsalu: The Estonian Artists' Association (EAA) was established in 1922, and it is the second biggest creative union in Estonia. We have around 1,000 members, and we also have 18 sub unions—painters, graphic artists, textile artists, sculptors, art critics, you name it. This is maybe important to know that there are 17 officially recognized creative unions that function as umbrella organisations [in Estonia]. So besides the artist's association, there are, you know, like writers, composers, actors and so on. And it's quite an exception that a creative union owns some real estate—I mean, like, buildings. I know that the writers own a house in the old town. But usually, normally, the creative unions work in rented spaces. But the artists' association actually owns several buildings; one of them is Tallinn Art Hall and also the next building to it where artists have their studios. And we also own this art factory. But at the same time, of course, the youngest of these buildings is more than 60 years old. So here you can imagine the huge responsibility which comes with these houses, and it's not so funny anymore...

But this building actually comes from history, from Soviet times. The artist association had a creative company which was called the Estonian Art Fund, which was actually engaged in these venues, they were also managing the art factory. So it was like a union. And the union had its company for all kinds of practical, business activities. There were all kinds of artists and workers, different things being produced here: glasswork, metalwork, accessories, leather work, objects, furniture. Anything for the interior, you name it, it was probably made here. It's quite a big building; at times there were almost, let's say almost 1,000 people working here. But this heritage also caused the artist's association problems on a structural or strategic level when we experienced the huge transition in the beginning of the 90s, when we regained our independence. We had this voucher system for goods. So if you were not lucky to get the voucher, you couldn't go to the TV store and buy a TV. And the overall quality of everyday stuff was, how to say, awfully low. But this somehow explains the huge success of the creative industries [of the time]. And working in this ARS Art Factory, Estonian artists and craftsmen produced quality objects, great artwork, design objects, and so on, which were hugely popular in Estonian homes and also in the Soviet Union. So it was like a real success story. And artists were rich then actually. They enjoyed quite a good life; I mean if you were an artist and had some talent, you could find a job and it was a happy time [for artists and art workers].

But after this huge transition, what happened then was that people rushed to the markets and stores buying coffee machines and TV sets, no one was interested in buying national artwork. And it was a huge shock for many artists and these were difficult times. Most of the artists and their new creative companies struggled to survive, and to pay a proper rent for their studios and workshops among other things. Low rents and not fully booked

studios in turn resulted in a lack of investment into the buildings. So the result was a vicious circle which we started to solve effectively only ten years ago when I became President of the EAA.



ARS Art Factory, Tallin, Estonia, 2022,
Photo: Meeli Küttem, image courtesy of ARS Art Factory

But among other things, what also happened was that no one actually noticed—or maybe noticed but did not do anything—was that the field of art was actually lacking an appropriate line and amount in the state budget because it had been so self-sufficient [previously].



Tallinna Linnamuuseum (ARS Art Factory's building from the 1960s), Tallin, Estonia, archival photo, photo: Hans Vanaveski, image courtesy of ARS Art Factory



Tallinna Linnamuuseum (ARS Art Factory's building from the 1960s), Tallin, Estonia, archival photo, photo: Hans Vanaveski, image courtesy of ARS Art Factory



Ubunoir Printing Studio, photo: Endel Apsalon, image courtesy of ARS Art Factory



ARS Project Room, photo: Vano Allsalu, image courtesy of ARS Art Factory

AZ: I'd like to follow that with learning a bit more about the way the space functions now and how it has been adapted since Estonian independence, and since this big shift in how art and culture is related to society. Maybe you can talk a little more about who is actually in there now and who these artists or individuals are who use the space on a daily basis.

VA: Absolutely. So there are actually about 100 now who are artists, artisans, and creative companies, they each have a profile on our website.

AZ: And do they rent their spaces from the association?

VA: Yeah, absolutely. And we do our best to keep the prices as low as possible and still survive as an organization. Sometimes it seems an awfully narrow path to walk, especially during the Corona crisis. People were really afraid for their future. But that was that moment. Now we are fully booked and we always have someone who wants to join us.

AZ: So is there a waiting list?

VA: Yeah, it's not a huge list because people who are looking for a new space can go find one somewhere else. Some people cannot wait for two years, so yeah, there are some dynamics like this always. We also have several spaces for short-term rent..

AZ: Ok, so people can rent on a short-term basis, if they have a small project or something, that's great to know. Would you actually also give me a little bit of a better sense of the landscape in Tallinn? Are there other spaces like this in the city? Do artists have options when it comes to studios or is the art factory kind of the main space?

VA: Well there is Telliskivi [Creative City], it's like a bigger and fancier version. Inside there are like a dozen restaurants, cafes, small galleries. It's a classical example of something you would find in Berlin, I'm sure you have a number of them in Warsaw. What differs is that our model is oriented on professional artists, to create the best conditions for them and also to be open for the public. It's definitely the biggest center of art production in Estonia at the moment. But it's good to have different kinds of models. So I even would say that there's a little boom. But what's also different is that these places are owned by serious businessmen, I mean real estate developers. And they, of course, follow the classical model—of creative people creating the ambience, the atmosphere and fun...and then step by step they will be replaced by commercial properties and commercial development.

AZ: I'd be interested to know more about the public program [at ARS] or how this space engages with the community. Is the community component a recent development or is it something that has been an important part of the factory since its inception?

VA: So I'm a painter, and in 2013 I was selected to be President of the Artist Association. At the moment I'm working as the Vice President, and, well, ten years ago, it was one of my first impressions that we have to do something about the public programming [or lack thereof] and that we needed to start building a viable creative community. At that time the art factory was maybe only 60 to 70% booked. And I'm not sure if even half of the residents were artists, it was just like a cheap office building, a bit rundown. But then with our team, we started to develop the concept. It took about five or six years to implement this new plan and I am extremely thankful to our team members for this effort.

2020 was the next big step; two weeks before the pandemic broke out, we opened a fully re-planned and renovated area (around 1000 sq m) of the art factory—a project called Open ARS. It was done with the support of Enterprise Estonia. And the idea was because historically, the building was like this mixture of factory and office building, that it was very closed, you know, with long corridors and closed doors, which are claustrophobic. And [so our goal was] to open it for the artists and for the public. We reworked it to create multifunctional rooms for seminars and presentations, a number of smaller exhibition spaces and workshops, a state-of-the-art ceramics center, etc. And now we also have ARS Project Room which we are really proud of, and I would say is probably the best big white cube in Estonia! Now I can say that our space is up-to-date and has a user-friendly spatial concept.

AZ: And is that white cube open to anybody who would like to have an exhibition or a performance there, or do they have to have a space in the factory or be related to the factory somehow?

VA: It's not totally free for the artists, but it's something like 500 Euros per month to rent this 200 square meter gallery. So it's a very good price. But we also keep our eye on the professional level, I mean, you cannot just bring your money and book the room. And at the moment we are already fully booked next year and we have several exhibitions booked for 2025. So it's very popular! And we also have several smaller galleries. But the development of the community has been really step-by-step and let's say, from the inside out. It has been centered around creative people and it's not always easy because sometimes you meet very talented, creative people who are, how to say very bad taxpayers [Vano laughs]. And they move in and they don't want to move out, but they also don't want to pay their taxes. But fortunately it's a minority. So it's good to have good neighbors! It's a *lot* to have good neighbors. And I mean, actually, based on that, we can develop services and new possibilities.

AZ: So how does that work then in terms of organization, do you have somebody that acts as the curator or manager of these spaces, or is that decided/cared for by the association?

VA: Indrek Köster. He's our Service Manager and also Program Manager. What's most important, he's the soul of this art factory. He's a sculptor, a professional artist, and that's important. I mean, when artists come and talk to us, they speak the same language, and I think this is important and it makes a huge difference. As a board member it is my responsibility to curate and supervise the development of the ARS Art Factory. For strategic planning I also involve EAA's President Elin Kard and Managing Director Mati Sillak.

For day-to-day operations we also have a Sales Manager who's responsible for the sale of artworks in the galleries and via our e-shop (pood.arsfactory.ee), for renting out rooms (short-term), designing the customer journey for our visitors etc. Actually we should hire someone to do full-time marketing and communication, but cannot afford this yet - so we try to cover this area collectively. Of course there are also other team members who support the everyday activities of the art factory like bookkeepers or repairmen. We all are sort of multi-talented and multitasking people here. So, yeah, we are not rich but we are quite happy, I would say.

AZ: I run a small independent space in Warsaw, in a garage. And I always like to say we're small but we're mighty. And while you guys are big, there's a similar sentiment, right? You work with what you have, we may not have everything that we need but there is something vital in this.

VA: Yes!

AZ: Can we go back to the logistics for a moment, and can you just clarify for me, the city actually owns this building? Or does the association own the building?

VA: The EAA owns the building, but actually no one's helping us to cover the costs for maintaining it, for providing creatives with the working space! What I know

from cities like Liverpool or Manchester or Helsinki is that the usual model is 33/33/33. Something like one third of the money you have to earn yourself—I mean, the organization or whoever owns this kind of art center—and one third usually comes from the local government or local community, and one third comes from the state or from some state cultural fund. This is just a general model. But we have to cover 99% of the art factory's budget ourselves, which means it's quite a struggle. But at the same time we are not dependent on political decisions or if people change their positions, or a new minister comes in, etc., we are not so sensitive. We are quite independent. It's good and bad at the same time.

AZ: What would you say is the greatest threat to this community or the space?

VA: Well, I mean, the overall situation not mentioning global security and the climate situation, I mean, the local situation is that we have had huge inflation here in Estonia, like we are the first or second in Europe, I don't know, it is something like 30%. Can you imagine? The rising prices for consumer goods affect creative people as well as anyone. We may again face a problem similar to the beginning of the 1990s when people just stopped buying art... I'm not sure if a ceramic artist right now can make a profit. But still at the moment we have new records (partly due to the high inflation rates!) at the auction houses, but it's usually for dead artists. So somehow people are trying to, or they've realized here that they can invest in art, which is a good thing, but it's not the art that younger artists are making in their studios. So it's a bit of a strange moment.

AZ: And then just to continue off of that question, what would you say is maybe the biggest success or the biggest strength that you have in this space?

VA: I have to say one of my favorite sayings. It relates to the relationship between members and their organization, which ends up being mostly like a relationship between a parent and a child. Which means that if you are a good parent, of course you love your child, whatever they are. And you also hope that they love you back. But sometimes they act like teenagers and can be awful. But the key word I think is trust, and maybe this is the biggest value we can offer to our members, our association, and as well, some stability in turbulent times.

AZ: That's very powerful.

VA: But we're also open for all kinds of international cooperation and we receive nice proposals to take part in projects from around the globe; we can forward them to our sub-unions or our artists, for example. We also have our guest studio here in Tallinn where we can offer space for our partners and so on. So let's say Polish artists find someone interesting on our list of residents, for example. I can just encourage them to get in contact. We try to provide this umbrella, you know, the space for work, the possibility to exhibit, to do something. And this is also important, so we're not living and working in a bubble.

AZ: You can provide a network, yes, exactly. That's great, it's very important. So what does the future hold for the Art Factory?

VA: Yes! It all sounds very economic, not arts [related], but we also have a plot of land in the center of Tallinn. It's almost two hectares around the art factory and we're in the process of making this architectural plan, a general plan for the whole area. It's actually been going on for like five years now so it's a long process. So we also have a bigger vision for the future, which of course depends on cooperation with public and private investors. But what I would like to say is that we are also quite happy that we had two visits this summer, one from our southern neighbours in Latvia and one from our northern neighbours in Finland. And they actually came to see the art factory as a good, functioning model [of how to successfully run such spaces].

AZ: Super! Well I really appreciate your time and you sharing all of this with me. I know it will be very helpful for us, to have a record of how things work in different parts of Europe, it's a great inspiration. Thank you so much for your time today.

VA: So you are very welcome in spring when it's not so very cold! Please bring some colleagues!



MAXIMILIAN LEHNER

TRANSFORM, NOT CONFORM ...TO KEEP SOME FREEDOM IN ALTERNATIVE ART SPACES

In 2021, I contributed a text to a publication⁴⁶ that started as research on the history of alternative art spaces and instead turned into a euphoric plea. “‘Alternative spaces’ is a general term referring to the various ways in which artists show their work outside commercial galleries and formally constituted museums. It includes the use of studios as exhibition space, the temporary use of buildings for work done on site, and cooperatives of artists, whether for the purpose of putting on one exhibition or for running a gallery on a long-term basis.”⁴⁷ Brian O’Doherty “explains how alternative art practices aim at exposing the spatial and institutional context of the art work, instead of an autonomous object. As a challenge offered to the formalism of late modernism, alternative art practices therefore appeared as a challenge to the art practices so far established within the white galleries of modern art museums.”⁴⁸

When it comes to alternative art spaces, this idea stems from a time when these spaces hosted artists that otherwise were not shown in galleries and museums. The most known cases were the spaces in New York of the 60s to 80s that managed to bring Minimalism to broader attention, and ultimately into museums. This example is also the idea that a lot of people (without consideration of the specific history in the US) have in mind when they think of an alternative art space. It also comes with this aesthetic of the rough spaces, maybe industrial, with raw materials, and most probably temporarily used and leftovers of the past usage shape its appearance. These spaces can have many different

usages, be it exhibition space, rehearsal or studio space, a theater or a bar. All of these appearances of a concept of the alternative space adhere to this need of experiencing something that is off the widely accepted, that also offers more freedom of expression and therefore a radical creative space of thinking (differently from the mainstream).

I was sure that alternative spaces persist in such ways because they always manage to spot a need or a void in the local scene. This conviction comes from participating in, working for, or organizing events for these types of venues. In smaller towns, I experienced how such places can become the cultural center for those who aim for more experimentation, something for which in larger cities maybe even a specific offer exists. Often-times, alternative art spaces anticipated something that would later happen in institutional settings. My idea for spaces like this has always been fueled by this history, where each one of them was about a lack of something within a local art scene.

46 See Lehner, Maximilian, 2021. *Alternative Art Spaces and Their Alternatives*. In: P. Rauch/T. Čiček (eds.). SKUP, Ljubljana: Zavod Artard/Galerija Škuc.

47 Alloway, Lawrence, 1978. *10 Downtown, 10 years*, New York: 10 Downtown, p. 4.

48 Terroni, Cristelle, 2011. *The Rise and Fall of Alternative Spaces. Books and Ideas*, 7 October 2011. URL: <https://booksandideas.net/The-Rise-and-Fall-of-Alternative>.

To make a long story short and sum up what I euphorically conceptualized in the text from some years ago, this famous example

leads to the common misconception that alternative art spaces are part of this legacy; their mere existence makes them alternative. Today, many commercial galleries and spaces that don't aim to give the sort of freedom this history attaches to the aesthetics of these spaces also decide to go for the same, shabby style. To embody a sort of "sound idea" of radicality, though, they would have to bring forth change in the scene—respond to a lack, offer space for something new—and not just contribute to the same style of programming and managing that defines most institutions. Radical alternativity, which is somehow associated with these aesthetics of using old spaces temporarily, would mean that you are not part of the system. For art spaces, this would mean to actually function outside of, on the one hand, a dysfunctional system of capital distribution that has considered cultural work for too long as some kind of leisure activity where only some popular voices are considered to be worth to get paid. On the other hand, it would mean to also leave the art world in its current state, where those interests overlap and also the "alternative" players search for recognition by the bigger and more "established" ones.

One problem with this text is that it tries to tackle this unbridgeable contradiction between being part of the art world and wanting to change something. Another issue is the belief that change is actually possible. In all kinds of publications and conversations in the art world, we can hear and sense that the cliché of the radicality of the art space is hovering around, as if these spaces were not underlying any conventional economic and political structures: "Though it might seem like a grim moment, alternative art spaces remind us that there is always another way—an alternative to the now. For generations, artists have not only conceived of other, better worlds, they have made them a reality in their backyards, in their basements, and other overlooked corners of society. [...] Faced with censorship, governmental pressures, and capitalist privatization, alternative art spaces have always thrived. They adapt, support, and break new ground. They need no permission—only passion for an alternative to the status quo."⁴⁹ Statements like this seem hypocritical, when, while mentioning the difficult political climate, they conceive the alternative art space as one that could exist independent of it, just for the sake of celebrating the aura and ideas connected.

THE NEED FOR INDEPENDENT ART SPACES

The text you are reading was inspired by a simple conclusion I drew from the aftermath of the disappearance in 2021 of the Autonomous Cultural Center Rog, a big space hosting art studios and different art and culture venues in Ljubljana. When Rog got evicted during the pandemic, there were protests in the city. Meanwhile, the building hosting "ateliers, music, video or graphic studios, theatre and dance halls, meeting rooms for different associations, playgrounds, social activities etc"⁵⁰ across more than 7000 square meters got replaced by a project the municipality had planned there—a 90s-style dream of a place for creative industries, also hosting some commercially run art workshops. Without going into the details of the disturbing idea of an eviction during a time of lockdowns, I thought that the vivid protests against it would eventually lead to a whole new thing that aims to fill the voids. With a fellowship from the Igor Zabel Association, I came to write about the changes I expected within the local network of art spaces. I thought I would be able to map the newly emerging spaces and re-contextualize the idea of independent spaces filling voids and then turning into institutions. My expectations, inspired by the history of institutionalization of alternative spaces in New York from the 60s to the 80s, were that the art scene would rapidly come up with ideas and experiments to fill the void, laying the foundations for big new things to come. But during my first conversations about this with artists and cultural workers running existing spaces, I realized that none of my imagined scenarios had happened. All the institutions that existed before kept on going with their programs as planned. There was little need to use the aforementioned event as an excuse to create something new.

Since I did not encounter any of this sort of creative organization of spaces and new ideas when I came to Ljubljana after the eviction of Rog, I began to question my expectations (or rather conclusions referring to the idealized history of the New York alternative scene): I thought new spaces would occur as a reaction to the decisions taken, experimenting with what to do about the sudden lack of open spaces for art and culture. This made me doubt if this unquestioned image of the alternative art space that actively influences the scene and challenges the institutional players is actually true, it also made me question if today there is even still a need for such places, or they are just remains from that conviction that they could bring a change for the better.

49 Yuzna, Jake, 2022. No Approval Required: Twin Cities Alternative Art Spaces. *Mn Artists*, 8 August 2022, URL: <https://mnartists.walkerart.org/no-approval-required-twin-cities-alternative-art-spaces>.

50 The temporary users of the factory Rog, 2006: Collective Statement About Opening Rog To The Public, 13 April 2006, URL: <https://tovarna.org/node/111>.

Despite drawing on this concrete example, it is a theoretical text—and not a case study—that tries to inspire agents from the

alternative scene to think about why they want to run these spaces, and to reconsider how to visit and look at these places—if they should be compared to commercial galleries trying to promote artists or if they follow the legacy of the idealized alternative space.

BUT WHERE?

“The raw and crummy nature of alternative spaces was [..., in the case of the early New York alternative art spaces] a matrix and constant source of inspiration for artists. It was also the direct consequence of the economic situation surrounding their birth in the first place.”⁵¹ Neither the freedom that these American artist groups of the 1970s had, nor the legal frameworks for temporal, cheap, rentals are available in most countries today. While in some countries the latter lets an art scene flourish, the example of Slovenia showed me how rigid legal requirements prevent independent culture from expanding beyond the spaces it already inhabits. Early in becoming part of the EU as well as the Euro Zone, Slovenia seems to be an ongoing investment case for real estate. Therefore, even empty buildings don’t offer cheap interim use. Who is able to pay for and get funding for using a space, thereby creates also an elitist closure of who can even run an alternative art space. A lot of initiatives try to circumvent this by following the rules of creating associations that enable them to get annual funding, and through this, also pay their rent;⁵² a move that ruins all spontaneity. “The arrival of public funds represented a real threat to the essentially spontaneous character of such art venues whose alternative identity was tied to yet undefined avant-garde practices and financial instability.”⁵³ The alternative art space in its idealized image turns into a self-deceiving endeavor: The institutionalization of P.S.1 (an independent space famously incorporated into MoMA New York), which historically became the powerful argument that alternative art spaces can also become the future fillers of the voids they point to, and upon institutionalizing their needs, faced protests. The promised creation of cheap studios to continuously support artists was perceived as a distraction so that fewer artists would complain about the overall scarcity of spaces to work and exhibit: artists should pursue their dream labor in affordable studios, even without payment. Obviously, the creation of new spaces is not enough to maintain alternative ways of living and working together that are so self-sufficient so they could exist outside the system. The institutionalization of that space also took away an important space for creation and inspiration, that could not just be replaced by offering studio spaces. So even the success story of an alternative art space developing into a new institution points to the need for addressing the surrounding economic questions.

AND HOW MUCH?

In working with artist-run spaces and art associations in Austria and Slovenia, I have noticed that a lot of them promote a climate of support towards artists and all people working in these spaces, as well as engaging in political ideas and struggles more than public institutions usually can. But again, also public institutions take into their programming a lot of political and social questions and are at face value with alternative spaces. So, if there is no differentiation except the larger precarity associated with annual funding applications, and more precarity in terms of working conditions (and how the people running them exploit themselves to adhere to standards which are brought forward in discursive events of large institutions), the demand should actually be towards institutions, to implement what alternative spaces already do.

The above-mentioned situation characterized by renting spaces equally counts for the gap between the general price level and the wages in Slovenia and other countries where the economy adapted to the EU while wage standards remained almost the same. This leads to people working several jobs to make a living, still oftentimes not being able to afford to pay rent for their own place. Making art, never mind running such a space, has become almost unaffordable for an individual or even for smaller groups since people are struggling to cover their own basics. Generally deemed high in status and maybe even (through perpetuated narratives of highly paid renowned artists and curators) imagined economic value, support for fair pay struggles in the arts is not widely recognized in society. This leads to many in the cultural field accepting precarious conditions, simply to work in their dream jobs. The idea of loving what you do (and oftentimes also the financial possibility of running spaces without support) enables a system of self-exploitation. These convictions are part of the devaluation of artistic practices, where art is considered a leisure activity. But a society where the gap between wages and living cost becomes larger and larger might not be able to demand these kinds of places, even when they are needed. In many European cities, for example, there is an acute need for studio spaces. But it is hard to communicate their importance since the work is romanticized, as mentioned above, and this pragmatic need is therefore not visible for society. Positive examples to achieve funding is the combination with other more public needs, such as exhibitions, theaters, and concert venues, a subcultural venue of extreme value to the city marketing or urban culture, or simply educational purposes for children and teenagers that find their places there. More elaborate is the collaboration with stakeholders from the economy since there are different needs, and

51 Terroni, 2011.

52 All this structure is oversimplified, since all these parameters are mutually dependent and somewhere needed in the application process. For the sake of the argument, I think, it is enough to see the problems of all those factors being entangled.

53 Terroni, 2011.

also other modes of calculation. So, why should we even wish to keep running alternative spaces and think they are worth investing in, while we could also stop and hope that institutions would take over their functioning? When the alternative space points to a gap, and the institutions pretend to have that criticality themselves— polemically speaking— the institutions should immediately fill the gap.

BUT HOW DOES IT LOOK?

Drawing from history, one could simply ask what might be the need now, what is to be addressed? On the one hand, I assumed that the idea that alternative art spaces want to address a certain lack in cities is still functioning the same way. But that would ignore the fact that the aesthetics of the alternative space is also exploited by those who turn it into cultural capital, without wanting to fill any void or change anything—except their status. So, the typology of alternative art spaces is so blurred that visitors cannot tell if the space they are in addresses a certain need or just uses this imagery that alternative art spaces turn a hidden place into the coolest spot. The legacy of the 60s–80s became a paradigm of the alternative art space, and ironically became proof for new spaces to be the next up-and-coming thing in the arts. We may take this capitalization of the potential (as well as the precarity, etc.) as a problem they have to face, but also as a simple fact that this wish for change is outdated. The reason why nothing changes might lay in a well-known system that I have encountered in most of Europe: Slovenian art funding provides just enough for the established spaces to keep a programming ongoing, where artists can survive by producing new exhibitions. No one in the field is really able to address the lack of spaces for experimentation as an urgency, and no one can afford to just provide it as a luxury. The threshold in which the arts operate seems to be tailored to make the arts more and more part of the capitalized system and not offer escape routes, and also not inspire or enable people to even think outside of the box because the mere existence of these places is an achievement, so artists, curators, cultural managers, and so on don't reflect on what radical alternativism might entail and what else they could demand or try out.

CAN ART SPACES TRANSFORM, NOT CONFORM?

“We need more radical spaces. This doesn't mean that they have to have a radical political agenda that is easy to identify, and which will create a different kind of marginalization or elitism. Making radical space is about developing spaces that denaturalize the norms of the dominant culture and provide for new ways to build community, social relations, and the production of art. This implies the development of forms of art that don't repeat the logic of the market or even bureaucratized democracy.”⁵⁴ But the spaces are stuck in a dilemma that they must follow at least bureaucratically, or by some rules of the market to not cease to exist. Only for some larger structures that have achieved a special status (legally or in some semi-legal agreements with authorities), it can work out that a true alternative emerges. But looking at examples of Metelkova and Christiania, we are struck by their commercialized image to an exterior eye, that entails touristic interest to keep them. And above all, also the legal status—even though different rules can apply in these areas—is one authorized by the municipality or state, and therefore needs some investment.

This means that we have to get rid of a pure idea of the alternative art space, they cannot escape being part of economic relations and systems of valuation of what is deemed to be important in the art world. The general movement of the idea of an independent art space is more and more merging with a commercialized image of art, and therefore also with the idea of capital accumulation or a continued success and career in the arts. If we look closely at this idea that something emerges from the foundation of a new space, and that we always aim for this continuation, we just fulfill the idea of a heteronormative and capitalist society. All our attempts to be different are stuck in the idea of succeeding within this system. “Just as material inequality reigns, we also succumb to the endless present of capital's calculative machinery, seemingly rendering resistance pointless. [...] Indeed, there's an urgent need for alliances now more than ever [...] in order to build collective power and disrupt the hegemony of colonial capitalist violence that harms us all, if differentially.”⁵⁵

It seems that radical shifts are necessary when we see these mechanisms at work even in the places that give us a sense of freedom. If resisting the urge to inscribe the art space into the temporality of innovation and reproduction—essentially linked to capitalism and heter-

54 Bloom, Brett: Radical Space for Art in a Time of Forced Privatization and Market Dominance, retrieved from: http://www.temporaryservices.org/rad_space_art.pdf, 2013, p. 86–87.

55 Demos, Radical Futurisms, <https://www.springerin.at/en/2021/1/radikale-futurismen/>

onormativity—the radical alternative might be to stop working. But, as Pamela M. Lee put it in the conclusion of *Forgetting the*

Art World, in response to a common misunderstanding of its title: “my argument has been that we shouldn’t turn away, or better put, can’t. For better or for worse, we’re in it, here and now, the reason, undoubtedly, for our collective exhaustion with it.”⁵⁶ More and more assimilating to standard models of exhibition spaces and institutions, I have the feeling that the concept of the independent art space as a radical alternative needs some healing. The art world is no separate realm of experimentation. We must take the constraints that inform our daily practice seriously, and maybe we will find some humble solutions.

A micro-cure is maybe to use the dynamics I criticized above and see the institutional art world and other agents considered opposites of an alternative art world as useful partners, especially since they oftentimes engage in similar political discussions, and the people responsible for the programming often come from a non-institutional background. With this modest suggestion, I want to come back to the potential I saw in the events in Slovenia which shaped this text: it is these moments that we can use to inhabit the radicality of alternative art spaces. When there’s a political urgency that is also visible from outside of the art bubble, it changes the impact of what we do. The fact that nothing was initiated after protesting against the eviction of Rog, made me afraid of the amount of performative allyship and superficiality in the alternative scene today. But reasons not to create new alternatives are complex and might relate to economic situations, renting conditions, political constraints for funding, nepotism, or the personal impossibility to invest unlimited time into such a project, personal financial instability, or mental health challenges, that make it difficult to start something like this again.

Even though this whole text might sound like a criticism of alternative art spaces and how they work, it is more a reminder that such spaces can still work, and can provide alternatives to the system, but also that they can be seen the same way as (and be compared to), to put it bluntly, Instagramable spaces run with generational wealth. If we cannot escape it, let’s use the imagery of the alternative art space—exploit it for our needs. This kind of space is always entangled in dependencies of economy and politics, but don’t let people, who can navigate these fields easily, use the imagery of alternative. Truly radical might be to get rid of the idea of symbolic capital. I think it is time to more clearly address and work on a certain “lack” in the local scene or in art in general—to inscribe spaces into this void.

56 Lee, Pamela M., 2012. *Forgetting the Art World* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, p. 186.

ARTISTIC, COLLECTIVE, METROPOLITAN. WARSAW ART STUDIOS AS MICRO-INSTITUTIONS

Authors of texts:

MAXIMILIAN LEHNER

ŁUCJA STASZKIEWICZ

ALEKSANDRA TARKA,

VERA ZALUTSKAYA

KATIE ZAZENSKI

Editor: *VERA ZALUTSKAYA*

Translation: *MAGDALENA SZWEDOWSKA*

Language correction: *JULIA SEEHOLZER, KATIE ZAZENSKI*

Graphic design: *KAROLINA PIETRZYK, TOBIAS WENIG*

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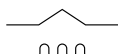
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