

*The venue has ceased to mean the physical reality of a museum and has started to act as an indicator of socio-economic relations, functioning as a kind of social, institutional, economic and political framework, thus becoming an artistic issue in itself.*

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I started collaboration with museum institutions which are representative in their fields of activity, such as Wieliczka Salt Mine and the Historical Museum of the City of Krakow. These venues housed installations created in accordance with the understanding of what 'site-specific' means. Such actions should be preceded by an in-depth analysis of the character of a given site, the scheme it functions within, its structure and history. A work of art is created in close relationship with the site, even if it means, so to say, acting against this site, in opposition to it, and temporarily disturbs its current mode of functioning. When I work on my projects, I think about what constitutes the identity of a site, how and why it comes into being, converts and redefines itself, and also about what does not undergo any transformation, remaining a stable element – a core around which changes oscillate. It is possible that ultimate [non-ambiguous?] answers to the essential questions do not exist and we just have to accept being able only to point towards them. For me, art is just this kind of indicator- raising questions and provoking thoughts. Artists and their works enable us to come a bit closer to answers and see questions from another perspective.

Wieliczka Salt Mine is an institution whose main aim is to preserve centuries-old cultural heritage represented by a salt mine and relics, which have been collected since the 1950s, and it belongs to the most often visited museums in Poland. The museum exhibitions are attended by a million and a half audience every year. To a large extent, the institution acts as an economic stimulus for the region it functions in.

When I was tracing back the history of this place, I got fascinated with an artist who had played a significant role in it. After World War II, almost the entire mine was supposed to be flooded, with all the facilities and objects that had been functioning there for centuries. The person who managed to block this decision was Alfons Długosz, an artist, a photographer. In my view, he made a Duchamp-like gesture: he picked up simple mining tools from the ground and elevated them to the status of museum exhibits. His passionate efforts culminated in establishing the museum in Wieliczka, and later, in putting it onto the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1978. In his monograph "Magnum Sal as a Monument of Material Culture" he recollects:

*(...) from the underground maze of collapsed spaces, depths and primeval extracted walls, we were wresting old forgotten and forsaken equipment, bizarre machines and centuries-old devices. We were gathering them meticulously in an underground chamber. They were meant to do justice to the enormous miners' efforts over the centuries and supply documentary evidence of the millennial history of the inhabitants of the underground land, marked with spouts of sweat and blood. We were collecting rocks and salts, fossils and crystals. I filled one chamber after another with those treasures. – In the same monograph, he included 134 photographs. While he was taking them, he developed his own method of illuminating chambers, and in this way he created an invaluable document showing the salt mine "during the breakthrough", as it stopped playing an exclusively utilitarian role, becoming a cultural institution. The title of my project "Salty Bread" intentionally refers to the short movie released by the Educational Films Studio (Polish abbrev.: WFO) in Lodz in 1958, which was shot on the basis of Alfons Długosz's guidelines. The movie shows what mining works looked like in the old days by means of demonstrating the applications of the old machines and tools he found in the salt mine. The activity of Alfons Długosz, who was inseparably connected with the museum, is the starting point for my reflections on the project "Salty Bread". Below, I will cite extracts from the curator's opinion prepared by Agata Franaszek in the course of the project-oriented activities, analyses and conversations: Długosz, an artist, turns up in the salt mine and introduces a kind of "new deal". He transforms the way of*

thinking about the mine, which is thereby given the status of heritage which deserves to be preserved and protected. As he himself said, “appalled by what I saw, I decided to help in saving the priceless monument. I understood that it had to be remembered and the mine just had to be shown to the society, which had not realised it was there and still did not know it. For it was not known even to those who were down there every day because of their job.” Thanks to a kind of change in perspective, the necessity of looking at things in another way, one can see them anew.”<sup>01</sup> This method is also used by Natalia Wiernik. Długosz picks up mining tools from the ground, changing their status and assigns a new value to ordinary everyday objects, whereas I, observing and examining the institution as it is today, the transformations it has gone through, as well as analysing the directions it may proceed in, reach for, inter alia, a flagship fragment of the current permanent exhibition, namely for the precious collection of meticulously gathered saltcellars- literally and figuratively “throwing them off the table”.

*Items in a collection are usually well-organised and classified, while in Wiernik’s project they are presented in disorder and their plethora is striking. The saltcellars displayed against the background formed by reproductions of paintings of 17th- century Dutch masters seem to belong to these reproductions, regain the status of cutlery items, become everyday objects again. Fragments of the still life, disorder, light reflected by shiny surfaces and making use of luxurious items represent the common denominator, linking works of art by old masters with a contemporary artistic creation. In this project, the presentation of two superimposing and permeating each other museum collections forces us to reflect upon the concept of the museum and its collection-creating role. The photographs of saltcellars are intentionally placed in the sanctuary of the Maria Theresa II chamber, where one can feel of the undisturbed space of the mine with the traces of mining activity. Symbolic beginning and end – a juxtaposition of a place where salt was mined for centuries and objects in which it was served on the table. An indispensable element bonding these two realities are people working here over the centuries. The film “Salty Bread” aims to show how miners worked – the artist reaches for this motif to draw attention to the work of those people who currently work in the museum, who look after the space of the mine itself as well as after the collections. By using the forms of performance and video, the artist makes us focus on their small, insignificant, everyday gestures in which she focuses, as in a lens, the notion of the preservation of cultural heritage. In this project, the problem of introducing a new order can be interpreted also at a different angle – as a return to the origin, eliminating all the redundant elements, arriving at the essence – in this case, at the very salt mine and its character.*<sup>02</sup>

The performance, being the starting point and the main axis of the event, was a literal reconstruction of the situation “from the life of an underground museum” I had witnessed on my arrival there. Within the framework of my collaboration with this institution, I could learn about its structure and when I was visiting particular chambers, I experienced the following phenomenon: on entering the spectacular in its character cave called “Maria Theresa II”, which is spacious, dozens meters high, preserved in its original character and form, not “cluttered” with special effects/tourist attractions (abundant in the other sections of the sightseeing route), I heard the sound resembling that of the approaching freight train, the sound carried high due to extremely good acoustics of the chamber – it was so overwhelming and disturbing as if the whole salt mine was about to “collapse on my head” any minute... while on the opposite side from behind the corner suddenly cleaning ladies appeared, one by one –there were about seven of them – each of them was pushing a trolley equipped with two buckets, broomsticks and floor cloths. The ladies whose duty was to “clean” the mine...It took me three months to complete the film documenting the conservation works, stop motion animations and photographs of the saltcellars collections as well as to reproduce, in the form of performance, the “cleaning of the mine”. “Crushing off” the walls of the mine lasted for two weeks... let me explain: the chamber where the event was supposed to be held was , for the most part, unavailable for sightseeing as there was a

risk that salt crystals might loosen from the walls of the mine chamber and, falling down from the height, pose a serious danger for visitors. Miners, hanging several meters above the floor, prepared the “exhibition space” by throwing salt onto it. I have to emphasize that all my actions and the entire creative process were perceived as disturbing by the employees, and the “guardian” of the saltcellars collection was especially suspicious towards me, very reluctantly giving me access to the collections she looked after, and on the opening day the curator plainly told me that she was afraid of a scandal because of this exhibition.

Wieliczka Salt Mine represents a lot of contradictions: on the one hand, it plays the role of the collector and, on the other hand, the role of the producer of “powerful experiences” in the underground mine; the conservation of heritage frequently takes the form of curious arrangements, not even slightly related to the original assumptions of Długosz, covering the old chambers with superfluous exhibitions, showcases, pictures, sculptures...

When I was visiting the mine and the museum in the castle, I made the decision to come up with a critical opinion about the institution and the direction it had chosen. And not from the point of view of a judge, but a person who gets inside and tries to look at the place as it is today - certainly, taking the original principles and the site history into account and constantly juxtaposing them with new ways of functioning [?]. However, an attempt to initiate a debate concerns not so much *the visual potential of the site but, first of all, the communities inhabiting this space and their problems.*<sup>03</sup> *There was a time when site-specific art wanted to counteract reification, associating itself with the site, becoming still: at present, wishing to attain the same aim, it favours fluidity.*<sup>04</sup>

What is important? The need to work out a compromise with alterity? A clash of conceptual schemas, fruitful discussion, exchange of experience, dispute and conflict of interests? It is not about declaring identification, or overidentification, with a given site, i.e. a form of involvement and giving up to it... It rather means numerous visits, time spent in this place, examining its structure, history, the mode of functioning, analysing the collection, the gathered relics, texts, archives, getting familiar with the community connected with the site, including the administrative staff and the persons responsible for direct “collaboration” with artists during the creative process. The crucial thing is to perceive the museum as a place where discussions take place – the museum should enable people to reflect both upon themselves and art. And also the society as well as artists. And further:

*(...) We should understand the idea of collecting things in perpetuity as the one which allows for a reinterpretation at any time.*<sup>05</sup>

The works I created within the project, presenting lying randomly and falling off the table saltcellars, have been included in the permanent museum exhibition. Now, the “violation of the order” coexists with the foregoing order. This kind of fracture, even self-questioning, is an extremely interesting example of looking at oneself from a distance, while to me it came as a complete surprise and an unexpected “effect” of my activities.

01. Ługowska, A. (2012) Place of Art - Art of Place. Article, Aesthetics and Critics no 25

02. Franaszek, A. (2016) Folder for the exhibition Salty Bread

03. as above

04. Ługowska, A. (2012) Place of Art - Art of Place. Article, Aesthetics and Critics no 25

05. as above