

## **Ewa Partum**

Born 25.03.1945, Grodzisk Mazowiecki, Poland

*Concrete poetry artist, performance artist, film maker, mail artist and conceptual artist engaged in linguistic activities in an attempt to discover a new artistic language.*

Ewa Partum studied at the State Higher School of Fine Arts in Łódź from 1963 to 1965. She went on to study in the painting department at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw from 1965 to 1970, where earned her diploma through her work in poetry as art.

Since 1969 she has been engaged in linguistic activities in an effort to discover a new artistic language. She has taken part in linguistic actions and installations which have been exhibited both in galleries and outdoors. One example is her meta-poetry, the spilling and spreading of letters through existent or non-existent texts from the history of literature (with some help from the likes of Goethe and Proust). In the early 1970s she produced conceptual installations such as *Legality of Space* (1971) and *Breakfast on the Lawn, after Manet* (1971). The first one appeared in an open space between two houses near Plac Wolności (Freedom Square) in Łódź. There she exhibited numerous boards with prohibition. A number of them were actually various restrictive traffic signs, and others created by the artist bore absurd messages, for example: 'Prohibiting prohibited' or 'permitting prohibited'. Touching on the issues of the authority of signs, Partum commented on the work: "This situation serves only to leave an empty space which should not be filled with any experience or consumption."

In *Breakfast on the Lawn, after Manet* she referenced the universally known painting as a text in the real setting of a park. She restricted that which Manet presented in his painted work to tautology, referring the text to reality.

Since the early 1970s she has been creating *Poems By Ewa*, 'conceptual poetry' in the shape of poetic objects on which she imprints her lips while articulating sounds. The texts combine the imprints of her lips with specific letters, sometimes whole phrases. The first lip imprints (with red lipstick) were made in 1971. One of them was signed with the sentence, 'My touch is the touch of a woman', a conceptual statement about femininity formulated on the linguistic level. Her later *Poems* take both a strongly feminist and a social tone, although this is never stated in a clear or obvious way.

Partum created a number of short films between 1973 and 1974 called *Films by Ewa*, though she gave them one common title: *Tautological Cinema*. Through these films, she analyzed the problem of the automatism of the film medium and the structure of film language as a medium of semantics.

In 1974 Partum staged a performance called *Change 1974* in Łódź, in which, in front of an audience, a make-up artist worked on half of her naked body. At the conclusion of the performance, Partum announced that she herself was a work of art, making her body an element of the feminist discourse. At her 1980 exhibition *Self-identification* in Warsaw's *Mała Gallery*, the artist's nude performance was accompanied by a controversial series of photomontages of her naked figure superimposed on scenes of Warsaw; Partum appeared naked among pedestrians, at a crossroads, next to a policewoman, in a store queue and in front of the presidential palace. The title *Self-identification* defined the work as the search for one's feminine identity.

Partum continued to develop feminist themes in her subsequent work, and in the autumn of 1980 she presented the performance *Women, Marriage Is Against You!* in the *O.N. Gallery* in Poznań. Appearing in a wedding gown and wrapped in transparent foil labelled *For Men*, she proceeded to cut through the foil and the gown itself with scissors while the wedding march played, finally emerging naked before her audience. In her 1981 *Stupid Woman*, Partum parodied the ways in which women try to conform to men's idealized expectations of them. Much of her work was banned by the Polish censors, who also forbade it to be reproduced in catalogues.

During the period of martial law in 1982, she presented her performance *Homage to Solidarity* in the Underground Gallery in Łódź. She stood naked in front of a long stretch of white cardboard on the wall with the caption 'hommage à' and talked about the internal exile of artists caused by the criminalisation of the Solidarity movement. Then she imprinted the letters of the word *Solidarność* one by one with her lips on white paper, scattered flowers on the floor and lit some candles. She repeated her homage in West Berlin at Galerie Wewerka in 1983. Influenced in part by the Fluxus artist Wolf Vorstell and Berlin's feminists, Partum decided to settle in the German capital. In 1984, as part of an art competition on the subject of the Berlin Wall, she created *Ost-West Schatten*, a conceptual installation consisting of photographs taken during a camera action. She stood naked in high-heels one meter away from the wall, holding up a big letter 'O' (for Ost - East) in her left hand and a 'W' in her left. Her shadow wandered over the wall like the hand on a sundial, and it wandered with the passing of time from East to West.

In 1992 *Neue Berliner Kunstverein*, together with the Art Museum in Łódź organised a representative exhibition of Polish avant-garde art 1930-1990 at the Staatlichen Kunsthalle in Berlin. Apart from the late Katarzyna Kobro, only men participated in the exhibition. Ewa Partum appeared at the opening with several assistants and handed out black condolence envelopes with the critical commentary: Polish female avant-garde artists have their great opportunity, yet only once they are corpses.

A wide monograph of Polish artist Ewa Partum's works has been published by the Wyspa Institute of Art. The project is supported among others by the Adam Mickiewicz Institute in Warsaw.

The first major retrospective exhibition of Partum's work was held at *Badischer Kunstverein* in Karlsruhe in 2001 presenting original works, photographs, reconstructions and film documents. In 2006 two major Partum exhibitions were organized in Poland: *The Legality of Space* at the Wyspa Institute of Art in Gdańsk and *Self-identification* in Królikarnia (a branch of the National Museum in Warsaw). For the show in Gdańsk the artist prepared the installation *Poem by Ewa* in the stairwell of the building. Sea waves were projected onto paper letters so that it was as if the visitors were forced to cross a stream of letters. The artist also conducted a new work, *Disasters Daily (2001-2006)*, based on a photographic theme from 11th September 2001 showing the shattered Twin Towers. This subject was transferred onto cushions lying on a sofa in front of a TV set. In this way, Partum stated how reality goes beyond the ability to represent and poses everyday questions about the impact of art. For the needs of the exhibition, a series of works was either reconstructed or produced, including some in the form of lightboxes.

At the second retrospective exhibition in Królikarnia (2006) the artist staged a repetition of her *Active Poetry* action from 1971. In the same year, at the invitation of curator Katherine Wood from Tate Modern Gallery in London, Partum re-enacted the action as *Text Installation* based on an excerpt from Joyce's *Ulysses*, sticking up 6000 white adhesive letters and scattering white cardboard letters all over the space of the Turbine Hall. At the same time and also at the Tate Modern, films from the series poems by Ewa were shown as part of the *Image/Text* film programme. The exhibition at the Tate Modern was a decisive moment in Partum's international career resulting in subsequent invitations to exhibit in the most important art institutions worldwide.

### **Selected group exhibitions:**

W.O.R.K.S., Conceptual Graphics 'Reading of Our World' in Calgary, Canada in 1973; *Prospectiva 74* in Sao Paulo in 1974; International Exhibition of Mail Art '75 in Buenos Aires in 1975; the Film Festival 'Film as Film - Film as Art' in Łódź in 1977; *Quattro* in Milan in 1982; *Contemporary Polish Art* in Berlin in 1984; *Polska 86*, an exhibition of 20th century Polish photography in Boston; *Black-and-White Poland* in Paris in 1990; *Jesteśmy* at

Zachęta National Gallery of Art in Warsaw in 1991; Wack! Art in the Feminist Revolution at MoCA Los Angeles in 2007; European Contemporary Art Biennale Manifesta 7 in Italy in 2008; re.-act. - feminism - performance art of the 1960s and 70s today at the Akademie der Künste in Berlin; REBELLE. Art and feminism 1969-2009 in Museum voor Moderne Kunst in Arnhem; Gender Check. Feminity and masculinity in the art of Eastern Europe in the Museum Moderne Kunst in Vienna in 2009; Promesse du passé in the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 2010; Particolare. Art which arouses disquiet in Venice, Italy in 2011; Intense Proximity, La Triennale at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris in 2012

Partum's works from the series Partytura (Scores) (1984), the collages made of photographs picturing her in naked erotic poses were shown in Aleksander Bruno Gallery in Warsaw in May 2015

The book **Ewa Partum**, edited by Aneta Szyrak and Ewa Małgorzata Tatar, has been co-published by the Wyspa Institute of Art and Revolver Archiv für Aktuelle Kunst in Frankfurt, and distributed in collaboration with Revolver (spring 2007). It includes essays in both Polish and English by Professor Grzegorz Dziamski, Dorota Monkiewicz, Professor Andrzej Turowski, Lukasz Ronduda, Angelika Stepken and Aneta Szyrak. The role of the publication was to bring together a variety of perspectives on the perception and interpretation of Partum's art, to deliver precise information about her output (especially regarding its chronology) and to problematize the specific threads in her art. As Wyspa's curator Szyrak writes:

Sharply innovative, her work has had a clear trajectory leading from the deconstruction of logos to an expansion of her own artistic language as a conceptual and feminist artist. She was the first Polish woman artist to encroach upon public space in the nude, publicly making a value statement about being a female artist, basing her art and its vocabulary on her specific experience as a woman, and connecting her artistic gestures with political statements and a visible presence in the public sphere. She announced that she would perform naked until female artists got equal rights in the field of art. This strong connection between purity of conceptual practice and a clear political statement is grounded upon very authentic intellectual and cultural premises, as is her work – along with such performances as Stupid Woman, Women, Marriage is Against You, Pirouette and Homage to Solidarity. Partum has always treated her body in a very dry, instrumental and modest way, trying neither to abuse nor amuse, leaving one with the sense that she is already far beyond the body-art practice of her times. Her newest work shows a significant shift in her area of interest: a stinging assessment of the economy and politics, as well as institutional critique.

Source Culture.PL, Aneta Szyrak (curator of The Legality of Space. An art critic and curator, she co-founded the Wyspa Institute of Art in Gdańsk and has curated many important exhibitions in Poland and abroad, including Architectures of Gender: Contemporary Women's Art in Poland at the SculptureCenter in New York, 2003)