

**800. Sara Piotrowska, Maciej
Szczęśniak**

curator: Łukasz Białkowski

Documentation (excerpt) submitted for the competition
for the curatorial project for the exhibition
in the Polish Pavilion at the
59th International Art Exhibition in Venice in 2022

THE PROJECT'S CONCEPT

The project will involve placing inside the Polish Pavilion a large-format installation containing photographic documentation of about 800 monuments of John Paul II erected in Poland in the years 1980–2021.

Undoubtedly, the figure of John Paul II is one of the most expressive motifs of the Polish identity imaginary. It is also one of the strongest elements of the worldview debate that has been going on in the Polish media for several decades. This discussion covers a whole range of attitudes: from extremely critical statements that outrage the public opinion, such as the well-known, scandalous article by Jerzy

Urban from 2002 published in "Nie"⁶, to the behavior and statements appearing in the extremely conservative media, which even sacralize the figure of the Polish pope (this phenomenon was pointed out by, for example, Zbigniew Kaźmierczak in his book *Alter Christus* from 2014⁷).

However, in addition to the media narrative, somehow "official", legitimized by the statements of opinion leaders, experts, scientists, prominent politicians and officials of the Catholic Church, another narrative has happened and is still happening: spontaneous, grassroots, vernacular. It was and is taking place far from the big media (at most it intersects with their trajectory). Unexpectedly, its language is the language of art and aesthetics, and it happens using the *fait accompli* method – from time to time another papal monument appears in the Polish landscape. This phenomenon began in 1980, when the first of them appeared. For the next dozen years or so, on average, 3 of them were erected a year, until 1998 (between the pilgrimages of John Paul II to Poland in 1997 and 1999), when 22 new papal monuments appeared in the Polish public space. They were built to a similar intensity until the Pope's death in 2005. As a result, during his lifetime, John Paul II had about 230 monuments in Poland. This phenomenon exploded in 2005–2009, when another 300 were created. It is believed that currently there are around 800 of them in Poland.

Like many mass phenomena, the grassroots initiative of believers and local parish priests somewhere in the provinces was met with laughter and mockery of the mainstream media and – to use a term not entirely precise, but useful due to its capacity – elite. At a time when monuments were showing up at their peak, the term "monumentosis" [pl. pomnikozja] was coined, and the media competed in describing how kitschy, unsuccessful or simply ridiculous papal monuments are⁸. For a skilled

⁶ J. Urban, *Obwoźne sado-maso*, „Nie”, August 2002.

⁷ Z. Kaźmierczak, *Alter Christus. Krytyczna rekonstrukcja światopoglądu Jana Pawła II*, Universitas, Kraków 2014.

⁸ See M. Piasecki, *Polska ma bekę z pomników JP2, i słusznie. Dlaczego papieskie pomniki są takie brzydkie?*, „Noizz”, 24 September 2020 [<https://noizz.pl/opinie/dlaczego-papieskie-pomniki-sa-takie-brzydkie-pomnik-jp2-z-glazem-przed-muzeum/wk43gvk>, access: 15 August 2021].

eye, however, they constitute a rich visual material that can tell more about contemporary Poland, the dreams and identity of its inhabitants than scientific articles or texts by journalists from any world viewpoint. Papal monuments are an interesting knot in which religious, aesthetic and political attitudes intertwine. They also illustrate the economic condition of their founders. The time span of this phenomenon also allows us to observe the evolution of vernacular aesthetics, tastes and aspirations motivating the construction of monuments – the Polish "Milk of Dreams". In other words, these sculptural portraits of John Paul II are also (or perhaps primarily) portraits of Poles themselves. They say more about us than we would often like to admit ourselves. It is enough to have a look.

The project will be carried out in a formula of the research based art. Its originators are Sara Piotrowska and Maciej Szczęśniak, who have been exploring this type of artistic practice for many years. This interdisciplinary approach – combining artistic and scientific perspectives – perfectly resonates with multidimensional problems which papal monuments evoke. The starting point for the project will be the existing scientific research devoted to the subject of "monumentosis", especially by Kazimierz Ożóg, a specialist who researched this phenomenon two decades ago⁹, and the lists of existing monuments created by amateurs fascinated by this phenomenon¹⁰. On this basis, a map of the monuments of John Paul II in Poland will be created, which will serve as a route in the several-month-long process of documenting these objects. The collected photographs, along with descriptions indicating the place, author and year of the building's creation, will be placed in an installation prepared especially for this purpose. It will consist of 11 shelves located in the space of the Polish Pavilion, and their contents - i.e. the collected photographic documentation of the monuments - will be made available to the public.

⁹ See Kazimierz S. Ożóg, *Miedziany Pielgrzym. Pomniki Jana Pawła II*, „Pro Patria” 2002, nr 2, p. 16-17.

¹⁰ See https://web.archive.org/web/20111003125301/http://rilian.republika.pl/text/po_smierci.htm, access: 15 August 2021.

At the basis of the project is also the assumption that, using the research and archiving perspective, it should remain in the space of artistic expression. In other words, do not draw conclusions from the collected archival material and do not make theses, because this is where the role of science begins. Therefore, the project limits its ambitions to prepare a visual database for those who will want to draw some conclusions.

A SUMMARY OF THE SHOW'S SCENARIO

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