

Maja Ruszkowska-Mazerant, *How is a Private Museum Set Up? - An interview with Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański*, MUZEUM 2, Purpose for Europe magazine, no. 42, march 2008

How is a Private Museum Set Up?

MRM. Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański is a Polish-German sculptor. For over 28 years now, he has been living in Germany, and there he is planning to open a private museum. He tells us about his ideas, plans as well as the problems he is dealing with.

"Those who enter Ausbesserungswerk in Hamburg for the first time have an impression that they are in New York, London or Paris. Situated in the industrial ruins included among conserved historical buildings, the art museum was created thanks to the invaluable efforts of the two Hamburg-based artists - Klaus Elle and Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański. Many years ago they discovered this inspiring place and started to redo one of its assembly rooms to make it fit for artistic work and exhibitions. Together – without any financial support from anyone else – they created a gigantic 2-storied art space in the style of 'living art factory' which is of comparable standard to other similar places around the world. Ausbesserungswerk is not a 'lifeless' museum, but a dynamic and creative hotbed where art is conceived, created, exhibited, taught and loved – so, it is vibrant with life. A great win for the culture of Hamburg – a little wonder of Hamburg. " This is how Jens Ullheimer described your initiative - a private museum that no longer exists.

MRM. Why was this extraordinary place closed down?

JWW. The answer to this question is very simple. Unfortunately, nowadays art seems to be doomed to a losing position when juxtaposed with commerciality. Today the ruthless pursuit of profits gives investors who are armed with the most effective weapon, which appears to be money, an almost unrestricted freedom of action. Very frequently bodies established solely to protect cultural heritage, representing the state apparatus, have a shortage of financial resources and can't cover their expenses. And so they're doomed to forced cooperation with investors. Such compromises often result in only partial fulfilment of the requirements set by authorities. For example, an investor preserves only some architectural elements of the facade, redoing the whole building make it serve previously specified and clearly commercial purposes (be it opening another Baumarkt). Similar factors, in 2005, caused Ausbesserungswerk with its 'creative hotbed' to disappear irrevocably, and without a trace, from the cultural map of Hamburg.

MRM. Still, you're planning to open another private museum. Could you tell us more about this project?

JWW. At the end of December 2005, when I was handing over the keys to the assembly room in Ausbesserungswerk (by then completely emptied by me), I instantly decided to undertake creating another exhibition space where my works could be presented. Since at that time I didn't have any ideas or prospects for finding a new place, I had decided that from the beginning of 2005 my works would be sent successively From Hamburg to Poland, where, in the meantime, I had been invited to show my works at a few interesting exhibitions. And so, after my 24-year-long artistic absence in my home country, the first was the exhibition in the Centre of Polish Sculpture in Orońsko, then large individual exhibitions in the Patio Art

Gallery in Łódź, in the Szyb Wilson Art Gallery in Katowice, then in 2006 in the Museum of Contemporary Sculpture in Orońsko, in the BWA Art Gallery in Jelenia Góra, and finally several of my works were presented at the International Sculpture Triennial in Poznań. So, this way, the problem where to store my works got solved for the following 2 years, sort of 'by the way', and so I was just looking for the right place.

Meanwhile, the municipal council in Hamburg-Bergedorf, where I had been living since I had left Poland, offered me a place, among others, which so far had been used as a storehouse by the Bergedorf Museum. I accepted this multi-storied room of circa 400 square metres and rented it. Of course this architecture can't be compared with the previous huge postindustrial assembly room, but its cosiness has many other interesting advantages. So far my artistic budget has made it possible for me to solve the problems concerning electricity, water, sewage system, telephone, windows and some floors. Now is the time to redo another floor. All the work, as much as possible, I try to do on my own. At the beginning of 2007 I managed to open Galerieatelier, which is partly a studio, and partly an art gallery with the permanent exhibition entitled "Holz-Archiv" (Eng. "Wood-Archive"), now encompassing over 70 of my wood exhibits. Unfortunately, many of my works, because of their size and number, are still stored, as it was previously, in the storehouses of the municipal council, thanks to the courtesy of the council. In the meantime, I try everything I can to talk to, persuade and win over politicians, public administration clerks and sponsors for my next project – ultimately creating, right here, in this place, a private museum.

MRM. But how to avoid the same problems that occurred in the case of Ausbesserungswerk?

JWW. I think these two cases shouldn't be compared with each other, even for the simple reason that the Ausbesserungswerk assembly room was merely one of the many parts of the previously large building complex belonging to the former rolling stock repair company that supplied the whole northern part of Germany. The mechanism of adapting that kind of buildings is governed by totally different economic laws. Investments made there must pay off and guarantee continuous profits. So only those things are built which are bound to be profitable. Generally, investors don't feel like doing additional "playing with art". By contrast, the place in Bergedorf, where I opened my Galerieatelier, is situated in the area that have been excluded from further urban development. Nevertheless, it is the property of the municipality, and I only rent it. Of course, there's always the purchase option, but, regrettably, right now it is beyond my reach.

It seems to me that I have 2 options at the moment. The first one is to win over sponsors who would possibly be willing to provide the money for the purchase of the place. The second one – which appears to make more sense – is to negotiate with the city authorities for the building to be handed over in order to be turned into the Holz-Archiv Museum. In this case, the public administration clerks and politicians need to be persuaded that this is the right thing to do and that there'll be benefits to the community from opening a cultural centre of that kind in this region. My contribution encompasses over 150 wood exhibits, some large in size, as well as all adaptation work done in the building so far. Either way, however, the case is very complicated because nowadays sponsors prefer to invest in sports, whereas the the municipality safes are empty. Still, I'm optimistic that my next discussions with other politicians, many of whom do not treat art merely as another tool to win the next elections, will bring about the expected results and beneficial decisions.

MRM. And what does your cooperation with public administration clerks look like? Do they understand artists' needs?

JWW. In my view, there's probably only one answer to such a question: public administration clerks are the same everywhere. This doesn't depend on a country or city. So, cooperation with the clerks from Hamburg-Bergedorf is most likely neither better nor worse than anywhere else – it's within the scope of normality. Frequently, they are people aware of the fact that any initiative supporting art is simply positive and should be supported. A problem crops up when, for example, an application for a house number appears on a desk in a given public administration office, which seems to be something most obvious and easiest to handle. I'm giving this example, because it's similar to the situation with my present Galerieatelier. The building which was rented out to me for a particular purpose and with a guarantee that it'd have a number assigned, suddenly, after a thorough examination of the case and applicable regulations by a clerk, proved impossible to qualify as either a residential building or an outbuilding (unfortunately, only in those 2 cases regulations allow a house number to be assigned). Besides, it also turned out that the building, earlier rented out to me by a different public administration office, was situated in an environmentally protected area, which was an additional argument against assigning the house number.

However, very frequently, other clerks help out with cases which are in their seriousness incomparable to the example I've given. They find appropriate gaps in the law that allow a beneficial interpretation of regulations, which very often are simply unfeasible. The truth is that a little bit of good will suffices to find a way out of a situation, even if this way out might be precedential. What seems typical is that the lower the clerk's rank, the bigger problem our application becomes. Finally, on a more optimistic note, I want to add that in the process of setting up my Galerieatelier with its permanent exhibition, I was always getting a lot of support from the Mayor of Bergedorf and many other responsible clerks from that city hall and none of my requests were ever declined. These people truly understand artists' needs and they support, to the extent they can, any activity meant to implement new artistic concepts in the city.

MRM. Isn't your museum perceived as a private initiative? And can the municipality get involved in such projects?

So far, as I mentioned earlier, only Galerieatelier was created with its permanent exhibition. So it's too early to discuss this problem in terms of private initiative and pose questions about the chances of the municipality getting involved in that sort of project. For the time being the building remains the property of the municipality, and I, as an artist, merely rent it. That's what the situation looks like today. Instantly, a question comes to mind whether there's any point in creating a museum like that. To some extent what I've done so far could be perceived, in a way, as a private investment. Ultimately the museum itself is still only a plan.

The thing is to reach an agreement whether, and to what extent, the municipality would be interested in such an institution to be created and whether it would be willing to participate, at least partially, in this project, by donating its building for that purpose. In the case when a scheme or an option entailing bilateral contribution in the project was worked out, the question of private enterprise would disappear, which thus would give the municipality more opportunities to get involved in the project.

MRM. And do your family get involved in the museum project?

JWW. As it's usually the case with similar ideas - on the one hand, belonging to the sphere of dreams, on the other, demanding hard work and sacrifice of one's health, free time as well as money surplus – my wife's part often boils down to consistently bringing me back down to earth. Of course, this doesn't mean that she disapproves of my doings. Also, my sons fully accept my project.

MRM. Have you ever considered returning to Poland and establishing your museum here?

JWW. I have to admit this has been on my mind for a long time. Making a decision like that seems difficult to me at the moment, especially that I've been living outside my home country for over 28 years – plus one shouldn't forget that, in the meantime, everything completely changed there. Since we're talking about this, I'd like to mention one thing that happened when I had my exhibition in Łódź in 2005. One of the local businessmen suggested we could organize a large permanent exhibition of my works in one of the old assembly rooms that he owned. I really liked the place and decided to accept the offer. Unfortunately, after some time, I heard that the owner used the place for a different purpose, and so the idea, spontaneously suggested, perished irrevocably with the speed of a falling meteor.

Of course, if there was a person, alternatively a town or district, that would be really interested in creating a museum for my collection of wood exhibits, and, for that purpose, would offer and adapt an architecturally interesting building – certainly, I'd seriously consider such an opportunity. Yet, for the time being, I'm still going to work here, in Hamburg-Bergedorf, to successfully realize my goal – the idea for "Holz-Archiv" museum.

MRM. HOW IS A PRIVATE MUSEUM SET UP?

JWW. In a few stages which encompass the following:

1. Cataloguing and preparing the set of artworks, to be the basis for the future museum collection.
2. Working out an action plan, the way to have regular exhibitions, potential marketing methods.
3. Preparing the material justifying the creation of such a museum and gaining the support of politicians, local authorities and enthusiasts.
4. Finding an appropriate place.
5. Establishing a foundation for the museum, appointing the board of trustees.
6. Finding a sponsor/sponsors.
7. Additionally raising money for a potential purchase of a building, its ultimate adaptation, or working out another way of gaining exhibition space.
8. Raising a capital allowing to finance the future activities of the museum.
9. Preparing all necessary contracts in accordance with all legal requirements.
10. Getting all the necessary, legally-required permits allowing an entity to be a public institution.
11. Finding an art historian to be responsible for the artistic activity and to manage the museum.

Maja Ruszkowska-Mazerant