

Ethnography, Art and a Societal Road to Nowhere: The Tear Dealer Project

Tomasz Rakowski

University of Warsaw

Introduction

In this article I present an ethnographic description of the Tear Dealer socially engaged art project¹ conducted by Alicja Rogalska and Łukasz Surowiec, in the town of Lublin, Southeast Poland, in an urban area with high unemployment, full of pawnshops, and loan sharks. The main purpose of this paper is to interpret the project using an ethnographic approach and the experimental technique of “thick description” as related to quite artificial, and intentionally manufactured social reality. The important context is that socially-engaged art, even at present, first of all functions through conforming to the effects of the reality of action in order to generate palpable social change, even though in recent years a widespread critique of its practices, ideas, and also ideals has appeared (see Bishop 2012). This was the case in the work of Polish artist Artur Żmijewski, the controversial curator of the Berlin Biennale in 2012. In his manifesto, Żmijewski (2012, see also Żmijewski 2007) clearly says that art can demand for itself, much like the social sciences and journalism, the role of refurbishing minds, creating new conditions of social life, reaching toward what is efficient. In this way, art can be transposed into wholly new terrains, into places that offer very little safety for it, places not protected by the prestige of an art gallery or official artist institutions, and then art will be also harnessed so as to act directly on people—with all the risks such gestures entail.

¹ The project was curated and commissioned by “The Studio of Socially Engaged Art <<The Districts>> [Rewiry - TR],” a part of the municipal culture centre in the town of Lublin, Southeast Poland.



This change in emphasis is stimulated by a broad understanding of art that grew out of the various traditions of *collaborative art* (Frąckowiak, Olszewski, Rosińska 2011; see also Bishop 2012, Kester 2011) and out of the various movements within *community arts* (Crehan 2012; de Bruyne, Gielen 2011). Socially-engaged contemporary art, *collaborative art*, and the adoption of the tools of the arts in *community arts*, have in different ways strived to bring about social change: the starting point of the activities themselves is only the beginning. However, a parallel phenomenon is that for the last two decades anthropologists (and the social scientists in general) have also significantly moved away from the position of disinterested observers of events. These disciplines now absorb, with increasing intensity, the tools of the arts and in this way build up a knowledge that is both socially engaged and mutually created (Wright, Schneider 2006; 2010; Leavy 2009, Pussetti 2018). In addition, this has led to a situation where the artist and the ethnographer who work together in, for example, the new paradigm of collaboration, establish something like ‘refunctioning ethnography’ (Holmes, Marcus 2005, 2008), which means that they do not merely meet and register the layers of a closed or intimate cultural experience, but instead increasingly open up to strong and advanced interpretations flowing equally from the people and public with whom they cooperate.

In that context, I would like to present a quite unique project, the “Tear Dealer,” by Alicja Rogalska and Łukasz Surowiec, which took place in Lublin, east Poland, in July 2014; this text will present a particular ethnographic view of this project. This action was held within the larger artistic enterprise, conducted in Lublin since 2012, and called The Studio of Socially Engaged Art “The Districts”, where artistic works were realised in co-operation with the inhabitants of the neglected and underdeveloped parts of the town (see *The Studio of Socially... 2012*). Originally, the project “The Tear Dealer” was located in an urban area of Lublin, southeast Poland, with high unemployment, full of pawnshops, and loan sharks, and was designed with the aim of discovering what would happen when people were offered money in exchange for their tears. According to the project description, people took their tears there to sell them, as if they were selling some precious treasures in a pawn shop or a gold dealer’s. The artists intended the project as a real, professional reality that provides employment, creates “some kind of a business” and pretends to be something typical and routine, such as a bank, a barber shop, or a beauty parlour. Indeed, it was treated by customers just like venues in the neighbourhood, like the mobile phone repair-point or pizzeria.

At the same time, the artists compared their venue to a waiting room, a chapel, and a para-religious space, where the social “Bitter Cry” can be bought. They created something that escapes definitions, a “shifted” space (they described it as a “mirage”). Tear Dealer was cheating – it was paying for something unreal and unbelievable with entirely real money. Still, the situation demanded completion and thus forced participants to enter the improbable and to face their emotions: the lamentations, memories and even jokes that occurred there were also very much real. Thus, the project simultaneously encroached upon the world of collaborative art experiments and the field marked out between ethnography and art. But here, on the crossroads between artistic action and ethnographic insight, the problem remains the same: it is that in this situation, all activities (both “action through art” and ethnographic engagement) can be unconsciously taken as a form of the process of “mobilizing culture,” preparation for “improvement” or even as a certain kind of cultural colonization. This is frequently connected to the fact that such activities lead not so much to any kind of “positive” or “critical” work, but rather into a “double colonization,” as posited by Leela Gandhi (1998)—the “recipients” of such projects are fitted into roles of stereotypical, incomplete, and very often economically and socially impoverished characters.

How then is it possible to act through art in the face of all these burdens? Is it at all possible to use art and introduce its elements into one’s life and the lives of others without

simultaneously erecting a position of colonization at some juncture? As Hal Foster (1996) asked, is reaching for experiences that are someone else's, that is, of the Other, the peripheral, not a necessary move of the avant-garde artist, who becomes something of an ethnographer? In this text, I strive to present the ways in which it is possible to act in such a situation as well as how the ethnographic is revealed and expressed in the action-oriented art experiment. Thus, the methodological opening of an art-based ethnography is aimed here, which means unfolding the processes that create the expanded field of both art and ethnography, at the same point, transgressing disciplinary limitations (see Pussetti 2018). The experimental form of "thick description" comes here to the fore, based on fieldwork I conducted along with the subsequent projects of "The District" Studio. I took on the ethnographic work, based on sharing time with all the parties engaged in the project, the artists and their collaborators, the people coming to the place, the inhabitants, or better to say, the users of the street where the Tear Dealer was anchored. Thus, over the research I combined anthropological interviews with living and spending time together with the team, and the local inhabitants, and the *users* of the street and the neighbourhood of the Tear Dealer, in order to explore the social and cultural experiences that emerged at the crossroads between worlds of art experiment, ethnography and everyday life. In this sense the research resulted in a new, and prototypical fieldwork, crafted to unlock the emergent epistemic field what meant in this case pursuing the experimental collaboration through taking part in the artistic and social platform that may be considered as a kind of ethnographic device (see Estalella, Sánchez Criado 2018; see also Sansi 2013), not only researching detecting but also "co-producing" the analysed social forms. At the same I am trying to develop a new language for describing the meeting of various sides involved in the action, in order to reveal the hidden dynamic of the project, and the unique new logic of posing "appropriate questions" embedded in the action, and thus leading to new knowledge-formation.

Scandal

It took the artists over a fortnight to set up the site for the Tear Dealer. They searched for the right venue using Google Street View, browsing through urban facades, old tenement houses, streets and crossroads. After an appropriate place had been found and accepted, they had laser-cut foam letters made in one of the businesses in Lublin and placed them on the freshly painted front wall. The inscription, accompanied by tear-shaped symbols, read: "TEAR DEALER." Inside, they created a spacious and modern interior, with mirrored walls and halogen lights. The refurbishment took many days and the overall effect is reminiscent of

a reception room in a spa or a beauty salon, and also a bit like a bank, or rather - a shadow bank. The windows, just like in a proper bond or gold dealership, advertise, “100 PLN for 3 ml of your tears*” (there is a caveat: “only cried on-site”). So we find ourselves in a business that buys, trades, sets up conditions: you can only cry on-site. The participants reported for example, that they would refrain from going outside, despite the July heat, because – as they were informed – there were cameras everywhere. “And outside,” they said, “you cannot cry. You could cheat.”



Suprisingly , Tear Dealer was treated like any new business, be it an exchange office, a mobile phone dealer or a pizzeria. The artists received multiple offers for flyers and advertising trailers that would promote the new venture throughout Lublin. Immediately after opening, they got a courier-delivered advertising package (the label read “Tear Dealer” and was addressed to 1 Maja St., Lublin). Alicja and Łukasz considered promoting their undertaking, so they made a video, something like a “TV ad”, and designed a flyer (one of the neighbouring businesses offered to distribute these, as did many other services in Lublin). But most importantly, people arrived from day one – only a few at first, but soon, they queued out the door, and the next morning, before the shop even opened, they are waiting. Hour after hour, the budget for buying tears was running out – Tear Dealer was supposed to last eight

days, but it only took four to drain the funds. The media caught on quickly, and every day there were more journalists from both local and nationwide papers, television and radio stations. The artists were exhausted with what was happening, with working with people (“I hope nobody gets hurt.”) as well as with endless interviews.

Tear Dealer stirred emotions. Its presence was soon known to almost everyone in town – as it turned out in fact neither flyers nor ads were needed. Lublin people knew about it – for example, when I got off the train on a summer afternoon, entered 1 Maja Street and asked a random person for directions to the Tear Dealer, a 20-something woman immediately pointed: “oh, the Tear Dealer, it's not far from here, go straight there and you'll see it on the right hand side...” Local newspapers featured the project immediately and it became a sensation that is hard to believe. For many, the fact that somebody is buying tears was entirely unthinkable. When the people arrived, they first wanted to make sure it was real and that you can, in fact, cry here for money. They showed up at the dealership even couple of days after closing. “Is it here?” they asked, as I sat in the closed shop. “Is it true? We've come from Kraśnik, I'm such a wailer, that's just how I am. My husband drove me here today, and I found out about it on the internet. I wanted to check it out.” “I arrived today, I think someone found it on the internet. I wanted to see if it's real... it's enough for me to see a video about eye make-up, and something happens to me, tears... I'll start crying. So I thought: “I'm not leaving without a hundred.” “I'm thinking cigarette smoke, incense, onions...” Even days after closing people still arrived. Everyone I met did a double take upon discovering Tear Dealer, to make sure it existed.



Tear Dealer pretended to be something typical and routine: a bank, a barber shop, a beauty parlour, “a new business” that is socially acceptable and possible to imagine. But it also got under people’s skin. Why would anyone buy tears? Many search for an answer, but many assumed that it is possible to find the real purpose: “to make cosmetics”; “I heard they make artificial tears with it.” But there was also a deeper problem. If it was not a new commercial franchise but an art performance, people started to wonder where the money to buy tears comes from. Who paid for it? The unease built gradually. Some of the press saw it as a “waste” or “mismanagement” of public funds. The project’s budget was discussed in the media, but different costs appeared in different sources, sometimes significantly incorrect. Some scandalized journalists wrote about tens of thousands of złoty instead of just couple of thousand, probably misled by the whole yearly budget of the “Rewiry” (The Studio of Socially Engaged Art “The Districts” [Rewiry - TR]), the organisation which commissioned the project. One could wonder though, why would they write about finances at all? “Why do people only ask about the guts of this project?” the irritated artists were repeatedly asking, when I was staying with them, in a rented flat in Lublin. “They ask what the rent on the shop was, how much we paid for the tears, what the budget was. Why doesn’t anybody ask about the meaning of all this, about why we do it?” At the time, someone wrote a complaint to a

local public health office. The inspection started the very same day. Every room was checked thoroughly and an almost three page report was produced, but in the end, Tear Dealer was allowed to operate. Key factors included in the report were that the tears were not being sold and that they were intended for exhibition.

Art

Undefined actions, such as those often undertaken in modern art, incite aggression. When a fire broke out in London's Momart, destroying most of the collection, papers and tabloids were quick to pronounce that “it's for the best,” that the pound sterling value of the works is “a joke” and “a mockery,” and that proper, hard-working society does not need such a luxury (Crehan 2012:11). To some extent, Tear Dealer evoked similar feelings, at least in tens and hundreds of comments put in the web in response to the mentions about the project in the local (and also in national) press. The other part of the problem is that such actions – modern, socially engaged, relational – propose a certain vagueness; they only seemingly mimic reality in their “excessive” execution. Sometimes, trivial activities, such as climbing trees (Cecylia Malik), peeling potatoes (Julita Wójcik) or perusing a deck chair (Elżbieta Jabłońska), gain a different, intense meaning and become disturbing. They appear devious and forged; they can easily form a strong impression of falsehood, fraud, and wastefulness. At the same time, though, Tear Dealer, as the artists intended, was real, professional, it provided “a moment employment”, for the people that came, created “some kind of a business.” After a while, the participants were the ones creating it no less actively than the artists; they filled the business with their presence and their action, they got accustomed to it, making it somehow natural, as any other business or service point in the nearby area. They calculate the amount of money they could get for a given volume of tears, competed to cry as much as possible, shared tips and tricks – rubbing onions, using camphor oil or nasal sticks, blowing into each others' eyes. Kids from the tower blocks in the nearby Bronowice district pulled on their neck hairs and cried on cue. Everyone wanted to show me that they could do it, that it is entirely possible to collect the tears.



But Tear Dealer was still improbable. People I talked to always started with how they needed to make sure, to see with their own eyes that it was true. They were in disbelief. The workers from neighbouring offices and shops also had a problem trusting their own eyes (“What’s that? Do I smell onions? Onions, here? So I go out and – my God, people are cutting onions, just standing there and crying...”). The dealership was therefore – as the creators intended – “a bit shifted”, something that was related to the real economic experience, but at the same time something that was in fact a fake business. It both was and was not a business, it was and was not a freshly refurbished shop. People sold something in there, but at the same time they sold nothing; they took up employment (“the pay is good, I’m satisfied”; “It pays three times better than construction companies.”) and did not work (“That’s no work, just a couple of tears.”). It was professionally forged, but only pretending to be real.

Unbelievable

From the beginning, the Tear Dealer project was aimed at creating something escaping definitions. The action was supposed to make no sense, but at the same time to be something very real, rooted in emotion, physiological – and as such, making perfect sense. “We do not want to cheat,” they said. “We do not want to sell a mirage or a service, we do not want anything with an agenda, ideals or values, be it religious, spiritual or just market value. Ideals

and desires are being sold to people in shops, malls, galleries and churches. We want what is real and purposeless. What belongs to the people [their private, intimate affects – TR] – to give it back to them.” Tear Dealer was therefore engaged in a fight for relations that were only about to develop; it fought for artistic actions (Indo-European *ar means action or synchronized action) that – as Nicolas Bourriaud (2002) has shown – are formed by relations, and that only exist when there is someone to participate in them. This is the kind of art that – as Liam Gillick (2000; see also Bourriaud 2002) wrote, “is like the light in the fridge: it only works when there are people there to open the door”. But what opening of the door occurred in Tear Dealer? What did people do there? According to the project description and to Alicja and Łukasz, the people were taking their tears there to sell them as if they were selling some precious treasures in a pawn shop or a gold dealer's. Such venues are plentiful in the neighbourhood and one can see them immediately after leaving the station. 1 Maja Street is full of old tenement buildings with hidden courtyards and outbuildings that are home to those offices where one can buy insurance for their family in case they suddenly die or fall sick, or where flats are pawned for a monthly pension. It's a place of an increased turnover, as the artists were fully aware of², emotions – both precious and painful – are being traded together with used mobile phones, “no-licence” guns, tobacco, e-liquids, e-cigarettes and – reportedly – designer drugs, too.

² That was their initial recognition, based on a short social research they carried out, which triggered in the end the whole idea of the action.



There was commotion in the dealership during the project. People would laugh and joke, couples looked into each others' eyes, some listened to music or called their long lost loves. Everyone tried to invent the dealership for themselves, find a way to make it their own. The Tear Dealer was improbable, and as such had to be continuously upheld by action. But there was more to it, as my interviews with the participants have shown. A young man I talked to wanted to challenge himself, show that he was able to “reach for the gold” in the Tear Dealer; he was a strong man, living in a village near Lublin, who used to work as a guard and at a construction site. “If,” he said “I don't have to hide from anyone in my village, then I can manage in Lublin, too.” After a while it turned out his family had left its problems in the village and now they rent a flat on 1 Maja Street; he, a twenty year old, is actually a breadwinner who takes care of his younger siblings. He fixed the apartment and is now trying to pursue an IT career. A young woman was also trying to support her husband and kids with her intern job at a candy factory. She got hired through a local public employment service. For a long time she carried her tears within. “I needed to get it all out. I think I cried it all out the first time.” A student at Maria Curie-Skłodowska University says she was crying for herself, the music on her headphones and a nice spot by the window helping her isolate herself from the world and the chatter. “It's a difficult moment in my life,” she said. “I cry

every night because of what I've done... Lately, I've spent time with my friends a lot, so I didn't have any opportunity to cry. I thought I could cry here undisturbed. That it's for me. And I can earn money to pay for retaking an exam at the Uni." People took their problems into the Dealer just to be on their own. At the same time, the interviews exposed everyday life of this concrete part of Lublin: the cheap flats on the way to the station, housing new tenants every week.

Language stretching

The several days during which Tear Dealer operated were enough to leave the creators with a substantial collection of tears. They were later gathered into a glass beaker. The artists thought about what to do with the tears for a long time (A local archive? A museum? Parliament? Any other state's institution?). They compared their venue to a waiting room, a chapel, a parareligious space, and, as they were saying, to "a place where the social <<Bitter Cry>> is to be bought". Tears, they said, make us unsure about how to behave, they make social forms disintegrate, and a weird kind of a community forms, bearing witness to the crying. They created something that escapes definitions, a "shifted" space (they described it as a "mirage", something enchanting, and only pretending to be real). Tear Dealer was cheating – it was paying for something unreal and unbelievable with entirely real money. The lamentations, memories and even jokes were therefore also very much real. Still, the situation was created in a way that was forcing one in a search of even a provisional explanation or justification for the place and the action, forcing one to enter the improbable, and to enter one's own deposits of emotions, when starting to cry. An experience like this makes for a long interview afterwards, long and very dense, as it pertains to something that both, I, as an anthropologist, and my interlocutors were not used to; it was not entirely possible to grasp and express the experience we have been talking about. During our talks, everyone, that means also the researcher, had to give this feeling a name, which constituted a new experience and, in a way, through this struggle of finding appropriate expression, evoked the ability to partly re-create ourselves anew. Nigel Rapport (2010) has written about this extensively, as did Andrzej Turowski in his essay about "particular art" (Turowski 2012). My talks were a mix of the biographical and the social; the criers' biographical perspective (individual action) and the perspective of social tensions (jobs, migrations, renting a flat, providing for a family). I was not trying to "discover" an individual perspective nor the very existence of individuals; it was rather about making the individual and his or her experiences, that were entangled in the project, an intermediary for common thinking about something as abstract and concretely

It made people do something that they might otherwise never have done before they could realize it – they cashed in on their emotional time and on a moment of at least momentary transformation of the self. This path, a kind of provoked (but also pretended or performed) emotional journey, was full of focus, but at the same time, it had no purpose, it led to nowhere; one might say it was a path no one was ever ready for. Curiously, people cried enthusiastically, treating this situation also as challenging, sometimes funny, or just - requiring concentration. In certain moments the atmosphere in the Tear Dealer was also familiar, even a bit entertaining. Notwithstanding, during interviews, their situation was revealed to be rather serious. Cashing in on their tears opened them up to talk about what was important, thanks to the fact that the whole process was so undefined and impossible to express with common sayings.

“I would like,” Łukasz Surowiec told me, “for the people to find themselves in a situation where the purpose of their action is neither ready nor specified. Many would probably say that people are not prepared for such experience, that they would not understand it. I believe that as people we are never prepared enough. That everyone is allowed to enter such situation. That it is an act of courage, in which we have to figure out our goals ourselves.” Tear Dealer was a special invitation, in a sense, that effectively made it impossible to clearly label what happened here in regard to people's lives. Although it created a difficult, even critical situation (not to say a deceitful one), it also opened up a path no one expected to find, a path one was forced to take. As a set of “appropriate” questions, it was also pure, because in any given moment it efficiently removed, at least for a while, everything that was safely real, what was common and what was possible to deal with even using the most mundane experiences.

*This article is based on the research project *The Challenges of Creative Ethnography* granted by the Polish National Science Centre, no. 2012/05/D/HS2/03639.

* Photos by Filip Chrobak and Tomasz Rakowski

References:

Bishop, C. 2012. *Artificial Hells. Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. London:Verso.

Bourriard, N. 2002. *Relational Aesthetics*, Dijon.

- de Bruyne, P. and Gielen, P. (eds.). 2011. *Community Art: the Politics of Trespassing*. Amsterdam: Valiz.
- Crehan, K. 2012. *Community Art. An Anthropological Perspective*. Oxford.
- Estalella A., Sanches Criado T. (eds) 2018. *Experimental Collaborations. Introduction*. w: *Experimental Collaborations. Ethnography Through Fieldwork Devices*, Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Foster, H. 1996, *Artist as Ethnographer* in: H. Foster, *The Return of The Real. The Avant Garde At the End of the Century*, Cambridge and London.
- Frąckowiak, M., Olszewski L., Rosińska M. (eds) 2011. *Collaboratory. On Participatory Social Change*, Poznań.
- Gandhi L. 1998. *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*. New York.
- Gillick, L. 2000. *Renovation filter: Recent, Past and Near Future*, exhibition catalogue, Bristol.
- Green, Ch. 2001. *The Third Hand. Collaboration in Art from Conceptualism to Postmodernism*, Minneapolis.
- Holmes D. and Marcus G. 2005. "Refunctioning Ethnography. The Challenge of an Anthropology of the Contemporary." In N. K. Denzin, Y. S. Lincoln (eds.) *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Thousand Oaks: Sage Publication.
- Holmes, D., Marcus, G. 2008. *Collaboration Today and the Reimagination of Classic Scene of Fieldwork Encounters*, "Collaborative Anthropologies", 1.
- Kester, G. 2011. *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Leavy P., 2009, *Method Meets Art. Arts-Based Research Practice*, New York.
- Rapport, N. 2010. *Apprehending Anyone: the non-indexical, post-cultural and cosmopolitan human actor*, "Journal of Royal Anthropological Institute", 1.
- Pusetti, Ch. (ed.) 2018, *Art-Based Ethnography. Experimental Practices of Fieldwork*, Special Issue of "Visual Ethnography", 1.
- Sansi R. 2013 *Anthropology, Art and the Gift*, Oxford: Bloomsbury.
- The Studio of Socially...* . 2012. The Studio of Socially Engaged Art "The Districts", [<http://www.rewiry.lublin.pl/#pg=3379845295202168136&ver=en>, accessed 12.09.2018].
- Turowski, A. 2012. *Art that Sparks Unrest. The Artistic-Political Manifesto of Particular Art*, Warszawa.

Wright, Ch., Schneider, A., 2010. *Between Art and Anthropology. Contemporary Ethnographic Practice*, Oxford.

Wright, Ch., Schneider, A. 2006. *Contemporary Art and Anthropology*, Oxford.

Żmijewski A. 2012. *Forget Fear.*, in J. Warsza and A. Żmijewski (eds) *Forget Fear*. The Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art, Berlin.

Żmijewski A. 2007. *Stosowane sztuki społeczne/ Applied Social Art*, „Krytyka Polityczna”, 11-12.