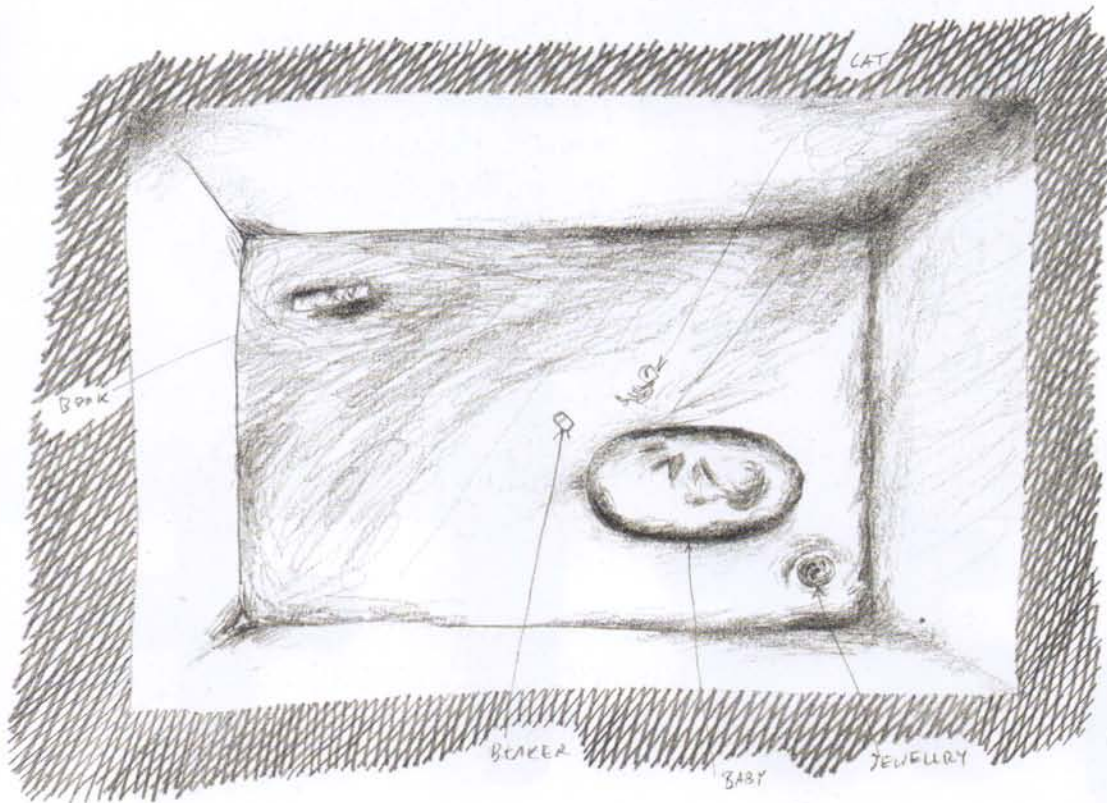


# Books



David Crowley

## Two recent publications examine conflict and collaboration in public art projects

**Joanna Rajkowska**  
*Where the Beast Is Buried*  
Zero Books, 2013

**Tom Finkelpearl, ed.**  
*What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation*  
Duke University Press, 2013

Recently, a work of art returned to Warsaw after spending almost two years in an anonymous storage centre in Peterborough, a small city in the UK. Joanna Rajkowska's *The Peterborough Child* (2012) was commissioned by the city council and the Royal Society for the Encouragement of the Arts, Manufacture and Commerce as part of their joint 'Arts and Social Change' scheme, a programme with

the aim of 'creating new connections between people and where they live in order to strengthen participation in community life'. This sounds like the mantra of many public art projects across Britain during the last decade. Rajkowska's proposed art work for Peterborough presented itself as a burial pit containing the skeleton of girl who had died 3,500 years earlier, alongside a beaker, the skull of a fawn and other grave goods. These were fabricated in Germany and Poland for installation in one of the city parks in what was meant to look like an archaeological dig. Nearby, an information plaque would identify *The Peterborough Child* as the progeny of a mother from Eastern Europe. Her child's death was to have been the result of a rare

eye cancer. Rajkowska also proposed highly individual viewings of the installation. Parents of ill children or of those who had died were to be invited to meet the artist at the site or to supply photographs, clothes or written testimonies which would demonstrate 'the never-ending care of children' even after death. On the eve of the installation, Rajkowska was invited to describe the project to community groups in the area. The meeting exploded with discontent. The council and the Royal Society pulled back from the project: fearful, it seems, of the unpredictable wave of anger that was stirring.

The unfinished history of *The Peterborough Child* is one of a number of episodes that Rajkowska recounts in her new book, *Where the*

*Beast Is Buried*. Each chapter charts the origins and fate of her public art works in Germany, Palestine, Poland (her birthplace), Sweden, Turkey and the UK (where she lives today). Other sections take the form of interviews with the artist. Strikingly, the book recounts more failures than successes, at least when completed schemes are tallied up. A two-year project to dress a historic factory chimney in Poznań, Poland, as a minaret from the Great Mosque of Jenin on the West Bank failed in 2011 after an often-rancorous public discussion that drew in the local Muslim community, the Historic Conservation Office, the city authorities, school children, right-wing commentators, academics and architects working on a nearby regeneration scheme. With Rajkowska's

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project killed off by bureaucratic indecision, supporters of the scheme arranged a funeral procession for it, *The March Backwards*, which led from the cathedral in Poznań to the city's former synagogue. Walking backwards and stumbling as they looked up at the church's twin spires, the marchers were making a comment about progress. After all, Poland was once a multiconfessional state.

Rajkowska has an intuitive knack for public art proposals that attract both deep enthusiasm and splenetic opposition. In fact, her schemes are far less important as modes of representation than for their capacity to spawn what Bruno Latour would call acts of representation by others. Welcoming the minaret project, Essikh Mohamed Saleh, president of the Muslim League in Poznań, said: 'We do a lot of things in Poland, but we still remain invisible,' whilst local architects revealed their thin-lipped ethnocentrism by declaring the project as being 'culturally alien'. *Where the Beast Is Buried* does not so much record Rajkowska's projects as the responses to them. Commissioning bodies – which espouse an inclusive rhetoric about cultural dialogue or social participation – turn out to be paralyzed by a fear of unpredictable exchanges. And often, it seems, the final decision about whether or not to make a work of public art does not rest with the agencies supposedly charged with this role.

Is Rajkowska settling old scores? Maybe, but *Where the Beast Is Buried* is far more interesting (and readable) than that. The artist offers an extraordinary, often

painfully intimate description of her experiences. It becomes clear that *The Peterborough Child* was an attempt to come to terms with the terrible fact that her own baby daughter, Rosa, was diagnosed with a rare form of eye cancer, bilateral retinoblastoma, in 2012. Elsewhere, the reader follows Rajkowska's response to the death of her mother after enduring Alzheimer's disease. Rajkowska decides to become her own mother, by enacting her escape from hospital. 'I had the impression that my mother had filled me, that she had entered all my orifices, that I was defenceless against her and her fear.' The effort seems to lead to her own breakdown. These often-disconcerting autobiographical passages – interwoven throughout the histories of her schemes – make it clear that this unusual book takes the form of a testimony and, as such, its claims to truth lie not in objective facts but in the closeness of the author to the events described. These are public acts: testimonies have to be voiced or written for others.

Tom Finkelpearl's book, *What We Made*, also employs testimony. It features 15 interviews and conversations, dating from between 2004 and 2011, with artists, critics and people involved in various kinds of participatory art and architecture – hence the pronoun in the book's title. They reflect on the motivations for, and effects of, making different works of participatory art since the 1990s, in America and in the country's long shadow. Finkelpearl has a close relationship to the subject having worked in New York as the Executive Director of the Queens Museum of Art since 2002 and, before that, as a curator at MoMA PS1.

The book behaves like its subject: each chapter is a conversation. Finkelpearl interviews some conspicuous names, including the art historian Grant Kester – whose *Conversation Pieces. Community and Communication in Modern Art* (2004) is a key book on the subject – and the artist Tania Bruguera. Unsurprisingly, most of his interviewees are advocates for collaboration, albeit not uncritical ones. Sometimes Finkelpearl leaves the talking to others: artist Wendy Ewald converses with social scientist Sondra Farganis about *Arabic Alphabet*, an installation that she made with Arabic-speaking kids from nearby Jackson Heights for her 2003 retrospective at the Queens Museum. Finkelpearl calls on participants, too. He interviews Jay Dykeman, the owner of Jay's Quick Gas in Portland, Oregon, who dreamt of filming a version of James Joyce's 1922 novel *Ulysses* on his garage premises. Dykeman's vision was realized – brilliantly, and in a bespoke fashion – by the artist Harrell Fletcher in the film *Blot Out the Sun* (2002). Mechanics and customers performed for Fletcher's camera and the resulting footage was screened on the forecourt. There is clear merit in Finkelpearl's approach. If we want to judge the claims made by the champions of social cooperation in the arts – those who've embraced Joseph Beuys's 1974 proclamation that 'every living being is an artist' – then it is important not only to record the experience of curators and artists, but also non-professionals who are swept up into participatory art schemes, too. Dykeman might be a living illustration of Beuys's vision, but, almost ten years later, he does not recognize himself as an artist. That remains Fletcher's domain.

Some of the conversations in *What We Made* were conducted almost a decade ago (before talk of 'nightmares' or 'artificial hells' by writers like Claire Bishop, herself an interviewee, questioned our readings of much participatory art).

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Joanna Rajkowska  
*The Peterborough Child*, 2012,  
preparatory drawing

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Mark Dion and the  
Chicago Urban Ecology Action Group  
in Belize, 1992–93

Occasionally, the time lag tells (and Finkelpearl admits as much). But there is much about this book which is current. Attempts to model alternative modes of education are mapped out in vivid reflections on the Chicago Urban Ecology Action Group, established by Mark Dion in the early 1990s, and Bruguera's thoughts on the Cátedra Arte de Conducta (Behavioural Art Department) in Havana (2002–09). The role of the artist as curator of the skills of others (or, as architect Teddy Cruz puts it, as 'cultural pimp') as well as the desire to demonstrate the everyday usefulness of art in the face of its spectacularization by the market, are recurrent themes. Some less convincing preoccupations of the present surface in these conversations too, such as attempts to quantify the social benefits of participatory art and housing design schemes.

Finkelpearl presents his social collaboration both as a critique of America, a country that he describes in conversation with Bishop as an 'extreme form of self-oriented individualist society', and as an attempt to demonstrate the vitality of 'America's most significant contribution to philosophy, pragmatism'. In fact, the conclusion to *What We Made* offers a kind of *a posteriori* thesis that sets out to reclaim the thinking of pragmatist philosopher John Dewey, who died in 1952, and in particular the idea that truth – for which we might read 'art' – is made in the act of inquiry and through social interaction. This is not the first time that Dewey's ideas have been resurrected. In the 1970s, Richard Rorty turned to his writings to mount a postmodern attack on universal values, whilst nevertheless admitting that Dewey 'insisted', in a rather un-postmodern way, 'that the only point of society was to construct subjects capable of ever-more novel, ever-richer forms of human happiness'. Here is the forthright claim on progress which motivates many of Finkelpearl's interlocutors, too. Is this another version of American can-do? After all, if Rajkowska's book is a critical balance sheet that seizes on failure and even trauma to make its points, then Finkelpearl's claims the social importance of success.

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