

Sometimes I feel that I fall apart, crumble into the pieces

Essay by James Yood, from the folder printed by Spaces Gallery Cleveland, US

It's a cliché of contemporary art that it appears sometimes to position itself as over the heads of its viewers, but there are instances when that's precisely the case. There are lots of more or less contradictory ways of describing Sometimes I feel that I fall apart, crumble into the pieces., the recent project Malgorzata Markiewicz created during her time in Cleveland as a 2007 SPACES World Artist Program resident—it was a sculpture and a performance, it was collaborative and the product of one person's conception, it was highly patterned and randomly chaotic, it stood up to the laws of gravity until it completely surrendered to them, and it literally found itself both over our heads and under our feet.

Markiewicz arrived in Cleveland—this was her first project in the US—as a young Polish artist who already had a reputation as being interested in mixed media sculptural projects/installations/performances that often used materials such as fabric and fiber as major components. But beyond that, and the implied feminist critique of intimations of the body, domesticity, fashion, and craft that such an agenda might pursue, Markiewicz also was beginning to concern herself with social practice, with the idea of an artist leading a community—however that might be defined—toward a kind of interactive cultural collaboration. Rather than having the artist demonstrate his or her aesthetic through their isolated production, rather than privilege expert creativity as some performative display done by those individuals we identify as “artists,” social practice invites a bit of a surrender of that position, working with, rather than for, an audience. Put another way, there are several moments in Markiewicz's Cleveland project that we might understandably wish to emphasize, as the accompanying illustrations surely indicate: (1) the lovely profile of her installation, handsomely hanging aloft, replete with historical and cultural allusions, a feast for the eye, a true visual pleasure; (2) her performance action in dismantling the piece, a time-specific activity done before an audience with implications of theater, a kind of happening of brief but dramatic duration: (3) the residue of that action, in its way an obverse of the initial installation, its elements now scattered as the

dictates of gravity willed, order giving way to disorder, just as intended. But I would argue for a fourth moment as well, one largely unseen, somewhat more an experiential than a visual moment, and that was the weekend when Markiewicz invited groups of Clevelanders to participate in the fabrication of her piece, to sit around a table and, in a kind of pre-industrial way, spin the hundreds and hundreds of balls of yarn that would adorn her installation. Yes, these volunteers would to assist her, but would also be cultural workers for a few hours, giving labor for a collective goal, meeting one another and conversing together in what Markiewicz surely intends to be an echo of the sewing circles a century or two ago that in their ways proved to be the building blocks of feminism.

These balls of yarn these local citizens crafted are the literal building blocks of her installation. They take advantage of the stupendous palette of contemporary fiber, and Markiewicz's piece was an upbeat pointillist composition of literal orbs of color. Texturally too, from crisp and twine-like to soft and fluffy, these puffs of fiber, each wrapped around a thin metal tube were paired with similarly permeated smallish balls of wood and blown glass and then strung on long strings of nylon into some extremely extended variation of a strand of pearls. Hung in loops from the ceiling this all suggested some kind of chandelier run amok, a highly rhythmic and baroque effusion of curvy color, an elegant arabesque, a strange conglomeration of line and color that was the sole adornment of the gallery. And then the deluge—at the opening a tall stepladder was suddenly brought into the center of the gallery and Markiewicz with a large hedge clipper climbed to its top. Then, in what took about ninety seconds, Markiewicz cut the nylon cords one by one, sending her balls of yarn and wood and glass falling to the floor, hundreds of them randomly scattered about, most congregating beneath their original position, but some rolling quite a distance away. The yarn balls descended as lightly as a cloud, cushioning themselves in their fall from grace, while the wooden balls hit the floor with a good deal of clatter, and many of the glass orbs met their end in a smash and crash. Now a space that had moments before had been the hallowed white cube of art became something else, something chaotic, something you had to step over and

around, its elegant organization rent asunder, its taut helixical rhythms now broken and strewn about. Markiewicz's act was both creative and destructive, it seemed to affirm an artist's fundamental right to the disposition of his or her work, including the right to destroy it. But it might be better to see it more as an act of fulfillment, a rounding off, another step in a journey that began in collegial and collective creativity, then, through the transformation by an artist of raw material into something overtly displaying the profile of high art, and then the convulsive act of freedom from that construct, a violent release that allowed this to follow the dictates of both gravity and its own materiality.

I see the collapse of Markiewicz's sculpture, or, better put, the transformation or evolution of it from an organized to a disorganized state, as a kind of victory. I haven't forgotten the title she chose for this piece, and even—perhaps especially so—in its slightly awkward employ of English, it bespeaks a universal of the human condition. The trick is not in never crumbling into pieces, it's in seeing that for what it is, and picking oneself up and moving on, somehow chastened by the experience. The fragility of her ceiling construct, perfect, ideal, becomes a metaphor for a state or emotion or context nearly impossible to maintain and actually hanging by the slenderest of threads, a quick snip away from public collapse, and really the awkward and impossible moment, the true vulnerability we experience when we decide to expose ourselves to the vicissitudes of life. Cut them loose, and let the ramifications begin.