

## introduction:

In the autumn of 2022, two extraordinary artistic projects, *Three Earths* and *Moving Earth*, were realized by Anna Schapiro in Poland as part of the Places of Remembering and Forgetting initiative led by FestivALT and the Urban Memory Foundation. The projects were connected with marking the sites of three Jewish cemeteries that still exist today, but that have been erased from the urban spaces of two cities - Wrocław and Kraków.

For the realization of both artworks Schapiro used mainly natural, earth-based, non-invasive and harmless to the environment pigments, bringing out the previous historic and topographic layers of the places and showing their transformation in time. The pigments reflected the colorful spectrum that can be found within the earth – from yellows, greens, reds and browns in Wrocław, to deep orange in Kraków. She intentionally exposed her work to natural and urban forces: rain, wind, interacting with pedestrians, making its presence in the city landscape ephemeral and temporary.

The artistic interventions marked the three Jewish cemeteries for the first time in the post-war era and were important from the perspective of community building, education, civic engagement and Jewish tradition. In Judaism, the ground once used for burials stays a cemetery forever, and, according to the Jewish law – the Halakha, the remains of the buried should not in any way be moved nor disturbed. As a general rule, exhumations are not allowed in Judaism, except for very rare special circumstances. That is why it is so important to define the boundaries of cemeteries, especially when the material borders on the surface of the earth have been destroyed and obliterated. This aspect of the activity was emphasized by the Rabbinical Commission for Cemeteries in Poland, who supported the realization of the projects.

## the making:

In September 2022, Anna Schapiro's artwork *Three Earths* appeared in Wrocław. It included two parts, both painted by the artist in a *fresco* technique: one on the paved surface of Plac Konstytucji 3

Maja Square, and the other on an old wall that separates a yard of a residential area from Gwarna Street.

Why were these specific places chosen by the artist? Because of their history. In both of these places, a trace of a former Jewish cemetery's boundaries is still visible – that is, if you know what to look for. The wall, just an old, neglected element of the local landscape, was in fact a fragment of much longer cemetery wall raised in 1908 with the sole purpose of separating the burial ground from the street. The paved square, thanks to the urban development plan established for this area in 2000 by the City Council and the awareness and attitude of the design office responsible for the project of the square's renovation and raising a new office building, follows the triangular shape of the former cemetery. However, no information about it is available in the area – not even a simple plaque that would inform the passers-by of the history of the place. Thus, the artist decided to make the invisible visible in the urban space.

In October 2022 Schapiro came to Krakow to undertake another non-invasive commemoration. In a project *Moving Earths* she set out to mark the historic boundaries of two Jewish cemeteries, located on the site of KL Plaszow Nazi concentration camp. There was another participatory element added to the process in Krakow, involving – local inhabitants, activists, members of the Jewish community – into marking the entire boundaries of the cemeteries with natural pigment.

For her artwork, Schapiro again chose natural, earth-based pigments that make for the temporary, ephemeral nature of *Moving Earths*, which just as *Three Earths* was exposed to weather conditions, such as rain and wind, and bound to disappear in time. These pigments, with the support of experts from the Rabbinical Commission for Cemeteries and the Zapomniane Foundation, were applied by the residents of the area, activists, representatives of the local university, and members of the Jewish community for over four hours in an unprecedented act of remembrance and solidarity.

## **the background & influences:**

The realization of both artworks was possible within the Places of Remembering and Forgetting project – the project implemented together by two Jewish organizations: a Krakow-based arts & activism collective FestivALT and Wrocław-based the Urban Memory Foundation focused on

research, architecture & civic engagement. The project's aim was to employ the mechanisms of civic engagement in order to work through tensions surrounding the very idea of revitalization and commemoration of two sites in Poland – the Jewish cemetery on Gwarna Street in Wrocław (formerly Claassenstrasse, Breslau) and the former Nazi concentration camp in Płaszów, Kraków (known as KL Plaszow). Under the project, the partner organizations conducted a social and information campaign for local residents about the Jewish heritage in their neighborhoods, and raised civic competences of local youth, who have conducted and recorded conversations with the key stakeholders, especially local residents who live next to the sites and are most frequent visitors and users of these spaces, as well as activists, decision makers and descendants of Jewish families who are memory keepers of the communities tied to both cities. The purpose was to make all the effort it would take to create conditions for mutual trust and dialogue in order to build the foundations for a common vision for revitalization and commemoration of the two sites of Jewish heritage.

The ultimate long-term goal of the project, which goes beyond the project itself is to achieve such results and conclusions from the activities in both cities that would allow to open a new chapter in the dialogue with local authorities, as well as to share good practices recommended elsewhere in Polish cities dealing with similar challenges. Involving an artist and creating a temporary, ephemeral marking of the sites has proven to be a successful way of starting a wider, fruitful discussion on difficult heritage among the local inhabitants.

Schapiro, underlines the importance of the research done on the sites by both UMF and FestivALT. She claims that learning a lot about the difficult history of both sites, to know what happened there, why it happened, and why commemorating the places is such a problematic issue for the local inhabitants connected her to the sites on a deeper level: *The process itself was short and intense, but I felt I have been connected to the subject, to the history of both sites, because I was familiar with all the work you had already done there. I felt that I entered a field that was already worked on and taken care of, and that enabled me to just come and add something to that ongoing process, become a part of it – of something bigger than myself*, she says.

It was not the first time when Schapiro's works touched upon the topic of difficult memory and sites of horror: *I never marked places in a way similar to what I did under this project, but some of my experiences are very much connected to similar topics. During my studies, I spent a lot of time in*

*Lublin and in the camps that are close to Lublin: Majdanek, Sobibor, Belzec... We have also visited the mass murder sites located in the nearby forests. There, we would just sit or stand, without doing anything, without speaking, for a longer while, we would just listen to how the wind goes through the grass. Before that experience I always wondered how one can ever imagine, what happened in such places, how one can ever grasp it. There I felt the closest I ever did to understanding it, to feeling what had actually happened there – maybe because of the wind. The Hebrew word for wind is נר, ruach, but it also stands for spirit and even soul, so this experience of listening to the wind in places, in which such horrifying scenes took place... Yes, I believe that this experience has influenced me a lot, both as a person and as an artist.*

Anna Schapiro also underlines the necessity of marking the borders of cemeteries in the Jewish tradition. In her words, it is important to know where a cemetery is – and in the Jewish tradition, grounds that had once been used for burials remain a cemetery forever – in order to know where *not* to enter. *If you follow the Jewish tradition, you may simply not want to enter a cemetery unknowingly. There are also certain rituals, for example after going to a cemetery, you need to wash your hands. If you enter a cemetery without knowing about it, you are not able to fulfill the requirement, simply because you are not aware you have been to a cemetery. Therefore it felt correct to engage in the project and to mark the burial grounds – in Wrocław, in two places, not only on the former cemetery wall, and around its entire territory in Kraków. I decided to get involved in that project not just to commemorate the remains of the people buried there, and not only to show how big the cemeteries used to be, but simply to mark it, so that people would know it used to be there,* says Schapiro.

## **the technique(s):**

The technique of commemorating the two sites of difficult history was also not immediately obvious. *In my other works, I use a lot of color. However, here I knew I did not want to be in any way aggressive – I wanted all the materials used for the project to stay as natural and environmentally neutral as possible. The idea came from my previous experiences – the year before we started working on the project, I had a residency in Kremer Pigmente in Germany, a place that specializes in producing and selling natural and natural-based pigments. While working there, I became deeply interested in learning about how it is produced, how it looks from the perspective of chemistry, and how it works... I always wanted to keep my materials as simple as possible, as natural as possible, and there I had the*

*opportunity to learn a lot on how to do it and how to use the pigments – because they all have very different characteristics, they differ in weight, in how they react to water and other substances you may want to mix them with... it was a wonderful experience, working and learning at the same time, and thinking back to it I realized this is exactly the knowledge I might put into use for this particular project. Natural pigments are safe for the environment, fully neutral for the ground, and their colors may be really vivid, so I decided that earth pigments are a perfect way of highlighting the difficult history of the destroyed Jewish cemetery in Wrocław.*

The success of the project in Wrocław gave rise to the idea of realization of a similar artwork in Kraków, on a much larger, open territory of the former KL Plaszow, where also two Jewish cemeteries were located. The question of materials was already solved, but the artist decided to change the technique a bit – instead of mixing the pigments with a binder and actually painting over architectural elements, the pigments were to be thrown onto the ground in order to create a visual representation of the borders of the cemeteries. But with the change of the technique, the question of what colors to use arose. *Since the pigments are made from natural earth, you have a limited choice of colors. You get lots of greens and bronzes that would simply disappear when thrown on the ground, and some lighter colors that would not be easily visible. There is a wide palette of yellows, but we felt that yellow is not the best choice for this project, and many shades of red, although it was difficult to find a shade that would not feel ‘too red’. The final choice, the deep, dark-ish orange, was the best one in my opinion,* says the artist.

## **the artistic process:**

As the artist herself has noticed, *usually, when the idea of setting a sort of monument appears, it all starts differently. There is a call for projects, an allowance, and different people applying for the opportunity to be the one who creates a commemoration for a given place or a historic event. Here, we started the process from a totally opposite perspective – we knew that there is a place that requires a sort of marking, a commemoration, we knew about the neglect of even marking the place in any way for so many years, so we had to act. We had to lean into it, see what could be done, what are the possible ways of dealing with the situation – and then do it,* says Schapiro.

At Gwarna Street in **Wrocław**, Anna Schapiro only marked two fragments of the former border of the cemetery. Marking the entire territory – whether by creating a line that would surround it, or by covering the entire surface of what used to be a burial ground – was impossible, as the pre-war cemetery area is now partially covered by numerous architectural elements, including residential buildings, a sports club with tennis courts, a hotel, and a parking lot. However, some architectural elements that used to mark the cemetery's boundaries are still there – for example the former cemetery wall, built in 1908. *I knew about it, and I thought – why shouldn't we highlight the fact that it is still there? Let's place the focus of an average passer-by on something they know, on something that has been there since always in their perspective – but they never knew what it used to be originally. And if there are traces of how large the cemetery used to be, how much land it used to cover – why shouldn't we show it? In the actual city space, not in the maps, which you cannot immediately transfer to the area that surrounds you,* says Schapiro.

Why did she only use the elements that were already there, without creating anything new, any new symbol, sculpture, or a more permanent commemoration? *This place is not a site of violence in the same terms as the former concentration camp in Kraków is, but it is still a place of violence – violence of forgetting, violence of willfully creating layers upon layers upon layers of new constructions, new buildings on it. A lot of new things have already been created – the residential buildings, the sports club, the hotel... But the cemetery is also there, it is still there, underneath, even if it is unnamed or not spoken of.*<sup>1</sup>

In Wrocław, Schapiro painted the former cemetery wall and the paved square which used to be a fragment of the burial ground's borders by herself. In **Kraków**, where the situation is much more complex, she marked the borders of the two cemeteries together with a group of people. *The site is much, much bigger, so I knew it would be difficult to do it on my own, but I saw it as an opportunity to add something from myself to the Places of Remembering and Forgetting and to engage a wider local community to join me in the creation of this artwork,* she says. Schapiro and the two organizers, FestivALT and UMF, decided to involve more people in the process because of the difficult history of the place and tensions between the residents and the municipality surrounding the creation of an actual KL Plaszow Museum on the site<sup>2</sup>: *In Wrocław, the destroyed cemetery is a place of death – but*

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<sup>1</sup> More about the controversy of building over the cemetery site here: <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/community/articles/wroclaw-jewish-cemetery>

<sup>2</sup> Read more about here: xxxxx

*of death that every one of us will encounter someday, death as a part of life. There is violence in the way it was forgotten, erased from the public space and from the collective memory, in how its commemoration has been neglected for so many years. But in Kraków, there is a multilayered history of brutal violence – first, there were cemeteries, but then the area became a part of the KL Plaszow concentration camp, and people were buried in large mass graves dug out on the former cemetery grounds. In some places you don't even know what is located where, the borders of the two cemeteries, mass graves, and the general area of the former KL Plaszow are not clear. The artwork needed a precise identification of the borders, which was at some points almost impossible to achieve. Therefore I felt that it was necessary to approach this site in a bit different manner, and I also felt very much different when I was throwing the pigments together with so many people, with local residents, activists, people from the city, and members of the Jewish community.*

The act of creation was not, however, free of any doubts or hesitation. As the artist describes it: *In the morning on the day we were going to go and mark the cemeteries, I was taken to see the area, and when I saw the mass graves, all I could think was 'this is too big. This is too heavy. I can't do it'. I also had concerns if I should be doing it – but at the same time I also felt I am doing it for my community. I felt so happy to have been invited and asked to do it! That was when I realized – yes, I am able to do it. It was heavy, it was difficult, but it was also beautiful – we have done it all together, with so many other people, carrying one hundred kilos of pigmented earth and marking the borders of the cemetery. It turned into a sort of field lesson in history – one of the activists, Aleksander Schwarz, would stop us every once in a while, explaining why it is not certain if the borders should end here, or if we should continue our markings in some other places.*

The realization of the project took quite a long time. *It is often my thing to want to start managing in situations like this – let's get to work, let's get it done, let's be fast – but in this case, I felt I really wanted it all to go extra slow. And it worked out perfectly – many people stayed a long time, marking the borders together with me, and in the end there was a wonderful surprise, because we were not sure if we had enough pigment – only at the very end it turned out that yes, indeed, we did have just enough. It took us over four hours to get to this point, but at this moment, it felt as if everything just fell into the right place, says Shapiro.*

## interactions & reactions:

Making artworks available to the general public by displaying them in urban space is not unheard of. However, Schapiro went one step further with *Three Earths* and actually painted the artwork in the open, public space, on the wall and on the pavement. It was a challenge for her, but not only because of creating her art outdoors. She says: *When I create, I always wonder how I can connect the recipients to the piece that I am currently working on. How do I create a piece that evokes a response from the recipient? How do I activate a sort of a reaction on the other end? It was a challenge for me in this project, because I did not know who the recipient would be – it could be anyone. I also felt that people respond to art differently when they are exposed to it incidentally. There is no sense of it inherently being an artwork, it is just an element of the space that surrounds you in your everyday life, you come in contact with it by chance – it just happens to be there on your way to work, to school. I had no idea what sorts of reactions it may evoke, what it may activate. I knew that there were certain risks connected to the fact that I was creating both pieces outside – I had no idea what the weather would be, who would come and ask questions, I had no idea what could happen, because it felt like everything could and I would be there, in the open, subject to it, without virtually any control over the situation.*

However, her fears proved to be unfounded. *What I managed to activate with my works were the interactions with people – of course, they were very different in the two cities, as the process of creation of each artwork was very different, too. In Wrocław, on the site of the neglected cemetery at Gwarna, there is a shelter for, among others, people fleeing the war in the Ukraine<sup>3</sup>. It is very close to the train station, they may stay there overnight, etc. I was allowed to store the pigments there, and the people staying there helped me carry them out to the street, and obviously we started talking. This was when I realized that it is such a strange role you take on as an artist – you're painting this wall or doing whatever you are doing there, you answer other people's questions on what you are going to do, and then the conversation steers away. First to the current events, the war in Ukraine, and then my own situation in it, being born in Russia and then having emigrated to Germany, and then suddenly you are talking to people you just met about Jewish history, she laughs.*

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<sup>3</sup> The sports hall of the Youth Sports Center (Młodzieżowe Centrum Sportu - MCS) was transformed into the migrants shelter for many months in 2022.

She sums up her visit to Wrocław in all positives. *I guess it is a blessing that I don't speak Polish – if somebody was saying something negative or offensive, I simply did not understand it, so I have no memories of anyone being unfriendly, she laughs. In total, I have spent 5 days in Wrocław, during which I worked on the paintings. I was exposed to interactions, I engaged in discussions with the people from the residential area and the sports club, but also with random passers-by. There was also this guy, who parked the car nearby, we started talking and he told me he remembered the Jewish family who used to live down the street. There was also the other guy, who obviously had no idea what I am doing, but he probably figured that if I am painting something on a pavement, I am probably doing it for money, so he came up to me and gave me 2 zlotys.*

In Kraków, there were less incidental interactions with people – mostly because Schapiro did not work by herself. The artwork was created during an organized event, with many people intentionally coming to take part in the process of its creation. This does not mean that the artist did not interact with them in any way – just the opposite. *Because we all did it collectively, as a large group, I felt like I was just one of the puzzles making it all possible. I was not The Artist, I was just one of many, many people involved in the creation of the work, and one of even more who made it possible for me to be there and do what I was doing. It was not the role of the artist that was key in this case, it was the role of the artistic work – you may call it an artistic intervention, or whatever you like, but I think the point is that an artistic work makes it easier to open the door, to name what is unnamed, mark what is left unmarked, to start the discussion on a deeper, more open-minded level. I hope it will allow for the task of marking more places of difficult history to go on.*

*It was not even the planning, but only the realization of the task of marking the cemeteries in Plaszow that made us understand how unclear the boundaries of these burial grounds are and how impossible a request it was to ask the local residents not to enter that area, because, well, which area? Nobody actually knew. Nobody was 100% sure where the cemetery begins, where it ends. And since it is incredibly important for the Jewish law, when we set out to mark the boundaries of the historic cemeteries it was a task we knew could not be done properly without somebody who understands maps, who can read them and sort of 'translate' them to actual space, going back and forth with a measuring tape. We still did not identify the boundaries with 100% certainty, but we made sure that our outline encompassed the entire area of the cemetery, including a small margin in some*

*troublesome places, so as not to leave out any part of the burial grounds. And it was only when the lines were already there that it became visible how big the cemeteries actually were. It also made it possible to locate them in the actual space, and not only on the map – which does not show you the scale, the size in the context of the surroundings. You may think that when you see it on the maps, you can imagine the size, but for me, the result of putting a physical outline on the ground was absolutely striking.*

## future

Was this a one-time project only? Time will show. Anna Schapiro, however, hopes it was not. She sees both the possibility and the necessity to continue her work on the two sites of difficult memory, and even has some ideas already. *It all came to me when we were still preparing for the realization of the project in Płaszów – this place has so many layers to it, there was the cemetery, the concentration camp, the mass graves, I had to stop and think ‘where do I start?’. And at that moment it felt right to start with the cemeteries – they were the first there chronologically, so they had to be the first to be marked, but choosing them also leaves the possibility to commemorate all other aspects of the difficult history of that place, to find a way of marking and naming everything else that happened there, and everything that is there physically, says Schapiro.*

While she admits that finding the perfect shade of pigment for *Moving Earths* in Kraków was not an easy task, she is also sure that this exact shade is not the only one that she would ever want to use on the site. *After that first artwork is done on this site, I can really imagine doing it again, with different colors of pigments for different times of the year. Maybe at some point we will be able to repeat the project, but using stones instead of powdered pigments? Stones would not fly away with the wind nor get washed down with rains!*

But the pigments are also not easily washed down. An activist from FestivALT has seen traces of the deep orange that survived the first heavy snows of the late autumn, and even once the snow melted, nearly 6 months after the intervention, and the activists from the Urban Memory Foundation have been taking pictures of the artwork weekly – it is fading away, but it is doing so very slowly. The project’s deadline has actually been extended – it was previously planned that Schapiro’s artwork would be visible only until December 2022. Now, the official ‘deadline’ is December 2024 for the square on Pl. Konstytucji 3 Maja and the painting on the cemetery wall on Gwarna Street can stay

indefinitely (!). Why is it holding so well if it was planned as *ephemeral*? The artist explains: *for the artwork in Wrocław I used a very old technique called fresco. It requires the use of a binder that binds the pigments together and makes them hold better to any type of surface. Neither the technique nor the binder are typically used for painting outside, so I contacted the company selling the binder to ask whether it would hold at all in the difficult weather conditions of a Polish autumn. They did not say it straightforwardly, but in the end, it turned out to be more resistant than I thought and that the company selling it thought. She laughs: If it won't come off on its own by the end of March, will you have to brush it?* Just the opposite, it has already been planned that Schapiro will come back to Wrocław in September 2023 to refresh her artwork in both places as part of the partner organizations' next project, NeDiPa - Negotiating Difficult Past.

## **ANNA SCHAPIRO**

Anna Schapiro is a visual artist and writer based in Berlin, whose visual works move between sculpture and painting. Contrary to the classical idea of an artistic work with a fixed form, her works are flexible, site-specific, and often adapt to the selected location like a second skin. A given site becomes not only a place where a work appears, but also its active career. Her works have been shown, among others, in Basel, Berlin, Dresden, Hamburg, Heidelberg, Łódź, Lublin, New York, Porto, Stuttgart, and Wrocław.