

BEYOND THE DECISIVE MOMENT



PUBLIC SPACES IN CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY

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URBAN PHOTOGRAPHY AND REPRESENTATIONS OF PUBLIC SPACE – FROM THE ABSTRACT TO THE CONCEPTUAL TO THE DOCUMENTARY

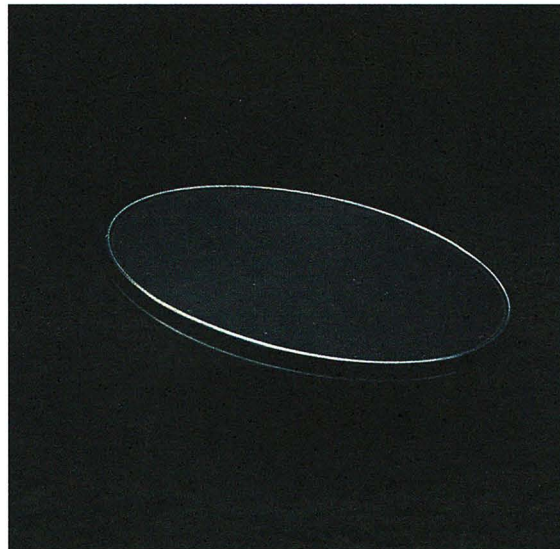
Photographing public spaces is as old as the medium of photography itself.

One of the very first photographs ever taken – **Daguerre's 'Boulevard du Temple'** (ca. 1839) – is a view of a Parisian street recorded from the photographer's studio. From then on, streets and public spaces have remained a permanent feature in the history of photography with many different strands and types of street photography championed throughout the years. Technological developments of the 21st century have allowed for a real proliferation of the genre, with an omnipresence of mobile phones and digital cameras acting as the top contributing factor. These days, not only can anyone be a street photographer but you can also create street photography by never leaving your house. Take, for example, **Mishka Henner's 'No Man's Land'** project using Google Street View, or the works of **Fernando Pereira Gomes**, who photographs the virtual streets of 'The Grand Theft Auto V' computer game.

Street photography has been present in Poland for as long as the medium has been present in the country, with some 'interesting recent projects following global trends such as **Mikołaj Długosz's 'Summer in the City'** (2016), where he pairs vintage 1970s – 1980s postcards of public spaces with contemporary Google Street View images of the same places. In fact, many Polish artists have been experimenting with novel approaches to urban photography and representations of public space – from the abstract, to the personal, to the documentary. **Agata Madejska**, **Karolina Jonderko**, and **Wojciech Wilczyk** focus on public space and its elements in their photographic practice. While each artist approaches this broad theme from a different perspective, they have all produced excellent works worth an in-depth study.



Agata Madejska, *kosmos #1*, 2006, Lightjet C-type print on dibond aluminium, black aluminium tray frame, 41.8 x 54.8 x 4 cm © the artist



Agata Madejska, *kosmos #3*, 2006, Lightjet C-type print on dibond aluminium, black aluminium tray frame, 41.8 x 41.8 cm © the artist



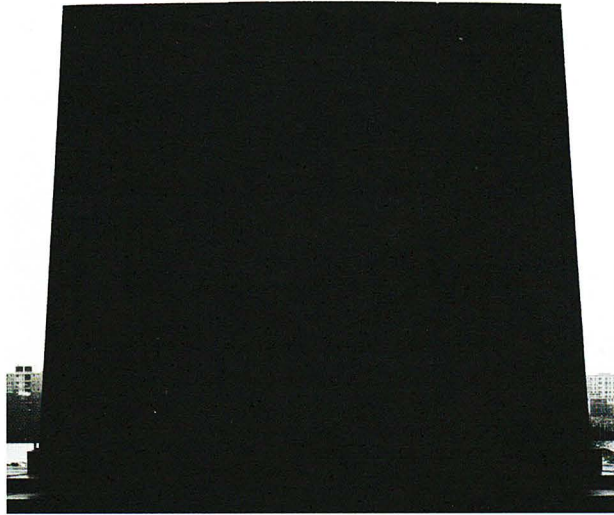
Agata Madejska, *kosmos #7*, 2006, Lightjet C-type print on dibond aluminium, black aluminium tray frame, 41.8 x 57.3 x 4 cm © the artist

ABSTRACT AND CONCEPTUAL SPACE

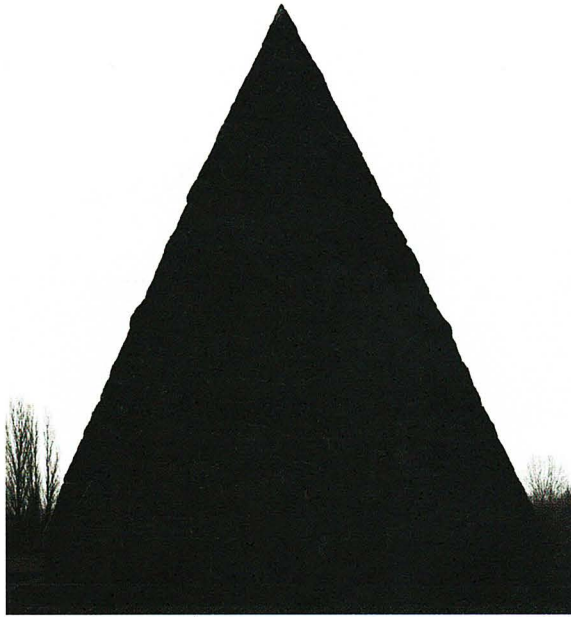
Agata Madejska (b. 1979) is an established Polish-born London-based artist known for her conceptual, often visually abstract explorations of urban space and its elements. Her project **'kosmos'** (2006), directly inspired by Witold Gombrowicz's book with the same title, consists of eight abstract, highly aestheticised and largely monochromatic images of (initially) unrecognisable metallic objects. Placed centrally in the middle of blackness, the photographed shapes reflect an eerie, moon-like light. Upon a closer inspection, however — and especially if we study the actual, physical prints — the viewer begins to discover more and more details. Previously abstract shapes become increasingly familiar while the disorientating black void, in which the objects appear to be floating, starts to give away its secrets. Tree trunks, a fence, sand, and dry leaves are lurking in the dark. **'kosmos'** seduces the viewer into believing it depicts a different universe. No matter how abstract and hard to decipher at the beginning, these images show recognisable objects like slides and other playground toys installed outside. By visually isolating these common objects from their surroundings and photographing them at a certain time of the day and in a very specific light, Madejska creates highly abstract and conceptual works. She has consciously dissected reality and distilled it into abstraction. After all, an abstract is also a summary, an essence of something bigger — Madejska's works serve

as an abstract of reality, which through this process, becomes an abstraction in itself. A similar philosophy and working process is observed in Madejska's later cycle **'The Order of Solids'** (2010–2013). Once again, the viewer is faced with hard-to-decipher images, here dominated by centrally placed mostly geometric shapes filling the majority of the space in each image. Black squares and triangles are paired with black-and-white circles. Recognisable elements of reality (here, the surrounding world) are visible only on the margins and — once again — only upon closer inspection. Just like with **'kosmos'**, the experience of surveying physical prints is crucial to the understanding of the work. What look like anonymous, flat shapes transform into three-dimensional forms that are very common in urban landscapes — monuments. This transformation, however, takes place only if time and movement are added to this equation. The viewer's eyes (and brain — as that is where the visual information is processed after all) become accustomed to the represented shapes with time. Movement, that is approaching the work and looking at it from up close, allows more details to be revealed. Finally, knowing what we are looking at, it becomes clear that the cycle's title plays a role in confusing the viewer in the first place, drawing the attention to the solid forms. Time and abstraction also point us to a bigger concept that Madejska explores through

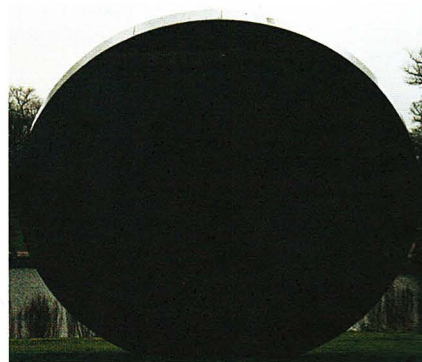
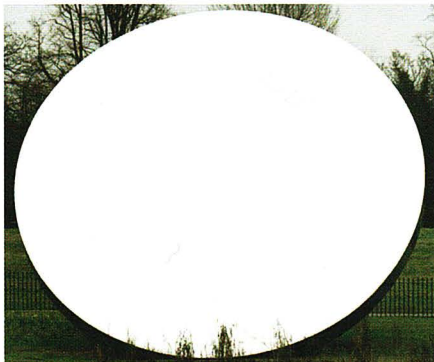
this cycle. As she has written in her artistic statement: '[f]rom one generation to the next, it becomes more difficult to relate to the message of a specific monument. What does not change is the relation to the object as a unit in space.' Also, after Madejska, '[b]y reducing [monuments and other urban structures] to a formal rhythm, in which the disappearance of their functions and names make the context disappear too, [she] reduce[s] the structures to their basic state of being — being a form' (both quotes from an interview with Agata Madejska by Piotr Drewko, March 2014. Original in Polish). Finally, **'The Order of Solids'** — as well as her other works — can be seen as an exploration of the photographic medium itself. By isolating, dissecting, and extracting elements of reality, Madejska works with fragmentation. **'Fragmentation'**, as she explains, 'is not only the only possible way of perception, it also is the only form of photography.' Apart from fragmentation and photographing elements of the public space, Madejska — through her work — enters into a dialogue with our experience of and relationship to the public/urban space. The way a viewer interacts with individual works from the two series in the context of time, space, and the appearance and disappearance of content can also be said to mimic how the same viewer might relate to the same physical objects in real space-time.



Agata Madejska, *The Order of Solids*, 46–48, 2010, Lightjet C-type print on forex & waxed black MDF, 119 x 130 cm © the artist



Agata Madejska, *The Order of Solids*, 1906, 2012, Lightjet C-type print on forex & waxed black MDF, 130 x 119 cm © the artist



Agata Madejska, *Here and There*, 2011, Lightjet C-type print on forex, wood, 12.5 x 33 cm © the artist