FINDING AND LOSING A PLACE. ŁÓDŹ UNDERGROUND TOWARDS EXPERIENCE OF EVERYDAY LIFE OF A CITY
L-UND – such abbreviation appeared in posters of an exhibition which was an attempt to present the phenomenon of Łódź underground music scene in 1985–1995. L stood for Łódź, and UND – for underground. Distinctness arising from the local character was noticed not only by a participant of the movement and curator of the exhibition in the Manhattan Gallery – Wiktor Skok – but also by the authors of the vast majority of critical and publicist texts dedicated to that phenomenon\(^1\). The very movement grew in the frame of the punk esthetics, but it absorbed successive genres surprisingly fast: hard-core, industrial, later also, among others, techno and rave. It used various forms of expressions: first of all sounds, but also projections, site-specific actions, graphics, graphic design, street art or fashion. In the mid 1990s the scene of Łódź was known for its openness and variety, which contributed to the creation of Freedom Parade, known nationwide. That event was modelled on Western European techno festivals, however, it was different from the original by being open to other music genres, and, on the other hand, being less related to the ideology of emancipation. The fact of the parade being blocked in 2002 by the local government may be considered the turning point after which mass audience in Łódź steered away from the musical experiment and progressive genres.
The phenomenon and history of the underground has not been analysed yet. It is not the purpose of this article to comprehensively present facts and times of the movement and define its borders. On the basis of memories and output of some of its most active participants, it poses a question of how the underground movement easily absorbed new genres and aesthetic models on the one hand, and on the other – remained so strongly separate (local). In that context, an important trace here is the movement participants’ frequently declared objection against the routinized daily life, and at the same time – intense exploration of the city – understood both as walking along its streets and experimenting in its space, and the process of getting more and more knowledge regarding its history, structure and potential. The second direction for exploration was to get to know, experience and creatively transform cultural changes coming from the West, as well as new musical genres and aesthetics. This relation was of a procesual nature, what encouraged to take a look at it in the context of a performative shift and methods of studies and theoretical frames (performance studies). In the view of Jon McKenzie performativeness was perceived not only as activity and its agency, but also as onto-historical formation of power and knowledge – being for the 20th and 21st century what discipline was for the 18th and 19th century 2. The word performance in English is successfully used in technical terminology related to management – both human resources management and management of organizations and culture. McKenzie convinces that we are subject to influences of complex global performances, which do not give us one precise task (as if on a production line in a factory), but stimulate to undertake more or less specified actions. The Polish language has adopted the word performans from the language of art and, despite its wider and wider usage, it has not become such a natural and universal term as in English. Performatics, however, draws attention to action – and this
word is used in Polish in many various contexts. Similarly as performance in English, action combines different areas of life.

An attitude to act in the critically perceived reality, as stuck in malaise rejecting any inspiring new aesthetics, was for participants of the Łódź scene a contribution to create something unique: a critical view on new streams so that they are not copied, but transformed and enrooted in the local experience. Wiktor Skok emphasized: for the whole time I was aware that we live in a totally different system, different reality, so we will do it our way. That tension between the process of search, both external and universal (international art of experiment, contemporary art, anti-totalitarianism), as well as internal, local, related to the closest subject experience (city exploration, criticism of daily life, building bottom-up organizational structures). That procesual nature of the tension and exchange between the said components seems to be what the distinctiveness of the Łódź scene is called in common language.

**Unbearable city performance**

The underground was born in opposition to the malaise of the second half of the 1980s which was connected with the gradual crisis of the city, which continued to employ high numbers of workers in state-owned industrial works. In memories of the movement members Łódź appears as an ineffective city, overwhelming with heavy and rough functionalization and everyday routine. Wiktor Skok recalls: We lived in a city in which, if you wanted to go to a friend to the other side of the city, you waited for half an hour, as the tram did not come, and there was no phone. You spent weeks, years, at tram stops. You were a young crazy boy, and everything around went so slowly that you wanted to die. All you could hear around us was an echo: adapt – it will be easier.

For the movement participants immersed in the aesthetic and intellectual vanguard it was tiring to function in the, as they saw it,
poor and uniform everyday accumulation of events. Dariusz Kosiński gives it a name of *Theatrum*, so a series of actions rendering life theatrical and, therefore, shaping the images of collectivism functioning in a given place. Each of the inhabitants uses it in their own way, choosing schemes helpful in everyday communication with others, based on being ‘one of us’⁵. In the view of Wachowski city is a space of multiperformances where all the people active in space are at the same time performers and spectators. Notwithstanding what they do and what the aim of their activity is, they co-create a net of actions to which we get accustomed so much that not only it is difficult for us to see them, but also to imagine the city functioning without them⁶.

In Łódź of the 1980s the multitude of impressions specific for a big city was on the defensive (even though it coloured the life of Łódź before the war). What was preferred included variously understood ‘normality’, treating anything which was radically different with distance or hostility.

‘Normality’ is a complex and living, evolving creation. One of the most influential researches of the *performance studies* stream, Richard Schechner, notices how everyday actions of people are ‘restored behaviours’. Each of us uses the adopted, observed and somehow accommodated behaviours, like a director deciding which parts he will use in his film, puts them together in diverse compositions, depending on the situation. Extracts of behaviours may be presented and re-played; they are not a part of causal systems (personal, social, political, technological), thanks to which they occurred, but ‘they live their lives’⁷. Therefore, protagonists of the underground have the feelings that these were not the organs of the system that involved them in the oppressive atmosphere of fighting with differences, but the other citizens of Łódź, permeated with the models preferred or tolerated by the system. Weeks and years spent at tram stops are a hyperbole depicting the experience of unbearability of the whole
activity of the city, including the activity of non-human actors⁸, creating in its frames a net of dependencies. It was, in the opinion of the movement participants, oppressive, as if aimed at increasing the difficulty of living in an industrial city.

The unbearable unification of the life of the city was also connected with its modernisation, realized since the 1960s and being in fact constant restructuring. It related to the authorities’ adoption of a functionalist perspective, with progress as the aim of the city management, understood as satisfying certain basic needs. Referring to Ewa Rewers, a city functions on the layer of *polis* in the frame of the space organized, defined, managed, designed and inhabited by given persons⁹. On that layer Łódź – which according to the propaganda of communist authorities of Poland, was soon to become the second metropolis in Poland – still had to ‘catch up’. The atmosphere of a race towards modernization pushed to the margins the issues of anthropological, subjective experience of the city, namely the sphere Rewers called *metapolis*, composed of feelings arising from, among others, the landscape, possessed parts of knowledge, the cultural and intellectual ambience of a given place. Local culture and identity were mostly left for inefficient and passive institutions to take care of. Traces of the past were barely highlighted.

The thing here is not only that due to ideological reasons stories of factory-owning families collaborating in a multicultural city seemed problematic. Also the memory of Holocaust was escaping from the awareness of the inhabitants. Only actions by some individuals, carried out persistently on the verge of obsession, helped to stop the progressing unification and related impoverishment of matter, which could stimulate richer experience of *metapolis*. As noticed by Skok, at the turn of the 1980s there was no question of the Ghetto or the Holocaust, and for the majority of Łódź inhabitants *The only proof, unintentional and absolutely unconscious, is in vile, insulting writings on walls.*
A four-letter word Jude. Not without a reason written in German. A synonym of condemnation. The final hatred. It became the name of one of the most radical music groups in Łódź. On the one hand being a certain taboo, on the other – in practice used in the streets to intimidate and humiliate – was, as a name of a music band, radically confusing. Schwabacher was the font chosen by the band, occurring on black-and-white posters. That was an element of the strategy to take over and reverse the total aesthetics, applied also by some Western European and American industrial bands.

In Łódź the totalitarian aesthetics was criticised also by Ewa Blum-Kwiatkowska and Sławomir Kosmyk, Phetrus and Andrzej Gagza. As emphasized by Skok, the band Jude and its production was to confront and expose the generally spread aggression and violence and dormant totalitarianism, still capable of moving the masses. The aesthetics of Jude and the series of concerts Wunder Wave occurred thanks to the visual messages in the streets, embedded in the landscape of the city. Posters had informative function but were also a ‘visual’ explosion onto walls of the city.

In this way Jude was not only a hollow mark, but a word implicating actions. Its nature was not conventional or illusionary, but it was connected with real consequences such as criticism, aggression, lack of understanding, rejection experienced by the performers and, to a certain extent, by the related people.

Forms of manifestation

Artistic manifestations occurring in response to everyday life of a city can be found in the beginnings of avant-garde. Manifest against old-fashioned Venice, scattered by Italian futurists in Saint Mark’s Square in the summer of 1910, was a kind of a rebellion and action aiming at the audience, authorities and inhabitants of the dying and old-fashioned (in the opinion of the artists) city. The Venetian alive-dead
municipal organism was to become an example of a city of the past, a space that is evil for a modern human. The futurists’ form of expression assumed confrontation. The Dadaist practices were another form of criticism of the state of the widely understood notion of the city. These included *Excursions and visits* – meetings with a guide in places which ‘have no reason to exist’. These events, realized in the frame of *Grande Season Dada 1921*, were a form of taking the Dadaist practice out to the city space and criticising social relations in it.

The underground tried not that much to change the city, but rather not to get subject to it. A bit different that the older generation of the artists of Łódź associated around Warsztat Formy Filmowej [*Film Form Workshop*], Pomarańczowa Alternatywa [*Orange Alternative*] or Kultura Zrzutu [*Drop Culture*], its creators were rather distanced towards actions aimed at the audience, whose recipient, and matter at the same time, was a random group of people. The underground – as the name suggests – sought first of all autonomy and ways to manifest and defend its non-conformist attitude. From the moment when the squat at Kiliańskiego 210 was created and the first inhabitants appeared (Marcello Zamenhoff, Marcin Pryt) until the end of this initiative nobody communicated to the outside that something special was happening there. Something totally different from similar, colourful and strong initiatives in liberal democracies in the West of Europe; here scarce parties were disrupted when a neighbour intervened, because the squat’s inhabitants did not want to get into conflict with the locals. As noticed by Skok: *We were aware that we are a small group in a sea of junk that needs to stick together and take care of itself somehow*. Due to that certain elements were unified. What resulted was a characteristic minimalist ‘black style’ of outfit, the aesthetics of the posters. On the other hand, in a small and well-acquainted environment there was little space for doctrinarism and creation of subsequent, clearly separated sub-groups and streams, while new inspirations easily penetrated it.
City exploration

Seeking a place for its distinctiveness did not mean isolation or attempts to build a utopia. It was an important part of the artistic practice to critically get to know and test the city, and exploration was one of the methods. It gave inspiration, strengthened competences of the movement members as regards topography, history and colours of particular districts, and at the same time allowed to find places possible to adapt as places for permanent activity or ephemeric performative events or site-specific actions.

Exploration of a city as a space for experiences was popularised by the 19th-century figure of flâneur. Flâneur, however, moved around metropolitan space which was an effect of the colonial order and wealth gained through it. A subversive perspective in that matter was popularised by the situationist movement, and, in particular, the practice of drifting and using it to create foundations of psychogeography, described by Guy Debord. The situationists’ views of the city suggested increasing experience almost to the level of the purpose of the city structure’s existence. Staying under the influence of the concept homo ludens by Johan Huizinga, they saw in the newly designed situationist space appropriate conditions to realize revolutionary postulates and re-build the old social structures subordinate to the spectacle16.

Interest in everyday life did not decrease with the loss of the power of utopias which emerged in the 1960s. Everyday life, route, walking (around the city) became the topic discussed thanks to the work Wynaleźć codzienność by Michel de Certeau. He proved in it creativity of ordinary people which becomes visible thanks to effective trickeries, by means of which everyone finds their own way to omit bans of the dominant order. The crisis of industrial cities that took place in Western Europe in the 1970s generated an industrial aesthetics which is a mixture of fascination, disappointment and fears
connected with dehumanized civilization that could appear owing to the industrial revolution\textsuperscript{17}. Post-industrial everyday life generated a mix of nostalgia and fears connected with the uncertain future.

The results of the city’s exploration by the underground were transferred into two fields: inspiration visible in aesthetics and texts, and practical selection of places for artistic activities. Spaces were often chosen – as emphasized by movement participants – with regard to the fact that they were convenient to ‘unwind the scene’ but it is difficult not to have the impression that mainly the ones with special atmosphere and strongly marked by the past attracted the attention. One of such crucial places was the system of air-raid shelters in the park of Prince Józef Poniatowski. It was created during the Second World War as a shelter for German citizens. After the war it was adapted by civil defence and in the very park there was a cemetery and a monument of Soviet soldiers. Abandoned and not supervised by anyone, at the end of 1980s the place was used mainly by punks and became a venue for musical events. Another place was Hospital Unit – an unused tunnel around the Clinical-Didactic Centre of the Medical University in Łódź. The fourteen-storey hospital started to be built in 1976 but due to political and economic reasons its construction lasted as long as 38 years. In the 1990s some parts of the facility were already used, some deteriorated due to a lack of funds for equipment. The Clinical-Didactic Centre was an example of a large-scale project which had to face a constant crisis, becoming a symbol of Łódź’s unsatisfied dreams of fast and spectacular modernization.

Either in ‘bunkers’ (shelters in the Poniatowski park), in the ‘unit’ (Hospital Unit) or in unused industrial or post-industrial spaces, each event was ephemeric, but not really spontaneous – usually preceded with actions such as an aesthetic and functional arrangement of space and technical preparations – e.g. providing power generators and lighting. These spaces were not only places of creativity,
but spaces of unfettered experiment, fun, the experience of directly entering the tissue and ambience of the city. Besides actions in the above-mentioned places there was a cycle Wunder Wave, which was realized mainly in club spaces or even cultural institutions.

The experience of exploration becomes visible in the output of the bands which emerged during the underground. The song titled Szpital Heleny Wolf [Helena Wolf’s Hospital] from the album Piękno [Beauty] by 19 Wiosen [19 Springs] talks about entering ruins of a former hospital which is an authentic place with strong traces of history. Finished just before the war, it was part of the ghetto during the occupation. In 1940 Chaim Mordechaj Rumkowski, head of the Council of Elders in the ghetto in Łódź, located the Health Department and hospital No. 1 there. In the left wing he found a place for his private apartment. The hospital served the inhabitants of Łódź from after the war until 1980s when a long renovation was started. After 10 years of works, the sense of using those facilities for health treatment was questioned and a discussion begun about their selling or making another use of them. The song by Marcin Pryt, the leader of 19 Wiosen, depicts the experience of a lonely, accidental exploration of the facility. The lyrical subject realizes or imagines that it is the place of his being born. In this way he starts to identify with the ruins of the transfer place which creates neither special identity, nor a relation. He knows that soon this place will change radically, new plans for it will be realized. He wonders what it will mean for him, what kind of change. Faced with the inevitable erasure of the traces of his individual past and a part of the past of the city, he decides to put the hospital on fire.

Losing the place
The discussion is still open whether the underground should cover the period of the 1980s and the 1990s, 1985–1995, 1985–2002, or maybe
also include later activities of people related to it. No doubt a continuation of these experiences is visible in the Łódź music scene. Groups like Jude or 19 Wiosen are still functioning, artists such as Marcello Zamenhoff are also active, there are concerts organized like Wunder Wave or the series of Kosmopolitania by Marcin Pryt. What is more, the centre of actions of people connected with it is in the club DOM [house] in the old factory, known today as Off Piotrowska. It is symptomatic that the underground was not absorbed in the official structures of the city – its participants did not join formalized units, such as cultural institutions or universities (although they cooperated with them). DOM operates as a social cooperative and is located on the premises let by a development company. What is interesting, its members do not avoid cooperation with the local government or institutions. With the support of the city’s authorities there was an independent music festival Domo fon held from 2015 to 2017. In 2018 there was no agreement between the authorities and organizers as regards financing. The music scene in Łódź has experienced many such turbulences and the most known was the decision (or rather no consent from president Kropiwnicki) to hold the Freedom Parade in 2002. Numerous reasons for remaining in the underground may be found and proposed for discussion. Nevertheless, the fact is that artists from this circle – both in the 1980s and the 1990s and at present – know that they have to count on their own efforts and bottom-up organization. Today, of course, I walk along the same streets of Łódź and all this: people around me and myself wearing grey (not to stand out from the crowd) – this has not changed […] that until the end one needs to object to it\textsuperscript{19} – explains Marcin Pryt when talking about his motivation to animate the Kosmopolitania cycle lasting since 2011. The process-oriented approach and action, which is a momentary experiment, are strongly enrooted in that stream. Places, tendencies, ideas are there to be explored, modified, transformed. However, experiment involves unpredictability and impermanence.
Tension
The tension between experience of the new, generally unknown, music and aesthetic streams and the everyday life of a post-industrial city, mentioned in the introduction, is a material factor influencing the distinctiveness of the Łódź underground – a movement belonging to the most progressive and boldly experimenting in Poland, and maybe in the whole circle of post-socialist countries. The sluggishness of the music scene from the beginning of the martial law period and the general ambience of ‘stopping’ any unlicensed creativity inclined underground participants to constantly and consistently act despite the obstacles. Its specificity influenced the whole music scene and contributed to universalization of new music streams, enjoying mass audience participation at the end of the 1990s.

The underground was not familiar with utopian social transformations (characteristic of the atmosphere of the 1960s and the 1970s); it was more about fighting for the right to act and the place for expression. Building a network of places and routes in the city, animating actions of a site-specific nature, editing and distributing own zins were the responses to financial shortages, lack of instruments and public infrastructure and scarce rudimental information about the Western culture. Upon Poland’s opening to the world in the 1990s, new trends were quite rapidly adapted – techno and rave music. In this way the underground lost its subcultural nature, and created a local specificity, where an important role was played by strong disagreement to the order of everyday life of a city in crisis. The underground functioned in the process of sanctioning and emphasizing the distinctiveness of its experience both on the aesthetic grounds, and on the grounds of experiencing a city connected with the awareness of its history and specificity, adopting a character of a performative process, where new knowledge and new inspirations emerge in action. It combined particular, diverse attitudes and forms of expression into one movement,
whose local character and specificity is so strongly emphasized by critics and researchers, who described this phenomenon, however, not devoting sufficient attention to it.

1 Krzysztof Jurecki calls it a permanent relation with the city reality (K. Jurecki, L-und/The L-Und, ‘Exit’, 2011, no. 3(87). Marta Sklodowska differentiates something which made the visual area created around musical events in Łódź different from those in other cities (M. Sklodowska, „Hear Something. See Something. Say Something”. Łódzki underground of 1980s and 1990s, ‘Obieg’ [online access]. Jakub Brożek notices that Łódź is something irritating and energy-immersing (J. Brożek, Wypełnianie fabryk dźwiękiem, ‘Dwutygodnik’ [online access]).

2 J. McKenzie, Performuj albo... Od dyscypliny do performansu, transl. T. Kubikowski, Cracow 2011, p. 23.


6 J. Wachowski, Performans, Gdańsk 2011, p. 212.


8 Referring to the actor-network theory.


10 E. Gaust, op.cit. p. 5.


12 Ibid, p. 42.

13 J. Wachowski, Performans, op.cit. p. 54.


15 E. Gaust, op.cit. p. 31.


Finding and losing a place. Łódź underground towards experience of everyday life of a city

The Łódź underground had emerged from the punk aesthetic, yet it absorbed successive genres surprisingly quickly: hardcore, industrial, later also, among others, techno and rave. It utilized diverse forms of expression: most of all sound, but also projections, site-specific actions, graphic design or fashion. The article, drawing from the memories and output of several most important participants of the movement, poses the question, in what way the underground so easily absorbed new genres and aesthetic patterns on the one hand, while on the other – it remained so strongly separate.

The separation is revealed in the tension between experiencing new, experimenting musical and aesthetic trends, and the overwhelming everyday life of the post-industrial city. This tension was the reason why the underground movement was so intensely performative in its character, in which new knowledge and new inspirations were mostly created in action.

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