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The City That Is Not There? —The Author's In Situ Works in the Context of the City's Historicity

Doctoral dissertation in the field of art,
in the discipline of fine arts and art conservation

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Contents

122	1. Introduction
124	2. The Historicity of Place
130	3. Bielsko-Biała: The City That Is Not There?
134	4. The Author's In Situ Works
140	4.1 People
156	4.2 Faces
170	4.3 Sphere
180	4.4 Ivy
214	4.5 Wall
222	5. Summary
224	6. Conclusion
228	7. Bibliography
232	8. List of Illustrations





*In Vienna, I have always felt as if I were in Bielsko-Biała.
In Bielsko-Biała, I have never felt as if I were in Vienna.*

1. Introduction

My doctoral research initially centred on the concept of ‘Little Vienna’¹—a term once used to describe Bielsko and now commonly associated with my home city, Bielsko-Biała.

Over time, a certain dissonance began to grow within me. On one hand, there is Bielsko-Biała—a medium-sized city with a rich industrial heritage. On the other, Vienna—formerly imperial, and still imposing in its elegance and monumentality. As my work progressed, I realised that this initial comparison was beginning to limit my research perspective. Following a detailed analysis of scholarly studies documenting Viennese architectural influences in Bielsko-Biała, a significant turning point proved to be the recollections of residents from the years 1900–1945. It was thanks to their accounts that I began to realise how much the city’s unique character transcends mere architecture.

‘Our city always reminded me of Vienna. [...] Bielsko had its own promenade in the form of 3 Maja Street [...] The second main street—today’s 11 Listopada—had beautiful shops... [...] Today’s owners of these shops can only feel ashamed. What remarkable shop displays there were before the war!’²

¹ The term Little Vienna refers to towns whose architecture draws on the Viennese style. Cities described by this name also include Cieszyn, Lviv, Timișoara, and Ruse. For further discussion, see E. Janoszek, *Ile jest Wiednia w małym Wiedniu? O twórcach znad Dunaju w architekturze i sztuce Bielska-Białej*, in M. Bernacki, R. Pysz (eds.), *Czytanie miasta Bielsko-Biała jako kulturowy palimpsest*, Bielsko-Biała 2016, pp. 44–45, 58

² M. Koterbska, in J. Polak, *Bielsko-Biała w zwierciadle czasu. Wspomnienia mieszkańców z lat 1900–1945*, Bielsko-Biała 2012, pp. 185–186

'[...] From the Market Square, I also remember the inhabitants of Old Bielsko, dressed in their distinctive attire with tall, conical hats, speaking a local dialect – a distorted form of German.'³

'Higher up were the Złote Łany, or sztajnbrochy, where my friends and I used to play scouting-style games. In winter, we went there for sledging and skiing.'⁴

Reflections on the term 'Little Vienna' became a point of departure for a deeper exploration of how the past has shaped present-day Bielsko-Biała. In this dissertation, I focused on the artistic reinterpretation of the city's lost multicultural identity. My aim was to present this vision through original site-specific (*in situ*) works that are embedded within the historical context. Through these artistic interventions, I explored and symbolically reconstructed various aspects of this loss. In my works, I address the decline of the textile industry, forced displacement, the destruction of the historic architectural fabric, and my own critical stance towards the current urban space. In pursuing this doctorate, I decided to seek visual solutions that would allow me to creatively combine my primary field of digital photography with other media. Consequently, I chose to experiment freely with traditional techniques. The research process required continuous reflection on urban space, in both its physical and metaphorical dimensions. In these activities, I drew upon the experience gained during the creation of series such as *Reminiscences of Bielsko* (2009) and *Historianka* (2020), which provided the foundation for developing my working methodology. By exploring the complex identity of Bielsko-Biała, this work is situated within the long-established tradition of site-specific (*in situ*) art, as well as practices that take a critical approach to public space. It engages with the themes of post-memory and lost urban identity—subjects that have been, and continue to be, investigated by prominent theorists and artists such as Miwon Kwon, Krzysztof Wodiczko, Christian Boltanski, and Rachel Whiteread.

³ A. Herok, in J. Polak, op. cit., p. 180

⁴ J. Sikora, in J. Polak, op. cit., p. 195

2. The Historicity of Place





The city of Bielsko-Biała was formally created in 1951 through the merger of two distinct urban entities, Bielsko and Biała. Its complex identity has long inspired scholarly reflection. Scholars such as Professor Ewa Chojcka,⁵ Dr Ewa Janoszek,⁶ and Dr Jerzy Polak⁷ are among the many authors who have addressed this topic.

Bielsko-Biała has also inspired me—as both an artist and a resident who, from an early age, sensed something in the city that was at once inexplicable and intriguing. This fascination was sparked by imaginings of nineteenth-century Bielsko, often referred to as ‘Little Vienna’, which directed my attention to the architecture and urban planning of Vienna. I tested these visions against reality in 1998, when I visited the Austrian capital for the first time. I was deeply fascinated by the city. I began to notice similarities between Bielsko-Biała and Vienna. I remember gazing with admiration at the compact urban development composed of multi-storey buildings characterised by a high degree of attention to detail. I admired the well-maintained squares, clean streets, meticulously groomed lawns in public parks, and orderly urban spaces. I was particularly struck by its multiculturalism.

⁵ Prof. Ewa Chojcka (b. 1933)—art historian specialising in the art and architecture of Upper Silesia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

⁶ Dr Ewa Janoszek—art historian specialising in the architecture and urban planning of former Austrian Silesia and Galicia.

⁷ Dr Jerzy Polak (1954–2023)—historian and museum professional specialising in the history of Bielsko-Biała, the Pszczyna region, and Cieszyn Silesia.



It was during my observations in Vienna that I became fully aware of the scale of neglect and littering in Bielsko-Biala's urban environment, which fell short of the standards I had admired. The condition of the streets and the façades of tenement houses no longer reflected their former elegance. This situation was further exacerbated by the economic transformation in Poland after 1989,⁸ which led to a significant decline of the textile industry—the very foundation of Bielsko and Biala's development. It was no longer possible to encounter members of the Orthodox Jewish community in the streets or to hear a local Bielsko variety of German, both of which are referenced in historical studies. Trams, which in 1895 had symbolised modernity and technological progress, had ceased operating in the city by 1971. They gradually deteriorated in a so-called 'Tram Museum', an informal open-air storage site belonging to the Municipal Transport Authority in Bielsko-Biala. Within the historic urban fabric, architectural interventions began to emerge that bore no relation to their surroundings. In close proximity to the Art Nouveau tenement house 'Pod Żabami', the Klimczok Cooperative Department Store was constructed. In place of buildings from the Josephine period,⁹ a structure was erected that for many years housed the PKO Bank.

However, prior to these developments, Bielsko—whose origins date back to the fourteenth century—together with Biala, which was granted town rights more than 400 years later, formed a shared industrial centre.¹⁰ The urban fabric was characterised by a diversity of architectural styles, ranging from historicism and Art Nouveau to early modernism.¹¹ The region was historically dominated by a German-speaking majority, while the presence of Polish and Jewish communities contributed to its complex cultural, religious, and social identity.¹²

⁸ P. Kenig, W. Stysińska, *Stara Fabryka: przemysł Bielska-Białej w XIX i XX wieku: dawna technika włókiennicza*, Bielsko-Biala 2018, p. 47

⁹ The period of independent rule by Joseph II (reigned 1780–1790), Holy Roman Emperor.

¹⁰ B. Chorąży, P. Kenig (eds.), *Zwiedzaj Bielsko-Białą. Trasy Turystyczne. Przewodnik*, Bielsko-Biala 2018, p. 35

¹¹ E. Chojecka, *Architektura i urbanistyka Bielska-Białej: 1855–1939*, Katowice 1987, p. 11

¹² B. Chorąży, P. Kenig (eds.), op. cit., p. 6



The coexisting—and at times interwoven—cultures of former Bielsko and Biała constitute not only a testament to a fascinating history, but above all a key to understanding the dynamic development of the textile industry.

As a result of the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648), Lutheran clothmakers were among those who migrated to the city. As indicated in the relevant literature, their settlement laid the foundation for the development of clothmaking, which over the following two centuries evolved into the textile industry.¹³ According to Piotr Kenig¹⁴ (2014), Lutherans—Evangelicals—provided a significant impetus for progress through their industriousness, strategic investments, technological improvements, and the expansion of industrial infrastructure.¹⁵ Over time, they were joined by members of the Jewish community, who had previously been engaged in crafts and small-scale trade. As the wool industry developed, they began to see it as an opportunity for economic advancement. According to the sources, '[...] they monopolised the trade in wool and cloth, and in the 1830s some of them established the first factories.'¹⁶ Some scholars even argue that the nineteenth-century prosperity of Bielsko was largely due to their activity, and that the use of the term 'Little Vienna' in reference to the city's architecture was closely linked to their role.¹⁷

Meanwhile, the urban fabric of Bielsko and Biała—so consistently compared to that of Vienna¹⁸—as Professor Ewa Chojecka observes: '[...] through its architectural legacy, it creates an environment with a distinct and self-defined artistic expression.'¹⁹

¹³ P. Kenig, W. Stysińska, op. cit., p. 17

¹⁴ Piotr Kenig—historian specialising in the history of the industrialist families of Bielsko and Biała.

¹⁵ bielsko tv, 'Bielscy przemysłowcy na przestrzeni wieków. Wywiad', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u7Cj5GXcjG0&t=218s>, 2:37–3:38, (accessed 26 April 2025)

¹⁶ B. Chorąży, P. Kenig (eds.), op. cit., p. 103

¹⁷ Historia mówiona / Kolekcja Muzeum POLIN, 'Bielsko rozkwit zawdzięcza Żydom. Dorota Wiewióra o życiu Żydów w Bielsku-Białej', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dg6T1L22blc&t=745s>, 12:25–15:42, (accessed 27 July 2025)

¹⁸ For further discussion, see Bujak M., 'Śladami Wiednia', *Relacje-Interpretacje. Kwartalnik Regionalnego Ośrodka Kultury w Bielsku-Białej*, nr 2 (6) maj 2007, Bielsko-Biała 2007, pp. 8–13

¹⁹ E. Chojecka, op. cit., p. 99



The completion of the railway lines in 1855 can be regarded as the beginning of dynamic changes in Bielsko's urban fabric.²⁰ Access to the railways, which connected the city to the European railway network, contributed to its expansion, the establishment of new factories, and the influx of workers. With this development, the prosperity of the inhabitants increased, and they began to erect grand buildings. Although the neighbouring city of Biała experienced these changes with some delay and slightly less momentum²¹, from the second half of the nineteenth century onward the cities became centres of architectural activity, attracting both local and Viennese architects. As Professor Chojecka points out: '[...] the construction movement [...] as a result of rapid technical and economic progress was carried out on a large scale and with unprecedented scope; it created an architectural substance that surpassed in quantity everything created in earlier periods.'²² Although Professor Chojecka states that cities form '[...] homogeneous urban organisms that are almost exemplary',²³ it is precisely the contrast between them that is particularly evident along the Biała River, which historically served as their natural boundary, particularly in the area of the present-day intersection of PCK and 1 Maja Streets.

The success, which was the result of the entrepreneurial spirit of industrialists and the labour of workers, led to Bielsko and Biała becoming the most important centre of the wool industry throughout Silesia and the third largest within the Austro-Hungarian Empire.²⁴

From the mid-nineteenth century, other branches of industry also began to develop. Factories producing textile machinery, electric motors, boilers, copper and metal goods, screws and fittings, as well as metal and iron foundries, emerged in the cities. In addition to these, there were also facilities producing high- and low-alcohol beverages, fruit preserves, brushes, paintbrushes, matches, soap, and gymnastics equipment.²⁵ After the collapse of Austria-Hungary and the regaining of independ-

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 17

²¹ B. Chorąży, P. Kenig (eds.), op. cit., p. 35; cf. E. Chojecka, op. cit., p. 31

²² E. Chojecka, op. cit., p. 27

²³ Ibidem, p. 30

²⁴ P. Kenig, W. Stysińska, op. cit., p. 29

²⁵ For further discussion, see ibidem, pp. 30–31



ence by Poland, the Bielsko-Biała centre remained one of the leading centres of the textile industry. It was also among the most industrialised areas of the Second Polish Republic. After the outbreak of the Second World War, despite the fact that the ownership structure of many factories underwent fundamental changes following the incorporation of Bielsko and Biała into the Third Reich, industrial censuses continued to record an impressive number of plants. In the post-war reality, on the basis of the Nationalisation Act of 3 January 1946, the new authorities nationalised all factories and subsequently began merging them into larger enterprises.²⁶ Although from the mid-1960s Bielsko-Biała began to be referred to as the 'city of a hundred industries', with the establishment of the Small Car Factory (FSM), where the Syrena and the Fiat 126p—commonly known as the 'maluch'—were produced, the electrical machinery industry became the most important branch of industry in the city. The textile industry, which for centuries had been one of the key factors driving changes in Bielsko and Biała, almost completely collapsed as a result of decisions taken by the state authorities.²⁷ Over time, the FSM met the same fate.

²⁷ Ibidem, pp. 45–47

3. Bielsko-Biała: The City That Is Not There?





Bielsko-Biała. In this city, I see not only a collection of buildings, streets, and people, but also an invisible, metaphorical space. The city I contemplate does not exist in a physical sense. It eludes imposed names and delineated boundaries. It is a product of my imagination, closely linked to the memory of former Bielsko and Biała, acquired through archival photographs and written history. My experiences correspond to the concept of postmemory formulated by Marianne Hirsch, who describes memory borrowed by those who did not directly experience the events in question.²⁸ The memories of the residents allow me to evoke the atmosphere of those years, while archival images enable me to reconstruct their appearance.

I search for material traces of my imagined city while walking through the historic centre. As I walk along 11 Listopada Street, I enjoy looking at the restored façades of the tenement houses. Some of them, with their Josephine-era architecture, evoke images of Vienna at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which I came to know through the photographs of August Stauda.²⁹ Unfortunately, the revitalisation is only superficial. Buildings from whose half-open windows voices once emerged are now silent. The premises that once housed bakeries, pastry shops, bookshops, restaurants, and wine bars, as well as pharmacies, shops, and drugstores, now stand empty. The workshops of artisans—tailors,

²⁸ G. Gajewska, 'Postpamięć jako marzenie senne – Achtung Zelig! Druga wojna Krzysztofa Gawronkiewicza i Krystiana Rosenberga', *Images* vol. IX/no. 17–18, Poznań 2011, p. 69

²⁹ August Stauda (1861–1928)—Viennese photographer specialising in documenting Vienna's old buildings slated for demolition.



glaziers, butchers—once bustling with life.³⁰ A similar phenomenon can be observed in many renovated tenement houses in another part of the city, whose interiors are devoid of any traces of human presence. The absence of the ‘world of living people’³¹ strikes me particularly during Sunday walks, where I perceive emptiness behind the restored façades. The former energy of the street—not the festive kind—is then recalled through memories of a world that has temporarily vanished:

‘That period [...] remains in my memory as the world of the city—seen in the street as the world of living people. [...] It was a street observed with curiosity from the apartment windows—by a child noticing differences in behaviour and in the way of dress of the residents of the surrounding tenement houses, as well as the “businesspeople” and factory owners, and their workers, encountered in various situations on the street. One could also mention Polish soldiers in impeccably tailored uniforms and policemen who presented themselves well in the street scene. There were also members of youth organisations of various nationalities.’³²

The specific character of the street described in the memoirs of Adam Bunsch Jr. disappeared with the year 1945. Since then, Bielsko and Biała have become cities in which the clamour of diverse languages has fallen silent, and the traditions and customs of a multi-ethnic community have given way to new social and cultural realities.³³ Over time, the industrial character of Bielsko-Biała also faded, and the city ceased to be shaped by workers and their specific rhythm of labour. We can no longer find any factories there that once created—as Adam Bunsch Jr. put it—‘the landscape of an industrial city [...] with its characteristic view of chimneys and smoke set against the backdrop of the Beskid landscape.’³⁴ The end of

³⁰ J. Polak, *op. cit.*, pp. 223–224

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 275

³² A. Bunsch junior, in J. Polak, *op. cit.*, p. 275

³³ For further discussion, see B. Chorąży, P. Kenig (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 7

³⁴ J. Polak, *op. cit.*, p. 275



the ‘city of a hundred industries’³⁵ initiated the transformation of Bielsko-Biała, leaving it burdened with abandoned buildings—material traces of its former glory.

At this point, I ask myself some fundamental questions: What kind of city do I actually live in? Is it still ‘Little Vienna’, or merely an afterimage of its former self? As Bielsko-Biała, at the turn of 2022–2023, undertakes efforts to obtain the title of European Capital of Culture 2029 (ECC), it begins to make up for years of neglect—a fact that seems to be confirmed by the city’s new strategy, which envisions development based on culture and grassroots activity among its residents³⁶. Hence, initiatives such as displaying photographs of Bielsko-Biała residents in empty shop windows take on particular significance. There is, however, a risk that the enthusiasm surrounding the ECC will overshadow the substantive meaning of the entire project, reducing it to nothing more than a series of spectacles. Once we understand that this is not about a ‘festival of festivals’, we will recognise another opportunity in the history of the twin cities for development and, more importantly, for restoring it to national (Polish), and perhaps even European, consciousness.³⁷ Is there, then, room alongside contemporary successes for the difficult past that Professor Chojecka says is often silenced out of fear of its problematic nature?³⁸

³⁵ P. Kenig, W. Stysińska, op. cit., p. 45

³⁶ For further discussion, see *Bielsko-Biała PSK 2026*, <https://bb2026.pl/>, (accessed 1 February 2026)

³⁷ Beskidzka TV, ‘Czy Bielsko-Biała zostanie dziś EUROPEJSKĄ STOLICĄ KULTURY? Miasto na tym zarobi, czy dopłaci?’, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h7B0t7wPTzA>, 1:15–1:25, (accessed 10 January 2026)

³⁸ For further discussion, see ‘Kiedyś “Mały Wiedeń”, dziś upadek Fiata. Gorzka diagnoza znanej profesor: “To dwumiało jest samo dla siebie problemem”’, <https://dziennikzachodni.pl/ar/c1p2-28881111>, (accessed 13 April 2026)

4. The Author's In Situ Works





This doctoral dissertation consists of ephemeral artistic works³⁹ placed in the urban space of Bielsko-Biała, which most fully embodied my main artistic and research objectives. These works do not constitute a series of independent actions, but rather form a conceptually coherent cycle of *in situ* artistic interventions—understood as the creative use of a physical place.⁴⁰ Their aim was to bring to light the invisible, forgotten layers of the city's memory, thereby constituting a practical extension of theoretical reflections on postmemory and the artist's role in the process of reinterpreting a place's lost identity.

Proper preparation required conceptual work and a thorough analysis of the place's context—historical, social, and spatial. To this end, during architectural walks through Bielsko-Biała, I carefully observed places as potential sites for artistic interventions. This constituted a study of space, enabling me to better understand it. My selection of architectural objects was not dictated solely by form; I was primarily looking for traces of memory—cracks, old inscriptions, faded plaques. Photography became a key tool in this process, serving both to faithfully reproduce reality and to deconstruct space and capture its hidden details. I focused on the play of light and shadow, which highlights the texture of the façades and reveals traces of human presence. The materials gathered in this way served, on the one hand, as a form of

³⁹ Ephemeral—short-lived, fleeting, transient, W. Kopaliński, *Słownik wyrazów obcych i zwrotów obcojęzycznych z almanachem*, Warszawa 2007, p. 150

⁴⁰ K. Trzeciak, 'Site-specific: miejsca oporu i oporne definicje', *Kwartalnik Rzeźby "Orońsko"*, nr 4/2024, Orońsko 2024, p. 4



documentation, and on the other, as the foundation for my artistic activities, in which creative experimentation and the desire to enter into a dialogue with the existing fabric of the city became key elements. Independently of my field photographic research, I conducted archival research at the Historical Museum in Bielsko-Biała and at the Bielsko-Biała Branch of the State Archive, which allowed me to give my works a more credible historical context.

Working in public space requires directness and an element of unpredictability; hence, my aim became to confront the casual passerby with thought-provoking themes in unexpected locations. By remaining anonymous, I was able to freely express my criticism, using forms of expression that constituted an unofficial artistic intervention.⁴¹ In this way, my actions became part of the street art tradition, represented by artists such as Blek le Rat, Banksy, Shepard Fairey, JR, and John Fekner.⁴² However, my intention was not to damage property. I planned the interventions in such a way that they could be removed without leaving a permanent trace. Out of concern for the environment, I used recycled materials and employed only water-based paints, varnishes, and adhesives.

Observing the nature of contemporary urban art in Bielsko-Biała—murals, monuments, and posters—I took a different approach to my own works. Placing objects in a public space that is accessible to all and free of charge⁴³ requires formal approval.⁴⁴ I chose not to seek it, drawing on previous experiences of collaborating with the city, which had raised concerns about interference in the subject matter and visual concept of the proposed works. I therefore carried out unofficial artistic interventions to achieve my intended goal and actively participate in urban discourse concerning public space.⁴⁵

⁴¹ B. Dziadzia, B. Głyda-Żydek, S. Piskorek-Oczko, *Sztuka w przestrzeni publicznej. Artystyczne wymiary wytwarzania kapitału społecznego i kulturowego*, Bielsko-Biała – Cieszyn 2015, p. 34

⁴² The artists mentioned represent a shared current in street art, characterised by commentary on contemporary reality. Yet street art remains ambiguous: it is both a set of visual practices and a practice operating within a specific social circulation; cf. Ł. Biskupski, *Prosto z ulicy. Sztuki wizualne w dobie mediów społecznościowych i kultury uczestnictwa – street art*, Warszawa 2017, pp. 29–32.

⁴³ B. Głyda, *Przestrzenie władzy Miasto*, Toruń 2020, p. 228

⁴⁴ Cf. W. Łabędź, *Street art. Sztuka ulicy*, Warszawa 2024, p. 10

⁴⁵ B. Dziadzia, B. Głyda-Żydek, S. Piskorek-Oczko, op. cit., p. 34



The artistic techniques were selected experimentally. In all my works (although I employed different media in each), I pursued the same goal—they were intended to provoke a dialogue between what was and what is now. For example, in the Ivy series, my aim was to evoke in the viewer a sense of overlapping eras. By using the anaglyph effect, I sought to create a sense of space through which the photographic posters became a kind of ‘time machine’, allowing for the simultaneous experience of historical images and contemporary space. The unifying element across all the works was the use of layers of metallic paint imitating gold, which served as a symbolic reference to the heyday of Bielsko and Biała in the context of the term ‘Little Vienna’.



To view the multimedia content, use your phone and the EyeJack app

4.1. People





Memories of former residents describe a moment in the city's history when there was greater freedom in using its public spaces:

'Passing by Danielczyk's hat shop (today's "Befado") [...] between the street and the bank of the Białka River stretched a strip of fallow land where Roma people sometimes camped.'⁴⁶

Unlike in Vienna, it is not common practice in the centre of Bielsko-Biała to relax on the grass. What's more, the city's green spaces have for years been a source of contention between residents and officials. The conflict is exacerbated by the felling of trees, which are disappearing from the urban landscape. I feel their absence most acutely during the summer, when I walk through sun-heated, concrete-covered streets in search of shade.

The Viennese relaxing in Stadtpark⁴⁷ became the subject of my photographs. Although there was nothing extraordinary about their behaviour—the sight of people reading books, chatting, or simply resting—it evoked a sense of calm within me. The space surrounding them was not staged; it is a place accessible and welcoming to everyone. In addition to benches, swings, and sandboxes, the grass offered them freedom, and the trees muffled the city's hustle and bustle. Despite my admiration, the image also raised questions: why can't we achieve such an atmosphere in Bielsko-Biała? Is it due to a lack of appropriate regulations, or perhaps our habits regarding respect for green spaces? In light of these considerations, I decided to create a symbolic bridge between the two urban spaces, bringing Viennese models of natural recreation to Bielsko-Biała.

When creating my figurative works, I began by selecting four Viennese subjects from among a dozen or so that I had photographed. Next, using software, I converted the photographs into vector images devoid of shadows and tonal gradations.

⁴⁶ K. Korzeniowski, in J. Polak, op. cit., p. 308

⁴⁷ Stadtpark—Vienna's oldest city park, located in its very centre.



Simplified in this way, the image was ready to be transferred onto the board. I chose OSB board as my painting surface because of its durability and weather resistance. After cutting out the human shapes, I began painting the images onto them in acrylic. During this process, I experimented with tonal values, juxtaposing light, muted shades with deep, dark patches of colour. Corrections—repainting several times—proved necessary in order to achieve the final result. Despite the contemporary character of the works, I applied gold paint in selected areas as a reference to the idea of ‘Little Vienna’.

By installing four figures of Viennese people in 2023 in a small public green space at the intersection of PCK and Sempołowska Streets in Bielsko-Biała, I sought to draw attention to simple, natural forms of recreation. In this way, my work served as a commentary on the direction of the revitalisation of green public spaces, opposing imposed forms of recreation and emphasising the need for its more spontaneous nature.

During my observations, it became clear that the figures had been set too shallowly in the ground and lacked additional stabilisation, which caused them to topple over in the wind. This structural flaw—I must admit—partially undermined the intended visual effect. However, to my surprise, passers-by noticed the fallen figures and took the initiative to set them upright again. This unexpected interaction



caused the figures to change their positions several times. This prolonged the duration of the intervention—from September to December—did not spare it from an act of vandalism. After three months, the figures were broken, and their remains were removed a few days later.

The small public green space, which served as the site of the three-month intervention, underwent revitalisation in 2025 as part of the ‘adaptation to climate change in Bielsko-Biała’⁴⁸ programme. Over 2,600 grasses and perennials, 111 shrubs, and three trees were planted there, and several concrete benches were installed along the newly created walking path.⁴⁹ In this way, the focus of my intervention is completely at odds with the results of this revitalisation, which merely replicated a well-worn pattern. It seems that only the sign reminding us of the ban on entering the lawn was forgotten.

⁴⁸ Investments increasing the city’s resilience to heavy rainfall, flooding, and heatwaves. For further discussion, see ‘Adaptacja do zmian klimatu na terenie miasta Bielska-Białej’, <https://bielsko-biala.pl/fundusze/adaptacja-do-zmian-klimatu-na-terenie-miasta-bielska-bialej>, (accessed 26 January 2026)

⁴⁹ ‘Skwer gotowy’, <https://bielsko-biala.pl/aktualnosc/skwer-gotowy>, (accessed 26 January 2026)























4.2. Faces





For years, I believed that the Germans, Jews, and Poles living in Bielsko-Biała coexisted in complete harmony. This belief took shape in my childhood, when, captivated by ‘Little Vienna’, I would encounter cursory tourist descriptions of the place. However, as I delved deeper into its past, I began to uncover a more difficult side of the city.

‘Bielsko, lying just beyond the border of Galicia, together with the city of Biała, remains to this day a stronghold of the most fervent Hakata movement in the Polish lands under Austrian partition. Surrounded on all sides by a Polish population, these two cities defend themselves against all influences of Polishness and, indeed, with truly Germanic arrogance, seek to eradicate all traces that this is Polish land. [...] Bielsko and Biała are border strongholds in the Germans’ age-old “Drang nach Osten”.’⁵⁰

As historical accounts indicate, the multicultural character of Bielsko-Biała was lost as a result of World War II, the consequences of which transformed the city into a largely monocultural entity.⁵¹ Of what was once a vibrant melting pot of cultures, only tangible remnants remain—through which the city’s former identity may still be discerned. Among the most distinctive are the historic tenement buildings characterised by rich architectural detail, where mascarons particularly draw my attention. I perceive them as the ‘faces’ of the former Bielsko and Biała: silent witnesses to historical transformations and to the lives of their past inhabitants.

The loss of multiculturalism in my work was symbolised by the figure of a woman with a suitcase. Her posture expressed the effort required to lift her luggage—a burden representing the memories, history, and cultural heritage that people who were forcibly displaced had to take with them. The motif of the past materialising in the form of objects appears in the work of Christian Boltanski, who inspires

⁵⁰ ‘Appeal of the Spółka Ochrony’, October 1912, cited in J. Polak, *Dom Polski w Bielsku 1902–1952*, Bielsko-Biała 2002, p. 42

⁵¹ For further discussion, see B. Chorąży, P. Kenig (eds.), op. cit., p. 7; cf. Ł. Giertler, ‘Miasto utracone’, *Relacje-Interpretacje. Kwartalnik Regionalnego Ośrodka Kultury w Bielsku-Białej*, nr 1 (77) marzec 2025, Bielsko-Biała 2025, pp. 23–26. The author supplements this historical overview with an analysis of the processes shaping the identity and memory of contemporary residents.



me. In his installations, the artist often used personal items—photographs, clothing, and even recordings of heartbeats—intended to represent absence, loss, and memory.⁵² Boltanski often worked with portraits of others; by giving them new meaning, he created a world that was both nostalgic and unsettling.⁵³

Drawing on the method of creatively reworking existing elements, I used an architectural motif in my work—the image of a female mascarón embedded in the façade of the building at 9a, 3 Maja Street. I rendered the expression of shock captured in this image in a simplified painterly form on an OSB board. Referring to the historical value of a lost world, I used paints imitating gold and drew a thin layer of light paint from the eyes, suggesting tears running down the cheeks.

I installed the figure, which seemed to bear witness to unimaginable events in the area next to the Catholic cemetery in Biała. The location was dictated by the ruin of a building, whose appearance intensified the traumatic symbolism of the installation. On the third day from the moment of installation, a cemetery maintenance worker collecting wilted flowers at that spot removed the figure. He left it damaged on a pile of debris. My attempt to repair it and move it to another location proved futile. I regarded the fact that it had been broken just an hour later as a symbolic conclusion to the intervention—the act of destroying the work became a metaphor for the brutality of postwar displacements:

‘To this day, I remember one of the most tragic incidents I witnessed in connection with them. When they came for Mrs. Hönigsmann, a nearly eighty-year-old woman, she did not understand the situation at all. She wanted to go up to the third floor to fetch our mother so that she could help her, but a militiaman (not in uniform, only wearing an armband) did not allow her to do so and beat her.’⁵⁴

Referring to individual fates as well as the city’s lost multiculturalism, I created a second figure—depicted as a sobbing woman sitting on a tram seat. As with the first figure, I based her appearance on a mascarón derived from the façade of the same tenement building. I placed her at a historically significant site in the Olszówka district—the former terminus of the tram line, where she ‘waited’ for a month for her last tram. After that time, she was removed, leaving no trace behind.

⁵² ‘Christian Boltanski. W mgnieniu oka’, <https://cricoteka.pl/pl/christiana-boltanski-so-quick-tak-szybko/>, (accessed 17 August 2025)

⁵³ ‘Kronika wypadków Christiana Boltanskiego’, https://www.swiatobrazu.pl/kronika_wypadkow_christiana_boltanskiego.html, (accessed 17 August 2025)

⁵⁴ K. Korzeniowski, in J. Polak, op. cit., p. 369

















4.3. Sphere





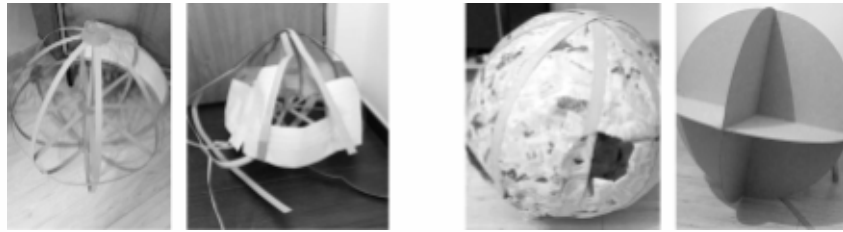
From the windows of my childhood room, I watched the closure of one of the Wega wool factory's divisions. I remember how its production gradually ceased, and with it, the noise of the looms that had echoed throughout the neighbourhood fell silent. When the building stood empty, it remained in darkness for many years. In hindsight, I realised that the emptiness that prevailed there was a symbol of the end of the textile industry. Reflecting on this situation led me to consider the work of Rachel Whiteread. The artist became known for giving material form to space —by casting the interiors of houses and everyday objects.⁵⁵ Just as the absence she cast became a sculpture, so the abandoned 'Wega' became for me a monument to absence—the fallen textile industry. It was this very sight—an empty hall, a silent witness to past glory—that made me realise that the history of Bielsko-Biała's industry is worth remembering.

Bielsko-Biała is home to an institution whose origins date back to 1865. It is the Bielsko Industrial School, established in connection with the rapid development of the textile industry. The building, which has housed the institution—known to older residents as 'Włókiennik'—since 1913,⁵⁶ is surrounded by a stylish, original fence bearing visible signs of deterioration. At its corners are massive stone spheres resting on stone plinths. At one of these, my attention was drawn to a rusty iron rod protruding from the plinth—a remnant of a missing sphere. In this image, I saw a metaphor for a world that no longer exists, an absence I felt compelled to fill.

Although the missing element left room for multiple interpretations, I decided that only a new sphere could properly relate to the original character of the surroundings. My intention, however, was not to recreate its historical appearance. I wanted it to become a symbolic monument responding to the site's history and commemorating a broader phenomenon—the industrial development that shaped the character of Bielsko-Biała.

⁵⁵ E. Łączyńska, 'Anioł Południa', <https://artpapier.com/index.php?page=artykul&wydanie=57&artykul=1281>, (accessed 20 August 2025)

⁵⁶ 'Państwowa Szkoła Przemysłowa w Bielsku-Białej obecnie Bielska Szkoła Przemysłowa', <https://bsp.edu.pl/historia/>, (accessed 20 August 2025)



Anonymous artistic interventions in a city under video surveillance require swift action. While searching for a way to build the sphere, I realised it could not be heavy, as this would hinder easy installation. Furthermore, the material had to be safe in order to minimise the risk of injury to people or damage to property in the event of uncontrolled movement. I decided to use 2 mm thick bookbinding board. I cut it into strips, believing that their assembly would create a solid, openwork structure for further work. However, the concept turned out to be flawed. The use of such thin material was a design flaw—the frame was too flimsy to support its own weight. During the second attempt, I changed both the thickness of the material and the design of the frame, which, due to its complex structure, came to resemble Arnaldo Pomodoro's *Sfera con sfera*. Although it was sturdy, it proved too heavy to justify further work.

On my third attempt, I used a large balloon, which I began covering with torn pieces of newspaper. A drawback of this method was the gradual loss of air, which caused the paper layer to tear during attempts to inflate it. Following this line of experimentation, I purchased an exercise ball, which I covered with a much stronger material—a plaster bandage. As I was unable to achieve a smooth surface, the final result proved disappointing.

In the face of these setbacks, I lost sight of the fact that the essence of the project lay in its concept, rather than in the struggle with material constraints. By turning to a 48 cm Styrofoam sphere, I was finally able to focus on the main idea. I envisioned the final result as a golden object featuring a composition of letters forming the historical names of factories—not only textile mills, but also metalworks, machine shops, and chemical plants. It was important to me to use reproductions of typefaces from historical advertising prints for this purpose. I wanted not only the names but also their visual form to capture the spirit of the era. To this end, I conducted archival research in the State Archive, where I obtained a wealth of source material, which also constituted a study of the typography of the period.

Although the sphere appeared complete, its interior—like an empty shell—was devoid of any content. I decided to fill this intriguing void with meaningful content. The idea of placing words in different languages inside it arose from the fact that the development of Bielsko-Biała's industry was driven by the city's multicultural



community. I sourced them from press articles published in Bielsko-Biała between 1895 and 1930, including, among others, *Wieniec-Pszczółka*, *Bielitz-Biala'er Anzeiger*, and *דאָס ייִדישע וואָרט*. I treated these words, taken out of context, as the voices of anonymous workers whose contributions were just as significant as those of the factory owners whose names adorn the object's outer surface.

The intervention was intended to culminate when a bystander began to remove the sphere from its pedestal, thereby releasing the words contained within it.⁵⁷ This conclusion—though somewhat different from what I had envisioned—was hastened by weather conditions that damaged the mounting hole. This caused the object to tilt, resulting in individual slips of paper spilling out. Carried by the wind, they ‘filled’ the space with meaning, spreading its hidden message. The sphere remained in place from September to November, making it one of the longest-lasting interventions.

⁵⁷ Cf. W. Ellsworth-Jones, *Banksy. Rewolucjonista spod ściany*, Warszawa 2022, pp. 236–239. The case of *Girl with Balloon*, as described by Ellsworth-Jones, although different from my intervention, remains related to it in terms of incorporating the act of destruction into the concept of artistic action.













4.4. Ivy





As I walk through the centre of Bielsko-Biała, I cannot help but feel as though I am a spectator in a theatre whose principal actors have long since departed, and what I observe is merely a beautiful yet empty stage set. There are also discordant elements within it, entirely out of keeping with the Viennese aesthetic—namely, contemporary metal bus shelters. My first artistic intervention in Bielsko-Biała was a series of large-format paste-ups with Art Nouveau motifs, which I began affixing to these structures. Despite the high hopes I had for this project, the final result made one thing clear to me: my project was not about decoration. As a result, I created yet another element of the stage set that not only failed to provoke discussion but also elicited no reaction whatsoever. I would even argue that the paste-ups blended so seamlessly into the metal shelters that they were no longer perceived as a street art intervention. This experience showed me that my interventions should be something that cannot be ignored—something that, rather than decorating, compels a response. While considering a new direction for my work, I came across Banksy's words: 'Imagine a city [...] where standing at a bus stop was never boring.'⁵⁸

In creating this series, I decided to break away from the traditional poster form—typically associated with a simple, legible layout based on typography and graphic elements. By deliberately omitting these elements from my compositions, I wanted each piece to communicate with the viewer exclusively through photographic imagery, which I enhanced through the use of an anaglyph effect. As a result, the works feature red–cyan offsets that create a three-dimensional illusion when viewed through special glasses. In this way, I added an additional interpretative layer, moving beyond the traditional approach to viewing art. The viewing experience thus became active rather than passive.

The works were vertical in format, with a uniform layer of ivy—a symbol of memory and immortality⁵⁹—playing a dominant role. In the paintings, the plant forms an impassable barrier, separating portraits of historical figures from contemporary reality—figures whose activities shaped the urban, economic, and social fabric of

⁵⁸ A. Mattanza, *Street art: wielcy artyści i ich wizje*, Warszawa 2020, p. 1

⁵⁹ 'Bluszcz', in W. Kopaliński, *Słownik symboli*, Warszawa 1991, p. 25

‘Little Vienna.’ Among them were the architects Max Fabiani, Carl Korn, and Emanuel Rost Jr.; industrialists Gustaw Josephy and Franz Strzygowski; as well as the rebellious clergyman and social activist Father Stanisław Stojąłowski, and the last holder of the entailed estate in Bielsko, Prince Aleksander Karol Ludwik Sułkowski. I drew them from commemorative plaques and historical studies to cast them in a new role.

In this project, I used archival portrait photographs. Their formal character—aligned with the fashion trends of the time—was digitally altered, through which I introduced my own gestural language into the figures. Presented in this way, the figures emerging from the past ‘commented’ on the contemporary reality of Bielsko-Biała, which they would likely regard with detachment today. This procedure corresponds with Krzysztof Wodiczko’s 2018 project *Żywe obrazy* [*Living Pictures*], in which historical portraits were made to speak through the gestures, and even through the voices, of contemporary citizens.⁶⁰

I did not assign this series to any category. Therefore, I do not classify it as informational, propaganda, social, or—least of all—advertising posters. I deliberately left their classification to the judgment of viewers who might have encountered them at selected bus stops and—occasionally—in a shop window. I did not choose these locations at random; I ensured their historical connection to a given figure, which in one case required abandoning the bus shelter in favour of a display window. Notably, my interventions preceded a municipal initiative called ‘Stop: Art’, which aimed to present selected artists working in street art, photography, and tattooing.⁶¹ In contrast to this project, the exhibition of my works was short-lived—the posters lasted only a few days before disappearing. They also deteriorated due to weather conditions, a consequence of the material choice, as I produced all the prints digitally on drawing paper. This acceptable shortcoming was, however, compensated for by its pleasant texture, which, combined with hand-applied gold layers on selected ivy leaves, gave the works a distinctive sense of refinement. The initial format was 106 × 200 cm, but the final dimensions of the posters had to be modified to fit various types of bus shelters.

⁶⁰ For further discussion, see ‘Krzysztof Wodiczko’, <https://culture.pl/pl/tworca/krzysztof-wodiczko>, (accessed 11 November 2025). A detailed study of Krzysztof Wodiczko’s artistic oeuvre see B. Czubak, K. Wodiczko, *Krzysztof Wodiczko. Na rzecz domeny publicznej*, Łódź 2015

⁶¹ For further discussion, see ‘Przystanek: Sztuka’, <https://punkt11.pl/projekt/przystaneksztuka/>, (accessed 11 November 2025)

















Lipnicka Żywiecka (205)
13 11w 35 35L









Advertisement for Gemini Park featuring a male athlete running on a track. The background is blue with a white star logo and the text "GEMINI PARK". The athlete is wearing a black and white striped singlet. The track is red with white lane numbers 4, 5, 6, and 7. The text "ZE SPORTEM CI DO TWARZY!" is prominently displayed in the center. At the bottom, there are logos for "SPORTS DIRECT", "marken", "4F", "REGATTA", "SFD", and "GYM".

ZE SPORTEM
CI DO TWARZY!

SPORTS DIRECT | marken | 4F | REGATTA
SFD | GYM



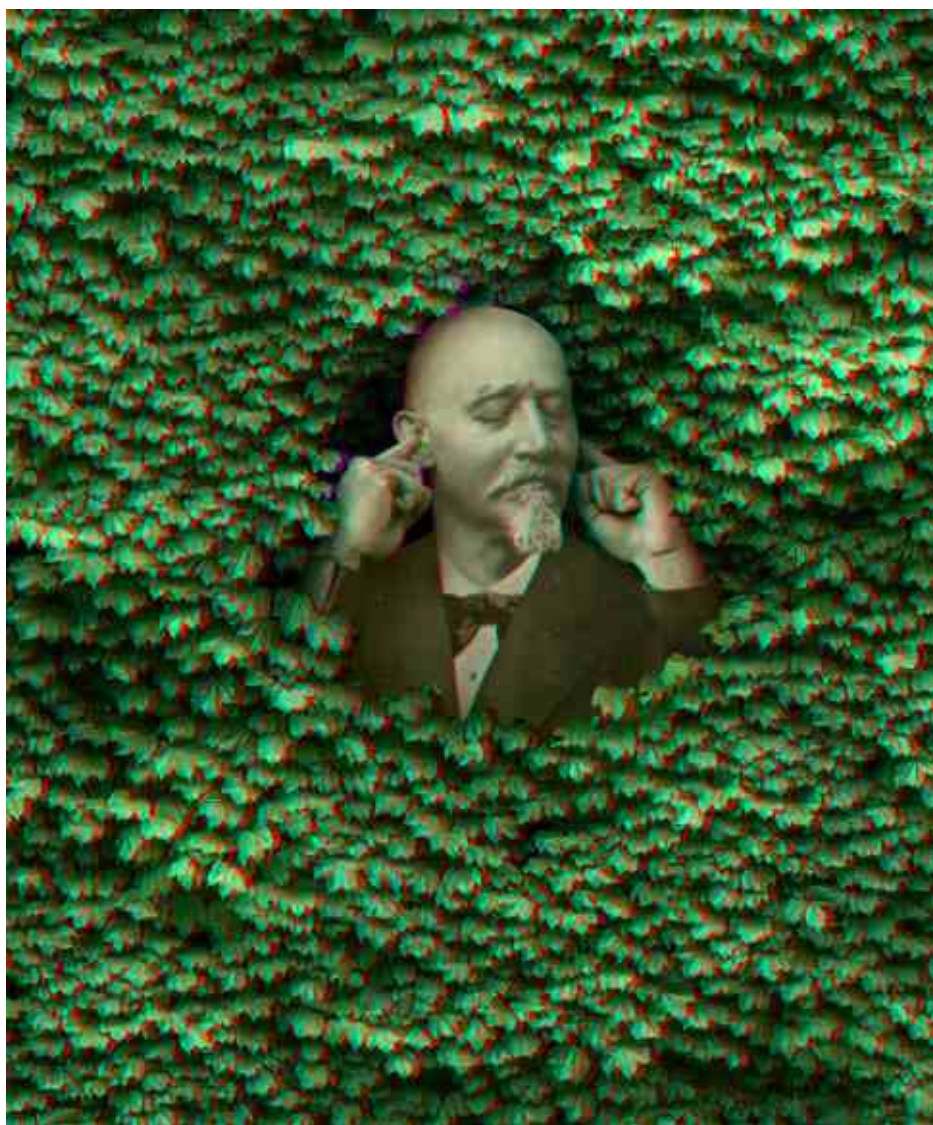


Bielsko-Biala

PKP Lp 263









Partyzantów Białos (253)







5
PL. ZIMNY / WILNY













WYKONANIE
TANCA I WESELA
WIECZORKI TANECZNE
EM TOWARZYSKI
ANTA DLA SINGLE
WIOZDY TANECZNE W CZASY Z
TANECZNE
WANNIENSKI I URODZINY Z TANECZNE
A OPRAWY TANECZNEJ
O TYPU IMPREZ

365













4.5. Wall





‘Respecting the old—we create the new’ was the propaganda slogan accompanying the redevelopment of the city centre of Bielsko-Biała in the 1970s.⁶² From today’s perspective, these words appear to be an ironic justification for the decisions made by the ‘Presidium of the Municipal National Council in Bielsko-Biała’,⁶³ which, in my view, amounted to an assault by the authorities on the historic urban fabric. ‘Respecting the old’ in practice meant the ruthless demolition of what was deemed less ‘representative’, or—as it was put in the press in 1973: ‘which obstruct the normal functioning of urban transport’.⁶⁴

In my opinion, the redevelopment of the city centre of Bielsko-Biała has robbed the city of some of its unique character. When I walk through its streets, I sense an absence in places once occupied by the former castle marketplace or by the tenement houses at the intersection of Sikorskiego and Partyzantów Streets—sites which I can now only imagine based on old postcards. The deliberate removal of architecture from the cityscape has destroyed its urban coherence. It is therefore striking to me that I have not encountered any artistic response to these transformations. I saw this absence as a call to create new works that symbolically commemorate what has been taken from the city.

Near Żwirki i Wigury Square stood a tenement building slated for demolition. Its crumbling façade had been ‘secured’ with OSB panels, forming a large, uniform surface. Behind this makeshift structure, however, lay the past, and the protruding edges of the warped panels gave the impression that they were trying to reveal it on their own. This wall became, for me, the embodiment of a longing for the old city. I wanted its surface to become a medium onto which images could be placed, evoking the memory of the postwar dismantling of the former ‘Little Vienna’.

⁶² ‘Szanując stare – tworzymy nowe’, http://www.historia.beskidia.pl/1645_bielsko-biala_szanujac_stare_-_tworzymy_nowe_stare_zdjecie.html, (accessed 28 August 2025)

⁶³ National Councils—state administrative bodies established pursuant to the Act of 20 March 1950 (Journal of Laws 1950, No. 14, item 130)

⁶⁴ For further discussion, see ‘25 lat MZD – Era “Antka Burzyciela”’, <https://mzd.bielsko.pl/era-antka-burzyciela/>, (accessed 28 August 2025)

The works I installed on its surface were digitally created images framed in gold. The first depicted a boy sitting on a sphere that appears to strike the letter ‘b’—representing Bielsko—with force. The figure alludes to Antoni Kobiela, the mayor responsible for the transformation of the 19th-century city centre, colloquially known as ‘Antek the Demolisher’.⁶⁵ The second ‘b’—referring to Biała—was left unchanged, as demolitions there occurred in a different period. The choice of typeface was also significant. The letters ‘bb’ were rendered in Fraktur, a variant of Gothic script used in local periodicals. This choice alludes to the demolished architecture, much of which was built during the era of Viennese influence and German cultural dominance.

In the second piece, I referenced the dismantling of the tram infrastructure in 1971. I feel the absence of trams—locally known as ‘bimbaje’—acutely, even though I know them only from stories. I have never heard the clatter of wheels on the tracks or the characteristic bell. However, the more I delve into the history of the line’s opening in 1895—two years earlier than in Vienna—the harder it is for me to come to terms with its dismantling. I do not hesitate to say that with the disappearance of the trams, the city lost part of its charm and functionality. My work depicted the act of dismantling—the rails are wound onto a spool, preventing their reuse. In this way, I illustrated a rejection of returning to the past, in line with the ideology of the time:

‘[...] The decision was therefore justified, however painful it may have been for many of our city’s residents [...]. Progress cannot be stopped. It paves the way for the future...’⁶⁶

Although both works hung on the wall for only three days, subsequent events gave one of them unexpected resonance. On November 16, 2025, the swollen OSB panels gave way under the pressure of debris that—as it turned out—had been accumulating behind the structure for years. The silent, progressive deterioration made itself known when, under the cover of night, part of the façade crumbled onto the sidewalk. This event transformed the work depicting a boy seated on a demolition sphere: it ceased to function merely as a visual commentary on the demolitions of the 1970s and became a foreshadowing of the demolition of the historic tenement building, which had been allowed to decay out of sight.

⁶⁵ ‘Tajne plany wyburzenia bazarów zamkowych. Do dziś wydarzenia sprzed 50 lat budzą wielkie emocje’, <https://bielsko.biala.pl/aktualnosci/57117/tajne-plan-y-wyburzenia-bazarow-zamkowych-do-dzis-wydarzenia-sprzed-50-lat-budza-wielkie-emocje>, (accessed 28 August 2025)

⁶⁶ M. Bujakowski, *Kalendarium Bielska-Białej 1956–1989*, Bielsko-Biała 2020, p. 124





BIURO
PODROZY
CARIS

KSIĘGO
PILSŁATKI





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Komunie
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5. Summary

In creating art that engages with urban space, I decided to step partially outside the comfort zone that digital practice represents for me. This decision, however, turned out to be a greater research challenge than I had initially anticipated. Working on ‘The City That Is Not There?’ did not come easily—it was a process fraught with dilemmas.

Over the course of four years of activities related to the project, I primarily created physical objects made using traditional artistic techniques. As my theoretical assumptions evolved from year to year, the demands I placed on myself—and consequently on my artistic activities—increased as well. This entailed numerous technical difficulties that significantly prolonged the creative process. I did not anticipate that I would have to repaint the wooden objects multiple times to achieve a satisfactory result. I did not expect that producing the sphere would involve four failed attempts. Nor did I assume that I would decide to hand-cut several dozen large-format stencils to facilitate my work.

Due to the experimental nature of the activities undertaken, I withdrew from some of the ideas during their implementation. In addition to the paste-ups mentioned earlier, these included work on miniature models made of self-hardening clay, intended to recreate non-existent architectural objects, as well as on stencils featuring patterns drawn from tiles produced in Viennese workshops.

As ‘site-oriented’ works, they aligned with the premises of site-specific art, whose theory was described in detail by Miwon Kwon—a curator and art historian. In the context of her theoretical framework, my actions were not intended to create permanent aesthetic objects. Instead, I focused on an ephemeral process in which I moved beyond the production of physical works. I assumed the role of a ‘provi-

der of artistic and cultural stimuli', as well as that of a moderator, educator, or coordinator—what Kwon calls the performative aspect of the entire creative process.⁶⁷

Works inextricably linked to a specific space are intended to fully engage with their surroundings and viewers.⁶⁸ My interventions achieved this goal by provoking spontaneous reactions from viewers—ranging from positive engagement to acts of aggression. The paste-ups are an exception: their inconspicuous character has allowed them to remain *in situ* from 2023 to the present day.

Working on 'The City That Is Not There?' has reinforced my belief that artistic interventions should both attract attention and achieve an outcome that lasts long enough for their actual impact on the place and the audience to be assessed. Following this line of thought, in the future I would like the art I introduce into public space not to be merely a physical object, but to assume any artistic form,⁶⁹ situated in both the real and virtual worlds. Transferring some of these activities into the virtual sphere will ensure that the message stands the test of time, even if the physical medium is destroyed or removed—as my interventions demonstrate.

⁶⁷ K. Izdebska, *Sztuka publiczna Od obiektów do praktyk postartystycznych Brikolaż socjologiczny*, Warszawa 2021, pp. 67–68

⁶⁸ 'Kontekst miejsca', in sztukapubliczna.pl, <https://sztukapubliczna.pl/pl/pojeciownik>, (accessed 1 August 2025)

⁶⁹ K. Izdebska, op. cit., Warszawa 2021, p.12

6. Conclusion

It is difficult to deny that the city is a rich and diverse cultural phenomenon. Its space is alive and aesthetically varied. It is a place where beauty and ugliness coexist, and the past and the present engage in a constant dialogue.⁷⁰ Given the above, what definition can be given to the city that is not there?

The answer to this question defies a clear-cut definition. It can be either a place that physically existed or one that existed purely as a product of the imagination. Regardless, I believe that its ultimate form resides in memory. For me, Bielsko-Biała is such a city. It is here that I see places transformed by both time and deliberate decisions that erased its former image.

My postmemory does not allow me to forget that Bielsko-Biała is, in fact, two separate cities connected by bridges over the Biała River. Standing in the middle of one of these bridges, on 11 Listopada Street, it is impossible to deny this. Although I cannot tell by the residents' appearance who lives on which side of the river, the gulf between metropolitan Bielsko and the provincial character of Biała remains clearly visible.

I believe that the socio-cultural differences, which were supposed to fade away as a result of the merger of two distinct urban centres,⁷¹ still persist in the everyday consciousness of the residents—particularly among the older generation. Interestingly, although I was born thirty-four years after the formal merger of Bielsko and Biała—which also linked Cieszyn Silesia with Lesser Poland—I have always expressed my affiliation with the latter part. I consider myself a resident of Biała, and thus of a city that has long since ceased to exist.

⁷⁰ B. Głyda, op. cit., p. 5

⁷¹ M. Bujakowski, P. Kenig, J. Polak, *Biała poprzez wieki. W 300. rocznicę nadania praw miejskich*, Bielsko-Biała 2023, p. 306

After my returns from Kraków, I sought out traces of a multicultural past, which, unlike in the Kazimierz district, must be uncovered here. Wolfsburg, on the other hand, with its proud industrial identity, served as a point of reference for analysing how Bielsko-Biała translates its heritage into a contemporary identity. After observing the Austrian capital—its architectural and urban-planning approaches, as well as the customs of its residents—I returned convinced that Bielsko-Biała should not be so persistently referred to as ‘Little Vienna’. While life in nineteenth-century Bielsko-Biała largely unfolded ‘in a Viennese manner’, in the twenty-first century the city now directly defines its own contemporary character, thereby strengthening its position as a leading regional centre in key fields.

The city’s present-day appearance bears no resemblance to the one described in the memories of former residents. Importantly, it is also not the place I remember from the 1990s—the period of my childhood. Today, it appears orderly, although it is regrettable that the urban regulation plan proposed by Max Fabiani⁷² was not fully implemented, and that key architectural ideas were not realised. Since 2005, the city has been undergoing a transformation as part of the Municipal Revitalisation Programme. This includes the renovation of tenement houses, the modernisation of infrastructure, as well as initiatives aimed at social and economic revitalisation, changing the face of degraded urban areas. This long-term process has laid a solid foundation for a vision of cultural development, resulting in a project that not only placed Bielsko-Biała in the final round of the competition for the title of European Capital of Culture 2029, but also earned it the title of the first Polish Capital of Culture for 2026, awarded by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage. All of this gives the impression that the city is becoming a place friendly to residents, entrepreneurs, and artistic communities. There is no doubt that, in the context of this distinction, the city once again faces the challenge of redefining itself. The transformation of a former industrial centre into a ‘city of interweavings’—of culture, tourism, and services⁷³—is not so much an attempt to link the past with the present as an investment aimed, as Deputy Mayor Adam Ruśniak points out, at: ‘[...] making it more significant on the European stage, and thus ensuring that not only will tourism increase [...] we would like our city to gradually enter the creative industries’.⁷⁴ The question of what will

⁷² Max Fabiani (1865–1962)—Slovenian-Italian architect and urban planner who, commissioned by the Bielsko City Council, outlined the directions of the city’s spatial development.

⁷³ ‘Już nigdy nie będziemy miastem stu przemysłów. Ten tytuł, to wielka wizja rozwoju do 2029 roku’, <https://bielsko.biala.pl/aktualnosci/52677/juz-nigdy-nie-bedziemy-miastem-stu-przemyslow-ten-titul-to-wielka-wizja-rozwoju-do-2029-roku>, (accessed 10 January 2026)

⁷⁴ Beskidzka TV, ‘Czy Bielsko-Biała zostanie dziś EUROPEJSKĄ STOLICĄ KULTURY? Miasto na tym zarobi, czy dopłaci?’, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h7B0t7wPTzA>, 1:15–2:20, (accessed 10 January 2026). The deputy mayor’s vision of Bielsko-Biała as a creative-industries centre echoes B. Michel’s account of post-industrial spaces becoming creative and cultural districts; see B. Michel, *Dzielnice kreatywne i kulturalne. Wieloznaczność sztuki i kultury w mieście postindustrialnym*, Kraków 2023

happen once the programme of celebrations comes to an end and the excitement surrounding the title subsides remains open.

Just as I never imagined, after defending my bachelor's thesis entitled *Reminiscences of Bielsko*, that the historical image of Bielsko-Biała would become the subject of my doctoral research, so now the completion of this work does not mark the end of my explorations, but rather the beginning. I suspect that the city will serve as the backdrop for my photographs, paintings, and posters on more than one occasion. My strong attachment to its past and my reflections on the present will lead to new artistic interventions. Although I recognise the changes that have taken place in recent years, I believe that essential elements of Bielsko-Biała's identity remain invisible. Through my creative work, I wanted to shed light on them in order to deepen understanding of my hometown's heritage.

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On the cover The tower of the Evangelical Church and the ‘Szkieletor’—an unfinished office building of the Small Car Factory, view from a window, 2007, photo by the author **p. 2** Cartouche with the coat of arms of Bielsko on the façade of the tenement house at Franciszka Smolki Square 3, 2025, photo by the author **p. 3** Transom above the entrance door with a Star of David motif. Tenement house at Zygmunt Krasińskiego Street 13, 2007, photo by the author **p. 3** Fragment of the façade of one of the buildings in the passage of the Municipal Savings Bank, view from 3 Maja Street, 2025, photo by the author **p. 4** Mateusz Taranowski during his first visit to Vienna, 1998, photo from the author’s archive **p. 6** Map of Bielsko-Biała from ca. 1891, photo from the collections of the State Archive in Katowice, Bielsko-Biała Branch, via Wikimedia Commons **p. 6** Fragment of the floor in the lobby of the former Pod Orłem Hotel in Bielsko-Biała, 2013, photo by the author **p. 7** Castle of the Sułkowski Dukes in Bielsko, eastern façade, 1918–1935, photo from the collections of the National Digital Archives **p. 7** Biała, Ratuszowa Street towards the Town Hall, 1921–1939, photo from the collections of the National Digital Archives **p. 8** Panorama of Bielsko, ca. 1855, photo from the repository of the Silesian Digital Library, from a private collection **p. 9** Overdoor panel with the Eye of Providence above the entrance door of the tenement house at Księżdz Stanisława Stojłowskiego Street 2, 2025, photo by the author **p. 10** Żwirki i Wigury Square in Bielsko, 1933–1939, photo from the collections of the National Digital Archives **p. 10** Construction of the State Gymnasium in Bielsko, 1925–1939, photo from the collections of the National Digital Archives **p. 11** Press advertisements for the companies ‘Unja’ and ‘Polmopomp’ in Bielsko, scan from *The Address Book of Bielsko, Biała and the Surrounding Area for Industry, Trade and Crafts, with a Detailed List of Apartment Owners*, 1937, from the collections of the Silesian Library in Katowice **p. 11** Female worker at the ‘Wilamowice’ Linen Industry Plant in Bielsko, 1937, photo from the collections of the National Digital Archives **p. 12** View from Jagiellońska Street in Bielsko, now 11 Listopada Street, towards Biała, 1927, photo from the collections of the National Digital Archives **p. 13** Fragment of an advertisement from the first half of the twentieth century on the façade of a tenement house, view from 1 Maja Street in Bielsko-Biała, 2013, photo by the author **p. 14** 11 Listopada Street, 2024, photo by the author **p. 14** Abandoned residential units in the tenement house at 11 Listopada Street 23, 2026, photo by the author **p. 15** Entrance to the closed general store ‘u Steciaka’ at 11 Listopada Street 53, 2026, photo by the author **p. 15** Empty commercial premises at 11 Listopada Street 4, 2026, photo by the author **p. 16** Fragment of the author’s *in situ* work, view through a gap in a boarded-up window opening, 2024, photo by the author **p. 17** Detail of the author’s artistic work, 2024, photo by the author **p. 18** Sign with the German-language street name, view from

Księżda Stanisława Stojłowskiego Street, 2013, photo by the author **p. 19** Bullet marks on the façade of the tenement house on Legionów Street, 2026, photo by the author **p. 21** QR code and multimedia content area, 2026, compiled by the author **p. 22** People relaxing in Stadtpark in Vienna, 2012, photo by the author **p. 23** Children's paddling pool at the intersection of Słowackiego and Piastowska Streets, 1934, photo from the collections of the National Digital Archives **pp. 24–25** Character designs, vector drawings, and a compilation of photographs documenting the creation of the figurative works, 2022–2023, photo by the author **pp. 26–27** Artistic intervention in the square at the intersection of PCK and Sempołowska Streets, general view, 2023, photo by the author **pp. 28–31** Compilation of photographs documenting the course of the artistic intervention in the square at the intersection of PCK and Sempołowska Streets, 2023, photo by the author **pp. 32–33** Artistic intervention in the square at the intersection of PCK and Sempołowska Streets, reactions of passers-by, 2023, photo by the author **pp. 34–35** Compilation of photographs documenting the destruction of the figurative works in the square at the intersection of PCK and Sempołowska Streets, 2023, photo by the author **p. 37** Square at the intersection of PCK and Sempołowska Streets, condition after revitalisation, 2026, photo by the author **p. 38** Architectural detail on the façade of the Town Hall in Bielsko-Biała, 2023, photo by the author **p. 38** Architectural detail on the façade of the Municipal Savings Bank building, view from Wzgórze Street, 2024, photo by the author **p. 39** Jews in the window of a railway carriage, 1918–1939, photo from the collections of the National Digital Archives **p. 40** Architectural details on the façade of the tenement house at 3 Maja Street 9a, 2023–2024, photo by the author **pp. 42–43** Artistic intervention on the grounds adjacent to the Catholic cemetery in Biała, general view, 2024, photo by the author **p. 45** Detail of the figure of a woman with a suitcase, 2024, photo by the author **pp. 46–47** Compilation of photographs documenting the damage to the figure of a woman with a suitcase, 2024, photo by the author **pp. 48–49** Artistic intervention at the site of the former tram line station, now the terminal stop of bus line No. 1, general view, 2024, photo by the author **p. 51** Close-up of the figure of a sobbing woman, 2024, photo by the author **p. 52** Close-up of the golden sphere and strips of paper scattered at its base bearing words in various languages, 2024, photo by the author **p. 52** Fragment of the original fence of the Bielsko Industrial School at Teodora Sixta Street 20, 2026, photo by the author **p. 53** Abandoned branch of the 'Wega' Wool Industry Plant at Romana Dmowskiego Street 6, view from a window, 2013, photo by the author **p. 54** Compilation of photographs documenting the course of work on the sphere's framework, 2023–2024, photo by the author **p. 55** Painting work, 'gilding' of the sphere's surface, 2024, photo by the author **pp. 56–57** Compilation of sequential

photographs documenting the process of filling the sphere with content, 2024, photo by the author **pp. 58–59** Artistic intervention at the intersection of Piastowska and Juliusza Słowackiego Streets, general view, 2024, photo by the author **pp. 60–61** Compilation of photographs documenting the course of the artistic intervention at the intersection of Piastowska and Juliusza Słowackiego Streets, 2024, photo by the author **p. 62** Fragments of posters with a hand-applied gold layer, 2024–2025, photo by the author **p. 63** Artistic intervention, paste-ups in bus shelter windows, 2023, photo by the author **p. 65** Portraits of people associated with the history of Bielsko and Biała; detailed descriptions of the photographs are provided below **p. 66** Portrait of Gustaw Josephy, photo from the Wikimedia Commons repository **p. 67** Fragment of a poster featuring Gustaw Josephy, 2024, graphic design by the author **pp. 68–69** Artistic intervention, poster in the window of a bus shelter on Michałowicza Street, 2024, photo by the author **p. 70** Portrait of Emanuel Rost Jr., photo from the Wikimedia Commons repository, from the collection of Zbigniew Popadiuch **p. 71** Fragment of a poster featuring Emanuel Rost Jr., 2024, graphic design by the author **pp. 72–73** Artistic intervention, poster on a bus shelter on Lipnicka Street, 2025, photo by the author **p. 74** Portrait of Max Fabiani, photo from archinform.net **p. 75** Fragment of a poster featuring Max Fabiani, 2024, graphic design by the author **pp. 76–77** Artistic intervention, poster on a bus shelter on PCK Street, 2024, photo by the author **p. 78** Portrait of Franz Strzygowski, photo from the Wikimedia Commons repository **p. 79** Fragment of a poster featuring Franz Strzygowski, 2024, graphic design by the author **pp. 80–81** Artistic intervention, poster in the window of a bus shelter on Partyzantów Street, 2024, photo by the author **p. 82** Portrait of Aleksander Karol Ludwik Sułkowski, photo from the Wikimedia Commons repository, from the collection of the Historical Museum in Bielsko-Biała **p. 83** Fragment of a poster featuring Aleksander Karol Ludwik Sułkowski, 2024, graphic design by the author **pp. 84–85** Artistic intervention, poster in the window of abandoned premises at Żwirki i Wigury Square 5, view from Zamkowa Street, 2025, photo by the author **p. 86** Portrait of Carl Korn, photo from the Wikimedia Commons repository, from the archives of the Jewish Religious Community in Bielsko-Biała **p. 87** Fragment of a poster featuring Carl Korn, 2024, graphic design by the author **pp. 88–89** Artistic intervention, poster in the window of a bus shelter on Księdza Stanisława Stojałowskiego Street, 2025, photo by the author **p. 90** Portrait of Father Stanisław Stojałowski from the weekly *Nowości Illustrowane* 23/1907, photo from the Wikimedia Commons repository, from the collections of the Jagiellonian Digital Library **p. 91** Fragment of a poster featuring Father Stanisław Stojałowski, 2025, graphic design by the author **pp. 92–93** Artistic intervention, poster on a bus shelter on Paderewskiego Street, view from Legionów

Street, 2026, photo by the author **pp. 94–95** Compilation of photographs documenting the condition of selected artistic interventions after several days of display, 2024–2026, photo by the author **p. 96** Fragments of a wall made of OSB panels, 2024, photo by the author **p. 97** View of the Castle of the Sułkowski Dukes and the castle markets on Zamkowa Street in Bielsko, 1918–1939, photo from the collections of the National Digital Archives **p. 97** View of the Castle of the Sułkowski Dukes and the retaining wall on Zamkowa Street in Bielsko-Biała, 2026, photo by the author **p. 99** Close-up of graphic works hung on the wall made of OSB panels on Partyzantów Street, 2024, photo by the author **pp. 100–101** Artistic intervention, wall made of OSB panels on Partyzantów Street with two graphic works mounted on it, 2024, photo by the author **pp. 102–103** Demolition work on the tenement house on Partyzantów Street, 2025, photo by the author.

