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ANETA FAUSEK-KACZANOWSKA

CAN PARTICIPATORY ART EXIST ONLINE?

Online implementation of an artistic
and social action on the example of
“#givethanksfor”

ABSTRACT

The article presents the objectives, concepts, methods and characteristics of the artistic and social action known as “#givethanksfor”, pursued through social media, based on the assumptions of participatory art. The article describes the components of the action, how it was created and importance of the artistic work done, which is the finale of the action. The artist asks questions: “Can participatory art exist online?” and “Will the artist’s actions based on participatory art allow to awaken and show a feeling of gratitude in a group of people?” Answers were attempted based on considerations of participatory art, gratitude and online artistic activity.

KEYWORDS

Clair Bishop; Adam Chmielowski; Barbara Lee Fredrickson; Philip H. Friedman; Łukasz Horbów; Michalina Kostecka; Janusz Łukaszyński; Karina Marusińska; Magdalena Morawik; Dawid Radziszewski; Krystiana Robb-Narbutt; Alicja Rogalska; Erna Rosenstein; Chiharu Shiota; Georg Simmel; Patrycja Steczek; Zuzanna Surma; Łukasz Surowiec; Małgorzata Szcześniak; Ewa Małgorzata Tatar; Janina Turek; Marcin Wnuk; artistic and social action; educator; Facebook; photography; Internet; collection; coronavirus; list of thanks; lockdown; protective mask; social media; artistic object; eyes; pandemic; positive emotions; social profile; society; glass ampoules; participatory art; theory; creator; participant; gratitude

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Can participatory art exist online?

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Introduction

C. Bishop (2015) defines participatory art as follows: “Socially engaged art, the kind of strategy by which people become the material of artistic work. The artist arranges a situation and encourages its participants to behave in a certain way in the specific place. The artist is a collaborator and producer of socio-artistic situations and the audience become co-creators or participants. Ephemeral actions are based on meeting people, are aimed at inducing emotions, stir, creating a temporary community, stimulating energy. The origins of participatory art stem from the activities of Italian futurists: evening parties (serate), meetings with the public and futuristic actions of provocation, which foreshadowed the later actions of the art of performance and happening.”

As Ms Bishop points out, the artist is the originator and collaborator. It is the artist who chooses the time and place. Activities that are an example of participatory art physically link the originator with the recipients. Paul Althamer took this activity, creating diverse communities in the course of his projects based on cooperation with people.

What if the only place available to the artist is his Web-enabled computer located in his room? This happened in March 2020, at the time of the coming of the new reality during the pandemic lockdown. This context provokes questions such as “Can participatory art exist online?” and “Can the artist’s actions based on participatory art awaken and show a feeling of gratitude in a group of people?”.

The transfer of the above-mentioned assumptions to the Internet introduces a new chapter in the work of an artist isolated from his material. It becomes the only safe way to gather and reach more people. A Facebook page becomes a work and is used to create a temporary community of people who are the main element in the artist’s hands. Involving an audience will allow the creator and educator to carry out his planned actions and create a visual effect. The created situation is designed to arouse emotions, stimulate inner energy, make us aware of, and sensitize to, the ability to appreciate the good around us, direct a group of people on the path of gratitude during the ongoing pandemic.

The aim of this work is to present the results of the online artistic and social action titled “#givethanksfor”, which aims to strengthen the feeling of gratitude in the era of the pandemic using the assumptions of participatory art laid out by C. Bishop, and to answer the above questions.

Art has been evolving with the development of technology and with changes in the society’s approach to it. Artistic activities online go back to the 1090s, they have adopted the name: “net-art”. They began to exploit the popularity of websites and, next, social media. This gives new opportunities to forms of expression, allows you to interact with your audience on a global basis. Social media play a significant role in today’s functioning in the world, especially in the situation in 2020. This potential is exploited by all areas of life, including culture, as well as artists themselves. Cultural institutions have adopted a strategy of outreaching. They organize online private viewings and exhibitions, virtual tours, discussion panels, workshops and other unusual events for contact with the audience. The production by Dawid Radziszewski, “An exhibition in your apartment”, takes the form of videos recorded in his apartment and posted on Instagram. Other artists were also not indifferent. An attempt was made on Facebook to arrange for the #alivefemaleartists chain challenge. Social media were also used to share the results of unusual artistic residencies in Magdalena Morawik’s and Łukasz Horbow’s “Self-House Residency” project. The actions taken by Patricia Steczek and Zuzanna Surma have also been documented. Visual interpretations of emotional states

were presented on the “Touching/Defrosting” fanpage and in the space of Krakow. The virtual world hides many such performances under the “art in the times of the plague” catchphrase.

Gratitude

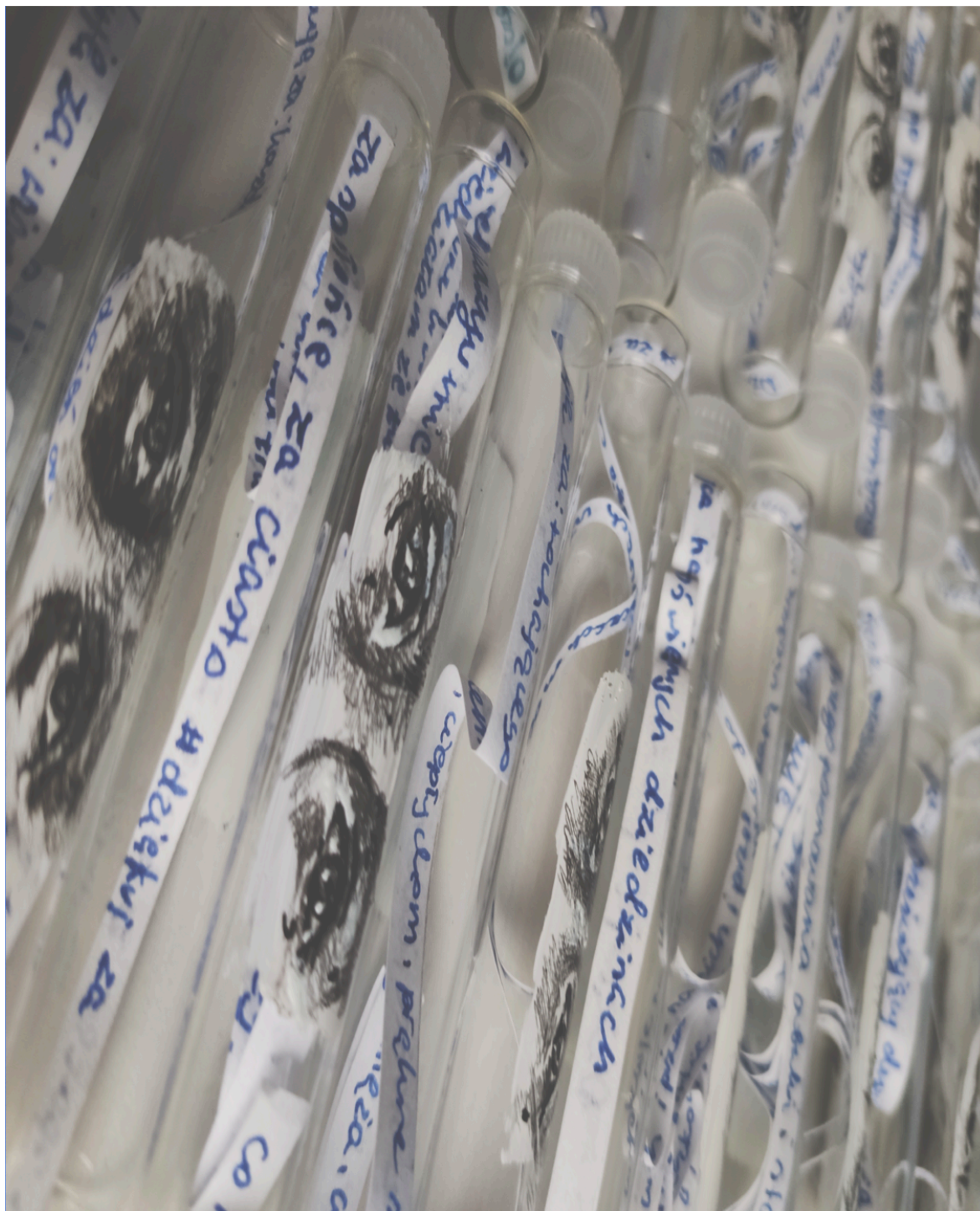
According to *The dictionary of the modern Polish language*, it is a feeling that responds to experienced goodness, a sense of moral commitment, a desire to reciprocate, thanks for something, a memory of someone’s goodness. The adjective “grateful” has as many as four different meanings in the dictionary: (1) obliged, feeling grateful for something, wishing to reciprocate, to thank; (2) arousing pleasant impression, graceful, cute, endearing, sweet, nice; (3) satisfying, enjoyable, satisfied, beneficial, kind; (4) sympathetic, well-disposed, kind, positive, teachable. The last three definitions have and cause a positive connotation. In contrast, the verb “to thank” in its five meanings has both positive and negative overtones: (1) to express gratitude, to thank, to be grateful; (2) to express politely the refusal; (3) to give up, to resign, to refuse to participate in something or to accept something; (4) to send away, dismiss, fire, or to express dissatisfaction with, someone; (5) to charge or blame someone or something. All this indicates to us how to look at a particular thing or situation.

Georg Simmel (1975) expressed an optimistic view of the nature of human gratitude: “if we removed in one fell swoop the ability of the human soul to respond with gratitude for past benefits, the society, or at least the society as we know it, would fall apart.” These statements prove the importance of this attribute that distinguishes people from the natural environment, landscape, sky, rocks, flowers, fish, animals, etc., which, without knowing anything about gratitude, do not show it to one other and which cannot be thanked for aesthetic sensations or imparted knowledge (Dront, 2004, op. cit. in Łukaszyński, 2015, p. 134-135).

Both another person, nature, God, the cosmos or an animal can be the source of gratitude. According to Friedman’s definition (1989, op. cit. in Wnuk 2017, p. 57), you can be grateful for the circumstances of life, for what you have received, experienced or learned, for spiritual resources, for what you have offered or forgiven, for your inner qualities, future positive experiences, prosperity, or blessing. In my opinion, the gratitude that belongs to every person, regardless of the views and values he or she professes, shows the potential and importance of this feeling. Gratitude leads to happiness and joy, the stimulation of positive strength and differently understood energy in a person who is often stressed, busy or in a pandemic situation, uncertain of the future. This is confirmed by

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The glass ampoules with the eye portrait and thanks



Source: The author's archive

youTube videos offering topics from gratitude meditation, coaching advice, music to Christian lectures (Fausek-Kaczanowska 2020, pp. 28-29). My fascination with gratitude began with a record of ten things for which I am grateful on any given day. Then came the idea of writing thanks on narrow sticky note and placing them in glass ampoules. The resulting work contains 365 ampoules. Among them are also empty, waiting to be replenished, and black, which are symbols of worse days. All this practice has shown me what gratitude really is. I have found my way of expressing it.

As an artist of the young generation, committed to working with people, I moved my activities into the virtual world in the era of the pandemic. I have tried to ensure that these issues are reflected in the area of the socio-artistic project, which is the "#givethanksfor" action. For this purpose I used the online environment, especially Facebook. I suggested that future participants should appreciate and notice the things they want to thank for and write them off on a piece of paper. I suggested taking a photo and uploading it in a private message or sharing it on my social media profile. I used the se photographs to work on the creation of an artistic object containing eye portraits of the participants of the action taken on glass ampoules along with thanks enclosed inside. The collection of the ampoules visualizes the virtual meeting.

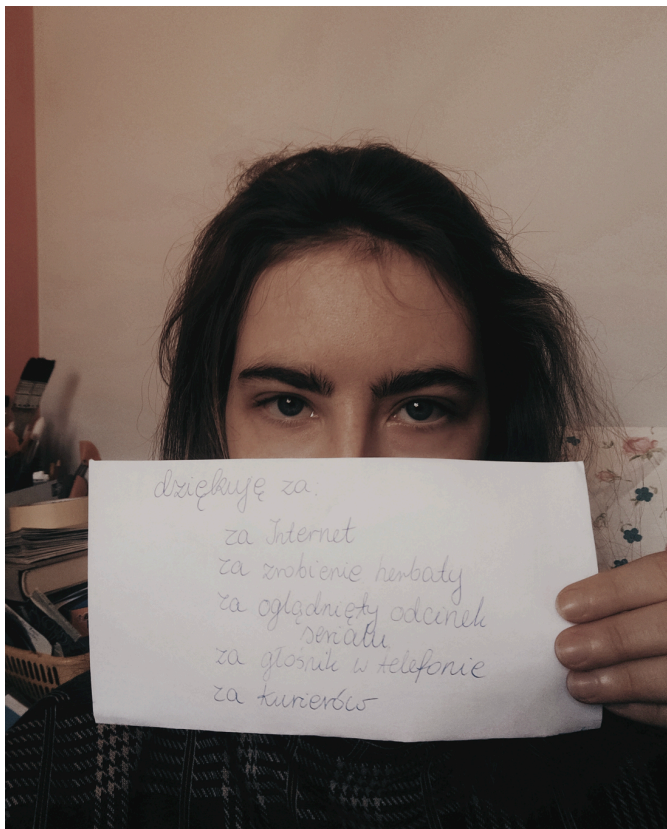
Main goals of the “#givethanksfor” action

I will start the presentation of the actions taken by presenting the objectives of the action and describing how to reach the participants and obtain the material needed to perform an artistic object. After examining social projects and the impact and views on gratitude, I set out the following objectives of the action:

- raise public awareness of the conscious survival of one's life and appreciation of what is before and not what is after it;
- motivate a change in the perception of reality;
- listen to your spiritual interior;
- encourage people to think and raise their awareness of the need for gratitude and thus to give thanks in every situation;
- discover small and great things for which you can thank, thanks to which you can celebrate and rejoice;
- deepen social relations;

- build up the inner positive strength and energy that is the gift we enjoy;
- take the trouble to find things for which we want to thank and to desire to discover and taste what is really important to us;
- stop and find what small and everyday things have unusual in them (among big breakthroughs that happen less often);
- show the beauty and strength of the expression of human eyes, which have become a method of communication after the introduction of the obligation to cover the mouth and nose;
- strengthen the feeling of satisfaction and certainty, which positively affects the physiological system;
- accept yourselves and the present moment;
- induce positive emotions;
- perform artistic work (the portraits of eyes and the letters of thanks enclosed in the ampoules) based on the submitted photos; (It is based on the assumptions of art that breaks barriers and boundaries. The work will connect physically distant people who have expressed their gratitude, by connecting glass ampoules into an artistic object.)
- use art techniques as a vote of gratitude (the drawing of the eyes together with the glass ampoule with thanks will be sent in the form of graphics as an expression of gratitude for participating in the action);
- educate with visuality to encourage the universal feeling of gratitude;
- carry out the action on the basis of the assumptions of participatory art (Fausek-Kaczanowska, 2020, pp. 33-34).

As I mentioned above, the aim of the action was to create a community that appreciates gratitude and converts negative thoughts into positive ones. “Thank you for ...” – these are the words that awaken positive thinking in the recipient, a distraction from the prevailing reality, in which uncertainty and fear dominate. Thanks are a material for building a virtual group and arouse a feeling of joy in the participants. According to Barbara Lee Fredrickson (an American professor of psychology dealing with the theory of positive emotions), “the ‘enriches-builds’ theory, confirmed by empirical research, shows that gratitude is a powerful transformation reservoir for individuals, organizations, and communities”. According to the author, “gratitude is not only a response to the other person’s enjoyable actions but an emotion with an exceptionally strong potential that enriches personality and builds community” (Fredrickson, 2004, op. cit. in Szcześniak, 2007, pp. 104-105).



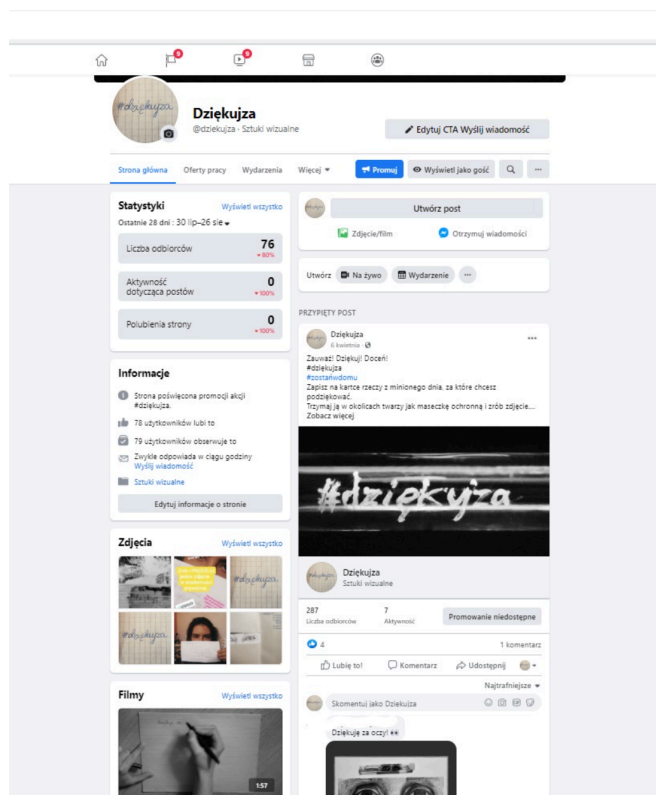
The author's archive

The target audience was reached on April 6, 2020, by creating the “Givethanksfor” profile on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/dziekujza>). This date marks the beginning of the action. Then the first, reference, photo was placed with its own list of thanks and instructions for future participants. It was recommended to write a list of thanks on a piece of paper and describe the next steps to implement the assumptions of the action: taking a photo with the above-mentioned card held at the height of the nose and mouth like a protective mask and posting it on a private social profile. Photos of authors' works appeared also on the “Givethanksfor” page:

1. from the words for what I thank (visual poetry, contextual poetry);
2. from visual signs, forms, compositions that speak of thanksgiving, of community, of selfless action, of giving, etc.

The goal was to educate the profile visitors with the visibility.

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“Givethanksfor” on Facebook



Source: The author's archive

Despite the promotion of the action on the social network, there was no response. The question “Why?” came to my mind. I got an explanation in the final survey, which I will refer to later. The recipients were afraid to show their feelings in public. After introducing the ability to upload a photo in a private message, the first photos were sent and the number of participants began to grow. The number of people following the site and taking an active part in the action has increased gradually. From the site's founding until May 18, 2020, there were 70 people who liked and observed it, as on June 13, 2020, there were already 77. As of July 2, 2020, page likes were added 78. As of May 18, 2020, 30 photos were uploaded. As of June 13, 2020, the number of 50 photos has remained unchanged. In conclusion, I have received 50 photos that I used for further work during the next stage of the action, which was the production of the artistic object. This number is the same as the number of participants in the “#givethanksfor” action as on July 2, 2020.



Source: The author's archive

The final artistic object of the action

The reliance on the form of diaries, journals, blogs, etc. allowed me to propose the archiving of the daily life in the form of a list of thanks from a given day or time. The inspiration was the meticulous records of Janina Turek, a diarist of Krakow. She recorded and numbered the facts of her own existence for 57 years. Thanks to the change in the traditional method of recording everyday life and based on the submitted photos, which are the determinant of the participation of third parties, as well as using glass ampoules, the final object was created. Each tube contains a note with a list of thanks re-written from the photo. On the ampoule there is a drawing of the eyes of the thanking person. The combination of 50 ready-made “caskets of gratitude” forms a collection that changes traditional methods of keeping a record of everyday life. This indicates that all the participants are connected to a visual and physical work about gratitude and community at the time of the difficult experiences of the pandemic and the associated isolation. The work is intended to show through its technique and execution how spreading and articulated gratitude can build a community and unite the individuals and the community. This way of working shows that thanks to the internet and the

artist's work a group of people can be built at a distance, centered around a single project, without disrupting their functioning in their everyday lives.

Another important aspect of the resulting work is the drawing of an eye portrait made with the same technique, black ink, pencil and white acrylic. This does not change their artistic expression. Some are specific representations of the anatomy of the eyes while the other are unreadable, which emphasizes their diversity in their unity. They gently loom and pulsate in combination with the text written in a pen with blue ink, indicate a notation of emotions and unsightly everyday life. The blue ordinary pen reflects the grip of what we have in the palm area and in sight, to record important thoughts.

At the time of the introduction of the order to cover the mouth and nose the eyes became the main element of communication. This fact is closely related to the activity performed by the participants in their photos. In the eyes we are able to read a lot of information about a person. They express emotions, moods and states of spirit, such as pain, fear and lies. Through them we look deep into the person. They have the rank of identifying the person, which I try to express in the drawings, personalizing each ampoule of the participant along with the re-written note with his words. A piece of paper held by the face, on the other hand, is a proposal to replace it with a mask of positive energy. In the photo, it is supposed to shield against the spreading gripe with the pattern of a protective mask. This is done by the list of things in the form of nouns, phrases or sentences: everything that arouses in a person a feeling of gratitude and, thus, causes a change in the perception of the events of everyday life.

In addition, the object was created from ampoules which gained rank through the important message hidden inside and through the image of the eyes. This ennobled the ampoules: these useless objects have become something important and necessary; a necessary thing to protect against the loss of thanks just as the glass coating plays a protective role for biological material taken and enclosed in a sealed tube. This focuses attention on the essence of thanksgiving for things often unnoticed and underestimated.

The presented work is made of 50 identical glass, disposable, ampoules with eye drawings and lists of thanks. They form a collection. This is another argument in favor of including the work in the

One side of the artistic object

The other side of the artistic object



Source: The author's archive



Source: The author's archive

area of visual arts. This is confirmed by examples of actions of artists focused on collecting unnecessary objects. They accumulated the crumbs of life, giving them a higher rank. Apart from Ewa Małgorzata Tatar (2010) we have two other artists: Erna Rosenstein and Krystiana Robb-Narbutt. Both these artists used elements described in culture as waste in their work. Rosenstein found beauty in them. Robb-Narbutt stored the collected items in arranged categories so that they could be used in her art. These artists are just a small piece from the art world where we find the search for something more in painfully ordinary things.

Collecting things can also bring people closer together and allow them to establish a community. Such actions were carried out using participatory art by other artists. Alicja Rogalska and Łukasz Surowiec created a collection of tears from voluntary donors in 2014. They called it the "Tear Redemption Center". Such "collections" discover human experiences collected from individuals and give them a new rank. For example, Michalina Kostecka's "Dress Code": a series of objects made of processed worn clothes carrying DNA codes of their users. Another example is Karina Marusińska's "Tester": a mixture encased in a glass bottle, made from collected sweat of a football team, applied to random people in a sports bath. An the work of Chiharu Shiota, a Japanese artist creating in Berlin is an excellent reference; specifically her "Room of Memory": window frames from buildings demolished after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The collection of eyes and thanks based on the unified graphic system is part of the collection within the artistic idea, which consequently leads to the involvement of participants in cooperation in the project without physical contacting one with another. The production of the object ended on July 2, 2020, while the “Givethanksfor” page is still there to attract new audiences.

Feedback from the participants

The creation of the survey and its completion by the participants allowed to verify the objectives set before the action. It was to check whether the proposed action caused a stir, aroused desired feelings and whether the artistic and social action online had the intended effects. The survey consisted of four questions, a place for feedback and the request for the participant to find his or her own pair of eyes. 26 responses were submitted. I wanted to know if the action had an impact, whether it met the objectives and what others thought of it.

Four pairs of images representing a shape, color, or photo answered to one of the main questions. Each subject was tasked with choosing one of the options in a given pair by linking it to the feelings and thoughts that accompany the production of the list of things and photos. The first two questions contained answers in the form of photographs with specific associations with feelings and emotions while the next two were abstract concepts freely interpreted by each individual. I chose images so that the pair had extreme feelings hidden in the form of signs, shapes, images, so that the respondents could read a positive or negative reception.

In the first two questions, 100% of those surveyed chose photos that we can easily associate with positive emotions. Pictures of the shape of smiling lips and a clean green landscape were indicated. The variety of color and abstract texture interactions is indicated by the difference in the choice of an option in the other two questions. Yellow and gray color and flaky and clean wall can be interpreted differently. The differences in these choices should be read by the sensitivity of the subject.

The statements received from the participants describe their impressions and thoughts. The comments received indicate the strength of the action. Here are some of them:

I would like to say that this is a mega-super-action that can allow people to realize what is important to them.

The "#givethanksfor" action is in my opinion fruitful in smile and well-being, it is nice not to think about the problems and sorrows that unfortunately accompany us every day, so we forget about these good things on the day, we should put this action for good into our lives and although for 5 minutes sit down and think what a wonderful thing happened to us today.

A super-action with the thanksgiving, a simple and much needed practice that should accompany us every day. And the very form of presenting the project with bottled eye drawings is also suggestive and hit. I was associated with throwing a clogged bottle into the sea, with our letter inside. Thanks to you, we do not have to do this, devastate the environment! You are a mediator in conveying positive emotions.

Thank you for this action which allowed me to see how many things you can thank for, and this every day, and sometimes forgotten about it. This is especially important during a pandemic when difficult events come from the outside. It makes you realize that there is more in life, which we do not always reach for every day, and gratitude changes man. It also makes us give ourselves even more to others and make us feel fuller. I associated it with a vessel into which we can pour something but it can also give something back afterwards. This action was such a light, a rise and a reminder of important things, and it allowed us not to give in to bad thoughts. The sight of the eye drawings encouraged action. It reminds me a little of the part of the Ignatian account of conscience but more useful for everyone, including non-believers, and I think that's very important. It also propagates art. Recently I described the painting of Adam Chmielowski, "Ecce Homo", and in this picture are important eyes, which brother Albert painted so that they look deep, I discovered it recently. The face is the most recognizable in a person, and as you painted the eyes themselves, it was still the impression that this is already a person, a face, not just an element.

This initiative opened my eyes to small, daily, often imperceptible things. It was worth taking part in it!

(Fausek-Kaczanowska 2020, pp. 46–49).

Summing up the above statements, the #givethanksfor action has been welcomed.

For me, as the author of the whole project, it is important that I received comments from people for whom it was initially hard to take part in it. They were unable to thank or did not know what to write. Some returned after a long time, wanting to join. This information answers the questions “Can participatory art exist online?” and “Will the artist's actions based on participatory art help to awaken and show a feeling of gratitude in a group of people?”. The answers show that the project, although not carried out in direct contact with the participants, fulfills its task. It aroused among the audience the need for showing a gesture of gratitude, recognition and appreciation. It showed many

possibilities that are enough to see in a life filled with many stimuli. It caused a halt and a thud of awareness and mindfulness. It encouraged the practice of the habit of gratitude. Also, thanks to the online contact, I was able to ensure that the action will not be forgotten.

Photos were sent out as proofs of participation and thanks. The following is a specimen of a picture of the drawing of the eyes and of the personal ampoule



A photographic souvenir for a participant



Source: The author's archive



Questions in the final questionnaire

kształt *



☐ Opcja 1 ☐ Opcja 2

obraz *

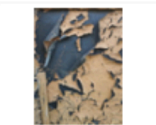
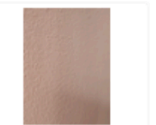
☐ Opcja 1 ☐ Opcja 2

kolor *

☐ Opcja 1 ☐ Opcja 2

obraz *

☐ Opcja 1 ☐ Opcja 2

Ważne na Twoje przypomnienie: Działamy mi bardzo miło. gdybyś zostawił/a kilka słów... 🙏

[Twoje odpowiedzi](#)

Source: The author's archive

Conclusion

As artists, we grasp every way to meet the audience. It is for them that we take our creative effort. The moment of isolation only helped them and gave them new directions of their development. This time brought the need to solve social, cultural and artistic problems. In my opinion, the Web Internet is one of the worthy methods for use by the artist and educator. During the pandemic we became a threat to ourselves, which is why the virtual world took over part of our lives. The hardship forced the use of modern means of communication in favor of going into public space with artistic

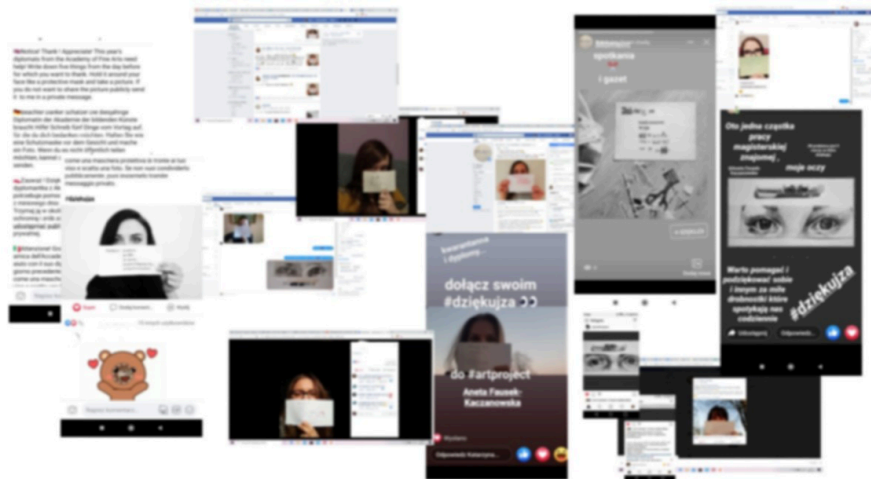
activities. It has made it possible to reach a wider audience. As I have already mentioned, I consider actions in the form of participatory art to be exploitable outside the real world. After all, living in real life, we can live virtually. However, offline meetings are more important and more important in quality, and online meetings help make them more attractive.

**Thanks from
participants on the
“Givethanksfor” page**



Source: The author's
archive

Examples of participants' involvement in the action



Source: The author's archive

The assumptions made narrow the audience to users of the Web, however, they can reach the rest and recruit them to the project. I would like to draw attention to the possibility of solving the problem by sharing the impressions of the audience with others and thus trying to change their attitudes which affect the environments in which they live.

I consider the #givethanksfor" action to be successful. Based on the assumptions of participatory art, as defined by C. Bishop, it was possible to build the core of its course. These assumptions inspired me to specific actions that I tried to implement in the community built at a distance. I tried to become its organizer, but also a companion, giving greater importance to participation and people without whom the whole strategy could not have materialized. It has had many positive effects. This is confirmed by the opinions expressed in the final survey and in unexpected thanks from the participants for the received photographic portraits of their eyes. I consider gratitude to be a trait that has a lot of positive effect on our daily lives. The pandemic contributed specifically to its practice. As Simmel (1975) points out, it is an important building block of the society and, according to Fredrickson (2004), it has an impact on the individual and the community. In my opinion, the action fulfilled its objectives and showed the importance of gratitude.

The online activities aimed at activating the society raise thoughts and many questions. Will the Internet create new opportunities for artistic practice in the building of social interactions between art educators and artists? Is an indirect impact on the viewer able to replace the real contact? Will it give you the same feelings? Does such action still have an aesthetic dimension? Will this form bring about lasting effects and changes in audiences?

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