

Monika Drożyńska. 24,20

Exhibition of the series *Embroidering in Transit*, 2015–2025

Dates:

Opening: April 12, 2025, 4:00 – 8:00 PM

Exhibition: April 12 – August 30, 2025

Venue:

Common Arts Foundation
Sienna Street 83/802
00-815 Warsaw, Poland

Spanning a decade, Monika Drożyńska's *Embroidery in Transit* project ran from 2015 to its completion on February 14, 2025. For nearly a decade, while traveling across Poland, the artist embroidered headrest covers on PKP trains, aiming to provoke reflection among passengers of the state-owned railway company. Drożyńska describes her "headrests" as follows:

The themes of my works include women's rights as well as quotes from poetry, literature, and my own texts. I embroider Tuwim, Białoszewski, Janion, Tokarczuk, Bator, among others. I leave the embroidered pieces on trains and planes for fellow travelers. Sometimes I receive messages from passengers saying my embroidery accompanied them on their journey. My works always evoke strong emotions – from admiration and affection to outrage and criticism.

In May 2024, Intercity PKP S.A.'s Central Division in Warsaw accused Monika Drożyńska of "damaging 58 headrest covers by embroidering them, resulting in losses amounting to 510.04 PLN." In August, under summary proceedings (without a trial, based on testimony and evidence), the court found her guilty of the charges and "imposed a reprimand and an obligation to pay compensation equal to the damage to the injured party".

Although the artist admitted to making the embroideries, she did not plead guilty and appealed the verdict, seeking a proper trial and a platform for public discourse about art in the courtroom. The trial thus became a post-artistic action.

On February 14, 2025, the District Court for Warsaw Praga-Południe, Criminal Division III, convicted Monika Drożyńska for embroidering on headrests belonging to PKP Intercity S.A., issuing a reprimand and ordering her to cover the cost of the damage. A total of 58 embroideries were documented, which formed the basis for the indictment. Ultimately, the court confirmed the execution of three embroideries, fining the artist 24 złoty and 20 groszy. Monika Drożyńska's art was thereby given an exact legal valuation.

The court acknowledged the embroideries' artistic value but ruled that they infringed upon the railway's property rights. The judge stressed that "artistry does not override illegality," meaning that artistic merit does not justify the infringement of private property. As a result, Monika Drożyńska became the third artist to be convicted by a Polish court for her creative work. She is also the first to be sentenced on capitalist grounds – placing the private property of a state-owned company above artistic freedom and social engagement. Her actions were deemed harmful, leading from accusation to final verdict.

The conclusion of the project thus marks the beginning of broader reflection on the "headrests." Drożyńska's activist stance in public space and the legal system's response has reignited the debate on the boundaries of artistic freedom and the distinction between public and private. And if private, then whose private? Where does artistic freedom end and private ownership begin? What does private ownership mean when it comes to public space – space that belongs to everyone? On what basis do we determine what is permitted or forbidden in shared space? Who decides whether an action is art or vandalism? Is aesthetic value, so subjectively perceived, a sufficient criterion for defining art? And if so, who gets to decide? These questions are not new, but in the age of late capitalism, isn't it time we ask them out loud again?

From April 12 to August 30 in Warsaw's Wola district, visitors will be able to view 58 "PKP headrests" – a series summarizing and closing the *Embroidering in Transit*, 2015-2025 along with a documentary film of Monika Drożyńska's trial. The works, created over a span of 10 years, will be presented together in one gallery space for the first time.

The exhibition is curated by Iwona Wojnarowicz.

Monika Drożyńska

Visual artist, embroiderer, Doctor of Arts, activist. A pioneer of embroidery techniques in contemporary art and textile art in public space. She explores language through hand embroidery on fabric. Recipient of the 2024 Polityka Passport award in the Visual Arts category. She has collaborated with POLIN Museum, Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, Wrocław Contemporary Museum, MUMOK in Vienna, Ludwig Museum in Budapest, Bozar in Brussels, and NGBK in Berlin. She also works with the Dramatyczny Theatre, developing embroidered visual identities. Her works are held in the collections of: Bunkier Sztuki, National Museum in Kraków, MOCAP in Kraków, National Museum in Kyiv, and Lentos Museum in Austria.

OPENING HOURS:

Tuesday: 10:00 AM – 4:00 PM

Wednesday: 10:00 AM – 6:00 PM

Thursday: on appointment

Friday: on appointment

Saturday-Monday: gallery closed