

# **GOLDEX POLDEX**

**WWW.GOLDEXPOLDEX.PL**

## **BACKGROUND**

Goldex Poldex is an experimental project space in Kraków, Poland, that is run by four friends: Janek Sowa, Janek Simon, Kuba de Barbaro and Agnieszka Klepacka. In its programming, the space combines art, theory and design. It is independent and 100% self funded (no external public or private sponsoring).

## **FUNDING**

Privately funded by the three founding members.

## **DEVELOPMENT**

2006/2007: the idea of running an independent project space comes up

2008: Goldex Poldex comes to life

## **LOCATION**

Kraków, PL, 756,267 inhabitants

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## **CONVERSATION**

This conversation was held in a beer garden in Kraków in May 2011.

**Fabio Franz: To begin with, how did Goldex Poldex come about as a project space?**

**Janek Sowa:** The project started as a sort of joke proposed by Janek Simon, an artist friend of mine. At the time, he was doing a project in Madagascar where he organised a 'Polish Year' as a sort of mockery of these international 'Polish cultural seasons' in Britain, Germany, France and so on. When he returned to Poland after one month, he told us, very excitedly, that there is a gold rush in Madagascar! Basically at that time, in 2006/2007, a lot of people were looking for gold as it was the time when gold prices were going up because of wars and the economic situation. So, jokingly, we thought, 'OK, let's try to open a gold mine in Madagascar!' Well, really he convinced us—he proposed that we could each invest the equivalent of €1,000 in order to open a gold mine. It seemed like such a great idea and then we thought, 'OK, we have the gold mine, what will we do with the money we earn from it?' And so we found it would be interesting to actually use this money to do some sort of activity in Poland and that this

would maybe help us to be 'independent'. At that time, we had a lot of discussions about what it meant to be independent; we were constantly questioning in which situations we are independent. Is it possible to be independent? We thought that this source of money could make us really independent: we would not have to work, the gold mine would just run there and we would just get the money. We then started looking for a place to actually do something cultural in Kraków and we thought, 'Let's first rent and set up a place here. Once we had done that, we would go to Madagascar, get the gold mine and then the money will flow and fuel the place.' So we did find a place in Kraków, but also, in the meantime, we met a geologist who was doing proper research in Madagascar. He was not looking for gold but for some sort of precious stones—not diamonds since they are monopolised by the Russians, but rubies, beryl, etc. He persuaded us that actually the gold mine could be a difficult endeavour and that it would be a bigger investment than we thought, with a high risk of not finding anything. After that, for a brief time, we had the idea of buying an abandoned gold mine and putting some people to work there—becoming capitalists—but then it turned out that that is not such a great business either. So eventually, it turned out that the gold mine was not going to work, but we already had this space in Kraków and we had got so involved in running it that we thought we could still do something without a gold mine. It also turned out that the place we found was cheap, so we only had to change our lifestyle a little bit to save enough money for the rent of this place. But the name remained: 'Goldex Poldex', the Polish gold mine. The '-ex' was actually added because in the '90s there were a lot of small companies mushrooming in Poland and, at that time, for everything you were doing, it seemed you would just add an '-ex' to it to make it sound more international.

**Fabio: When you realised that the gold mine might not be happening, what other idea did you form as to how the space might be run independently?**

**Janek:** I had a vision that the place would develop, that there would actually be more people wanting to join and that it would multiply: imagine twenty people putting the same small amount of money into the project! You would already have considerable potential and it's not unfeasible—I know twenty people personally who are doing some kind of cultural activity and that could easily spare the money that we would need to spend. By investing it in Goldex Poldex, we could effectively

operate as a cooperative—a benevolent association of an unlimited number of people. For me, that is the power of the multitude: you have a lot of people and together you can do things which you cannot do on your own. It is basically the old-school idea of a cooperative; we simply tried to apply this thinking to the field of cultural production. We really hoped it would become something like a cultural co-op and actually my biggest disappointment is that it has not in fact evolved this way.

You don't see so many people willing to do this kind of stuff—they think it is your project and that they can only get involved in specific proposals. This does not really lead anywhere, but the idea of doing things together as twenty people where everybody puts €100 into the pot every month—that would be something quite different. With €2,000 a month, you already have quite some possibilities—you can do a bigger exhibition, publish a book, invite someone from anywhere in the world—if you plan it in advance. And if this person is happy to come without charging a big fee, €2,000 would allow you to really do something. But this hasn't happened.

I think that a lot of people are still thinking about cultural production solely in the frame of animator-audience situation, where we are there to provide the program for an audience. People who have skill and will to organise things just go on with their lives, following individual career options that are open to them rather than continuing to work associatively. It is a certain type of subjectivity: the way they are shaped as subjects, so they don't really consider this co-operation as a real possibility. I think this is because of the way the general social landscape is structured, so that in general people think 'Why would I do this without earning any money and even having to put in my own money, when instead I could set up an NGO and apply for a grant?' The system is like those photographs where you have an empty head where you can insert your face: this represents an NGO having lots of money from the Norway Fund, the European Union or any other of these funders—'I put my face in there and I'm gonna become a cultural entrepreneur.' This kind of attitude is also being actively promoted as the right way of action with the so called "civil society".

Many people are thinking in terms of the 'cultural entrepreneur', which is horrible. In relation to this approach, I had this very funny experience. I was invited by the British Council to take part in an international meeting of young publishers in London and I thought 'This is sort of strange—why would the British Coun-

cil invest money in inviting people from Poland, India, Argentina and so on, to bring them to London for a free two-week program?'. In the end, it turned out that this whole endeavour was all about finding a good business opportunity for the British book industry! All they wanted to do is to gain knowledge about our local markets. They were asking us what kind of books are best sellers and all the seminars were about sucking knowledge from us. They also continuously repeated that we had to become 'cultural entrepreneurs'. This 'creative industries' thing is disgusting.

**Fabio: When you imagined that twenty people could be involved, how did you see this collective functioning? What ways did you imagine these people would deal with shared authorship?**

**Janek:** Running such a project together is yet another problem that is definitely linked to the model of subjectivity. People want to sign their name on everything they are doing. They want to see their name in the media, they want to be shining. Another issue is how to decide what to do in practice—this is definitely something to experiment with. I think this kind of issues can only be sorted out by practice—by trying different types of organization, discussing it, arguing maybe even quarrelling over how do we act together. You cannot figure it out in a purely speculative way. So I haven't had any sort of preconception, how it could in practice run.

**Fabio: So how is Goldex organised at the moment? How are you taking decisions and how are you making your projects happen?**

**Janek:** Everyone involved in Goldex has his or her own specialisation: I'm a theorist, Kuba is a graphic designer and Janek is an artist. Consequently, most of the time we are proposing things that are linked to our own fields of activity. The only person who actively joined Goldex since its creation—Agnieszka Klepacka, who is also Janek Simon's girlfriend—has done film studies and she has been running a sort of film club in Goldex. The rule is that we only do things that we all agree on. Each person has the right to veto a proposed idea. We don't have to actively support the carrying out of a decision, but everyone has a right to say 'no' and in this case, we don't do it. This is basically our only rule.

We try not to do too many things that are proposed from the outside, because then it is too easy to become

a service provider. We are happy to collaborate and we do some things with other institutions, but we prefer to realise our own ideas. When we agree to produce something, then we are producing it. We try to be as self-sufficient as possible, but sometimes we borrow stuff from our friends—someone always has a projector, a TV—or we bring our own things. We take care ourselves of our guests—picking them up from the airport or the train station, hosting them in our places or renting a place for them. But, of course, there is a limit; the most costly thing we've have done was maybe €500. There are many things we have done with €50, which essentially pays for one person's train journey from Warsaw to give a lecture here. We could not really go beyond the €500, which is a shame in a way, but good in another: I don't like spectacular culture and so a limited budget actually prevents us from becoming spectacular. Even if we had a spectacular idea, if we ever were that mentally ill to be wanting to do a laser show, for example, we simply couldn't do it because we don't have the resources. In this sense, we're in a safe position.

**Bianca Elzenbaumer: Of course there are also freedoms connected to the way you operate—how would you describe these factors that give you a certain degree of independence?**

**Janek:** We certainly don't have to worry so much about offending anyone with the things we do, since we don't depend on some funders' benevolence. Moreover, since you are free to do things the way you want, you don't have to worry about getting an invoice and all the other bureaucratic stuff. This is surely the freedom you get. I think that the bottom line is a lot about whether you need to make a living with what you are doing or not. If running an NGO is your job and you have to earn a living from it, you are obliged to do one thing after another, since that is the only way to sustain getting money. Goldex Poldex is definitely only possible because we have a sort of privileged personal situation. It is a luxury that we can actually 'waste' this money. Of course, personally I don't think it is wasted, but from the point of view of the rest of our economic situation—paying for a flat, a car—it is 'wasted' as you don't get anything practical in return. I have always considered Goldex Poldex to be a hobby and I know I'm only going to do it as long as I have enough money to spare for this hobby. So this project is only possible because the three of us have professional lives outside of the project. Of course, there is always a sort of benefit we have, like being invited to speak at a conference be-

cause we run Goldex Poldex, and being paid a fee for this—but this is rather a collateral effect than what we aim at. You could say that this money was earned because of Goldex Poldex, but this is a sort of unintentional and, since it only happens once in a while, can never be considered a regular income.

**Bianca: Do you think that teaching theory is also feeding back into the way you run Goldex?**

**Janek:** The problem of how to run and maintain the project is definitely fed by our relation to theory. For instance, we reflect quite a bit on the theory of forms of capital by Pierre Bourdieu. He says that it is not only material capital that is productive, but that you have different forms of capital—cultural, symbolic and social capital. Cultural capital is the education you get from your home: you know how to speak and how to be polite, for example. Let's say if you are looking for a business partner, you have more chances of convincing someone to work with you if you have a high cultural capital. So it is ultimately productive in an economic way, since you can potentially earn more when having a good cultural capital. The same is true for your symbolic and your social capital—the people you know. Goldex Poldex is certainly based on convertibility of these capitals. We have little material capital, but we have considerable social capital, which means we know people because we have collaborated with them in different circumstances. These people see that what we are doing is not commercial, so they are ready to participate under different conditions than they would expect when working with a public or private institution. People are willing to do something with us, even if they only get refunded for their travel costs and a place in our house in Krakow, because they know that we don't earn—but rather lose—money in this. They also accept the invitation because they know us personally, they know what we are doing, they like it, they trust us in the sense of the quality of the outcome. They want to participate. This allows us to convert social capital into practical solutions. Without this social capital, we could not do anything. Again—it's a privileged situation. Social capital, like all other forms of capital, is not equally distributed. So in fact, it is not a universal solution. We cannot just suggest anyone to run their own Goldex Poldex just because we are able to run it. We are, in a way, privileged.

**Fabio: Do you also feel that Goldex is only possible**

**because you are economically privileged or does that not really matter?**

**Janek:** It matters quite a lot. We are not rich by any standard, but our material situation is somehow secure. For instance all of us get some support from our families: for example a help in getting, an apartment. Otherwise—especially with the prices in Krakow—I could never ever be able to afford my own flat. The maximum credit I could get would allow me to buy a 35m<sup>2</sup> flat and I would have to pay half of my monthly salary for the next thirty years. I'd have no surplus to put into projects like Goldex. So we are privileged because we are not really economically precarious. Janek is not employed but he is economically stable, since he has a good reputation as an artist and he also got a family flat. Of course, everything could change, the state could go bankrupt and I could lose my job, or the economic crisis could slow down art funding. In that way, we are precarious to some degree, but not as precarious as some people.

**Fabio: After having run Goldex Poldex for a while now, how do you see its future development?**

**Janek:** I think that, after these three years, our activities are becoming repetitive and I feel that we might end up doing more of the same, also because of the budget constraints. It has been fun, a great experiment, we tested certain things and did some interesting stuff, but I have the sense of hitting the wall. To continue, it will have to function in a completely different way. Maybe if we had some sort of business downstairs and a project space upstairs, then the business would fund the place and we could work with a different budget. But I don't want to go into the NGO sector with Goldex. I'm already in the NGO sector with my publishing house Korporacja Ha!art, so I want to do something different with Goldex.

**Fabio: And how do Janek and Kuba see this situation? What do they imagine?**

**Janek:** Personally, I am running out of money and maybe I'm gonna have to stop, but I think Janek enjoys it the most out of us three. In part, this is because he's found a niche—a small, independent gallery with a really ambitious program that he can realise because he has friends in the art world who are willing to come and contribute. I actually think Goldex works in the gallery mode, but for me it was more of a social ex-

periment, with the aim of trying to build it into something bigger. In this sense, it is not so attractive for me now because organising lectures is what I do for a living anyway. Also, somehow, I think this kind of place cannot be permanent in the way a public institution is. Recently, I have also been thinking that in fact many people that would like to do something in a social or political dimension tend not to like art because they see the art circle as posh and egotistic, that everybody has to be trendy and look nice. So I think the fact that Goldex is also a gallery and art place discourages many people who would rather be involved in a purely social or political project. This is my recent intuition—I have this feeling that socially-engaged art tends to attract certain kinds of people, who are not necessarily people who like to be social and political activists. So I am becoming sceptical about running a place that intends to be socially and politically active whilst at the same time operating within the art world. That is my own sense of what is going on with Goldex.

[www.goldexpoldex.pl](http://www.goldexpoldex.pl)

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