



Mosquitoes, Easter Eggs & the Power of Art Episode 42 with Agnieszka Matejko

Matejko: What is the role of artists? How can we be really useful to the community? You know, these rural community monuments have a sense of humour. And so these monuments, they're doing something right.

Cross-pollination: Welcome to Cross-pollination. A show about tackling problems with creativity and innovation.

Today's episode is about giant roadside art, what art means to communities and people, and why it's important.

Including art that's a giant mosquito.

Edmonton, Alberta-based artist Agnieszka Matejko has been fascinated with these art pieces scattered over the national landscape for a long time. She's travelled around to visit them, researched them extensively and written about them for Galleries West magazine in an article shortlisted for this year's Canadian Online Publishing Awards that we'll link to in the show notes.

If hearing from Agnieszka about these intricate, sometimes quirky, unexpectedly powerful pieces that act as everything from tourist magnets to cultural icons doesn't make you want to make a road trip, we can't imagine what will.

Matejko: My interest in this began decades ago, soon after graduating from fine arts and like a lot of artists, I got a studio in an old warehouse, you know, very dusty and grungy. And I was working away, applying for art shows and that's not an easy process. Sometimes it takes two years to get an art show. And so eventually when I did, here and there, it wasn't constant, but I was getting shows.



I was so surprised that after every show I was disappointed and discouraged and it wasn't the selling that was really discouraging.

I mean, I did sell here and there, not that much, but for contemporary art, that's pretty normal. And it was because there were so few of the general public coming in to see contemporary art. And it wasn't just me, you know, if it had been just me, I could have said, oh, I need to be better. But even shows that I thought were fantastic that, you know, just made me jump up and down with joy because they were such good art, they were still poorly attended by other than the art community and patrons.

And then I realized that, what are we doing something wrong? What can I do to bring art out into the public rather than having the public try to go through the closed doors of an art gallery?

And so what I started to do was take, I was teaching art at the time at MacEwan University, and I started to take my students' work out into the streets.

So for example, I organized an exhibition in a bank for their sculptures and in an antique store and sometimes right on the sidewalks. By the way, I didn't realize it was illegal, but it was. But I did it with the local business association and the business association let me do it.

I just didn't know that the city wouldn't but in any case. So at the same time as I was starting to take student work out, I began to work on murals and public art projects.

Like, for example, I worked with pregnant teens in a high school and sandblasted their poetry into the High Level bridge in Edmonton. So it was art or I went to the Hope Mission, various social service agencies. I collected poetry and then sandblasted



those. So it was very much community-minded art by the people for the people.

Cross-pollination: Agnieszka's interest in community art grew from her career, as we heard, as an artist. How did she become an artist? And what makes art and this kind of art important to her?

Matejko: Art speaks without using words so you can speak any language.

I'm a child of immigrants. We went from Poland, we immigrated to Africa, we were there for two years and then when we moved to Canada it took me quite a while to become accepted. I think that I was just fairly shy and introverted. And so I spent a lot of time on my own without friends. And that drew me to art and it stayed. You know, maybe for people who are immigrants, I don't know, I don't want to generalize, but maybe, we don't feel that we belong to any one community.

I'm very comfortable, my best friend in school was Egyptian. And, you know, right now I'm comfortable with some Polish community members, but I'm comfortable with my, some of my closest friends who are from India or from, you know, wherever it is. Right. So, you kind of feel like a citizen of the world.

Cross-pollination: A citizen of the world, notwithstanding different people's different life experiences in it. So, who built these giant art pieces? And what's interesting about them?

Matejko: First of all, I would say 10, 20 years ago, these monuments wouldn't have been seen as art at all. They would have been seen as kitsch, I think, and I could be wrong. But I think that the art community is a little bit more open now because art has, I've seen a lot more art that utilizes humour. Art



has become much more mixed media. There's a kind of an openness right now to all kinds of art.

And so are these, first of all, are these monuments, art? I don't know, I can't answer that. Are they fun? 100%? Absolutely. Are they great as advertisement? Yes, they're fantastic as advertisement. And are they community projects? I would say they're excellent community projects because they are so successful and it takes, you can't put up a \$200,000 monument without a lot of involvement from the community. They are the ultimate community art, right.

People go to see them in droves, like hundreds of people every summer drive around taking these tours. And they're also built by communities not funded by arts organizations. They're just, sometimes they're funded by individuals. And so that just impressed me.

So I thought, well, what are they doing right?

Cross-polliNation: Over the years, Agnieszka has made several trips to explore the roadside art, including one of her favourite pieces, a giant mosquito surprisingly surrounded by wonder and humour.

Matejko: I drove across the prairies. I drove through Manitoba and I drove through Alberta and I drove to Saskatchewan. So there are three that I really found powerful and memorable and that I really loved.

And so I flew to Winnipeg and then drove with a friend of mine to see all the major ones in Manitoba. And the giant mosquito was a little bit of a shock because we drove an hour and a half outside of north of Winnipeg between the two lakes. There were a lot of bogs there and so on and it was empty, you know, you drive



through empty highways and then we drove on this little side road for, I don't know, a good 10, 15 minutes.

And then we were expecting to see this town and what we saw was a few houses and it turns out that the town is, has about 200 residents. That's it.

And all I saw there's no main street, there's one grocery store there that doubles as a post office and triples as a liquor store. And, you know, I thought, well, the mosquito would be there and somewhere around the store.

No, we had to drive around and around and I finally found this magnificent mosquito built out of, I don't know, actually steel mixed media, you know, with wings.

Really a magnificent sculpture designed by artist Marlene Magnusson Hourd who is quite a reasonably well-known artist in this tiny community.

And you know where this mosquito is, it overlooks the prairies. Like there's nothing, there are some private houses behind, beside it. So this little community of 200 people had it in them to fundraise for a sculpture that I couldn't find the price of it. But I would imagine it would have been, you know, in the \$100,000, at least, if not more because this is very well made.

Like if this was in Edmonton, it would be iconic and the way that they did it is they fundraised and it was the idea of one person in the town.

And so they do have an update. It's just a recent story from 2023. One of the funders for this project was Off, you know, the mosquito spray. And they actually just did an Off commercial in 2023.



So their sculpture is getting refurbished because of the Off commercial.

Oh, and of course, I have to tell you the name of the town. The reason it's a mosquito is because the town is called Komarno, which in Ukrainian means, mosquito-infested.

Cross-pollination: From mosquitoes to a giant egg we'll hear about shortly, the art pieces have a long and interesting history, as well as a lot of purpose in addressing practical challenges in the communities where they stand.

Matjeko: So when they started was in the [19]50s and the earliest one I could find was the Edson Squirrel, which by the way, has been replaced. So the original one isn't there anymore and even that one wasn't that big.

But there are three factors, three things that got them started. It started in the States and it started in the 50s when the Federal Aid Highways Act was passed in 1956. And so that spurred it on because all of a sudden little towns were, you know, connected or there were roads that tourists could go to.

But also in the 50s, the Guinness World Records started publishing their books. And then all of a sudden, you know, these towns could build a giant egg or whatever it is and all of a sudden they'd be in the Guinness Book of World Records and they'd be on the map.

These towns, with urbanization, a lot of towns were dying. And so what a fantastic way to bring people in and bring families in and bring families into the town so that they would eat at the local restaurants and so on.

But also I think, especially for the prairies, and I think this is very interesting, the grain elevators in the prairies started to come



down in the 50s. So, you know, a small town in the prairies, if you look across the landscape, what do you see? You see grain elevators? But when the grain elevator comes down, what do you see? The town disappears.

And so with these giant, you know, you suddenly build like, in Macklin, Saskatchewan, you build this giant horse's ankle bone that's three stories high, or over three stories high, and all of a sudden that replaces [the grain elevator], that's a symbol of the town.

Cross-pollination: In Agnieszka's research she found the history of many of these unique pieces has been lost. Much of it wasn't formally documented and even older community members didn't always remember the exact histories or know when they went up. She did discover a lot about their unexpected humour and elements she finds so striking about them.

Matejko: Well, the most recent one I found was 2020, so that is very recent. And I can tell you a little bit more about that one because it's really quite interesting. But I think what I think what I loved about them more than anything else is that they didn't take themselves too seriously.

So, you know, when I was interviewing people like about the giant Mundare sausage, it's kind of raunchy, you know, from one side it's almost pornographic. And I thought that, am I offending the community if I mentioned that? And I interviewed the fourth-generation member of the Stawnichy family. They are the ones who helped to put it up. They partly funded it and it advertises basically their business because they make sausages. But it also promotes the Ukrainian culture because it's a kobasa.

But what struck me about talking to him is that the humour was just fine. He said that, you know, in the Ukrainian culture, like many, most cultures, what do you do together? You eat, you talk,



you laugh. And so being able to laugh at a giant pierogi on a fork or a giant sausage, that's a little bit risqué is completely fine, as well as advertising and attracting tourism.

Cross-pollination: The art pieces also had a really interesting and powerful cultural function that speaks to pride and belonging in the face of exclusion.

Matejko: One of the main ones that's a 3.5 story Vegreville pysanka, that's an egg. It is huge and it's a spinning one. It's like a weather vane. And so, it was one of the earliest to go up in Alberta, not the earliest, but it was put up in 1974. So it was one of the earliest.

So I interviewed the artist's daughter, the artist, Paul Maxym Sembaliuk, had passed away, so I couldn't speak to him. But I spoke to his daughter who is a scholar of Ukrainian culture and folklore. And so she explained to me why so many of them, particularly in Alberta, some in Saskatchewan, have a Ukrainian theme to them.

Fascinating information. I was really sitting on the edge of my seat as she was telling me. So, first of all, she said that before these sculptures were put up, there was a lot of racism and prejudice and her own father, you know, the sculptor or the designer who created the egg, he was actually stopped by the RCMP [Royal Canadian Mounted Police] and carded as a young boy when, as a young man, when he was travelling to various baseball games.

She said that her grandfather was punished for speaking Ukrainian in school. My Ukrainian friends and I do have a number of those, Edmonton has a large Ukrainian community and my background is Polish so there is a little bit of a connection there, they said that pretty well all the way along from the time Ukrainians came [to Canada], they would be segregated.



They would, they were called various names. They didn't, couldn't get the jobs that other people did until they changed their names. And all of a sudden, you know, they were able to get the jobs. So it seems like as soon as people immigrated, they were considered second-class citizens.

The artist that I interviewed and the scholar that I interviewed is, Larisa Sembaliuk Cheladyn. So what she said is that the memories of the [1914-1920] internment were still very vivid.

It was 8000 Ukrainian men who were interned and their property was initially confiscated. It was later returned to them. But also 80,000 people, mostly Ukrainians, were declared enemy. Enemy aliens. So you can just see that.

But she said that what happened in the 1970s when many of these monuments started to be built, her dad's was built in 1974, is that all of a sudden those walls broke down.

So Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau in 1971 declared the policies of bilingualism and the Canadian Multicultural Act was a result of that, you know, it was much later.

But the point is that Trudeau started this. Also the bilingual, Ukrainian bilingual program was instituted in 1974 as well. So all of a sudden there is this pride. But, so all of a sudden, Ukrainians felt like they were Canadian. And what they wanted to do and what they did is in these small towns instead of trying to hide, they would build this giant pierogi on a fork, a giant sausage. In Saskatchewan, it was a Ukrainian woman who was welcoming people to the town. Apparently dance groups would gather during Easter, they have an Easter festival where they'd all gather around this monument.

So it was a gathering place, a place of pride. I love that, right. It's this explosion of ethnic pride, cultural pride.



Cross-pollination: Not only was the giant Easter egg or pysanka, a source of cultural pride and a prominent monument, it was complex too in its design and construction.

Matejko: It was a technological marvel of its time because the question the designer asked himself is, how do I create a giant egg out of flat two-dimensional pieces of metal? Right. How do you do that? So this is a mathematical, it's a big mathematical problem.

So he worked with a computer scientist and who apparently also had students working on it and, you know, it was quite a huge challenge. So what they did is they made it out of 3500 anodized aluminum pieces. They put it together to form a perfect egg shape.

Yeah, it's fantastic. And this sculpture is about 3.5 stories high. I'm just checking to make sure. Yeah, it's 3.5 stories high and 31 ft long. And as I told you, it spins because the artist found an old navy gun turret. And so he mounted it on a gun turret. So it's actually a weather vane as well.

And so when I drove up, it just towers over the prairie, you know, in the prairie sky. It's just this blue sky with clouds and you look up and against this wide open prairie in the sky is this gleaming egg.

And, oh, and yes, another interesting thing about it is that the anodized aluminum doesn't fade. So it was built in 1974 but the colors are as good as the day it was built.

Yeah. And you know, the Prairie is so either gray or ochres or you know, greens. But it's this great shining thing in the sky.



Cross-pollination: The Vegreville egg, if you're interested in looking it up, is patterned with the anodized aluminum tiles Agnieszka mentioned in shades of gold, yellow, orange, white and black.

In addition to art pieces that relate to Ukrainian communities in the region, there are lots of others. Another one with a sense of humour is a bunnock or horse's ankle bone located in Saskatchewan.

Matejko: It's the world's largest bunnock, which is a horse's ankle bone and that's located in Macklin, Saskatchewan. So the reason that that was a very romantic trip for me, and that's the one that I kind of still remember very fondly, is because I drove by myself and it's about a 3+ hour drive the way I drive, it was probably 3.5 or 4 [hours]. And when I got there, I had booked a hotel.

So I drove straight up to the hotel, and the park it was, the hotel was in the middle of the field. Like in the middle of the prairies. There was nothing. Like, the nearest walking-distance object was maybe 10 minutes or something like that. So, and I got to my room, my room looked out onto these beautiful wheat fields and at night I just walked out to see the monument to see the giant bunnock. And I realized there was nobody in the parking lot. Like not a single car. I didn't see a single staff person in the whole hotel. So I think I didn't even see a guard. I think that I was the only person for the entire night in that hotel.

And so, when I went to photograph the giant bunnock in the setting sun, you know, it was just this beautiful experience of seeing this huge sculptural, bizarre, interesting sculptural object in the middle of just this tiny community.

But apparently, a veterinarian told the town that they put it upside down, that the horse's ankle bone is actually the other



way around. But it is recognizable somewhat as a bone, but most people when they drive up to it, they think it's a female torso, which again is kind of funny because originally the town was not upset, I guess they thought it was funny.

But originally, it's a tourist office. So the door to the tourist office was black. And so of course, where her hips are, this black door, you know, it was very suggestive. So eventually they ended up painting the door white.

And you know, who built it? That's the other fabulous thing. Like some of these, some of these structures are done by artists, but many are just done by people like this. This one was, this man was a taxidermist called, Ralph R. Berg who lived on a farm in Cadbury, Saskatchewan. And he built this out of chicken wire and fibreglass on his farm.

And it's been around for well, they, they built it in 1994 and it's still as good as new. It's gleaming. It's lovely.

Cross-pollination: One kind of art that Agnieszka found wasn't well represented among the giant roadside art pieces was art representing Indigenous communities. Although it is the case that historical Indigenous art can be seen at many sites across the country like, Writing on Stone provincial park in Alberta as well as right across the prairies and the country, as well as in other contemporary forms along roadsides and elsewhere.

Matejko: Well, the problem with prairie, these giant prairie monuments is that very, very few address Indigenous themes. So that's definitely a problem, and not only that, some of the ones that are out there like the Chiefs Head in Saskatchewan are outright racist. So again, I don't know what to do about that. I don't know how to address the issue.



But of all the ones I found, there was only, in Alberta, I found the Saamis Teepee, which is near Medicine Hat, which is a beautiful, oversized teepee monument and it's lit at night. It's apparently spectacular. And there is a world's largest tomahawk, which was a collaboration with Indigenous groups in Saskatchewan. But other than that, it's very few and far between.

Cross-pollination: If you're interested in finding out more about the giant art as a whole, you can not only read Agnieszka's piece in Galleries West magazine, but also find out more online.

Matejko: There are many, there's a lot that you can Google online, but there are three of my favorite sites. So one was funded by Ed Salonica. In 1998, he's passed away since, but he was a simply a man who was interested in these monuments who drove around Canada finding them and he started this website. And so I love that personal touch and I think I don't know who is continuing it, but they said that they're continuing it in his memory. So a lovely, you know, very personal site.

The other one that I would say is if you're planning a road trip, go to just google.com Maps, and Google, "large Canadian roadside attractions" and you get to Google map site. And what it has is little icons that show up and it shows you where it is where these monuments are in Canada and then you can click on the little icon and then you can see the monument when you actually look at each monument.

Not all of them are that large or impressive. So I would say the best site if you're really looking for the really impressive, large ones is called bigthings.ca. And they list around 60 for Alberta alone. But as I told you Ed Salonica's site lists about 200 for Alberta alone.



Cross-pollination: Something I wanted to know from Agnieszka is the role she thought these giant community art pieces have in the places where they live.

Matjeko: Well, that's, that's the question that I keep pondering about is, what is the role of artists? How can we be really useful to the community?

I think art itself is, you know, for me, it is when I go to an art show, I'm challenged intellectually, emotionally spiritually. But if that art isn't seen by the overall community, then it's, then I begin to question its function or its. I would love to see more people go to art galleries. I genuinely love art galleries. I think they deserve to be seen. I think artists work incredibly hard to make their art really good, but not enough people go through the doors and so these monuments, they're doing something right?

And do we have anything to learn from them as people in the art world who love the art world? And I think we do. But if I have to give you a summary of the lesson, I don't know if I could. I think maybe we just need to have more of a sense of humour.

Cross-pollination: That's it for this episode about art that speaks with humour and size to the people who visit it and the communities that built them.

If you'd like to read a transcript of this episode, it's available along with Agnieszka's article [[Big Smiles, Big Art](#)] mentioned in this episode and her own artist [website](#) through links in the show notes.

Join us next time for an episode with Dr. Mahadeo Sukhai, Vice President of Research at CNIB, the Canadian National Institute for the Blind, about AI and its benefits and biases when it comes to accessibility and the disability community.



If you enjoyed this episode, please feel free to share it with other people who you think might enjoy it as well, it's hugely helpful to the show.

Thanks for listening. We appreciate you lending your ears and see you next time.