

Plate from "A Book of Fiction," hand-colored drypoint engraving, one of a folio of 25 sets of 25, 1983. (Artwork/image copyright and courtesy of the Jan Sawka Estate)

Artists on the Rise

# Immigrant Artist Jan Sawka, Global Icon

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JAN SAWKA, a Polish-American immigrant artist, may not be a household name in the United States. He is most certainly known in his homeland of Poland. Sawka's work was featured in a solo exhibition at the Gallery of 20th Century Polish Art in Krakow, Poland in 2013, and his work is frequently on view in both solo and group exhibitions internationally. A legendary artist, printmaker, illustrator and set designer, Sawka was exiled with his family from Poland by the reigning repressive Communist regime in 1977. The family relocated first to France, then to New York City.

We took the time to discuss Sawka's work with the artist's prolific filmmaker daughter, Hanna Sawka. Through our conversation more details on Sawka's personal life came to light, including how his career evolved due to a stint creating images for the New York Times and through various collaborations with other creative luminaries across the world as far away as the UAE and Japan as well as right here in the United States.



Jan Sawka, "The Fallen," 70 x 84", acrylic on loose canvas, 1990. Artwork/image copyright and courtesy of the Jan Sawka Estate.

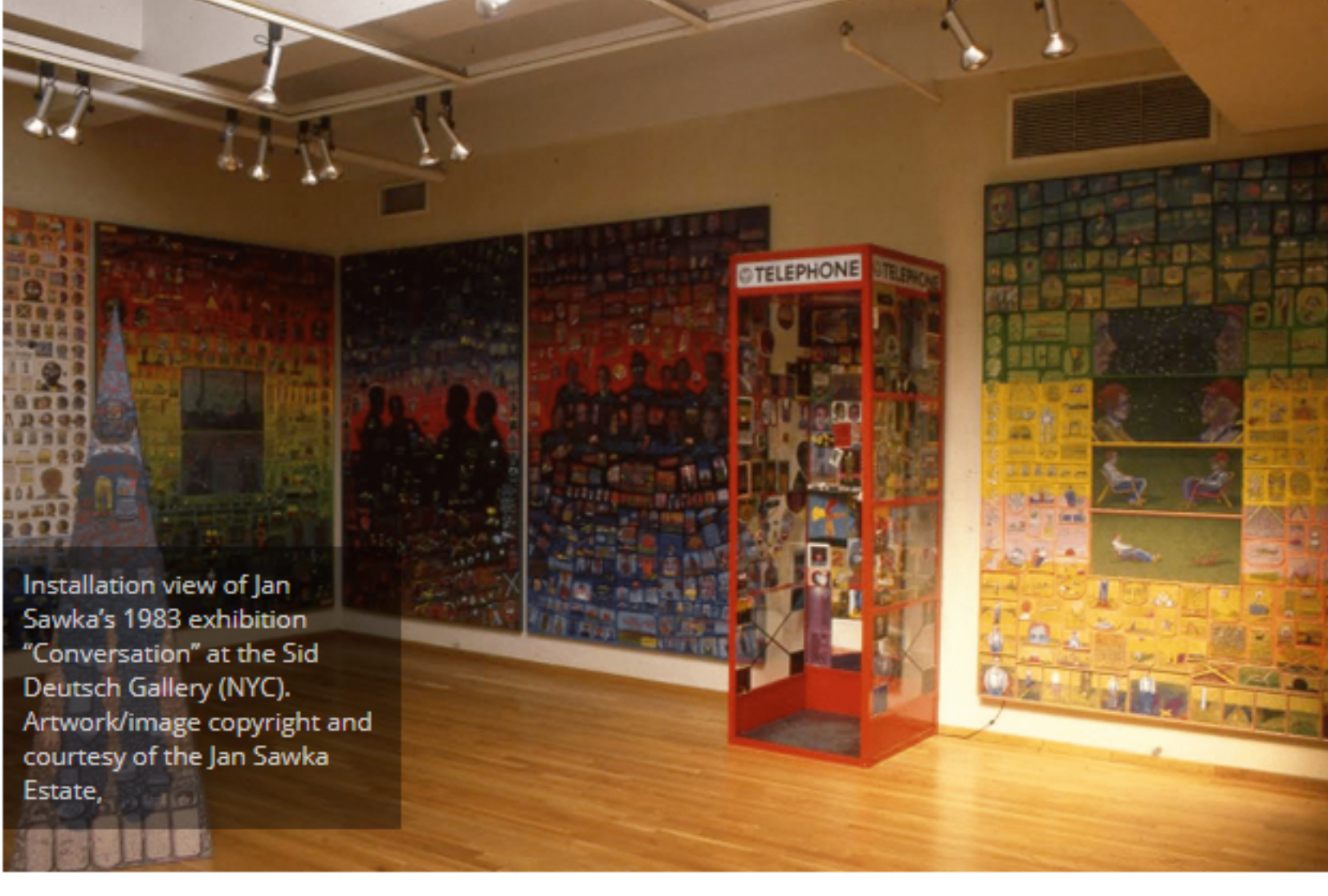
## 20th Century Immigrant Artist

OG. Thanks, Hanna, for speaking with us today about your father, artist Jan Sawka. Sawka not only showed in exhibitions regularly but was also a featured illustrator for the New York Times. How did he divide up his practice? What was his working method like, and how much time did he devote to each aspect of his practice?

HS. Thank you. My family emigrated to the United States in 1977 with nothing but \$52 and a few suitcases. Lucky for this family of political refugees, we had someone who wanted to help us. The year before, my father had met the legendary graphic designer and typographer Herb Lubalin at the Bicentennial Aspen Art and Design Conference. Although we had just been in France for two weeks, my father had been sent by the French government to represent the newly opened Pompidou Center, where he was an artist-in-residence. He met Herb at the conference and told him of his recent exile, as well as his worries for his future in France. Herb already respected my father's work from Graphis Magazine and he sympathized with his troubles. He told Dad that, if he ever showed up in New York, to call him immediately. When my father called, Herb recommended my father to the NY Times. This job was vital to our family's survival after our immigration! As much as this was a practical situation, the political commentary aspect of creating the illustrations was exciting to my father. Some of his illustrations prompted the Soviet Embassy to lodge complaints with the State Department. In the meantime, though, he painted the whole time through. He hated making work that didn't allow artistic freedom and freedom of expression. In Poland, he created posters to make a living in the same way. When my father's gallery career took off was when he stopped illustrating for the (New York) Times.

OG. What was it like growing up in an artistic household? What personal reflections can you share with us from this time period?

HS. My father was always home, with the exception of when he travelled for projects or exhibitions. He worked a great deal. I've compared him to a monk: he was like a monk who worked for hours to illuminate manuscripts. The scraping sound of his etching needle is a sound of my childhood, one that I miss terribly. It was a very magical childhood, one that brought other creative people into our home, took us to show openings, and even took me backstage during a Samuel Beckett production. It was exciting to see paintings and other artworks manifest, from a plain white surface into a painting with color that often held lots of stories playing across the surface. It was a rich childhood!



Installation view of Jan Sawka's 1983 exhibition "Conversation" at the Sid Deutsch Gallery (NYC). Artwork/image copyright and courtesy of the Jan Sawka Estate.

## Interdisciplinary Artist Jan Sawka

OG. Your father's artistic practice can be considered "interdisciplinary" during the 1970s-80s: an era before this term was popularized. Can you explain his impetus for working across multiple mediums? Was this central to his approach as an artist?

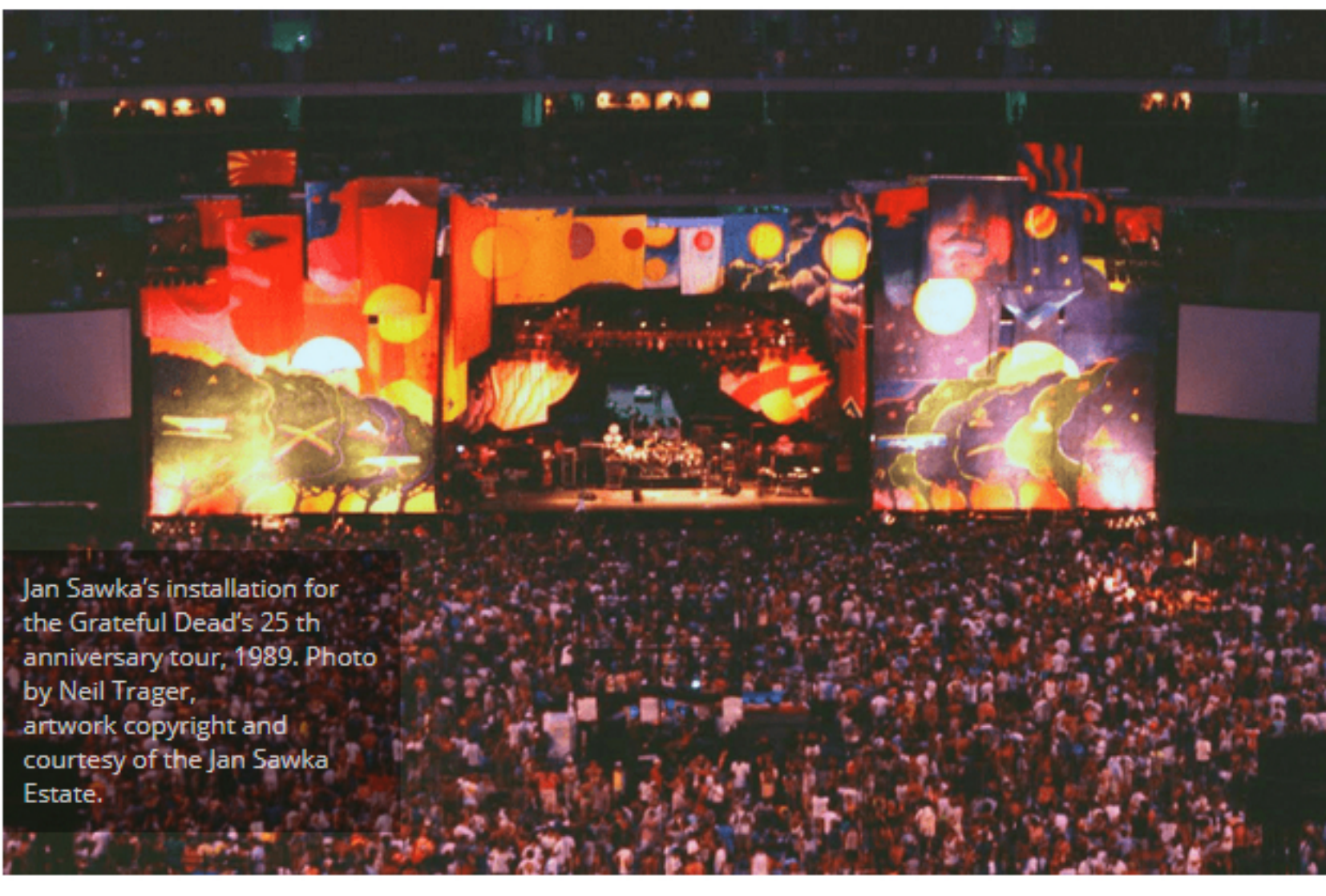
HS. An interdisciplinary approach (in the arts) has a long and rich history in Poland, and is largely rooted in a political and cultural fight for independence and the struggle to maintain a Polish identity during nearly two centuries of occupations. Polish culture had its very identity under attack by such policies as "Russification" and "Germinisation," consisting of such tactics as a ban on the Polish language and limiting education opportunities for Polish people. It is within this context that artists and intellectuals developed a rich, interdisciplinary and highly collaborative culture, where outstanding creatives of different backgrounds (music, visual arts, poetry, performing arts) would gather and create together. This energy that was put into culture and identity-preservation was most certainly key to holding Poland together through what collectively would amount to two centuries of occupations. One prime example is pivotal Polish playwright [Stanislaw Wyspianski](#), whose plays were essentially expressions of the political and cultural dilemmas facing a major European nation with a deeply established culture. In addition to his work as a playwright, Wyspianski was also a painter and set-designer.



My father was part of a rich and long legacy of being an interdisciplinary artist who worked with poets, performing artists, other visual artists, writers, and musicians to create free expression wherever possible. This was not an easy task within a highly controlled system. He worked with the poets who are now considered the best of their generation – Edward Stachura, Leszek Aleksander Moczulski, Ryszard Krynicki and others. He created the sets and posters for the "Jazz on the Oder" festival. He created happenings for the Festival of Academic Youth (FAMA). He created satirical illustrations for the edgiest publications of the time. He created the sets and all graphics for cabarets and theaters. He also wrote and performed in a radio show under an anonymous name, which was a satire of government officials *and activities of the time. All the while, he defined himself as a master drypoint engraver and painter.*

As for whether this was central to his role as an artist, I would say that the multidisciplinary approach was central, but it was not a "goal." Rather, it was the result of his *disegno*-based approach to art. The Renaissance concept of *disegno* denotes the ability to draw and to conceive concepts and designs across disciplines: this is evident across da Vinci's engineering projects and Michelangelo's sculptures, for example. *Disegno* was the unifying concept behind everything my father did across disciplines. My father was likely already familiar with the concept even before his art and architecture studies, thanks to his father, who was an architect (and bibliophile) – a rarity behind the Iron Curtain. The art scholar and Columbia University Professor James Beck, the most consistent supporter of my father's work, was the first to observe *disegno* as the unifying principle within my father's practice.

## The Original Collaborative Artist



Jan Sawka's installation for the Grateful Dead's 25th anniversary tour, 1989. Photo by Neil Trager. Artwork/image copyright and courtesy of the Jan Sawka Estate.

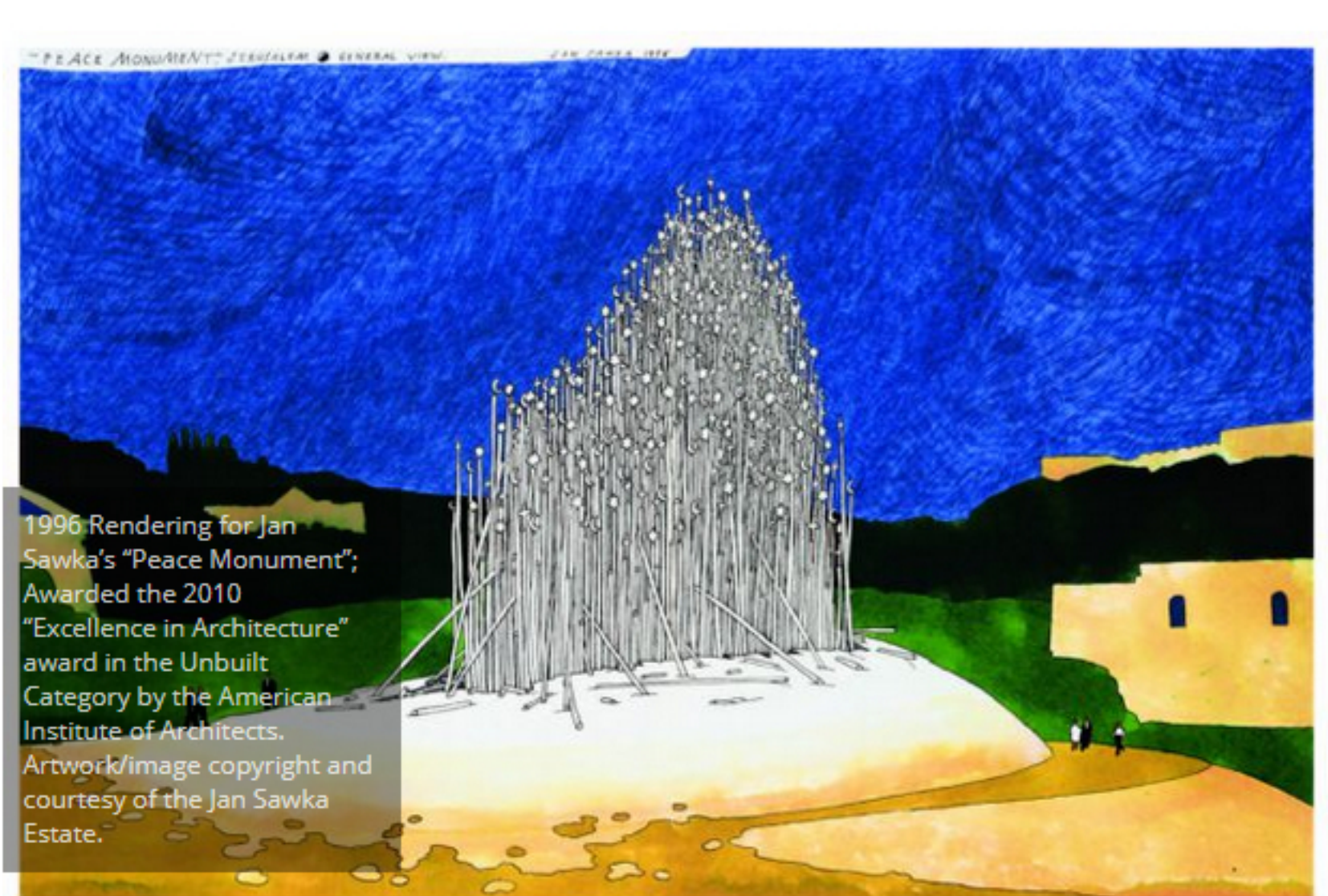
OG. Your father has collaborated with musicians, such as the Grateful Dead, on creative direction. Where did his interest in music stem from and how did these relationship(s) develop?

HS. The Polish tradition of creative collaboration was essential to this (collaboration). My father had spent his formative years as an artist collaborating with cabarets and theaters. He also had an early interest in jazz, which, during his childhood, was forbidden by the communists. You could go to jail for playing jazz or for attending a secret performance! A lot of his social circle gravitated around clandestine jazz clubs. Once jazz was legal, my father created sets and posters for the jazz on Oder jazz festival. He collaborated from several years with a Krakow theater called "STU." For my father, the Grateful Dead represented American counter-culture and resistance, so it was natural for him to gravitate towards that collaboration as an immigrant artist.

OG. Your father has noted that in the 1990s his work reached its farthest point from his origins as a graphic artist shifting instead toward installation art. This shift seemed to have resulted from his work with the Grateful Dead; can you reflect on the impact this shift had on his artistic practice? Did his method or approach to art-making change as a result? Did his studio look different?



HS. The scale that in which he was able to successfully manifest an artistic concept in the Grateful Dead installation was very important for my father. He felt it was an achievement that he could handle that scale artistically. He wanted to go further and that period is when he started to explore possibilities for architectural and performance projects. This included proposals of projects based on projections of art, which included one for the Vatican. He created an architectural design for a cultural complex in Abu Dhabi, which he proposed to the UAE Royal Family. He continued to develop a concept for a projection-based show called "The Voyage" that had originated during his talks with Jerry Garcia. He created a concept for a Peace Monument for Jerusalem, for which he received the last award of his life, an "Excellence in Architecture" in Unbuilt Designs award from the American Institute of Architects in 2010. As much as the scale was bigger, all of these designs were rooted in New York, just as his set-design work for off-Broadway theaters did throughout the 1980's (for which he was chosen by "Backstage" as one of the top designers in New York).



1996 Rendering for Jan Sawka's "Peace Monument"; Awarded the 2010 "Excellence in Architecture" award in the Unbuilt Category by the American Institute of Architects. Artwork/image copyright and courtesy of the Jan Sawka Estate.

OG. Your father has worked on immersive projects abroad from Japan to the UAE. Was he seeking certain projects internationally? How did this wide range of projects come about and what were his reflections on working across such a wide range of projects/culture/geographies?

HS. He loved and had a deep respect of other cultures. For him, art and creativity was "one," a universal spirit, just expressed in many different ways. He especially appreciated art that was rooted in its culture and not propagandized. He spent his childhood behind the Iron Curtain, during the time of the Stalinist Terror. It was a place where one could not even dream of travelling and encountering other cultures, so his ability later to travel was very important to him.

OG. What are a few key aspects of your father's practice that he would want the general public to know about his approach and worldview?

HS. I think that his opposition to oppression, in whatever form, was essential to his world view – he opposed oppression in any form and used his art to actively further that value.



Installation shot from 2004 show including the "Calligraphy Tower" and "Sun Tower," Jan Sawka collaboration with a design team in Japan. Artwork/image copyright and courtesy of the Jan Sawka Estate.

Has Sawka's experience as an immigrant artist resonated with your experience as an artist and/or immigrant? Have you lived and worked abroad? Share your experience in the comments, or if you have any questions about Sawka's experience please leave them below!